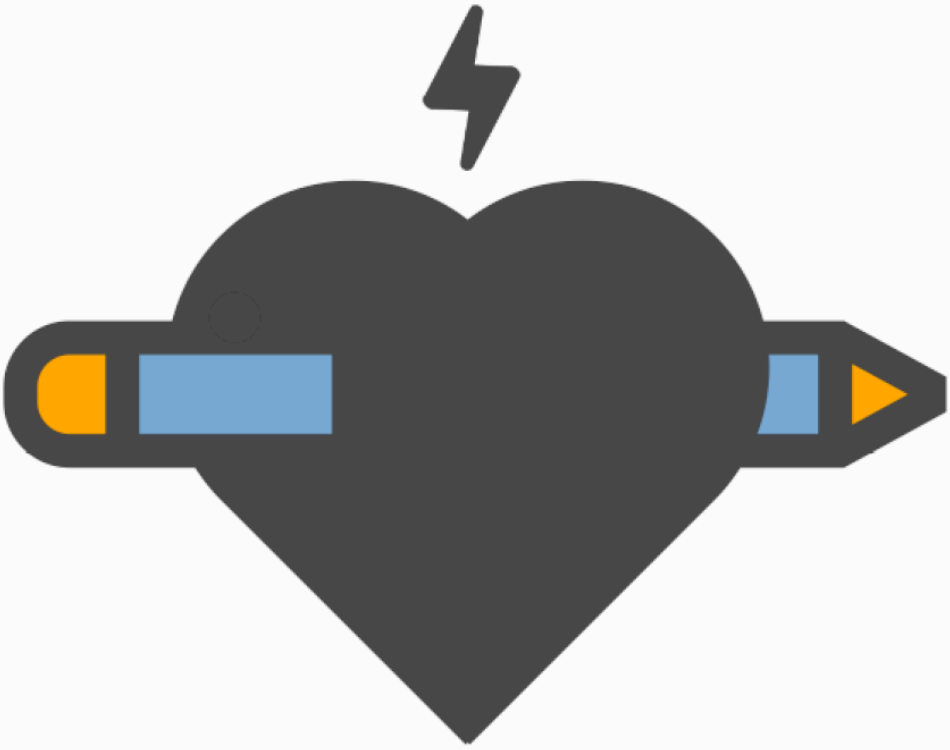
LITTLE FICTION | BIG TRUTHS



THE 2019 FLASH NONFICTION ISSUE

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AFTER graduation, you flew from the U.S. to Europe on a one-way ticket to join friends on a motorcycle trip from Germany to Morocco. Two thousand miles. Three BMW motorcycles. Four countries. Five people, whose past and current histories with each other proved too complicated for camping and close quarters.

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What you remember. Sun glinting on vineyards and green fields in the south of France. The amazing warmth and lightness of the wind on all sides as you gripped the motorcycle with your legs, arms around his waist,

leaning into his body on the curves. The fragrance of thyme and lavender. The heady sense of freedom.

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Three men, two women. Three Germans, two Americans. All twenty-something. Two had been childhood sweethearts, and had broken up. Two would marry in Germany, move to the U.S., and break up. Two would move to the U.S., marry, and break up. Two were carrying on a clandestine affair during the trip. The mathematical combinations almost too confusing to calculate, like a propositional logic word problem on an aptitude test.

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What you remember. The five of you lounging in a field in Provence on a late summer afternoon, motorcycle helmets and golden corn silk and green husks strewn around you. The rosy light as the sun sank on the horizon. The taste of the pale yellow corn, raw and sweet, and the red wine you swigged out of a bottle, sour like vinegar.

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You were American, traveling with your German boyfriend. The other three were traveling solo, but one of the Germans was having an affair with your boyfriend, which you didn't discover until you were camping in the Pyrenees, when she objected to him sharing a sleeping bag with you. All of the hints she'd been dropping clicked into place. You were stunned. So many years later, you can't remember exactly what he said when you confronted him. What she said. What you said back. Or maybe you've chosen to forget.

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What you remember about northern Spain. How icy cold and clear the rushing stream was when you went down to the swimming hole alone the next morning. How immense the tumbled boulders were in the ravine. A yellow butterfly that fluttered gracefully above you and landed on your wet hair.

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Did you decide that you'd return north on your own while the other four continued south, or did he decide, or did you all decide? He drove you back to the Spanish-French border so you could hitch a ride to Germany. You can't remember how many miles you traveled to get there, only that the two of you stayed overnight in a hotel. He became feverish from an abscessed tooth, and you found a doctor for him.

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What you remember about that night. Spooning soup into his mouth. The heat of his forehead under your hand as you smoothed back his hair. The tenderness of your lovemaking, despite his betrayal. How dim the room was.

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A young German couple headed for Hanover agreed to take you to Göttingen, and your boyfriend left to join the others in Spain. The trip north must have been close to a thousand miles. There was no speed limit on the autobahn, so you can't guess how many hours you drove. They had a fast car. An Audi. You don't remember any stops.

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What you remember about the long ride. The backs of their heads. Your view between the bucket seats: their hands darting to the radio dials, his, then hers, his, then hers, as they bickered over what station to play. How you sobbed quietly in the back seat, eyes swollen, tears sliding down your face.

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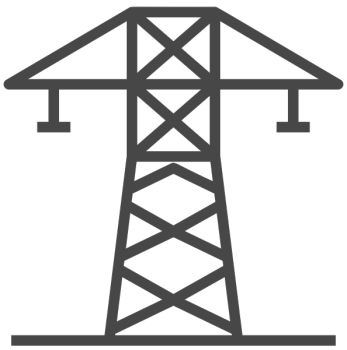
He returned to you in Germany a month later, bearing an armful of blankets from Morocco, a handful of silver rings and bracelets, a bouquet of apologies and promises. You've forgotten the precise arithmetic: how many years of happiness before you married, how many years of marriage

before the next infidelity, how many apologies and promises before the divorce. You've lost the jewelry. You still have two wool blankets from Morocco, white and brown and charcoal striped, and very scratchy.



MY body heaves with sobs, curled in a ball on the cold bathroom tiles. Eyes puffy, face red, upper lip shiny with snot. Fistfuls of damp Kleenex surround me. I'm wrung out like a wet rag. I empty my body of tears and lie, motionless and strange, exhausted. Sink further into the floor.

I can't move. I don't want to move.

I close my eyes.

This is how to disappear.

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I saw my first psychiatrist at sixteen. Dr. Leslie said I showed depressive symptoms, but not full-blown depression—"Not yet." She took notes while I talked about too-early curfews, fights with friends, hiding in the school washroom to cry. I saw the top of her head, brown hair parted down the middle, more than I saw her face. I had never heard of apathy before I described it to her: no energy, little emotion, falling asleep at school. On my fifth visit, she prescribed Prozac. I sent my mother to the pharmacy. I stared at the half-green, half-white capsules, and wondered what colour they were on the inside.

The next therapist was the psychologist, with a basement home office. I bumped my head going downstairs every time, never learning. The insurance coverage lasted three appointments. Then the social worker; clients weren't allowed to wear shoes in her office. I spent a year stuck in the corner of a green vinyl couch, my stocking feet tucked under me, chilled but never saying anything. The psychiatrist, who sat low in her chair, floating head framed between two teetering piles of files. She questioned, accusingly, why I continued to talk to an ex-boyfriend who cheated on me. She told me about her friend who dated an adulterous man, her residency in psychiatry, her daughter. Between appointments, she texted to re-arrange

the next one or confirm the time. During appointments, she texted her other clients, looking down in her lap as I talked.

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Depression is a battering ram.

Shackled by twisted bed sheets, I missed days of work. I ate cottage cheese from the tub, and granola bars, letting the crumbs and wrappers drop to the floor. I played Johnny Cash's *Hurt* on repeat, staring at the ceiling. When my roommate's boyfriend was over, they giggled behind her closed bedroom door and I wanted them to stop. Just stop.

While camping, I tried explaining to friends that I felt weighted, and alone. I sat by the campfire swigging wine from a carton. I wanted to slip away while they laughed and shared old jokes and made up new ones. The lake's glassy surface was black and still. How could the water be so calm?

I showed up tipsy to outings, black out drunk by the end of the night. I went home with strangers, the ones who bought me drinks, the ones who called me pretty. The next day I lay hung-over and collapsed, marinating in shame. I started to cancel plans. I stopped making plans. I

hoped someone would notice, take my hand, say *let me help*. "Stop being a victim," Lily said. "Suck it up." She studied holistic nutrition. "You probably just need oxygen therapy."

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I escaped to grad school. Alone in a new city. Winnipeg was flat and bleak. The bitter winter air burned like ice against my face. I churned through my weeks, from class to the library to home. Slogging to and from the bus stop, the binders in my knapsack pummeled my back. I gazed at letters and words in textbooks and articles, and somehow strung them together to write essays and term papers.

I met Michael, who was tall with brown hair and a big toothy smile. We became friends, and one night we became friends who kissed. I avoided him long enough that we went back to being friends.

When I told Michael I was under water and far from shore, he laughed. "You must get hungry out there," he mused. "I'll throw you some sandwiches."

When I told him the waves were getting stronger, he said he could be a rock, something for me to hold onto. My high tension line. "You ever been camping in the middle of nowhere? You think you're as far from anything as anyone's ever been, and then all of a sudden, there's this clearing and a massive hydro tower. You know that you could, in an emergency, follow the power lines back to civilization. Well, maybe that's me."

I hated myself for crying every day, more so on the days I woke up crying. I drank my coffee black so I wouldn't need to leave the apartment for cream and sugar. I washed three dishes at a time, wandered from room to room. The light bulb in the kitchen burned out. The thought of tracking down the superintendent to borrow a ladder to replace it exhausted me. I placed a living room lamp on the kitchen table, and cooked with a headlamp.

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This is how I disappear.

I slump on the flowered velour couch, left behind by the previous tenant and balanced on three legs and a stack of textbooks. My weight crushes the corded seams, imprinting the backs of my legs.

Sunlight presses in between the blinds. I stare at the repeating pattern of shadow and light marking my arm.

I could call Michael. He could come over, open the blinds.

MY mother went missing in the city of Milwaukee when I was three. I don't remember this; it was told to me by my father as we drove through the desert of Utah on the way to Salt Lake City where I would have my superior vena cava bypassed.

She wasn't missing-missing, but my father had driven up from Indiana to hand me over—their bi-monthly custody exchange—and she never showed up. Always late, my father said of her, so he waited around my grandparents' house for a few days before he resignedly drove back to Indiana with me in tow.

We spent a lot of time in cars, he and I.

About the bypass: Every human being has small, dime-to-nickel-sized pockets of scar tissue scattered throughout their body. It's the law of the land, this fibrous tissue filling inefficient gaps as our DNA unspools its instructions for creating these fragile bodies of ours.

One in twenty million people will have one of these pockets of scar tissue somewhere vital. In a lung. On the heart. On an ovary. Or, choking the superior vena cava, the body's largest vein, returning oxygen-depleted blood back to the heart for replenishment.

Without the superior vena cava, blood backs up like the morning traffic switchbacking down the mountains into Salt Lake City, and like the wrecks of overzealous cars now fused together, the blood clots and one's left arm, one's neck, one's face, swell and redden, overripe. As if you stood up too fast, consciousness tenuous, but all the time, sitting, standing, sleeping. And if a clot breaks and hits the brain, aneurysm.

Better get that taken care of, said my doctor. And he sent me to Salt Lake, to a friend of his from his residency, who invented the surgery to bypass the superior vena cava. My insurance would cover the surgery, but not the transportation, so my father in his self-sacrificing Piscean way,

offered to use a week of his vacation time and drive me to the hospital in Salt Lake City in his blazing-red Pontiac Firebird.

I hadn't wanted anyone to come because I fully intended to die there. But here was my father, the creases of gnarled, stubby fingers permanently inked black from years of machining, carving other people's designs from massive blocks of steel. Those hands shifted his Firebird into a lower gear as we roared down the mountain, this last-minute slowness unbearable after the high-speed burn across the dry sepia tundra of Wyoming and Nebraska. Those hands smoothed back his hair, what was left of it—nothing on top, but still, his '70s stoner ponytail clinging to the back of his head.

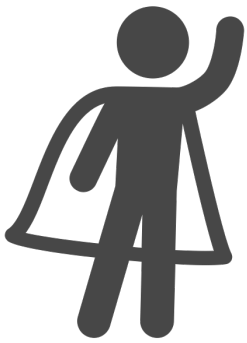
Getting my father to talk was the proverbial blood from stone. Years we spent together, the two of us, crisscrossing the Midwest, saying nothing. He listened to Meatloaf, to Heart. We'd stop for sausage biscuits at McDonalds before dawn. A Ford Pinto deserted us in rural Indiana when I was six. We hitchhiked to a junkyard, walked a pilgrimage through the cemetery of junkers, retrieved an ancient artifact, and hitchhiked back to the Ford where he finally said, people are friendlier to hitchhikers with children.

And then, in Wyoming, he said, I watched my father die from complications after a bypass. And now I'm watching my son.

As if he knew as well that I would die there in Brigham Young's briny lakebed of the intermountain West. And then I asked, and I asked until he answered, about everything I couldn't remember, especially those early years with my mother, who had never returned. Once he got going, his voice at first grit, mere rumblings, turned avalanche as his tongue and his teeth found their momentum. What do you remember, he asked, and I said only the piano, the one visit, the piano in her house, and the loose brick in her fireplace, behind which there was nothing hidden.

That, he said, was your mother, a mystery behind which nothing was hidden.

And to a boy who'd never felt kinship to his quiet, stoic father, that poetry sparked a confluence. Our ten thousand mile silence was broken. I should have known then, that the Firebird, the phoenix, that which burns up and is reborn, would bring me back.



THE new kid doesn't live in the housing project but further west, the changing area between Strathcona and Chinatown. Each time I walk him home after program I see fresh real estate signs, blossoming like the cherry trees.

The other kids at the community centre peg him as weird right away. It's the slight look of surprise he has on his face and how his sentences are too long and the things he wants to talk about are too specific. When I pick up his backpack it weighs a ton. What's in there? I ask. He lets me look at his seven books about World War Two. Hitler, the Holocaust.

Wow, I say, those are some heavy books.

Is that a joke? he asks.

Yes and no, I say.

The centre is a contradiction for him. I can see the struggle on his face each time he comes in. This place where the computers are. But also other kids who are so much harder to read than books or even adults.

On the walk I try asking him about the books. Are they for a school project?

Nope, he says.

So it's just something you're interested in?

Yep.

You just started coming to the centre. Did you live someplace else before? Do you have any brothers or sisters?

I can't tell you that.

Why not?

What if you're a secret agent? What if you're a spy?

Who would I be a spy for?

Who knows!

Is that a joke? I ask.

Yes and no, he says.

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Secret agents. Spies. Words that could be coming from his books or his immigration status or maybe from his own household. Is his mother escaping an abuser, in the country illegally, working in the drug trade? I've met all those kids, living inside secrets they don't even understand. I can remember being a kid with secrets. My dad was a small scale drug dealer. My mother was an activist. Sometimes I can remember the sick feeling you could have at a simple question. All the dangerous things it is possible to be asked. And other times I forget and ask them myself.

What did you get for your birthday/Christmas?

What does your dad/mom do for a living?

How many people live at your house?

Because what is a secret but something that changes how a person looks at you after you say it out loud.

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The next week I ask him about school and the kids in his class.

I don't want to talk about that.

Because it's secret?

Because it's boring.

OK, fair enough. What would you do with a million dollars?

That was one of the questions I had to ask the summer I worked as a telemarketer. It always kept people on the phone, which was the trick to making a sale.

He seems to have thought a lot about this for a twelve year old because he answers with a long list of weapons he would buy. I'm doubtful a million dollars would go that far and I tell him so.

Tanks aren't cheap, I say.

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He discovers I have no sense of direction and so walks me around in

circles when I am taking him home from the centre. He likes the million dollar question. The next week he has to spend half on anything but weapons. He begrudgingly helps out his mom, gives me money for the computer lab. I try to engage his interest in the technical details. Monitor size. RAM. Processor speeds. But he's not that kind of geek.

Just don't buy crappy stuff, he says. Don't rip me off.

The week after, I try to talk to him about the problems he's been having at the centre.

Tell them to leave you alone really loud. Yell it. LEAVE ME ALONE! That way we can hear it and help you but the other kids can't say you're a snitch. Sometimes it takes a while to solve a problem. Sometimes we have to try more than one thing.

I've thought about my list and I have some changes, he says. The new list is more realistic. No tanks or helicopters. But guns, so many guns. Different weapons for different occasions. Zombie attack. Civil war.

We have to take a break from talking about guns, I tell him.

Why? They're so interesting.

Not to me. All they do is hurt people.

But they *protect* you.

Against what?

Everything!

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I talk to the other staff about his gun obsession. The school counselor is called. There are shared concerns. There are some assessments planned.

It's hard having a vivid imagination sometimes, I say to him. When everything feels like a story where anything could happen. But just because something could happen doesn't mean it will.

Like a zombie apocalypse you mean?

Zombies, alien invasions, societal breakdown, war and other doomsday scenarios he can't help imagining. Just because something could happen doesn't mean it will. Like the movie that sometimes plays in my head of him coming through the centre doors with one of the many weapons he's talked about. In the movie I always remind him of our walks, but what happens next depends on the day. Sometimes I'm a hero and sometimes I'm the first victim.

Short or long walk? I ask him after one of our last programs before

summer break. That's our new deal, instead of pretending to get lost.

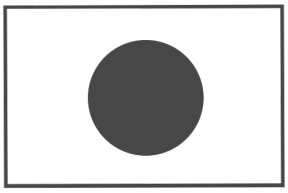
Long, he says. We need the exercise.

Catapults and midieval weapons are mostly what he talks about now. It's not guns, he says. You only said no guns.

Nearly all the For Sale signs down his street say Sold. He tells me they might have to move out of the neighbourhood. Where? I ask and he just shrugs.

OK, I say, imagine you could have *any* super power in the world. What would you pick? I think I'd want to be able to read minds.

What about being able to control them? he says. That would be a million times better.



IN third grade Social Studies, we decorated paper hot air balloons to display the different ethnicities in my class. In the brown Crayola colored basket was my school picture and on the red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple colored balloon was my ethnicity, written in my tiny graphite handwriting. Japanese. I remember looking over at my classmates' hot air balloons. In awe at the girl who had so many commas between Hawaiian, Filipino, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish, she barely had room around her words to color. I will never understand how the boy couldn't remember all that he was. He kept erasing and rewriting Irish, Dutch, German, and French. Growing more hesitant with each letter he wrote, perhaps wondering if there was a neighboring country he was missing. I

was amazed by another classmate who recited the percentages of who he was, as if it helped him to color within the lines. 10% Portuguese, 16% Hawaiian, 25% Filipino, 8% Japanese, 16% Chinese, 20% Chamorro, and 5% African American.

When I would meet someone for the first time they would always ask me, *"so what are you?"* The tanned skin and American accent threw them off. I would reply with a forced smile, "Japanese." Period. But they were waiting for the commas. *I thought you were Hawaiian. Are you sure you're not part Korean? You look Hispanic to me.*

My dad is 100% Japanese. My mom is half Japanese, half Okinawan. But I stopped trying to explain the difference after a White man argued that Okinawan and Japanese are the same ethnicity. I keep the history books at home and say Japanese. Period.

I never felt like I fit in growing up as a full Japanese-American in Hawai'i, a melting pot. But I didn't fit the mainland Japan image either. My skin wasn't fair enough, I couldn't use chopsticks like they were an extension of my fingers, and I was embarrassed to speak the little I knew of the language my grandma thought in. I didn't grow up reading manga or watching anime. I am Buddhist, but only during New Year's and at funerals.

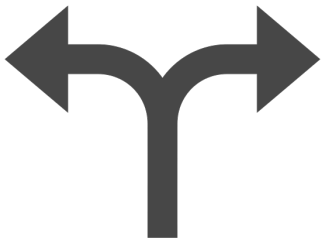
Whatever I was taught, it was never enough. Someone always knew more. Like my half-Japanese and half-Caucasian friend who told me I had no authentic ethnic background because he can speak Japanese and I can't. He tried to preserve the local Hawai'i culture he never embraced growing up while he attends school in the mainland. I remember a Japanese classmate who would only eat using chopsticks and drink Japanese brand beers. Clinging onto her culture like a crutch, I always wondered if she was trying to prove she was "Japanese enough" to those around her or to herself.

I remember being called a "Jap" when I was too young to really know what it meant but the intonation filled in the gaps. That day I became ashamed to be Japanese. At the time, to be Japanese meant spending New Year's Day making mochi with my grandma and riding my bike in the street with my neighbors. It meant greeting my great grandparents in their butsudan and sleeping over friends' houses. There was never a separation between being Japanese and being American but that day I felt a crack inside of me that has only continued to grow.

I do not feel whole. But I would be preaching to the wrong choir if I were to say this out loud. How can I say *I do not feel whole* as a full Japanese-American living in Hawai'i, a string of tiny islands that only when

combined form a whole state? How can I say it to biracial friends who never felt like they were enough to identify with neither mother nor father so just weren't anything at all? To friends who don't know where their dad is, half of their family history lost. Who am I to say to them that I do not feel whole?

Pieces of me are dissected and labeled—at the end of the semester, my professor told me I was a "good little Japanese girl" because I did the work and never complained. Parts of me I learned to be ashamed of—I never told my coworker that the Japanese music she was studying for her music course that sounded "screechy" to her, soothed me because it reminded me of cool summer nights dancing in Obon festivals. Parts of me I learned to hide away—my mother warned me that I shouldn't bring tsukemono and rice for lunch because others will not like the smell. But these parts of me are all of me. I learned to be inadequate because of a lack of commas or a lack of not being "Japanese enough" despite that being all I ever was and all I ever could be.



BY the time I get to work, R has cut the cord to the sprinkler head in his office and water is gushing out the door. He stands on his desk, scissors in hand. His shirt is sheer in its wetness, the flood as black as photocopier toner.

My office is bugged, he says.

I watch as he scrambles off his desk, his shirt half-tucked, his dress pants wrinkled like they were slept in. He flips through his day timer, stops at a page covered with license plate numbers and stabs at one with his wet finger, leaving a black smudge.

This guy, he says, *blue F150. He followed me here today.*

The water runs around my shoes like the tide coming in over rocks.

• • •

When I first work with R, we chainsmoke, take turns ashing in a coffee cup in the middle of his desk. He teaches me how to bifurcate a convertible debenture. How to compound interest monthly. How to accrete a bond discount.

I don't go to post secondary school—I have R.

His pencil scratches the paper while he talks, as he explains these complexities like he's giving instructions for making toast. We become fast friends even though he's my boss. We go on double dates with my husband and R's girlfriend-of-the-moment. He is refreshingly straight-edge. Normal and nerdish.

• • •

Do you have a brain tumor? I ask part-way through one of R's hour-long diatribes about *they* and *them* and *them them them*.

Have you been to the doctor?

He shakes his head, his bangs swishing across his pallid forehead.

Can't trust him, he says. *They're paying him to kill me*.

• • •

I think everyone I know is living with an undiagnosed illness, that everyone is dying. This is the fallout from my dad passing away inexplicably when he was forty-six, and it is something R and I bond over—he lost his dad when he was young, too.

• • •

R doesn't come to the office anymore. He telephones from the parkade, tells me which spot he's waiting in. It's always a different spot and he's always backed in, ready to go. I meet him with files, with cheques to sign, with the growing stack of personal bills accumulating on his desk. I'm pissed he's not around more, that I'm left doing all the work.

Fast food wrappers cover the floor of his car, post-it-notes with more license plate numbers stuck to his dash, a crack runs the length of his windshield.

What happened? I ask.

They tried to shoot me, he says.

It looks like a rock hit it.

He shakes his head. *Bullet*.

• • •

We join a pool league and play every Tuesday night. My husband and R carry the team, often running the table off the break. We share beers, we share wings, we share stories about how we grew up. R is a real mama's boy. Has supper with her every Sunday night, cuts her grass, takes her to the doctor. He encourages me to reach out to my mum, to try and repair our relationship which has been strained since my dad died.

It's never too late, he says. *It's never too late*.

• • •

R gives me a lift home and drives so fast I am convinced I'm going to die. It is a blur of traffic lights, brakes, and horns horns horns.

They can't catch me if they can't see me, he says, as if we're moving faster than the speed of light, and maybe we are.

He looks over and smiles like he used to, swishes his bangs out of his face, but his eyes are crazy and he is crazy, and that's when I know. When I finally calculate the right answer, an answer I know I don't need to do the proof for.

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When I am in my late-teens, early-twenties, I smoke a lot of weed, eat a lot of mushrooms. I stay away from acid because someone once told me acid makes your brain bleed and if your brain is bleeding, you can't go into space. As a girl, I dreamed about the kind of quiet the atmosphere held, the bigness of it all when viewed from a different vantage point.

What are you on? I ask R in the parking lot.

I'm shivering because of nerves and exhaustion and the dread of confrontation.

Crack, he whispers. *It's crack.*

He looks so small, so defeated, when his eyes meet mine. Looks like he could float away.

That night, I read about crack—what it does to your brain, to your body—and I cry.

• • •

The first time I meet R, I'm tending a makeshift bar in an office building where he works. It is the Christmas season, and I've recently moved to this city on a whim with my soon-to-be husband. R orders a whiskey sour, asks what I'd rather be doing when I tell him I don't normally bartend.

Numbers, I say. *I'm into numbers.*

So am I, he says. *So am I.*

I start working with R the following week.

• • •

R promises he'll get better, he'll get treatment, he'll be clean clean clean. His aging mother spends tens of thousands of dollars she doesn't have on rehab facilities he doesn't stay at.

Late one night, R calls me from a payphone at the ferry terminal twelve hours after checking into the last center he'll check into.

I can't do this, he says.

I stare into the darkness of my bedroom, listen to my husband snoring, listen to R hyperventilating on the other end of the line.

How hard it is to separate yourself from someone once you get to know them. To reconcile who someone used to be with who they are now. That kind of bifurcation doesn't come so easily.

Neither can I, I say.

And I hang up.

Breathe in that baby smell

I smell lavender body wash. I am curled on the floor of my bathtub, and my sister is showing me how to relieve my over-swollen breasts. I am too weak and too sick to stand, and the cascading water is hot but I am shivering. She shows me how to massage away the pain, but I am too cold and too weak. She covers me with a towel and helps me out of the tub.

I smell hospital. Antiseptic and lunchmeat. My son is in the back of my room, my husband bouncing him to soothe him as we wait for another doctor. We stare at the closed door, the barrier between my

newborn and the many invisible threats to his underdeveloped body. A security guard jokes about how bad it is to bring a newborn to the ER. We want to hurt him.

I smell ginger—the cookies I can stomach when I can't eat anything else. I smell my husband's deodorant as he smooths my hair when I'm too sick to get out of bed.

I don't smell my baby. I don't want to.

#Dontblink

I become obsessed with time. I want it to go faster, speed up. Whisk me away to a future place when things are better. I don't know what "better" means. I just know it's different.

I think about how quickly time passed before the baby, and hope it goes as fast after. Our vacation to Seattle was two months ago, and those two months flew by. How can I make the next two months go just as fast?

They say to soak it in now because I'll blink and it'll be over.

I blink and blink and blink and time still feels sticky and slow.

I held you instead

I read about leaving the laundry for later. I read to let the dishes pile up. I read that I should let other people help me. I should enjoy this fleeting time with my baby.

I haven't been in my kitchen in a week. I orbit from the bed to the couch. I want to do the dishes. I want to fold my laundry and wipe off my counter. I want to see something clean, stacked, orderly, complete.

I savor the feeling of clean clothes against my skin.

I cannot hold my baby.

Mom and baby are happy and healthy.

I scroll through my phone and see beaming women holding their babies. They are secure in their hospital beds. I want to warn them that it changes once they get home. But it doesn't seem to change for them. Why did it change for me?

Settling into a new normal they say. They joke about finally getting a shower. They use hashtags like #newmomlife and #needcoffee to make light of it all.

I want to make light of it all, but it all feels so heavy.

I am not happy and I am not healthy.

I miss those newborn noises.

I hear him through walls. I can hear each grunt, each cry, each sniffle. Each noise sets sparks across my skin and makes my heart race. I cannot sleep when he sleeps, as they tell me to do. He is too loud. I am too frantic.

When my mother holds him downstairs, I listen through the crackly silence to hear him cry.

I stay in the shower too long and let the water crash on my ears. It's the only place I can't hear him.

This. Right. Here. This is everything.

I ask people to keep telling me it gets better. It gets better, right? It gets better, right? Tell me it gets better?

I don't want this to be all that's left for me. Please tell me that there's more.

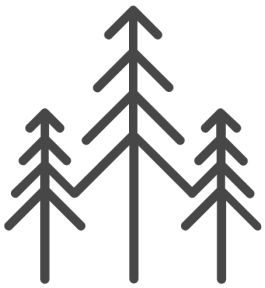
And just like that…

I post pictures of my baby. He is smiling and it feels like a salve. People tell me he always looks happy.

I don't post about the night we held him as he screamed, when he wouldn't latch and we knew he was starving. I don't post about my husband feeding him with a syringe, and the feeling of defeat and fear that I couldn't care for him.

I can't figure out how to share my child with the world. I want to, but the internet strips away complexity. It makes everything black and white. Everything is either amazing or terrible.

I want to be many, many things, but I am reduced to just a mother.



Tell me a story.

1. Sapwood

In American lumberjack folklore, the hidebehind was a fearsome beast that camouflaged itself behind tree trunks so it couldn't be seen. It stalked wayward loggers, attacked viciously, dragged them back to its lair to be devoured.

The lumberjacks, crammed in single-room cabins and working twelve-hour shifts, marched into the woods daily to cut the trees, to clear paths for roads and railways.

But come night, fires roaring, tucked inside and drunk on warm beer and homemade moonshine, how they dreaded this place, these godly lands. How they feared that the critters the old gods of the woods sicced on them would eat them whole.

• • •

Primordial, is how you describe it. The feeling of being lost in the woods, abandoned to your wits, what you remember from low-budget survivalist TV shows and action films.

I'm thirteen or so. Down by the elementary school, there's a red-iron bridge traversing a small creek filled with crawfish. Around the bridge, thick woods potted with oak and elm, skyline locust and chestnut and linden between sectioned neighborhoods. I'd seen deer here once, at recess, when I was younger. So I reasoned it's possible to disappear, this close to home still, if I wanted.

2. Cambium

Pliny the Elder was convinced that deep in the Hercynian Forest there lived birds with feathers that glowed like bonfires in the night. They were called *hercinia*, and their shining feathers were meant to lead people out of the dark, twisting woods. He sought these birds—many did—and wrote about them endlessly, desperate to prove their existence.

This search for something almighty, ignoring instead the splendid, astonishing natural world itself, the *actual* birds, their sweet music, how they keep the forests healthy, happy—*How much do we leave behind?*

How much do we miss?

• • •

Now I've come, with a backpack full of crackers, having told my parents I was at a friend's house, to see how much nighttime I can take in. I stand, let the blue-black come for me, and it's quiet, once the birds sound off: I hear trees creaking, branches cracking, evening animals I don't know the names of emerge from their daylight slumbers.

Back home my parents argued, my older brother jammed a steak knife into the wall in protest of his life, being born into *this* family. He'd hole himself off in the small bathroom and smoke weed, blow the smoke out the open window, hate the very earth this place was built upon.

Here, in these woods, I think about my house. I'm breathing hard. I ask the trees what it would take for me to live with them.

The wind picks up and they roar back at me.

3. Pith

In Irish mythology, the famous King Suibhne was cursed in battle and fled to the woods. Years there, he went mad, but after a lengthy exile he emerged with a mastery over the animals, the birds, the trees themselves. He'd learned their language. He could see mankind for what it was: bitter and mean.

In the woods he'd found refuge and solace—freedom. Not long after, taking shelter in a monastery, Suibhne was killed by a cook envious of the

way his wife was looking at him. He couldn't, any longer, see any of this for what it was.

• • •

At a party my sophomore year in high school, in a friend's backyard acreage, a bonfire soars up and crackles into the purple dusk-lit sky. People have paired off, are making out on the oversized trampoline, have wandered, hand-in-hand, to fool around on spread-out blankets along the lawn. I'm alone, have only just recently had my first kiss, so I take a stroll in the small woods at the side of the property.

I amble slowly over soft piles of fallen tamarack needles, penny bun mushrooms, viburnum and trillium and toadshade and wild geranium. Way in the back, near the crooked chain-link that squares off their massive yard, I sit on a rotting elm log. My face is red from the fall chill, my knees knocked together. From here, I can see the bonfire lit up brilliantly, can just make out silhouettes of drunk teens laughing and dancing in place, lips pressed together, bodies humping in unison.

I touch the sides of the log where rot has set in and my fingers press deeply into the soft inner parts, velvety on my fingertips. I smile. From here, I can see the whole world.

4. Heartwood

In Swedish folklore, the skogsrå were mythical female nymphs that lived in the vast evergreen forests, lured men—hunters—into the deepest parts, never to be seen again.

• • •

In college, I meet a girl I like in a forest near campus rife with trails and bike paths. We walk next to one another and make small talk about classes, the impending summer break. She rubs her hands tenderly along a silver maple, tells me about her uncle who makes maple syrup from trees in his yard, gifts it to family members. She's crying when she turns to tell me she's leaving school. That her ex back home has asked her to marry him, that

they agreed college wasn't for her. Overhead, blue jays and warblers sound off. Then all I can hear is the distant din of traffic, a train whistle even farther off.

I touch the tree with her, lie my palm flat on its bark, carefully catalogue its patterns, the fissures and cracks, the initials of past lovers, dried sap clinging to the carvings like scar tissue.

Together, we are quiet.

We are.

Plastic Meeko glass, Pocahontas Burger King promo

We entered through the kitchen, a grime-coated galley with crust-chunked plates stacked in the sink and flaking white cupboards with half-hanging doors and a Formica table squeezed against the wall and I curled up my toes in my sandals, involuntarily. The effluvia of decades in the house, the damp, hanging gloom of humidity because there was no central air conditioning and the painted-over windows couldn't open. Down the hall was a small faded-paper bedroom, and crammed between the dresser-tops heaped with Looney Tunes beefy tees was the bed. That was where her mother and Chip lived. There was a deadbolt on their bedroom door, the

front door uselessly skeleton-keyholed, and the back screen door flapping, the hook-and-eye unlatched.

Three-inch-thick phone book

Two years earlier, I had been befriended by a girl who also lived in Club Pines, my neighborhood. When her mother remarried, the girl received a stepsister whose cleverness and willingness to engage in make-believe worlds as a pre-teen drew me to her. I ignored the original girl and only came over on weekends to see her stepsister. She and I invented sister cities named Tylacia and Lovers Lane, populating them with the families we fantasized about: Tazz and Scarlett Claiborne, a movie producer and his stay-at-home wife; Kevin and Mona Farice, a paramedic and Tylacia's first female mayor; Jennilyn Janswood, the new fourth grade teacher. We assigned our citizens pen pals in their neighboring towns, and we would perch on the slipper chairs in the front sitting room of her stepmother's house, scribbling their get-to-know-you letters, throwing the folded papers across the carpet to each other, waiting for someone to write back.

Videocassette in a padded manila envelope

We were new builds, my friend and I. My parents had upgraded from a flat 1950s ranch in Oregon to the two-story splendor of eastern North Carolina, and her parents had come south from New York, though they splintered shortly after. Her mother was now living in an old white clapboard out near Ayden with Chip, the son of the tobacco farming family who owned the fields behind my neighborhood. My friend lived with her mother during the week. As she neared the end of eighth grade, my friend became fixated on attending boarding school. She sent away for promotional materials and I followed suit, confusing my parents as I received videocassettes from The Madeira School with girls rappelling through forests in their green plaid skirts, gorgeous ivy-covered brick buildings revealing classrooms of students earnestly discussing science and math in their dormitories and dining halls. I felt I needed to purchase a history for my descendants if we were ever going to belong in the South, but I didn't want to leave my family. I wanted the rabbit warren, the crumbledown tunnels, the unseen movement, nine tenths of the law.

Matted green shag carpet

Across from her mother and Chip's bedroom was a living room, dark and murky because there was no overhanging light fixture, just a single lamp near the doorway. The windows looked out at the shin-brushing weeds of the front yard, but the ratty blinds stayed pulled; too much light would heat up the room too quickly. A long, worn velvet couch, an old television, and more furniture and boxes girding the perimeter. I slept somewhere in that room, once, and I assume my friend slept on the couch because it was where she slept five times a week, but I fuzzed that night from my memory.

Roach husks

Up the stairs were the two bedrooms no one lived in any more. The roof needed patching, and after a good rain, streams would drip-drop into the bedrooms my friend and her brother had abandoned, though their stuff was still spread everywhere. Clothes my friend didn't wear, old school

projects and books and the ephemera of life that she left in place, didn't pack in her weekend knapsack but also didn't throw away. There was a large, "lawyer-looking" desk with a broad leatherette ink-blotter tabletop and a cunning, thin brass fence standing along the back that I was instantly drawn toward. I admired the desk loudly, and my friend said I could just have it. Chip and her mother muscled the desk down the stairs, banging into the walls, and heaved it into Chip's truckbed, where my friend and I held the legs in place as they drove me back to Club Pines, the wind greasing my long hair.

Elsa Peretti for Halston silver bean-shaped locket with solid perfume wax

My friend's mother and Chip had found ten one-hundred-dollar bills from the 1920s buried in the wall of their bedroom, a stash they assumed was from Depression days, when the Nobles had owned the house. It was never clear how or why they went hammering in the walls, but the discovery convinced my friend and me that there was money squirreled away in other corners; we had elaborate plans to jackhammer the stairs

apart once her mother bought the double-wide she was angling to slide into the tired-out tobacco fields alongside the house. We were going to demo the place like the Bobbsey Twins, surely finding a secret not meant for us to discover.

Moon pie wrappers

We did not go to boarding school, did not carry out our plans to marry my cousin and his friend in Alabama, where it was legal if you were thirteen. Wednesday Utah wrote a letter to Jennilyn Janswood, informing her that Lovers Lane had burned to the ground, leaving my Tylacians stranded. My friend's mother and Chip moved into the mobile home and it was clean and fresh, a 1995 model with a small vaulted ceiling and beige carpeting, well-lit, nothing like the dark, cluttered, wet history I'd wanted to burrow into. I could find aspiration anywhere. What I couldn't find was the collapsed core of a home, broken into parts I could steal.

YOU listen from the vestibule to the clicking of compacts and lipstick as your mother gets ready to testify. She stopped raising you before she could share this specific ritual, but she tries to make up for it.

She says "take this mascara, I never use it."

And, "take this nail polish honey, this is a great color." She places these tools in a Ziploc for your flight back to Portland.

Between rooms, you can see most of the apartment. It is sparse; she brought little with her from California in your uncle's minivan over a decade ago.

Two large, abstract paintings in crimson with stripes of yoke-yellow lean heavy against the rear wall of the living room. A corner computer desk, a beige couch, a candle set. You wonder how she managed to fit the paintings in the van, if they rested on her meager pile of clothes and crimson blankets, if they kept her occupied crossing all that flat land.

The kitchen is a space of pride for her. A clove of garlic and a knife set rest on the island countertop. Lately her staple is steak, cooked in a pan on the stove, placed over a slab of butter. You watch as it melts into a golden pool on her dinner plate at your grandmother's house, where you've decided to spend most of your week-long visit because—by house rule—grandma's is a place of sobriety, no alcohol allowed.

Your mother joins you in the vestibule; her hair is done up in large curls, kinked-up spirals dyed burgundy. Her faux leather jacket, lipstick and nail color are all coordinated in shades of maroon.

Her presence is magnetic, salt on eggplant, withdrawing small beads of story—an unfamiliar need you feel to confess and divulge: back home you are lost. After eight hours on your feet you shower off the smell of coffee and mayonnaise first thing, only to find your boyfriend in the same place you left him. You walk to the Sapphire Hotel alone and order a well gin and tonic, squeezing the lime, catching weekend jazz, reading sci-fi amidst the

manicured couples. You post the moment: *drink and read*, your one message to the world.

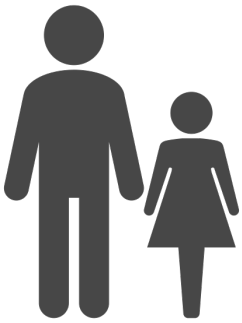
It's ironic, because you've always been in a kind of vestibule with her. Your head leaning against the wall as she drops stretchy dumpling dough into bone broth. You—in the passenger seat of the car, watching her smoke curl, missing the cracked window. You—peeking through the opening in your bedroom door, wondering if she might ever turn off the music, stop dancing, sleep. You've always been in this useless space, the center of her orbit.

You pity the maroon, her perfume, the anti-frizz spray. Because, especially today, her appearance is also her credibility. You read somewhere that *a woman will return to their abusive partner an average of seven times.* You've learned so much about her from the internet, much more than she is willing to share.

You place your palms on her cheeks, forcing affection. You too, put on a mask and say you believe in her. None of this is familiar. This is your space and now, here she is. You've never seen her so up close before.

After the trial she walks to Walgreens in the night and returns with a plastic bag.

Inside are seven shades of "fruit" scented chapstick, the kinds in the little globes, as if you can't find chapstick in Portland. As if each were a carefully concealed word.



1. ~~Make~~ *break* promises ~~and follow through~~.

Remember when I was little and how I wanted to marry you when I grew up? I can't remember if it was for my birthday or Christmas, but I remember getting this large ugly winter coat. It had a purple patchy pattern and a furry black hood. You said, "You look like your Slovakian grandmother." The best part about that coat was the present inside one of the pockets.

I pull out a rosy pink ring box. You open it for me. Someone jokes, "Are you going to marry your dad, Ann?" You give me the little gold ring engraved with the first initial of my name.

Someone says, “Be careful. Don’t lose it.”

- *Don’t recognize the engagement ring you gave your ex-wife.*
- *Don’t ask your twenty-six-year-old daughter why she wears it.*

2. Be a parent ~~forever~~ *until you don’t feel like it anymore*.

- *Your oldest daughter is twenty-one. Send her an email on Christmas Eve.*
- *Write, “Gone to the Czech Republic. Took the dog. Get your sister to grab her things from the apartment.”*
- *Send her an email three years later of you travelling in Europe.*
- *Attach a photo of yourself smiling in bed with a thumbs up as you showcase your leg in a cast from a motorcycle accident.*
- *Write, “This changed my life.”*

3. Teach your daughter to find a husband that is as ~~honest~~ *secretive* as you.

- *Preach to her the idea that she can tell you anything and expect the same in return.*
- *Don't ask her about her boyfriend, Andy. Don't ask if he is honest like you.*

In the boiler room of the Health Centre you work at as a maintenance man, you say, "Humans are just like any other animal. It's natural for people to check each other out. You know my boss, Susan? She's good looking. I can say that because you know I wouldn't do anything. But if I didn't think she was good looking then there's something wrong with me."

- *Tell her the same week she found out that Andy cheated on her, "I'm seeing a woman in the Czech Republic."*
- *Convince her that you are not cheating.*

4. Teach your daughter to ~~build self-respect~~ *compromise her integrity*.

- *Your oldest daughter is twenty-six.*
- *Send her a text message. Write, "Where are you?"*
- *Don't tell her why you are contacting her, so she knows that it is her job to keep holding the door open in case you want to pop back in.*

"What do you think, Ann?" You asked me during one of our daily conversations in the living room.

"I don't know," I said when I didn't agree with you. I knew that if I told you the truth you'd keep me there until you felt like I had seen your point of view and understood why you were right.

"What kind of answer is that? Are you stupid or something?" You said with a laugh like you knew that I knew that I wasn't stupid.

"I don't know," I said again. I knew that what was coming next was faster than verbally disagreeing with you.

"What do you mean you don't know? I don't even know why I talk to you. You always end up crying. See, there you go."

- *Train her to believe that her voice is only valid if it agrees with yours.*

5. Teach her that guys only want ~~one thing~~ *favours*.

- *Your oldest daughter is seventeen. Take her out to her favourite Chinese restaurant. Sit at your usual table.*

The cushioned chairs welcome our familiar figures. Order a pitcher of iced tea and a side of their famous cho-cho beef.

"Can I borrow $5000 from you?" You ask me as you cross off on a yellow-sticky note the $2000 you owed me. I felt like an adult when you included me in the financial conversations of the house. "I want to buy a scope for my gun, and that snowmobile we looked at." I thought about the two in our backyard.

It doesn't occur to me that it's my money that is paying for this food. I don't think about the $500 a month I started paying for rent because you said, "it's your responsibility to help take care of the family."

A co-parent without children. An imitation of your Slovakian mother.

6. ~~Forgive~~, never forget.

"You're the reason why we are in debt," you said to me after I said that you cannot stay in the spare room of my apartment. "You wanted to be an actor and a singer remember? Remember? We spent all that money on you. Your brother and sister won't get the same opportunity to do what they want because there's no money left. You wouldn't have any of this—this furniture, this place, your life—if I didn't give up what I did, right? Right?"

You wouldn't be free if you didn't give up me. Right?

7. Tell your daughter her wildness is a ~~gift~~ *syndrome* of Czechoslovakian-gypsy blood.

- *Ask her, "Who in your life is number one?"*

When mom doesn't get her way with me, she says, "you're just like your father."

When you don't get your way with me, you leave.

When my boss doesn't get her way with me, she says, "Settle down."

When you asked me what I thought, I said, “Family?”

I roll the engagement ring you once gave mom around my finger and say out loud, “I am not my dad.”

ON Friday nights, we circle our father's chair for the blessing over the children. He rests a heavy hand on our heads, spills familiar Hebrew words —*May you be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah*—then we run around the long Sabbath table, forcing him to give chase. He does (he could, back then) and lands quick kisses on our cheeks.

• • •

I have my first kiss while sinking into cold sand in the shadow of the

Ventnor City boardwalk. I'm six years old and wear an oversized casino shirt that doubles as a dress. That house on the beach had the gold shag carpet where I learned to walk and then danced to Polish lullabies on my grandfather's toes and then twined the rubber cord of a rotary phone through preteen fingers.

• • •

My father's labored breathing echoes down the split-level staircase. He trades the middle of his days for naps at high noon, sleeps on a black leather couch in the heart of the room, a cracked book, one of his mysteries, rising and falling on his chest as grandchildren swirl around.

• • •

When I move away from home, I frequent a coffee shop with egg-yellow walls along one of the city's main arteries. I'm new to being in the world and caffeine is my drug of choice. I drink it strong. Dark. Often. Amid the din of other people's days. Come middle of night, my heart flutters and

races. I milk every hour for what it's worth. I miss nothing.

• • •

The walls of my father's lower chamber have thickened over time. Apical hypertrophic cardiomyopathy: a heart closing in on itself. He flies to the deep Midwest in the dead of summer to the one surgeon who would crack him open and carve away some of the growth. He was warned, though, it could always return.

• • •

On a dark February morning, I'm on my back in that lofted bed in the dorm room off Lincoln Field. The square-jawed sophomore is arched over me in a threadbare tee, telling of the time he sang to a dying pigeon on the side of the road. "I don't want to scare you," his words like a distant train whistle, "but I think I'm falling in love with you." I no longer need sleep, only him. He is not Jewish. Not allowed. My mother has already threatened to mourn for me if we marry.

• • •

One day in April, the call comes that my father's brother dropped dead on a golf course. We all get EKGs after that. In me, they find a functional murmur—subtle sounds caused not by defects in the heart itself, but by circumstances in its surroundings.

• • •

We take the sophomore's old blue Volvo station wagon, a hand-me-down from his parents, to diners across the state line. We talk in aching tones about how we have to end this and I look across the table, hating the thought of him with anyone else. I order cheese fries and we draw on the backs of paper menus with kid crayons: stick figures, our childhood nicknames, maps of our family trees. A hieroglyphic of us.

• • •

My grandmother saw 95 before dying of congestive heart failure. You can live a long time with a broken heart.

• • •

We leave behind our forbidden love in a wood-paneled room on an early summer night. He wears a yellow raincoat, hands me a letter listing our memories. I hope we find our way back to each other, but I never say so and we never do.

• • •

I'd travel in trains down the coast—Linden, Edison, Hamilton—to boys I'd lie next to on cold campgrounds, kiss on the porch of a hostel in Crete, or in the copper fog of a New York City 3 a.m. and never see again.

• • •

Now I've found my way to the farmlands of Pennsylvania and I have this husband and this house. Four children. I fix dinners and buy tap shoes and take out the trash on Tuesdays. I get my heart checked every three years, lying on a table as the echo machine bares the contents of my chest.

• • •

Things look fine for now. But if you listen closely, you can hear a soft flutter, the clamor of all I've known or loved. The murmur that could be my quiet undoing in the end.

After Alexander Chee

1. I HAVE, as I like to say, two master's degrees and half of a Ph.D. Which is to say that I spent six years pursuing an MA and Ph.D. in English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I completed all of the Ph.D. requirements except for the dissertation.

2. My first conception of a dream job, at age seven or eight, was to own my own general store out in some rural community. I have no idea

what sparked this desire, but it lasted for a while. I think I was drawn to the idea of a community hub where everyone goes and knows everyone else. I also fantasized about all the hours I'd have to spend organizing shelves.

3. From age eleven to fourteen, I stopped dreaming of things "to be." I was approaching and then entered "womanhood" (according to my father, whom many have called a cult leader), and it was now time to start looking for a husband.

4. Because, you know, the only reason God made women in the first place is so that men have someone to cook for them and in whom to spread their seed.

5. I can't technically call myself "ABD" (not that this acronym means anything outside of academia anyway), although I *did complete* my dissertation proposal, and although my advisor and second-in-line committee member both approved of what I had written. I can't call myself ABD because my third committee member, Eduardo, the one I

added last minute—the one I didn't even want on my committee to begin with, but asked him anyway because he was the only other Victorianist in the department and I wanted to finish this final step before leaving the program to pursue a degree and career in Student Affairs—*that* committee member decided my proposal was not "elevated" enough.

6. If it had occurred to me that "Being Nancy Drew" was a potential career path, my first dream job would have been that of a detective or private investigator.

7. I was twelve when my dad decided Bill (twenty-two at the time) was an eligible enough bachelor to begin courting me once I became post-pubescent.

8. I definitely also wanted to be a singer when I grew up.

9. The only class I took with Eduardo was on the topic of Liberalism. Not Victorian Liberalism, liberalism generally. And not Fin de Siècle Poetic

Decadence, as my cohort had requested. But I took the class anyway, because at the time I was committed to the idea of being a professor, and I thought I needed Eduardo on my dissertation committee.

10. By the time I was ready to schedule my dissertation proposal defense, I had already been accepted into the Educational Leadership program for enrollment that fall. My advisor and second reader were aware of and supported this career change.

11. Actually, my first dream job was to be a mermaid. In some box somewhere is a video of me after my fifth birthday party, trying out my new karaoke microphone stand with my best friend. We are singing along to "Part of Your World" from *The Little Mermaid*, and I'm being an all-out diva. The whole video is basically me wriggling around the living room, hoarding the microphone and squirming away from my friend every time she moves in for a duet.

12. Bill turned out to be gay.

13. When I met with Eduardo about being my third committee member, for transparency's sake, I also told him about my upcoming departure. He said, "I hope you don't think I'm going to let you by with mediocre work just because you're leaving the program."

14. During my Ariel phase, I refused to swim normally in our apartment's pool, instead crossing my legs at the ankles to emulate merhood whenever I swam.

15. The next potential suitor was Levi, the son of one of my dad's followers. He was two years younger than I, so the waiting period on that courtship would have been several more years.

16. My final paper for Eduardo's class was a Marxist-Feminist reading of *Aurora Leigh*, arguing essentially that what moves the narrative forward is its resistance to the market forces of the traditional "marriage plot" structure (even though Aurora does end up marrying in the end). I would later present the paper at the annual British Women Writers

Conference, where it was met with praise. He gave it a B- and called my theoretical framework "trite."

17. Shortly after his arrest, my dad met Daniel McCross. They were cellmates for a while in San Diego County Jail, and my dad converted him. Daniel replaced Levi as my future husband. At the time, Daniel was thirty-one, and I was fourteen. His favorite photo of me was from when I was twelve.

18. In college, I briefly considered switching my major to Art instead of English. I wanted to be a photographer. I had been doing black and white photography since my junior year of high school, a skill I was proud of. I could spend hours in the darkroom without noticing that any time had passed. One of my professors got her MFA in Iowa, and whenever I looked at her photos, I dreamed of making art and having naked sex parties for three years out in the middle of nowhere.

19. A week before my wedding, I got a letter from my dad. My birthday had just passed, and I hadn't told him about the wedding, so I thought it

was one of his annual "Happy birthday—I love you but you need to stop sinning" letters. It was, but with an added admonition: "Do not marry that woman. Your marriage will be an abomination in the eyes of the Lord."

20. Then I thought, *What if my photos aren't actually any good?* So I stuck with English.

I'M as old now as my dad was when he dunked me underwater in the baptism font at our local Mormon ward, baptizing me into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

• • •

"I was today years old…" people say on Twitter, when tweeting about something that they just learned. Turn of phrase borne out of form and function, out of finding a new way to say something old.

• • •

The other day, one of the essays we'd read and were discussing in one of my classes mentioned 9/11 as marker of time. I looked at my room of mostly freshman students and realized, for the first time, that likely some of them were not yet born in September 2001. I asked them what cultural moments—whether tragedy or celebration or something in between—they thought of as markers of time, moments they remember where they were then they happened, demarcations of before and after. I was surprised there wasn't an immediate or universal answer, though I wouldn't have had one when I was their age either. Kurt Cobain killing himself, perhaps. I wanted to add McGwire breaking Roger Maris' twenty-seven year old homerun record—I remember where I was, who I was with, the excitement amongst my roommates in the moment—but in fact that would have still been another couple of years away.

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Father as parent, as role model, as measuring stick. How big my dad's hands seemed when he held me and told me to fall back, fully submerging underwater as act of baptism. How fast his beard stubble grew when he didn't shave for a couple days. The pant size on the label on the back of his jeans.

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On Tuesdays, I play soccer at the YMCA with a group of grad students and one of their professors from the University where I am a Lecturer. I don't know how old the students are. I presume them to be older than my stepdaughter, who will start grad school in the fall, but younger than I was when I was in grad school.

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I was seven, eight, nine years old when I would go with my mom to the YWCA to visit my grandmother, working there as a counselor, largely helping and talking to women who had left abusive partners, who had

nowhere else to go. I was nineteen years old, a month away from beginning my sophomore year in college, a year older, give or take, than most of my current students, when my grandmother passed away.

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I was last year years old when I saw the Mr. Rogers documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Near the end of that movie, Mr. Rogers says, "I'd like to give you all an invisible gift. A gift of a silent minute to think about those who have helped you become who you are today." I was last year years old when I took that minute to think about my grandmother; last year years old when Mr. Rogers encouraged us to "imagine how grateful they must be, that during your silent times, you remember how important they are to you;" last year years old when I cried through that gift of a silent minute.

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I've been doing this thing more and more as I get older, more nostalgic. I do the math, backwards, forwards, figuring out how old I was when, how

old I am now. Memories and events and people as benchmarks and frames of reference. Venn diagrams of figurative and literal size, age, meaning. The speed, the size, the shape of a parent, a dad, a child, husband, teacher, adult, human.

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I started teaching at the University where I still teach now when I was the age that my wife was when we started dating. We met a few years after I graduated college. Her daughter was as old then as I was when my dad's large hands held me next to him in the baptism font at our church. Her daughter's half-sister was as old then as I was when I went on my first date, and is as old now as I was when I moved across the country, Washington to Michigan, to live with them.

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I was a couple months ago years old, when I drove back across the country to spend the summer in the city where I grew up. When I stopped in a city

that I'd only noticed the day before to be on my route, and met my biological half-sister, the first blood relation I've ever met. She's one year older than my stepdaughter's half-sister; I was as old when she was born as my younger brother was when I graduated high school, though I was still years, decades, away from knowing about her. We had dinner, and talked about the years and time and distance and lives between us, these measurements that felt both surprising and not. It became one of my favorite stories to tell during this summer of seeing friends and family.

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I've spent the summer having meals and hanging out and going on adventures and reliving the past and telling favorite stories and creating new stories to retell in our futures with friends and family. Friends who are basically family. My best friend's daughter is as old now as her mom was when she and I went on a date—another favorite story—this little kid date to see *Ernest Goes to Jail* in elementary school. Their son is as old as my stepdaughter was when I met her. One evening, having dinner with their

extended family, I marvel at how little the kids' youngest cousin is, how he is the same age my best friend was when we met—one more of my favorite stories to tell, waving through the fence in my grandmother's backyard to this little kid who seemed about my age.

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I was today years old when I thought about that memory of going to the YWCA, when I realized I hadn't heard or thought about the YWCA in years, when wondered if it is still even a thing, when I thought anew about my grandmother—and my mom, and my dad, and my brother, and my biological mom for giving me up for adoption, for the gift she gave my parents—and how much she, and they, helped me become who I am today. A parent, child, husband, teacher, adult, human.

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