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Honor's Thesis

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The Personal Essay and the Memoir: A Comparison

This thesis will attempt to put into perspective the various differences between the personal essay and the memoir. Furthermore, it will discuss why the personal essay is more useful for the creative portion of the thesis. According to Wendell Harris, the immediate effect of the personal essay is “simply the consciousness of participating in an individual way of looking at things [and] of savoring the striking or pungent phrasing that gives force to the author’s individual point of view” (Harris 936). By examining personal essayist such as Jo Ann Beard and Phillip Lopate and comparing their work to memoirs by Abigail Thomas and Joan Didion, one will be able to clarify the fundamental differences between these authors and their types of writings.

As Phillip Lopate wrote in his book *The Art of the Personal Essay*, “At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (Lopate xxiii). This statement becomes increasingly important when attempting to discover what makes a personal essay honest and the essayist reliable. Because humans are often seen as a self-deceiving, rationalizing species, it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly makes an essayist “honest.” Yet, there is a small, but important difference.

In the personal essay characters converse, tell each other how they feel, and therefore are able to show the reader what is going on in a more intimate style. Remove this component and it is more difficult to get to know the characters on an individual level.

On the other hand, memoir does not efficiently utilize this component. For example, in Abigail Thomas's memoir "For You, For Me," there is only one line of dialogue, while the rest of the essay consists of reflection:

"I showed it to a friend. 'What's wrong with this?' I asked. 'Why isn't this working?'

'Because it's not about not feeling guilty,' he said. 'It's about feeling guilty as hell.' Bing. I went back, and learned a few things." (Thomas 39)

This can work for many subjects in Thomas' work but it does not give the reader the personal narrative that a personal essay calls for.

Compare Thomas' work to Joan Didion's memoir, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," in which she attempts to make a statement of mercenary purpose but masks it as a seemingly confessional piece. Although this memoir gives readers a lot to dissect and think about, it does not attempt to directly relate to them, as would a personal essay. The lack of dialogue often gives the memoir too much intimacy with the essayist because the reader only sees the essayist's side of the story, with no real input from other characters. This, in turn, makes it feel too messy for the reader to grasp the full extent of the message that is being portrayed. Abigail Thomas demonstrates this when she said, "I don't know anyone's story except my own and I don't even know that," in her memoir "What Comes Next" (Powers 1). Here, she makes it clear that although she can reflect on her life and describe it in detail to her readers, she cannot fully grasp or understand her life and story that she wants to get across to her audience through the memoir. On the other hand, the personal essay seeks to acknowledge the multiple selves of the human experience through conversation in order to show the disputes many essayists have with themselves (Lopate xxiv). This direct conversation helps to give the essay a point. In other

words, a general idea reaches out to the reader and engages them to partake in a part of the author's life. Conversation between characters or directly to the reader serves to establish emotional intimacy with the audience that would otherwise be forgone. Furthermore, by incorporating conversation into the essay, the story comes with language that is casual and everyday, which can then help the reader to relate to the piece, rather than the stiffness of the formal dialogue in the memoir that lacks this element.

Often, the memoir is compared to the autobiography, and for good reason. As Leigh Holmes points out in her article, "Linkages of Nonfiction and Selfhood: The Places of Personal Essays," an autobiography is a, "retrospective prose narrative written by a person concerning his own experience, where the focus is his individual life, in particular, the story of his personality" (Holmes 65). Here, the memoir can be seen as "rooted" in the autobiography because it consists primarily of personal accounts that are reflective and focus on "meaningful moments" in the author's life (Kirby 23). Because of this linkage between the memoir and the autobiography, it is difficult to maintain a relationship between the author and the reader. Unlike the personal essay, the memoir requires lengthy reflection and is often described as a "confessional genre" that is hard to relate to the majority of readers. This confessional type of writing is often seen in Joan Didion's work, especially in her memoir, "Where I Was From," which reflects on her upbringing through the process of delusions of her California pioneer ancestors. Here, she dissects her past for her readers and attempts to evaluate her life. Additionally, it is common to see conventional literary devices such as figurative language, metaphor, symbolism, and imagery in the memoir and is almost always in the first-person voice (Kirby 23). They can often come off as psychoanalytic or redemptive journeys, which can be useful for some but is not the aim of the creative portion of this thesis. Instead, the wish is to give an honest unfolding of the human

experience through the trials and triumphs in the author's own life, which can more fully be done through the elements of the personal essay.

As mentioned before, the memoir is often seen as too intimate and messy; therefore making it harder for the essayist to direct the message to the reader. It is too intimate because, in most cases, the memoir is about such a specific instance in the author's life and then expanded from that small example. For example, Joan Didion's "The Year of Magical Thinking" involves the story about personal terror and bereavement through the death of her daughter and her daughter's husband. However, much of this essay uses so much detail and repetition without giving the audience enough information on the characters to fully understand their role and importance in the story. She describes everything from her point of view, allowing the reader to see inside her head, but this type of writing offers too much intimacy and does not seem to have a point or an end. Often, early memoirs were seen as rambling and largely ineffective in the reflective portion of the essay, which can be seen throughout Didion's work. She is very repetitive in her reflection, which can work to demonstrate her thoughts and feelings but does not give the memoir any direction. In other words, it seems to remain static. This element is frequently seen in the contemporary memoir as well. By using the first-person voice the memoir creates detailed "word-pictures" for their readers and will frequently take them on "memory journeys" throughout the author's life (Kirby 23). This can cause the reader to become easily confused by what the author is trying to relate or the message that should be interpreted from the work. On the other hand, the personal essay takes this sense of intimacy and attempts to spin it into a way that is more honest than anything else. "Honesty" in the personal essay often means not only seeing the story from the essayist's perspective, but also seeing it from another character's point of view as well. It allows the essayist to critique him or herself and show their

audience multiple levels of the story. This honesty becomes important because it connects the reader to the story the author is telling. For example, the more honest the author is about the conflicts or story line of the piece, the more trustworthy they become to the readers. As a result, the reader finds more connections that can be made in the essay to either their personal lives or the message as a whole.

However, honesty in the personal essay is one of the most difficult things to obtain. The reasoning behind this is that because humans are irredeemably self-deceiving, rationalizing beings, they cannot be completely trustworthy (Lopate xxv). Inherently, humans do not want to admit to their failings. However, this is what makes the personal essay so much more effective than the memoir. By using other's perspectives in the same story, the essayists can examine his or her failings and give readers the chance to decide for themselves what the story is really about. What makes honesty so vital is the essayist's ability to get past these human features and failings in order to get to the most sincere part of the story. One of the key components that are noted here, according to Wendell Harris, author of "Reflections on the Peculiar Status of the Personal Essay," is presence (Harris 934). In order for the essayist to remain honest to the readers, he or she must remain present in the essay. For example, even when the essay turns toward another character, the author's narrative voice is always in the background, sneaking through the story. This presence, according to Harris, allows the essayist to appeal to the reader's own experiences and implore an active response, comparing the author's experiences and insights with the reader's own (Harris 936). Lopate further explains this by stating, "If the essayist stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition" that many await for in the personal essay (Lopate xxv-xxvi). The more the essayist confesses and entrusts in the reader, the closer the

essay comes to being successful in this element. However, it is important to create a “respectful kind of relationship with the reader: an effective narrator comes off as honest, yet does not burden the reader with a confessional that places that reader in the role of a mediator of personal problems” (Holmes 65). As Lopate explains in his research on the personal essay, an essayist should focus on their habits of thought rather than on the “abuses and crimes that spice their afternoon” and should be frank, yet protective of their privacy (Lopate xxvi-xxvii). This can be accomplished by creating a personal voice, or tone, that impresses upon the reader that the essayist is not only detailing an essential part of themselves but also welcoming the reader to critique the way in which they write about their experiences.

Although memoirs also have this honest element, the style of writing is so formal and muddled that it lacks the personal element needed to connect to many readers. Its formality makes the memoir less familiar to the reader and more confessional. This “confessional” voice, as Holmes mentioned in his research, creates a burden on readers to create a solution to the essayist’s problems instead of relating to the reader (Holmes 65). Consequently, it does not instill the same response as the personal essay. Additionally, it leaves the reader to do the “heavy lifting” of the intellectual engagement with the text, therefore increasing the amount of confusion that is conveyed by the author (Kirby 24). For the purposes of the creative portion of this thesis, it is important to maintain that connection with the reader in order to get the message across. By using both the essayist’s and character’s perspectives in the piece, it will be easier for the reader to relate to the story and find the honesty in it. Because of the honest element of the personal essay that the memoir does not require because of its partially fictionalized element, it is more efficient in this regard.

The exploration of the self in the personal essay is another component that becomes important when explaining the differences between the essay and the memoir. According to Lopate, personal essayists are proficient at interrogating their ignorance (Lopate xxvii). Although they often tell the reader what they do know in the essay, they counteract that with exploring exactly what they do not know or understand. Additionally, it attempts to state individually determined attitudes, feelings, or beliefs to the extent that the essayists are successful in conveying the state of their minds and readers are encouraged to consider their agreement with such attitudes (Harris 437). This, again, gives an individual component to the personal essay and helps to reader to connect to the author. Though the memoir is similar in this regard, it is again important to recognize that it is not as proficient in this type of exploration and therefore less effectual than the personal essay. The memoir can move in a linear direction and has no need to keep explaining narrative points, such as who the narrator is or who the narrator's parent is. For example, the repetition and observations that are demonstrated in the memoir does not allow for the movement of plot that is vital in the personal essay. On the other hand, because the essayist cannot assume that the reader has ever read anything by him or her before, the personal essay must reestablish a persona continuously, which allows the essayist to explore him or herself more fully and consider their life and story from every angle (Lopate xxix). By pointing out their own weaknesses, limitations, and disabilities, the personal essayist not only becomes more reliable to the reader but also is able to delve deeper into the understanding of themselves.

An engaging personal essay will have a subject that relates vividly to both the writer and reader and moves from the individual (the essayist) to the universal, which are the readers (Holmes 66). It attempts to unpack a part of the essayist's life that is engaging and relatable.

This can be accomplished through the writing of certain experiences that seem to have significance and developing that experience so there is a “point” or an “end” in mind.

Additionally, this self-awareness allows the essayist to present the complex portrait of the human being and may help the reader to discover more about him or herself as well. By moving back and forth from particulars to general ideas, connections are kept throughout the essay.

Furthermore, it is essential that the personal experience be presented in a way that gives a personal imprint and interpretation to readers (Harris 941). This, again, develops the self-awareness and discovery for not only the essayist, but the reader as well.

On the other hand, the memoir establishes a tone but focuses on reflection, which does not allow for the movement between ideas and solutions, as the personal essay does. It is important in the thesis to move towards a solution, which makes the memoir less useful in that regard. For example, as explained previously, in Abigail Thomas’s most recent memoir, “What Comes Next and How to Like It,” she states that not only does she not understand anyone else’s story except her own, but she also doesn’t really understand her own story (Powers 1). As stated in the book review, she seems to “while away page after page with fiddling matters of daily existence,” such as picking an apple, where her dog sleeps, and the nature of forgiveness (Powers 1). Although this could be helpful in some of literature, this type of writing does not help the reader and the essayist move towards a solution to the problem presented in the essay. Instead, it becomes a “confessional” of all the irrelevant details of an essayist’s life. Because the personal essay attempts to unpack a part of the essayist’s life in a way that can relate to a reader, it is more efficient than the memoir. It establishes human characteristics and flaws and attempts to examine them in a way that is applicable and advantageous in the establishment of the self.

All three of these elements of the personal essay – honesty, the exploration of the self, and the conversational element – are what make it more useful in this thesis than the memoir. By establishing human characteristics through dialogue, as well as making it clear to the readers that the author is just as human as they are, the personal essay has an intimate element that the memoir does not have. Because the personal essay moves toward an “end” or solution, it is able to focus less on the essayist and his or her own personal troubles and more on the connection established between the essayist and the reader. The maintenance of this connection throughout the essay helps to keep the reader engaged and interested, as well as giving them something to relate to. On the whole, the personal essay is more readily suited to stimulate the reader’s own thoughts and experiences than the memoir. By breaking down different portions of their lives in great detail and rewriting them in a way that is easily interpreted, personal essayists are able to create a relationship with their reader that seems more valuable.

The Recognition of Each Other

My mother once told me that anger fueled by betrayal could be the worst kind in the human experience. Moving on and accepting change can be the hardest thing a person is forced to do, but that these are all aspects of life that we learn by simply living. I never put too much thought into it until I reflected on my relationship with my dad.

He left us when I was fifteen years old. Not in the “I’m leaving my family and starting a new life” type of way many are accustomed to seeing. He left because we were poor and he found a good job overseas that would keep us afloat. He did not expect or suggest that we should come with him. In part, I am thankful for that. I got to keep my friends, my school, and my life. But I lost my dad.

Seven hundred, five hundred and six miles. That has been the distance between me and my dad for the past seven years.

“I was not very kind to my dad as a teenager.” I stated to my friend, Erica as we sat down discussing our various family feuds. “Actually, I was incredibly heartless at some points during high school.”

She laughed, thinking I was exaggerating. “We all have family problems. My mom used to call me fat and make judgments without caring about my feelings.”

Little did she know the regret I had for the many times I passive aggressively spoke to my father, trying to make him hurt as much as I did. At the time, him leaving me behind was the biggest betrayal he could have done. Although I know now that he did it out of love and want for a better future for all of us and the rest of his family, it was hard for me to grasp then. The future I have before me was laid out because of the incredible selflessness

that my dad displayed for me. Not only did he give up the chance to watch his children grow into adults, but he also missed opportunities that he could not get back.

I asked him about it one day, curious to see what he thought about his decision. It was over the phone, as usual, because these were not conversations we had face-to-face. However, as I spoke to him about it, he said he had no regrets. Yes, he wished he could have found a job adequate enough in the States, but he would do anything to make our lives as comfortable and progressive as possible.

That is the closest I have ever come to receiving an apology from him. Like I said, we don't have these conversations face-to-face. I grew up embracing the "don't ask-don't tell" mentality. Don't talk about feelings or problems in the family. Hide every emotion that might make others upset. If you are angry - too bad. Keep it to yourself.

I'm not sure if I am comforted or hurt by that conversation. He missed out on everything important to me - learning to drive, my senior year of high school, moving to college - the list went on and on. I could understand that he did what was in our best interest. But, I can't understand why this was the only option. Still torn between forgiving him for his decision and holding a grudge, I try to move on.

February 2012.

"My dad is leaving." I state through sobs to my best friend, Sammie. "He got a job in Dubai and he is *leaving*."

It was clear that she did not know how to comfort me. Her subsequent questions of "why" and "when" were met only with cries of anger and hurt. I didn't know whether to be

infuriated with my father's decision to take a job seven thousand miles away or hurt that he did not even consider how it would affect his family.

And why was my mother, of all people, completely okay with the decision? As we, my siblings Jonathan, Christine, and Theresa, sat in the kitchen listening to my father's explanation, she sat by and said nothing.

"I got a job that will help pay the bills and send each of you to good schools," he said.

No argument.

"It will be a hard adjustment, but I expect you all to be there for each other."

No insight.

"If I had any other choice, I would not be going."

Nothing. As each of us cried at the news and my father went to the next room because he could not bear the sight, my mother snapped at us to "be quiet" and stop being selfish.

Mom called up to my room, telling me we were heading out to get lunch. I tell Sammie goodbye and hang up the phone. As I head downstairs, I ignore my dad's sad eyes and walk past him, not wanting him to see how upset I am. *This cannot be happening. This cannot be real. Please tell me this is a cruel, overplayed joke.*

It is July in 2008. The seatbelt light comes on as the plane descends to its finally destination in Dubai. There is a man with dark hair and a thick mustache who is jolted awake by the dinging noise and the attendant that thanks everyone for a great flight and tells them all to have a safe stay in the United Arab Emirates. As he stares out the window

at the ground that is steadily approaching, he thinks about his wife and children that he had to leave behind.

Remembering the look his children gave him back in February when he and his wife told them about their decision nearly breaks him. Their tears hurt, causing the man to wonder if this was a mistake. His eldest daughter acted indifferent, but he heard her crying to her best friend on the phone later that day. The final goodbye at the airport in Saint Louis, Missouri was more than he could bear. It was only a day ago but his heart already aches to have them by his side. He considers turning around and buying a ticket back to America and his family.

But, after inhaling deeply to calm his nerves, he tells himself, again, that he is doing the best thing for his family. He had to leave his job at Saint Louis University because he could no longer handle the pressure. His boss hated him and made sure he knew it. He made the man's life miserable until he had no other choice but to turn in his resignation.

I didn't have any other choice, did I? He wonders to himself. He knows he cannot afford this kind of second-guessing, though. The longer he dwells on it, the harder it will be to keep moving forward.

Because the man knows how important education is to his family, he had to find a better opportunity to support his children's aspirations. And this is it. There would be more pay and better benefits in the long run. He is now the head of aircraft engineering technology at the university in Al Ain. Yes, he is only allowed to go back for visits at Christmas and important events, but there would be a pay raise and the benefit of being in a culture he is very familiar with. Growing up in Lebanon and moving to America by himself wasn't easy and he missed hearing the Arabic language he is fluent in all around

him. No one would poke fun of his thick accent here. This will be a good change, he thinks as he picks up the small amount of luggage he brought with him. It had to be.

I am jolted awake by my overly peppy mother on the morning of my sixteenth birthday. “Happy Sweet Sixteen, Megs! Do you feel another year older?”

As I attempt to gargle a response as I squint my eyes open, I see her big smile and bright eyes that can light up any room. “Thanks, Mom.” I don’t bother to answer the question. It’s too early for this much cheerfulness.

It’s the day every teenager waits for. The moment they are finally about to take that first step towards freedom and get behind the wheel. After all the lessons with my mom, and the fights that went along with them, I could finally get my license. Better yet, I got to have my “Sweet Sixteen” birthday with all of my friends later that evening. The night would be full of music, dancing and lots of food. I had been planning this party for over a month now and every detail was completed. There was no room or time to think about my dad not being at my birthday party for the first time since he left.

My mom took me to get my license that afternoon and I passed with “flying colors,” as the officer who presided stated. Mom told me I had to call my dad to tell him I got my license. I didn’t want to, I wanted to avoid him, but as she handed me the phone and waited for me to dial, I knew I had no choice.

“I passed, Papa.” I said with almost no enthusiasm in my voice.

He said he was proud of me and was excited to see me drive in December. He claimed that he hadn’t had time to call to wish me a happy birthday yet but that there would be flowers and a bear coming for me later that day.

“Now that you are a driver, you have to be very careful on the roads, sweetie. Never text and drive, if you are too tired, call Mom and she will come get you...” The list of advice went on and on.

I acted indifferent. He should have been there for that, but he wasn't.

The father looks at his phone after hanging up with his eldest daughter on her sixteenth birthday. A wave of regret washes over him. Another important day missed because of his decision.

“She understands,” he thinks to himself as he settles in front of the television for the evening, “She, of all the children has to understand the most.”

I was appointed captain of the cross-country team in my senior year of high school. It was a position I had wanted for a long time and I was happy to take on the challenge. When I told my mom that I got it, her immediate response was to not forget to tell my dad. So, I called him.

“I'm captain of cross-country this year, Papa.”

“You're still running for that team? Not sick of it yet, I guess?” He joked lightheartedly.

“Nope and we will probably make it to State this year, too bad you can't come and cheer us on.” I always had a response to remind him of what he was missing.

His voice dropped an octave. “Yes, I will be sorry to miss it.”

She was saying it on purpose, just to hurt him, and he knew it. But he let it slide because although it hurt, he knew she was right. He would not be there for her State cross-country race. But one day he knew she would understand why he was making this sacrifice.

November 2010. It was one of the most important nights for the seniors of Rosati-Kain High School – the father and daughter dinner-dance. Out of kindness, and a bit of pity, my friend Katie had offered to take me with her and her dad to the dance. She said her dad “hates dancing anyway” so she would need someone to take his place. I didn’t buy it, but graciously accepted the invitation.

As the night wore on, more father-daughter songs came on the speakers. When this happened, my friend Jane and I would stand near the edge of the dance floor and watch as the girls in our senior class danced the night away with their dads. It was hard for her, because she lost her father at the age of three and hard for me because not having a dad around all the time was still fairly new to me.

I called my dad at 11 p.m. after the night was over. It was 8 a.m. there. I told him I was driving home from the senior father-daughter dance.

“How was it?”

“Good. Jane and I dance together for the slow dances, just to be silly. Her dad died when she was three. So we kind of stuck together for the night.”

Silence. I knew he felt guilty, but I didn’t care. He should know how much this night hurt.

“I’m sorry, habibi.”

Driving down I-55, heading home, I cried as silently as I could. I didn't want him to hear my weakness catching up to me.

On the other end of the phone, he shook his head and had to take a moment to regain composure. He could hear his daughter crying and it broke a little part of him. She was hurt and her pain was also his. However, he was at a loss. Comforting was his wife's strong suite, not his.

"We can make up for it in a month, habibi. Let me take you to dinner and a movie."

"Okay," was all she could muster out of the sobs that sounded as though they were choking her.

"Are you home yet? You need to focus on your driving." Safety was always his go-to response when he did not know what to say.

"Yea, I'm home. Don't tell Mom that I called; she will worry. I'll talk to you later, love you - bye." Dial tone. He is left with silence.

April 27, 2011. It was finally *prom*. I wore a beautiful navy blue, strapless gown with perfect heels that I picked out with the help of my mother. I was over the moon because I was going with the perfect boy and all of my closest friends would be there with me to dance all night long.

My mom came with me to take pictures all of us. She kept exclaiming, "Perfect, just wait until your dad gets to see these!" This not only annoyed me but also reminded me that he wasn't there. Again.

My date, oblivious to my family situation, asked why my dad was not there. After explaining that he lives overseas, he blushed and apologized for bringing it up. This was yet another typical response from someone who just did not understand.

I e-mailed my dad pictures the morning after, with the subject line "Prom." The moments were captured by my mom and showed me with a boy he had never met and probably never would.

He replied simply, "You looked beautiful. Skype me soon and tell me all about it. Love, Papa."

I couldn't hide the pain from yet another missed milestone. So, I didn't.

He opened his e-mail to find the pictures of his daughter at prom. As he flipped through them, he counted only one of the many people that he actually had met over the years. There was no one to blame but himself for missing prom.

Protective, fatherly instincts told him to warn his daughter about boys and how they are "immature at this age." He did not, however, knowing the response he would receive would be one full of sarcasm and comments detailing all the things he did not know about her prom date.

Lately, his daughter had been calling less frequently and showing no interest in speaking with him when she did call. This, for obvious reasons, concerned and bothered him. So, he decided his response would include an offer for conversation. He didn't expect a reply.

He got none.

He came to my high school graduation. My mom introduced him to all my friends that I had made over the previous four years. He stood there, shaking hands with each of my closest friends, occasionally nodding an agreement at what they had to say. He only knew Jane. Awkward introductions followed by uncomfortable conversations.

None of my friends knew what to say to the man they had only heard about on very few occasions. The last time someone asked where my dad was, I snapped, saying it was “none of your damn business.” So, the subject was rarely brought up again.

His eldest daughter’s high school graduation was an uncomfortable occasion. Yes, he knew the family members there, but other than that he had no clue who any one was and no one knew him. He was the father no one had met. The foreigner that was only discussed when it was necessary.

It bothered him that his daughter made no effort to introduce him to her friends. His wife made all the formal introductions as she walked away to go talk to a former teacher or cross-country coach. It was if she did not care that he was there.

In the summer of 2011, a few days after my high school graduation, my dad was home for ten days from his job in Dubai that he had been working at for three years by that time. So, as was the norm for his short visits, my mom made him dole out the punishment. She loved to make this his job, claiming it was to make up for all the yelling she had to do while he was away. He called my full name up the steps, telling me to get downstairs in his firm, “don’t you dare mess with me,” thick Arabic accent. That tone sent a shiver up my spine. My dad has always been very good at the “quiet but deadly” approach – yelling was

not needed, just the still, stern look in his eyes was enough to shut any one up, especially those who knew him best. I was screwed.

As I walked down the steps and out the deck door to where he and my mom sat outside, I couldn't help but feel how *unfair* all of this was. He was the one who left and didn't even take a moment to understand the consequences of his actions. He never apologized for leaving and now I was expected to take punishment from the man who was never hear to begin with.

I stared at my dad with the most piercing, unhappy glare I could muster. *Whatever you do, do NOT cry*, I kept telling myself. This was the silent ritual I always played in my head when my dad got mad at me. It never worked.

"What." I folded my arms across my chest, assuming the role of the angry teenage girl. The wall I hid behind had gone up when they first told me he was leaving and it wouldn't come down until I was twenty. No one could hurt me as long as I remained armored.

It was no secret in my family that I was more than ready to get the out of there. I had a countdown to the last day of summer after senior year to when I would *finally* be in college and away from my dysfunctional family.

"Your mom tells me that you've had an attitude with her and its becoming more of a problem. Why are you being this way?"

He always had a way of spinning his lectures into questions that make me feel like a terrible person. But I wasn't giving in this time. He wasn't going to break me and make me apologize for something I felt my mom deserved at the time. So, I just stared at him, arms crossed, my blood boiling and heart racing, refusing to respond.

“Well? Are you going to respond?”

He was infuriating. He wanted an answer that I couldn't give. How do you explain the inexplicable? I couldn't be around her for more than one hour at a time without wanting to bite her head off for saying something that upset me. I was angry all the time. Ever since he walked onto the plane for the first time and left me, I couldn't help but be angry. My face felt hot and it all began to bubble over. If I wasn't at school with my friends or at a friend's house, I was unhappy. I would lock myself in my room and stay there the whole night just to avoid my mom and the rest of the family. Walking in the door to my house made my face burn and my hands shake instantly. Frustration was always festering under the surface of my skin. No one wanted to be around me when I was home for fear of seeing me lose my temper. It was not a pretty sight. The holes in my bedroom walls were evidence of that.

“No, Papa. I am not going to answer. I don't have an excuse.” I said through gritted teeth in a slightly mocking tone, with my hands balled into tight fists.

“Why are you so angry, habibi? This is not the Meghan I have always known.”

And just like that, everything inside me, the three years of holding it all in, burst out.

“You have to *be here* to know me. Last time I checked you don't live here anymore and you talk to me once every two weeks, if that. You can't know someone with just biweekly, twenty minute Skype conversations, Papa.”

It all rushed out. To this day that is the conversation I remember the most vividly and also the one I most regret. But at the time, I didn't care. I just kept going.

“You want to know why I'm so angry all the time? Maybe because my *dad* left when I was fifteen and his parting words before getting on the plane to start his new job were

'you're in charge of the family, you need to watch out for Mom.' Who leaves a fifteen year old in charge? Oh and thanks for missing the father daughter dance this year, that was awesome. You didn't even ask any of us, besides Mom, if it was okay to leave. You just assumed we would accept it. Well, news flash, I wasn't okay with it."

I stared at them both, my chest heaving as the tears streamed down my face. My hands shook as I pushed the hair out of my eyes and brushed past them both. The shocked look on their faces was enough to tell me that I had gone too far. But I didn't care. I was broken and had been for a long time. I wanted my parents to hurt just as much as I did. So, instead of apologizing I walked up the stairs, slammed my bedroom door, curled up in a ball on my bed and let the tears spill over.

He was in shock. Never before had any of his children spoke in the tone that she had used with him. He knew she was unhappy with the situation they were in, but he had no idea it had become this much of a problem. The anger in her eyes was almost more than he could bear. She looked at him as though he was the one thing she hated most in the world, and that burned him straight to his core. He looked to his wife, who was crying.

"Do you see what I have had to deal with while you have been gone?" She sobbed to him. "It is not easy acting as a single parent."

More guilt. There were always more faults from his family to dole out. He missed dances, races, plays, and choir performances, among many other experiences for each of his children. Yet, none of his other children ever treated him the way Meghan did. She was not only hurt, but she seemed to feel betrayal as well. That, more anything, was what bothered him the most.

He walked into the family room where the rest of his children sat. He looked at each one in turn and asked that if what Meghan was feeling was a mutual feeling among them all. He got blank stares. Perhaps they were too shy to respond or too afraid of the outcome of their actions. However, he just looked at them, waiting for an answer.

Jonathan, his eldest and only son, was the first to say anything. "No, Papa, I understand why you need to be there. Its okay."

The younger girls nodded in agreement.

Although not completely convince, he thanked them, turned around, and headed back outside to comfort his distraught wife.

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