Before 19
Creative Nonfiction Class of 2013
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Bottle Man
By Lily Herzan

I can imagine him when he was young, eyes shining, maybe with a newsboy cap perched precariously on sandy locks. He told me he was a Brooklyn boy – born and raised – and he never would have found his passion if he hadn’t stumbled upon the group of boys that day. They were a few years older than him, wielding shovels and sticks like mini undertakers with their pants covered in dirt and their faces bathed in mystery. It wasn’t illegal back then, he told me. Regulations barely even existed – all he had to do was hop a lot fence every now and then and he would find the pieces of the past that he was looking for.

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The 77th Street flea market is a conglomeration of eccentric items that are looking for eccentric owners. Various knickknacks litter rickety tables, which are covered with old sheets and patrolled by loud New Yorkers telling you to buy their sunglasses, furniture, or old jewelry, because it’s the best deal you’re gonna find. Tucked in behind the old Russian man selling a variety of fur coats, and the Chinese woman selling socks and sunglasses, is a small table manned by a man who is clearly stuck in the wrong century. His clothes are covered with stains of dirt from the hours spent sifting for old treasures, and his suspenders sit loosely on his shoulders just barely keeping his green army pants above his waist. He is tall and thin, with a white Santa Claus beard trimmed short. His hair, also white, is mostly obscured by the spotless black top hat that sits, Abe Lincoln style, atop his head. In front of him, lined in neat rows, are a plethora of bottles. Fragments of the past that he should have been a part of: inkwells, medicine bottles and flasks. His face is weathered, and his skin hardened, yet his eyes pierce blue against the muted colors of his face and seem to refract off of the bottles in front of him and shine into the faces of the people standing before him. “Hello there- I’m Scott,” he says. “What can I help you with?”

Over the weeks that I returned to the market, Scott told me about his childhood – how he eventually became a member of the digging gang. Over the years, while the others grew out of it and went on to college or jobs, Scott didn’t. He stayed in Brooklyn, digging for old bottles in lots and dumps around the city, and filling his apartment from ceiling to floor with shelves upon shelves of artifacts that he polished until the dirt no longer muted their true colors, and the oxidation marks shone forth in the sunlight. Over the years, he began to learn bottle jargon – the secret language of the cult of diggers that frequented New York City construction sites. He learned about design – which ones were French, American or Italian. How to read the oxidation marks on an old blue 1860s bottle. How to tell whether the lip was glass blown and crudely cut, or how to distinguish that one specific shade of blue that only one New York company knew how to create. Over years that felt like an instant, he became a veteran digger – one of the privileged few who had been chased away from illegal sites by the cops and had callouses from driving the shovel into dirt hardened by decades.

The first bottle that I chose from that table was a tiny medicine bottle. It was blue and marked “Bromo Caffeine - ” a liquid used by people in the early 20th century to cure migraines. It cost five dollars – but Scott let me take it for free because it was my first bottle. This was my initiation.

I returned almost every week after that, eyeing the week’s new selection, and asking a million questions. “Where did this one come from? How about this one? What was this used for? Does the ribbing mean anything? Are these rare?”
Scott patiently answered each trivial question, as I distractedly picked up, and then methodically put down each bottle on the table - looking for the one that seemed just right.

My shelves began to fill up with bottles - not just from weekly flea trips. I had a purple bottle from Hawaii, where Japanese World War II bottles were cheaper than an ice cream cone. There was also the Bermuda bottle that had its top chopped off so that young Bermudians could extract a marble that was buried in the neck. There was also the bottle of Cocaine that my grandmother fished out of Spy Pond with her bare feet when my father was a young boy. Each time I had a new discovery, I would bring it to Scott - “the Bottle Man” - and he would tell me what I had found. “Cocaine was used in the late 1800s by men to stimulate hair growth. There was cocaine in it that actually made their heads tingle.”

I picked up a light washed blue inkwell. “That’s from an old privy well in Brooklyn. Dug it up from someone’s old toilet.”

Scott had found a digging partner: Fireman Jack. He was a jolly old retired fireman, with a strong accent and paranoid Long Island wife. “JAAAAAACCK. When ya gonna stop messin’ around in dead people’s toilets lookin’ for buried treasure, huh? Not like we can fit anymore of it in this house!”

They split the dig halfway – the rule of thumb was finders, keepers. If you dug it up, it was yours. Some pits were rich with rare artifacts from old New York – the times when all bottles were glass, marbles were hand - painted, and toilets functioned as garbage cans. Who knew that history could be preserved in the depths of its toilets?

I can’t imagine Scott and his bottles living in a New York City apartment but I guess they do. I’m always too wrapped up in the fact that he doesn’t live in a gas lit tenement or log cabin in the middle of the farmlands of Harlem. Scott doesn’t own a cellphone. He says he can’t figure out all the little numbers and symbols, and who needs a phone on them at all times anyways?

Scott gave me a call the night before the dig. “We’ll meet at the Times Square subway station. Wear boots you don’t care about and long pants. Digs are messy, so you’re gonna want to wear things that you aren’t afraid to get dirty.” With that, he hung up leaving me to wonder about what I got myself into.

The sun pounded over my head, and dirt seeped into my beat-up, dying army boots and stuck to my light denim jeans. My muscles protested as I again drove the metal shovel into the reddish earth. “That’s it – keep going. But remember to stop the second that you see the dirt changing color.” Scott’s voice sounded from above my head. It was late August, and I was in the middle of Brooklyn somewhere, sitting in an eight-foot deep hole in the earth that used to be someone’s toilet and trash in the 1860s. Above me was a tripod pulley system, controlled by thick old ropes and attached to a bucket that was laboriously dragged full of dirt to the top of the hole. “Start to look out for objects,” Scott’s voice sounded above me. “We should be hitting bottles just about now.” The earth beneath my feet was sure enough beginning to darken into a charcoal ash color, so I abandoned the shovel and picked up the wooden digging stick that Fireman Jack had lent me. “Dig around for a little,” said Jack. “If you hear something squeaking, that’s when you know you hit a glass goldmine. That’s when you gotta be careful for bottles under your feet.” I worked from an outside corner of the hole, feeling around in the ground, and waiting for the screech of the wood hitting something that wasn’t 150 year old dirt.

The squeak came from just below a thin layer of earth. Dull green glass appeared out of the brown around me as I worked the bottle out of the ground. It was a small wine bottle, in perfect condition. There were no chips on the lip, and the pommel mark on the bottom wasn’t crudely cut. According to Scott it was a “cute little Italian,” that was fairly common – nothing to write home about, but a good first find nonetheless. Good enough for me.

I decided the green wine bottle belonged to the Italian family who had lived at the small Brooklyn house. Maybe it was a gift from a visiting relative that they shared over a family dinner. Or maybe the bottle belonged to the drunken uncle, who would stumble in late after a long night at the local pub drinking his way into oblivion to mourn the loss of his recently dead wife. It might have been a big family – maybe they went through a couple of the small bottles a week, if they were the stereotypical Italians I imagined. They were jolly – life in America was new for them, but this family had managed to scrape by. The father had a job, the two sisters were factory workers, and the mother cooked. In my mind, Italian family X was happy, apart from the stress caused by their depressed uncle, and the illnesses that ever threatened 1860s homes.
“I guess these guys liked to drink a lot,” quipped Scott, as he unearthed a third identical wine bottle. I was out of the hole, and sitting on the edge, pulling up bucket after bucket of packed dirt. “I think I found something – Lily maybe you want to come down and dig it up?” I jumped back into the hole, and Scott handed me the digging stick. It was a small, clear bottle tainted with dirt and unexpectedly heavy for its small size. “Be careful,” warned Scott. “It might have some liquid still inside – probably some medicine left over, so it’s gonna smell.” I gingerly tipped the bottle over, and let the context glug into the dirt, releasing a wave of potent old chemicals. I cleared my throat, as we returned to work with the dull roar of Alice and Chains in the background.

At the end of the day, Scott wrapped my finds in newspaper and I put them in my green beat-up Lands End backpack. I said goodbye to the team and walked out of the house onto the quiet street and into the subway. I was completely covered in dirt. My boots were caked, and I could feel the filth in my socks. The knees of my light jeans were brown, and my white shirt was streaked as well. I felt questioning eyes on me on the subway as we sped farther and farther away from the Bergen Street stop. I stood out next to the polished weekday businessmen and women of Manhattan. The subway was clanking along, taking me far away from the past of dirt and glass to the present of high-rises and concrete, and we were going fast. But underneath the concrete and buildings, there lies a history. The history of old New York -- the days of the horses and cobblestone streets. The days when there was farmland where uptown is, and there was no grid system. The days when glass bottles were thrown in privy holes the same way that we throw plastic Coke bottles into a trashcan.

My first bottle, the blue bromo caffeine that Scott gave me for free always seems to stand out on my shelf – even next to the towering medicines and flasks that flank it. I’m always worried that the small blue bottle will get lost in the mix, and I’ll forget which one started it all for me, so I marked it by filling it with old pieces of broken pottery from the 1800s and a rusted old button that I found on an old rice plantation in South Carolina. When I came home with my first bottle that day and told my mom about my selection, she laughed. “It’s pretty perfect for you Lil – too bad there’s no medicine left in it!” At one point there was. At one point, someone who didn’t have the easy access to two Advil emptied this bottle to get rid of the same pounding headaches that I get. Back in the day, maybe another 17-year-old girl used the bottle. Used it before it was buried by time, with layers of dirt forming over the years, waiting to be dug up.
Whenever I drive past the rolling pastures sprinkled with the occasional cow, I remember seeing them through Max’s car window. I picture the many different backdrops that unfolded that summer. Like those few pale gray mornings when a fog crept over the pasture’s surface, tickling the cattle’s ankles. Or the early evening drives home with the silhouette of Max’s arm resting on his windowsill, a dark shape against the pale pink sky and the glowing sun that dripped warm amber onto the grass.

I first came to the farm on a rainy June day carrying a backpack full of insecurities and lacking a rain jacket on my back. Immediately I was offered a variety of rain protection and ended up wearing an eclectic collage of clothes from the crew I had just met. During my initial ride to the field I was wedged in between Max and Kelly in the front of a Kubota vehicle, with Tyler and Sarah bouncing in the back. As we climbed the pebbly path and entered the field through the wooden gate, Max turned to me and said loudly over the engine, “Welcome to your new home.”

My home was in between the rows of vegetation where we would spend hours kneeling in the dirt, our hands weeding the emerging carrots and beets. It was gently feeling plump Black Krim tomatoes with the hot yellow smell of tomato pollen coating our arms, in the winding labyrinth of hoop houses. It was bending over the sprawling tentacles of spiky summer squash that scratched our forearms when we unearthed zucchinis the weight of newborns. It was cutting the limbs of fennel that looked like spritzes of pale green paint and whose delicate aroma lingered in our fingertips.

The first job I did with the crew was harvest deep green spinach. We each planted our knees in the ground and cut the leaves with our respective red handled harvest knives. Despite Max’s clear instructions, I still had to scrupulously observe the rest of the crew in order to understand, and even after that I was still slow. Yet Kelly kept pace with me, and we soon bonded over horseback riding and the artist Sally Mann.

Kelly was known for sharing her midmorning fruit, separating a segment of her tangerine and offering it without a second thought. Max offered robust vegetables grown from the ground with pride. A slice of apple, a dollop of sunscreen, a great white tomato, a hand to finish your job, or an excerpt from our favorite book Good Poems. It seemed as though nothing was enjoyed alone.

My summer passed not in weeks or months but in the life-cycles of carrots and tomatoes. Each morning the field yawned, rubbed her sleepy eyes, and opened them to find that her figure had again changed its form overnight. Despite their longer experience on the farm, the rest of the crew seemed to share my awe at how rapidly the buckwheat surged through the ground, or how the two carrots we uncovered romantically twisted in an embrace. Dew drops fell on new bean sprouts like diamonds. Tie dye streaks of yellow, orange and red enveloped the Striped German tomatoes as they ripened up in the hoop houses on the hill.

I felt myself changing simultaneously with the field. My skin tone deepened as my hair lightened. I gained a few cuts on my hands, tiny wounds of initiation. The knees of my jeans became permanently caked in mud, and sepia stains sprawled across my shirts. But it was more than these physical alterations. It was the way my hands, like Kelly’s, began to naturally carve my peaches into segments. It was the way my hiking boots seemed to bounce and my chin no longer pointed towards the ground. And it was my words, my words that finally came.

A Summer of Spinach
By Annie Mesa
Before 19

With beads of sweat rolling down my back, and my hands digging into the rich earth, I seemed to excavate my words, and ones that felt as simple and honest as the Yukon gold potatoes our fingers were searching for. Memories of Charlotte's words from *Charlotte's Web* drifted into my mind, “Humble has two meanings: it means ‘not proud’ and it also means ‘near the ground.’ That’s Wilbur all over.”

Usually being the one to dodge eye contact and avoid unfamiliar people at all costs, I slowly began to facilitate conversations with people I didn’t know. I was able to talk to strangers, what a concept? It was as though dirt and sweat were the catalyst for me to actively relate and talk to others more effortlessly than before. Digging my fingers into the mud filled me with the brilliant confidence and curiosity of childhood that seems to get buried in adolescence.

During my summer routine, Wednesdays were particularly strange. I had painting classes in the city those evenings. I would step off the dirt field onto a concrete train platform and wait to sit down inches from somebody who could not feel farther. Before those evenings, I had never felt the urge to interact with anyone on a train. Yet little offerings of conversation escaped from my mouth before my mind could realize. Was this me? In the crowded subways full of toxic grime I longed to return to the healthy dirt of the field. I missed the easy smiles and comforting nudges of the farm in contrast to the stressful grimaces and hurried pushes of the packed subway cars.

On my last day it poured. Skin soaked, we thinned the new spinach sprouts who grew with zeal. All of our hands were impeccably clean for once. When it was time to go I opted for the back of the Kubota. The bumps felt nice and I let my body sway as I said my silent goodbye to the field. I would be back, but I knew she and I would not be the same.
Dad and I
By Ryan Rosenberg

He knows at breakfast what he will have for dinner; God forbid he eat poultry twice in one day. I could eat the same thing for each meal. In fact, I find comfort in knowing when I wake up that morning means yogurt, regardless of whether or not lunch might mean yogurt as well.

He loves the camaraderie of a rolling golf green. Whether he is playing with a partner or alone, it doesn’t really matter. I refuse to pick up a club and the thought of being stranded on an island of sand edged with grass with one other person terrifies me. What do you talk about after four hours? My island of sand is being isolated on a treadmill, where I am untouchable and unable to speak to or listen to anyone. I can recall countless afternoons when I sat under an awning with a sketchbook and watched him as it started to pour. After a curious while, my father would appear, walking towards me, completely drenched and not entirely satisfied with himself, despite the fact that in the midst of torrential rain he was the only person on the course.

He knows nothing about music. Of course, I know nothing about great classical music, but know a lot about music in a quirky sense. I have shamefully (and unintentionally) memorized the order of the tracks on the America: Greatest Hits CD and will tap my fingers when I hear most sounds.

When he buys new reading glasses, he turns first towards me, before the mirror and before my mother. He tells me that he thinks I look best when I wear my hair in a bun on the top of my head, a hairdo that my sisters warn me never to sport because it makes me look like I’m five years old.

He thinks that simply “grinding out” work, schoolwork, or any other kind of work is an unquestionably simple task. I think that doing work takes the universe’s pull and sheer determination. He wonders why the science section of the ACT takes me so long to not even fully complete. I tell him that I’d like him to try it one day.

He jumps with seeping concern if he sees a small child walking alone in a parking lot. I tell him that he needs to relax and that his jumping makes me jump.

We both have oddly cold hands at all times of the year. He told me about going frantically to countless physicians about his cold hands only to discover that his poor circulation was nothing to worry about. I laugh when he tells me this story, but I am secretly relieved that my cold hands are also probably nothing to worry about.

Before he taught me how to drive stick shift, I was concerned that my initial incompetence would spark a reaction that I sometimes hear through the glass doors of his study on Sunday nights when he is on a business call. I was relieved to be instructed with conscious patience. Although every so often he would screech when I got too close to the curb, as we followed a strict regimen
of stopping and starting the car every few feet up hill, he eventually decided that 
we could listen to the radio as I drove.

He never looks at the check before handing his credit card to the waiter. I 
am frantic about adding the correct percent to the tip and about whether or not 
it’s okay to leave it lying on the table.

During candlelit dinners with my family, he reminds me each time that he 
has never had a meal with me when the contents of the dish did not end up on 
my clothing. I remind him that I shouldn’t be able to hear him chewing from 
across the table.

He tells me about how much he misses us when he goes abroad on 
business trips. I get instantly jealous when I imagine him walking around 
London, although there is a familiar comfortable cadence of our home when it is 
just my mother and my sisters and brother. I also think about what he would 
have been like had his conservative parents allowed him to go to architecture 
school rather than business school.

On my last day of work this summer, he was waiting for me outside and 
the two of us went to my favorite Scandinavian restaurant, followed by taking 
our two dogs on a July night walk. The streets were dark, apart from an 
occasional firefly flicker, so we each held flashlights. I sometimes walk the dogs 
with my mother after dinner, which is usually a quick, down the block, 
prescribed affair. When I walked with my dad that night, I never said anything 
about where our steps were leading us, mostly out of curiosity to see where he 
might take me. As we floated through the heavy air, our conversation began by 
discreetly analyzing our family at that moment, which amazed me, as I had no 
idea that he noticed subtleties that I didn’t even see. He then went on to tell me a 
story that he had already told me over and over again. He starts the story with 
him watching me through the glass window out of countless other, bundled, 
newborn babies shortly after I was born. He then claims that an anonymous 
woman arbitrarily pointed to me, as she whispered the words “that one’s a living 
doll.” I think this is made up, although he insists each time that it is not.
Twenty-one Months
By Hannah Weber

We are Hannah and Abigail, in that order. I am older and she is younger, and it will always be that way even though once she was convinced she was going to catch up. As an infant she was both the crier and the babbling laugher. She playfully threw toys at me; I picked them up and stacked them in the corner. To Dad I was smart and she was funny.

She is fifty percent me, and I am fifty percent her. Elisa is our mother and William is our father. We grew up ten feet from each other. The chicken I chewed quickly was the same chicken she mixed with mashed potatoes and threw at the wall. The school bus I boarded each morning was the same bus that felt the clamor of her amusement in the back. Mom’s words of warning and love resonated in both of our ears; Dad’s stories made us laugh at the same pitch. Only our hysterical snorts would emerge within a few seconds of each other.

Abigail is sixteen. The difference that twenty-one months can make is enough to render two sisters incomparable, except for the similar contours of our faces and the indistinguishable tone of our voices. I’m an inch taller; her hair is two inches shorter and five times as dark. At family reunions I see relatives struggle to discern the “silly one” from the “serious one.” After a few minutes of conversation, they find out for themselves.

If they only knew how different we really are. I teared up over spilled milk, she laughed as it poured on the carpet. She lights things on fire and goes out at night. I won’t sleep until I finish the last sentence of my Latin homework or until my anxiety calms. The roar of laughter coming from her room is a nightly occurrence, as is my constant frustration and pleas for silence. Her closest friends are innumerable; mine can be counted on two hands. Adults probe her for jokes and stories, while I prepare my arsenal of polite responses to questions about college or work. Can the girl who blasts Green Day in the bathroom be the same sister with whom I built forts and dollhouses?

Maybe one day I’ll learn to have fun melting candles and covering my fingers with the wax, or skipping homework for a game of tug of war with our dogs. Maybe I’ll throw flour on my sister while baking together instead, and then maybe we’ll get sick eating the cookie dough. Maybe I’ll stop thinking about history essays and worry about what movie we’re going to see tonight. Maybe I’ll sprint not to impress a coach, but because I want to see how fast I can go. One day I’ll have as much fun as she does, maybe. We’ll be thrown back to the days where we spent hours dressing American Girl Dolls or inventing games to be played with some string and a second-floor balcony. Or we will just sit together on the couch watching Jeopardy, she answering the pop culture questions and I the sporadic classics questions. Either way, we’re a duo, she the entertainer, and I the caretaker. People tell me I’m going to do great things. People tell her she’s going to be happy, no matter what. Can twenty-one months make so great a difference?
My dad is proud of the softness of his hands. He swears it’s because he always wears gloves. His right hand I see gripping the gear shift of his deep green Volvo like a staff, power collecting in the shadows of his knuckles and swelling in the bulges of his veins.

Blue veins like roads, I want to follow them back. Back to the streets of Bogotá, to see him and his four older siblings under their respective mango trees, where they would patiently wait for the fruits to fall. I want to trace his vessels back to the subways of Queens and find him peacefully reading his copy of The New York Times on the way to school. I want to trail his arteries back to the basements of Madrid, and catch him with his medical school friends sneaking into the university’s food pantry, using the master-key they created. Sometimes I forget that the only roads of his I do know are the curves of the Saw Mill Parkway.

For two years when my dad was working in the city, I went to an elementary school on the Upper West Side. We were closest during our daily drives together to Manhattan. Our biggest arguments were over who got domain of the radio. He insisted on listening to classical music, while I tried to inconspicuously turn the dial to the pop station any chance I could get. Whenever songs with unsubtle innuendos came on, which was frequently, he would shake his head in disgust and gruffly switch back to Bach. This always irritated and embarrassed me, even though I did not particularly like the pop station either. I just wanted to be able to sing along to the songs like my friends at school. If the classical station was playing a piece he particularly liked, the sounds would slowly take hold of his body. His bobbing head would follow the tempo as he ardently hummed or whistled along.

Sometimes before the ride home we would grab a bag of Russet potato chips: his weakness. We were both careful not to get any crumbs on the seats. Crumbs and anything sticky made him crazy. In between crunches I would tell him about school. He would let me sit in the front seat, even though I was not old enough. I relished being treated older than my age. If my mom was outside gardening or barbecuing as we pulled into the driveway, she would shoot us a disapproving stare when she caught me up there. “Not the look!” he would exclaim as we both giggled.

As soon as it was frog-catch-season, we would fill the Volvo’s back seat with a tangle of nets and buckets and head over to the lake. Mud coated the soles of his brown leather dress shoes and my Converse sneakers. We must have been a funny sight, the white-haired man in khakis and a buttoned down shirt with a little dirty-blonde-haired girl in shorts and a T-shirt, both squatting at the swampy banks. People often mistook him for my grandfather, which always gave him a good laugh. He had the same amount of energy as I did when we were sloshing through the mud. Whenever he spotted one first, he would make broad miming motions, silently and eagerly calling me over. He always let me take the first pounce.

My dad and I both have brown eyes. We are both quiet. And we are both the youngest children of our families. As a result of being the youngest, I think he wanted me to learn from the “mistakes” of my siblings the way he claimed he did when he was growing up. Driving to the city he complained to me about
how my sister never cleaned the dishes. About how her ripped jeans were too
ragged and revealing. About how she lied when she said she did not break the
shower handle. But it was never inherently about the dishes, or the jeans, or the
shower handle, which took me awhile to understand.

He would jokingly make me promise not to become an “obnoxious
teenager,” given this was before I knew what the word “obnoxious” meant.
“What it all comes down to is respect. You have to respect yourself first, before
you can respect others.” His forehead matched the creases of the Volvo’s leather
interior, his voice throaty as he studied the highway ahead of him. I would nod
and fiddle with my shoelaces trying to repress memories of the yelling I heard
downstairs the night before. I made a vow to myself not to hurt him that much
when I was older. But at that time respect was a sound, a word teachers said
when you talked over someone else in class instead of raising your hand. It was
an idea too intangible for me to grasp. I tried to catch it, my mind pawing
through the air, clenching its fists, but I only opened them to find emptiness.

The school in the city became too expensive, so I went back to my local
public school for fifth through eighth grade. My dad left his job in Manhattan to
work in a higher, more stressful position for a new company in Yonkers. I
usually walked to school and only asked my dad for rides into town or to my
friends’ houses. He despised that I spent so much time in town. I always had to
brace myself before asking,

“Dad? I was wondering if maybe I could please get a ride into town?”
“Really? What are you even going to do there?”
“I don’t know...get pizza...hang out,” I cringed as I said the last two words,
knowing what would come next.

“Ugh. I hate this ‘hanging out’ business. Such a waste of time. You should
be going to museums or reading books.”

As he dropped me off, I would quickly close the door before waves of
classical music could reach my friends’ ears. I had difficulty fitting into the
groups I hung out with in middle school, and desperately believed that I should.
It was during these times that I wished I had a dad who watched football and
could fix cabinets. Who wore jeans and liked Chinese food. One who would
practice soccer with me in the backyard without hurting his back. Who I could
chew gum around and would let me keep my elbows on the table. Whose name
was John or Steve instead of Ricardo.

Despite my vows, I also began to forget to clean my dishes, to wear shorts
he thought were too short, and to lie about not being the one who left the lights
on in the house. He would approach me about my mistakes in the Volvo,
conveniently a place with no escape. It hurt with a fresh layer of pain when he
called me “princess” and “inconsiderate” the way he used to call my sister,
because I knew all the distress that followed these statements. I remembered
sitting in the same tan leather seat as the person he would take solace in, rather
than the one inflicting this pain. I would stubbornly stare out the car window,
not allowing him to see the glistening trails slide down my cheeks.

When I think of my father, one of the first images I see is his Volvo 850,
which was created the year before I was born. I see its rich green color and its
cracked tan leather seats. I see the straight contours of its frame and its box-like
form. Sophisticated yet practical. Serious yet kind.

A couple years ago, his Volvo heaved its last haul up our driveway where it
now lies empty—a mass that your eyes skim over from habit. The new company
he was working for fell through the gaps of the recession, and so he no longer
needs a car to drive to work. Presently we share the family station wagon. Unlike
the green Volvo, the station wagon’s seat is not molded to the scoliosis induced
curves of his spine, so he has to use a pillow to ease the pain in his back.

Nowadays if he has to drive me somewhere because he needs the car, I do
not change the music station. I try to appreciate the melodies as I listen to his
stories.

“What are your most vivid memories of Colombia?” I asked one evening
as he drove me home.

“Of Colombia? Hmm...Well, let me think.” He looked behind his shoulder
before changing lanes. “I remember the house quite well. It was very open
because there was no need for heating. In the back there was my mother’s
garden, which had a huge fig tree, but now come to think of it, it probably wasn’t
even that big—since I was so little I just saw everything as big back then!” We
both laughed, “Oh and the house was situated near the church and ‘La Mesa’
which was the town square. I remember when I was around three or four years
old I used to love spending hours sitting up on the balconies, or los balcones, holding on to the iron bars and peering down at the people below mingling in the square.”

I see him in a postcard from the 1940s, corners creased with white lines and yellow stains that sprawl across the printed black image. In the photograph there are men in bowler hats making women in ruffled white dresses laugh. Buildings surround the square, forming a border that meets at a large church. And up in one of those buildings there is the form of a young child perched in a balcony. The words ‘LA MESA’ ~ Bogotá, Colombia are printed across the bottom.

Presently he spends most of his time stationed in front of his computer analyzing the jagged slopes of the stock market. He does not talk about the possibility of another job. During our nightly dinners we never entertain the thought of him working somewhere else. He is past the age that most people retire, but I worry about his countless hours in the house alone. I worry that now his veins are mostly markers of past memories rather than future plans. Are there not many more roads ahead?

Late at night when I can’t sleep, I quietly sneak out of the house, slowly turning the lock, to go outside and perch on the green Volvo’s hood. I close my eyes and smell the indigo summer night or my raw winter breath. Silence hangs. Alone, I huddle on top of the car observing the dark neighborhood around me the way my dad looked through the iron bars of los balcones. I’m always afraid my parents might ask questions about my sneaker marks or butt prints mussing up the thin layer of dirt on the car’s surface, but no one has seemed to notice yet. They never talk about the green elephant in the driveway.
There was always the dark green bag that had the cheap Motorola in it and the signature LV purse. There was always a box of tissue, and overstuffed back pockets of the front seats, filled with my mucus. There were always the same trees along the sidewalks, the same markets, the same kindergarten, the same elementary school, and the same middle school. And there were always the two of us running in the direction of home.

When I began kindergarten at the age of three, my aunt would pick me up and give me a piggyback ride until we got to my school. I would lean against her back and enjoy the rhythm of her steps. I would brush my face against her short smooth hair. I would feel the warm sun wrapping around us. The kindergarten was only a fifteen minute walk, but for a person with the height of five feet and carrying a giant baby, it was a workout. In the tropical weather of Taiwan, my aunt and I would be stuck together with sweat by the time we got to school. She would drop me off, walk home and come back again at noon to pick me up.

My aunt began taking care of me when I was five days old. My parents had just started their own company when I was born; therefore, they needed someone trustworthy to look after me when they were busy. My mom turned to my aunt and asked if I could stay with her on the weekdays. My aunt accepted the proposal since she had taken care of all my cousins and my brother since they were five days old. She was professional at being a mother. She changed my diaper, washed my pee-soaked sheets, and sang lullabies until I fell asleep. When I got sick, she would stay up the whole night worried that I might feel any discomfort. She gave me the maternal love that I did not get from my busy mother.

When I turned four and was too heavy for my aunt to carry around on her back, she bought a bicycle. She would bundle me up behind and say, “Don’t ever let go!” I would lean on her back and feel the bumps as she rode. She would take me to traditional markets in the morning to buy fruits, vegetables, and meat for the meals that day. The markets were always loud and crowded. I would be scared of the chickens locked in cages screeching at me, the strings of dead pigs hanging on the meat stalls, the living fish with their eyes wide open, the owners yelling “come buy!” at me. Then all the panicking stopped when she placed me on a choo choo train ride and bought me a cup of sugarcane juice. After our daily adventure in the market, she would take me to my kindergarten and pick me up at four. My aunt said that I was older now, so I had to stay in school for lunch. I hated that because the meals could not compare to my aunt’s. But I never cried because I knew she was going to be at the gates at four. Then we’d ride back home under the orange sky, with my hands holding on to her shirt as tightly as possible.

My aunt got a divorce because my uncle gambled away their only bicycle. She never wanted to marry the man, but because her mom thought the man would give my aunt the perfect life, she obeyed my grandma’s order.

“I used to date a young gentleman, who was so nice to me. Not only was he nice to me, he was nice to my whole family. He took me out on my first date. He bought me my first earrings and necklace. He picked out my first dress,” my aunt would say with her watery eyes, “but he was too skinny, and my mom thought he wasn’t manly enough. The next day, she told me to break up with him. So I did.”

After my aunt broke up with that gentleman, she was forced to marry a man she did not love. She did it anyway, because girls were supposed to listen to
their parents in those days. Just as she began her married life, she found out that her husband was a gambler. He gambled all his money away, gambled all her money away, and gambled her only bicycle away. After three years of this unbearable marriage, she divorced him with a baby in her womb.

“You know what that gentleman said when I broke up with him? He said, ‘you will regret this. We’ll see who lives a better life in the future.’ And I got what I deserved,” my aunt said.

When I went into elementary school, my aunt bought a box-shaped dark red car. Even though she no longer had to bring me to school in the morning, she still wanted to drop off her homemade lunch for me. “The school’s food is unhealthy,” she would say. I would walk to her car when lunch came. She would hand me my ginormous lunch that usually took me an hour to eat. “You always make so much food. I want to eat the school’s food,” I would say, looking at my peers walking out of the dining hall. But that never happened because my aunt was persistent. After lunch, she would then drive back home, and when four o’clock came, she would come and pick me up. That was three hours of driving already. Then she would drop me off at my tutor’s house and wait in front of the tutor’s apartment for two hours. When I finally got back in her car, my aunt would hand me my pillow and blanket. I would lie down on the seat, and fall asleep to the sounds of passing cars.

My aunt raised her own son by herself. It was difficult being a single mother during her times. When people asked her where her husband was, she would say that he died of cancer. Because she had to raise my cousin on her own, she spent most of her time working at my grandma’s fruit stand. “I love you more than my son,” she would often say to me. But then at other times she would say, “Sometimes, I feel guilty for not having spent enough time with my son.” I could never understand how anyone could end up showing more love and care for someone else’s son. But then again, her son was twenty years old by the time I could make sense of the world, so I missed out on the days when my aunt did actually care for her son. All I knew was that my twenty-year-old cousin babysat me when my aunt was busy. I didn’t think much of people’s care for me because everyone around me seemed to give me love unconditionally.

By the time I went to middle school, my aunt had bought a dark green Toyota, but she still had her dark green bag with an old Motorola and an LV purse. She no longer brought me lunch though, because I finally convinced her it really was too much work for her. But missing that lunch forced me to enter the world of lunch tables. By the time I reached seventh grade, I was fat. My aunt’s previous large lunches made it hard for me to make new friends. People would call me fat and ugly in person. I never had anyone to sit with during lunch. I missed my old friends, and moreover, I missed the homemade lunch. One day after school I was extremely depressed with being bullied at school every day; I could no longer bear it. I stepped into my aunt’s car and felt tears collecting in my eyes. “How was school today?” my aunt asked.

“Nothing much,” I said.

She could feel that I was depressed so she didn’t ask more. Then, when we were midway home, she suddenly said, “It’s always hard being in a new environment, but don’t let people’s nasty looks or words make you ugly.”

January of 2012, I was getting ready to fly back to the States to study at my boarding school. That day I really was feeling homesickness kicking in before I even left the house. On the way to the airport, my aunt asked, “So how do you feel about the three years you have studied there?”

“I don’t know. It’s a very mixed feeling. I love the education, but I just don’t fit in with the culture,” I told her.

“Well isn’t education why you’re there? So if you like the education, then that’s all it matters,” she said.

“NO. The food matters too,” I jokingly said.

Tormented by the mixed feelings of flying away from home, I watched the passing trees on the way to the airport taking a final glimpse of my city. As I thought of school and of my aunt, I remembered that she never finished first grade. Because she was the oldest girl in the family, my grandma asked her to leave school when she was midway through first grade. My aunt began working at her family’s fruit stand when she was six, and her career began from there. My mom, being the second oldest girl, was being forced to drop out of middle school, but because my mom really wanted to pursue a higher education, my aunt told my grandma that she would work two jobs to cover the tuition fee. After thirty years have passed, she was still giving people the courage to complete their education.
When we got to the airport, my aunt told me to take care of myself, and not to stress over the little things. She hugged me and I walked into the immigration by myself.

When the airplane took off that afternoon, we flew beyond the orange sky. I leaned on the window and listened to the humming of the propeller, knowing this journey I was pursuing was going to take me far away. But I knew someone was always going to be waiting for me, waiting to pick me up from school.

My mom gave my aunt the LV purse and the dark green bag. My aunt never owned much her whole life. She worked hard to raise her five other siblings when she was a teenager. She worked hard to send her siblings off to school when she was a lady. Then when she had the chance to enter a happy marriage, she was forced to give it up. All she was left with after the divorce was a baby and the name of a divorced woman. But because being a widower sounded better than being a divorced single mother, she decided to accept the societal tag of a widow. Because she had to raise the baby on her own, she wore clothing that did not suit her age to the fruit stand every day. Her beautiful dark hair and her watery big eyes were covered up by the layers of dirt that collected in her pores while she sold fruits on the side of the street. But she was not humiliated with being a single mother or working at a fruit stand, because she was just like her old Motorola, practical and simple.
The boardwalk swayed as I walked through the phragmite brush of saturated swamp to the solid earth of green fern-forest. My small hands reached out to push away the golden reeds that hung low in my path shooting their seeds into ecstatic dance—like those white semi-transparent dandelion spheres blown away by young breaths. To the right of the boardwalk was a large patch of prickers—green leaves, inviting red berries, and painful needles. Every time I walked by, I wound up with small trickles of blood from the places the needles pierced my miniature denim overalls. After my father left, my mother let the briars grow all over. She said they were protecting her, but my feet took the beating.

The woods behind my house were once farmland—the trees will prove it. The old rock walls of lichen-covered granite are still there, but have eroded with time. You can see the old boundary lines where the pastures separated. In these places the trees grow tall and wide. It would have taken three little me’s to stretch around these giant trees and feel the gentle hum of their internal watery rush.

On early August nights, when constellations sprinkled through the trees, I would sit down in the moist velvety dirt with my legs crossed Indian-style, my back following the tree’s back, my left overall strap undone, and stare up into the sky at the arms of this eternal being. My father once told me that the Oak was 150 years old. It would live those years once again before death. Before tears stopped running through the roots.

I remember the fallen oaks. On their horizontal bark I tiptoed, holding tight my father’s leathery hand as he walked alongside. He in his denim jeans and jacket with light faded leather boots and hair flung wispily back; me in my one-piece hazy sky blue overalls with a thin blanket of hair the color of the late-summer pond reeds and wheat. Toe to heel, heel to toe, one foot, then the other; and for every four steps I took, my father took one. The calloused and creased bark beneath my feet was so much the same as the hand I was holding—rough and cracked like sun-dried cowhide. I choose to have that memory more than the others.

Some nights I would go out to the woods to swing from birches and crack sticks against beech trees. To listen to the crack carry, to be captured only by outstretched leafy arms and the ears of no one listening.

Once a month, when night was bright as day, Barred owls would shatter the veneer of stillness with their signature Who-Cooks-For-Youuu hoot, like a pane of tempered glass exploding into infinity and falling to earth like evanescent crystalline dew droplets. On those nights, color faded and sight was in varying depths of black and white like the undecided blues of the ocean.

On those days when my house erupted with steam rising from the chimney and cries rising from the walls, my sister and I would slip into our green rain boots and head to the woods where those same outstretched arms snatched up the running echo of the white house before our ears could. Then the woods became safe, serenity, solitude, silence—my sister sat with me. Each of us understanding the other’s thoughts as if they had simultaneously jumped ship.

When my father moved, he went to a studio where he found occupation as an artist and did artist things. I would visit him there and his clothes would be crusted with splattered drips of the setting sun. Crimson-sky-sun-ocean-mud-trees-fall leaves-oxidized barge black, all of which somehow never turned brown.

My father loved boxes. When I went to his studio I would open them when he wasn’t looking. I was always waiting to find the thing that made him leave.
Without my father, my woods didn’t hold the same magic as they did when I was three feet tall. They weren’t my woods anymore. I suppose they never were.

Everything was more known, everything was less known. I stood too tall and had to bend down to see the small things of great delight. Maybe that’s why imagination fades as we age. The saplings that once seemed to stretch beyond like the Giant Beanstalk now came no farther than a small reach above me.

Now, again, I go into those woods often. Each bend in the old farming trail holds something somewhere down low—beneath a leaf or under a loose stone. The briars are gone and the old felled tree I had once walked upon has rotted now into the ferns. Those woods are like a graveyard full of the living.

Sometimes I try to forget, but when my skin touches the old woodsy childhood compost, I’m walking again on that felled tree holding tightly the leathery hand of my father.

When I go back it is to stay a while. To sit cross legged in the dirt and look up at the uncertain sky, through the swaying canopies and dancing leaves, to be at peace in the stillness of day with the cracking of twigs and rustling of squirrels, in the forest of ferns and long rotted trees whose dirt rubs softly against my ankles hinting but never forgiving.
When I was in kindergarten, I remember telling my friends that I was moving to the big building with two towers that you could see from the rooftop playground of Convent of the Sacred Heart on 91st and 5th. We would run to the edge of the building and stick our noses through the chain-link fence and stare out at my new home from across the Central Park Reservoir.

My lobby is huge. The heavy gilded glass front doors open into the dimly lit front room with marble floors and a big wooden desk plopped in the center. To the left is the hallway that leads to the elevator bank, with mirrors covering every inch of wall space so that it feels like someone is always watching you.

There are sixteen doormen in my building and I’ve had twelve years to get to know them. There are always six doormen on shift at a given time—three at the main entrance, one at the side, and two in the back. When I was little, I didn’t remember all their names. They would blur together. I got high fives from someone when I got home from school in my red-and-white-checkered uniform, and on the weekends there was always someone to wish me good luck on my AYSO soccer games, and to cheer me up when I lost. When I turned six, the guys on shift brought me a cake with sparkling candles and sang a badly harmonized version of Happy Birthday, and when I looked like I’d been crying, they made me smile.

I used to bike to school, and every morning, I would go with my mom to the bike room in the back of the building. Patrick runs the bike room. Every day, he’d greet me with a “Mornin’ Lily,” in his potent Irish accent, and help me buckle my helmet without pinching my fingers in the clasp.

I used to get home every day promptly at 3:30 and the usual crew would be on duty. “Hello Miss Lil,” Manny said as he opened the door for me. “How was school today?”

I get home at 6 or 7 nowadays, but the shift hasn’t changed. Manny, Lenny, Kenny and Eduardo are in the front. “Hello Miss Lil,” Manny says as he opens the door for me.

“LILY waddup girl?!” Lenny slaps my hand for a high-five as I step over the threshold.

My building has the most faulty and complex security system ever. It’s more than just a key or a phone call. Each announced visitor gets an elevator card from the front desk that only works half of the time. I always forget my card.

Kenny sits behind the front desk most afternoons, while Lenny mans the door, and Eduardo is in the elevator hallway. It’s easy for me to read Kenny’s moods. “Hi sweetie,” he says, rubbing the dark circles under his eyes and looking down at his hands.

“How long?” I ask.

“You have no idea,” Kenny mumbles. I woke up at 5:00 this morning.
“cause they wanted me to fill in for Orlando this morning. It’s a double shift
day.” He ran his hand through his buzz cut hair and rubbed his eyes.

An old woman with her white hair pulled back into a tight updo walks
through the double front doors. Kenny straightens himself up. “Hello Mrs.
Diamond, how are you?” He forces a smile onto his face and waves as she
silently clip clops along the marble floors in her kitten heels. He slumps back
down when she rounds the corner, and tells me about how he was supposed to
pick up his daughter from school. “It’s not your fault,” he says. “It’s just family
stuff.”

Lenny is usually the one to break the ice of Kenny’s sad moods and rile
him up. When Lenny is on his feet, he struts around the lobby and speaks fast
with a thick Brazilian accent. “I need you staying in school now, and finishing
off well – not like some other kids in the building,” he’d say to me. “You know
I’ve seen some other kids, and they’re bad news. They’re bad kids, smelling like
pot all the time and smoking on the corner. Like they think I don’t see them.
We’ve got eyes everywhere!”

Sometimes I think that Lenny and Kenny should have their own sitcom.
“IT SWEAR to god young lady, if you come in these doors tomorrow, and don’t
have your card, I’m gonna make you walk up those ten flights of stairs for a
week!” Kenny shakes his head at me and laughs as Lenny comes bounding over.

“Oooooooh Lily you better be scared!” he teases.

They put on their best shows whenever I have friends over. Lenny puts
on his macho doorman act for about a minute to make people sweat. “You.
What’s your name? And where exactly do you think you’re going?” He breaks
down after that first minute and starts laughing, always on cue. It’s contagious
too. He’s jokingly locked people out of the lobby, he’s rapped “Chicken Noodle
Soup” at the top of his lungs and he has ballroom danced around my lobby with
my friends. Kenny usually sits at the desk laughing and shouting things.

They do their best work together. God forbid a boy steps into the lobby
asking for my apartment, Lenny an

The late night shift is a mellower bunch. Guarding the door stands Angel, with
his arms crossed and shoulders firm. He wears black aviators in the dead of
night. I think it’s because it helps with his intimidation factor. I wouldn’t want
to cross him. Ever. Jose sits behind the desk. He’s new, so he doesn’t talk to
me like a kid he’s raised. He didn’t see me when I was five and I came in crying
with a skinned knee or wearing a Harry Potter costume for Halloween. We’ll
talk about school, or whatever I was doing past age eleven. He’s also there with
Angel when I wake up for school in the morning, bleary eyed, and stumble into a
taxi.

Jose was sitting behind the desk the other day, taking an extra shift as
Kenny was hailing a taxi. A girl a few years older than me walked across the
street towards us, and Kenny’s face lit up. “Suze! How’re ya doing sweetie –
long time no see!”
The girl smiled back. “I just got back yesterday – thought I’d stop by and say hi to everyone.” She smiled and started to walk inside.

“Say hi to your brother for me now. Haven’t seen him in a long time,” Kenny shouted over his shoulder as a cab pulled up and he opened the door for me.

In the taxi I thought about the girl. Next year I’ll be her. Maybe in a few years I’ll come back to the building and just wave and smile at Kenny and give Lenny a high five. I won’t see Jose or Angel, and I won’t hear about Kenny’s bad days, or get wished good luck on soccer games. I’ll have to learn to buckle my own bike helmet, and think back to Lenny’s dancing and laugh. She was probably only a few years older than me, maybe a college junior but already she was almost a passerby to Kenny. Four years ago, she was probably just like me. She might have heard the same stories and seen the same mood swings, and shared the same laughs as I did every day.

Return to Contents
Despite my growing collection of shoes, there is a pair that I never threw out. Whenever I open up my closet filled with my footwear, my eyes always fall on those dull shoes -- the pair that sits in the corner never to be worn again.

With my white shirt tucked into my perfectly ironed navy blue pants, I followed my black dress shoes into a small sketchy alleyway. This alleyway was famous for its popularity amongst young teenagers in Kaohsiung. As I walked farther down the narrow path, I realized I was not ready for this glamorous world. High school and college students who had colorful pants, leather jackets, and shiny shoes flooded every corner of the tiny street, and I was suffocating beneath the ocean of rainbow and bling bling. To escape from the chaos, I quickly found the famous shoe store on this street and walked into it. The small shady store had all kinds of shoes: shoes with feathers, spikes, lights, and even wheels. Just as I was lost in the puzzle of fashion, I found the missing piece.

They were black, but not completely black. They had toe caps that were white, which made them seem livelier than normal black shoes. They were made out of two layers of canvas which wrapped around my heels tightly. I could tuck the laces behind the tongue so all I had to do was slip my feet into the opening when I wanted to wear them. They only had a thin layer of outsole, which exposed my feet to a lot of danger, and made me feel like I was barefoot. Most importantly, the shoe design was commonplace; a lot of people wore that kind of shoe on the street. It was a pair that was not noticeable. It was quiet.

That pair of black Converse led me out of the shady shoe store and stayed with me until the last day of sixth grade. I went to a Catholic school when I was still an elementary student. My classmates and I wore uniforms to school every day, yet my peers managed to find ways to regulate this so called “sixth grade fashion world.” There were a lot of regulations in this world such as “shirt-tucked in Monday” and “Collar up Tuesday” and “Belt Thursday.” But those were all the minor ones. To survive the sixth grade fashion world there were only three rules you had to remember: 1) get a fashionable haircut, 2) change out of your uniforms once school was over, and 3) have a pair of fashionable shoes.

I had grown up with my sixth grade classmates since first grade. We were all part of the southern city of Taiwan. Kaohsiung was known for its agricultural and fishing industry, and so there weren’t many skyscrapers that interrupted the slow-paced, country life-style. My parents drove me to school every day, and hills after hills of pineapple fields and barns were what I saw. I would even see trucks of pigs and chickens waiting along with my dad’s ear for the green light. School life was as simple as the farmland. Everyone who went to the Catholic school wore pure white shirts tucked into perfectly ironed dark navy blue pants, and a pair of glowing black dress shoes. I was in a class composed of twenty-two students, and that number stayed static all through my elementary school career. It was a small grade and so there was only one clique. But like Kaohsiung, the simple school life grew more and more complex as the skyscrapers started rising higher and higher into the clear blue sky.

School was easy before sixth grade. All that my peers and I thought about was what we were going to eat during snack time and lunch, what games we were going to play during lunch, and if we were going to play basketball or soccer after school. Andrew was my best friend, whom I followed around all day. He was the bad student of the class, who never did his homework. He never tucked in his shirt. And his white shirt was always dirty. In spite of that, we would share our snacks together and be on the same team when we played hide and seek, basketball, or soccer. We were both chubby and had the same hairstyle, but there was something blatantly different about us. I followed and he led.

Our friendship changed the day he started looking into a hand-sized mirror he would bring to school.

“John, I think I’m too fat. I need to start going on a diet so that girls will start liking me,” Andrew said that day.

“What’s a diet?” I asked him.

“You need one too. Look at your face,” he said as he placed the mirror in front of me.

I could not see what was wrong, but clearly, he did.

That year, I was eleven and Andrew began gelling his hair up every day. Andrew stopped eating my snacks and even stopped going to lunch. He began tucking his shirt in on Mondays, popping his collar on Tuesdays, and wearing a belt on Thursdays. He also began bringing a set of clothes into class every day. When four o’clock came, he would immediately run to the bathroom and change into it. He began coming to school with different kinds of shoes: shoes with
wings on the sides, shoes with lights on the bottom, and even shoes with wheels. And slowly all of my friends became his followers. That was the year the sixth grade fashion world took shape.

I wasn’t a part of that world when it was first created. Though I was Andrew’s first follower, we grew apart when he began going on a diet. I continued eating the ginormous servings of lunch and dinner every day. I continued tucking my pure white shirt into my perfectly ironed dark navy blue pants. I stuck with my short black hair and protected my black dress shoes from being run over by wheels that rampaged through the hallways and classrooms. When Andrew saw that I was the only member of the sixth grade class who had not done anything to follow his rules, he decided to have a one on one “man” talk with me.

“We are old now, we need to stop looking like children,” Andrew told me. “But we are. My dad drives me to school every day,” I said. “Psh! You are such a baby. I come to school by myself every day,” Andrew said. “But how,” I exclaimed with a little admiration, believing what he said. “It’s a secret, but that’s not the point. I don’t want our friendship to change, so just come to school tomorrow following my rules. Remember! It’s collar up Tuesday!” Andrew said as he turned away.

The next day, he came to school sitting in the back seat of his dad’s car, with a Mohawk and his collar up. I was going to run up and laugh at him for being a baby, but I was struck by his Mohawk. I stood there and saw him walking out of the car with confidence. I followed behind his footsteps and saw my classmates begin talking about his new haircut.

“It looks so cool!” someone exclaimed. Then everyone swarmed around Andrew and began touching the gel on his hair that held his Mohawk up high. All the boys in my class were saying that they wanted that hairstyle, but to me, he looked like the chickens in the farm that I drove by on my way to school every day. That day Andrew did not talk to me or even notice me because he was busy explaining to my classmates why he got the magnificent Mohawk. I sat on the side of the classroom with my collars popped.

“A popped collar was my first step into the fashion world Andrew had created. After Andrew took the initiative, my classmates began coming to class with all kinds of peculiar hairstyles. Some boys began shaving one side of their hair; some began to let their hair grow longer so that they could have bangs. Other boys also got Mohawks, to stay loyal to Andrew.

“John, you are not one of us. Go get a haircut,” Andrew said to me after everyone in the class had been influenced by him, “or else I won’t talk to you.”

I really did not want to get a haircut, but I needed to impress Andrew in order to survive sixth grade, so I decided to buy a pair of fashionable shoes. If I could follow one out of his three major rules, maybe he would just leave me alone. So I went home that night and asked my parents if I could buy a pair of converse because black converses were the most popular shoes that year.

I walked into school the next day with my uniform tucked into my dark navy blue pants and wore black Converse.

“Oh cool! Nice shoes! Were they expensive?” Andrew asked immediately after he saw my shoes.

“… yeah a little, but I begged my parents so they bought them for me,” I said.

“Nice! I was going to buy those, but they were too expensive. Anyways, they really match with your whole outfit and hairstyle,” Andrew said it as if he was a fashion designer, “Come play soccer with us during lunch.” I smiled and accepted the invitation.

That pair of Converse walked me through the rest of sixth grade. It was like a pass that allowed me to enter and exit the sixth grade fashion world as I pleased. No one would ever comment on my outfit, but my classmates would allow me to join in on their games and after school activities. I wore that pair of dull black shoes onto the soccer field and basketball court, into the hallways and classrooms, until the outsoles of the shoes eventually wore down and began splitting apart. They eventually fell apart during the last day of my sixth grade year, and so I placed them away into the corner of my closet along with my black dress shoes, never to be worn again.

Two years after my first pair of Converse fell apart, I realized that they were fake—a pair of fake Converse that had a fake logo on it. So after all, I was saved that year by a pair of unknown black shoes with a toe cap that was white and two layers of canvas which wrapped around my heels tightly.

I close my closet of shoes and head towards the elevator with my pair of real Converse. I am now a ninth grader ready to start my high school career in
New York. I follow my pair of Converse into my dad’s car, into the airport, through the boarding gates and onto the plane. As the plane flies higher and higher into the clouds I realize that many once green fields of Kaohsiung have all become giant buildings soaring into the sky. And on many buildings are the words: Zara, H&M, Mango, Chanel, Louis Vuitton… As the years went by, Kaohsiung and I both changed. We both began running faster and faster, chasing after and following ……………….things.
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Niche
By Dylan Etzel

When I first met Bjorn, he was at Anders’s house, wearing checkered Vans shoes, a Quicksilver hoodie, and skinny blue jeans. He had long, curly sand-colored hair and a wiry frame. His face was pensive and amused; he resembled a wolf, and his cerulean eyes peeked out from under a black visor beanie. I had never seen him before; he went to public school. I had just begun the 8th grade at private school in Dobbs Ferry. I was wearing a Bob Dylan T-shirt, khaki shorts and sneakers. He was sitting on the couch as Anders turned up the volume dial on the computer speakers, causing an eruption of heavy metal music. We and Anders’s other four friends began violently thrashing our heads and playing imaginary instruments in the air with rapid finger-shaking, like we had seen the band In Flames do in online concert videos.

Thirty seconds into the song, Bjorn shouted to me over the roar, “You’re not doing it right. They don’t just strum, the guitarist has to put his left hand on the frets.” Glancing down at my own fingers and then at the Youtube video, I noticed he was right. When he said that he knew because he played guitar, I asked him how long he’d been playing for. “Two weeks.”

The next week, Bjorn invited me over to his house. It was a bit of a zoo, complete with a cat, a dog, a little brother, and an obnoxious parakeet, the kind that repeats everything you say. The carpet was covered with shed hair. His black Epiphone guitar was on a stand by the wall. When we sat down at the table in the living room, I noticed celery-colored pills in a plastic bag on his desk. He said it was Ritalin, his ADHD treatment. I gradually noticed over the next few weeks that he was pretty hyper when he didn’t take it. He seemed constrained by the need to always move. I feel free because of that need, always able to change.

Having newly purchased black jeans like Bjorn’s, I mentioned that they were my first pair of skinny jeans.

“No, those are slim jeans,” he responded. “Try these on.” The jeans I put on were tight, but something about them just felt cool, a little like the first time I listened to punk rock. The disorganized noise can be soothing to an anxious spirit.

We ate dinner and soon found black stickers in his room with the words, “EXPLOSIVE,” “MIRACULOUS,” “MYSTICAL,” and other thought-provoking adjectives. He shared them with me. We stuck them to our jeans’ crotch area. Next thing I knew, we were wading through foot-high snow at 1:00 A.M., crossing his neighbors’ expanses of wintry lawn, legs constricted by rigid denim. We stenciled out the letters “F-U-C-K” in the widest snow-covered backyard, each letter twelve feet by twelve feet. We were chuckling, when suddenly an outdoor light came on. He sprinted to the side of the property, ducking behind a pile of firewood, silently flailing his hands to instruct me to do the same.

As I dove over the woodpile, he whispered, “I forgot to mention, these guys have a shotgun and an automatic light.” Shivering, I responded, “You forgot to mention? How do you forget something like that?” We laughed a little bit. The cold forced us to hug ourselves in search of warmth.

“You know what? You’d look really badass with a cigarette right now,” Bjorn whispered. We both returned to dead silence. My grandpa had recently died from cancer, which had cemented my stance on cigarettes. He knew that. I frowned.

“You know I’m never going to touch one of those.”
“I’m not saying you should! You’d just look really cool.” And silence again.

The end of middle school brought with it many realizations. One was that Bjorn and I were becoming best friends, which was affirmed when he invited me to spend a summer weekend with his family and their friends in a house in the Hamptons that they rented. We strummed electric guitars without amps and got farmers’ tans until our arms appeared crustacean. We actually went crab fishing, catching one bold little guy who kept ramming the wall of our Styrofoam cooler until we let him go out of pure admiration. We shook our shoes together on the front porch until all the sand seeped through the cracks in the porch. Mosquitoes bit us in the same places. On the four-hour bus ride alone to Manhattan, where my dad would pick me up, I whistled with satisfied nostalgia.

The other realization was that kids my age had actually started experimenting with drugs. I heard rumors from school friends that one notorious kid had actually smoked “the marijuana.” To escape from that, I hung out more with my friends from outside of school, like Bjorn. He and I saw a little-known metal band perform over the summer, Sky Eats Airplane. During one song, I cupped my hands and boosted Bjorn onto outstretched arms of
fellow fans. They excitedly passed him up to the stage, where he gave the lead singer a massive hug. When Bjorn returned, he lifted me up too. Hands surged and receded like tiny undulating waves beneath me. I reached the stage. I was there for only a moment before diving back onto the ocean of fingers, which passed me back to Bjorn’s wide smile.

When high school started, it wasn’t as scary as I’d thought it would be, until one Friday, when I got the first memorable call.

“Hey…I know we were supposed to hang out tonight, but my parents grounded me.” Bjorn was breathing heavily. For the first time since I’d known him, he seemed afraid.

“Why would they ground you?”

“Well, I’ve been suspended from school.” He stopped audibly breathing.

“What for?”

“Look. A teacher found my bowl.” His voice had channeled half of its fear into embarrassment.

“Bowl? Bowl of what?”

“Y’know.” He hesitated. “Pot.”

As I hung up the phone, I whispered to myself, “Bjorn…does pot?”

That night, I stayed at home and watched Dragon Ball Z, a cartoon I could follow for hours. I was depressed, but too unnerved to tell my parents the real reason why I was staying at home. I hugged my knees on the couch in our den, watching Vegeta (a good guy) fall to the Majin (the bad guys) and become one of them. I imagined myself as Krillin, a weaker good guy who could only watch behind a boulder as Vegeta was defeated.

Over the next couple of months, I got a lot of calls canceling our plans. Either “something has come up” or “I have a lot of homework to do.” I expected to see him again at Anders’s house, but Bjorn stopped coming. One time I waited for him on the porch for an hour, sitting on a bench that was suspended so that it swayed like a rocking chair, pushing myself back and forth through the leafy autumn wind.

When I finally went to Bjorn’s house again, I was wearing my own hoodie, skinny jeans, and Vans grey-and-black-checkered shoes. He was a little pale and temperamental. He’d gone off Ritalin, but he seemed pretty calm anyway. We stayed up till 3:00 A.M. talking about life. He had a “sort-of-girlfriend,” which seemed fairly impressive. I remember telling him that a girl I had asked out had declined, to which he jeered, “FRIEND ZONE. FRIEND ZONE,” over and over. I looked down somberly; I had yet to earn a rite of passage he had obtained. The equality hovering over us cracked. He mentioned that he had met two kids from my school.

“A 10th grader brought them over to a party.”

“He did? Isn’t he a…a pothead?” I said.

“They’re all potheads. Well, fail potheads.” Fail was an adjective at the time. We frequently agreed that Justin Bieber was a fail musician because his songs failed to be enjoyable.

“How does someone be a…fail pothead?”

Rubbing his closed eyes with his right hand, he sighed complacently and walked over to the bathroom. I was disappointed to be clearly out of the loop.

Soon after, Bjorn got grounded again when his parents caught him getting high. I’d just assumed that once his teachers had caught him with his bowl, or whatever, that the jig would be up. That he’d flush it down the toilet or something. He’d never offered me any, which was a relief. I was especially upset because we had been so excited, listening to the punk band Rise Against for weeks in preparation to see them rock the crowd at Bamboozle, a massive concert in Asbury Park. Both of us had to sell our tickets—I just couldn’t go alone, without him—and we bought tickets to go see a less popular band, Anvil, a couple weeks after with a few friends. For the first time, my dad was coming to supervise. I thought it was weird that he would agree to go to a heavy metal concert. He’s more of a James Taylor guy.

When we got to the venue, the warm-up band had already started playing. One of Bjorn’s friends, Ryan, offered us earplugs. Bjorn answered for me, “Earplugs are for pussies.”

When Anvil came out and asked us how we were doing, a screaming fan launched a pillow-sized bag of weed onto the stage, a ritual offering for his favorite god.

As the band began to play, a mosh-pit opened in the middle of the room.

“You coming in?” Bjorn asked.

“Isn’t it dangerous? You showed me a video of someone dying in one of those…”

“That wasn’t a mosh-pit; that was a wall of death.”

My dad, aloof as always, sat loftily in the seating while we entered the mob of erratic shoving that was the pit. Even as the fierce drumbeat and the melodic
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screeching guitar flooded our ears with music, my dad remained invisible. Some supervisor he was. We pushed screeching mohawked strangers into imperviously fat college students wearing sweaty, sleeveless Iron Maiden shirts, only to be tossed back around the pit ferociously. We were all like wolves in *Call of the Wild*, attacking one another to receive both honor and a moment’s rest. For half a second, I’d stand in place, a champion, with other fans towards the sides of the pit or on the ground. I’d hear the guitar ascend a musical scale as if lifting me into the air—but then I would drop, a tangle of elbows and knees breaking my fall and probably my vertebrae as I slowly blinked and heard the scale inevitably descend back again.

Then Bjorn got hit in the face. The culprit was a thirty-something year-old man, who rather than shoving, employed whirring karate chops and manic kickboxing.

“Well that guy’s a dick.”

All of us “traditional” moshers roared in agreement. We left the fool spinning like a top his own corner of the pit, while he derived no enjoyment from slicing the moist air with overgrown nails. Bjorn and I kept inaudibly yelling the word “asshole” into the rapid current of deafening music. The top hadn’t seriously hurt Bjorn, but he had ignored moshing etiquette. No kicking, no hitting—just shoving. There was a correct way to fight people for fun.

We took a break, escaping the pit with ignored bruises. Two of our friends came over with a couple of joints from absolute strangers. They airily pointed at their source.

I turned to Bjorn grimly. “What are you going to do, Bjorn?”

“I promise I won’t. I promise. But if your dad sees them, make sure he knows I wasn’t involved.” Bjorn grabbed my shoulders, practically shaking me. “Make sure he knows. You have to make sure. Please, I need you to make sure.” He was quivering. I was shocked. My mouth was open, but instead of saying anything, I could only nod. He’d gone from blithe to scared to now desperate to stay out of trouble. Did that mean he was cleaning up his act, or just being more discreet?

I woke up the next morning with ringing in my ears. I chewed on a muffin for a little while in front of the phone, considering calling Bjorn. I was afraid of making plans that would only be canceled again, but scattered hope was better than a weekend alone. So I called; He was going to Vermont. He would be around in two weeks. But two weeks later he wrote to me on Facebook telling me we could hang out on Friday or Saturday. But he canceled on Friday. And then on Saturday. So I stopped calling him.

* The names of the people in this narrative have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Embers of the Evening Sun
By Jack Bynum

On warm summer mornings Chris and I would walk down to the lake below his house, pull his red canoe to the shore, and paddle out into the glass cathedral. It was silent except for the occasional honk of geese or chickadees or the crack of a paddle against the gunwale. Chris would rock the boat to taunt me, but often enough he flipped it entirely. We would tug the sinking canoe back to shore, our feet kicking furious strokes in the warm water.

I remember one morning well: mud splattered on his chest and shrapnel flew into his dirty-blond hair and just missed his eyes, his mouth stretched out into a wild grin. Mud flung through the air until our skin turned to earth. Chris dove into the lake, breaking through the mirrored image of the sky. I stood there with a frown cracking the drying mud on my face, wishing he didn’t want to go back in the water. I was terrified of water.

The sun poured embers over the mountain’s brim as I hesitantly joined Chris’s fish-like circles under the surface. We sat on the pond floor, among tangled green algae, a stream of bubbles erupting from our mouths.

There is an image on my bedroom bookshelf of Chris and me when we were ten. Chris and I sit on a mound of garden dirt, I have a two-foot shovel in my hand, and the dirt has just left it. Our faces are alight with laughter as the dirt rests silently suspended in the air. One of Chris’s arms is thrown loosely around my shoulder and the other stretches into the sky, his hand curved as if trying to grasp something. His hair is short; my hair is long and down to my shoulders. His face is round, his chin nondescript and his eyes blue like the mirrored image of the sky. I stood there frozen sky black.

The fragments of sheet metal spread like the memories written on a page. Chris was so full of anger, but that fullness seemed to grow from emptiness. He was like the sky the night we heard of our parents’ divorce: perforated by a thousand pinholes. The pond shore sung silent. What should have pulled us together pushed us apart. I reminded him of the divorce and he reminded me.

Chris’s parents never beat him but his older brother Derek did. Derek would kick him until his ribs turned red. Chris stopped trying to fight back. Soon he learned to pass it on to his little brother. Chris tortured Hudson so that there was someone who felt the same pain he did. When Halloween came, Chris told Hudson he’d built a haunted house. Hudson walked in through the doorway; Chris cut the lights and punched him in the face. His little brother swayed, deathly cold in the darkness.

Chris’s anger towards Derek grew like a thundercloud soaking up the sky’s tears, just waiting to let loose.

Rain slapped the roof. Chris chased Derek through the slate-floor hallways; tears rushing down his red face. There was no reason for it. He had a saw in his left hand and a hammer in his right. “I fucking hate you, I fucking hate you,” he screamed at Derek. Over and over and over the words spilled out like his only prayer. His brother had said something, but I hadn’t heard. I don’t think Chris heard either. Rain drowned the words. Derek slammed the door shut just as Chris wound the hammer back and hurled it at the doorway. The hammer stuck straight into the closed door. I stood there unsure whether I should yell or scream, run or cry, wishing it wasn’t happening, wishing Chris and I were in our underground fort—even if the rain did leak through the roof.

When Derek wasn’t home, Chris and I would go searching through his room. We were never looking for anything in particular. I remember the day we opened his drawer and found a bunch of needles and thick yellow rubber bands. I remember thinking it was weird Derek sewed. He always acted so tough.

Once, when John, Chris’s father, yelled at him for spray painting the big rock out in the woods, Chris ran out to the garage, grabbed a red fireman’s axe, and swung it down on a can of black spray paint. I followed him outside wondering where he was headed. Turning out of the garage I saw the axe come down, the can explode, the black paint spray, coating Chris and covering me. The fragments of sheet metal spread like the memories written on a page. Chris stood there frozen sky black.

He was so full of anger, but that fullness seemed to grow from emptiness. He was like the sky the night we heard of our parents’ divorce: perforated by a thousand pinholes. His innocent childhood glow seemed to spill out the holes to join the murky lake water. I wanted to plug all of the holes.
“See what you did to me John. See. This is how arguments always go. You say one thing; I say something different, so why don’t you just shut the fuck up. I don’t need to hear your shit,” Chris yelled. His mother would laugh, like she always did. She and John still lived together after the divorce. “You’re a bitch too,” Chris would say turning to her, “don’t talk to me. I hate both of you.” His mother would look at him with a slight curl to her lip and glazed manic eyes and walk away.

I saw Chris at a party with my old friends a few years ago. His eyes were smeared a few shades darker and I never saw him smile. I did see him puke. He had pulled out a few 40s and was pouring amber Old English 800 down his throat. That golden liquid was the color of his old smile. His skin looked like the white sofa he had lain down on as he threw up red and yellow and baby blue chunks into the steel bowl on the floor. Someone shuttled the bowl out to the woods where parents wouldn’t see, the bile sloshing, spilling over the brim and slipping down the sides. I sat next to him, my elbows resting on my knees, my hands laced together, and my head down.

I ran into him down by the river. The sun was casting a thin light. He was stumbling in circles, wearing a grey hoodie, waddling to keep his jeans from falling down. I could smell cough-syrup-cherry and cigarette smoke like it was perfume. He staggered back to the car as if his legs were made of setting concrete and drove off.

I stood alone in the deep valley by the river, the same one that I’d grown up in for fifteen years. The sun had slipped through the sky and now left only dancing shadows in the evening half-light, the silhouette of the river, and old repeating memories. I am haunted by waters.
I could write a polished essay comparing Ancient Aegean designs and their influence on 1920s aesthetic and honestly enjoy doing it, and I could talk to you about why elegy and ecstasy often go hand in hand in the most revered poems, and want to keep talking to you about it. However, I came to a point earlier this year, when I told my seventeen-year-old self that it better figure out a way to make some money so it could hire a driver when public transportation was not an option, because it seemed as though I would never pass my driving test.

In the autumn of my junior year I started taking driving lessons on Saturday mornings with a man whom a friend of my mother’s friend recommended. His name was David Salzman, which was particularly hilarious to me because a kid who graduated from my high school when I was a sophomore was also named David Salzman and it was common for admiring lowerclassmen to chant “SALZMAN, SALZMAN” whenever there was a pause in our all school morning assemblies. High school David Salzman was very different from the fifty-something driving instructor who resembled the Pillsbury Dough Boy, wearing a beat-up baseball cap reading “Carnival Cruises.” David spoke in a dusty and almost feminine whisper. His skin was floury, but his lips nearly red.

When we began our excursions, I assumed that it would be a matter of weeks before I would get my license. I later learned this was an absurd assumption.

As I drove, between 25 and 30 miles per hour, he sat in the passenger seat, his foot just above the set of pedals on his side. We listened to Irish step-dancing music, which I hated, but never accepted his offer when he asked me if I wanted him to change to another station. Ritually, as we approached a certain suburban street I learned to pull over in front of his house where he told me, “Just give me a few minutes, I’m going to run to the bathroom.” About ten minutes later David crouched back into the beige Toyota, a lavender specked smoothie prepared by his TSA officer wife in hand. We also routinely made a stop at this one broken down Victorian house in White Plains where David would deliver a large case of cat food. I never knew what that was about.

I approached the art of driving in the same way I imagined someone sprung up into the new Industrial Revolution age might approach his systematic factory job. I believed that just as there was not a tiny elf living inside of the traffic lights, pulling levers with steam and dramatic background music, I could operate a car as if I were a machine myself and that it would and should be simple. I was convinced that this mentality would not only help me achieve a task that even the dumbest people I knew could master, but that it would be easy to mold and memorize my movements to the rigid lines on the pavement and the rules that “just make sense.” I asked David questions constantly. “What’s the rule about switching lanes? How do I know when it’s okay to turn right on red? Why is it bad to stop for pedestrians when there isn’t a crosswalk?” These stupid questions consumed me and I was still determined to understand what should have been so straightforward. Each time I sat in the driver’s seat of the car, even with my parents, I felt a block of anxiety weighing on my neck, making me forget to check my blind spot.

The more I got David talking as we drove, the less he criticized my three point turns; however, his rare comments always sounded more stinging in his red-lipped whisper. When we conversed, I was most relaxed and drove my best. Routinely, he would say, “Make sure to check the speedometer from time to time” and then go back to explaining our country’s financial crisis, which gave me the idea that not only was David an avid Republican, but that he fantasized about doing something bigger than owning a small driving school. From what he hinted at about his childhood, he seemed to resemble the soul searching Holden Caulfield, or at least he wanted to sound like that. He mentioned going to
military school and stupidly quitting the basketball team after he got frustrated at the coach and getting into trouble for trespassing. He told me once about how the soccer coach at his school said that a spot would be given to the boy who ran on the track the longest, without stopping. David was alone on the track until it was dark and yet the coach decided not to take him. He still didn’t understand and his mind was still running on that track. Even though he held the secrets to gaining what any John Hughes character would tell you meant true adulthood in the shape of metal car keys, it seemed as though no one ever whispered the secrets into David’s ear. It made me think about pieces and principles that should, in a sense-making world, fit together, like me swiftly obtaining my license or David acting like a “real” grown-up. As he rambled on, I stiffly turned the steering wheel. At one point he actually made me get out of the car and switch seats with him so he could show me how ridiculous I looked when my arms twisted and I neglected to turn “hand over hand.”

Months after Saturday mornings spent with David, he picked me up early from school to venture a few towns over to New Rochelle where I would take the road test that was seemingly an easy task to tackle for each of my car key dangling friends. Not only did they dangle their keys, as they contemplated their evening plans that were not restricted by a mother who wants to pick you up at “10:00 and that’s the latest,” but their number of key chains was just excessive and frankly braggy. So, one look at the woman who was about to conduct my driving test, tattoo covered, frosty lipsticked, streaky blonde-haired, sitting like a foreigner in the passenger seat of David’s car holding an unidentifiable electronic machine, I knew I was in trouble. I can’t even remember why exactly I failed because the whole thing shook me up so much that it’s only a blurry haze.

From then on, driving with David was no longer purely nonchalant lectures about the looming fiscal cliff, but rather strict analyzing of what I was doing wrong. The fact that I couldn’t pass the test actually frustrated David more than me. When he drove me back from the first failed test, I let out all of my pent up anxiety in uncontrollable laughter and then skipped the rest of the school day after immediately climbing into bed.

On the “walk of shame” drive home from my third failed driving test, David drove swiftly on the highway and told me something that changed me. “Listen, here’s your problem. You can’t try to memorize these mathematical formulas about driving, because there are none. I can’t tell you that you always need to look this way or that way, because how am I supposed to know whether a kid is gonna come chasing after a ball in the middle of the road or whether the road might look different from the same roads we drive on together?”

It was then things started to click. Just as my good looking tennis teacher had begun to mock my “correct backhand structure questions” by telling me in his swift British accent, “Just hit the damn ball and stop worrying about what angle your racket needs to swing at,” I began to realize that I had to start taking what came at me as it came.

One smashed side mirror, countless David Salzman lessons, and four driving tests later, I finally got my license. And it wasn’t easy and it didn’t matter how thoughtful I was or how much I tried to predict and prepare, because soon after my license came in the mail, I drove my three siblings to school in our family’s tank-sized Suburban, and there was no time to think when I honked my horn for the first time at a car that was switching lanes and didn’t use its blinker.
Focus
By Emma Shephardson

I hear everything that is coming out of your mouth. As a matter of fact, I am staring, well trying to stare, right into your eyes and understand. I shake my head as if I am deeply taking in the information, but where my eyes land is what truly grasps my attention. I want and I try to be interested in what you have to say to me, and believe me, I want to help with every inch of my body. I will pour every last drop out of me, if it involves helping you solve this one problem, no matter how stupid you might think it is.

But it’s my eyes. They aren’t staring into yours. I am trying though. I have learned the hard way that the only way to reassure someone that you are truly engaged in what they are saying, is if you stare right into the backs of their eyes. I am paying attention, I really am. But it’s my eyes, again. They are the most attracted to whatever it is that is moving. The boy who is sitting by alone and the interactions he is sharing with nature. The girl sitting in the corner smiling every time her phone lights up, I assume it is her boyfriend or a crush of hers she is texting. The two girls gossiping about the boy they both like, but he only likes one of them. The four boys talking about that one girl who accidentally said something, unintentionally, related to sex in class today. The girl and the boy who are “just friends,” but within two months or so will realize they actually have feelings for each other. The squirrel jumping from branch to branch hoping the next one will not fall, causing the poor squirrel to spiral down to its death.

Oh, but back to what you are saying. I understand what you’re saying, I know how annoying it is, but there are a few more people walking by. It’s two teachers talking about something, seemingly, serious. I wonder what it is. Did a student do something stupid again? Wouldn’t surprise me at this point. Maybe something personal happened in your family. If so, I am very sorry, that is just unfair. Maybe you did something wrong. Now this is getting interesting.

I look back at you, right into your eyes. I see that your eyes have been staring into the depths of my cornea, which you now know was not the case with my eyes. I just want to tell you that I am trying to only look at you, but I can’t. I can’t interrupt you either. So I just have to try harder.

To be honest, all I want to do is hear your voice because I hear mine way too much. But I just have to notice other things as well. I cannot miss a single thing that is going on around me. However, I cannot miss a single thing that is going on with you. Now I am multi-tasking. I hear you mention him, but then I see him. It is not the same him, it might not even be the usual him, but it is the him you mention. I wonder what he is going to do. I kind of hope that you don’t see him, but it has no reason to bother you, nor does it have a reason to bother me.

It almost hurts how badly I just want to be able to sit there and listen, actually listen and indulge in every word that you are so gracefully speaking to me. I must do this all the time. How do you put up with me? What the fuck is wrong with me? I’d really like an answer to that question. But I am still listening. It is all about you. It’s always about everyone. It was never about me. That’s exactly how it should be.

I just need to keep trying. Trying to focus on you and only you. The stories you are telling me, because I will ask you about them later and you’ll think I am stupid; the problems that you are having, because I only want to help you, I just need to be reassured that everything and everyone else around me is in its place and hanging in there; I want to give you all the advice in the world because you give me advice like it is as simple as a high five or a handshake, but it is not, and after all the advice I ask for and need from you, why would you ever take advice from me?

I guess that means something. I guess I should stop looking around me and thinking about everything and everyone else. I need to only focus on you. Focusing is hard enough as it is, let alone focusing solely on one thing, one person, something that is not moving anything but their mouth and the words echoing out. That’s where my eyes should be. Staring at the words leaving your mouth. They will resonate; I just need to see them with my eyes.

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“Dude, so the James Blake concert.”
I smiled back at her. “Yeeeah.”
“It was…amazing.” That pause between words was so perfectly Jess, in the best way possible. My smile only widened.
“That’s so awesome. I’m jealous.” Jess and I were sitting at the notoriously long traffic light at the Stop ‘n Shop. A light rain had begun to speckle her windshield. The jazz tape she had bought at a yard sale filled the car with jaunty sax and cheery drum hits. Was it homemade? we guessed. Probably. She continued.
“So after he’d done some of his slower songs,”
“Yeah?”
“He goes, ‘so everyone, uh, this is dance music now.’ And he starts—he pumps, like—he does like CMY—oh yeah, and it’s him, and a drummer and a guitarist.”
“Word.”
“And the drummer is sooo tight mmmmm!”
“Mmmmm!” I bobbed my head, and my smile widened still. I could totally picture Jess rocking out at the concert, her wild hair cutting slices through the air above the crowd.
“So then they do, like, CMYK which is the like, ‘damn, red shirt, look I found her.’ Like that song.”
I didn’t know the song, but I didn’t want to interrupt her energy. “Yeah.”
“And then me and Will and like this bubble of people we were near started a mosh.”
“Yes,” I said with a jokingly stern face.
“And we were just like…….” She threw her arms up in the air and twisted her body side to side. I could see a part of her was still there at the concert. I let a laugh bubble up inside me and escape. “It was—it was so good. It was so fucking good.”
“That sounds dope.”
“Yeah, it was awesome.”
“You paid dearly for it, though.” We exchanged a joking grimace. We were both recalling her state at 11:30 the morning after. She had come out onto the ironically sunny quad, her wild hair wilted, dark circles under her eyes. I couldn’t help but laugh at the memory.
“Yeah.” She let out a chortle. “Yeah, it’s, I mean, it was fun. I didn’t regret it, honestly.”
“That’s good.”
“Yeah and I mean also because I’ve had these stomach problems recently, I’m kind of, like, used to throwing up—I know that sounds bad—but like—I just—even though I threw up once and felt kinda shitty the next day….”
“Yeah…it’s worth it.”
“Yeah, like I honestly—” The light turned green, and Jess guided the car forward.
“Hell yeah,” I said. I knew exactly what she was talking about. I’ve been there. Minus the getting used to throwing up bit. For a minute I thought about asking her what was up with her stomach issues, but I then I thought better of it. I wanted things to stay light.
“I—it was a semi-religious experience for me.”
“Wow.” My eyebrows shot up, but I didn’t judge her. I was willing to hear her out.
“I like—I was really like—he opened with my favorite song, of his…”
“Ahh, yeah.”
“And I just started crying a little. Like I wasn’t weeping but like—”
“Yeah, yeah.” I nodded my head. I’ve been there, too.
“My eyes just filled up with tears.”
“I hear you.” She took the car for a wide turn onto 9A.
“I was just like, oh my god, like, it’s real!”
“This is happening!”
“Yeah it was—it was surreal.”
“That’s amazing.” I settled back in my seat and watched the rain-washed grass and trees float past us. I looked over at her and found we were both smiling at each other.
“That’s so awesome. I’m jealous.” Jess and I were sitting at the notoriously long traffic light at the Stop ‘n Shop. It had started to rain, which was kinda sucky. The jazz tape she had bought at a yard sale—(wow, be more stereotypically hipster, I dare you)—made the inside of the car sound like an elevator in a cheap motel. She guessed the tape was homemade. So much cooler that way, I thought. She continued.

“So after he’d done some of his slower songs,”

“Yeah?”

“He goes, ‘so everyone, uh, this is dance music now.’ And he starts—he pumps, like—he does like CMY—oh yeah, and it’s him, and a drummer and a guitarist.”

“Word.” Damn. Stutter much, Jess?

“And the drummer is sooo tight mmmmm!”

“Mmmmm!” I bobbed my head, and my smile widened. Does she know I’m mocking her? Awkward. It was funny. I could totally picture Jess waving her ridiculous hair around at the concert.

“So then they do, like, CMYK which is the like, ‘damn, red shirt, look I found her.’ Like that song.”

“I didn’t know the song, but I didn’t care enough to say anything more than ‘yeah.’”

“And then me and Will and like this bubble of people we were near started a mosh.”

“Yes,” Look out! We got a badass over here.

“And we were just like,” she threw her arms up in the air and twisted her body side to side. I was forcibly reminded of those blow-up dancing monstrosities they have outside car dealerships. “It was—it was so good. It was so fucking good.”

“That sounds dope.”

“Yeah, it was awesome.”

“You paid dearly for it, though.” Of course she hits up a concert on a Thursday. I mean I know the school year’s almost over, but shit, have some common sense. At 11:30 on Friday she stumbled out onto the quad and slightly raised her head—probably all she could muster—at me in greeting. I shook my head.

“That’s good.” I was honestly just agreeing with whatever she said at this point.

“Yeah and I mean also because I’ve had these stomach problems recently, I’m kind of, like, used to throwing up—I know that sounds bad—but like— I just—even though I threw up once and felt kinda shitty the next day….”

“Yeah…it’s worth it.” What?

“Yeah, like I honestly—” The light turned green, and Jess gunned the car forward.

“Hell yeah,” I managed, as I held onto my seat. I wanted to believe I knew what the hell she was talking about, but I didn’t. All I could think of was how gross that sounded. Used to throwing up? I thought about asking her what was up with her stomach issues, but I didn’t really care.

“I—it was a semi-religious experience for me.”

“Wow.” My eyebrows shot up, and I stifled a giggle.

“I like—I was really like—he opened with my favorite song, of his…”

“Ahh, yeah.” Really, man?

“And I just started crying a little. Like I wasn’t weeping but like—”

“Yes, yeah.” I nodded my head.

“My eyes just filled up with tears.”

“I hear you.” She jerked the car left for a wide turn onto 9A.

“I was just like, oh my god, like, it’s real!”

“This is happening!”

“Yeah it was—it was surreal.”

“That’s amazing.” I settled back in my seat and watched the rain-soaked grass and trees shove past us. I glanced over at her, and saw her grinning stupidly at me. I returned a half-hearted smile.

______________________________________________________________

“Dude, so the James Blake concert.”

I glanced down as she looked over at me. “Yeeeah,” I squeaked.

“It was…amazing.”

“That’s so awesome. I’m jealous.” Jess and I were sitting at the notoriously long traffic light at the Stop ‘n Shop. A light rain had begun to splatter against her windshield. In a weird way I didn’t know which side of the glass I belonged on. The jazz tape she had bought at a yard sale filled the car with jaunty sax and
cheery drum hits. But it was as though I were hearing it from the far end of a stone tunnel. I shifted in my seat. She continued.

“So after he’d done some of his slower songs,”

“Yeah?” I couldn’t meet her eyes, so I looked out the window.

“He goes, ‘so everyone, uh, this is dance music now.’ And he starts—he pumps, like—he does like CMY—oh yeah, and it’s him, and a drummer and a guitarist.”

“Word.” I glanced over at her.

“And the drummer is sooo tight mmmmm!”

“Mmmmm!” I bobbed my head, and my smile widened. Then I turned away quickly. God, I must have just looked like such an idiot. I pictured Jess rocking out at the concert, doing her thing and not giving a single shit.

“So then they do, like, CMYK which is the like, ‘damn, red shirt, look I found her.’ Like that song.”

“I didn’t know the song. Of course I didn’t know the song. But I wanted her to think I did. “Yeah.””

“And then me and Will and like this bubble of people we were near started a mosh.”

“Yes,” I said with a jokingly stern face.

“And we were just like,” she threw her arms up in the air and twisted her body side to side. I could see a part of her was still there at the concert. And I felt like a candle flame next to a bonfire. I let out a defeated laugh. “It was—it was so good. It was so fucking good.”

“That sounds dope.”

“Yeah, it was awesome.”

“You paid dearly for it, though.” Shit, was that not cool to say? I thought. Her smile relieved my tensions. We were both recalling her state at 11:30 the morning after. She had come out onto the ironically sunny quad, her wild hair wilted, dark circles under her eyes. I couldn’t help but laugh at the memory. I hope she knew I wasn’t judging her.

“Yeah.” She let out a chortle. “Yeah, it’s, I mean, it was fun. I didn’t regret it, honestly.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah and I mean also because I’ve had these stomach problems recently, I’m kind of, like, used to throwing up—I know that sounds bad—but like—I just—even though I threw up once and felt kinda shitty the next day.…”

“Yeah…it’s worth it.”

“Yeah, like I honestly—” The light turned green, and Jess guided the car forward.

“Hell yeah,” I said. I wanted to believe I knew exactly what she was talking about. That I’d been there. Minus the getting used to throwing up bit. For a minute I thought about asking her what was up with her stomach issues, but I then I thought better of it. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable.

“I—it was a semi-religious experience for me.”

“Wow.” My eyebrows shot up, but I didn’t judge her. I waited to hear what she had to say.

“I like—I was really like—he opened with my favorite song, of his…”

“Ahh, yeah.”

“And I just started crying a little. Like I wasn’t weeping but like—”

“Yeah, yeah.” I nodded my head, but turned my face away.

“My eyes just filled up with tears.”

“I hear you.” She took the car for a graceful turn onto 9A.

“I was just like, oh my god, like, it’s real!”

“This is happening!”

“Yeah it was—it was surreal.”

“That’s amazing.” I settled back in my seat and watched the film of rain coat the grass and trees as they slid past us. I looked over at her and tried to match her smile.

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Before her folds of flesh could be revealed, the elevator sounded a faint ding and clumsily opened its creaky metal door. I exhaled.

I told myself that my sister took this class when she was thirteen too. That I would be fine. That no one would laugh at my drawings. That I had the right supplies. That if I had to draw a penis it would be okay. As we unpiled from the elevator I was surrounded by gray floors and lockers and walls smeared with layers of different colored paint. How does that even happen? Do paint-brush-clad people run wild down the hallways at night? “Oh we’re here to add to the general ambience,” they would say. I checked my registration ticket to find my classroom number and gingerly opened a wooden door, unsure of what genitalia would be poised and waiting for me on the other side.

Fortunately, I arrived before the model’s first pose and found a roomful of frenzied gray-haired people instead. Not a single pair of Converse sneakers or skinny jeans in sight. I folded and unfolded my ticket as I walked towards a woman with cat-eye glasses. She had the air of a TA, and a fistful of registration slips to prove it. She took mine, saying thanks hun and pointing me towards a row of folded chairs leaning against the back wall. “Good luck finding a good spot,” she added as the right side of her mouth frowned.

I struggled to unfold my chair for what felt like a century, silently panicking that I might have to actually engage with another person. The chair finally eased open. Crisis averted. I settled between an older African American man with a wooden box full of wrinkled oil paint tubes, and a short gray-haired woman with a set of fragmented powdery pastels. My hands shook a little as I laid out my embarrassingly new pencils and eraser on the stool next to me. The pristine white cube of an eraser, with its sharp corners, almost sharp enough to prick your thumb, was the newest thing to be seen for miles. The woman took a sip from her disposable coffee cup and smiled at me as she swallowed, “Your first class?” Ha. How’d she know? I nodded.

We created an amphitheater of tangled collapsible wooden chairs and easels around our model. He was petite, bald, and, thankfully, clothed. One of the TAs was getting him situated, trying to place his chair in just the right spot, attempting to please the masses before marking the corners with blue masking tape. No, no to the left, they demanded. Would you lift his arm up a few inches? How about down one? Extend his leg. Now that’s way too extended. With a huff, the exasperated TA slapped down her definitive pieces of masking tape.
Before 19

One Hundred and Eighty Degrees

over the hundreds of other pieces. Thousands maybe, enough layers of tape to add a few millimeters of height to the platform.

“Would somebody pull down the drapes? The light’s going to change in an hour.” A nasally voice called out from the far corner of the room.

“Oh but isn’t the sunlight lovely?” reasoned an older woman perched on a stool before a canvas.

“You’re only saying that because the sunlight won’t affect your view.”

“What do you mean it won’t affect my view?”

As I squirmed in my seat, I was soon overcome with this eerie feeling that I was trapped in an episode of Seinfeld. The one where Jerry visits his elderly parents in Florida and whenever anyone says anything they either A. cannot hear it (“Whaat?”) or B. somehow twist the remark to find it personally offensive (“What do you mean ‘pass the salt’?! What, my meat loaf’s no flavorful enough for you?”).

The pose was about to begin. The masses were moderately pleased. A hush came over the class. “First pose, twenty minutes,” called out the TA as she clicked her stopwatch. Okay, show time. Immediately the dry swift sounds of people’s first marks filled the room. I stared ahead at the blank page of my brand new sketchbook as I listened anxiously to hips being aligned, nose widths decided upon, skulls situated and feet placed.

I lifted my brand new 4H pencil. Here goes nothing. I like faces. I’ll stick to his face. The model had one of those impeccably clean faces. His eyes were like two deep set golf balls, with no visible lashes and very dark brown irises (a term I learned in a middle school art class, so there). He had three distinctive vertical creases between his eyebrows. Oh everyone’s going to have a field day with those, I thought. His lips were set into a stern frown.

I whipped my head up and down between the model and my sketchbook page like a bobble head on the dashboard of a Jeep driving through bumpy terrain. This was a practice my art teachers in elementary and middle school promoted. Yeah, I was pretty much a pro at the head bob. I thought about the woman next to me seeing my skillful head bobbing, maybe she would think to herself, “Oh she looks up at the model, and down at her page, and then up again so quickly, she must know what she’s doing!” Ha. First class my ass.

Beep beep beep. “End of first pose. Five minute break!” called the TA. I put the bobbing to rest and looked down at my page. In the middle of the sheet there were a series of very light pencil marks suggesting a small egg shape. Over and over again. Huh.

“How’d it go?” the woman next to me asked as she leaned over.

“Umm...”

“That’s a good start!” Again with the smile, “Though you might want to think about your composition a little more, and you might want to go a bit larger.”

“Oh much larger,” the man next to me chipped in, he waved his dusty hand over my page, “look at all this great space you have. Use it up!”

I nodded earnestly but grumbled internally. I had years of valuable experience copying photographs from magazines for hours in my bedroom. I know what I’m doing, okay? It’s not like I’ve never drawn a face before, okay? And where is the actual teacher anyways?

“Second pose please, twenty minutes.” Furiously I erased my egg. Then drew a slightly larger egg. Then remembered that I should be looking up at the model. I drew a vertical line down my egg and then three horizontal ones to suggest where I might place the egg’s eyes, nose, and mouth. A figure that I’d seen on the cover of a ‘How to Draw Faces’ workbook that was usually in craft stores between ‘How to Draw Horses’ and ‘How to Draw Manatees.’ It looked pretty professional to me.

There was so much to do, so many nooks and crannies of this stern man’s face to describe. And all the old people around me were already rolling. Creating put together pieces of art. I needed to find a hook. Some crevice to latch onto and begin with. I was floundering. How much more time is left in this pose? I need to have more to show for forty minutes than an egg and three lines. What about the eyebrow creases? Why not. I spent the next fifteen minutes lost in those three eyebrow creases. I caressed them with graphite. Then I got some thumb grease into the shading as I literally caressed them (finger shading was the in technique in most of the middle school drawings I’d seen).

Beep beep beep. “Long twenty minute break. We will resume at 12:00.” Now I had an egg, three lines, and three blobs.

After turning my drawing sideways and upside down, hoping to like it from at least one of its four angles, I gave up and set it down on my chair. When I raised my head, I began to see that this twenty minute break was the time in every class where we all size each other up. Slowly, men and women circulated around the room. Many had their paint stained hands raised to their cheeks,
thoughtfully rubbing their jaws as they eyed each other’s artwork. The careful lifting and placing of each step seemed like a Renaissance dance I’d seen in a movie, where the characters look meaningfully into each other’s eyes as they step around in circles but never say a word. A part of me expected someone to start playing a mandolin. Some students were more obvious with their infatuations than others, nodding their heads earnestly as they eyed a piece they particularly liked. Then creasing their eye brows and tilting their heads as they saw ones like mine. You just don’t get it! I wanted to say. I tried not to look at their reactions as I joined in the dance on the other side of the room.

I was struck by how different all of the pieces were. It’s crazy what one hundred and eighty degrees around a room can do to change your view. I first eyed an immaculate oil painting that made me want to quit altogether. To leave before the next pose. Quickly I looked away and saw a pen drawing that put our model’s eyes too close together and made his nose way too pear-like. He looked like a Muppet. Okay, I guess I can stick it out for the rest of the class. One man painted in completely flat shapes creating a propaganda poster look, making our model resemble a heartless dictator. A careful pastel rendering gave him some alluring eyelashes I’m pretty sure he didn’t have, and brought a bit of rouge into his cheeks, making his gender altogether little ambiguous despite the bald head. Stifling a giggle, I pressed the knuckle of my index finger to my lips as I envisioned our model in a floral print dress. The many different faces of Mr. Eyebrow Crease Bald Guy. And they did all manage to include the eyebrow creases, like an anchor keeping all of our view points somewhat in sync.

The teacher, Sherry Cahmy, finally arrived for the last pose. Her small, interested brown eyes lit up behind her oval wire-framed glasses as she walked around the room. Her long silver ponytail draped over her shoulder. On her petite frame she wore a fitted black turtleneck sweater with short sleeves and faded Levis. She took turns with the students, smiling and leaning over their shoulders as she gave them advice. Some took it well nodding their heads, seeming to agree with her feedback “Oh yeah, I guess his jaw is more angular.” Some tried to defend their choices in proportions. “Yes well, the eyes are two thirds across his face. I measured them, see? See?” his hands shook as he measured the model with his pencil again, praying that he could prove her wrong. Sherry spoke slowly and in a whisper. Killing you softly. I dreaded my turn.

She swiftly unfolded a chair and sat next to me, knowing this would take a while. I stiffened. She gently introduced herself and asked to look at my drawing. “Lovely shading and attention to detail,” she said in a way that made me believe her. She followed with an inevitable ‘but’: “But we may need to go over some of the proportions, do you mind if I use some tracing paper?” I nodded for her to go ahead. She whipped out a piece of translucent paper and started sketching over my egg head. Thoughtfully she laid down her borders. Left Eyeland will meet the Democratic Republic of Right Eye here, and share borders with Noseland there. Her countries lost all resemblance to mine. How could I have seen such a different world?

When she saw the disheartened look on my face, she urged, “These are just suggestions though. I do this to help with general proportions. I do not want to tell you how you should see! I’m not trying to create thirty Sherry Cahmys. Don’t ever doubt your own view.” As she left I thanked her. I held onto her proportion cheat sheet. And debated. I finally raised a small white flag and decided to shift the borders of Noseland and expand Cheekistan but stuck with the borders I originally created for the upper half of his face.

Beep beep beep. “That’s a wrap folks!” We all clapped for our model as he stepped down from the platform, thanking him for sitting so impossibly still, and apologizing for the stiffness that will undoubtedly plague his neck for the next few weeks. I peered at the drawings around me, stretched, leaned back, and looked at mine. “Nice eyebrow creases,” a voice from behind me said. I turned to see the model smiling.

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Before 19

Down the Rabbit Hole
By Raleigh Capozzalo

The splashes of Hudson River and blurred fragments of greenery rush by me at breakneck speeds. I get the familiar feeling that we passengers are standing still, and the world is the thing moving, spilling past either side of the train, Grand Central hurtling towards us.

After Harlem-125th Street, the train begins its decent. Or is it just going straight and ground is rising steadily up around us? Like hurtling through a hill. I’ve never been able to accurately judge the distance from this point to Grand Central station. I get up either too early and stand awkwardly in front of the doors for another few minutes, or too late and have to rush to gather my things and get out the doors. But the daily commuters know the distance. They seem to act on a sixth sense, a deeper perception of time and space rooted in daily repetition. And if you are fortunate enough to ride with them every so often, you learn to pick up on their cues. It starts with one man. He looks out the window into the black and then, as if on a whim, reaches for his briefcase. Then a woman does the same. Almost as if they have planned it, she waits a precise amount of time before also taking her briefcase and standing up behind the first man. And then it’s like reverse dominos. After one stands up, they all stand up. Everyone files in behind the pioneers just as the train begins slowing. And at the exact moment the first two reach the exit, the twin doors spring open with a whirring sound. I follow the crowd out onto the platform.

I barely notice the grand ceiling and fabled central clock as I rush through a sea of multicolored coats and sweaters. I hop on the 3 train.

Penn Station. I walk down a vast tunnel with a brushed metal ceiling arching high above me. I feel like an astronaut on a moon base. Intergalactic space-trains come and go from this artificially lit capsule hanging like an ugly pearl in an ocean of blackness. I cannot tell if those dark spots in the high ceiling are dents in the space-metals or simply years of built up ion-dust and moon-grime. The high-powered florescent lamps make it as bright as day down here. As I walk towards the Amtrak terminal, my eyes dancing from sign to sign, I cannot even see the ceiling and for a moment I think I am outside. But then the passageway compresses around me as I arrive in front of the Departures billboard, and the spell is broken. The vast arching space-ceiling is replaced with low hanging blue bulkheads, the Amtrak logo plastered all over.

This area is ill lit. The walls are painted dirty greys and blues. Tired looking employees stand by the escalators to the tracks. A homeless man edges away from a squadron of four police officers, his eyes darting back and forth, his mouth a jagged and unsteady line. A hard faced officer stands a little ways off with a leashed dog by his side. A man and a woman both in full Army uniform stand by a desk with more police officers behind it. The two soldiers stand tall and straight in spite of the heavy-looking bags on their backs and waists. Despite and indeed perhaps because of their presence I feel like something shady will happen. I trot quickly past this circus and hurry towards my track. I flash my ticket at the Amtrak woman and continue down the frustratingly slow escalator. And down and out I go. Down into the bowels of Penn Station, into my train number 3655, and out into the daylight. As we break through the end of the tunnel, the first natural light since I went under at Harlem-125th Street hits my face. My eyes are rudely reminded of how bright it is this morning. I close my lids against the glare and lean back into my seat.

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Cherry Blossoms and Fairy Houses
By Rachel Nierenberg

One of the childhood experiences that I never had was the quintessential running away from home story. I never had the pleasure of packing myself a sandwich and sneaking out of my apartment with the intention of never returning. Though I have no young childhood stories like this, I have since developed a habit of abruptly walking out the door when I get frustrated or angry. The first time this happened I must have been in fifth grade. I had a cell phone because I was old enough to take the train by myself to school, but I was young enough that my mother still wanted to know exactly where I was at all times. I got angry with my mom, over what I don’t remember, but I do recall storming out of the apartment and heading for the only place I knew would calm me down. In Central Park, on the northwest side of the Great Lawn is a large swing set. It was always my favorite place to stop, and I always happier after I had a good swinging session.

I was born in New York City and lived all my life in an apartment on 96th Street between Central Park West and Columbus. As I was growing up, Central Park acted as my back yard. My school was on 79th Street between Fifth and Madison, and during recess, the park served as our playground. Each grade had a specific area; the teacher led us from the posh, cold buildings of the Upper East Side into a grassy field surrounded by comforting trees, where we would mix magic potions from berries we found, play man-hunt, climb trees. I was intimately familiar with every windy path, playground, climbing tree, and secret passageway on both the east and west side from 79th Street to 96th Street.

In second grade my class’s assigned area was near a stone bridge, with a reverberating echo. In the spring through the fall, my friends and I would always see a saxophone player jamming out under the bridge and collecting what we thought was quite a bit of money. In the winter our musician friend thought it was too cold to play outside, and the grand bridge was left silent, but one day we decided to take his place. We bonded together and formed a singing group called the Fugies. In our very short recesses, we would stand under the bridge and sing the rounds we learned in music class. *Come follow follow follow follow follow follow me.*

One day we put out an up-turned hat and managed to collect, in the twenty minutes we were outside in the dead of winter, $9.26. With our recently obtained knowledge of long division, we were able to calculate that it was a little more than $2 for each of us.

When I was still in kindergarten and elementary school, my mom used to take me to school. Every day we would take the B or C train down to the 81st Street Natural History Museum stop. We’d walk up the same stairwell, which was tiled to look like the center of the earth. Then we’d take the M79 across the park to the east side. As the bus wound around the bends of the windy road, I would stand in the middle and try to balance like a surfer without touching the bars. My mom taught violin at my school, so after the school day was over, I’d wait for her to finish her lessons. Sometimes I would sit in the same room, and at a desk at the back of the classroom, I would draw pictures with the crayons I found at the teacher’s desk. At the end of the day we’d take the bus and train back home together, just the way we came.

On certain occasions, when the weather was particularly beautiful, and we were both feeling energetic, we had the special treat of walking home through the park. We entered the park at 79th Street and walked along the path, passing the statue of the three bears marking the entrance to the Three Bears Park. We walked under the stone bridge, where the saxophone player lived, and around the Great Lawn. Sometimes my mom and I would stop at the Great Lawn, and she would lie down and rest while I practiced the latest flips I had mastered in gymnastics class. My mom and I always stopped at the swings on the northwest corner of the Great Lawn, even if it was just for a few minutes. Even before kindergarten I was great at swinging really high on the swings. I would stand up on the board and watch the older kids far below me talk among themselves, and hear them ask what the hell I thought I was doing, and say that I was going to break my neck or something. After our visit to the swings, we would move our way uptown via the running path around the Reservoir. The Reservoir used to be blocked by a giant chain-linked fence, and the water was only barely visible as shimmers behind the overgrown plant life that surrounded it, but in 2003, it was restored to an elegant fence similar to the original. Instead of being thrice my height, the new barrier only came up to my chin, and I could easily see the shimmering water because the plant growth surrounding the Reservoir was also cleaned up and trimmed. The Reservoir continues to be one of my favorite places. In the summer I take my morning run round the path. In the evening you can see the colorful sunset over the western trees from the east side, or if you’re standing on the west side, you can see the windows of the Fifth Avenue.
apartments blaze a bright orange. At night the Reservoir is the most peaceful scene. The branches of the trees drape over the path, and the street lamps shed pools of yellow light onto the gravely track. I like to stand at the north end of the Reservoir and look up at the tall midtown buildings and the masses of bright windows.

For about a week and a half each year (usually around late April) the entire west side of the Reservoir is blanketed in fluffy pink petals. Right to the side of the bridle path, runs a separated pathway paved not with cement, but woodchips. It only stretches the equivalent of five blocks, but the entire path winds underneath an archway of cherry blossom trees. My mother told me that the day before I was born, she remembers walking down the path when the flowers were just reaching their peak. Now the passage serves as our favorite walkway. When I was in grade school, my mom would meet me outside the heavy iron doors of my school on 79th Street between 5th and Madison, and if the weather was nice, we would across the park, around the Great Lawn and along the Reservoir, until we finally got to the “pink flower tunnel,” as I named it. This was my favorite part of our journey. I liked to try to take one petal from each tree, because one of my mom’s students had told me it was good luck. He was a fifth grader, so I believed him.

In the summer my mom and I like to go on picnics. She has a quilted blanket, which remains dormant in the winter because we only use for this purpose. A few years ago my mother found a set of pretend fancy china plates, which are actually made of aluminum, in the Met gift shop. They have deep blue rims and look surprisingly realistic, but can be dropped or even thrown against the ground without taking a scratch, perfect for picnics. We pack boxes of scones, containers filled with butter and jams of all flavors, and thermoses filled with hot tea; mine has honey, and hers remains unsweetened. My mother carries it all in a large straw basket with leather straps and stuffs in a book for each of us. There is a specific field not far from where we live that we like to go to and have gone since I was very little. The field is not very big, but it is surrounded by trees, which cast a very agreeable shade. We sit and chat over tea and homemade scones, and after all are gone, we lie down on the soft quilt and read for a few hours. When I was younger I didn’t have the patience to sit still and read, so after a few minutes, I would wander off into the trees that surround the lawn and build fairy houses and villages out of stones and woodchips that I found. The houses were certainly well constructed, but they never lasted. They all withstood gusts of wind, but a clumsy squirrel or an oblivious baby was a different matter. When I came back the next day, I would only see small piles of woodchips, or stones, but I was never too upset. Maybe some fairies had stopped by to play when no one was looking, but I didn’t worry that they had gotten crushed. They were probably pretty accustomed to clumsy squirrels.
My mother was born on the west side of Manhattan and raised on the east, at 812 Park Avenue with Jerry, her favorite doorman, a nanny, her parents, and two birds named Alex and Alex. I was born in a different kind of New York, on the east side—and raised on the west. It’s difficult for me to imagine my mother with her short gray hair and warm brown eyes living among the bleach blonde plastic surgeried Barbies who prance down Park today. But her New York was a different world from mine, a world of cigarettes, old money and beluga caviar.

My mother and I are strikingly similar; I just like to pretend that we aren’t. I pretend that I’ll stay mad at her if she won’t let me sleep at someone’s house at the last minute, or if she doesn’t want me alone on the subway at night. But I know why she does it—because I’m just as neurotic and worried as she is.

My mother will tell people she was really raised by an Irish sitter named Betty Reilly. Betty had a round face, light brown curls that were hair sprayed stiff, and a petite figure. She had different dresses for each day of the week, smelled like Mentos, and prayed her rosary every night. She lived in the apartment with my mother and taught her, as much as she could, not to put her elbows on the table, or to sit like a truck-driver. Betty was with my mother on those long nights that Douglas and Lily weren’t.

I had two Irish babysitters: Betty, who raised my mother, and Sarah, who came to us when I was two weeks old. Sarah had a sharp face with kind pale eyes and feather thin blonde fair that she was constantly trying to thicken and curl. She used to pick up my thick curls and sigh. “One day if you’re not careful Lily. I’m just going to steal your curls straight from your head.” Sarah wore a different colored blouse and ironed slacks every day. She took care of me on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Betty came on Tuesday and Thursday.

My mother says that Douglas and Lily were out most nights to some party or opening or dinner. They were society people who mingled, remembered names, and laughed a little too loud for it to be believable at parties. Grandfather wrote for Time magazine, ironically, the religion section. He never really was religious until he converted to Catholicism to marry his fifth wife, KK, after he divorced my Oma, Lily. He was sarcastic and smooth and carried a flask full of vodka in his jacket pocket. Every so often, he would stay home for dinner and make his special spaghetti sauce loaded with garlic. The smell would
lead my mother to the kitchen, where she would try to steal some away from him. But every time, Grandfather would see her sneak in, and he’d spit in the bowl several times to make sure it was all his, and not my mother’s. He was the best father he could be to her because she was right there alone in front of him for twenty years. He was the one who would say, “This too shall pass, Al.” He would chat with her friends, and make sure that everyone was laughing. That wasn’t the Grandfather I knew. I knew him when his hair was gray, and he couldn’t hear anymore. He had two yappy dogs, a yappy wife, and he gave me a new teddy bear on each visit.

Everybody I meet tells me that my Oma was beautiful. “Your Grandmother was real in a world of high faluting nobodies,” they’d say. She wore Halston before his clothes were fashionable, sequin headdresses, and she wasn’t afraid of color. When she was in a hurry to be somewhere, she never ran. Instead, she took long deep lunges, racing forward to catch a taxi before anyone else beat her to it, and she did it all with a cigarette in hand and an air of elegance. There were a lot of things that made Lily nervous: bikes, yelling, small children. She was aware of her neuroses, and avoided them as much as she could. That’s why my mom had Betty.

Lily didn’t know how to hug. She was a master of the bisou-bisou double cheek kiss that she gave her acquaintances. She was also a fan of the air hug, where she just barely touched the arms of the other person. My mother taught Lily to really hug, like she did for me when I was three and I decided I didn’t want to touch or hug anyone ever again.

When I was younger, my parents would go out a lot. Or it felt like a lot to me. Each time they did, I asked how late it was going to be. I liked the nights that they told me 9 or 10. When they left, Sarah would try to calm me down and get me ready for bed. I made her read me stories over and over, willing myself to stay awake until my ears perked up at the sound of the front door opening, and I knew they were home safe.

I was always anxious – mostly about my parents when they went out. My imagination went wild. I always pictured a scene like in Cinderella. Suddenly my parents would be gone, and I was going to wear rags and live in some scary person’s attic. When I was eleven or twelve, I couldn’t do sleepovers because I got too nervous. I would start to hyperventilate and convince myself that my parents had been in horrible accidents, and I would have to leave for home in the middle of the night.

Every March, Douglas and Lily would entertain friends at a villa in Cadaqués, Spain. My mom hated Spain. She was the only child, surrounded by adults drinking and laughing on boat trips and cocktail nights. All she wanted was to be back in New York with Betty. What she got was a slew of nannies who didn’t speak English. Douglas and Lily thought my mother would learn Spanish, but she didn’t.

My mother and I are both New Yorkers, born and bred. Her New York was the one I always secretly wished I was a part of. I wanted in on the ‘70’s parties where people talked about art and stood out if they were dressed head to toe in black. She didn’t want to be a part of that world. She complains about going out and dragging herself into a pair of heels and maybe a dress. If it’s something really fancy, then she’ll put on lipstick and ask me to come in and help her choose her jewelry. I used to help my mom get ready for the big parties. I’d sit on the floor next to her closet, and point for her to wear my favorite dress. It was a beaded pink shift dress that looked like it belonged to someone from the 1920s with a cigarette dangling from one hand and a champagne glass in the other. Each time she would shake her head. “Not tonight, Lil. This isn’t the right kind of party for that.” Then she’d reach in her closet and pull out something black, or white, or red – her go to colors.

I used to beg my mom to let me go with her to MoMa openings. Sometimes, she’d let me go for the cocktails, and I’d leave when they headed to dinner. I’d do my best to brush out my hair, and clip back my frizzed bangs. Then I’d see if I could get away with wobbling around in heels, and I’d practice
Before 19

Our New York

my no-teeth smile so my braces wouldn’t show. When I actually got there, it was never any fun. My mom would mingle with a glass of seltzer in her hand and talk about things that I didn’t get to be a part of, even if I wanted to.

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Douglas worked, and Lily slept in, so my mom went to school alone every morning. Much to her embarrassment, a black limousine picked her up in the lobby, and took her to the red front door of Spence, on 91st, between 5th and Madison. Every afternoon, Betty would stand outside the red door and wait to walk my mother home.

Every morning, my mom took me to school on her favorite mode of transportation: a bike. The click, click, click of the bicycle chain was the telltale signal that Mom was home. Sacred Heart was just across Central Park on 91st and 5th – we could see the top of the roof from our living room window. Down the street was the red door of Spence that my mother had walked through every morning for twelve years. Our bike was a tandem, and I’d sit in the back with my feet sitting loosely on the pedals, letting my mom do all the work. Biking was her thing, and it never relaxed me the way it did for her. The older I got, the more self conscious I became. My legs were too awkwardly long for the backseat, and my thick long hair formed a triangle under the helmet. I learned to hate the bike. People used to stare, and wave. Also we rode through the park around the Great Lawn. In the afternoon, it would be packed with private school teens, smoking cigarettes and laughing in uniform kilts and ties. I would keep my head down and pretend no one could see my seat in the back. I asked if I could start taking the bus with my other West Side friends, and eventually my mom gave in.

I was in fourth grade when I first took a taxi home by myself, and seventh grade when I was allowed alone on the subway. “When I was a kid, I never went on the subway,” my mom would tell me. “We walked or took cabs – there just wasn’t anywhere in the city that the subway could take me that I wanted to go.” Today, the subway takes me almost anywhere I want to go.

Once, my mom showed me her senior yearbook. Under the bold ALEXANDRA AUCHINCLOSS at the top, was a picture of a face covered by a camera lens, with big bushy hair spouting out from the edges. I could just see the tips of her round glasses over the top of the camera. “I was a total nerd!” she told me. “And that’s why I never had a date until college.”

She spent her summer before college “hosteling” around Europe with her best friend Sophia. Their original plan was to hostel, but Lily was a nervous mother, and gave them extra money, just in case. They stayed in 2 star hotels and drank Orzo at French bars.

My mother knew that she wanted to go to Connecticut College from the beginning, and her half siblings used to poke fun at her, chanting “ED to CC!” The June before college, Mom begged Oma to rent a normal car, instead of their usual black town car, complete with chauffeur. But by the time moving day came around, Lily had forgotten about the rental. In a last minute scramble, Lily did what she knew best, and called a car company. Douglas sat in the front of the black limo with his silver flask in hand. Next to him was the chauffeur in a full cap and suit, with Lily crying in the backseat and my mother sitting next to her, mortified. Mom made sure they stopped at a Howard Johnson’s on the way, and she begged Lily to have the driver change out of his uniform. As they rolled into campus, eager students surrounded the car. “Welcome to CC Mr. Auchincloss!!” they yelled enthusiastically into the driver window. The driver looked around, bemused. “Me? I’m not Mr. Auchincloss. I’m just the chauffeur.” My mom buried her face in her hands as Douglas took another swig.

My mom studied history at Conn, and then decided to study social work at Columbia. She moved back to New York, to 6 West 77th Street, with a doorman named Owen and a cat named Harry. She was pretty sure that Harry the cat was going to be her closest true love until she got a phone call one day. “Hi, this is Paul Herzan. I’m calling at the suggestion of Ken Butler. He said that he thought we might enjoy meeting one another. I hope you don’t find this too forward, or really weird, but I look forward to speaking with you.” He left his number and hung up. She didn’t call for a month, or at least that’s what it felt like to my dad.

My mom tells me that she fell head over heels in love. The kind of relationship that is only real in the world of cartoons, not in New York. My parents were dating for three months before my mom gave up Harry and got engaged, which seems slightly insane. The wedding was at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and Lily of course, planned every detail, from the dress to the cake, flawlessly.

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I was born eight years later, on the east side of Manhattan. I was raised on the west on 90th Street, with a family of ten doormen, and a crazed dog named Rosie.

My parents always knew what my name was going to be, whether I was a girl or a boy. If I were a boy, I would have been named Francis, after my father’s father. But instead, my namesake was my glamorous Oma, who knew me for little over a year. She was diagnosed with lung cancer when I was in utero – her years of social smoking turned to chain addiction had taken their toll. In that year, my mom spent the most time with Oma. “I used to tell her how I just had the best baby,” Mom would slip into her storytelling voice. “And she used to tell me ‘NO, I had the best baby.’” Then my mom would pause for dramatic effect. “And then she’d say, ‘no – you’re right. You did have the best baby.’” When Oma died, I don’t know how my mother reacted. “Your Oma loved me more than anyone, except maybe you,” she would tell me.

I don’t remember ever really fighting with my mom. We had tried to before. My mother’s voice would start to rise and screech. Her nose would scrunch and her lips would purse comically as she yelled, “LILY!” The fight was over at that point, because I wouldn’t be able to stop my nervous giggles. “Ok, ok I’m sorry!” My mom would storm out of my room, and later she’d come back and apologize for yelling. “You know – you’re lucky,” she would tell me. “How would you have liked being stuck with someone else’s mother?”

My mom still complains when she gets home from a long meeting and has to go to a late party. She still bikes everywhere around the city that she can, or walks instead of taking a cab. The New York she grew up in with black Lincoln cars and older people she can’t talk to doesn’t exist anymore. Now it’s filled with subways and her people. Ones that I’m not so keen on talking to, the same way that she used to be. But her New York is my New York.
Wherein Lies a Candle Snuffed
By Dylan Etzel

A typical child has one precious room. But I used to have two: one in safe, energetic Irvington, and another at my grandparents’ house hidden away in the gloomy forests of Redding, Connecticut. I had inherited my uncle’s blue walls and blue carpet, his poster of Dark Shadows, and a library of Charlie Brown graphic novels. While my room in Irvington was constantly evolving from Beanie Bears and Power Rangers into PlayStations and a Stratocaster, this room remained the same, colored by the growth of a typical ‘70s son. But beyond the dust-covered Mets pennants on my uncle’s walls, there was the creeping eeriness of the rest of the house in Redding.

Each time my parents and I visited, I prepared to wrestle with new nightmares. But I also marveled at it all. The house itself was framed with warm oak on the outside and lined with cold bricks on the inside. Nature surrounded it from all sides. No matter how gruesome the rampant ivy and the fallen decomposing trees were, there was an eternal quality of the house, as if it were haunting its inhabitants. Unlike in my cul-de-sac in Irvington, here the concept of next-door-neighbors did not exist. The closest house was an indefinite length away. The driveway was covered with rotting, multi-colored leaves. I remember fearing the gigantic, slippery slate steps encroached upon by blossoming moss that “welcomed” the visitors, my parents and me. In the event that it had just rained, my grandmother would present an alternative route, through the garage thick with airborne dust and up the squeaking, brittle stairs. But whichever way we went, the path remained unchanged. My grandparents would never clear the moss, and the same spots on the stairs would always noisily creak “Beware!”

Our visit would usually start in the living room. I’d always ask my parents to let me open the heavy, sliding wooden door, and my grandpa would appear, offering a handshake to me with an iron grip. The scent of wool wafted from his pine-colored sweater. With him would be the corky walls. The shaggy, scarlet carpet. The peeling flowery wallpaper of the kitchen. Potted plants placed everywhere. Familiar troll dolls on the wall that never failed to bend my smile. Walls swelling with novels and VHS tapes, most of them concerning realistic nightmares like The Black Dahlia Murder and Fargo. Coming out of the wall, a stone fireplace last used in ancient times. Beside it, a graveyard of framed photographs, ghostly with varying levels of twentieth century sepia. And no matter how much all of this rattled me, these things came to remind me of family. I grew accustomed to eating a mix of cereal and bananas with my grandma in the kitchen. We carefully studied the photo albums, acknowledging the dead and smiling back at the living. We watched Fargo together, huddled around the TV decorated with the leaves and smell of devil’s ivy.

I often liked to scramble upstairs. I’d sit on top of the lofty carpeted staircase that led to the bedrooms, gazing down at my grandma squinting up from the bottom, in the foyer. Over and over again I pushed off the top stair and slid down, my butt hitting the next step, each one shaking me as if I were hurtling down a course of icy moguls, until I landed in the affectionate embrace of arthritic hands and a soft wool sweater. As I was released, I’d spill onto the cold bricks and fly into the parlor, another room haunted by barely living azaleas and Raggedy Anns patched with age and cotton. I’d climb onto a piano bench by a rocking horse, which my parents would soon herd into our own house, and play childish arrangements of unorganized notes. My grandma would laugh and call me a “Nutsy Fagin”; I still don’t know what that means. Much the same, when I entered the living room, my grandpa would call me “Herkommer” and tease me about whatever crossed his mind. The name means “Problems here” in Dutch, but none of us knew any Dutch.

“Oh, you’re learning Latin now are you? Then what does ‘pectus’ mean?” he once asked.
“I don’t know Poppa, I just started a week ago.”

“But you have to know what ‘pectus’ means; it means ‘heart’!” I scowled and became engrossed in the usual Yankee baseball game, while he quizzed me on the names of the players. He coughed a little from the medical treatment I didn’t know he was having, but he seemed pretty much fine.

Love continued to outweigh fear, until an ambulance stole my grandpa from his usual reclining chair in the living room, one Thanksgiving. We were trying to enjoy mashed potatoes and turkey out of aluminum containers when cancer filled his lungs with fluid. EMS arrived and rushed him out on a stretcher. My grandma turned on the radio, which responded with Norah Jones’ “Don’t Know Why,” hoping to dissuade possible burglars with sound, as if the sight of the house was not enough. When we got to the hospital, I asked the man with the fancy M.D. on his name tag how long it would be until my grandpa could leave. He ignored me. Instead he replied with the reasons why he would not be able to use a defibrillator, like the fragility of his old ribs, when “the time came,” which was four days later.

Yet at the end of that longest week of my life, when I returned to the house, it was mostly the same. Cancer couldn’t claim the clues that a great grandfather had lived with his wife in the woods. His chair was left empty, his beloved cookbooks unopened, and his hug still not burned out of my mind. I’d nestle with the same old nightmares, despite being a teenager. The nightmare always happened the same way: I’d see my mother’s childhood room, my grandparents’ room, and then nothing but a melting candle following me through the corridor that led to endless emptiness. There were no sounds; there were no odors. I could deny that the chuckling dolls and sylvan smells scared me, but one thing could grip my throat so tightly with fear that my lungs filled with nothing but the enveloping emptiness. The Dark. He always went to sleep with a light on, which I remember as I routinely click the button on my nightlight at my home. I never talked about fears with him, but my grandpa could innately tell. We shared a naive sense of hope and a fear of what we don’t know or understand.

And somehow, even without him there to smile, I could stomach the house. It got colder and colder as the next Christmas approached, and still, I volunteered to spend Christmas Eve in a house heated only by my grandma’s love. I was going to bring her a lone present early: a space-heater. I realized that I can’t find any more memories or adjectives about that chilly place because it burned away on that Christmas Eve. We got the call in the morning. The ground level had combusted, perhaps even spontaneously, and the fire spread to the rest of the interior, just as my grandma climbed out of the window and entered the arms of the speedy firemen. My parents and I wondered about a lot of things, but mostly about karma. If the house was somehow connected to my grandpa’s own lifespan. As long as we had the house, we had him: pictures, mementos, and smiles. We buried his ashes but not his possessions and our pictures of him. They were cremated along with the house. The fire forced us to move on.

I switched off the nightlight, for good.
It was a sunny Saturday morning and the sun spilled its bright yellow color onto the burnt-orange roof, which peeked out of the layers of trees. My family was paying our usual weekend visit to my grandma. This is the weekend, and I still need to wake up at 7 a.m. What kind of life is this? As we slowly made our way into the mountain, I began seeing the four red pillars gradually ascending into my vision. The bright red arms were holding the roof up high into the air. The grand edifice that sternly stood in the middle of the mountain finally appeared as my dad drove into the driveway. This was going to be another long morning.

My father dropped my mother and me off to park his car. As I stepped out of the car, the mix of fresh morning breeze and the hint of warmth from the welcoming sun summoned the familiar Goosebumps. Why is the weather up here always like this? As I walked up the never-ending steps towards the gigantic entrance, I slowly hid away the tired boy who did not want to be here. It was an early morning, but there were already a lot of people. Kids were running around outside of the entrance, and adults were chattering amongst one another. As I took off my black Converse, I looked up at my mother. Her facial expression was very serious and her eyes were filled with respect. She bowed deeply at the entrance and entered. I, too, bowed deeply and followed her footsteps.

As I entered, the hint of warmth disappeared, only leaving behind the dark chills. No lights dared to peek in, and no sounds dared to whisper. While my eyes were still adjusting to the deprivation of light, golden sparkles of reflection managed to make their way into my pupils. It was these molecules of gold that united into a magnificent form ahead of me. His body smothered with gold, his eyes lucid blue, his lips bright red. I dared not observe him more, because I was scared he would look right through me. I quickly looked up only to find 10,000 eyes looking down at me. They were of different sizes, shapes, and gender. They all had different responsibilities and were in charge of different kinds of emotions. The breathtaking scene pushed my head back down to ground level. Before I knew it, I was standing beside rows of square-shaped mattresses. The enormous entrance behind me became a tiny door. I had officially entered the other world.

As my mom and I made our way to the mattress that we chose to kneel on, I noticed other people in the room. Though it was dark, my eyes could see the different emotions surrounding me. We all contributed a piece of ourselves into this new world. This was not my first time coming here, so I automatically noticed some familiar faces. Oh, she’s here AGAIN. Wasn’t she crying the last time? This old man’s new, what is he wishing for? Various trends of thought ran through my mind, but I was no one to judge them. Just like them, I had come for more.

My mom took her position and began her spiritual journey. She kneeled, bowed her head, and then quickly stood up. She repeated this three times. The standard operating procedure, how could I forget? I quickly repeated after her. On my third kneel ‘n bow, my mom already began her conversation with the almighty. While I took my kneeling position to begin my conversation, I overheard a little bit of what my mother was saying.

“Please protect my mom, who’s over there with you. I really miss her, but I know you are taking good care of her…” my mom said. My grandma became a nun when my grandpa passed away. She was a firm believer in Buddhism and decided she wanted to devote the rest of her life to serving Buddha. Because of my grandma’s religion, all of my uncles and aunts from my mother’s side were Buddhists. I, too, became a Buddhist the day I was born. My childhood memories were filled with temples, monks, and nuns. When I smell the scent of incense, my childhood automatically begins to play in my head. It’s almost like Buddhism runs in my blood. Something you can’t choose, but possess the day you are born.

When my grandma passed away, my parents placed her remains in a temple she loved dearly. This temple became a regular visiting site for my family. We would visit during important family reunions. We would visit during times of hardship. We would visit even during times of triumph. It almost helped in holding my family together and giving us the hope to move forward. But just like the darkness that surrounded me, sometimes I question if this belief is sucking us into a black hole of unlimited desires.

I can’t think straight with the lights off. Why do they always create this spooky feeling in here?

Ding, ding, ding.

A monk walked by, ringing the bell in his hand. All my thoughts were absorbed by the bell. Then what should I wish for now? I quickly thought of something new to wish for because I never ran out of those.

Hi, Buddha, my name is Yu Chun Chen. And I am your follower. Thank you for the good life that I had in the past 13 years of my life. And I am truly grateful for that. But
recently I am faced with obstacles in life. I’m applying to high schools in the States, and there is one that I really want to go to. Can you please help me? Please! I really tried so hard. I studied the best I could. PLEASE! And also, can you please give everyone I care about a good health? I don’t want any of them to run into any hardships in life. And can you please help me gain some more weight? I just really want to gain ten more pounds. Just ten more and I will be happy again. Please make me happy again.

It was a lot to wish for, but my childish mindset was that you always had to give it a shot. Who knows? Buddha might really like you.

As I finished my wish, I slowly lowered my head to the floor, stood up and bowed deeply. Though Buddha was just lying down on the ground sideways, looking at me, I felt like he was mocking me. I looked over to my mother to see if she was done. As expected, she was still murmuring rigorously, almost like telling a friend about her life for the past month. She truly believed Buddha was listening on the other end of the world. She sincerely trusted Buddha to fulfill her dreams. But at the same time she was humbly thanking Buddha for all the goodness he has done for her. I guess strong faiths take a long time to create.

I waited until my mother finally finished. She took a deep bow and walked towards a bowl of ashes, which sat in front of Buddha. My mom once again took out the indefinite shape of my childhood that was rolled into a thin long stick. She quickly lit the stick on fire and gave it to me. The scent began filling my nostril. It was the smell of hope and desires. It was the smell of my prayers ready to be taken in by the owner of the world I was in. The gold and magnificent mocking me.

So there it was. My untouchable past, present and future stuck within the ashes of hope, which stood tall and straight. It was slowly unraveling itself from the layers and layers of paper that embodied it. It was hoping to one day fulfill the dreams it had possessed from its owners, but knew that all hopes would end in ashes anyways. It was trying to stay strong, but the gentle fire was slowly nibbling away from it. As it dies out, indefinite shapes of wishes drift into the air. The hope is that it will reach the Almighty, but I know it won’t make it. Yet I still believe.
I sometimes get scared about my lack of formal religion. Although my last name is Rosenberg, my childhood years were comprised of stringing popcorn and cranberries together with a sewing needle as snow draped the windowsills before Christmas, and spring days of painting Peter Rabbit in watercolors on fragile white Easter eggs from the grocery store.

I wonder, though, about whether I’ve missed out on a soothing spoonful of something that might securely glaze over my peeling, cracking, thumping chest when I start to think about the hovering valleys of existence. Yet, I’m grateful that I inhaled Hinduism in the same way that I inhaled Christianity when I took a World Religions course at the drip-drop age of sixteen. My mind is open. “That was the point,” my mother said.

Some weeks ago, in grappling with the laminated title of “eighteen-years-old,” I found myself cross-legged in the office of my former English teacher, Mr. Wood, ready to absorb any scrap of meaning he had to offer me. The natural light from the window, glossing his gold hair, gave him a halo, and it never ceased to remind me to breathe. I began by rambling, as I often did. School was good, but what was I trying to make of my senior year? Why did I suddenly feel so old? We usually didn’t know, but we tried to figure it all out. As the next period of classes was about to begin, Mr. Wood hit me with some words that soothed me, scared me. He told me about an Emerson quote that a contemporary writer, Annie Dillard, also worked with.

“I might get it tattooed on my arm,” he said.
“What is it?” I said eagerly.
“No one suspects the days to be gods.”

And after some debate about whether we thought “gods” was supposed to have a capital G and an apostrophe before the S, we concluded that “gods” made sense and I’ve been thinking about it ever since.

I’ve made these words my religion, I think. I’ve come to believe that the days really are gods, that each one is meant to teach us a lesson, and that being present and aware is the only way you’ll gulp it down. I’ve even wondered if the days are specifically Greek gods and goddesses. Maybe Aphrodite kissed the sunrise on the mornings when I feel a loving spark buzzing in my chest, or maybe Poseidon had his pick on the calendar when streets flood with water and people drive boats like cars, even though they’re not in Venice. Or maybe not. Maybe there is no tangible god at all; rather, the day’s natural events, the way they influence you and others and coincide with different events, makes the actual components of the days bewilderingly sacred.

Shortly after my talk with Mr. Wood, the shiny approach had already kicked in. I started to look for holiness in everything—especially things that seemed the opposite. In yoga class it wasn’t the meditation or the vibrancy of my third eye that captured me, but instead the conversations with the vivacious, white-haired women in their 70s, who did headstands with strength. I felt they radiated a sacred essence.

One day after school, I was waiting in the parking lot for my mom to pick me up. As I waited, a teacher whom I’d never really talked to before walked by and she said, “My best childhood memories come from waiting.” I’ve thought about that a lot since that afternoon. The trees and the grass and the flowers hummed when I walked the dogs with my mom. I positioned my mind to think about things like how the colors that we dye on clothing and the makeup we paint our faces with all came only from the sky, the earth, and how really everything came from only the sky, the earth. I started to notice more.

A few days before Christmas Eve, I slept over at my grandparents’ apartment in New York City, so I could do some last minute shopping. That night, after I had taken a warm shower, put on a comfortably fraying pair of my
grandmother’s pajamas, and combed back my wet hair, I had the impulsive idea to scurry down the nighttime streets to go see the Christmas tree at the Met before the museum closed. My grandmother agreed, although she always took serious convincing when wet hair and cold air were both in the picture. When we finally got to the museum, rosy cheeked and out of breath, we entered the Medieval Art wing and there stood the glowing tree. The angels swept the branches, and the figurines by the trunk of the tree were busy doing whatever they were doing, just like we were. And although I know that there are religious symbols beyond the tree itself and that the name of the town portrayed probably has a name from the Bible, I couldn’t tell it to you. But I know that on a cold, dark night in December when my grandmother and I snuck out in our pajamas to a cove of candles and colors and people in the city doing the same exact thing, that something felt right.

My younger sisters made fun of my new outlook. When I complimented my mom on the night’s dinner, Georgia would ask, giggling, “Is the steak a god?” She had a point, but I wasn’t letting go. On Sundays, when my parents drove me and my sisters and brother home from our late evening tennis lesson, I watched the water bordering the highway. The sky’s lights grew dim and the colors streaked as if inside a marble. But I mostly watched the way my mom readily turned up the volume with her right hand when her favorite Chicago song played, and the way she clasped my dad’s free hand with her left one.

When things went right for me, it was easy to spot the sacredness that wove together the mornings and the nights. When things went wrong, it was harder. Beginning in the first months of my senior year, I grew a crush on this boy. For weeks on weeks, my days were consumed with whether this boy and I had spoken, whether we had made eye contact, or whether we did not. I was hyper-aware of my actions and when the school day ended, I would reflect on the day’s events, revolving around my progress with him. In the end, nothing became of this crush and I was kicking myself for allowing my mind to so intricately weave itself into something that it had basically made up on its own. And though for a while this bothered me, I came to realize something big. Even though the boy meant nothing, he somehow was a bridge that allowed me to wake up to the days’ events. I was aware that my senior year was fleeting and that I was eager to hold on, so for that “woken up feeling,” I was actually grateful. Looking back, I can remember less about the way he barely glanced at me in the hallway and more about the way I felt. I remember independently walking to the dining hall for my ritual Monday lunch date with my book, before heading to Poetry Club, and how after a while I slowly came to understand that those things were far more nourishing.

A couple of Mondays ago a bomb went off at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Three people died and 282 people were injured. “Is today a god?” I wondered to myself. I didn’t know and I didn’t begin to make remote sense of it until I saw an article in The New York Times a few days ago that pinpointed specific people who were at the marathon and their recollections of the day. One woman, Kristine Biagiotti, ran the marathon pushing her 18-year-old daughter, Kayla, who has mitochondrial encephalomyopathy, in a wheelchair. Kristine said of the day, “Kayla had her hand raised in the air; people had been cheering for her all along the course. All of the sudden there was an explosion. We saw a runner go down; people were screaming. The one thing I’m thankful for is the positioning of Kayla in her wheelchair; she was sheltered from the scene and was thinking that the big noise was part of the celebration for her finishing. She never saw the carnage. For Kayla, with all of this horror, she still has that picture of a beautiful day.”

I only know that Kayla’s own day was a faithful god. And maybe it will take time for me to understand why something like this happened, or maybe time won’t matter, but I don’t know where to start.

“The gods were fickle,” Mr. Ives, my ninth grade history teacher, wrote on the white board, as we delved into Ancient Greece. Just like the Grecian gods, the days are also fickle. There is no pattern; there is no shape. Emerson wrote in “The Oversoul,” “If we consider what happens in conversation, in reveries, in remorse, in times of passion, in surprises, in the instructions of dreams, wherein often we see ourselves in masquerade, — the droll disguises only magnifying and enhancing a real element, and forcing it on our distinct notice, — we shall catch many hints that will broaden and lighten into knowledge of the secret of nature.”

All that I’ve come to really understand so far is that it is vital to watch the days breathe and watch the days perform. I think they might be trying to say something too.
Concussed
By Emma Shepardson

I am really lucky. I grew up in a privileged town in a privileged family and not often did I have to worry about the big things. I did not have to worry about whether there would be food on the table the next morning. I didn’t have to worry about being able to continue my education, and I didn’t have to worry about having a place to sleep at night. Looking back on it now, I often took for granted the little things, such as reading a book, watching TV, and working on a computer.

Three months after my eighteenth birthday, I fell. I don’t exactly remember how it happened, but one moment I was having fun with my friends during lacrosse practice, and the next thing I knew I was on the ground, on my back, gagging on my mouth guard. I remember opening my eyes, and my three coaches were around me. I shot up, I spit out my mouth guard onto the turf and started coughing. I felt like I was going to throw up. I started walking, and then everything started to spin. I felt like there was a layer of tissue over my eyeballs and nothing was where it was before—everything seemed off and blurry. An hour later I was diagnosed with a major concussion.

Two years before this, yet again during lacrosse practice, I got hit in the head. Even though I was out of lacrosse for a week with a minor concussion, I went back to school the next day and every other day after that without a problem. This time was different. For a few days, I rarely left my dark room. I was told not to look at a TV, computer, a phone or anything with a screen. I was told not to read. I was told not to drive my car. And I did not want to do anything of the above, which is pretty odd for me, seeing as I normally do three of those things at the same time. At first, it was fine with this alteration to my daily life—I was so tired, I was sleeping most of the time, I didn’t feel like doing any of these things. Over a week later, once I got back to school, the frustration set in.

I can’t perform simple, daily routines without getting a headache. I can’t live my life the way I am used to. I come home from school in the middle of the day with a piercing headache, and am unable to do anything except sit on the couch and stare at my toes for nine hours until I go to bed. Then, I wake up and repeat the entire damn process again, so far for six weeks.

Pre-concussion, I was incredibly active on a daily basis. Aside from my classes, I’d have lacrosse practice after school every day, executive committee meetings, Athletic Club meetings, meetings with teachers, Middle School Peer Leading, and much more. I normally can’t sit still for five minutes, so sitting at the counter in my kitchen, watching my babysitter making herself a turkey burger, then eating her turkey burger, then deciding I wanted a turkey burger, then waiting for my mom to drive to the store to buy more turkey meat, then watching my babysitter make me a turkey burger, then eating the turkey burger, is killing me mentally. I’d rather run a marathon than sit at my counter for an entire day.

I feel like I have regressed to my childhood; it’s as if I became Benjamin Button. My daily routine, when this first happened, was like that of a newborn. I would eat, nap, take an occasional class, go on a walk with my mother, and that was about enough to wipe me out. Now that I am back at school more regularly, I still cannot make it through a full day without going home and resting my brain, even taking the occasional nap. I’m almost certain the last time I took a nap I was three years old. The simple idea of sleeping during the day makes me feel useless and stupid. Is there really nothing else an eighteen-year-old high school senior can do but sleep? It doesn’t seem right. It makes me angry beyond belief.

My anxiety over this is compounded by the fact that I feel I let so many people down—my lacrosse team, Executive Committee, my teachers, my friends, my family. I want to be better for myself and for them, and I so badly want to be doing more than doing nothing. Dammit, I wish I was the one behind the computer screen right now typing this paper, not my mother. But no, I can’t do it. The eye movement and concentration that is required of me to look at a screen or track words on a piece of paper is too much for my concussed brain to handle. Just as I thought things were going well, and I had gotten to an exciting and transitional phase in my life, I got derailed. My independence, which I pride myself on and probably have since the age of five, has been stripped from me. Yes, things are slowly coming back. I am able to drive again, I can attend school and certain functions on a limited basis, and I can begin to have fun again with my friends. But I am not myself. My head hurts every day. Simple tasks can still exhaust me. It’s the end of my senior year and I want to be at school enjoying the time I have with my friends. But it’s difficult to be in an environment that’s so upbeat and loud and happy about growing up and moving on, when all I can think about are the things I still can’t do.
No one understands what I am dealing with because I take a shower every day, put on my clothes, put on my makeup, and look like Emma Shepardson. I am not in a wheelchair, I do not have casts on all four limbs, and I don’t look injured. But I am not myself. I try to overcome the pain; I try to do things I know will make my headache worse because I feel as if I am being judged for doing nothing.

What did I learn from this unanticipated blow to the head? I learned that I really like being a student; I like working hard; I like to be busy. I’m the kind of kid who genuinely enjoys sitting in class and learning, or reading the front section of The New York Times cover to cover each day. Doing nothing does not suit me well. I’m not good at relaxing. Isn’t it ironic that the only way to feel like myself again is to go against my very nature and rest?

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The hallway of the Mount Sinai hospital surgical wing is painted with a bleach white color that has been layered one too many times. The newest coat transferred onto my small hands as I dragged them fully along the wall, ignoring the "wet paint" warning. I giggled at my stained palms and looked up at my towering father, whose own hands I could barely reach. His scrubs were neatly tied and his teal-clad figure stood out against the sterile white walls and newly waxed floors. The smell of antiseptic was familiar and comforting, as was the smile of my father. He bent down, brushing the dark hair out of his eyes, and wiped each of my fingers on the pant leg of his scrubs. The smears matched the color of his worn in sneakers, just as his focused eyes matched the color of the blue O.R. towels that draped the patient. Each set of his scrubs had its own unique markings of blood, ink, or in this case, white paint. My small fingerprints may still be impressed upon that wall.

"Han, wash with this." A passing nurse handed me a brown bottle as she saw me frantically scrubbing my white coat. The label was in Thai, but the color of the hydrogen peroxide bottle gave me the confidence to dump the clear liquid on the invading red splotch. I was still kicking myself for using the centrifuge incorrectly and stared down at the sink as I washed furiously. Once again, my jacket was clean. The small clinic I worked for in Udon Thani was no Mount Sinai, but its white hallways drew my fingertips like magnets. The walls felt the same: textured, painted, fresh. I grazed the thin coat of paint as I walked back to the blood bank. I picked up where I left off at my converted picnic-table lab station, meeting the patients with a needle in my gloved hands. I had just been given the assignment of finding a blood match for an ill infant. His mother was anxiously awaiting the results I searched for. He needed an O negative blood match; this most rare type had not shown up in any of the samples so far. I kept testing. Such a simple task could change a life. There could not be any stains on my coat.

Throughout middle school, I considered myself my dad's business partner, of sorts. He gave me odd jobs at his office that no one else bothered to do. My greatest task was sterilizing surgical tools. My official motto was "no scalpel left behind," and under my watch everything was folded and sorted, washed and sanitized, and ready for use by the boss. His motto was something like, "I'm in charge, so you can wash." I was the only person in the office who enjoyed wrapping tools in blue bibs, and probably the only kid who spent her pre-teen summer days walking through the hallways of a doctor's office. Cleaning was my specialty, mainly because before the age of thirteen, the sight of needles and blood made me faint. I was also responsible for talking to every single one of my dad's groggy patients as they woke up in the recovery room, folding his business cards into paper frogs, and posting Xerox prints of my hands along the narrow halls.

"Listen up, big shot," my dad said in his I'm only half-serious voice. "If you're going to get anywhere in this business, you're gonna need to be around these and stay conscious." His large hand grasped two fragile syringes. He was about to start a surgery and wanted me to observe.

"I don't even know if I want to be a doctor," I whined, feeling my face turn white and my knees buckle. He saw right through my act and laughed at me, waving me in. "But Daaaaaaaaad, you'll still love me even if I'm a professional rock star, right?"

"Did you just call me butt Dad? Come on, get in here." He held the swinging door open for me, and I walked into his operating room. I assumed my place on a stool in the far corner, while holding up my alcohol-swab safety blanket to my masked nose, the tried and true method to avoid fainting.

"Han, this is called an alveoloplasty. Won't take too long," His patient was anesthetized, and her face looked still and peaceful. His hands, which seemed suffocated in his gloves and far too big to operate on such a small face, gently pulled on her chin to reveal her jaw.

"I don't know what that means, Dad," I mumbled through my facemask. "I'm going to remove some of her mandibular bone so that we can fit another appliance in there later," he said while making his first incision. He joked with the techs in his own brand of esoteric medical humor while I sat, watching in the corner. I was caught by surprise as blood began to coat his gloves, and scarlet scalpels were returned to the table beside him. I hadn't fainted. I was leaning in closer, eyes wide and fixed on the patient's exposed ivory jawbone.
“So, last question. Why do you want to work here in the hospital?” My interviewer looked up at me skeptically over the top of her half-moon glasses. She clutched her clipboard in one hand, and tapped her pen with the other. I sat up straight to correct my teenage posture. I told her about my father’s fulfilling career as an oral surgeon and the many years I spent learning from him. I tried to explain my insatiable interest in patient care and my attraction to the healthcare field. I told her that my dad had passed away suddenly when I was sixteen, and that what had originally called him to hospitals was calling me back, too. She looked up at me, and her eyes locked with mine.

“I’m sorry to hear about your dad. I’m sure he’d be proud.” She signed her name swiftly on my Volunteer Contract and handed the clipboard over to me. “You will fit in quite nicely here. Go on and take this to human resources,” she handed me a slip of paper. “They will give you a Phelps ID badge. Welcome to the hospital.”

After June 2011 my dad was gone, and there were no more summer trips to his office. Instead, I volunteered at Phelps in Sleepy Hollow. My summer days were air-conditioned, sterilized, and scheduled. I was in a controlled environment. Now when I return each week, the only variations are the names outside each room. Thousands of patients have been admitted and discharged since my first shift, but the front desk remains the way I organized it, my dispatcher sits at her same desk, and I get sent down the same pristine white hallways.

On the bulletin board above my desk, I pinned up a photo of my dad. It shows his wavy black hair framing his shaved and confident face. He stands next to a pile of rocks and a stone hut in Kathmandu, Nepal. His hands are buried in the pockets of his navy blue fleece jacket, and his round sunglasses cover his face. White-capped Mount Everest towers over him.

For as long as I can remember, South Asia had always captured my father’s fascination. One particular organization, Himalayan Healthcare, brought him to Nepal as a volunteer surgeon. He went back almost every year, and came home with rolls of film and piles of negatives to develop. Almost twenty years after his first trip, the only pieces of evidence I have are the photos I have pinned to my walls, the prayer flags on my ceiling, and the stories he told of an indescribable culture. Senior year was approaching, and summer lay open. So, I

took a month off from Phelps, signed up with a student medical program in Thailand, and booked my ticket to Bangkok. I would not climb Mount Everest, or fix a young child’s cleft lip. But maybe, I hoped, I would stumble upon a missing part of me.

The trip got off to a rough start. Mysterious bugs were biting me, my jetlag was overbearing, and anxiety was building in all of us. My fellow student volunteers and I waited for our first “clinical day,” the day we’d be responsible for blood tests. The nurses were looking for a confident member of the volunteer team who would be responsible enough to deal with patients. They told us these patients rarely received any kind of healthcare. Unless they were seriously injured, we were the best they were going to get. For four nights straight we stayed up studying, and the night before the clinical day we practiced on each other, pricking fingers and finding veins. The amount of trust I put in people I had just met surprised me. Confidence was the key, or at least feigning it at first. My dad would have laughed hearing the number of times I reassured myself—*I can do it, I can do it, I can do it...I won’t mess up, I promise, I won’t mess up.* After the prick—*Oh, okay, that wasn’t that bad, right? Let’s do it again! New finger please...*
The next morning after a strong cup of coffee I put on my lab coat and welcomed the 5am sunrise. We lined the tables with plastic wrap, prepared the disposable needles and testing equipment, and readied the paperwork. Our translators helped us label our charts so the patients would be able to read them. The Thai nurse who was guiding us told me I’d start at the blood test station, under her careful eye. As my watch beeped at 6 am, I stuck my head out the window and saw at least 50 people standing in a line that stretched down the street. They ranged in age, from 4 or 5 to about 80. All of them were from farming families, and none of them spoke English. During that day and the week after, I was given tasks like centrifuging blood and testing for an O negative match for an ill infant. The translator told me the patients had expressed their gratitude, told him that the pricks didn’t hurt, and that they were happy to have met such a nice American doctor.

I have no professional training whatsoever, and never claimed to be enlightened or even completely confident. With a lot of help along the way I simply brought home the idea that I’m capable of completing simple tasks that can mean a lot to other people. I saw the trust my dad must have found so motivating during his trips. He certainly didn’t know everything either. He just did what he was trained to do, and absorbed the virtues of thankfulness and humility along the way. Maybe that’s all I’m looking for.

Even after a year of volunteering at Phelps Hospital and a spontaneous trip to Thailand, I have not had a sudden epiphany. No voice ever shouted in my head, “This is what you’re meant to do!” I even had to be forced to stand the sight of blood. What keeps drawing me back? I still don’t know for sure. It is that something I struggle to describe in conversations, essays, and interviews. A passion for healing? Helping? Magnets in the walls? Often I wonder if it’s just curiosity. It gave my father great satisfaction, and I always saw pieces of myself reflected in him. Am I just following the footsteps of a parent? Or was whatever drive he had also within me too? I still don’t quite know what that instinct is, but I’ve discovered pieces of the puzzle in the corner of that operating room, in the hallways of Phelps hospital, in the Thai clinic, and in the Polaroid of my dad’s expression as he holds a smiling five-year old Nepalese patient on his lap. For whatever reason I just want to be there, go back there, and find more places like those.

Under artificial lights in New York I got vaccines for tuberculosis, malaria, hepatitis, yellow fever, and typhoid. Research, applications, and thirty-two hours of travel brought me to Thailand with a white lab coat, curiosity, and a camera. After bumpy flights and a bruise-inducing cart ride, I spent late nights and early mornings in that clinic, rocking feverish infants and adjusting needle lengths to accommodate calloused skin. A weight was lifted off my shoulders when I found out the blood match I found had taken successfully and the baby was recovering. I don’t know who else lived longer because of me, or who remained ill in spite of me. But I do know I have all of them to thank, and my dad, as I brush my fingertips against the unending white walls of every hospital I’ve ever called home.

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I remember hearing the door slam shut. I can still hear myself screaming and banging on it over and over again. When no one came, I lay down and curled up in a ball. I closed my eyes so tight that the tears stopped. I could have been in there for a few minutes. I could have been in there for three hours. All I know is that I was six years old when those kids locked me in that pitch-black stairwell, and I haven’t cried since.

My mom remembers a call she received from my elementary school that day, saying something about me locking myself in a closet. When she tried to ask me what happened, I pushed past her like I always did and went to pace along the rocks on the edge of our yard. I would walk up and down for hours, thinking to myself and playing with my fingers.

She would watch from afar until it was time to go to therapy. At the time, I was working with a sweet old lady named Ellen who had an office full of toys and games. With my mom’s ear pressed to the door, Ellen would ask me what I wanted to talk about. She never tired of hearing me whine about how much I wanted a dog. I’d go on until she promised she’d make the strongest case she could when it was her and my mom’s turn to talk without me. Then I would start talking about dinosaurs.

“But Raphael, why don’t I get a turn to talk?” she would say with her false, disappointed voice. “Remember, I have feelings too.”

As time went on, Ellen became more certain of her diagnoses, citing my obsession with dinosaurs and inability to pick up on social cues. She lectured my mother on their dire consequences. For some reason, neither she nor any of the other people in my life ever picked up on what else was going on.

I grew up thinking that bullying was just a normal part of being a kid, like homework or bedtime. My dad had always told me that sticks and stones could break my bones but names would never hurt me. My mom often read me the book *Simon’s Hook*, in which the protagonist, Simon, is teased for a hideous haircut his mother gives him. He then seeks the advice of his grandmother, who compares teasing to fishermen’s hooks, trying to bait him. She gives him a list of five strategies to avoid the “hooks.” First, “do little or nothing,” second, “agree with the hook,” third, “change the subject,” fourth, “laugh or make a joke,” and fifth “swim in another part of the sea.” One day, our bus received a stern talking to because someone complained about the bullying. Everyone assumed it was me, and naturally, I was given my own stern little talking to, mainly by Avi.

Avi was a fourth grader and thus one of the oldest kids on the bus. I remember how his globular, pug-like face was scrunched in, how his nose looked like an Everlast speed bag dangling between his dark and beady eyes, which stuck out from his freckled face. A buzz cut always kept his red hair short.

At first, he only commented on how long it took me to get out of the house or how lame it was that I let my mom kiss me goodbye. I just thought about Simon’s hooks. When I ignored him, he would tell me how ugly my glasses were and how stupid I was. He began making fun of the way I pronounce my name, repeating it again and again, each time in a more mocking tone. To this day, my tongue stumbles over my name when I introduce myself, as if the very sound is repugnant and sour. To contain all those emotions bullies love to see, I moved on to strategy two. Somewhere in the middle of strategy three he first said he was going to kill me. When the time came for strategy four, he had already come up with a detailed plan for how he would complete the execution. First, he would shoot me in the stomach so that I wouldn’t die quickly. Then he would shoot me in my legs or something like that (he could never quite make up his mind). Finally, he would put one in my head just to finish me off. He detailed every element of it to me with such ferocity that there was no way I could laugh or make a joke (even though I knew he wasn’t serious). As I sat there silently he...
got more and more desperate, pleading like a junkie for a hit of reaction. When I refused, he forced a laugh from his chest that always came out crackling and broken. Finally I moved on to strategy five and began curling up over my Game Boy in the front seat of the bus. At recess I would go off alone. I talked to the only person I could—myself—and played with my fingers.

I switched schools after that year, and thought it was all over.

***

"Welcome back Kimura kid," I heard a familiar voice say.

I looked behind me and saw Jason, sitting at the desk. I was surprised because, last I heard, he’d gotten an offer from a top football program. Later, he told me that he couldn’t get the grades. He was wearing a shirt that said “Fighting solves everything.”


***

In third grade, I had a big red trampoline in my back yard. On Saturdays all the neighbors would come and play. One day, I saw a group of older kids approaching. I climbed down to introduce myself and saw a familiar scrunched face and frizzy red hair. Before Avi could climb on the trampoline, I got in his way and told him to get off my property.

“Who’s going to make me? You?” he said as he forced his way up, grabbed me by my shirt, and threw me off the ledge.

I went back to pace along the rocks. Watching him play broke me. I swore on my life that I would never let myself be thrown like that again, not without a fight, not without some serious scars to show for it.

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The first time I finished someone with a Kimura joint lock, I was fourteen years old. I had seen people use it plenty of times. I was drawn to it because, in addition to being very effective, it was so candid and clean. I remember being in the guard position, on my back with my legs wrapped around my opponent’s torso. I grabbed one of his wrists and used my other arm to push his head away, isolating the limb so that it lay across my body. I rolled on my side, facing away from his head and shot the hand pressed against his face over his shoulder, then back under his arm and secured the lock by grabbing my own wrist. From there I drove back as hard as I could, ripped his arm free, and pulled it behind his head and sure enough, he tapped out.

From then on, whenever I ended up on my back, I went for it relentlessly. They would drive their elbows into my legs, trying to pry them open or jump up and flail this way and that, but I refused to let go. Sometimes, after I had locked it up, they would connect their arms underneath me and from there it was always a battle. I would use the blade of my wrist to splice into the center of their arms and press my elbow into their faces and yank as hard as I could. They would use all their strength to pull me in and drive me into the mats. I became well acquainted with cartilage grinding and ligaments trembling and tendons threatening to tear. Sometimes my back tweaked, but I ignored it. I didn’t dare unhook my legs to finish it properly because that gave them the chance to explode out. There were some behemoths that were just too strong to finish, but I could still use the lock to roll them over onto their backs and spend a few minutes in top position. Jason is a state wrestling champion standing six four and benching over twice my weight, but he never broke my guard and almost always ended up on his back. I wasn’t naïve, though. I knew that my game was too one dimensional, but in the heat of contest, I got used to falling back on the Kimura.

***

Few appreciate how hard it can be to forget. It’s a tedious process that can take years of diligence and hard work, but by the time I reached eighth grade I had done a pretty good job. I was a good boy who, albeit quiet and reserved, did his homework and listened to his parents.

“When I look at you, I just can’t believe it,” my mom would always say.

As she began to tell me all about Ellen’s diagnoses, other memories came back. Soon afterward, I had a sudden urge to take up boxing. At the time, I was enamored by Bryce Courtenay’s The Power of One, but there was something deeper. Something that made me start watching Mixed Martial Arts when my mom wasn’t around. On the outside, I acted proud, laughing and talking about Ellen’s false prophecies like a beaten opponent, while somewhere inside, I had just been given missing pieces to a puzzle I had long since given up on. Slowly, more and more turned up. They formed the border of a dark silhouette. The outline of a face.

***

I won my first grappling match on points. I had locked up an Americana, but I couldn’t bring myself to deprive my opponent of that little bit of pride that comes from finishing a fight, so I let go of the submission and stayed on top till the bell rang. They handed me a bright red katana as a trophy and asked if I wouldn’t mind stepping up to fight a bigger guy who didn’t have an opponent.
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They had me fight that guy four times in a row. Each time he slammed me on the floor and kept me there until time ran out, and then on the last time my will finally broke and he finished me with an arm-bar. I think about it every time I see that katana. How the hell could I have let that happen?

***

When I was eleven, I walked into my bunk at summer camp and saw two kids from another group huddled in the corner. One had a dark, Mediterranean complexion and greasy black hair. He wore a Jimi Hendricks T-shirt and had dark eyes. The other had a chunky face and an unfortunate mushroom cloud of curly brown hair.

“Get out,” the darker one said.
I just ignored him.

“Listen up fat ass, I want you out of here before I turn around or else.”
I kept ignoring him.

“So you think you’re tough? You think you can take us both?”
I said nothing.

They looked at each other and then charged at me. I got into my cute Tae-Kwon-Do stance and prepared to prove myself.

The dark one picked me up and threw me to the floor like a wrestler. He proceeded to pin my shoulders to the floor while the other boy kicked me in the ribs. I moved wildly, desperately trying to break free, but no matter what I did, I was stuck looking up at rotting wood of our ceiling. When I finally stopped moving, they got off me, gave me the whole “don’t tell on us or else” talk and left. I wished I had let them break my ribs. Instead I lay there, completely broken.

Since the stairwell incident, I had always slept with a light on. I used to let Mom and Dad snuggle up next to me in bed. When I got back that summer, I turned out the lights and wouldn’t let anyone touch me. I became quiet and didn’t make friends at my new school for a long time.

***

In ninth grade I finally convinced my mother to let me go to a boxing gym. I was only allowed to do non-contact classes, which were mostly for middle-aged women, but I made like it didn’t matter. I would hit the bags as hard as I could until the blood from my hands had soaked through the cloth wraps. This went on for a few months until, after numerous arguments with my mother, I left the real housewives of Westchester behind and started training at Fight Club.

I remember the first time I opened that ignominious door, in a back alley of downtown New Rochelle. There’s a sign far above street level that says “Westchester Fight Club.” It’s fairly inconspicuous but I had done the research. I knew exactly what I was looking for. Over the next three years, I spent countless hours rolling on the mats, numb to the smells of bleach and sweat, and fighting among shadows of the cage.

During our conditioning sessions, the album Hybrid Theory, by Linkin Park, would often blare over the constant clamor of weights crashing to the floor. One song in particular, “Papercut,” became so deeply ingrained in me that I stopped hearing the words. It felt like a heartbeat, something so vital that I could not do without it. The track begins with a soft synthetic beat and then a loop resonating like a siren starts playing in the background. It keeps rolling, as if to keep the pounding of the electric guitar in check. Then the words start:

It's because everyone has a face that they hold inside,
A face that awakes when I close my eyes,
A face that watches every time they lie,
A face that laughs every time they fall,
And watches everything,

So you know that when it's time to sink or swim,
That the face inside is watching you too,
Right inside your skin

When I hear it now, it feels strange. If it comes on when I’m training, I get a rush, a burst of energy as if my blood came to a boil, but if I’m doing something else it makes me feel indignant and angry. I usually fast forward to the next track.

***

I kept asking my parents for permission to spar even though I was secretly doing it. We had agreed that I could go to Fight Club to work out and grapple, but I soon discovered that I could get away with anything as long as I didn’t
come home too messed up. I got good at protecting my face, developed a rangy Muai Thai style and learned to keep the distance with leg kicks. My skin doesn’t bruise easily, and I’m pretty good at hiding scar tissue.

Still, I wanted nothing more than to stop lying. At least in my mind, I was a still a good kid. I never smoked or drank. I was fairly polite, studied hard and earned good grades. Morals aside, lying made me paranoid. I worried every time I stepped in the cage that my overbearing mother or, worse yet, my father, would barge in and see. Every cut, bruise, and drop of blood had to be accounted for. It didn’t matter if something hurt. I would never ask to see a doctor.

It didn’t take long before fighting was the only thing that mattered to me. I began training compulsively. It got to the point where I was training three to four hours a day and still wanted to spend more time at the gym. I remember joining in on their fifteen round Muai Thai sparring sessions. Thirty of us would pack into the cage, blast some heavy music and go. By the tenth round, we were all past the point of pain, past the point of giving a shit about anything. We swung at each other like zombies, not really caring if either our or our opponent’s punches landed. By the end I wouldn’t feel any pain. In fact, I wouldn’t feel much of anything. In the morning I’d wake up with this deep soreness all over, so deep that it went past all the superficial flesh, and into the deeper parts that no one ever sees. The stuff you often don’t know you have.

I convinced myself that the pain meant nothing. That it was a temporary affliction. I took more pride in the beatings I endured than those I dished out. I took issue with the idea of a martial art because fighting is not a stylized Hollywood dance. It’s dirty, ugly and unpleasant, but in that, it’s about the most authentic thing there is. It’s the truth: fighting solves everything. It numbs you to your own insecurity and self hatred. It doesn’t leave you feeling warm and happy, but it gives you a sense of purpose that gets you through the week. That may be the reason I was so drawn to it as a disillusioned teenager. I never acknowledged the degree to which I had mastered the art of suppression. I was a cage fighter, laughing at my pain.

***

The only person I ever told about the incident at camp was my father. I can’t remember what he said. All I remember was the incredulous look he gave me. He told me once that if I was serious about all this bullying nonsense, I should just find the culprits, fuck them up and get it out of my system once and for all.

He could never understand why I have absolutely no desire to fight anyone from that part of my life. First off, as a rule I have no interest in fighting anyone who has no chance of beating me. That would never bring me peace. More importantly, the damage is done, and now they are nothing to me. In fact, I pity them. All bullies were bullied.

***

Ivan came to Fight Club a few months after I did. The Croatian wrestler had a long face and short, cropped black hair. We were together a lot, but never had much to talk about. We just stared at each other like reflections on a lake, rejecting any recognition of ourselves in each other’s eyes.

One day, just as we touched gloves to start sparring, Ivan leaped forward and punched me in the face before I was ready. I remember feeling like a door had just been slammed in my face. He took me down and I immediately worked on the Kimura. After I ripped his arm behind his head, we got back up and touched gloves again. This time I was more careful. I drove forward to establish the clinch and then used an inside leg trip, pulling one of his legs out from under him as we both slammed onto the mat. He tried to cover up his face, but I climbed up higher and crossed my legs underneath his back so that he couldn’t escape. From there, I rained punches down. He tried to squirm away, but I wasn’t about to give him anything. I didn’t stop until I felt his blood spatter across my face. At that point, I tried to look away. Watching him curl up like a swatted insect made me feel ill, as if the consequences of some inevitable prophecy, long dismissed and forgotten, were to finally come to fruition.

At Fight Club, things rarely got that bloody, but when they did, it didn’t matter whether it was your blood or someone else’s. First you would clean up the mats, and then cover the whole area with bleach so that no visible trace remained. Then all parties involved would head to the bathroom and wash.

I stared at the mirror for a moment, and then turned the tap on. The basin turned red as the blood trickled off my hair and skin. The clothes were another story. I scrubbed and scrubbed, trying to wrench the blood from the fabric. On the one hand I knew I needed it gone. What if they saw? But then there was always that little part of me that wanted some marks. I suppose I didn’t want bloodstains, but a black eye or a cut or something that someone could see and ask about. Maybe a person whom I’d never spoken to or perhaps even a girl I liked. I’d start thinking to myself about what I’d say if such a conversation were to come about, but then I’d realize how badly things would go and how false and
he threw me off and somehow he ended up in mount. It wasn’t long before he was pulling the blade of his wrist straight through my windpipe and jugular, but I didn’t tap. I couldn’t bring myself to. I just looked at the clock and told myself I had to hold on until the round ended. Dizzy and despondent, I moved on to my next opponent.

It was like I suddenly forgot everything. All I saw was the Kimura. I didn’t just see it, I felt it. It was impossible to resist. I locked it up but managed to hold out from finishing it. My third opponent finally cracked me, leaving his arm dangling so carelessly to the side that I locked it up and half consciously pulled his arm behind his head. What worried me was that it felt absolutely fine, as if I had totally healed and gone back to the same place I was in before.

That night, I dreamed I was climbing the stairs to Fight Club and when I reached the top, I opened the door and I saw that the cage had been moved to the center of the gym and rows of black chairs had been placed around it. Dozens of people were walking around, some professional fighters, some friends, and some people I had never seen before, chatting amongst themselves but when I tried to listen, I couldn’t hear them. All I could hear was the music blaring in the background while I watched my mom talking to one of my first grade teachers, as my dad opened up a beer looking into the cage and then I saw Ivan beckoning me to come with him so I followed him into the changing room which had become my chiropractor’s office, and started wrapping my hands. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw the kid who kicked my ribs in stretching his legs out on a foam roller, and I tried to say something but no words would come because my mouth and mind didn’t work. The music died down for a moment and then the familiar beat of “Papercut” came on and something told me it was my time so I got up and began my walk out to the cage. I saw a dark figure in a hoodie and sweatpants come out from the weight-room toward me and once he was inside he began to take off his clothes and my heart started racing when I saw those indignant green eyes and bulky build and it took me a moment to recover from the shock as I realized who I was about to fight. It was me, not the person I was at the time, but the adolescent I had been just over a year and a half before. While Jason, dressed as the referee, took the center of the cage and gave our instructions, I watched that pathetic version of myself look down to avoid eye contact, mumble softly to himself and bite his fingernails. In his face I saw pathetic I’d sound. I’d scrub furiously until I had removed everything possible. No matter what, though, there were always traces woven deep into the fabric, impressions that would never come out.

***

One night in the summer before I turned sixteen, I was grappling with a guy who was much bigger than me. When I tried to go for a Kimura, he picked me up and slammed me on my shoulder so that my back compressed and twisted. There was a loud crack. He asked me if I was OK. I said I was and kept going. I refused to take time to heal and kept training for months. I only stopped when I was in so much pain that I couldn’t walk. I was still thinking about that Kimura the third time I entered the MRI machine eleven months later. Herniated discs aren’t the kind of injury that gives you a massive cast for all your friends to sign. It’s constant grinding pain, gnawing at you every moment of every day in a place so deep that no one understands it.

That year was a very formative one. I knew my body wasn’t healing, and I thought about it constantly. Months and projected recovery dates flew by. Different doctors’ opinions ranged from “you’ll be fine in a few weeks” to “you’ll never be able to do any physical activity for the rest of your life.” I had plenty of time to think, so I thought. I reviewed myself from top to bottom. I thought a lot about fighting. I would visualize it as I shadowboxed around my room until a pinched nerve brought me back to the floor. I thought about what kind of fighter I’d be if I ever recovered. I promised myself that I wouldn’t care at all about winning or pride or anything but fighting for the sake of fighting, brawling my heart out for nothing other than the peace it brought me. I would fight smart. If something hurt I wouldn’t try to push through it. That was how I got hurt. I would tap out, or go get help. If I got rocked, I would call it a day. I would open up my game and throw caution to the wind. Most of all, I promised myself that I wouldn’t use a Kimura again. I thought it would put gives you a massive cast for all your friends to sign.

For five years I had totally healed and gone back to the same place I was in before. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw the kid who kicked my ribs in stretching his legs out on a foam roller, and I tried to say something but no words would come because my mouth and mind didn’t work. The music died down for a moment and then the familiar beat of “Papercut” came on and something told me it was my time so I got up and began my walk out to the cage. I saw a dark figure in a hoodie and sweatpants come out from the weight-room toward me and once he was inside he began to take off his clothes and my heart started racing when I saw those indignant green eyes and bulky build and it took me a moment to recover from the shock as I realized who I was about to fight. It was me, not the person I was at the time, but the adolescent I had been just over a year and a half before. While Jason, dressed as the referee, took the center of the cage and gave our instructions, I watched that pathetic version of myself look down to avoid eye contact, mumble softly to himself and bite his fingernails. In his face I saw
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The Kimura Kid

aw. It had been there for a long time, hidden right beneath my skin.

As soon as Jason said “fight,” the old me rushed in for his predictable leg kicks. At first, I ate them, and bided my time. When I had his timing down, I caught a kick just as his shin touched my thigh and threw a huge overhand left that caught him on the temple. He stumbled backwards, unable to tell down from up and I swarmed him with a barrage of huge punches.

The whole place was silent. My dad had fallen asleep and my mom was on the phone and only Ivan looked on with tired eyes. I began hitting hard, so hard that I busted his nose open and blood began to pour everywhere. From there he didn’t put up much of a fight but this time I hit him and hit him and hit him again. It wasn’t enough so I had to do something drastic. As he held on to the last sliver of consciousness he had left, I stepped over his arm, putting him in a crucifix and threw a few knees to his ribs. From there, I locked up a top side Kimura, stepped over his head, sat down, pried his arm free and ripped it around the back of his head. I chuckled at the irony: the Kimura Kid, finished with his own move.

Yet again, it was silent. I looked outside the cage and felt a sick feeling creep over me because the place was completely deserted and I went to open the cage door, but when I began to fumble with the latch, I saw that it was locked from the outside and I began to panic and I tried to shout but for some reason my tongue wouldn’t listen and I tried to pull the latch, kick down the door, but I had no strength to do it and then the lights went out. I turned to the battered body still on the floor and watched the outline of his face fade away with the echoes of my laughter.

I woke up from that dream in a sweat and started pacing up and down my room until a crimson glimmer caught my eye. I looked up and saw the red katana on the shelf behind me. I took it down, moving my hands across the smooth scabbard onto the hilt and gently curled my fingers around the Dragon talisman on the pummel. The steel hissed as I wrenched it from the sheath. The blade had been tainted with ink stains since I had used it to make a giant skewer of all my 11th grade homework. I scrubbed and scrubbed but couldn’t get the marks off.

I remembered hearing somewhere that it was a Samurai rule that if a katana was drawn from its sheath, it had to draw blood. I decided to give it a touch of authenticity and nicked the corner of my palm. I watched a few drops of blood make their way down the blade. As they neared the end of their journey, I noticed the short inscription near the pummel. A Chinese friend of mine told me it said something cheesy and trite, but I could not accept that, staring at my reflection in the tarnished steel. I began spitting out contrived proverbs and cheap adages until I came up with this:

Scrub on Kimura Kid
But know that face is right
Right beneath your skin.

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Notes on the Contributers

Jack Bynum is a developing essayist, poet, and student. He loves reading, exploring, and chance encounters with strangers. As a friend has said of him, “with Jack, one never knows what he will do next.”

John Chen was born and raised in Taiwan. He moved to New York in 2009 to go to a boarding school. He is going to NYU next year to pursue acting.

Raleigh Capozzalo is finishing up his senior year at The Masters School and will be attending Yale University in September. Raleigh often bumps The Polish Ambassador—an indie electronic dance music producer—and other fresh beats while he writes.

Dylan Etzel lives in Westchester, New York. He is near the end of his senior year and will be attending The Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University.

Lily Herzan is eighteen and will be attending Tufts University in the fall. She grew up in New York City and can’t imagine living anywhere else.

Annie Mesa likes to eat avocados whole, banter with her tabby cat Buddy, and admire animal bones. When she is not coddling baby vegetable plants or getting locked out of the art room, she is attending her senior year at The Masters School. She currently lives in Pleasantville, New York, the second best smelling city in the world according to GQ Magazine.

Rachel Nierenberg was born in New York City and has lived there all her life. She grew up in a family of musicians and plays French horn. Rachel loves exploring and eating new and exotic foods, but her true passion is music. She intends to pursue her musical studies and one day be a professional horn player.

Raphael Norwitz is a senior at The Masters School and will be attending Columbia University in the fall.

Ryan Rosenberg lives in the suburbs of New York City and is the eldest of four children and two Australian labradoodles. She has a fear of elevators and loathes Nickelback. She enjoys pretending to be good at yoga, admiring Christmas lights on other people’s houses, and eating Trader Joe’s Lentil Curls. She will be attending Brown University this fall.

Emma Shepardson resides in the suburbs of New York City and is the oldest child of three. She formerly had a fish named Fernando who froze to death during Hurricane Sandy. She dislikes shopping for shoes given that her left foot is a size and a half larger than her right. She enjoys interrupting people, chauffeuring around her driving-skills-deficient friends, and aggressively voicing her opinions. She will be attending the University of Southern California next year.

Hannah Weber is a senior at The Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York. She will be attending the Georgetown University School of Health Studies in the fall of 2013. New to creative nonfiction, she has enjoyed studying the genre throughout her senior year and plans to write many more personal essays in the future. She currently lives in Westchester, New York with her mother and sister.