THE WISE AVENUE

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

THE WISE AVENUE

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a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

To those who came before: Mom and G-Mom

&

To those here now: George and George Michael

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THE WISE AVENUE

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation's creative portion is a short story cycle constructed around two organizing principles: a place and a protagonist group. The cycle's setting is Dundalk, Maryland, a predominately white, working-class suburb. My protagonist group is a matriarchal triad of grandmother, mother, and daughter. How these characters define and reflect both the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering is of particular importance; therefore, my dissertation's critical introduction also focuses on maternal theory.

This essay begins as a conversation with Jo Malin's text, *The Voice of the Mother*. Malin argues that – via autobiography – a dialogic conversation occurs between a daughter-writer and her biological mother. Disagreeing with Malin's thesis, I propose my own theoretical conceit, one inspired by work of Carolyn Heilbrun: what if, instead of a mother-daughter dyad, we look at nonfiction works via the lens of a triad, one composed of Daughter-Writer + Biological Mother + Literary Mother? By examining the potential dialogic triads found within three nonfiction works – Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Louise DeSalvo's "The Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar," and Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* – I conclude that when daughter-writers pair the ideologies learned from their mothers (ones often steeped in patriarchal motherhood) with those communicated by their "lit moms," the result seems

to be not only a re-seeing of the biological mother but also a re-evaluation of who can mother and how this mothering can empower. In this way, my essay provides an example of how scholarship on motherhood can circumvent the gender essentialism that so often haunts writing about mothers.

Bakhtin's Dialogic, Irigaray's Dyad, and Mothers in CNF:

A Conversation with Jo Malin's The Voice of the Mother

In 2013's April, my mother sat in a hospital room, distraught. Even though she hadn't eaten in weeks, even though she could barely hold herself up, she did not want to talk to Dr. Neuner about what he wanted to talk about: whether or not to continue her radiation treatments. No. She wanted to talk about my upcoming move in August, when I would start PhD school far far away in Missouri. She explained to Dr. Neuner her concern: that I would postpone school because of her, because she was sick (she squeezed my hand), and she did not want that to happen. She kept saying the month of my move: August. *August August August*. She kept trying to convince Dr. Neuner to convince me not to postpone my trip. My life.

Finally Dr. Neuner said to her: "You won't be here in August."

And she wasn't.

And maybe this is why, when I did move in August and threw myself into academic work, when I began feverishly reading essay collections written by women, I noticed something I might not have noticed if Mom had not just died. Even in those texts ostensibly rooted within a particular topic, or in those essays linked by a particular theme – e.g., Eula Biss's *Notes from No Man's Land* (topic: American race relations); Jo Ann Beard's *The Boys of My Youth* (topic: Beard's romantic relationships, especially her strained relationship with her husband); and Joy Williams's *Ill Nature* (topic: environmentalism) – another topic inevitably appeared: that of the writer's relationship with her mother.

In Biss's collection, for example, she speaks of how her mother at "thirty-four…left her husband, who was the father of her four children" and "moved into a duplex with a poet and was initiated into the Yoruba tradition, a West African religion" (38). Beard's mother appears in almost every essay in her collection, and her mother is even featured – only briefly, but still, she's there – in the famous essay, "The Fourth State of Matter": "My mother floats past in a hospital gown, trailing tubes" (95). And, at the end of Williams's collection, in an essay titled, "Why I Write," her penultimate paragraph's main topic is her mother:

> In the months before my mother died, and she was so sick and at home….she would cry, If only I could do a little sweeping, just that….And her daughter, the writer, who would be the good broom quick in her hands if only she were able, could not help her in any way. Nothing the daughter, the writer, had ever written or could ever write could help my mother who had named me. (183-4)

I remember reading that last line again and again and again, underlining it once in black ink, then underlining it again in blue. Even now, I'm compelled to retype it: "Nothing the daughter, the writer, had ever written or could ever write could help my mother who had named me" (184).

Here's why I'm obsessed, still: if Williams's sentiment is true, then what exactly am I doing? Me, the daughter, the writer, who currently is pursuing a PhD, who has composed a dissertation (a fiction-CNF hybrid) in which Mom is Main Character: if nothing I "had ever written or could ever write" would help my mother, then why was I crafting my life around the craft of Writing About Mom? Unlike Williams, for years I believed my writing was, really, the only thing that *could* help my mother. Of course

writing would not fill her feeding bag with potassium; writing would not drive her to chemotherapy or tape the Fentanyl patch to her shoulder; writing would not shout at the PET scan technician when Mom had a 3:00 appointment and it was almost 4:45 and *exactly how many more people are gonna go into that room ahead of her? I mean: do you see her, Technician? Look. At. Her. Do you think she has all day?* No, writing could not force a hospital to stay on schedule, but writing was the only vehicle through which I knew how to give back to my mother everything she had given me. She had given me life, and if I wrote well enough, I could give her a life she never had, one in which Mom – high-school graduate, customer service rep, single parent – could be somebody folks would want to read about.

But then I read Joy Williams, and within a nonfiction book I did not anticipate having anything to do with mothers (*Ill Nature*, in fact, spends quite a lot of pages talking about duck hunting, which is a traumatic reading experience in and of itself), there was Williams suddenly writing about her mother, about how her mother died, and the cherry on top of this sundae was "Nothing the daughter, the writer, had ever written or could ever write could help" (184).

And so one spring I found myself wandering aimlessly through University of Missouri's Ellis Library, in a Joy Williams-inspired nihilistic funk when (quite by accident) I happened upon a book: Jo Malin's *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies*. And how quickly my funk dissolved; how quickly that funk was replaced by a feeling very much like falling in love. For there, in Malin's first pages, were these words:

> Every woman autobiographer is a daughter who writes and establishes her identity through her autobiographical narrative. Many twentieth-century autobiographical texts by women contain an intertext, an embedded narrative, which is a biography of the writer/daughter's mother….

…and then came this line: "The texts become conversations or dialogues between a mother and a daughter" (1-2). Here was an academic speaking back to Williams's nihilism: through autobiographical writing, I could not only bring my mother to life, but the act of writing itself simulated conversation. Writing as being able to "talk" to Mom again: for me, this theory was revelatory.

A Conversation with Malin, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Luce Irigaray

When Malin talks about *conversation*, about *dialogue*, what does she mean exactly? To understand Malin's theory, I began rehearsing her argument and all of its parts. As groundwork, Malin uses our everyday definitions of conversation and dialogue (e.g., an informal exchange – verbal or nonverbal – of information and ideas); however, her thesis depends on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, especially his theory of dialogic discourse. For Bakhtin, the dialogic is a system of communication that is anything but fixed/static. In my interactions with others, for example, who I am and what I think is in consistent flux, dependent on and influenced by how others communicate with me. Perhaps Wayne C. Booth summarizes Bakhtin's work best, when he "describes this important tenet of Bakhtinian philosophy": "We come into consciousness speaking a language already permeated with many voices – a social, not a private language….each of us is a 'we,' not an 'I'" (quoted in Malin 7). Like Malin, I find Bakhtin's theories about language and its relationship to social groups incredibly appealing, because – even

though, as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson points out, Bakhtin failed to include “race and gender…in [his] original system of social and linguistic stratification” (139) – Bakhtin stands in opposition to traditional Western discourses, those which position the “one voice”/“the individual” as most important. Instead, Bakhtin champions the multivocal/social aspect of language.

And it is seemingly this championing of a “we” that allows Malin to link Bakhtin’s theories to those of Luce Irigaray, particularly her work, “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other.” In this essay, Irigaray theorizes the mother-daughter dyad as an identity nonseparated and nonautonomous, and she expresses this one-ness by fusing pronouns: the essay’s speaker writes at times as “me/yourself,” “my/your,” and “you/me” (61; 67). Irigaray appears to insist that this nonseparation occurs only within the mother-daughter dyad and does not extend to other relationships, such as father-son and/or mother-son.[1] Because Malin appropriates Irigaray’s theory, father-son texts (such as Philip Roth’s *Patrimony*) or mother-son texts (such as Mark Slouka’s *Nobody’s Son*) don’t necessarily “work” when paired with this theoretical concept. Nonseparation also seems to work in only one direction: that of mother *to* daughter. The daughter can appropriate the mother’s voice but the mother might not be able to do the same, because Mother has never been within Daughter’s womb, which – according to Irigaray – is where the meshing of subjectivities takes place. This might be why a text that centers the mother as *writer* and daughter as *subject* (such as Joan Didion’s *Blue Nights*) would not be included in a study like Malin’s, because mother-writing-about-daughter doesn’t “fit” this Irigarayian framework.

Irigaray also conveys what Malin calls the "underside of [the] meshing of subjectivities": *underside* carrying a negative connotation, *underside* ostensibly pointing to the ways in which Irigaray posits the mother-daughter relationship as one of "anger, ambivalence, and confinement" (3). For example, Irigaray – occupying the daughter-position – writes: "I can no longer race toward what I love. And the more I love, the more I become captive, held back by a weightiness that immobilizes me. And I grow angry, I struggle, I scream – I want out of this prison" (60). In Irigaray's passionate language, we can see the overt complications she's presenting regarding the mother-daughter bond; she equates that bond – often literally – with imprisonment, thereby implying that daughter and mother cannot escape each other and are forever entwined.

It is precisely *within* Irigaray's envisioned "prison," *within* this "telling of nonseparation and nonautonomy" that we also find our way back to Bakhtin: if mother and daughter are, as Irigaray suggests, nonseparated – "nonseparated" in the sense that their identities are "meshed" – then these two figures may be able to converse with one another without being physically present. If we, like Bakhtin, "imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted," we may see that the

> second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intimate kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 197)

Because the mother's "deep traces" are alive within the daughter, the mother's words – even her "invisible" words – "have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker": the first speaker being the daughter (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 197).

And, if we look further into this theoretical "meshing" of Bakhtin and Irigaray, we can see how these theorists call forth and revise the life/death binary. At the end of Irigaray's essay, when she suggests that "it is only together that we can move," she is also implicitly revising our culture's conception of biological death (67). When Irigaray states, "what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive," she is aligned with Bakhtin's ideas of "invisible" conversations (67). Irigaray and Bakhtin both seem to suggest this theory: that a biological death is not necessarily as fixed as it may appear, for we have left traces of ourselves within other living beings, and because of these traces – these traces of us that live on within others – we, too, can live on. For Irigaray, this "death-defying act" happens specifically within the mother-daughter dyad: the seemingly confining "nonseparation" of these two identities is also what allows for the transference and subsequent "meshing" of *mother* and *daughter*. And this meshing is how, even when the mother's body dies, her "subject" still lives on within her daughter. Therefore, these two figures can, even after a biological death, converse.

You can see why Malin's initial presentation of these theories appealed to me, why I so quickly fell in love with her introduction's opening pages. But, as with many fallings-in-love that happen too quickly, when I delved deeper into Malin's text, discoveries were made, discoveries that could not be ignored. These were not you-don't-put-away-your-laundry-quickly-enough woes; these were potential deal breakers. For

example: how exactly does one "prove" the existence of a mother-daughter dialogic conversation when there is, in fact, only one writer: the daughter? These Malin lines in particular were troublesome to me:

> a conversation or dialogue is not always 'spoken' in a conventional sense. Rather, these texts are often modeled on inner dialogues. Each writer not only 'thinks' her mother's story as an inner dialogue with herself before putting it on the page, but her voice and her mother's voice are dialogic in her inner thoughts….What appears to be an autobiographical monologue is, in fact, a dialogue. The daughter's/writer's word is formulated with constant regard to her mother's word. (11)

In theory, I find this concept incredibly lovely, but how – exactly – would Malin prove this concept via textual analysis: that a daughter "thinks" her mother's story as an inner dialogue; that the daughter's words are crafted with *constant regard* to those of her mother's?

And furthermore: can this theory even be proven via textual analysis? Bakhtin does seem to argue that every voice is inherently an amalgam of the voices of others (*The Dialogic Imagination* 276). If we accept that theory, then no "proof" of mother-daughter "inner dialogue" necessarily needs to be provided, as the daughter's voice already has the voice of her mother's embedded within her own. Every time the daughter speaks, she is speaking as daughter + mother + all of the other voices (and silences) with which she has interacted. However, this explanation is perhaps a means to circumvent tricky and nuanced analytical engagement. (In other words: simply accepting this theory as a given seems an easy way out.)

A Conversation with Malin and Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*

I then decided to analyze how Malin's theory works when applied to one of her chosen mother-daughter dyads. In Rich's chapter on "Motherhood and Daughterhood," Malin claims that readers can see Rich's mother's biography embedded within Rich's autobiography.[2] Within a very limited space (roughly two pages), Rich tells her mother's life story, and because this life story is told so very briefly, Malin claims that the biography "breaks open" Rich's autobiography (41). And the "explosive" nature of this biography – how it appears and just as suddenly disappears, surrounded by other methods of writing (e.g., history, literary analysis, myth, etc.) – metaphorically represents how Rich and her mother conversed in "real life": conversations often marked by silence. According to Malin, Rich experienced frustration in not being able to talk to her mother in "real life." Rich writes: "When my first child was born, I was barely in communication with my parents" (222). This frustration, then, is the reason why we see the metaphorical manifestation of "silence" written into this chapter. Rich and her mother converse textually how they'd conversed in person: by not really talking to each other at all.

While Malin's textual analysis is appealing (i.e., a textual mother-daughter conversation mirroring a realistic one) I'm finding difficulty in seeing this "textual conversation" via a dialogic lens. When I think of Bakhtin's dialogic discourse, two words immediately come to mind: conflicting ideologies; how, according to Bakhtin, "any living discourse" is in a "dialogically agitated environment," one "entangled with alien" contexts (*The Dialogic Imagination* 276). In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin speaks about a novel's polyvocality, how a novel creates space for conflicting ideologies to "converse" with one another.[3] And it is here where I run into trouble with Malin's

argument: in order for her theory to "work," in order for her to say an absent mother is in conversation with the daughter-writer via a text, these two voices should be calling forth (and thereby "conversing with") conflicting ideologies. And I'm not convinced that's happening between Rich and her mother, or if that's happening – really – between any "textually conversing" mother-daughter dyad.

Arguably, Rich's mother's presence within *Of Woman Born* represents a hegemonic discourse, one that articulates a woman's life defined by patriarchal structures, one in which Rich's mother "would give her life over to the enhancement of" Rich's father's (221). On the other hand, Rich's words appear to represent a dissenting voice. Unlike her mother, Rich both recognizes and is fighting against patriarchal structures. "When I think of the conditions under which my mother became a mother," Rich writes, "the impossible expectations, my father's distaste for pregnant women, his hatred of all that he could not control, my anger at her dissolves into grief and anger *for* her" (224). In this reading, it seems as though a dialogic discourse can be culled from *Of Woman Born*. The mother's and daughter's voices, in presenting different "takes" on patriarchal ideology, metaphorically showcase how patriarchal ideology can force mothers and daughters apart. In Rich and her mother's case, this "forcing apart" is illuminated via textual silence. However, Malin's thesis depends on the intersection of Irigaray + Bakhtin: 1) mother and daughter are – in essence – the "same person" (Irigaray) + 2) because mother and daughter are the "same person," they can converse via text even when one (the mother) is absent (Bakhtin). And I'm finding difficulty when pairing what appears dialogic with Irigaray's lens.

While Irigaray's conceit – the "nonseparation" of mother and daughter – implies a meshing of voices, another might read this meshing as one voice speaking for – instead of alongside of – another voice. Even though Irigaray's use of joined pronouns (you/me) evokes collectivity, the "'I' of her discourse [the daughter] perpetually addresses a silent 'you' [the mother]"; thus, "one woman [the daughter] speaks for another [the mother]" (Hohne and Wussow xi). It could be argued that Irigaray's work – in and of itself – is not dialogic, but monologic. As Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow state in *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, "although [Irigaray] attempts dialogue with various mouths with which a woman speaks, the result is not a conversation between many voices but statements made by a privileged, single voice" (xi). This sentiment brings us back to Rich, for Malin might be too generous in calling Rich's "embedded maternal narrative" a dialogic discourse between mother and daughter. Rich firmly claims that this story is hers (e.g., "it is my story I am telling") and – perhaps more importantly – she could've incorporated her mother's voice into this chapter (Rich notes access to her mother's letters), but she chooses not to do so (221). Instead, Rich insists on telling her "version of the past" (221). This could be read as Rich (like Irigaray) silencing the mother's voice and therefore crafting not a dialogic but a monologic discourse.

Here's another wrinkle: couldn't "nonseparation" also imply that mother and daughter are potentially "speaking" a similar ideology? Or, in other words: might mother and daughter be conduits of a similar ideology, on the same continuum but – perhaps – in different places on said continuum? Irigaray's theory conveys a recognition of but also a trapping within patriarchal ideology: "Didn't I already have my/your lips? And this body open on what we would never have stopped giving each other, saying to each other? This

breach of silence…Where we come to relearn ourselves and each other, in order to become women, and mothers, again and again" (67). Irigaray's "speaking daughter" can see the patriarchal institutions in which she's trapped but she can also recognize that recognition alone does not guarantee escape.

Rich seems to occupy a similar positioning. Like other 20th and 21st century feminists, Rich can "analyze our mothers' oppression"; she can "understand 'rationally' – and correctly – why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons, why they bound our feet or simply left us" (224). However, she also found with her mother "an imprinting never to be wholly erased"; she found herself "divided, slipping under [her mother's] skin; a part of [her] identifies too much with" her mother (220; 223-4). And here I allow myself a brief memory: during a quarrel, my mother once shouted at me, "Why didn't you think about…*fill-in-the-blank with whatever she wanted me to think about that she assumed I wasn't thinking about*!?!" and I shouted back, "Of course I thought about that! We are the same person!" In other words: my mother's ideology was very much a part of me, just as Rich's mother's ideology was very much a part of her. Nonseparation, in a way, seems to limit how a mother and daughter can converse in the dialogic sense: are mother-daughter textual conversations necessarily conveyers of *dissenting* ideologies? Rich's text, then, appears to belie Malin's theory: 1) *Of Woman Born* may not – upon closer inspection – be polyvocal (in a literal or metaphorical sense), and 2) even if the text *was* polyvocal, can mother and daughter "textually converse" with truly *conflicting* ideologies?

Malin seems to express similar sentiments in her book's epilogue. She notes reading these concluding lines from Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot*: "The

greatest tragedy that can occur between mother and daughter is when they cease being able to speak and to listen to one another. But what if they inhabit the same body, what if they are the same person, speaking two voices?" (quoted in Malin 100). Malin replies with "Why did [Hirsch] stop with this fertile question? Where might this query lead?" (100). I, too, have this same question: where might this query lead?

A Conversation about a Possible New Theory

Within Irigaray's mother-daughter dyad, it seems that daughters can echo their mother's ideologies; however, this mother-daughter meshing may not allow these voices to conflict with one another. This is why I'm having such trouble with Malin's Bakhtin + Irigaray theoretical groundwork. Perhaps we could imagine a new approach, a new schematic, one that could expand the depths of dialogic discourse found within literary texts. To break away from Malin and craft my own thesis, I look to Carolyn Heilbrun's theory that "it is not mothers who free women" but "some other female mentor or figure, often not even known personally, most often dead, [who] operates in some new female plot to…encourage or inspire an awakening" (64). Although Heilbrun does not define "awakening" in her text, I'm choosing to interpret this word in an Irigarayian sense: as shown, the mother-daughter familial relationship is literally confining and often monologic (i.e., the mother gifted the daughter a particular ideology, and now the daughter speaks with traces of that ideology). However, another woman can "awaken" the daughter because that woman has access to ways of thinking perhaps unknown to – or perhaps yet to be unearthed from within – the mother.

What happens when we add a third voice to Malin's daughter-writer + biological mother dyad? What happens when we add the voice of "some other female mentor," one

"not even known personally, most often dead"? What happens when we look at nonfiction works in which daughter-writers speak about not only their biological mothers but also about this metaphorical literary mother? How might we make this theoretical, schematic leap? Before discussing the applications and implications of this proposed theoretical conceit, I'd like to briefly talk about two theories that ground my research: literary psychohistory and maternal theory.

A Conversation about Literary Psychohistory

In the 1970s, Harold Bloom defined literary psychohistory in Freudian terms: like Oedipus's paternal envy, writers are envious of their literary ancestors, worrying that they will never quite live up to previous literary greatness. Bloom posits that one's singular voice can be found not by interpretation but via *mis*interpretation: "Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem" (1658). It is important to note, however, that when Bloom speaks about poets, he means male poets; when he speaks about parents, he's speaking only about fathers. When Bloom notes that a "poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety," he applies this anxiety as belonging solely to male poets envious of ancestral male poets (1658). Bloom's male-oriented "anxiety of influence," therefore, colors literary psychohistory as one filled with competition, aggression, and – as scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out – apparently no women writers.

In *Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar revise Bloom's theory via a feminist lens: women writers also suffer from anxiety, but this anxiety is not of influence but of authorship. As defined by Gilbert and Gubar, anxiety of authorship is "a radical fear that [a woman writer] cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (1929). What can the woman writer do to

combat this fear? Unlike Bloom's "strong poet" who is "engage[d] in heroic warfare with his 'precursor,'" Gilbert and Gubar's female writer battles "not…her (male) precursor's reading of the world but…his reading of *her*" (1927-9). A woman writer, therefore, yearns not for competition but for collaboration; she begins "by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (1930). Gilbert and Gubar then apply their theory to women writers from the 19th century (such as Mary Shelley, Charlotte Bronte, and Emily Bronte) as well as more contemporary writers (such as Anne Sexton and Margaret Atwood).

Even though Gilbert and Gubar's theory is more inclusive than Bloom's, they make similar theoretical missteps. Bloom omits women writers from his theory; Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, do not mention writers of color. Bloom treats writers ahistorically, applying the Freudian model to any writer in any time period. Gilbert and Gubar do something similar when they assume that all women suffer in similar ways under patriarchal dominance. We now know and understand that this is not the case. A study of Alice Walker and her 1976 novel *Meridian*, for example, might showcase a very different "anxiety of authorship" than the one Mary Shelley theoretically suffered from when she wrote *Frankenstein* in 1818's England. Although flawed, at Gilbert and Gubar's theory's heart is the idea of a collaborative process, a partnership between writers, and it is in this literary psychohistory that I ground part of my dialogic triad: a collaboration, a potential conversation between a daughter-writer and her chosen literary mother.

A Conversation about Maternal Theory

Because I am speaking not only about biological mothers but also metaphorical mothers, I must also ground my triad within the teachings of maternal theory. When Canadian academic Andrea O'Reilly first coined "motherhood studies" in 2006, she grounded the discipline using the maternal theory of Adrienne Rich, particularly Rich's "distinction between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (13). Within motherhood studies, therefore, the difference between motherhood and mothering is crucial. The term "motherhood" refers to what Rich calls motherhood as *institution*, "which is male defined and controlled and deeply oppressive to women," whereas "mothering" links to Rich's reference to motherhood's *potential*, which calls forth "women's experiences of mothering and is female defined and centered and potentially empowering to women" (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 55).

Because of these differing definitions, motherhood studies can be divided into two separate yet linked areas of inquiry: theories that help us understand patriarchal motherhood (such as Adrienne Rich's "matrophobia," Sara Ruddick's "maternal thinking," and Sharon Hays's "intensive mothering"), and theories that assist in defining what O'Reilly calls "empowered mothering" (such as bell hooks's "homeplace," Baba Copper's "radical mothering," and Kim Anderson's "collectivism"). An aim of motherhood studies, then, is to show the connectivity between understanding patriarchal motherhood and embracing empowered mothering, which – in O'Reilly's words – "operates as a counter-narrative to resist and reform patriarchal motherhood"

(*Matricentri*c 101). In other words, empowered mothering "makes possible a mothering against motherhood" (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 102).

I will argue that a mothering against motherhood happens when we expand Jo Malin's theoretical dyad. If we add a third voice – that of a literary mother – not only does this voice add dialogic conflict but it assists the daughter-writer re-see her biological mother. If this re-seeing is awakened *after* the daughter-writer experiences the work of their metaphorical mother, I contend that this dialogic triad provides connective tissue between a mother's roots within patriarchal motherhood and a literary mother's empowered mothering. In other words, via the empowered mothering lens of a literary mother, a daughter-writer can re-see how her biological mother was impacted and/or influenced by patriarchal motherhood. (Adding a non-biological mother to a mother-daughter dyad in and of itself is a movement inspired and made possible by empowered mothering theory.)

Another theoretical benefit of adding a third voice to Malin's dyad is that this conceit potentially breaks away from the gender essentialism that haunts modern motherhood. Because the agent of change for these daughter-writers – their "lit mom" – is not necessarily a *mother* but someone who *mothers*, this theory utilizes Sara Ruddick's "repositioning of the word *mother* from a noun to a verb" (O'Reilly "Outlaw" 377). This repositioning is what O'Reilly claims is needed in motherhood studies, "so that the work of mothering is rendered separate from the identity of mother" ("Outlaw" 377). Mothering, therefore, can be performed by anyone of any maternal identity (e.g., "lesbian, noncustodial, poor, single, older, and 'working' mothers") and within any familial structure (e.g., "single, blended, step, matrifocal, same-sex, and so forth")

(O'Reilly "Outlaw" 370-371). Also, within empowered mothering, "care" can be "divested of biology" (O'Reilly "Outlaw" 377). In my proposed conceit, when literary mothers explain and critique patriarchal structures, writing – like nursing, teaching, cleaning, diapering, etc. – becomes a form of care. Mothering and care, then, can be provided via the act of writing and received via the act of reading.

In summary, highlighting dialogic conversations between Daughter-Writers + Biological Mothers + Literary Mothers hopefully not only adds tension to dialogic conversations but also breaks the gender essentialism intrinsic within writings about motherhood. I hope to show the potentialities of this theory by examining three different nonfiction works – Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Louise DeSalvo's "A Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar," and Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*.

A Conversation with Alice Walker, Walker's Mother, and Zora Neale Hurston

Although one could argue that Walker's essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* is a wide-ranging mix of memoir, feminist theory, poetry, and literary criticism, at its heart is the relationship between three women: Walker, Walker's mother, and Zora Neale Hurston, the woman I believe is Walker's literary mother. In its beginning, the collection focuses on Walker's discovery of Hurston, both literally (Walker details how she found Hurston's Floridian grave) and metaphorically (everything she learned by reading Hurston's – at the time – little-read works). Walker's mother can also be found throughout the collection. Even though she does not appear in every essay, she is often mentioned, and – at times – she even appears as a character-like presence

with her own lines of dialogue. For example, when she and Walker visit Flannery O'Connor's house, Walker narrates the following scene:

> "Do you think we should enter?" I ask.
>
> But my mother has already opened the gate. To her, life has no fences, except, perhaps, religious ones, and these we have decided not to discuss….
>
> "I would like to see old man Jenkins [who was our landlord] come bothering me about trespassing," she says, her head extremely up. (43-44)

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, then, is often dialogic in a quite literal sense. Walker weaves together her personal reflections and narrations with excerpts from Hurston's writings and lines of her mother's "real life" dialogue. Walker herself also admits to the connectivity of this triad when she notes that her award-winning story, "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," is "based on [her] mother's experiences during the Depression, and on Zora Hurston's folklore collection of the 1920s, and on [her] own response to both out of a contemporary existence" (12-13). The important question, then, is this: when these voices speak together, dialogically, what does this triad of voices illuminate about both motherhood and mothering?

Although Walker's mother was Black and therefore automatically fell outside of what was considered (at the time) normative motherhood (a place belonging only to white, middle-class, stay-at-home, heterosexually-married women), she still adhered to many patriarchal motherhood ideals. In O'Reilly's words, Walker's mother "followed the script" of "good motherhood" (*Matricentric* 53). She married early and young, something Walker notes "was expected of seventeen-year-old girls" (238). She willingly took on the roles of wife and primary caregiver; for example, she "made all the clothes [the Walkers]

wore, even [Walker's] brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all [their] beds" (238). She readily dismissed the pain of childbirth. When discussing Walker's decision not to have more than one child, Walker's mother pushed back against that decision with these musings: "That pain is over before you know it" and "Another thing about the pain, *you soon forget it*" (375-376). Walker calls her mother's way of thinking "Women's Folly," a euphemism for the ways in which women are often purveyors of patriarchal ideals: i.e., *society needs you to forget the pain of childbirth so you'll get back to having more babies! Stat!* (375). (Interesting sidenote: my mother belittled childbirth pain in a similar fashion, comparing labor to mild abdominal cramping.)

Even though it is clear that Walker loves her mother – she often sweetly "chuckles," for example, at her mother's "style" – Walker claims that she is "not easily seduced by the charms of painful past experience" (374). This "not easily seduced" phrase reminds me of Rich's concept of matrophobia, which is "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*" (236). Rich continues: "The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" (236). Walker does not want to emulate her mother's way of life, especially the ways in which she seems to embrace (or at least diminish the cruelty of) patriarchal motherhood. How, then, does the addition of Hurston's voice change/revise this mother-daughter dynamic?

If Walker's mother – a woman for whom "marriage…was expected," a woman who "by the time she was twenty…had two children and was pregnant with a third," a woman who was "rarely impatient in [their] home" – allows us to understand the

operations and influence of patriarchal motherhood, then Walker's literary mother Hurston may provide an example of empowered mothering. For one, Hurston mothers via the act of writing, by providing Walker with views and a way of thinking that break away from patriarchal ideals. Instead of conveying internalized sexism and racism, Hurston's work advocates for "racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings" (Walker 85). For example, Hurston's seminal work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which Walker says is "perhaps the most authentic and moving black love story ever published," is "about a black man and a black woman who spent only about one-eighteenth of their time worrying about whitefolks" (35).

Secondly, Hurston's identity is key to the specific types of empowered mothering she can provide. Because Hurston never had children herself, was twice-married, and "died in poverty in the swamps of Florida, where she was again working as a housemaid," she would be considered – in Rich's words – an "outlaw from the institution of motherhood" (Walker 35; 195). Hurston's outlaw mothering allows us to view this dialogic triad via the lens of two important theories about empowered mothering: othermothering and Black Feminist Standpoint.

According to Patricia Hill Collins, in West African culture, "[m]othering was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers" ("Meaning" 45). Instead, women referred to as "othermothers" – women perhaps not related by blood but by community – helped care for children. Hurston's metaphorical mothering within this triad, therefore, is reminiscent of othermothering. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, Hurston's outlaw mothering can be linked to another theoretical concept, what Patricia Hill Collins calls "Black Female Standpoint." This theory "develops

through the interplay of two discourses of knowledge: 'the commonplace taken-for-granted knowledge' and 'everyday ideas' of Black women that are clarified and rearticulated by Black women intellectuals or theorists to form a specialized Black feminist thought" (quoted in O'Reilly *Matricentric* 112-113). Collins continues: "Through the process of rearticulation, Black women intellectuals offer African-American women a different view of themselves and their world" (*Black* 31-32). If we apply Collins's theory to this particular dialogic triad, Hurston (a Black woman intellectual) provides an African-American woman (Walker) a different view of the "world," or in this case, a different view of her mother.

Here is an example of how Hurston's empowered mothering helps Walker re-see her biological mother. In the essay collection's titular essay, written during the same time period when Walker was "searching for" and researching Zora, Walker describes how for years her mother "adorned with flowers whatever shabby house [they] were forced to live in": Mother as Keeper of a Rundown Home (241). But after reading Hurston's words, Hurston's ways of looking at the world, Walker revises how she sees her mother's gardening: "whatever [her mother] planted grew as if by magic" (241). Mother as *Keeper* becomes Mother as *Gardener* becomes Mother as *Artist*. Because of Hurston, Walker re-sees her mother's life as one inundated with patriarchal constructions (yes) but one in which – nevertheless – her mother carved out a space for herself, for her artistry. Walker's mother crafted not only a beautiful garden but also her own identity.

A Conversation with Louise DeSalvo, DeSalvo's Mother, and Virginia Woolf

Like Walker, Woolf scholar and essayist Louise DeSalvo, in her essay, "A Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar," writes about a triad of

daughter-writer, biological mother, and literary mother. This essay is an autobiographical piece about DeSalvo's time researching and editing an early draft of Woolf's novel *The Voyage Out*, while simultaneously raising two children and wrestling with her husband's infidelity. DeSalvo's "lit mom" is (of course) Virginia Woolf.

But before delving into DeSalvo's work, it is imperative to note the similarities and differences between Walker and DeSalvo. Both women came of age in the 1940s and 1950s, when custodial motherhood was considered normative. This era, which covers approximately "the period between 1946 to the late 1980s," was characterized by intense domesticity: women were expected to "keep a clean house" *and* "serve well-prepared dinners" *and* take care of the children (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 82-84). Both Walker and DeSalvo were also part of feminism's second wave, which sharply criticized these motherhood ideals, perhaps most forcefully by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*.

However, Black feminists quickly pointed out that even though sisterhood may have been the theme of the times, all women who mother may not view or experience motherhood in the same ways. As bell hooks discussed in her essay, "Revolutionary Parenting," "Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, lack of jobs, lack of skills or education, and a number of other issues would have been at the top of the list – but not motherhood" (133). Therefore, when discussing Walker's mother alongside DeSalvo's, these racialized differences must be acknowledged. This also may be why, although a similar theoretical conceit can be applied to both Walker's and DeSalvo's texts (e.g., dialogically re-seeing a biological mother via a literary mother), this re-seeing leads to different conclusions about mothering and motherhood.

Unlike Walker's work, in which Walker's mother frequently appears, DeSalvo's mother is mentioned only twice. We see her once at the essay's beginning, when DeSalvo details a striking dream in which "Istar – the many-breasted goddess…place[s] her hands under [her] armpits and…pick[s] [her] up" (38). Istar's appearance is significant: DeSalvo describes her "with the face vaguely like that of Virginia Woolf but resembling my mother, in profile" (38). We see DeSalvo's mother only once more at the essay's end. In the final vignette, DeSalvo writes about asking her mother – pregnant with DeSalvo at the time of Virginia Woolf's death – if her mother had known of Virginia Woolf. Her mother "says no" (52).

There are also a few moments in the essay in which DeSalvo may be referencing her mother, but we – as readers – can only infer this connection. For example, DeSalvo mentions "the land of [her] forebears," a place in which "women sit around and wait for their men….Or they make a sumptuous meal and they work very hard and watch their children and wait for their men. But they don't go anywhere without their men. Or do anything for themselves alone without their men" (35). DeSalvo most likely is including her mother amongst these "forebears" even though she doesn't explicitly say so.

Another possible reference to DeSalvo's mother appears later in the essay, when DeSalvo talks about her "fascination with the figure of Cam Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*" (48). DeSalvo describes Cam as "the child Mrs. Ramsay virtually ignores," the child who is trapped "in [a] family with a tyrannical father" (48). DeSalvo then "remember[s] [her] own adolescence" and she asks herself this question: "Could it be that I have seen something of myself in Cam…and that in trying to understand the relationship between Cam Ramsay and her creator, Virginia Woolf, I am also trying to

learn something about my own past?" (48). I, too, have this same question, and I wonder if answers can be found by examining the dialogic triad of daughter-writer, biological mother, and lit mother, Virginia Woolf.

Even though DeSalvo's mother's presence in the essay is minimal compared to that of Woolf, conversing with Woolf appears to lead DeSalvo to an unstated awakening about her mother. When carefully reading the times when DeSalvo's mother is mentioned – both explicitly and implicitly – we can piece together a composite of who this woman may have been; we can picture a woman who seems to strictly adhere to the normative motherhood of her time: that of custodial motherhood. We envision DeSalvo's mother as someone who works very hard, who faithfully keeps house and makes sumptuous dinners. We also see a woman taking care of children in a house with a man described as tyrannical. DeSalvo describes this tyranny explicitly: as having a father who told her "dozens of times" during her upbringing that she was "not agreeable" or "docile" or "sweet"; in other words, that she was "not shaping up to be the young woman [she was] supposed to be" (46). We could argue that – because DeSalvo's mother's voice is not included in these father-centric episodes – that she either shared similar beliefs or kept her own beliefs quiet. However, there is that seminal moment to which I must return, that moment when DeSalvo dreams of a fused goddess, one whom is both Woolf and her mother. In this dream, this fused being "begins shaking [DeSalvo] and all of the things that define [her] as a woman fall off" (38).

And here, allow me to pause for a moment and return to Alice Walker, her mother, and Zora Neale Hurston. As a Black woman, as someone consistently defined by others, it was significant that Hurston helped re-see Walker's mother's identity. In one of

her essays, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," Walker notes that Hurston's critics "disliked her apparent sensuality" and "hinted slyly that Zora was gay, or at least bisexual" (88). Walker notes with chagrin that "there is not, perhaps unfortunately, a shred of evidence that this was true" (88). There was, however, as DeSalvo notes, evidence of Woolf's "love affair" with Vita Sackville-West (41-42). And it is here, within Woolf's particular identity, that allows DeSalvo to dialogically converse with her biological and literary mothers (as Walker did) but have a slightly different awakening. Both Hurston and Woolf perform outlaw mothering because neither woman was a mother herself, they both metaphorically mother writers who are not their own kin, and their mothering is provided via writing. However, whereas Hurston was able to help Walker re-see her mother from a racialized standpoint, Woolf helps DeSalvo view her mother via a queer lens.

Margaret Gibson's theory about "queering motherhood" provides a helpful framework here. To queer motherhood, according to Gibson, "is to re-think, re-shape, re-establish notions and practices of motherhood" (12). Although "the concept of queering motherhood extends beyond the experience of queer or trans parents," they are "central to this endeavor," and this theory begins, then, "where any of the central gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components of 'expected' motherhood are challenged" (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 133; Gibson 6). It seems that DeSalvo's dream of fusing Woolf with her own mother was no accident. "Before I worked on Virginia Woolf," DeSalvo writes, "I whined a lot like my Italian foremothers, about how men got all the breaks and about the ways they abused their women…but I really didn't understand that there was a social structure that was organized to keep men dominant and

women subservient" (51). In DeSalvo's dream, when Woolf together with her mother shake off everything that "defines" DeSalvo as a woman, the queering of motherhood is taking place. Here, DeSalvo's mother is parenting not with a tyrannical man but with another partner, a woman, and it is together that they engender their daughter's "emancipation from the tradition of the suffering woman" (DeSalvo 51). In other words: without the partnering of DeSalvo's mother's (apparent) patriarchal motherhood with Woolf's metaphorical outlaw mothering, DeSalvo's "emancipation" might never have taken place.

A Conversation with Rebecca Solnit, Solnit's Mother, and Mary Shelley

And now I would like to examine one last triad, one that showcases yet another application of the daughter-writer, biological mother, and literary mother schematic, one found within Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*. Within this book, a difficult-to-describe work – part memoir, part lyrical essay, part examination of her mother's descent into dementia, part geographical exploration, part literary criticism – Solnit links her mother to her chosen literary mother Mary Shelley by way of storytelling. While Shelley may have written *Frankenstein*, a novel Solnit calls an "undying work of art," Solnit's mother is also a storyteller, one invested in fairy tales (50). "If my mother had chosen a fairy tale about herself," Solnit writes, "it would have been 'Cinderella,' the story of an overlooked, undervalued girl, a delicate child made into a workhorse" (25). Solnit's mother "never stopped being Cinderella, and told her own story largely as a series of things that happened to her rather than things she did" (26).

Throughout the book, Solnit's contempt for her mother is often palpable. Solnit writes about being asked again and again whether or not her mother still recognized her;

Solnit's response: "Recognition can mean so many things, and in some sense she had never known who I was" (24). She writes about how, even though she tried to distance herself, she still "wrestled against [her mother's] inner voice…the voice of caution, of duty, of fear of the unknown, the voice that said the world was dangerous" (33-34). Solnit's mother "sent [her] clippings about young women who were raped and murdered" and "elaborated on obscure perils and injuries that had never happened to her all her life" (33-34). Like Walker (but arguably to a larger degree), Solnit seems influenced by matrophobia; she writes as someone who "see[s] [her] mother as having taught a compromise and self-hatred [she is] struggling to win free of, the one through whom restrictions and degradations of a female existence were…transmitted" (Rich 235). How, then, does the addition of Shelley's voice to this mother-daughter dyad assist Solnit's awakening?

As with Walker's and DeSalvo's literary mothers, Shelley is an outlaw mother because she is not related to Solnit by blood. However, unlike Hurston and Woolf, Shelley's empowered mothering is not linked necessarily to identity but to the practice of storytelling. If we look at Shelley's mothering via a maternal theory lens, we could link Solnit and Shelley via a theoretical conceit known as the Motherline. In *Stories from the Motherline: Reclaiming the Mother-Daughter Bond, Finding our Feminine Souls*, Naomi Lowinsky describes the Motherline as "stories of female experience: physical, psychological, and historical" (1-2). Lowinsky argues that daughters of the "baby boom" and onward are particularly susceptible to being disconnected from the Motherline because of the "headlong race to liberate" themselves from the rejections and humiliations suffered by their mothers (29). However, Lowinsky continues, women may

"reclaim authority and authenticity by reconnecting to the Motherline" and in so doing, they "will encounter ancestors who struggled with similar difficulties in different historical times. This provides her with a life-cycle perspective that softens her immediate situation" (O'Reilly *Matricentri*c 130; 13). If we apply this lens to the dialogic triad of Solnit, Solnit's mother, and Mary Shelley, a young woman who lived in the 19th century can mother someone living today.

Via the lens of the Motherline, Solnit and Shelley are linked because of fairy tales. Solnit's mother narrated tales of womanly heartbreak and woe; Shelley composed a novel Solnit calls a fairy tale: *Frankenstein*. Even though *Frankenstein* is a fictional work, one male-centric with a male antagonist, we are still able to access Shelley's parallel story via the Motherline. We see a young woman who lived in the 19th century ("an ancestor" who lived in "different historical times"). We see a woman who had little power when she lived, someone who "struggled": for example, Mary's father disowned her when she married Percy Shelley (Solnit 49).

Yet, despite all this, Mary Shelley still created a story about womanly power. "*Frankenstein*," Solnit notes, "is often remarked upon as a novel in which a man usurps a woman's power of creating life, which serves as a roundabout reminder that in this way women may be gods and men not" (44). In this way, Shelley's mothering via the Motherline allows Solnit to be part of a storytelling tradition and to see the different ways in which women have crafted the stories they tell about themselves. Solnit's mother may have crafted her own tale of self-pity and self-centeredness. Solnit's mother may have parented with a callousness reminiscent of Shelley's father; Solnit described her mother as giving [her] "everything before she gave [her] nothing" (29). However, via the

mothering of other literary storytellers, ones who (like Shelley) crafted feminist-minded tales, Solnit may be "provided with a life-cycle perspective that softens her immediate situation" (Lowinsky 13). Because of the Motherline, Solnit may draw upon her storytelling foremothers to craft her own feminist pieces.

And it is here that I am reminded of the other storytelling foremothers of which I have written, Walker and DeSalvo, and how their historical positioning is slightly different than Solnit's. Even though – like Walker and DeSalvo – Solnit grew up during the era of custodial motherhood, her writings begin appearing during a new motherhood era, that of intensive motherhood, which arguably emerged in the early 1990s (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 83). Like custodial motherhood, intensive mothers are expected to be the primary caregiver, and motherhood is "considered more important than paid employment"; however, intensive motherhood also "requires [mothers] to lavish copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child" (Hays 8). It is worrisome that at the same time during which Solnit is writing about troubling mothers and "men who explain things to" her, we have also seen the rise of the intensive motherhood paradigm, one that convinces mothers to "do far more work with far less resources" (O'Reilly *Matricentric* 93). I would argue that the dominance and acceptance of intensive mothering practices – especially when paired with our current cultural climate, during which we are seeing more and more abortion restrictions, lack of adequate reproductive care, and Covid-linked closings of childcare centers – is why talking about *mothering against motherhood* is so important, both as a field of study and as an academic endeavor.

Conclusion

When women writers engage in a dialogic conversation with their biological and literary mothers, when women pair the ideologies they learned from their mothers (ones often steeped in patriarchal motherhood) with those communicated by their "lit moms" (ones that embrace empowered mothering) the result seems to be not only a re-seeing of the biological mother but also a re-evaluation of who can mother and how this mothering can empower. Arguably the application of this theoretical conceit is also, in a way, a rebirth of the biological mother, too: a metaphorical rebirth but still a rebirth nonetheless. For the daughter-writer concerned about losing her mother – or, for the daughter-writer who's already lost, who's trying to somehow manage this punch-drunk forever-loss – the lit mom's voice can give a daughter-writer's mother back to her in ways she never would've discovered on her own.

And even though this essay has shown my complicated relationship with Jo Malin's text, I must admit: without my own dialogic argument with Malin (who I now consider to be one of my literary mothers), without arguing with her that a metaphorical mother is necessary to re-see a biological mother, I wouldn't have been able to craft my dissertation, the first book I've ever written, a short story collection that begins by highlighting a core belief my grandmother, mother, and I once shared – that a mother's self-sacrifice is necessary and heroic – and ends with that belief revised and my grandmother and mother re-seen.

My mother, for example, gave and gave and gave until there was literally nothing left. It was she, after all, who in that hospital room tried to convince Dr. Neuner to make me go to school instead of staying home and helping her (when she so desperately needed help, when she was dying). But Mom did not see what my reading of Malin and

subsequent research has taught me to see: the unfairness of it all; how "sacrificing mother" is a trope valorized but it is still a trope nonetheless. How often my own writings before this reinforced that narrative: Sacrificing Mother as the *Way Things Ought to Be*.

How I wish she could read what I've now written. How I haven't changed her story as much as I have re-seen it. Re-seen her. How I wish I could tell her. How she's been reborn.

Notes

1. She seems to share Helene Cixous' belief that women have a "privileged relationship with the voice" (in other words: women have a privileged relationship with their mothers). "No woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the [libidinal] drives as does a man," Cixous states; therefore, "whereas man represses the mother, a woman doesn't (or hardly does)" (173; Moi 115).

2. When Malin uses the term "autobiography," she seems to be speaking of texts that are not necessarily autobiograph*ies* (which is a term, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note, that "privileges the autonomous individual") but autobiograph*ical*: e.g., writing that includes "personal memories" as a "primary archival source" (3; 7). While having elements of the autobiograph*ical*, *Of Woman Born* also includes "personal recollections, political analysis, history, myth, and poetry," all elements that Malin herself recognizes and notes (37). Yet Malin still insists *Of Woman Born* is an autobiography that contains an embedded maternal biography.

3. In my studies of the dialogic, regarding both fiction and nonfiction, I've noticed that critics will at times characterize Bakhtin's theories literally (e.g., in *Brothers and Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman narrates as both himself and his brother; a reader can literally point to different voices on the page) and/or metaphorically [e.g., in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, the Biblical Origin Story is in "conversation with" the narrative of the African Diaspora (Peppers 48-49). These are not literal "voices" you can point to on the page. Rather, these are competing discourses that play out – metaphorically – throughout the text]. In this essay, I read dialogic discourses both ways: literally and metaphorically.

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The Wise Avenue

Five months before her 66th birthday, two weeks before her granddaughter's Miss Patapsco High School pageant, and nineteen hours after walking past a 7-11, tripping on a pothole, and spraining both of her ankles, Marie Niccoli saw an angel. She typically wasn't the sort to see things, or to even *believe* in the *seeing* of *things*, but there he was, her father, a slight predawn shimmer on the other side of the living room window. He looked as though snipped from a moment in Marie's childhood: a robust forty-year-old with a wrinkled work shirt and calloused hands, dirt caught in the folds of his knuckles. Not the old man she remembered, the one with wispy white hair and sagging skin, the one who barely remembered her name. That was a comfort at first – Marie made sure to note – that one did not lose looks or smarts in the afterlife. But then he held out his hand and gave her an order: "Come."

Interesting that her father found her here, in her daughter Christine's living room while seated on Christine's couch, two settings he'd never known when he lived in this world. To be fair, he'd never known Marie like this either: an old, brittle, couch-bound woman; her bandaged ankles propped on two dining room chairs; old Smurf and Care Bear pillowcases protecting her skin from bags of frozen peas. She'd been on this couch, with these pillowcases and these peas for hours now, and she imagined she'd be right here, in this very spot, for a long time to come. The pajamas she wore, also Christine's, were decorated with red and green reindeer. Long ago – last night? this morning? – the top button had popped off. She and her daughter, no longer the same size, she mused. With her thumb, she explored the canyon of skin where neck meets collarbone.

“Then what happened, Grandma?” Her granddaughter’s voice sent a surprise jolt through her body; pain zinged across her ankles. She’d forgotten about Paige; that Paige was here, sitting with her in the living room; that it was Paige to whom she was telling this angel story. Paige prompted again: “What happened?”

What happened is what always happens, in some way. A man (Christine’s husband, Paige’s father) decided to leave, and a woman (in this case, a grandmother named Marie) cleaned up the mess. Her daughter’s exhausted heart. Her granddaughter’s pensive grief. The beer bottles Son-in-Law smashed on his way out. Because she couldn’t stomach Paige being alone in the mornings after Christine left for work, and because she’d never learned to drive, and because the bus didn’t pass her stop until 7:10 a.m., Marie decided to take daily predawn walks from her house to her daughter’s, a distance that took her past three supermarkets, two 7-11s, and across one drawbridge. At seventeen, Paige no longer needed supervision, but the girl hadn’t yet shaken the ghost of early adolescence, often wearing faded Mickey Mouse t-shirts and a melancholic expression. Marie didn’t mind, the melancholy or the walking; she traveled in heat, rain, snow, even ice. But on this December morning, the sky was especially dark, the road especially icy, and because she didn’t see that gosh-darn pothole, she’s now seeing things. Like her long-dead father. That’s what happened.

“But what did you *tell* him, Grandma?” Paige said. “When your dad told you to come?”

Marie snapped up her head. She spoke with the same fiery precision she once used long ago, when scolding Paige for crossing the street unaccompanied. “I told him I have to stay,” she said. “For you.”

*

They lived a few minutes from the Baltimore city line, in the Gray Manor development of "New Dundalk." Old Dundalk, New Dundalk, did it matter? Over the years, as Marie took a bus through the streets, she looked at the houses, like children's toys stacked together, triangles on top of squares, two bedroom, one bath. The peeled siding; the faded shutters; in a driveway, a Chevy's dislodged bumper. She watched the men walk home from Bethlehem Steel, filmy orange soot covering their skin. Old. New. All the same.

Well, almost the same. Almost because while the kids who lived in "old" Dundalk attended Dundalk High School, the "new" kids – like Paige – were districted to Patapsco High. Patapsco: that name had always bothered Marie. How silly, to dedicate a school after geography no where near their town. The Patapsco River, way to the west, bordered Howard County, not their county, Baltimore. Not to mention the fact that most Dundalkians mispronounced the river's name; instead of the correct *Pa-TAPS-co*, they added an extra syllable: *Pa-tap-SICK-co*. Yet another thing that made Marie sick to her stomach. Consider, on the other hand, Bear Creek: now *that* was Dundalk's tributary, its waters cutting a perpendicular vein across the town's busiest boulevard. A local elementary school, though, had already laid claim. The only Dundalk waterway left was The Bread and Cheese Creek.

"But they couldn't name a school after bread and cheese, now could they?" Marie chuckled.

"Grandma," Paige sighed. "Can you please just look at this flyer?" That's right: once again she had been talking to Paige.

"What day is it?" Marie asked.

"Monday." Across from the couch, Paige sat in the rollator they'd rented from the medical supply store, a nifty contraption, part seat, part walker. On Paige's head was a Dairy Queen visor, an indication she'd just gotten home from her after-school shift. On her face was a mix of faraway daze and annoyance, her expression vacant, her lips pursed.

"Monday. That's right," Marie said. "You told me that already." She'd spent the past few days and nights in a tired, woozy limbo; naps taken and forgotten; body both awake and asleep; ankles still bloated and purplish-blue. Saying *you told me that already* was a ridiculous comment, she knew that, but what else could she say to disguise her mind's wanderings?

Paige leaned toward Marie, holding a fluorescent-green piece of paper at arm's length. "Look at this, Grandma."

Marie patted her head, located her bifocals, and then granted the request. *Enter today!* the flyer read. *The Miss Patapsco Pageant!*

"Mom's making me do this," Paige whispered.

The bottom of the flyer, in smaller print, noted the grand prize, sponsored by Mars Supermarkets – *$1,000* – as well as this information: *Although the event will adhere to traditional scoring systems within beauty pageantry, such as Evening Gown and Q&A, final awards will be based primarily on scholastic achievement*.

Marie's voice followed the decrescendo of a sigh. "I'm sure your mother has her reasons," she said, because Christine always had her *reasons*. Take this very room in which they sat, for example. Its slip-covered couch. Its knock-off Chippendale hutch. The bookends Christine bought at a yard sale, two cupids made of ersatz marble, meant to

spruce up the place, make it more elegant, but their presence just emphasized how the room was anything but. It was like those white lion statues so many people placed outside their homes. Dynasty mixed with dump, Marie thought.

But she looked at Paige, the girl such a contrast to this desperate living room charade. Maybe only Marie noticed, because she had watched the child grow up: her granddaughter's latent beauty. A once compact face had elongated; Paige's nose, for example, long ago a round, bulging knob, now stretched into a slender, straight line. Her body had become rubber-like as well, molding itself into a hesitant grace, thin limbs poised but gangly. When Paige was just a tiny little thing, Marie had told her every day, "You're a beauty. Inside and out!" But now, Marie wondered how much that platitude had affected her, this girl who curled inward like those pill bugs in the garden, the ones that rolled into tight balls at the slightest provocation.

And then! A eureka moment, which Marie spoke out loud: "Smarts!" All these years, she should've been complimenting the little one on her *smarts*. "Do you remember," she continued, "when you were in the 6th grade, and you did that science experiment? About mold? You put oranges all over the house – in cabinets, in the back of the fridge – and then you wrote up that beautiful report about your findings? Well, do you know that your teacher – what was his name? Schultz? Schulteis? Anyway, he didn't believe you wrote that report yourself. I picked you up from school that day because your mom was working and your dad was who knows where, and I said, 'No sir. She wrote that paper all by herself. I watched her do it with these very eyes.' He said, 'There's no way.' He said, 'The writing's too advanced.' And I said, 'She must be advanced then.'"

Marie took a moment to breathe. Paige rested her heels on the rollator's seat, hugged her legs with her arms.

"These teachers," Marie said. "They complain-complain-complain that students around here aren't *good enough*, and then when they finally get one that's *good enough*, they don't believe it!"

"How do you know he's an angel and not a ghost?" Paige said.

"Who are you talking about?" Marie shook her head, her thoughts still a bit off-kilter.

"Your father," Paige said.

"That's right. We were talking about him the other day, weren't we?" Marie clucked her tongue. "Ghosts want to bother you. Angels want to take you somewhere."

Paige let her chin fall to her knees, her long, straw-like hair framing her face like a curtain. "Isn't your dad bothering you?"

Marie paused a moment, squeezed her lips together. "I don't know," she said.

*

When Marie was a little girl, perhaps only ten or eleven, her father covered her eyes with a bloodied hand, just moments after beheading a chicken in the backyard. Through the gaps of his fingers, she saw flapping clothes on an overhead wire; the back gate, open to a cement alley; the stump of a tree; blood leaving the bird's neck and trickling downward, getting lost in folds of bark.

"Я тебе кохаю," he said, one of the few phrases of his language she understood.

Her parents sent her to Ukrainian school every Saturday morning, in the basement of the local fire station, but Marie learned very little – a choice on her part, a fusion of defiance and pride. During the week, at Patterson School, she watched other girls in her

class. Girls whose parents were not immigrants; who had been given clean first names (Joan, or Susan, or Mary); and whose last names did not end with *ski*. Girls who lived across from Patterson Park, in rowhomes with marble front steps. Girls who had pennies in their loafers, unlike Marie's, whose were penniless. On Saturdays, as her sisters and brothers – all nine of them – scribbled notes and participated in the chorus of mimics, repeating the guttural syllables of their teacher, Marie picked at the dirt under her fingernails, ran her tongue against the undersides of her teeth, and kept her mouth shut. When her father said, "Я тебе кохаю," though, she understood. He had said, "I love you."

But the night after the chicken-killing, at dinner, squeezed between brother and sister on a hard wooden bench, Marie lifted her plate toward her father and received the least desired part of the bird – the wings – and even though she licked the skin, tore the meat with teeth and fingers, and pulled the joints apart, twisting and bending until all the bones lay naked on the plate, her stomach still grumbled.

They lived on Rappolla Street in a skinny two-story connected to other skinny two-stories, with orange-tinted bricks and a front porch only half as large as the house, leaving an open space for someone to approach the living room window, which their next door neighbor, Mr. Constantinides, often did. He rapped on the screen and yelled, "Quiet now!" even though no one inside had been speaking. Their neighbors, both left and right, had last names ending with *des*. The neighbor in the back, *los*. They were the only *ski* on the block. This made sense, since their neighborhood was nicknamed Greektown, but it only filled Marie with shame and gave her something else to lie about. When classmates asked *Where do you live?* she said *Across from City Hospital*. The rest she kept to herself.

In between the galley kitchen and the basement stairs sat the house's one toilet, a solitary fixture with no room of its own, its only differentiation from the cooking area a splatter of aqua tiles. Years ago, Marie's father nailed a few hooks to the ceiling and hung a thin sheet, hoping to grant a small crescent of privacy, but her brother Yuri made a habit of wrapping his arms around the cloth in a hug-like embrace, exposing his cruelty and whoever was inside. Once, her brother's cackle at her back, Marie stumbled into the backyard, her trousers in a circle around her feet. Behind the shed, she pulled down her underwear and squatted. Afterward, she opened her left hand. Splinters dotted her palm, with which, for balance, she had pressed against the shed's wooden wall. She sat on the back stoop and plucked each shard, her breath expelled in steamy puffs, her hands trembling.

*

In the middle of the night – the night after Paige showed Marie the Miss PHS flyer – Marie awoke, startled. She did not see an angel; instead, she heard a noise, a loud *thwack* against the side of the house. She'd quickly learned the night sounds of this house and neighborhood – Christine's phlegmy snores, a faraway horn honk, an occasional curse as men stumbled home from The Zu. Sometimes, a branch – the wind its percussionist – tapped beats against the windowpane. But this was different. This was not a soft tap. This was – there! she heard it again! – a thud, another thud, a gush of sound, then silence.

"Chris!" Marie shouted. She tried hoisting herself off the couch, but her arms were too tired, too weak. "Chris!" she yelled again. "Come here! I'm not kidding!"

"I know you're not kidding, Ma," Christine said, rushing into the room. "I heard it, too." She flipped on the light, then pulled open the living room curtain.

The front window was covered with vegetables – peas, potato squares, green and lima beans, tomato clots. Oozing down the windowpane. A few small, doughy letters – an A, an S, a B, a D – stuck to the glass, which was splotched with a red tint.

"Somebody threw soup against the house?" Marie said. "That's what I'm seeing, right? Or am I going crazy?"

Behind her, a rustle. It was Paige, who stood at the edge of the living room, her eyes wide, her hand covering her mouth. Christine ushered Paige back to bed, saying, "Bubby, it's no big deal. It'll be okay. I'll clean it up," but what were things coming to in this world? What were things coming to in this town? What was happening to Marie's marbles, that she was still surprised by any of this? Whatever this was, Marie had never seen, but she had seen a lot. Eggings. Smashed mailboxes. Spraypainted cars. Nightly trespassings, footprints appearing in the snow where none had been the night before. Once, she'd even found a trail of cigarette butts in her backyard, like someone safekeeping their way home.

Marie, though, had also been *told* a lot. By Paige. Marie had been told enough to know that this souping was likely not some random act. Long ago – when had it become like this? – Christine had assumed the role of Paige's encourager, congratulator, champion. Marie, on the other hand, was confidant. All of Paige's achievements, it seemed, precipitated some kind of aftermath. Receive the lead role in *The Sound of Music*, get your backpack stolen. Earn First Chair Flutist, find the message *Everybody hates you* in your notebook. Win the spelling bee, have your chair pulled away just as you're about to sit down. All of these accomplishments: Christine celebrated. All of the unkindness that followed: Marie bore witness by lending an ear, unable to decide which

she felt more, thrill about her granddaughter's singularity, or fear about what would come next. And now, a new fear: Paige no longer told her much of anything.

The next morning, Marie caught the edge of Paige's coat as she was leaving for school.

"Hey kid," Marie said. "Is something going on with you? Is somebody bothering you?"

Paige pulled away. "Let's talk later, okay, Grandma?"

Marie knew her granddaughter well enough to know what *let's talk later* really meant: *we are never going to talk about this*.

*

When Marie was seventeen – a few months, she supposed, older than Paige – she bought, cleaned, and heated a Campbell's Soup can, her brunette strands wrapped around its curves, its contents cooling on the stove. Later that afternoon, she sat on a Jeep's hood, her hair bobbing in loose curls. A boy sat next to her. He reached for her hand. "I love you, hon," he said.

She had never been called *hon* before. Her parents never used that word; neither had her brothers or sisters. Did it make her special, or ordinary? She certainly felt special; she couldn't help it. A boy who lived on Ellwood Avenue wanted *her*, a non-Greek from Greektown. She looked at him, his curly brown hair beneath a plaid cap, his tan jacket zippered only halfway. "I love you too, John," she said.

She received a packaged deal – love plus a better address. When John bought their Wise Avenue house, he called it "a real coup." A single home in Dundalk, the suburb adjacent to Bethlehem Steel, where he had secured (she could still hear his voice) "a pretty great position." *If he did say so himself.* The first time together at the house,

they ran through its open gate, giddy, their hands in the air. “Look at the siding,” John said. *Brand new! Look at the big yard! Look! You can see Bear Creek! There! Through the gap in that tree!* And later, entering the house: “Look at this,” John said, placing his hand against a side wall. “We don’t have to share.” Marie pressed her palm against the wall, too, felt the tingle of electrical murmurs, evidence of the house at work.

And the years passed – calendars bought and discarded, wrinkles appearing at the edge of her eyes, seasons blossoming and dying. She had a husband, a house, a little girl, a sweater to hand-wash, a crusty pan in the sink, and a radio, turned to a talk-show on WQSR. As she scrubbed a bit of dried Ragu, she heard the DJs mention the newly-constructed sewer treatment facility on the outskirts of town. Marie liked to think of it as Dundalk’s own Eiffel Tower or Golden Gate: two gigantic, metal structures shaped like footballs on their tips. She thought of Colts kicker Steve Myhra, scoring through the uprights with seven seconds left, sending “The Greatest Game Ever Played” into overtime. What the DJs were chattering about now, though, was true. Because of the plant’s placement, anywhere downwind smells of rotten eggs. And most often, anywhere downwind is Dundalk itself. One of the DJs laughed. “How apropos,” he said.

The next week, as Marie cut the grass, next-door neighbor Frank Thompson called over the fence: “We’re getting the hell out of here.” And then, a month later, John was laid off. The mill was losing business, he said. He wasn’t the only one. He found work as a custodian for Baltimore County Parks and Rec, but he often arrived home with a sigh instead of the groceries Marie had requested, often turning his pockets inside-out, as if to say *See? Nothing*. He smelled of Clorox and mildew, a stench Marie began to associate with dismissal. He rarely spoke to her anymore, knew her body well but her

mind little, throwing his uniforms into the laundry basket and expecting her to clean them. Which she did, eventually – what else could she do? – but no matter how hard she scrubbed, how raw she made her hands from repeated rinsing, the smell was still there.

In the afternoons, as she took the bus home, up Wise Avenue and over Bear Creek's army-green drawbridge, she couldn't help witnessing her town's transformation. There was the High's convenience store, its cracked sign and boarded windows evidence of better business elsewhere. The dive bar's outdoor walls were paneled with dark oak, stained by weather and a graffiti artist's gold scribble. Then Marie reached her destination – a small, red house, its siding now rusted in spots; its yard littered with fallen monkey balls and a parade of wind-blown garbage.

Her life became stale, like the bread she ate as a child. Low-paying part-time work; thankless child-rearing; sewing buttons; patching holes; making love to make peace; and then one day, standing in line at the grocery store, her daughter on her hip, a half-pint of milk in her left hand. She placed the item on the conveyor belt and said off-handedly to the cashier: "How's your day going?" The cashier responded, "Don't get me started, hon."

Baltimoreans, Marie had learned, speak with an accent not quite northern, but not quite southern either, where water is *wudder* and *on* sounds like someone filled with disgust: *ewwn*. *Hon*, however, is most representative of the local dialect. In other places, the word is short for *honey*, a pet name, a term of endearment. For Baltimoreans, though, it's an afterthought. In Baltimore, Marie learned, everybody calls everybody *hon*.

*

The next visiting angel was not her father, but her husband, looking dapper in a tan linen suit.

“Where’d you get that outfit?” Marie asked.

John did not answer; instead, he held out his hand, the outdoor lamp catching his wedding band, making it shine in the moonlight.

“No, really,” Marie continued, her voice rising. “I need to know how you got the money to get that suit.”

Again, no answer from her husband – only a smile and a beckoning hand. Then, in a voice low and gravelly, he said, “Come.”

“I don’t think so,” Marie snapped. “Certainly not with you, of all people.”

The hall light turned on. Christine appeared, her hair disheveled, her eyelids heavy. “Good grief, Ma. It’s 3 a.m. Who are you talking to?”

“An asshole,” Marie said.

*

The next day, the three of them sat together in the living room, discussing pageant strategy.

“Practice,” Christine said, tapping paper with a pen. “We have to practice.” Her harsh voice belied the contours of her face, with mounds of soft flesh around her nose and eyes, a tire of puffed skin underneath her jaw. Paige had received Miss PHS materials earlier that day, and Christine now held the item she deemed most important – the question list: *What are your favorite hobbies and why? Where do you see yourself in five, ten, twenty years? Why do you deserve the title of Miss Patapsco?*

“What if I don’t make the top ten?” Paige ran a finger along the lip of her Dairy Queen visor, a remnant of her afternoon shift. Her foot shook with an erratic tic. “Only the top ten answer questions.”

Christine read aloud: “The winning contestant must demonstrate strong public speaking skills. More importantly, however, she must provide evidence, on her application, of an outstanding academic record.”

Marie blew a raspberry through her lips. “Then why the parade? If it’s based on smarts?”

“It’s bullshit,” Christine snapped. “But unfortunately,” she sighed, shook her head, “sometimes we have to do shitty things.” Her face looked like a deflated balloon, one found days after a party, behind a couch or under a table: wrinkled, raisin-like. She capped, then uncapped her pen. “Right?”

Shortly after, the younger two moved into the dining room – “So you can get some sleep, Ma,” Christine said – but Marie couldn’t help it. She listened. She heard Christine say, in a softer tone, “What if you start the application first? We can practice questions later, all right?” Then Christine began vocalizing a list of Paige’s achievements: “Student of the Year 6th, 7th, 8th grade. Geography Bee champ 9th grade. Knights of Columbus essay winner 10th grade. Student of the Year 10th grade, 11th grade—”

“Mom,” Paige interrupted. “I got this.”

“I know you got this,” Christine said, her voice quiet.

*

According to the physical therapist, Marie was supposed to complete what’s called an Ankle Alphabet at least five times a day, moving her joints in such a way that her feet would invisibly “write” all twenty-six letters, A to Z. Unwrapping the bandages, she examined her feet: the blue, raised veins like bridges across fair, almost ghostly skin;

both ankles ballooned to twice their normal size; dark lines of dirt underneath each toenail.

"Lord help me," she told the empty room. But she wasn't completely alone, because there at the window was her father, again with the outstretched hand.

"I don't mean *that* kind of help," Marie said, raising her head toward the ceiling and shaking her hands. "Didn't we already have this conversation?" She pointed at her father. "Go away."

And he did, but now she was alone – with Paige at school and Christine at work – and she disliked feeling idle. Hated it actually. "I hate it with a passion!" she yelled to the empty living room. Idleness reminded her of former co-workers at Two Guys Grocers, the women who took their time putting plastic gloves onto their hands, the ones who smoothed every wrinkle, like they groomed nylon instead of rubber. Unlike Marie, who slapped on her gloves and got to work, slicing the meats and sending them through the grinder. Now, in Christine's living room, Marie examined the knock-off Chippendale hutch directly across from her seat on the couch.

"Hello there," she said. "Feel like getting cleaned today?"

Stretching, reaching, she pulled the rollator close, lifted each leg – gingerly – to the floor, and then gripped the couch with both hands, hoisting herself up. An elbow cracked. She knew she shouldn't do this, but she allowed her left leg to handle some weight, and between that and her arms, managed to scoot herself onto the rollator's seat. She could feel her face twisting, the throb of a heartbeat in her legs, but she also felt useful for the first time in a long time. She pressed her toes against the carpet and then – as carefully as she could – she nudged herself over to the hutch.

She started with what she could reach, opening drawers and discarding unneccessaries: a pencil with no eraser; a pen that had run out of ink; old, crumbled grocery receipts; misshapen paper clips. She opened the silverware drawer, and noticed, with a gasp, that the silverware she had given Christine as a wedding gift – the silverware that was actually silver and that she had received from her own mother – had been replaced with tinny-looking substitutes, many with auburn rust stains around the handles and on the spokes of the forks. As quickly as she could, she maneuvered the rollator next to the hutch's left side. If she gripped the furniture with her thumbs, she could separate thin backboard from wooden frame. This she knew was Christine's hiding place. Here, her daughter kept an envelope filled with cash for Paige's college fund. Marie pushed her fingers into the tiny space, pinched the envelope, pulled it out, and found, looking inside the flap, that it was empty.

"Budd took it," Christine said. "When he left." She stood in front of Marie – trenchcoat still on, scuffed black pumps on her feet, the typical office attire of any office, anywhere. Marie hadn't heard her come in. Hadn't even heard the front door open and close. Hadn't seen this particular grimace on her daughter's face in years, not since the day an eighteen-year-old Christine had burst through the Wise Avenue house, giddiness wafting off her like strong perfume. After finding Marie in the kitchen, Christine had held up artwork push-pinned to a corkboard: a charcoal portrait of a young woman. Floppy straw hat on her head. Dark hair in waves. Tattered overalls. No smile. Beneath its title, "Self Portrait," was *Outstanding work, Christine* in light pencil, and beneath that, in a slightly darker shade, as though conveying the writer's enthusiasm: *A+*. Mother and daughter had spoken often of art school, voices hushed, hopeful, but that had been before

John's diabetes diagnosis; before his dismissal from Bethlehem Steel; before Marie found the hole underneath a loose bathroom tile and felt the shaking baseboards – what the contractor called a $5,000 foundation problem. She remembered very clearly what she had told a teenaged Christine: "If I had the money, I would give it to you."

And now, Marie looked at her daughter's empty envelope, yellowed around its edges and etched with creases, the paper thin, diaphanous. She came very close to saying once again, "If I had any money, I would give it to you," but Christine, in a visual echo of her younger self, had already tucked away her despair, using the same frugal gestures she'd used all those years ago: a quick inhale, a bitten lip, and a walk away from Marie and out of the room.

*

"Again," Christine said. "Why do you deserve the title of Miss Patapsco?"

To Marie, this practice seemed to go on for hours, days: responses written and revised; questions and answers volleyed back and forth; Paige speaking, but not without struggle.

"Why do you deserve the title of Miss Patapsco?" Christine asked again.

After a brief pause and the clearing of her throat, Paige's recitation began slowly, quietly, but soon her voice swelled and the words came quickly, the once-staccato beats building into a smooth crescendo, until there was a stutter, a stumble, and silence. And then, a faint whisper: "I deserve Miss Patapsco because…I deserve Miss Patapsco because…" Marie heard a sharp intake of breath, and that involuntary groan which often accompanies a sob. Christine's strong tenor traveled easily throughout the house: "Bubby, you're hard-working and intelligent. It's not a popularity contest. You can do this." And then, after a pause: "A thousand dollars is a lot of money."

*

On Friday evening, the evening of the pageant, Marie dressed her upper body in a lace blouse she had not worn in years. She needed help with her lower half, though, leaning on Christine as she pulled up the right, then the left side of her trousers. Then she sat in her rollator, pointed directly at Paige's closed bedroom door. A few moments passed, then a few more, and Marie thought the door would never open, but finally, there she was – in the sleeveless red dress her mother had chosen, the material clinging to her thin hips, pink rouge on her cheeks, and a smile – slightly crooked, a bit too much teeth – that seemed genuine.

At school, Paige rushed backstage, while Marie and Christine found seats in the auditorium, the rollator fitting easily into an open space in the back row. Marie studied the room, the same one in which, years before, Christine had graduated. The blue velvet curtain had patches of black where, it seemed, the fabric had disintegrated, an effect similar to ironing a delicate shirt with too much heat, the material crinkling and aging. In front of the curtain hung a sign – Miss Patapsco 1998 – written in bubble letters. Bubbling and big, just like the pants on the boys walking past her aisle, or the oversized button-downs the girls wore, the girls who entered the room in huddles and hushed when another girl walked by.

A few minutes later, the overheads dimmed. A spotlight – at first haphazard, moving frenetically from point to point – finally settled on a boy wearing a tux and a bloated red crown. He said, "Welcome," and the routine began. Each contestant entered from stage left, walked in front of the curtain, and then moved toward the microphone, perched atop a solitary stand in the center of the stage. There, the girls stated name and number before exiting stage right, obligatory smiles and waves along the way. The

audience seemed to have a routine as well. Big applause and whistles for certain girls – number 15, for example – a blonde knockout in a blue satin dress. Polite claps for everyone else.

From the program, Marie knew Paige was 47. 47 of 50. Each increasing number made her yearn for speed, for this pageant to be like those flip books she held as a child. Her favorite – a man riding on and then falling off a unicycle. She could animate his accident with haste or with sloth, depending on her mood. Now, she envisioned that same control, the pageant pages flipping at her discretion, the stick-like legs of the girls scissoring across the stage, their various outfits whittled down into one sartorial choice – a pink poof of chiffon. While speeding time, she also compressed sound to the audience's applause – rising, falling, drifting into half-heartedness, raging with passion – until Paige walked onto the stage, and then there was almost no sound at all. Nothing really except the click-click of her heels.

Marie at first thought it was a mistake, an oversight – this silence that now embraced the room. People do get tired of clapping, Marie thought, her own hands tired and showing patches of pink. But then she noticed a girl a few rows ahead. This girl turned to a friend; their heads dipped together; they laughed, silent, sneaky, with hands covering mouths. They pointed at Paige, who was making her way across the stage. In her right hand, a white, poster-board *P*, the number 47 drawn in balloonish-looking numerals. In her left, a fistful of fabric. She walked toward the mike. She spoke, clearly stating name and number. She smiled, held the *P* next to her hip, and posed – first for the judges on the left, then for the judges on the right, and then forward. She raised a hand, as if to say hello.

*

A half hour later, the boy with a puffy, red crown traveled the row of ten finalists, past hair-sprayed bangs, hoop earrings, and rippled satin. One by one, questions were asked and answered. Well, not everyone answered. One girl, unfortunately, couldn't muster a peep after being asked "What are your favorite hobbies and why?" But now, the crowned boy stood next to Paige, circled by spotlight and dressed in clichéd confidence: shoulders back, chin lifted. "Paige," the boy said, dipping the microphone toward her, "why do you deserve the title of Miss Patapsco?"

And she began her answer, one Marie had heard many times: "I deserve the title because—" but then a voice in the audience laughed, a brief hiccup, high-pitched and sharp. Paige's mouth closed. She stepped away from the mike. Then – in the back – a boy's voice, a shout of Paige's name followed by laughter, echoed by another cackle on the other side of the room. An adult – a teacher, probably – hustled onto the stage, motioned to be given the microphone, then said, "Quiet, everybody. Quiet now. Paige deserves our listening ears." He gave Paige the microphone. "Go ahead."

And then Paige looked up. She gripped the mike with both hands. Marie knew, just by looking at how Paige held herself in that moment, that the voice everyone was about to hear would be commanding, assertive, that of a showman. "I deserve Miss Patapsco," Paige said, "because I work hard at my academics. I help support my family with an afterschool job. I participate in several extracurriculars: marching band, the spring musical, mathletes. In the summers, I volunteer as a line judge for the Special Olympics volleyball competition." She paused for a moment – intentional, dramatic – then continued, her voice steady and clear: "If I'm given the honor to serve as Miss Patapsco, though, I'd try to help other people as much as I can." She again paused, but

this time she surveyed the audience as though searching for something. Someone. “My mom and grandma taught me that: to always give of yourself.” Paige waited a bit. Swallowed. “No matter what.”

In the darkness of the auditorium, in the middle of clapping – mostly half-hearted, obligatory – Marie looked to her left, where her daughter’s eyes welled with tears. She looked at her granddaughter, who gave the mike back to the crowned boy, stepped forward, posed, and smiled. Then Paige began her exit from the stage, her face turned outward, toward the audience, and she kept smiling, all the way across the stage, all the way until she finally disappeared behind the curtain.

*

Paige had agreed, at the pageant’s end, to meet them at the back of the auditorium. The overheads brightened. The kids shuffled out like they arrived, in tight packs, whispering, shoving, laughing, a mass of flannel and denim. And then there she was, walking toward them, the crown perched on her head and the sash across her chest, and she said, almost out of breath, as if she could barely believe it herself, “Grandma, I *won*.” Christine embraced her – “Bubby, I’m so happy for you!” – but even though Paige returned the hug, resting her cheek on her mother’s shoulder, she did not smile.

“So,” Marie said as the two separated. “What happens now? Any official duties?” Sitting on the rollator, eye-level with Paige’s hands, she watched her granddaughter worry the sides of her dress, pinching thin jersey between thumb and forefinger.

“On Monday,” Christine said, “she has to wear the sash and crown during school.”

“All day?” Marie asked.

“Yeah,” Paige said, her eyes to the floor. “All day.”

*

Saturday morning saw Christine eager to get to the bank, that $1,000 the first deposit in Paige's new college fund. Then Paige emerged with her DQ visor, black button-down, and khakis. She gave a quick hand-wave over the outfit, as if to signal *Got work. Gotta go.* Then she left the house, disappearing beyond the window's edge. Marie knew she only had a half hour, maybe even less than that, before Christine returned home from the bank, so she pulled herself onto the rollator's seat and scooted into Paige's bedroom.

The small space seemed property of a young child, Christine not having the means for updates as Paige aged. There, in the corner – a yellow dresser with clown-faced knobs, the pulling of red noses necessary to open a drawer. The only source of light – a Mickey Mouse lamp, the shade his hat, his body what-used-to-be white ceramic. And there – positioned haphazardly on Paige's desk, as though tossed, maybe even thrown – the sash and the crown. Pushing her wheels, moving closer, Marie placed the crown on her head and the sash across her chest. She hoisted herself up, managing to stand just long enough to turn the chair. Then she sat back down again and left, tracing her route backwards, away from Paige's room and down the hall, out of the rollator and onto the couch, where, with one quick push, the crown and the sash disappeared – just like that – behind the swinging bottom flap of the slipcover.

*

That evening, from Paige's room, Marie heard a drawer opening, then closing. A thwack, a bang. The swish of cloth, perhaps a bedspread being removed and dropped to the floor. The creak of a mattress as – Marie imagined – Paige searched the space between bed and wall. And finally, footsteps, until there were no sounds, just the sight of

Paige in the living room, the slight dip of the cushion as she sat on the couch. Marie placed a hand on top of her granddaughter's, and for a moment, their eyes met. But no words passed between them, just a hand squeeze and it was over. Paige returned to her room; Marie got ready for bed.

And later, nestled into the couch, Marie dreamt of something she had not thought of in some time – a Sunday afternoon, long ago, in her childhood backyard. Her father, an axe in one hand; a newly beheaded chicken in the other. She knew he loved her even if he never said a word: the gentle bend of his waist as he lowered and released his axe. The grace used to place the bird's head into a sack. The cinch of a knot. How he knelt beside Marie and, with his thumb, wiped her tears. How swiftly he offered his hand, and how quickly she gave him her own.

Chipper

She arrives one morning and there is her father, standing outside the mission, stretching, a brand-new pair of Adidas on his feet. She'd volunteered with *Running Beats Addiction!* for a year; she hadn't seen her father in twenty, not since she was eight years old. That night, back in 1988, something had startled her. She had crawled out of bed and into the living room, the one part of the house filled with light. There, she found her father asleep on the couch. Or, at least, she thought he was sleeping. Because soon, from her hidden spot behind the La-Z-Boy, she saw him stand up and wobble to the corner of the room. His right hand disappeared in front of his jeans. There was the slow peel of a zipper. A pause. Then, a stream of liquid – against the wallpaper and onto the floor, streaking the flowered pattern with dark zigzags, blackening the petals of a daisy, then a tulip, then a rose. Now, outside the mission, her father leans forward, moves his cigarette toward someone's lighter. He wears a *Running Beats Addiction!* t-shirt, its cross-like wrinkles betraying its just-out-of-the-box newness.

William, their group leader, probably gave her father the shirt that morning. William probably clapped her father on the back and said, "Welcome to our family." William was always talking like this, using fuzzy abstractions that never really rang true. *Running Beats Addiction!*'s website, for example, claims that *RBA uses running to help those experiencing homelessness change the way they see themselves*. The men she runs with, though, aren't exactly homeless; they're in rehab. They live at the ShipShape Mission downtown and are in some state of recovery – from heroin, OxyContin, alcohol, etc. During orientation a year ago, William spoke that "etcetera" aloud. William: thirty-

something, the quintessential runner. Legs thin but hard; calf muscles chiseled and taut; no problem wearing short-shorts, regardless of time of day. "Homelessness is often a state of mind," William had said, "not a physical fact." And now, her father, a perfect stranger, was in the *Running Beats Addiction!* "family."

This morning, there's about thirty runners gathered in front of the mission, its sidewalks cluttered with people talking, stretching, jogging in place. At first, it's easy to hide. She's there about a minute before William asks everyone to gather round. As they do every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 5:30 a.m., they form a circle, arms wrapped around each other, and begin reciting, "God, grant me the serenity…"

Her father is across the circle, about five feet away. His mouth is open, but he does not speak. She wonders about recognition, whether it will be as immediate for him. There is the possibility he will not recognize her at all. She does not resemble her mother, and she does not look like her father, either, not exactly. They share similar features – thin lips, a slightly bubbled nose – but her face is oval while his is round. The last time he saw her, her skin was baby-like, with soft pink hues on her cheeks, and freckles across the bridge of her nose. She often stares in wonder at child pictures of herself. Age seemed to have stretched her in all directions, morphing her face and body into new things with few physical ties to what had come before.

Now, across the circle, her father smiles at no one in particular. She sees his front tooth, a detail about him she always remembered, because it simultaneously fascinated and repulsed her. The tooth is brownish, bumpy and bristly, like a callous.

As soon as the group finishes praying and begins their run, she turns and walks away, fast. She's hoping to get out of there, in her car and off, before Abdi sees her. He's

her running buddy, her *BFF*, as William likes to say. Baltimore's Running Festival is in a few weeks, and she's helping Abdi train for his first half. On their schedule today is four miles.

"Chipper?" Abdi calls to her as though asking how she's feeling – You happy today? You all right? – but Chipper is her nickname, one he gave her himself. The first time they met, Abdi said, "That smile, girl. It's never-ending." He leaned into a hip-flexor stretch, and he widened his eyes, magnified by coke-bottle glasses. He waved his hand, a magician casting his spell. "Chipper," he said. He pointed at her – bull's eye, period, that's that. She often wonders if Abdi – or if anybody, in fact – remembers her real name.

"Chipper!" Abdi's voice is a rally call. She turns, sees him standing alone. Everyone else is running in the opposite direction, away and into the city's heart, their feet clapping against the pavement. Abdi leans down to pull up his white knee-highs. His glasses are secured with hot-pink elastic. He rights himself, begins jogging in place, then raises both arms in a "What the hell?" gesture.

She does the only thing that comes to mind. She waves. She could say, "Teach early this morning," but he'll know that's a lie. She always teaches early classes. She could blow a kiss, but that might be misconstrued. How careful she must be, what fine lines volunteers must walk. She cannot say, "Goodbye," because as William noted during orientation, "Are byes ever good?" Volunteers are never to say *See you later* or *See you tomorrow*. "It's a promise," William said, "you might not be able to keep."

So she waves – just a quick, little hand lift – and ducks into her car.

*

Running Beats Addiction! was not her first running group. Before this was the running club whose routes stuck exclusively to Federal Hill: *hill* being the operative word. She was a good runner, not a beginner but not incredibly advanced, either. The continuous hikes up and down seemed fine at first, but then she began having hamstring pain, so much hamstring pain she couldn't stay seated for more than ten minutes at a time.

"Piriformis syndrome!": one of the Federal Hill runners diagnosed her ailment. "The piriformis muscle in your butt! It's not being stretched properly. That's why you're having pain." Runners were always doing this, she soon learned. Runners were experts in pain; they were vocal prescription pads.

"Get a foam roller. Roll it – hard – over your hamstrings," one runner said.

"Don't run for six weeks," said another.

"A piriformis injury isn't something that happens to everybody," someone else said. "Maybe you're not meant to be a runner. Maybe you're not built to run."

After that, she saw a flyer at the library for *The Stoplight Running Group*. The name intrigued her; the flyer featured only the running group's name and a picture of Baltimore's Light Street. "Stoplight," she intuited, must reference a running route, specifically the famous row of stoplights on Light Street downtown. She thought the name simple and straightforward, which she appreciated. Light Street. Stoplights. Flat plane. Well lit. Easy enough. But "Stoplight" did not reference geography, but relationship status.

On her first day, Stoplight's leader, Stacey, gave her instructions: Wear green if you're available; yellow if you're in-between; red if you're taken.

"If this is a singles group," she said to Stacey, "why would anybody wear red?"

Stacey said, "Nobody does."

"Yellow would seem to keep people away, too, don't you think? Wouldn't it be better if everybody wore green? What is 'in-between' anyway? A legal separation? A break, like Ross and Rachel?"

Stacey's voice took on a hard edge: "It means whatever you want it to mean."

Whatever she wanted it to mean: yellow was the color of her childhood furniture, yellow with white trim. Since she ended her engagement to Benjamin, she woke every morning in this childhood bedroom, and in the same manner she did every day growing up: an eyeful of yellow, her mother entering her bedroom and whispering in her ear, "Time to wake up, Bubby."

She found herself – around mile three of her first Stoplight run – vocalizing all of this to fellow runner Doug. When she finished, Doug said, "Cool!" and moved up to run next to a woman in green. Good thing, too, because who knows how Doug would've reacted to what she was about to say. That she had ended her engagement – she had dumped her *future husband*, her college sweetheart, the man she'd been with for almost a *decade* – because long ago, her mother had offered just one piece of love-life guidance: *Never trust a man who refuses to pick you up after a flat tire*. Such specific counsel: she knew (even though she never confirmed) that her mother had once gotten a flat tire, and that her father had refused to pick her up, and that this seemingly small thing – if her mother hadn't ignored it; if she hadn't made excuses; if she hadn't thought, "Not a big deal, I'll take a taxi" – she would've saved herself a lot of future trouble.

She trusted her mother's experience so much that when she'd gotten a flat tire herself, she called Benjamin, thought *Well here goes nothing*, and when he said he couldn't help – he was just so *so* sorry but he just couldn't, he was busy, you know? He had rounds in a few hours, pediatric oncology, just the pits, right? Call a cab, okay? Kiss kiss! Bye! – she moved out of the apartment they shared and back in with her mother, no idea what was next but no regrets, either. There were other reasons to leave, of course – Benjamin's arrogance; his weird jealousy of the time she spent reading books; her vague sense of just something being *not right* – but how wonderful, to have had the good fortune to use her mother's litmus test. Before it was too late.

Even though she was now single, she didn't enjoy *The Spotlight Running Group*. She did enjoy running, though. To her, running was release. Escape. She was relieved when, a week after her move, sitting down with the Director of Composition to discuss her annual review, her boss said, "Teaching record is excellent, evals look solid, but your service area is a little sparse." So that night she googled *running + community service + Baltimore* and up popped *Running Beats Addiction!* When she left the house every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 5 a.m., her mother was already up, doing her usual morning routine, the same routine she'd had for years and years and years: WBAL morning show and a cup of coffee.

Of late, her mother had become obsessed with WBAL's new meteorologist, a woman her mother nicknamed "Weather in Satin." In the mornings, as she exited her yellow bedroom, as she laced her sneakers, as she gathered her cellphone and keys, she listened to her mother wax judgmental. "The woman *always* wears satin," her mother said, every morning. "I'm sorry, but the only women who wear satin before noon are

streetwalkers." Old jean overalls and well-worn Beatles t-shirts: these were her mother's current sartorial choices, mainly because Mom had decided to begin retirement by rehabbing their house. By herself.

"If he could do it, I can do it," her mother said.

Her father had been a construction worker. Before she was born, he and his friends built an addition to the back of their house, an addition that included a kitchen, a dining room, and one full bath. Later, when she was six, he'd build a structure in the backyard: half shed, half playhouse. How special she'd felt: having a house, a space, all to herself.

She told her mother she was running alone now, that groups weren't for her. She knew what her mother's reaction would be if she confessed to volunteering for *Running Beats Addiction!* Her mother would see it as naivete, as daughter having learned nothing, maybe even as a betrayal. The first time she left the house, the first time she lied, saying she was running alone when she was really with *Running Beats Addiction!*, her mother said, not looking up as she pried open a can of Behr's Whisper White: "Sometimes alone is better."

*

The next time she returns to the running group, Abdi says, "What the heck is wrong with you, girl? Where'd you get to the other day? WTF!" He chides her, but as always, he's smiling.

"Stomach thing. Something's going around." As she says this, she points to the circle, using her line – *Something's going around* – to disguise what she's really doing: looking for her father, seeing if he's shown up today. Most of the mission men come to

one run and then quit; some get up to three or four miles and then something happens: a relapse, maybe, or a removal from ShipShape, most often for fighting with another housemate. When this happens, William always makes the announcement solemnly, as though someone has passed away: "*Johnny* or *Bob* or *Marco* or *Tony* will no longer be with us." William never tells anyone exactly what happened. If someone does ask, usually a *BFF*, William is always firm, and he repeats his previous sentiment: "That member is no longer with us." Few men – very few – are like Abdi. Few have stuck with it; few have become good – *great* – runners.

On certain days, when they're doing hill work, Abdi will run ahead and call her names like *Slowpoke* or *Turtle*. But then, how quickly he becomes her cheerleader, yelling, "Come on, Chipper. Come on, girl. Come on!" And then, when she reaches the top, where he's jogging in place, he gives her a high five and does some jumping jacks.

"Showoff," she says to him.

"You know it!" he says.

Even those men who become like Abdi – real, true runners – don't have similar relationships with their running buddies. She feels lucky in this; she appreciates the sheer coincidence of their bond: he's outgoing; most of the other men are not. Most tend not to look you in the eye. Most prefer not to talk on their runs. Abdi sometimes talks more than she would like.

Once, while running down President Street, a woman sitting on a curb yelled, "Hey white girl. Get your ass out of here. What're you doing with a fine black man?"

Abdi stopped, ran back to where the woman was seated, jogged in place, clapped his hands, and chanted, as though in a cheer: "You so racist. You, you so racist!" Then he laughed. "Wait up, Chipper!"

"Hurry! Hurry up!" She flapped her hands in a frantic *come here!* gesture. When he was again by her side, she whispered, "You're going to get me shot."

And Abdi, in his regular, loud tone: "Now *that's* racist."

She laughed.

Abdi was old enough to be her father, and that was how she saw their relationship. Or at least their relationship was what she imagined a father-daughter relationship would be like: easy, no worries, kindred spirits. She knows little about Abdi's life before ShipShape. He was a mechanic, but whether he was – or is – married, whether or not he has children: these are things they've never discussed. On their runs, she rarely thinks of Abdi's past. She doesn't need to know the circumstances of what led him to ShipShape. She doesn't need to hear the particulars of his particular vice. She just continues to think of the *here*, of the *now*: how well he is doing; how – in him, in their friendship – she is lucky; how he taught her the stretch – lie on back, legs up, foot against right knee, push left knee forward – that finally eased her piriformis pain.

And today, this morning, she doesn't see her father as the runners gather around and say the serenity prayer. But an hour later, when she and Abdi return from their five-mile run, her father is standing with a few of the other newer members, stretching, panting. Her father doesn't see her; if he does, he doesn't give her a second thought.

Williams says to her: "The newbies just did their first one-mile loop. They're starting to put their best foot forward."

*

The bathroom: this is where she finds her mother when she comes home from work the day her father ran his first mile. Full demolition was already underway: toilet removed, a rag plugging the waste pipe; clear-plastic tarp protecting the bathtub; old, cracked bathroom tiles littering the hallway; and her mother, masked, pry bar in one hand and a hammer in the other, covered head to toe in soot.

"I never said I'd be Bob Vila," her mother says.

Last month, she'd refinished the kitchen, a minimal effort there, comparatively, more cosmetic than structural: painting cabinets, swapping light fixtures, changing drawer knobs, etc. But her mother seemed pleased: "It's *different*."

One thing her mother didn't fix, though: the kitchen's back door. This door, added by her father along with the rest of the addition, contains a large, square window. In this window's lower left corner, close to the door's handle, is another square, but this square seems a defect, as though someone had taken a nail or a razor or something sharp and etched a square into the glass. She'd seen this square for years. How many times had she noticed it? She noticed it when looking outside at her mother mowing the lawn, or watching her mother weed the garden, or examining her mother just standing there outside, alone, looking at nothing in particular. It was only recently, when moving her suitcases through the back door, that she stopped and really inspected the etched square. Only then did she ask her mother about it: "Mom," she said, "what is that scratch in the door?"

And her mother looked at her, she sighed, she answered in her I'm-already-tired-of-talking-about-this voice: "One night, late at night, after the addition was built, the dog

woke me up. The dog we had before you were born. The dog was barking because somebody was trying to break in. They tried to make a hole in the glass. That way, they could reach in and unlock the door. The dog scared away whoever it was."

"Where was Dad? Why didn't Dad help?"

Her mother answered only with a look: long, hard, stern.

And now, in the bathroom, her mother gives her another look, one anxious. Agitated.

"Get in here!" her mother says. The space is barely big enough to fit the two of them. Her mother gets on her knees, presses her ear against the bathroom's floor. "Do you feel it? Take your shoes off. Hurry! Take them off!"

She obeys. She takes her shoes off.

"There!" her mother says. "You feel that? It's shaking. The floor."

She too puts ear against floor. She can feel gritty, crumbled mortar beneath her cheek. The two wait, silent, but then she finally says, "I'm sorry, Mom. I really don't feel anything."

"I'm not crazy. This floor is shaking. The foundation's probably gone to shit. Your father." Her mother lets out a long sigh, rolls her head so that nose touches broken tile. "What an asshole."

*

After a run, after they've stretched, William does something he's never done before. He asks if someone would tell the group why he or she decided to volunteer for *Running Beats Addiction!*

"It might be nice," he says, "to end with some really strong kumbaya."

She looks across the circle to her father, and then to Juliet, who stands next to her father. Juliet is her father's running buddy, his *BFF*. Juliet is crying.

"I'll go," Juliet says. "I'm here because of my brother. He needed help. I tried to help him. I tried and tried and tried. He didn't want my help. And then…" She sighs. "It's just nice – it's so nice; it's so, *so* nice – to be around people who *want* to get better. Like Budd here. Budd, my *BFF*. Kudos, Budd. Kudos."

Juliet starts to clap, then Abdi is clapping, then everyone is clapping. She realizes if she does not clap, others may notice. Her father may notice; he may finally notice her. But if he hasn't recognized her by now, he most likely never will. How different her story is from Juliet's; how little she has thought of her own direct link to addiction, her father's addiction. How he was not even the tiniest part of her decision to volunteer for this particular running group. How he was such a distant memory that – until he showed up here, again becoming a tangential part of her life – she had viewed him as someone she didn't really think about at all.

She knows Abdi, though. She really *knows* him, doesn't she? And all of this knowing: it had happened despite William's strict rules about conversational etiquette, the long list of no-no's, everything William had deemed off-limits. Can't talk about going out to dinner, or anything having to do with restaurants. The men can't afford to go out to eat, but more importantly, *there's firewater at restaurants*. Can't talk about movies. So many feature drugs, alcohol, other vices. Movies *glorify* vices. Can't talk about books or music for the same reason.

So she and Abdi: they often talk about health. This was – usually – one of the few safe spaces. ("But" – William had said – "stay away from meds! Any talk of meds! Don't

go there! No meds. *Ailments*. Stick with *ailments*. Let them pontificate about *ailments* to their heart's content.") That morning, during their seven-mile run, Abdi had given her step-by-step descriptions of his recent root canal, and – what do you know? – she'd had a root canal, too, not too long ago, and there it was: another instant connection. But then, as Abdi talked about how uncomfortable mouth clamps are – "Or whatever the heck you call those metal things that keep your mouth open," he laughed – she couldn't help herself. She said, "Now here's a good tooth story":

One day, when she was five or six, her father was working inside what was to become her playhouse. He'd just installed the window, and he'd opened it so he could work inside, while she stayed outside and talked to him. There, she'd be safe. And she had done just that, staying in her safe spot, talking to him from her side of the window. She talked and talked and talked, and then, in the middle of a sentence, she opened her mouth and – by accident – her upper teeth collided with the window's metal frame. She heard a crack; she immediately put her hands into her mouth; she knew something had happened, something bad, and she had just seen the blood, she had just pulled shards of her teeth out of her mouth, when she felt someone pick her up around the waist: her father. He carried her, running, to his truck, and together they went to the emergency room.

The end.

She knows this memory stands out because what happened was a rarity: the one time her father took her to the doctor. The one time compared to the thousand times her mother took care of her. The thousand times her mother put a hand to her forehead; the thousand times her mother said, "You okay there, bubby? You don't look so good." The

thousand times her mother sat in a doctor's office with her, waiting and waiting and waiting until their name was called. Those thousand times – such devotion, such love – crushed into blurred memories, diminished somehow, not seen as clearly, not remembered as vividly as the one time her father did the same.

But then she finds herself talking again; why can't she stop talking? She begins telling Abdi another story: that once, when she was six, she and her father watched *Back to the Future* on VHS. Where her mother was, she didn't know. This was a rare thing, father and daughter alone together at night. It was rare for Dad to be the one to get her ready for bed. While she brushed her teeth, her father asked a question: "When Marty McFly first goes back in time and crashes into the barn, what's the name on the mailbox? The name of the farmer?"

With a mouthful of toothpaste, she yelled, "Peabody!" and she'd always remembered it: the look on her father's face. At first, she thought he'd really wanted to know, and she was helping him remember, but she realized he already knew the answer. He was testing her: a six-year-old's smarts, her memory. And she had pleased him; she had made him proud.

And then! Another time, they were playing the *Jeopardy!* board game, and the category was Miracles. Of course, she couldn't remember the exact wording of the original answer, but something must have encouraged her to say, "What is Miracle Whip!" And her father flipped the card over. He shouted, "Ha! You're right! It *is* Miracle Whip!" And together they'd laughed, genuine astonishment on her father's face. And she'd been astonished, too. *This is what happiness looks like on another person*, she'd thought.

“I’m done now,” she told Abdi. When they hit the red light at Eastern Ave. and President Street, they stopped running. She knew she’d talked too much. She could feel the flush on her cheeks. From running six-and-a-half miles. From having (maybe) broken some *Running Beats Addiction!* etiquette. From possibly overstepping a boundary with Abdi: they had never talked *family* before. Abdi knelt, began retying his shoelaces, but then he paused, waited for her to meet his gaze, and he said, softly, “Sounds like a solid dude.”

And now, the *Running Beats Addiction!* group is once again together after their concurrent runs, once again gathered in a circle, and Juliet has just finished her kumbaya speech. William says, “Thank you, Juliet, for sharing. And that’s a great segue, because Budd here – as of today – hit five miles.” William is the group’s mile keeper; he is the one to announce when certain milestones have been reached: five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five miles. Abdi recently hit 150.

“Congrats, Budd,” William says. Everyone is still clapping. Abdi puts his fingers into his mouth, let out a loud whistle. “Five miles. Good job, Friend. You’re doing us proud.”

Proud: how proud she was the day Abdi hit 150 miles, the most of any *Running Beats Addiction!* member ever. It had been a huge celebration. William bought cake, sparkling apple cider. How proud she was of Abdi, how far he’d come from wherever he’d been, a place that mattered little to her, if it mattered at all. This blasé carelessness about the past, this focus on the joy of what’s being accomplished *now*: this is what she feels about Abdi, this is what Juliet must feel about her father, and she finds herself clapping along with the group, softly, half-heartedly, but still: she claps.

*

That afternoon, when she comes home from work, her mother is outside, standing in front of the shed.

"I can't do anything about the bathroom. Foundation problems? I can't fix that myself," her mother says. "But I can do something about this shed."

"What's the matter with the shed?"

"What's the matter with it? Can't you see how the wood's decaying? It's chipped and warped and it just looks plain awful. Plain awful. You really can't see that?"

The shed doors were painted sky-blue. For decoration: wooden planks, painted white, had been hammered into an X shape on each door's surface.

"You're right, Mom. The planks look bad."

Her mother gives a grateful nod. "But here's the thing: The measurements don't add up. It looks like two solid Xs, but there's really six pieces. You'd think the pieces that *look* the same length would actually *be* the same length. But they're not. Not one piece measures exactly the same as another."

"Why is this a problem?"

Her mother sighs. "I guess it isn't a problem."

Together, they stand in silence. Then, she says, "Those Xs, Mom. They look really symmetrical to me."

"I know. They look perfect. But they're not perfect." Her mother kneels, places a finger against the chipped wood. "I can't figure out how he did it."

*

The day before the Baltimore Running Festival, she arrives at the mission for the final prep run and there is a man with a TV camera. There is a huge spotlight, the WBAL mobile truck, and Weather in Satin, dressed in an Under Armour tracksuit.

William gathers everyone and says, “Surprise! WBAL is doing a segment on us this morning! A *live* segment. *Multiple* live segments, actually. Sarah” – he points toward Weather in Satin – “was a runner in college, so they’re going to film our run. Live! Sarah will run with us, and then she’s going to interview a few of us after.”

“Cool beans!” Abdi says. “Chipper and I are in!”

But when the group begins their run, as the runners sweep by the camera, whooping and waving, hands in the air, giving thumb’s ups and peace signs – she stays on the far side of the group, shielded by the people around her. She stays as far away as she can from Weather in Satin, who’s running with the lead pack. She tells Abdi it’s a good idea not to run with the lead pack today. “Today is about getting ready for tomorrow,” she tells him. “Today’s about stretching our legs, not pushing ourselves. We have to save all of our energy for tomorrow.” As she says this, she thinks of her mother, of her mother’s morning routine: a cup of coffee, WBAL morning show. She knows her mother will be watching. She knows she can’t be filmed.

This morning’s run takes them through the Inner Harbor. They run on the brick path along the waterfront, past the National Aquarium, the Science Center, the Hard Rock Café, Fogo de Chao: Baltimore’s cosmetic top layer, the city’s glamour shot, the row of buildings that hide what’s on the streets where they usually run: the cracked sidewalks; the prison with its large sign *Drop the Gun or Pick a Room*; the many wooden benches

spray-painted years ago with the word BELIEVE, benches on which homeless men and women sleep.

When she and Abdi finish their run and return to the mission, she sees William positioning her father and Juliet in front of the camera. Weather in Satin is talking to all three of them, giving directions, moving between her interviewees and her cameraman. When William sees Abdi, he calls, “Hey! Need you guys!” and she begins to walk away, back to her car.

Abdi yells, “Chipper! WTF!”

She feels a tug on her arm, a firm grip around her elbow. Behind her, she hears Weather in Satin say, “Okay, everyone. We’re live in ten, nine…”

The hand gripping her, holding her back from leaving: it’s William’s. He smiles, but then he places his mouth next to her ear: “What are you doing?” He begins to pull her toward the spotlight. He continues smiling but his whisper is stern: “You need to be here. For Abdi. You’re here to help him get back on his feet. You *do not* walk away.” He pulls her until she is in front of the camera, until she is standing next to Abdi. William is on her other side, his arm around her shoulders. She is now on live TV. She is now in the shot that includes William, Juliet, Abdi, and farthest from her, her father.

Weather in Satin approaches her father. “So, Budd. How are you feeling about tomorrow?” She places the microphone in front of his mouth.

“Tomorrow’s going to be the best day of my life. It’s only a 5K for me, but it’s taken a lot of hard work, a lot of commitment for me to get here.” Her father looks down the line to William, and he says, “It’s so great to be here with my family.”

A few moments later, the live feed ends. She tells Abdi, in a flurried whisper, that she'll see him tomorrow. She runs to her car, takes her cell phone out of the glove compartment. She dials her mother's number, their home number. She lets it ring until she knows – she knows with complete certainty – that her mother has heard the phone ring. She knows her mother is sitting in the La-Z-Boy next to the phone; she knows WBAL is on the television; she knows that – inside the house – a choice has been made. She knows that even if the phone rings and rings and rings and rings, her mother will not pick up.

*

That afternoon, she arrives home to find her mother once again standing in front of the shed. In her mother's hands: two hammers. Her mother says nothing; she just extends her right arm, waiting for the hammer to be taken from her.

"Please," her mother says.

She takes the hammer. "What do you want to do to the shed, Mom?" They stand in silence for a few moments.

Finally, her mother speaks: "Do you know why the court agreed to keep you away from him?"

She remembers the tiny room in the belly of the courthouse. How she had been seated between the mediator and the judge. How she'd looked at her sandals. How she'd told her big toe, "I don't want to see him anymore. I want him to go away."

"I told them," she says now. "I told them I didn't want to see him anymore, so they made sure I didn't have to see him anymore."

Her mother shakes her head.

Before he joined *Running Beats Addiction!*, she hadn't seen her father in twenty years, not since she was eight years old. That night, back in 1988, she'd crawled out of bed and into the living room, where she'd watched her father urinate against the living room wall, streaking the flower-patterned wallpaper with dark zigzags, blackening the petals of a daisy, then a tulip, then a rose.

And then.

With a snap, her father's head turned.

A flurry of footsteps.

A low grunt.

A hand grabbed her ankle and pulled her backwards, fingernails piercing her skin, the carpet rough against her cheek, her body turning, flip-flopping, until she could smell his sour breath.

The crack of a slap.

The burn on her face.

The tears, blurring her vision and making her father's features appear fuzzy, distant, like a wet watercolor.

"Gotcha," he said.

Now, her mother kneels in front of the shed doors, uses the hammer's claw to start loosening decorative wooden planks. "I knew you remembered." The wood cracks, then splinters. Her mother hooks the claw around another piece of wood. Pulls. "You know why running works for people like him?" she says.

During *Running Beats Addiction!*'s volunteer orientation, William had said, "Running gives people with addictions something to look forward to. Running gives

them something to make them feel good about themselves." William paused, crossed his arms over his heart, ASL for *love*. "Running gives them something to strive for. A goal. Aspiration. A better future."

And now, her mother yanks away yet another wooden shard. "Running," she says. "It's just another addiction."

Chris & Bobby

In the spring of ’79, twenty-eight-years-old and seven months pregnant, Christine Laufert found a note in her front yard, a small pink thing nestled between blades of grass. She bent down in the only way she knew how, her body was so big and cumbersome at this point: knees bent outward, back straight, fingers outstretched, grasping. She inserted a fingernail into the envelope’s flap, ripped it open. The card had a picture of a sunflower. And inside, a message. *You must know how much* – it began, the *h* of that last word sporting a bubble of ink, where the pen had perhaps stayed too long, a sign of doubt, a visible hesitation of whether or not the next words should be written at all – *I love you*.

*

You must know how much I love you.

And the crazy thing was, she did. She had known for years. She knew when it started, too. Could pinpoint the exact moment, actually: seventh grade, the Greek God and Goddess unit in Honors English. Ms. Schappell said they were invited to a dinner with the Gods. In human terms: every student would be assigned a God or Goddess. They’d have to study their selected figure, then dress up and embody that persona during a lunchtime meal. “You provide the presentations and entertainment,” Ms. Schappell said. “I’ll bring soda and baklava.” Chris drew Aphrodite, a pull that caused immediate displeasure.

She wasn’t beautiful, or graceful, or desired in the slightest by anyone. She wore thick, black, Buddy Holly-esque glasses. Christine was, at best, presentable, plain. Mousy

would've been generous. Throughout middle school, she often sewed her own clothes, her mother Marie not having the money (or time) for shopping. Her mother *did* have time, Christine admitted, but rarely did she have time for Chris. Chris was self-sufficient, smart, capable, Marie said. It was Chris's brother John – five years her junior – who needed help with algebra and history and language arts. And Chris's littlest brother Dave – ten years her junior – needed a watchful eye every second, because who knows what he'd get into if left alone! Dave would burn the house down, Marie said. And all this on top of food shopping, house cleaning, meal cooking, and husband pleasing.

So Chris, on her own like always, studied Aphrodite with the same fervor with which she completed all schoolwork. She learned how, in exchange for a golden apple, symbolic of the fairest of them all, Aphrodite promised Paris the most beautiful mortal woman. Inspired, Chris went to Mars Supermarket, bought one McIntosh, and painted it gold. She repeated her Aphrodite speech again and again to the bathroom mirror. The day of the presentation, she carefully folded a white sheet and placed it in her knapsack. She put a few strokes of red lipstick on her lips. And in the classroom, at the table Ms. Schappell had prepared, with cups, Coca-Cola, stiff napkins, and a platter of baklava, she tried to hold herself a little straighter than usual.

Like Chris, most students had draped some kind of sheet around themselves. She felt a twinge of embarrassment for Stephen (Hephaestus), whose otherwise plain, white sheet had tiny trucks along the edges. And Bobby's toga was not white at all, but a dark evergreen. He sat at the head of the table. Today, he was Zeus, leader of all, the strongest, the bravest, the most cunning. In real life, he was none of these things. He was awkward and bumbling and shy, a boy who once was scolded for answering a question with a hand

over his mouth. “Be a man,” Mr. Oakley had said. Now, Ms. Schappell introduced Bobby as the first presenter: “Zeus. We’re ready for you.”

He scooted his chair back, a brief, harsh squeal punctuating his ascent. He was tall, even then, a height that caused obvious insecurity. A humpback. A shuffle of feet, slow and deliberate. He had a long face and a larger than average head, but his facial features – mouth, nose, eyes – were squashed together at odd angles. A cheap Picasso. He wore flip flops, and Chris could see, as he stood in front of everyone, the light, auburn hair on his toes. And perhaps that’s why she was first to discover what was happening, because unlike everyone else, who focused on his mouth and the fact that nothing was coming out, she saw liquid. A deep yellow, almost mustard-like shade. It pooled around his big toe and behind the ridge of his flip-flop.

The others began noticing, too. She knew they did: the silence that was too silent. No one shifting around, no clearing of throats. But nobody said anything. And then Bobby ran out of the room, Ms. Schappell yelled to the remaining group, “Grow up!” and only then did someone laugh, a nervous blip, and Ms. Schappell yelled again: “Detention for whoever did that!”

After school, Chris saw him walking ahead of her. He lived a few blocks east, so part of their route home overlapped. At the fork of Wise Avenue and Oakleigh Beach, he’d go right, she’d keep going straight. She quickened her pace. He must’ve heard her, because he turned around, alarmed: a flock of birds startled by a backfiring car. Then he continued walking away from her, but his steps were slower than before, and Chris continued to speed up, until they were side-by-side.

They walked home this way the rest of middle school and throughout high school, a silent pact between them. In May of '68, Bobby graduated early, immediately enlisted in the army. Christine had one more year left. Bobby wrote weekly; she responded in turn. And then a series of events happened, a series of events she can barely bring herself to think about anymore. Every day senior year, she walked home alone but one Friday close to graduation, Budd Laufert pulled up beside her in his Ford pickup, all sputtering and humming and hissing, and she – heartbroken and consumed by my-life-is-over melancholy – got in the car.

*

She enjoyed being pregnant, the sudden admiration of a body she'd spent years critiquing and criticizing. She enjoyed the feeling that wherever she went, she was never alone, that there was a yet-to-be-known buddy always tagging along. What she didn't enjoy were conversations with her husband that usually went something like this:

Chris: "When will you be home tonight?"

Budd: "When I'm home."

They'd married at eighteen, separated shortly thereafter for five years, but then one day Marie, in one of her off-handed yet piercing comments, said, "The clock is ticking, you know," so Chris came home to get pregnant.

Chris and Budd rarely spoke. They never had much to say to each other, really, having moved in discrete social circles throughout most of their school career, an adolescence segregated by smarts. Since the sixth grade, Chris was an "Honors" student, a title given to those enrolled in accelerated subjects – English, Math, Science, Social

Studies. Some Honors kids took all four advanced courses, some had three, others two, some only one. Chris was a four; Budd, zero.

The only time she recalled seeing him in middle school was during physical education, when everyone wore sky-blue t-shirts and navy shorts. And she only remembered having direct contact with him once – in the winter of ’63, seventh grade, during the Fitness and Wellness Exam. Everyone was weighed. Everyone was timed to see how long they could stand – chair-like – against a wall. But only the girls were lined up as Ms. Best took a metal instrument – what looked like the end of a claw machine, Chris thought – and used it to pinch the chubby underside of each arm. A way to measure BMI, the teacher said. After Chris’s turn, as she sat criss-cross-applesauce with the others, Budd had come up behind and pinched her himself, holding fast to the flab of her right arm, a hard grip, malicious even, one she later discovered had left a bruise.

And now there was a baby on the way, and a husband who said he would come home when he came home.

*

In high school, she and Bobby tried to sit by themselves, but this was often a fruitless effort. It delighted her: Bobby’s slow transformation from social pariah to Robert Redford look-a-like. She couldn’t believe it; he was like a lighthouse. Everywhere he went, girls would follow. He’d sit down in the lunch room and within minutes he’d be surrounded, even though he never said a word. She appreciated how much he still appreciated her, even after all these years. He wrote her letters, lyrical and passionate, about how much he’d always loved her. How he’d never known anything else: this intense desire to be with her always. She was cowed by his looks but more so by his

smarts. His letters were always grammatically correct and written carefully in steady cursive. He encouraged her to pursue her passion: photography. He analyzed her photographs, looking for symbolism in shadow and shading. He mused about whether or not her passion for The Beatles would fade over time. He wrote about the lovely curve of her nose; how he loved to run his fingers through her thick brown hair. He wrote again about how much he loved her.

And then he went to Vietnam.

Then she wrote him that a friend had asked her to the prom, and that she was going to the prom with this friend. As a friend. As only a friend.

You are the only person I will ever love, she wrote to Bobby.

And then she never heard from him again.

When she finally allowed herself to believe that he was gone, that he was never coming back, the rage that came out of her was something she'd never felt before or since. She blazed through the house. She found John in his bedroom, practicing his drumming. She picked up the first heavy thing she could find – a phone book – and lobbed it at his head. She moved into Dave's room, where she found toy green army men scattered all over the carpet. She sat down and methodically bit off all of their heads, one by one, the snapping of teeth her guillotine.

When Dave rushed into the room, his little hands clutching her face, trying to force her jaw to stop chewing, she thought, *my god, he's only eight-years-old*. She spit out the last head and examined what she'd done; her molars had made a horizontal crevice over the toy's green face. Little Dave started to cry, and he plopped himself down in her lap. And she started to cry too. Chris rocked Dave; stroked his dark, coarse hair;

held him tight. They sat in his room for a long, long time: brother and sister, together, crying. Then Marie came into the room, and with an I-don't-have-time-for-this-nonsense, said, "Get up. Time for dinner."

Chris had convinced herself she'd never hear from Bobby again, this love of her life, but then – almost ten years later, she was married and pregnant and there in her front yard, she found a little pink note.

*

Budd was somebody who liked to *have a little too much*. These were Marie's words, not Christine's. Marie would say this when Chris's father came home drunk, banging and crashing his way through their house. Little Chris would peek out her bedroom door, alarmed by the racket, and Marie would shush her, even though Chris hadn't said a word. Then Marie said what she always said, "He's had a bit too much."

The day after Chris found Bobby's pink note, Budd came home whenever he felt like coming home, which was 2:30 a.m. Like her father, Budd stumbled into their house, smelling of vomit and cigarettes. She followed him into the bathroom, where he missed the toilet and urinated into the basket Chris kept next to the sink. This basket held fresh towels and washcloths and a copy of Cosmopolitan Magazine.

"Get new towels," Budd growled at Chris.

And Chris said something that surprised her. She said, "Pisser, get off my back."

When she told Marie she planned on leaving Budd and taking the baby with her, Marie told her to get off something else: her high horse. Marie went on and on about how marriage is a *sacrament*. Marie hadn't gotten divorced, now had she? No, she had *stayed married*. She had done *the right thing*. What people are *supposed to do*. Even if

Christine's father was a *pompous son-of-a-bitch*. Marie had loved her, had given her as much as she could. Maybe it wasn't that much, but she tried. She had really tried. She had almost killed herself with all the trying.

Christine said, "But I don't love him, Mom."

"I didn't know what love was when I got married," Marie snapped. "I still don't."

Chris's mother sometimes had a strange way of saying things: was anger speaking, or the truth? Christine could never tell, and this had always unsettled her, the way it was unsettling her now.

Then Marie leaned forward, lowered her voice: "You made the bed."

And Marie was right. Christine had made it: she'd starched the sheets and hospital-cornered the edges, and a few days later, when her water broke, she called Budd, who sat in the waiting room with four other fathers-to-be. And then her baby was born, all wet and slimy and shrieking. She clutched this baby, this brand-new person, to her chest. Finally: here is someone who might love her.

Lucky People

The night before my 2nd grade Secret Santa exchange, my mother took me to Kiddie City, the toy store across from Eastpoint Mall. Hand in hand, we travelled the aisles, pointing at and then considering a Cabbage Patch with red pigtails and a purple jumpsuit, an Astronaut Barbie, a stuffed hippopotamus. This was in Baltimore, in 1987, before Kiddie City went bankrupt, before the store's windows were boarded and then graffitied. This was the year my father left, taking with him my mother's savings. The year my teacher, Ms. Richter, said – the Secret Santa rule is this: because we have an equal number of boys and girls in the class, buy a present for what you are. Boys get boy presents. Girls get girls. Ten dollar maximum. In one of Kiddie City's aisles, I pointed at an Easy Bake Oven but my mother shook her head. Her dark curls were permed, poodle-like, stiff with hair spray. Her scent was White Rain. She took my hand, gently pulled me away from the oven, and into another aisle.

Being together and travelling were two things my mother and I did often. We never went very far. All trips in her Corolla, with its malfunctioning gas gauge, were leaps of faith. Fingers crossed. Never one to press her luck – she didn't have any, she said – my mother only felt comfortable with trips thirty minutes or less. Fifteen minutes could get us to Guilford, where we circled the main street twice, looking at the gothic mansions, the manicured lawns, the inhabitants who were so assured by their wealth, by the security money provided, that curtains were rarely drawn, even at night.

"Look," my mother would say, stopping briefly in front of the house where we always stopped, Mrs. Haussner's old place. I had heard the story countless times. When

she was a teenager, my mother's mother had been a hostess at Haussner's Restaurant. Once, Mrs. Haussner asked my grandmother to look after her children. "Only for a few hours, dear," Mrs. Haussner had said. "It shouldn't be any trouble." So once, my grandmother had been inside that house, a house big enough to astonish, but also big enough to frighten. My grandmother had grown up sharing a room with four other sisters, just down the hall from a room stuffed with brothers. She wasn't used to solitude, or self-obsession. She shared every space – beds; couches; the tiny, warped mirror in the mud room, her siblings' reflections framing her own, which was usually cut off below the nose. After putting the Haussner babies to sleep, she had walked down the staircase and was startled by a reflection, her own, a sheer copy of herself in the floor-to-ceiling window of the master hall.

When my mother told this story, she did so with a smile, but even as a little girl I sensed the sadness within her. In Kiddie City, on the eve of my Secret Santa exchange, she said, "Look," and there was that voice, its syrup not quite strong enough to cover what was beneath. Her smile: a brief warm front. She held the Astronaut Barbie, its packaging a bubble-gum pink, and shook the box. "Look," she said. I did what she told me. I always did. And even now, as I reach life's middle age and my mother its twilight, I can still see that aisle as a seven-year-old, with its Barbies and bright lights, its wonders and stacks of gifts. I can also, though, see it as my mother did. On the floor: yellow tiles squared with dirt; a flattened cigarette butt; a straw wrapper folded like an accordion, an effort at first meticulous and then abandoned, the crinkled paper nothing more than litter underneath a G.I. Joe display. It's difficult to remember when my mother's mind became my own, when the deep creases around her eyes, the tight pursing of her lips, translated

into my own sadness. When her whispers, "You're getting out of here one day," became my own mantra: "One day, I'm getting out of here."

*

On a table in the front of the classroom were presents, arranged in a neat row. Each had been given a number, and we, in turn, had to pick numbers out of the bag Ms. Richter held. We pushed our fingers in, grasping. The number we picked corresponded to the gift we would receive. When I pulled number 13, Ms. Richter said, "How lucky!" before moving on to the next eager fingers. How lucky, I repeated, feeling happiness heat my cheeks.

While waiting in line to receive my present, I heard it again: "What a lucky girl!" This came from someone's mother, a volunteer that day, her face a blur but her voice popping in my memory like a cork: *What a lucky girl!* She handed me a white package. Plain white, like snow. Taking it back to my seat, considering my luck, I thought it must be the only thing I craved – a recorder, one of those tan, plastic instruments that looks like a clarinet but sounds like a flute. It had to be a recorder. The box was long and thin and – when I shook it back and forth – the object inside hit the cardboard edges with a strong thud. It must be something plastic, something hard. A recorder.

Ms. Richter told us not to open our gifts until everyone had received theirs. It was good manners, she said, so I didn't touch the box anymore. But when she finally shouted, "It's time! Merry Christmas!" my fingers flew to the paper, ripping, clawing, tearing. The ripping exposed colors, then letters – an R! R for recorder! And then an E, a P, an A, another P. I had unwrapped the word backwards. REPAP became PAPER. And then the word became an object, a physical thing, the item inside the box. Paper. A roll of white

paper, the same used to wrap the present itself, for there was the broken tab, evidence that the box had been opened at least once before. Maybe more than that. The ream, upon closer inspection, was smudged with fingerprints.

This description of myself – of a child's calm assessment – seems at times too generous. I was a tempestuous kid, capricious and volatile, given to fits of yelling, pouting, and stomping. The stomping – my mother told me years later – was easiest to handle. If I began to stomp, she would stomp, too, following me around the house, wherever I went – up the stairs, down the stairs, around the kitchen table, and once, out the back door and down the street, past Mr. Burke's antlered mailbox, past the wheel-less Corvette at the Simpsons', past the Korcznkis' plastic pool. "I told you" – Mom's voice a shout from behind – "you'd get out of here one day!" Usually, this mimicry elicited laughter, chuckles at first sheepish and then uncontrollable, and – just like that, my mother said – the fit was over.

At that moment in that classroom, then, it's easy to imagine a vicious wail, a cacophony of cries, of shouts, even. The pounding of a fist on a desk. An ache along the side of my hand. But at other times, I see what really happened. The slow rippling of bewilderment, those furtive looks around the room. What did everyone else get from their Secret Santa? My memory as stills: Timmy with his new Transformer, Optimus Prime – first as robot, then as machine. Patrick waved Lion-O, the red-haired ThunderCat, whose Sword of Omens was still stuck to the package with a twisty tie. Across the room, Danielle held my Astronaut Barbie. And later, hours later, at the end of the school day, my mother's face in close-up, inches from mine, a deep crease between her eyebrows.

Her features take on movement – the slow, southward curl of her lips; the opening of her mouth. “What’s wrong?” Her voice, emotionless.

We stood outside my classroom, on a cracked rectangle of sidewalk. For some reason, she had picked me up from school that day, something she rarely did. She worked for an insurance company downtown, a job that sometimes kept her after hours. No one I knew had stay-at-home moms; few had retired grandparents; most of us were bus-riders, walkers, latchkeys. But here was my mother, and I handed her the paper. She held it at arm’s length. Her words were slow to form, like the first bubbles in a heated pot of water. “This is from your Secret Santa?”

I nodded, still uncertain of how she was feeling. How I should feel. “They said I was a lucky girl.”

Lucky people, my mother once told me, could buy refrigerators. Ours had died a few months before the Secret Santa exchange, with a loud *humph* just as strong as the wail emitted by my mother, who knelt in front of the machine like worshipping an idol, forehead pressed against linoleum. Lucky people, my mother had said, could buy a new fridge instead of doing what we did – going to the dump and sorting through discards until we found a cooler, beat-up and red and moldy around its rim, but big enough to fit all of our frozen meat. “Because meat is expensive,” my mother said, “and it doesn’t grow on trees.” At home, after scrubbing the cooler, she took me into the bathroom and scrubbed my face, my neck, my arms, my hands, every nook of my body covered with dump soot. She turned me around, lifted my shirt, and put the washcloth against my back, moving the cloth back and forth and up and down. Broad, hard strokes that felt like burns. “Mommy,” my voice a sour whine, “it hurts.”

“I’m sorry, bubby. I’m sorry. Mommy’s sorry” and when she turned me around, her eyelashes were wet, like grass sprinkled with dew. “All clean,” she said. “All better.”

Her eyes looked that way now. Shimmering. Saran Wrap covering a container of leftovers.

In the schoolyard, kids stepped around us, lumbering home in thick packs of shouting, whispering, and shoving. I pointed at a girl in my class. Marissa Stonewall was a friend, but she wasn’t the type who slept over or made pinky promises. She sat at my lunch table and we talked about the New Kids and whether B104 was better than Mix 106.5. I had been to her house, a thin row house near Bear Creek, only once, for a birthday party when we were in kindergarten. She had chestnut brown hair, a big, frizzy bowl of it, chopped off just above her shoulders. Her nose was thin, her skin was pale, and a lot of the boys thought she was pretty. Today, she wore faded green corduroys and a black sweater. No jacket. She carried a My Little Pony, its box still covered in spots with metallic wrapping paper.

I can’t quite remember how I learned Marissa was my Secret Santa. But I do remember my mother’s legs stomping toward my classroom door. Me in a scurry behind her. A brusque whisper of “Wait here.” My mother and teacher in a verbal duel. Ms. Richter’s various rambles: “There’s no way to check the gifts beforehand” and “I’m truly sorry” and “Is there anything I can do?” I couldn’t hear what my mother said, but I heard how she said it, with the same voice she used when I forgot to brush my teeth or say my prayers.

She turned, walked toward me, and took my hand. During the ride home, I asked her why they had said I was lucky. We were stopped at a red light. She drummed a few,

hard beats against the steering wheel. “Because the number 13 is typically *un*lucky,” she said. “They were trying to make you feel better.”

*

It still amazes me, how her sadness was an anchor but her happiness a life jacket, a preserver. How quickly she could drop me and then bring me to the surface. After arriving home at the end of that Secret Santa day, my mother stood still in our kitchen, her face turned away from mine and down at the box of paper she held. She moved it back and forth between her hands. I stood in front of her, as still as she was. Then she looked up. “Come with me,” she said.

In the dim hallway that ran between the bathroom and the two bedrooms of our house, she sat cross-legged and patted the carpet next to her. I sat down, too. My mother opened the box of paper, pulled about ten inches off the roll, carefully made a crease, then ripped. A sheet came off cleanly. “Watch this,” she said. She began folding the paper, bending it in different directions: first in half, long-ways. Then, with two inward folds, into a triangle. Then another fold along the paper’s centerline and more creases and turns until finally, she put the airplane in my hand. “Now, you try,” she said.

I did exactly what she told me, following her directions carefully, making sure every fold was as precise as hers had been. When I finished my airplane, my mother said, “Let’s race.” We bet on whose airplane could reach the laundry pile at the edge of her bedroom; whose airplane could, if aimed upward, hit the round light fixture overhead. An hour later, my mother kissed my cheek and said, “Bedtime.”

*

I've only told this story once before – out loud, to a class of college freshmen. At the time, I was trying to steer them away from common narratives: death, injury, first-day-of-college. I stood at the front of the room and paused, exactly where I had paused just now. I said, "This Secret Santa business. What did I learn?"

The students were quiet at first, looking at each other before raising their hands. Then, with an unbridled burst of eureka, Caitlin said, "Karma's a bitch!" The comment drew immediate laughter. Caitlin blushed, gave a bashful smile. And I smiled, too, saying, "Well, not *exactly*…" And only now I realize I was correcting her, trying to edit her gut instinct, when perhaps it had been my fault. Perhaps that day I came across as too self-serving, too solipsistic. Maybe I hadn't put all the pieces in place, or maybe I forgot something important, something that needed to be said. Because when I finally told this story to my mother, it ended like this:

Once, there were two little girls, one with a mother who took her to Kiddie City, who held her hand, who taught her how to wrap a present, how to fold the edges into crisp, sharp points, how to judge where to cut the wrapping, so that the little girl wasn't wasteful. Because, this mother said, "Wrapping paper costs money, money doesn't grow on trees," and then she tagged on a non sequitur, something she added to almost every conversation: "One day, you're getting out of here."

And across town, there is another little girl. In my imagination, she is alone. Her mother, a waitress at Denny's, is working the late shift. Her father is supposed to be home by now. Yesterday, he had said, "Sure, I'll take you to the store. Sure." She needed something for her class. For her Secret Santa. "Sure," her father had said. Now, she waits.

The minutes pass. She begins looking. She sees the paper, she wraps it best she can, and then she goes to sleep.

The Role He Played

The first time Shia LaBeouf spoke to her, in April of 2014, she was sitting outside Panera Bread in Baltimore City, eating a roast beef sandwich and waiting for her fiancé's return from the bathroom. Even though there was a crowd outside – all tables were full; it was such a beautiful, crisp, early spring day – Shia marched right up to her.

"I deeply regret the manner in which these events have unfolded," he said.

She recognized him immediately: the scruffy voice, the curly orange-brown hair, the not-quite-so-handsome face. She had – she admitted – been a huge fan of Shia's when, as a teenager, he was a Disney Channel star. And she had despaired when, after his blockbuster success – everybody racing to cast him in films (Shia as Indiana Jones's son! Shia opposite Optimus Prime!) – he had suffered the public meltdown: the DUIs, the bar fights, the walking-the-red-carpet-with-a-paper-bag-over-his-head, and perhaps most embarrassing of all, the accusations of plagiarism. Turns out his directorial debut was a direct copy of a graphic novel. Turns out that when he publicly apologized for this gigantic faux-pas, tweeting a series of "I'm sorry's," these apologies were plagiarized, too. And she couldn't believe it: The apology Shia had just offered her, in fact, was an apology he had previously plagiarized.

"I fucked up, Paige," he said, and then with a quick turn of his combat boots, he walked away, into the parking lot and through the mass of parked cars. She couldn't take another bite of her roast beef sandwich. Even disgraced, Shia was a celebrity, a bona-fide movie star, yet outside of Panera no one seemed to know him, and this somehow seemed appropriate, as he seemed to know only her.

“What’s the matter? Why the sad face?” This came from Benjamin, her fiancé, who had just returned from the bathroom. Benjamin always seemed to be commenting on her sad face, or assuming she had a sad face. She wanted to ask him, “What exactly do you mean: ‘sad face’? Why don’t you just ask me if you think I’m sad, and then I will say yes. Yes, Benjamin, I am sad.”

She did not tell him about Shia. Instead she vocalized only this, in a measured, even tone: “Nothing’s the matter.”

*

Shia LaBeouf, the son of poor circus performers, grew up in southern California. At age eleven, while walking along the boardwalk, he noticed another young boy wearing – in Shia’s opinion – a very cool pair of Adidas sneakers. Shia’s parents hadn’t given him anything in a long time (if you didn’t count stale peanuts, or the occasional umbrella plucked from Barnum and Bailey’s lost and found).

Shia said to the kid on the boardwalk: “How’d you get those sneakers?”

“I’m an actor,” the kid said. “Don’t you know who I am?”

Shia didn’t know and didn’t care. The only connection that seemed worthy was this: acting = cash = fancy new sneakers.

The kid yelled, “I’m on *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*, asshole!” but Shia was already walking away, away from the kid and toward a phone booth. He flipped open the telephone book, searched for talent agents. Why he decided to call Teresa Dahlquist, who knows, but when she answered on the second ring, he shouted, “I need an agent!” A few months later, Shia landed a lead role on Disney Channel’s *Even Stevens*, and a few weeks after that, he had new sneakers.

Paige thought about all this a few days later as she stood in Safeway, trying to shop for groceries. What a huge fan she had been. When *Even Stevens* aired, she was in her early twenties, working as an intern at World of Kids Casting Agency in Miami Beach. She told everybody that watching the Disney Channel comedy – and Shia in particular – was research. This research would help Paige get to know the business; it would help her "decipher talent," a phrase her boss often used. Pampers, after all, did need to cast a boy for a national commercial spot. The campaign, focused on bedwetters, needed a young man, in the twelve to fourteen age range, capable of two things: 1) he could (believably) cry on cue, and 2) he'd be able to take real-life bullshit, because – odds are – when you are on national TV crying about wetting the bed, other kids will probably think that you, in real life, also wet the bed. The result: bullying ensues; Bedwetter Actor must be able to not care (or act like he doesn't care) about the real-life consequences of his acting.

"That's why I'm watching *Even Stevens*," Paige told anyone who questioned her viewing habits. "Pampers is looking for a Shia-esque kid, so I have to watch Shia."

She was now no longer attached to show business whatsoever (she has worked for years and years as an English Composition adjunct) but how much joy Shia had brought her back then. What range he had: he could pull off the most difficult physical comedy (one episode featured him eating a ten-pound hamburger while balancing on a soccer ball) but he could get emotional, too. An example: In the series finale, Shia's character looks at the camera and confesses his love for the girl who'd been his best friend all along. The tears in his eyes. The just-right sentimentality. Paige had recorded the episode and kept Shia's image freeze-framed for hours. She studied the contours of his face, that

look of intense love. Something so palpable she felt she could touch it. And she did touch it. Alone, in her apartment, she'd placed a hand against the screen.

And now, in Safeway's Aisle 3, Shia appeared beside her. "You got some of it wrong," he said. "The kid with the sneakers? He wasn't on *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*. He was a regular on *Barney*. Small thing. No biggie. People make mistakes."

Paige looked around; the two of them were alone. Shia took a drag of his cigarette, blew a smoky exhale toward the egg display.

"Since when have you been concerned about accuracy?" she said, her voice rising. "Since when have you become the truth police?"

"I deeply regret the manner in which these events have unfolded."

"Stop talking to me that way! Stop using your plagiarized tweets as dialogue!"

"Okay. Then let's get real. What're you making?" he said, peering into her shopping cart. "Food for Benjamin?"

"Yes," she said.

"How's that working out?"

She looked at the ingredients, too. "Well, I still need to get some sour cream. For the veggie dip."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought we were past the point of fake conversations. I meant: *how is that working out*?"

How that was working out: She would go home; she'd cook dinner; Benjamin would say *thank you*; he'd give her a kiss. They'd retreat to their new $2,000 king-sized bed. For comfort, they'd told each other. But even if Paige stretched as far as she could, her fingers could not reach his back. She did not move closer to him, and he did not move

closer to her. She and Benjamin had choreographed this dance and then rehearsed again and again. Until love was something done without much thought. And this was love, right? There were no punching holes in the walls. There was no getting fall-down drunk and then peeing on the living room wall. There was no extreme; there was no obvious bad guy hanging around the perimeters. And so whatever was going on in her house with Benjamin, this must be what love is. She kept doing this love – year after year after year – without much thought. Without much analysis. All the things that didn't matter to her anymore, such as *How did this happen? Why did this happen? Why do we keep letting it happen?*

In the grocery store, Shia leaned forward. "I've been thinking, and I think – in a way – this has been partly my fault." He gripped her shoulder, squeezed. "This is not a joke. This is for real: the apology that's about to come out of my mouth. I'm sorry for the role I played."

*

She really had no interest in casting. The World of Kids internship was just something she needed to complete her dual Communication and English major. Yet somehow, she'd cast herself a perfect partner, she told her mother senior year. Benjamin was smart – no, *the smartest*, she corrected herself. He had plans:

To score in the 99th percentile on the MCATS.

To attend Johns Hopkins Med, then complete a Harvard residency.

To go into private practice as a dermatologist.

To continue working on his discovery, made when he was just seventeen ("Seventeen years old, can you believe it, Mom?"), of a chemical agent that radically improves sunscreen. Patent pending.

To buy a ranch house along the Chesapeake.

To go sailing in the evenings and on the weekends. ("He sails, Mom! He's a *sailor*!")

To marry Paige. ("Me, Mom. Me! A girl from Dundalk. From nowhere!")

Yes, she must admit, he was a wee bit on the short side, but what he lacked in height he made up for in competence, in accuracy, in perceptiveness.

For example: Benjamin often held a small magnifying glass to each of her moles, every two months, looking for anomalies, for cancer-in-the-making. He studied her, all of her different parts. She didn't tell her mother this, but she found it romantic, even erotic: Benjamin's eyes, and therefore his mouth, and therefore his lips, so close to so many different areas of her body.

But she did tell her mother this: "I found something," Benjamin said once. His mouth was against her inner thigh. She could feel the heat of his breath against her skin. "I found something, and I think it might be very bad."

The next day, they had an appointment to see a general practitioner, to get a first opinion. Well, really, a second opinion, because if Benjamin thought the mole looked bad, then it must be bad; it must be very, very bad. Paige realized, sitting next to Benjamin in the waiting room, that her hand was shaking.

Benjamin noticed the shaking, touched her hand, squeezed it. Then he whispered, "You shaved your legs today, right?"

Paige laughed in the waiting room; when she told her mother what Benjamin had said, they both laughed.

"Oh Bubby," her mother said. "He's got a good sense of humor. Making a joke to make you feel at ease. Don't let this one go. Promise me."

"I promise," Paige told her mother.

But Paige left out a part of the story: that after her loud guffaw, she said, "Of course I've shaved my legs!" And then she'd thought: how funny to bring up something so trivial – the shaving of legs, of all things – in the face of life-and-death! But then: she'd caught a glance at Benjamin's face. He was looking at her legs, inspecting. Studying. He wasn't laughing.

(Paige's mole, by the way, was in fact "pre-cancerous.")

*

Ten years ago, in her Miami apartment, Shia's face freeze-framed on the screen, she'd found herself crying, and Benjamin, three-and-a-half-years her boyfriend, had found her in this state, crying hysterically, sitting alone on the floor, her hand pressed against the television screen. He'd let himself into her apartment, using the extra key she'd let him keep, just as she'd let him do a lot of other things. "Let" instead of "want." "Let" instead of "need." Benjamin in bed beside her, turned away instead of toward. Benjamin's half-hearted kisses. Benjamin, when she was sad, when she was crying, only doing this: patting her on the head, saying, "Why the sad face?" Sad face: Benjamin always acting as though what she felt was an act, and not something real.

"I want someone to love me like that," she'd said, her voice a whisper. She dipped her head toward the screen, toward Shia's frozen image.

“I love you like that,” Benjamin said. He said it as fact, as something that could not be disputed. He continued standing a few feet away. He made no move forward; he did not attempt to hold her.

She then looked at Shia’s face on the screen: freeze-framed. She tried to move her facial muscles to match his, to mimic the look of someone desperately in love. She copied his slight smile, his downcast eyes, the way he paused – for just a brief moment – before he said, so convincingly she knew it to be true: “I love you.”

“Yes,” she finally said to Benjamin. “Yes, you do love me like that.”

Trash

If I'm going to tell the story of my town, I should probably start with trash. My town: Dundalk, Maryland, a predominately white, working-class Baltimore suburb; a historically-rich place built up and then devastated by its proximity to and relationship with Bethlehem Steel. If I start this story with trash, I should probably begin with a particular trash can, one owned by my mother, my grandmother, and me. On a summer evening in 1999, this trash can is meticulously situated on our property's edge. Leaning, almost on the brink of tipping over, because – if you look close enough – a sliver of its base sits on the sloping asphalt of the public's curb. Most of the can, though, is on land we own: the small patch of grass in front of our makeshift grass driveway. In this driveway rests my mother's Toyota. Our trashcan is positioned in such a way that if Mom needed to move her car – which is a silly hypothetical, because Mom won't need the car until the AM; right now, she's in bed, exhausted from another round of chemo – but, hypothetically, if Mom needed to move the car, somebody would have to move that trash can. And my grandmother would gladly volunteer because she was the one, after all, who put that trash can there in the first place.

My grandmother, you see, has a plan. The can's deliberate placement, its "will-it-or won't-it-fall-over?" precariousness: Grandma believes this will put an end to something that's been boiling her blood – our new neighbor's penchant for blocking our driveway with his Chrysler.

Months ago, when the new folks moved in and, on that first day, blocked our driveway, Grandma swallowed her conviction that being neighborly closed down right

around the same time Bethlehem Steel did, and she walked next door, knocked, and said, “Hi, I’m Marie. Your new neighbor. Would you mind terribly moving your car? My daughter can’t get hers out of our driveway.” The response she received was not about cars or driveways or apologies but about America, specifically that the USA is a free country.

F-R-E-E, lady.

FREE.

I don’t know what was said after that, but if anything gets along well it’s my grandma and disdain. And my grandma did disdain so well that day the new neighbor walked outside, got into his car, turned on the engine, and moved that car exactly where my grandmother wanted it: out of our way.

But every day after:

“You gotta be kidding me!” It’s G-Mom again, shouting from the living room, her voice fiery and thick. “Come look!”

And every day Mom and I would come and we’d look. At the neighbor’s car. At how the car almost blocked our driveway but not quite. From the living room window, from a particular angle, the car appeared to be obstructing our exit, but upon closer inspection the car’s bumper aligned – perfectly, just so damn perfectly – with our driveway’s edge. Such technique. Such precision.

My grandmother read this parking job as any Dundalkian would: as a battle’s opening salvo.

*

In 2011, PBS aired a two-hour documentary about the Battle of Baltimore. In those two hours, you learned about the British attack on Fort McHenry. You learned about the naval defense. The fire. Francis Scott Key. Bombs bursting in air. Our flag waving even through the blaze. But an important detail was left out: the British attack on Baltimore happened not on one, but two fronts.

One: by water. This is the story in all the history books. This is PBS's two-hour documentary.

But at the same moment the fort was attacked, the British also attacked by land. On a moonless September night in 1814, three American sentinels stood watch at a house site, which would later (at least locally) become famous, known by Dundalkians as Todd's Inheritance. Back in 1814, though, General John Stricker had chosen the dwelling as a courier station, because – as a scout's letter noted – the location had "a tolerable view of the Bay," and Stricker needed a place where possible British naval movements could be spotted.[1] Which, on one moonless September night in 1814, were being spotted.

Which American spied the British first? Which young sentinel first caught sight of those red-coated soldiers creeping along that dark, dirt road, the enemy still wet from their drudge through Shallow Creek? We don't even know the sentinels' names. It's suspected that one of those sentinels was a member of the Todd family, but no one knows for certain. We only know this: "Wake the Todds!" one of them must have said. Because along with the sentinels, the Todd family also escaped, patriarch Bernard somehow having the wherewithal to tuck his spyglass into his coat pocket. This spyglass: now the only surviving memento of the original Todd home. (See it displayed at The Star-Spangled Banner Flag House in Baltimore! $9 admission for adults. Children under 6 are

free!) This spyglass is the only memento, because shortly after the Americans vacated – Look! There they go, racing up North Point Road on their horses, dirt clouds camouflaging their escape! – the British burned the Todd house, the grounds, the stable, and all the livestock trapped inside. According to legend, the Brits even dug up an old Todd family gravesite, expecting to find silver buried alongside the body, but these soldiers apparently had no knowledge of the Dundalkian mindset, alive and well even back in the 1800s: If there was silver to be had, it certainly ain't going in no grave.

Dundalkians: elegiac yet practical.

So the British left, continuing their march toward Baltimore. A few miles up North Point Road, at their next resting stop, the Shaw House, they took over the family's first floor and encountered yet another tried-and-true Dundalkian, teenager Eleanor Shaw. A British lieutenant, determined to kiss Eleanor, chased her up the staircase, where she turned, looked him straight in the eye, thought *over my dead body*, and then threw herself out a second-story window. She survived; bruised, a rib or two broken, an ankle sprained, but unsullied.

Dundalkians: strong-willed, no matter the consequences.

And then, finally, the British stopped next at Gorsuch Farm, which would be Major General Robert Ross's last stop, although he didn't know it then. In the hours before his death, he still exuded bombastic regality: for instance, the fluffy white plume in his hat perfectly matched his handsome white horse. Mr. Gorsuch, though, was not impressed. After being forced to cook breakfast for General Ross and his Vice Admiral Cockburn, Mr. Gorsuch offered the ultimate Dundalkian quip, one curtly passive-aggressive: "And what shall I make you two for dinner?"

General Ross supposedly replied, “I’ll sup in Baltimore to-night – or in hell.”[2]

Little did he know: he would not live to see dinnertime. Because just a mile from the Gorsuch farmhouse, General John Stricker was preparing for battle. In mere moments, General Ross would hear gunfire, step outside the Gorsuch home, and quickly ride – northbound – toward the skirmish. Soon, General Ross would encounter American soldiers who were really not soldiers at all, just young men given rifles and told to shoot a man riding a white horse. And one of those young men – McComas was his name – climbed a tree to get a better view. McComas saw the white horse, and then he saw the British general riding the white horse. McComas aimed, held his rifle steady – as steady as he could; he had, after all, only received the title of *sharpshooter* earlier that day. He took his shot.

Dundalkians: perpetually underestimated.

*

Back to 1999, back in our dim living room, my grandmother sits poised on the arm of an incredibly shabby armchair. Because – God dang it – if sitting on this crappy chair gives her a clear view out the window, then so be it. My G-Mom is the as-long-as-it-takes type of human, so she will sit here as long as it takes. She’s prepared. She has refilled the old water bottle she’s been refilling for months now, its label long gone, its middle circled with rubber bands, rubber bands which hold in place a few things: one pen and several small scraps of blank paper. For how else is she going to take notes? As she does every night, she’s keeping tabs on our neighborhood happenings. She’s ready for battle.

According to Grandma's notes, AN – her abbreviation for Asshole Neighbor – leaves the house every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 6 a.m. He'll sit in his car for roughly ten minutes, the time it takes him to smoke two Marlboro Reds. Then he flicks both butts out the window, litter my grandmother faithfully picks up every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Typical white trash, G-Mom thinks, as she picks up this man's trash. She thinks this even though we live right next door. As if our house, a small $75,000 two bedroom, isn't a mirror image of Asshole Neighbor's house. Sure, G-Mom might live in what most would consider a dump, but inside she ruled a dynasty. Where somebody's character actually *meant something*. Where folks did *right* no matter what. Where women birthed kids, raised kids, kept house, and put hot food on the table no matter when a shift ended, be it 3, 7, or 11 p.m. Where men worked hard, drank hard, and if they couldn't keep their pants zipped, they at least did the bare minimum. Like picking their gosh darn cigarette butts off the street.

Picking up AN's cigarette butts: oftentimes the butts are still warm, so G-Mom always wears plastic gloves.

Who knows where he's been, she thinks. *Or where he goes*.

Oh, how she wishes she knew where he went! When he leaves the house, does he go to a part-time job, maybe at 7-11 or Home Depot? Does he visit a girlfriend, or a boyfriend, maybe? G-Mom likes to consider her mind open, worldly, up with the times. If she could follow him, though, she would. In a heartbeat. He's up to no good, says her gut. But like most of her contemporaries, she never learned to drive. In 1950s Dundalk,

husbands were steelworkers, buyers, drivers. Women were homemakers, caregivers, passengers.

Grandma can't follow Asshole Neighbor, but in 1999, I'm nineteen. For three years, I've had my license. And look: here are my car keys.

Would you like to go for a ride?

*

His first direction: northeast, what Mom calls going "up" our street. As Parkwood Road curves to the left, so does his car. It's almost like he's drunk, drifting into the other lane's side. But he's drifting left because at McComas Avenue, he turns left. McComas: narrower than its neighboring streets but jam-packed with cars. Asshole Neighbor maneuvers around a parked Civic; we do the same. I wonder: why is he going this way? If he would've taken North Point Road, there's less chaos, more space. But then he stops where McComas dead-ends at German Hill Road, and we both notice the same thing: he does not turn on his blinker. Conclusion: he must be going straight, across German Hill and into that small shopping center, which houses only two stores: Freedom Fighters Bail Bonds (CLOSED) and Poor Boys Sports, an I-don't-quite-know-how-to-describe-it store, selling a hodgepodge of Ravens and Orioles clothing, lawn ornaments, baked goods, and potted plants (OPEN). Asshole Neighbor must work part-time at Poor Boys.

Well, that was anticlimactic.

But look! At the end of McComas Ave. is a tree. A three-story-tall pin oak, its giant majesty lessened only a tad by what's been built around it: a cinderblock-shaped shopping center on its right, yet another $75,000 two bedroom on its left. Once, when I was ten years old, my mother and I stood beneath this tree. She wore a crisp white blouse

paired with a long, violet, pleated skirt, its fabric trimmed with tiny white daises. My mother always dressed for respect, even though respect was something she rarely received, she being a middle-aged divorcée from Dundalk with only a high school diploma. She pointed to an overhead branch and said, "He sat right up there. The boy who ended the war."

In 1814, the British attacked Baltimore not on one, but two fronts.

By water: Fort McHenry.

By land: Dundalk.

*

A Travel Guide to the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake details how you can conduct a Battle of North Point vehicle tour. Begin your journey at the Fort Howard Veterans Hospital, where it's assumed the British first made landfall, and then follow the British route north, up North Point Road. There! On your right, a historical landmark: Todd's Inheritance, rebuilt. Look! The graveyard's still there! Then: continue to follow North Point Road north. And look! There, on your left: the Shaw House Site and Graveyard. It's called a *House Site* and no longer a *House* because only the brick and stone foundation remains. There's a graveyard, too, next to a residential trailer. (*Please respect the privacy of the [trailer's] occupants*, historian Ralph E. Eshelman notes, *and do not enter the house site area – view the site from the graveyard only.*[3])

In the late 1800s, when Bethlehem Steel picked my hometown to be the site of their future factory, brothers Frederick and Rufus Wood – the project's lead architects – were concerned about acreage, about access to waterways, about the availability of local laborers. They bought up as much land as they could, and then leveled it all, with little

knowledge of or giving a shit about what had been destroyed. So down came history and in its place: a pristine planned community.

In 1887, Rufus Wood sits inside a newly constructed brick townhome, its bay windows overlooking the same shoreline historians note as the probable landing area of the British, back in 1814. But, seventy-some years later, Rufus has no time for view-taking. He has no time for leisure. He feverishly pens letter after letter to Frederick, who – in Pennsylvania – is managing yet another Bethlehem Steel facility. It is Rufus, then, the brother who stayed behind in Maryland, who becomes the maestro of the brothers' collaborative design, its law-and-order calculus so brazenly transparent you can almost see Rufus twirling a thin mustache. Chuckling to himself. Admiring his own cleverness. His imperious braggadocio, however, not necessarily discreet.

Because the letters he wrote: you can still read them. Unlike Eleanor Shaw's home, Rufus Wood's letters survived.

He wrote: If a company is to follow the "Bessemer process of producing steel, furnaces heated to between 2900 and 3000 degrees Fahrenheit cannot be shut down."[4] Ever. So you need a large workforce, one so large that – via shiftwork – the furnace can operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. How do you acquire such a compliant workforce?

Hire mostly married men. Because what will those men need to be able to work such harsh shifts? Wives. Wives that work just as hard, maybe even harder. As the men learn the steelmaking trade, their wives will also receive an education. "The idea," Rufus wrote to his brother, "is not only to mould the girls into women but home planners and homemakers." He continued, his pen in a flurry: "Even girls ten years old go into the

training kitchen, don their aprons, roll up their sleeves, and do such things as knead bread and biscuits, make coffee that is clear and fragrant." And then, there's this charmer of a sentence: *A wife who is a good cook is a 'joy forever' to her husband, though she may not be a 'thing of beauty.'*[5]

Need an overworked workforce to stay in line?

Construct an alphabetized social hierarchy, placing living quarters for mill superintendents, physicians, pastors, and yours truly – General Manager Rufus Wood – on Streets A, B, and C. Situate white workers below D Street, instituting an unspoken hierarchy-within-a-hierarchy there, too: the closer one lives to the bigwigs (wink wink), the closer one is to excellence. And then! Strategically locate Black laborers across the only geographical boundary in the vicinity, Humphrey's Creek.[6] (In other words: literally on the *other* side of town.)

Don't stop there, though! Continue *Us vs. Them* within the mill itself, with whites working the higher-paying jobs upstairs. *Upstairs* signaling skill, hard work, dedication. And then, go down down down – keep going! – down to the basements, to the mill's underbelly, its hottest and dirtiest area, the coke ovens. This is where the Black folks will work. Those men, so eager to leave jobs as sharecroppers, tenant farmers, farm hands. Those men, who consider themselves so lucky for this higher-paying industrial job.[7] Yes, put those hardworking young men down there. In their place.

You see, Frederick, I imagine Rufus writing, *Baltimore isn't segregated yet. Black people still live in* all twenty wards of the city*, can you believe that nonsense? (In fact, Baltimore won't implement residential racial segregation for another twenty-five years!)*[8] *We have the opportunity, then, to be true pioneers! Import racism and classism into this*

*planned steel community and…*Voila! Proudly examine the export, an exquisite product: man-made boundaries transforming metaphor into fact. A finely-tailored system of control that will become a *Way of Life*, a *That's Just How It Is*.

Don't believe me?

Rufus's villainy: I tend to exaggerate. But this compulsion to exaggerate is hard to contain, especially when you are a living descendant of what Rufus has done.

*

In a home on E Street in 1926, my paternal great-grandmother Paola is hustling, like always. She is wife to Richard. Mother of six: four boys, two girls. My grandfather, John, is her youngest, a toddler, one-and-a-half years old. Like most other wives in her community, Paola is also a boarder. A businesswoman. I say this because that's the truth: she was a businesswoman. I say this even if no one in her lifetime called her that, even if she never received a paycheck. In 1926, she's opened her home to three single steelworkers. That means, she's running an eleven-person household. By herself.

By the time Richard arrives home at 7 p.m., she must have both bedrooms dusted and cleaned. She must tidy the living room. She must peel carrots and potatoes; she must chop an onion and celery; she must braise the chicken. While preparing today's supper, she must plan tomorrow's. But God bless this house! Unlike their previous residence on K Street, this home has electricity, a telephone, indoor plumbing! Oh yes, she almost forgot: she needs to scrub the toilet. She must bring the laundry in from the line. She must give two baths, the first for the younger children, the second for the older ones. She must supervise her eldest – Anne – who has been tasked with changing Baby John's undergarments.

And finally, she must put on a face when her husband arrives home, a face that's smiling, pleasant. He works so hard; this is the least she can do. Just look at how tired he is; he can barely keep his eyes open! He gives her a brief kiss, slurps up his chicken stew, and then off to bed he goes. But even if no one else notices: she too works hard. What causes her grief – the seemingly never-ending I-can't-go-on exhaustion – is also her most consistent source of joy, of pride: she takes so much yet she *can take so much*. Richard may make steel but look: she is made of the stuff. Her whole body, inside and out: hardy, resilient. Look at how far she can be pulled without denting, how much pressure she can withstand without breaking. Just look at all the things she can endure.

*

In 1961, Paola's baby John is all grown. Like his father, he too is a steelworker. His home, though, is not inside the Bethlehem Steel community but just on its outskirts. If one knows their War of 1814 history, they might even notice that John's house is a little ways down the road from where Gorsuch's farm once stood: at the intersection of North Point Boulevard and Wise Avenue. In this house, an eight-year-old girl, John's daughter – Christine is her name – has just gotten home from school.

Like she does every day, Christine dutifully completes the same ritual: on the front porch, before stepping foot inside, she carefully removes every piece of clothing, placing the dust-covered garments in a brown bag her mother has placed by the front door. Christine undresses in this manner every day but the dust she wears is not always the same color. If the wind comes from the mill's open hearth, for example, her clothes will be stained rust-orange; if the wind comes from the east, she'll be covered in black soot.[9] Every day Christine disposes of her clothes, and every day her mother scurries

outside afterwards: washcloth and towel underneath one arm, a water bowl in her hands. Delicate cleaning reveals ivory skin, freckles, and a daughter delighted in these few daily moments of her mother's intricate care.

But today is not like every day. Today John moved from machine operator to shift manager, a coveted promotion. As mother Marie washes, and as Christine tries to keep her body as still as possible, John pontificates. Full of Budweiser and hubris, John goes on and on and on about how his coworker, Mike, was pissed he hadn't gotten the job himself. Sure, Mike had been there longer than John; sure, Mike had even *trained* John, but really: what should Mike expect? When your only other job has been down below, in the basement, what exactly do you expect? A red carpet rollout? The better the worker, the better the job. And John is the better worker. Simple as that.

(I'm guessing I don't have to tell you the color of Mike's skin.)

Marie interrupts: "If you're such a bigwig now, do something about this dust, will you?"

John yells back: "The day we don't have to wipe everything down, people will be hungry!"[10]

Marie says, "Good thing I'm not starving then." She gives a conspiratorial wink to Christine, then tosses a washcloth toward John. "Make yourself useful. Clean the table." Mother and daughter share a smile, lean forward, nuzzle each other's noses.

"All clean," Marie says.

*

There are only a few conditions under which steel can break: one is overheating. Subjected to incredibly high temperatures – temperatures even higher than 2900 and 3000

degrees Fahrenheit – steel can lose both hardness and strength because of changes in its microstructure. If overheating happens, however, repairs can be attempted. The metal is reheated and then quenched, a rapid-cooling process that hopefully returns the steel to its original state. If steel is burned, though: there's nothing that can be done. Nothing except throw it away.

In the early 1980s, Bethlehem Steel began facing competition for the first time: from foreign companies and from other products, primarily aluminum and plastic. The company downsized, and as local historian and anthropologist Karen Olson notes, "between 1983 and 2002," the mill's employment "declined by 80 percent."[11] No longer coveted: a 21222 zip code. Families packing up and moving away, northbound, *up* always being better in their minds, to Harford County's fancy-named neighborhoods like Fallston, Churchville, Bel Air. No longer ubiquitous: "Live, Work, Shop Dundalk" bumper stickers.[12] No longer expected: the pension funds once promised by a now bankrupt steel company.

G-Mom is like most Dundalkians: a living embodiment of our town's history yet oblivious to the history itself. What do you do when your town, so rich in history, so instrumental in the forming of *who you are*, takes everything away? Your husband's money. Your identity: once proudly middle class, now white trash. Your dignity. Your ability to chin up. Your daughter's health. Soon, your daughter's life. What, exactly, are you supposed to do?

You start picking your own battles.

*

Now, back to the house I share with my mother and grandmother. Back to 1999. I've just pulled Mom's Corolla into our makeshift grass driveway, and then, in the rear view, I see a car driving past our house, past our driveway, and then the driver parks at our driveway's edge. Looking in the mirror, it seems like Asshole Neighbor has parked in such a way that if I wanted, yes, I could back the car out, but it would take some maneuvering. Wouldn't be easy, let's put it that way.

And our front door opens, the screen door flung wide so violently that it smacks – bang! – against the side of the house. Out comes my grandmother, Marie, walking at a fast clip – almost running actually – past Mom's car and toward our fence. Toward AN.

"Now that's what I call a skilled parking job," G-Mom shouts.

Dundalkians: curtly passive-aggressive.

AN steps out of his vehicle. He flips his stringy, strawberry-blonde hair over his shoulder. He moves around his car's front, a slow pace, or – as G-Mom might call it – taking his good old time. He seems to be ignoring her question, so G-Mom tries again: "Well, are you going to move your car or what?"

And then he says what these types of men always seem to say, something cruel, dismissive, and cliché: "Bitch, back off."

"Tell me something I haven't heard before," G-Mom says. "Like the answer to my question: are you going to move your car? Or what?"

Dundalkians: strong-willed, no matter the consequences.

If G-Mom is out here, I realize, that means no one is inside with Mom. I exit the car, hurry inside. Over roughly a ten-year period, starting when I was nineteen all the way until she died when I was thirty-three, my mother had various cancers of various severity.

In my mind – really this is a protective device – I've collapsed all her cancers into one: lung. When I remember her bedroom, there is always a medical bed, always an IV, always mid-afternoon sunlight, and my mother, her eyes closed. She stirs when I touch her hand, then whispers, "Water." I place a cup against her lips; she takes a sip. Then she tries lifting her head, but it's too much. She sinks back into the bed. She says, "I have something to tell you." The first time she said this, I thought, *here it is*: something important, something about herself, something she's never told me before, but then she says, "This Dr. Phil person. He's up to something. Something no good. I don't know what it is, but I'm involved somehow."

When hospice was set up, we made a habit of keeping the TV on in her bedroom, all day and all night. If she wakes up and hears the TV, we figured, maybe she won't feel alone. But a few days before, I realized that CBS reruns its afternoon talk shows in the middle of the night: *The Talk*, then *Dr. Oz*, then *Dr. Phil*.

"I'll call Dr. Phil, Ma," I say. "I'll call him and tell him to back off."

"Okay, good," Mom says. "Thank you, bubby." Then: "Where's Mom?" Only when she was close to death did I hear her call my grandmother "Mom." For most of my life, she called her "Grandma," like I did.

"She's outside," I say.

"Doing what?"

"Gardening."

"You're lying," Mom says, her eyes meeting mine.

And then I hear the front door open, G-Mom's steps in the hall, and then there she is in the bedroom doorway, beaming and exuberant.

“What were you doing with the neighbor?” Mom asks.

“Being neighborly,” G-Mom says, her voice taking on an impish quality, like a toddler’s ornery defiance.

“And where’s our trashcan?”

G-Mom says, “Where I usually put it.”

“Mom,” my mother says. “Please. Stop.” And for just a moment, there she is for the last time, my mother’s true self: her regality, her assertiveness, her cut-through-the-crap directness. And this chills G-Mom; something within her, that same something within me, knows this is the last time Christine will be in the room with us. G-Mom leans over the bed, cradles my mother’s bloated face, and says, “I’m sorry, Chris. I love you. So much. I promise. I’ll try to let this one go.”

Dundalkians: elegiac, yet practical.

*

On September 10, 1858, to commemorate the forty-fourth anniversary of the 1814 invasion, eighteen-year-old Henry McComas and nineteen-year-old Daniel Wells – the two apprentice leatherworkers credited with killing British Major General Robert Ross – lay in state at the Maryland Institute. But no one really knows for sure who killed General Ross. It could have been Edward Aisquith, captain of the American sharpshooters; it could have been Private Aquila Randall, who had a monument built for him at the site where Ross collapsed. Friendly fire could have felled Ross. Or he could’ve been “hit by a canister shot.”[13] Or he could’ve been killed by McComas or Wells. No one knows for sure.

But someone heard a story about the British general being killed by a boy behind a tree. And someone decided that the two young men, McComas and Wells – these two volunteer soldiers, who were killed in battle the same day as General Ross – would make good martyrs; therefore, their bodies were exhumed, lay in state for three days, and then reburied in heroic fashion, amongst great celebration, in east Baltimore. In 1966, a children's book also credited McComas and Wells with the kill.[14] My mother's generation: raised on a shaky truth that became unquestioned fact.

When I was ten, she took me to the tree, told me that a young man named McComas aimed, shot, and killed a British general, an event that crippled the British's land defense, an event that gave us Americans the leg up, and finally, the win. She told me that McComas fired from this exact tree. This one right here. The one with Freedom Bail Bonds on its right and on its left, a $75,000 box-like house with an antlered mailbox.

Standing beneath that tree with my mother all those years ago: she wanted to teach a lesson about singularity, that special people had once lived here, and therefore special people could still live here. She wanted to give me hope: Who knows? Maybe we could be those special people. But I learned something else that day: my first lesson in metaphor. I watched my mother place a hand against bark, and I knew, even then, even as a little girl, that what she said did not match how she felt. My mother saw where we lived, what was happening to our town, as mirroring her life-happenings. How it felt to be stripped of everything you are, of your history, of all your special parts. How it felt to be pared down and down and down until you were only this: a forty-something woman in a no-good town standing next to an ordinary tree.

*

And as for my grandmother, well.

Here she is on a summer evening in 2016. She's 85. Her mind's feeble but her body is more than capable. She's taking out the trash. Her thin, see-through pajama top should've been thrown away long ago, but my mother has been in the grave three years now, and Mom was the only one Grandma would ever (kind of) listen to, and that's not saying much. And so the ratty shirt is on! Sneakers are on! Out we go and into the world! And just watch her: she's putting our trashcan in that same spot, her special spot, her screw-you spot. The crappy neighbor moved out a few years ago, and now next-door's only occupant parks like a not-crappy human: considerately, in his own makeshift grass driveway. Grandma constantly forgets this fact, though. Her short-term memory: not like it used to be. In Grandma's universe, the one in which Mom is still here and I'm still a teenager, the Asshole Neighbor still lives next door, and when he gets home…oh boy, just you watch. He's gonna block our driveway.

And I know exactly what G-Mom is thinking as she positions her trashcan:

That'll. Show. *Him*.

Notes

1. Quoted from Eshelman's *A Travel Guide to the War of 1812*, p. 82.
2. Quoted from Eshelman and Sheads, p. 83.
3. Quoted from Eshelman's *A Travel Guide to the War of 1812*, p. 83.
4. Quoted from Olson, p. 38.
5. Quoted from Olson, p. 58.
6. Summarized from Olson, p. 20.
7. Summarized from Olson, p. 16.
8. Quoted from Olson, p. 21.
9. Summarized from Olson, p. 60.
10. Quoted from Olson, p. 60.
11. Quoted from Olson, p. 112.
12. Summarized from Olson, p. 154.
13. Quoted from Eshelman and Sheads, p. 90.
14. Summarized from Eshelman and Kummerow, p. 160.

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Words that Stay

The last time I saw my uncle, he said this: Don't be like your mother.

He stood in the doorway of my house, an oafish figure, tall and bulky, and he remained there throughout our conversation, as if he wasn't allowed further entrance. This happened two days before I left for my freshman year at the University of Miami. I was home alone, packing. When Uncle Dave called, asking if he could stop by, I thought his intention was to say farewell, to wish me luck. This was a big deal, everyone made sure to tell me, being the first in the family to attend college. But my uncle said nothing congratulatory or complimentary – just that one sentence, offered quickly and succinctly, emphasized by a stiff nod.

I don't remember saying anything. I do remember my hands fidgeting, my fingers finally connecting with the upper register of our piano, a tinkling of keys similar to *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, when the sad tree loses its pine needles. This piano was my mother's one extravagance, an item bought without regard for mortgages or interest rates or consequences. My mother wanted a source of music in her house because she heard melodies in the strangest places: When I opened my college acceptances, she said the various scholarship offerings "read like Beethoven." One college, in addition to a scholarship, offered a laptop. I had typed my applications on the old Commodore downstairs. My essays printed with a drilling hum. Removing the dotted edges of the yellowed computer paper was like slicing off bread crusts. When my mother heard about the laptop offer, she said one word: "Brava."

And now, here was my uncle, telling me not to be like her. As he left, I thought, *Fuck you*. A few months later, I heard his voice on my answering machine. He and his family were in Disney World, he said. Maybe they could drive down. Maybe they could stop by to see me. So many times I've tried to recreate that message. I try to imagine my uncle's voice: nasal but jubilant, as though coming not from him but from a puppet above his head. Sometimes I think he ended his phrases with exclamations: *We're in Disney! Maybe we can stop by! We'll be there in four hours! Tops!* Sometimes I think I heard a bit of reticence, his voice dropping a register as he read their hotel room number and then repeated it. As he said, "You got that, kiddo? I'll leave our info with your mother, too, just in case." I have to imagine all of these things because, once the message was over, I hit the delete button. I hit it more than once, actually; I hit it several times, each hit getting progressively stronger and harder, until my pointer finger felt tingly. And then, less than a month later, my uncle died.

The doctors said he had been born with a terminal heart defect, one never detected. He had seen his primary just the week before, who had said – my mother quoted – that Dave was "in shipshape," that he was "almost good as new." Through the phone, my mother's voice still had that lyrical quality, soft and tender. Those few months were the longest I had been away from her, a stretch of time now, looking back, I recognize as the loneliest of my life. I could hear her inhale, and then a sigh rushed against the receiver, causing a muddy fuzz.

"You know what, Bub?" Her voice cooled. "Sometimes death is better."

*

My mother was the eldest of three: John in the middle, five years her junior; and Dave the baby. My mother had a decade on Dave. I often think of that gap in time: when my mother graduated high school, Dave was in 4th grade. When she gave birth to me in 1980, Dave could, if he wanted, buy cigarettes and alcohol. When her only child went to college in ’98, he died at 36.

I really don’t have many memories of Uncle Dave. John was the one who played with me, who lifted me up to see exhibits at the zoo, who posed with my Cabbage Patches on the couch. What I know of Dave reads like dry facts: He worked as a mechanic, first for Nissan and then for the Maryland Transit Authority. In high school, he dated a girl named Donna, who gave me a stuffed cat she called Boo Boo Kitty. I was the flower-girl in his wedding. He did not marry Donna, a fact that, even though I was only seven, made me very sad. He lived in a rowhouse on Wareham Drive. He had a daughter, Danielle, when I was nine. A dog named Pepito. A ’96 Nissan Sentra. He told me before I left for college, “Don’t be like your mother.” When he died, my mother said, “Sometimes death is better.”

*

It would’ve been such an easy thing to do. When my mother said, “Sometimes death is better,” I could’ve asked her what she meant. I hadn’t asked my uncle what he meant either, when he said that I shouldn’t be like my mother. This was the person I’d become, the person I’d always been: Once, when I was small, my mother and I stood in line at the drug store, and the person behind us lightly tugged my ponytail. I remember looking at my mother, her blurred face haloed by the light of the store’s window. The person behind us tugged my hair again, and I heard a playful laugh, a grandpa’s laugh.

But I didn't acknowledge the man, even after he and my mother engaged in friendly conversation. I never saw the man's face. This is who I was then, and this is who I continued to be. Someone who gets her hair tugged and refuses to turn around. Someone who has questions but never asks them. Someone for whom regret is an inescapable consequence of her character.

For me, memory has become a locket my mother gave me when I was small, one modeled after the locket in the movie version of *Annie*, the one given to her by her parents. It's split in two, with smooth outer edges but cracked along the inside. Annie had one half, her parents the other. She would know she had found them, they told her, when she found the other half. Movie marketing had placed a version of that locket in my possession – one half mine, the other my mother's. We wore them for months, until the metal began leaving green spots on our necks. We tried putting them together, but the cracks never quite fit. You could tell they were meant to connect, but the metal bent at odd angles; in some places the edges touched, but in others an edge was too high or too low, a defect made in production or during transportation, perhaps, something meant-to-be but coming up not-quite.

*

Once, when I was five, my mother, my father, and I stood in our bathroom. It was a tight space, and all three of us were huddled together. I was in my mother's arms, and my father was yelling. My father: I can't even remember his face. If I saw him on the street or at the mall or in any other public place, I don't think there'd be the tiniest spark of recognition. But I do remember his hands, how they pushed, how his fingernails scraped my bare legs, and then the two of us – my mother and I – were falling. For me,

the backward movement was like a smooth swing ride, and so I was surprised when I heard the hard sounds. The clack, the bang. My mother's head hitting the shower tile, the splatter of body colliding with bathtub. She had cradled me in such a way I had felt nothing at all. Mother as parachute: securing my safe landing.

*

When I was sixteen, performing in a mall with my high school show choir, my mother stepped forward and out of the crowd. She was a regal figure, her brown hair newly permed and her blouse carefully ironed. After "Walking in a Winter Wonderland" ended, she yelled, "Why is my kid always in the second row? Why is my baby never in the first row?" This statement was directed toward my choir teacher – of that I am sure – but my mother looked directly at me, her cherub face all twisted and red.

Embarrassed, I did the only thing I could think of. I ran – off the bleachers and through the food court, past Arby's, past Lane Bryant, and then, in front of Claire's, she caught up, gripped my arm. It still amazes me how quickly she moved, the swiftness of unchecked emotion. She held me close and placed her lips next to my ears. Her voice was low, crackly, Saltines crushed by a rolling pin: "Why are you doing this to me?"

And then a security guard appeared. "Miss," he said. His hand hung in mid-air, frozen, mere inches above his gun holster. "Is this woman bothering you?"

*

She planned an Orlando trip when I was four years old. One morning, I woke in her arms. We were on a bus, surrounded by strangers.

"Look." My mother pointed out the window where there was nothing, really, just fields, but the sun was cresting, peaking a little over the horizon. Only years later did I

realize what she made me witness: my first sunrise. I sank back into the cradle of her arms, and I pushed my fingers into her hair: lush, brown hair that was so different from my own. My hair was long and stringy and took hours to untangle, a task my mother did, faithfully, with a fine-toothed comb, every day. In my early memories, she always wore the same t-shirt, sky-blue and faded at the right shoulder, the spot I often grabbed in a tight fist when she held me and I wanted attention.

"Bubby," she said. "Time to go."

The bus let us out in a field. As we moved forward with the crowd, I kept my hand pressed against her leg, which was cool and smooth. The group stopped; everyone waited. A man, motionless, held a camera to his eye. I began to stomp my feet and whine, and there was my mother's soft voice: "Just a little while longer, Bub." Then, in the distance: a rumble. A tiny stream of fire soared into the air, higher and higher, a shooting star, a comet.

"A spaceship, Bubby," my mother said, her voice awash with awe.

*

We were leaving JoAnn Fabrics in a hurry; I must've been seven or eight; my mother's hand was in a tight grip around my wrist. "Don't ever do that again," she said. In the car, I slumped in the passenger seat, running my fingers over the gray seatbelt. She didn't speak to me for hours afterwards, and for hours, I thought about what I had done. I had followed her throughout the store. I hadn't touched anything. I hadn't said anything, either. I wanted to say *I'm sorry* for what I had done, because she had said, "Don't ever do that again," but the only thing I could recall with clarity was this – at home, I walked

back and forth in front of where she sat in the living room, and she did not acknowledge me. It was like I was invisible, a commercial failing to keep her interest.

*

In 1968, my mother sat in a chemistry classroom, the lone girl in a cluster of boys. I know this the way I know almost everything about her, which is, I really don't know how I know. The boys in this classroom were wrestlers, with letter jackets, buzz cuts and a stench of vinyl, sweat. Funny she's there, in that roomful of boys, when the one she really wanted was far away. The one she really wanted, how well I know his name: Bobby Thornton. In 1968, Bobby was in the army. Every week, he wrote my mother a letter, and in those letters he told her about the men who fainted in the drafting office; his dreams of swamps, rustling leaves. In 1968, Bobby's arms and thighs were not thick. No, Bobby was lean and handsome and – most importantly – Bobby would never do what one of those wrestlers was doing right then: standing up in a teacher-less classroom, walking to the chalkboard, grabbing some chalk. Their teacher was Mr. Rob Rising, a man who would teach me the same subject in the same classroom thirty years later, but that day he had yet to arrive. The wrestler, in large, block letters, wrote *IS ROB RISING?* and then, with a goofy chuckle, pulled down the projector screen.

In a few minutes, Mr. Rob Rising walked into his classroom, apologized for being late, gripped the bottom edge of the projector screen, and, as it lifted, revealed the question underneath. He then released a diatribe my mother cannot quite recall. But this she remembered: Mr. Rising looked through the boys until his gaze landed on her. He asked, "Who did this?" and my mother, whether she was shocked at being the only one deemed trustworthy, or whether she was pledging her allegiance elsewhere, said nothing.

After dismissal, one of the wrestlers, a boy named Chip, asked whether or not she'd be interested, or would have the time, or *mind* – my mother remembers he said *mind* – being their manager. The manager of the wrestling team: my mother liked the sound of that. Since Bobby left, she had filled her days with schoolwork, writing and rewriting essays until all letters were uniform, with no smudges or misspellings.

Yes, she told Chip. *Yes, I will be your manager.*

In her letters, she wrote Bobby about the matches, all the new terminology she was learning. The tucks and holds and nelsons. How sometimes she couldn't stand the tension, the worry that flooded her body as she watched those boys spin on the ground, one on top of another, their skin shiny, their upper thigh muscles accentuated by tight singlet. But she didn't tell him this: that after a match, Chip found her, touched her elbow with a calloused hand.

"Will you go to the prom with me, Chrissy?" he said.

This much I know: my mother said yes. This much I know: she told Chip they were going as friends; *Bobby*, she told Chip, *is the only boy I will ever love*, a declaration that would remain true for the rest of her life.

And it is always here that I pause. It is here I always remember my uncle's last words to me: Don't be like your mother, he had said. But on that night in 1968, as Chip helped my mother out of his car, as she smoothed her prom dress before walking into the auditorium, my uncle was eight years old, across town, in the back room of a red, box-like house, asleep. What could little Dave really know about my mother, if anything at all? But still. I imagine everything he might've meant.

Don’t be like your mother, he had said. Don’t let your prom date, your friend, kiss your cheek after he says goodnight, after he says thank you and looks like he really means it. And then, the next morning, don’t write Bobby about the kindness you’ve done. Bobby is the jealous type; can’t you see that, Chrissy? He’s not going to understand your kindness. Don’t tell him about the prom, Chrissy. Don’t. *Don’t.* Don’t wait for the mailman. He has bills, circulars, 25 cents off Tide detergent. Nothing for you. Don’t cry a few weeks later when you finally do start getting mail, all of your letters returned, one by one, to sender.

And years later, more than a decade later, in the fall of ’79, when you see Bobby Thornton in the grocery store and he doesn’t see you, don’t touch your swollen belly, where the only child you will ever have is growing inside. Don’t let irrationality turn into hard truths, because what we believe about ourselves is something insidious we pass on. Don’t think: I’m worthless, I’m horrible, and that’s why he left. Because these are all untrue things that baby will eventually learn, untrue things that will eventually become facts, facts that baby will always believe, not about you but about herself. Don’t let that be the legacy you leave your daughter: that she is somehow less than. Don’t do it, Chris.

Don’t.

All of these *don’ts*: I’ve imagined my uncle saying them all. But all he really said was, don’t be like your mother.

And then fifteen years after he died, my mother was dying. About one month after her 62nd birthday, her hospice nurse took me aside, privately, and told me she probably had two weeks left, and that I should consider putting an end to putting liquid food in her IV. “Of course, discuss this with her first,” the nurse said, “but the food really isn’t doing

anything anymore." And so I told my mother what the nurse had said – about the food, not about the two weeks – and then, of all the questions I could've asked her, all the gaps in her life I wanted to fill, somehow, I only asked her this: "In high school, you were manager of the wrestling team, right, Mom?"

My mother closed her eyes. Squeezed them tight.

"Bubby," she said, "just stop the food."

*

I remember now. A memory of Uncle Dave.

In sixth grade, I became obsessed with magic, with magicians, and my mother, always one to feed my interests, purchased a book of magic tricks from the library's Used section. I studied the few that caught my eye, and knowing we were to have Easter dinner at our house that year, I planned a magic show – ten tricks in all. I even made a Playbill of sorts, writing my own bio on one page, then listing each trick on the other. With my family gathered around the dining room table, they turned to the kitchen, where I had set up my stage – a folding table, really, covered with a white sheet. I made a pencil turn into rubber. I made paper clips jump. I sawed a lady in half, not a real lady, but one I had cut out of yellow construction paper. And then, for my final trick, I balanced an egg – upright – on the table.

"How'd you do that?" Uncle Dave leapt up. Everyone had watched politely throughout the performance, clapping when necessary, gasping when appropriate, their actions indicative of those catering to someone young and melodramatic, but now, Uncle Dave displayed genuine incredulity. "How'd you do that?" he asked again.

“Daddy,” Danielle said, “she’s a magician!” Danielle was a toddler then, maybe two or three.

“Do you want me to tell you the trick?” I said.

“No.” Dave crossed his arms over his chest. “Don’t tell me.”

But for hours afterwards, as we ate chocolate cake and homemade raviolis, as Danielle hunted for Easter eggs in the backyard, as Uncle John chased her across the grass, around trees and through bushes, my other uncle sat in front of a turned-off TV.

“Dave, for crying out loud,” my mother said. “Why won’t you just let her tell you?”

So together we walked into the kitchen, and I lifted the sheet covering my table. In the table’s center: a mound of salt. Before everyone arrived, I told him, I poured that salt and then covered it with the sheet, so later, when I placed the egg on the table, it would stand upright, like magic.

And then my uncle said if I hadn’t told him, if I hadn’t exposed the trick, if I hadn’t explained the unity of all four elements – the egg, the table, the sheet, the salt – he would’ve never, *never* he said, touching the edge of his moustache, figured it out.

The Echo Migrant

Your student Bill's first narrative essay is about this: when he was twelve, he stole a six-pack from the refrigerator and rode his bike to a bench outside of the middle school, where he waited for a friend to show up. A group of high schoolers showed up instead, and they roughed him up, stole his cell phone and the stolen beer. Years later, as a young man, he returned to that bench. He sat on that bench, by himself, for hours.

In your office, you ask him, "What were you waiting for?" When he doesn't answer, you ask him the questions you find yourself asking all of your students: "What is your thesis? Or in other words, if you see yourself as a 'character,' how does that character change? Or: what did this life moment help you learn? About yourself?"

"I don't know," he says.

"Think about it?"

"Yes," he says. "I know something's there. I just haven't found a way to articulate it. I was a punk, for one." He laughs. "But there's more to it, I know."

"You will find it," you say. "Give it time."

"Yes," he says. "I will find it."

You smile. So does Bill.

Colin approaches you after class and says he needs a B. You say, "Well, that is up to you." He repeats, "I need a B." He is tall. Preppy. You think he is privileged because the friends he writes about have maids, nannies, indoor basketball courts. He writes about getting drunk at age twelve. Cheating on his girlfriend at eighteen.

"In retrospect," you say, "what do you think about the choices made? Do you think these actions have inspired change in any way?"

He doesn't answer your question. "I need a B," he repeats. In the end, he does earn a B, but not before he writes on your evaluation: "Could've done w/o all the comments of the teacher."

You mostly teach introductory writing: ENG 1000 or WR 100 or COMP 101. You have taught at five institutions, either as an adjunct or teaching assistant, with up to five sections a semester, but now you are a full-time instructor at a college in Maryland. You have taught for most of your twenties; now, you are a month shy of your 34th birthday. English Composition: over and over and over again. Various iterations and revisions here and there, of course – you are always looking for ways to improve, both your syllabus and your self – but really it's been a decade of teaching the same thing(s). Again and again and again.

Once, in grad school, you took a migration-themed fiction seminar, and your professor mentioned an article she'd read about adjuncts, how the article-writer had called adjuncts *echo migrants*, and this phrase – *echo migrant* – has stayed with you. You wished you remembered more about your class's conversation about adjuncts, about the article's contents, but you have always remembered *echo migrant*. Such a lovely depiction of the harrowing journey taken each time an adjunct sets foot in a classroom. All adjuncts: a collective, a royal "we," a 2nd person tense. How each semester manifests different elements – different students, different classrooms, maybe a MWF schedule one semester and a TTR the next, maybe even a different college in a different state than the

one in which you taught the year before. Each course, though, is also an echo. Students enter with similar insecurities/attitudes/ prejudices/backgrounds, but into your syllabus you have planted an arc, a journey to follow. A beginning. An a-ha moment. A denouement. And your hope, your wish, is that at least a few of your students see this path and take it – Students, please, *take it!* – and, every semester, at least a few of them do.

And a few of them don't.

You are not the giving-up sort, though, so you have molded the course so that the focus is the self. You have been cautioned against this approach – e.g., self is self-*ish*, a colleague once told you – but you have never quite been on board with this dismissive sentiment. You think – you *know* – that narrative is integral. For the most part, you instruct students to create narrative hybrids. Combining analysis with narrative; explanation with narrative; description with narrative. Everything you do, it seems, comes back to narrative.

Character as self.

Thesis not as self-*ish* but as self-*realization*.

And here is your hope: that maybe if students can plot a narrative arc, if they can track how a character changes, then maybe they can do that in their own lives, too.

This, really, is what you hope for. This, really, is the echo you yearn to hear.

Again and again and again.

You ask students to keep a journal. You collect these journals in late September or February, depending on semester. In Melissa's notebook, she has written that the first

assignment was stupid given by a stupid teacher who probably couldn't think of anything less stupid.

Dan hates homework. He hates it so much that hating homework is the topic of his first paper. It is a waste of his life, his existence, his time, and the fact that he is writing this paragraph, this sentence, this *word*, right now is a waste. His second paper is – can you guess? – about how much he hates homework.

Bridgid earned a disappointing grade on the first assignment. When she enters your office, she starts crying and cannot stop. You hand her tissue, after tissue, after tissue, until the box is almost empty.

At this time in the semester, the only plot points you remember in your own life are these: getting up, teaching, crying, going to bed. Doing it again the next day. And the next. And the next.

And it is usually about this time: you tell your students a story from your own personal narrative. You stand in front of your class. You begin to speak.

Your mom was a single mom. She could've gone to college but couldn't because of money. She wasn't going to let the same happen to you. *Over my dead body*, she said. She worked at an insurance company during the day and during each summer also worked at Camden Yards, hustling up and down aisles during baseball games, selling lemonade. An unspoken truth always simmering between the two of you: She had given

her life to give you yours. You cannot let her down. You are accepted to college – *Multiple colleges! All of the colleges you applied to!* your mother shouts – but to keep your scholarships and to keep your mother from putting any more of her money toward your education, you must also keep a high GPA: 3.75.

(Some of your students gasp.)

You decide you will only get A's. And you do, first semester, get all A's, even if that meant spending hours on a single paragraph of an essay comparing *The Age of Innocence* and *The Awakening*. Even if it meant memorizing ten pages of film notes and in the morning, during your daily run, reciting those notes in your head instead of listening to your Walkman. Even if it meant that, in the end, you could count all of your friends on one hand. Your mother, though, was happy, and that really was all that mattered.

The next semester, you take a Communication course taught by the University's Vice Provost. Your first assignment: *What is the meaning of meaning? Two pages*. You panic. You think this is what it must feel like to have a heart attack. After a week of torment, you have two pages. You know it is okay writing – you can put subject in front of verb in front of direct object – but that is about all you can say.

You get a C.

You think: *Bastard*.

You taste venom in your mouth. You hate this professor, with his charming good looks, his salt-and-pepper hair, the way his voice booms, his many stories about his WASP tendencies. He calls himself that, a WASP. You know the acronym but you push

it aside and consider the real thing: WASP. How badly he has stung you, how you have swelled up, thinking of nothing but this: *I will show him.*

Before the next test, you spend a week in the study hall.

Do you want to watch the Grammys? a friend asks.

No.

Do you want to take a walk?

No.

Do you want to eat dinner?

No.

You realize the supersize bag of spearmint candies, the one your mother sent in a care package, is empty.

A week later, the professor enters the classroom, graded tests in hand. “Someone in here got a 100,” he says, writing 100 in large print at the top of the blackboard, and then, drawing a solid line all the way to the board’s bottom, “and someone in here got a 5.” You know, even before he hands you the graded test, before he stops you, congratulates you, says *well done*, that you are the 100. At the end of the semester, your grade is an A+. Your mother cries. “Happy tears,” she says through the phone.

Your friend, though, the friend who wanted to watch the Grammys with you, is interested in the course. She asks what you studied. All you remember is *what is the meaning of meaning two pages*. The C. *Bastard*. How you got revenge by getting an A+. How that A+ made your mother cry happy tears. Your friend is miffed, but you are telling the truth: that really is all you can remember.

Years later, after you have graduated summa cum laude and are in your last year of grad school, you get caught up in your teaching and put your thesis on the backburner. A month before its due date, you submit the thesis to your advisor, and a week later, he hands it back to you. “For such a smart girl you really are stupid,” he says. “Do it again.”

You think: *Bastard*.

This professor is notorious for telling-it-like-it-is, and in the past, he had been generous with his praise, too generous. Once he called you “an evolution of the species.” He read your work aloud in class. Now you know he is being honest with you. Those 100 pages of thesis, your two-year project, your story about an adulterous red-haired woman, is a piece of shit.

You throw the pages out. You start over. You write through weekends. For the first time in your educational career, you are more concerned with process than product. You had been stung by your advisor’s words, by him calling you *stupid*, but just as he had been right about your thesis, he had also been right about your stupidity. You understand his particular definition of the word *stupid* and his application of this word toward you. You had been stupid for a long time; maybe you had been stupid your entire life. When you realize this, you are not only relieved, but happy. You tell your mother this: that you are happy. “I’m happy, too,” she says. You are also happy about your revised thesis. You submit the thesis to your advisor. A week later, he hands it back to you and says only three words, three words you will forever remember: “That’s my girl.”

And now, to the class seated before you, you say, “What did I learn? What did I learn about learning, about grades? How did my character change?” Because it is close to the beginning of the semester, they look around at one another. They are silent. Maybe

you haven't told the story well enough; that is always a possibility. "What do you think I learned?" you ask again. You decide to wait them out, but you can only wait so long. You have other lessons to attend to and only twenty-five minutes left in class. Finally you say, "One day, I hope you will understand what I mean."

You wonder if any of them do. But you can't help it. You find yourself telling this story again and again and again. Year after year after year.

You revise your syllabus. Instead of written comments on papers, you will meet with students one-on-one, for thirty minutes, twice a semester. You decide to do this even though you have eighty students and would spend an hour with each of them, totaling eighty hours. You lead the first conference. During the second conference, roles are reversed. *They* must conference *you*. They are the teacher; you are the student. They must critique their own work. "It's all about learning to self edit," you say. They groan. What you don't say, what you never say (you have been teaching them about *show don't tell*, after all): Please please please, see this class as something more than what you think it is. It's about learning to think for yourself, and in that thinking, maybe somewhere there is a meaningful realization. Please, students, fill in your particular life realization here:_________________________.

Jackie's roommate only eats a fried onion for dinner.

"Every night?" you ask.

"Every night," she says. "Well, not every night. Sometimes she pairs that with a piece of lettuce."

The roommate needs help. And, you're afraid, looking at her sad eyes, that Jackie might need help, too.

"What do you think about what your roommate's doing?" you ask her.

"Well," she says, hesitant. "It's really smelly in our dorm. Frying onions is smelly."

"Have you thought about leaving?" You can hear your voice rising, taking on an urgent tone, and you try to calm yourself. "Have you thought about asking to be transferred to another room?"

Her answer is quick. "No, not at all," she says. She pauses again. "It is really smelly, though."

When he was a young boy, Sam had cancer and lost all of his hair. Now he has thick, lush, dirty-blonde locks. Sam wants to transfer. He comes to your office and shows you an essay he wrote, comparing his experience with cancer to the battles of *Lord of the Rings*. You make some suggestions. Later, he tells you the Tufts admissions officer commented on the essay's strengths. He thanks you. Even though he was accepted to Cornell, in the end, he chooses Tufts.

"Why Tufts? Why not Cornell?" you ask.

He hesitates before speaking. "There's a girl at Tufts. Not just *a* girl. *The* girl."

Your gut tells you to scream at him, to yell *No! Please rethink this!* To just tell him straight out that this is a bad idea. But really who are you to judge? Who are you to tell this boy what to do? This boy who has looked Death squarely in the face and has said, *Go away, Death! I am going to live!* And furthermore, telling Sam what to do would

make you a hypocrite. What have you been teaching them all semester but *show don't tell?*

"Are there programs at Tufts that you're interested in? Writing programs, maybe?" you say instead.

"I haven't really looked into it all that much," he says. He must've read the look on your face because he continues with "I'll be fine, Professor. Don't you worry about me."

But you can't help it. You know you will.

Kerry has writer's block. She e-mails you. Says she has no idea what to write for this upcoming assignment. Can you help her? When she arrives at your office, you bombard her with questions: How old are you? What are your hobbies? What is your favorite book? Favorite TV show? Favorite class? Where were you born? Do you have siblings? What is your relationship with your parents like? Your mom? Your dad? What are your passions? What is your favorite thing, right here, right now, right at this moment, for the love of God, Kerry, you have to help me out here, you have to say something.

Kerry shrugs. "Can't you just give me a topic to write about?" she says. "All of my high school teachers did."

In class, you get tired of their blasé attitude, their blank stares, their lack of vocal participation, so you yell at them. "Get up! Get up! Do some jumping jacks!" They stare at you. "I mean it!" You jump with them, and afterwards, they talk a little more than they

did before. You think, *Success!* You consider this session a small triumph, you can't believe the happiness that's coursing through you – this, this right now, is what it feels like to get it right, to know you're a good teacher, to have made something better, even in a small way. But months later, on your evaluations, under least productive activity, you read this line in small black print: "Doing jumping jacks."

Someone else writes: I hate how she grades. She needs to be re-evaluated by the college.

Someone else writes: She is the greatest teacher of my life. The greatest.

You stop reading your evaluations.

Mid-semester, you say, "I'm going to tell you another story." This is the personal narrative that always comes out mid-semester, year after year after year.

You take a breath. Here it goes, once again.

When you were a college sophomore, you fell in love with a short boy.

(Some of them laugh.)

Really, he was so short he asked you to stop wearing heels. And then, he didn't ask you to his fraternity formal, because he knew another girl who happened to be 4'5''. *With* heels. Another friend in the same fraternity asks you to the formal instead. Against your better judgment, you say yes. The formal is in Key Largo, the day before your twentieth birthday. As you make the drive from Miami, you wonder why you love him.

The short boy. He is smart, for one, the smartest boy you have ever known. As a teenager, he discovered a chemical compound that improves sunscreen. In 1998, he was featured in USA Today as being one of the top high school seniors in the country. On your first date, he took you to a seafood restaurant. When he ate snow crabs, butter dripping down his hands, he licked his fingers. You liked that: *licking* as down-to-earth; *licking* as not pretentious, not snobby.

When you arrive at the formal, he is two sheets to the wind. He offers you a sloppy happy birthday, and then over the next several hours proceeds to dirty-dance with every girl on the dance floor, until you have had enough, until you approach him and say, “Thanks for ruining my birthday,” to which he responds with a four letter word, a word that begins with a C, a word he screams so that everyone can hear, even over the loud dance beat.

You run away, past your date, past your friends, to your car, where you decide that, even though it is 3 a.m. and there are no real light posts on Route 1, going home to Miami is best. During the hour drive, you listen to Macy Gray’s “I Try” over and over and over.

(Again, some of your students laugh.)

Later, another friend informs you that your love spent the night with another boy’s date.

The devastation, its all-consuming weight: you have never felt anything like it.

This devastation is only compounded by the fact that, in a month, you are scheduled to have orthodontic surgery. You had worn braces your entire sophomore year, and, even though you hate to admit it, you often wallowed in self-pity, crying whenever

you heard the track “Unpretty” by TLC; blushing in shame during the visits to your orthodontist, when you sat in between ten-year-olds and stared at framed posters of Woody and Buzz. You are having this surgery because you have a jaw disease. If you don’t have this surgery, you will most likely, one day, get cancer of the esophagus. Your surgeon tells you that a possible side effect is loss of feeling in the face. “Don’t worry,” he says. “You won’t drool.” You wonder whether or not he is kidding.

After ten hours in the OR and five in recovery, you can barely make out the figure of your mother in the hallway, and when she sees you, her hand jerks to her mouth in surprise. You cannot breathe. Or talk. Or use the bathroom by yourself. The nurse tells you that if you cannot urinate, then someone will have to come in and drag it out of you. You do not want that to happen. You write scribbles to your mother: C-A-N-T-B-R-E-A-T-H-E. They test your breathing canal. Say everything is fine. They send you home.

Sitting on the La-Z-Boy, you again scribble: C-A-N-T-B-R-E-A-T-H-E. It is past midnight. Your mouth is wired shut. Your sinuses have been sliced so that they could adjust your upper jaw. You cannot feel your face, but you can sense the blood pooling behind your cheeks. You go to sleep, wondering if you will wake up. Surprisingly, you are calm when you ponder the possibility that you may not. In the morning, you write: C-A-N-T-B-R-E-A-T-H-E. Then, in the bathroom, supported by your mother, you blow your nose, and a blood clot appears on the white tissue. A round, dark thing. Veiny. *A raisin!* you want to shout but you remember: you cannot speak. Then you faint.

A few days later, you visit the surgeon, and in the waiting room, a little girl, who you cannot see because you cannot yet fit your glasses on your face, says, “Ewww, Mommy. Will I look like that?”

When you get home, you badger your mother with pokes until she relents and helps you stand in front of the bathroom mirror. She holds your lenses in front of your face. You wish you hadn't looked. "Well, you're not drooling," your mother says, and the laughter surprises you, comes up your throat and gets caught in your mouth, trapped by teeth and wire.

You begin to find joy in the unexpected. This is the summer you become Hanson's number one fan; you wonder if anyone else understands the masterpiece that is MMMBop. **Listen* to these lyrics*, you write to your mother. **Little boys* wrote these lyrics!!!* You love the grooves in the La-Z-Boy, the way that, if you rub your fingers against it hard enough, you feel a slight tingle on your skin. You live for days your mother takes you for a drive. She dresses you in one of her button-down blouses – button-downs to avoid pulling anything over your bloated, sore face – and you love the way her garment feels loose on you, how the air from the window moves through the fabric, cool air against flushed skin. When your glasses finally fit, you pay particular attention to your mother's face: the straightness of her nose, the chubbiness of her cheeks. You have never seen anything more beautiful.

In a month, with your mouth still bloated but no longer wired shut, you are strong enough to sit in front of the computer. You open your e-mail, see a message from the boy you loved. You do not open it. In fact, you delete it. Click. Delete. Like a reflex. Later that day, your mother takes you for a ride to KFC. In the drive-thru, you can smell the spices, and your tummy grumbles when you hear her ordering mashed potatoes. Back home, at the kitchen table, you open your mouth a tiny bit – for that's all you're able to do right now, open your mouth just a tiny bit – and you slide the blue baby spoon against

your tongue, and then you taste them – the best damn mashed potatoes you've ever had. You motion to your mother – hurry! *hurry!* – you need your writing pad and pencil. In a flurry of scribbles, you start writing MMMBop lyrics: *Hold on to the ones who really care. In the end they'll be the only ones there. When you get old and start losing your hair, can you tell me who will still care?*

Your mother starts to cry. "Happy tears," she says. She squeezes your hand, puts her other hand against your swollen, sweaty face.

The end.

Your students are staring at you. Most are smiling. You think, "Okay. Maybe this isn't so bad."

But reading their next drafts, you are disappointed. As always. They still write about high school graduations, the first day of college, service trips to Appalachia. Dan B., though, writes about a skiing vacation with his father. His father booked a room at a run-down motel; they are the motel's only occupants. The proprietor constantly hovers. He wakes them in the middle of the night when the power goes out; he checks to see, in the morning, if they know where the best breakfasts are. Preoccupied with slopes and bunny hills and not losing balance on the lift, Dan B. and his father barely notice the proprietor begin painting the outside of the dilapidated motel a dazzling white. He is old, and his work is slow, and a few days later, only a third of the building is painted. That same day, Dan B. breaks his arm on a slope and the visitors hurry away, the motel once again empty, the proprietor once again alone. The last thing Dan B. sees, as his father's

car exits the drive, is the proprietor putting away the paint cans. *Did the man finish painting the building after we left?* Dan B. wrote. *I don't think he did.*

In your office, by yourself, you give Dan a rousing round of applause.

Four times a semester, year after year after year, you have a stack of eighty essays on your desk. Eighty narratives or narrative-hybrids. You want to give complete attention to each piece of writing so you've done the math. To return the essays within a week, you must read eleven essays one day and twelve the next, and then eleven the day after that, and then twelve the next day, and this pattern on and on and on until all are read. So here you are in your office, toward this particular semester's end, on Day 4 of reading their last drafts, and thus far, these are the subjects:

Essay 35: Vacation/service trip.

Essay 36: Sports injury.

Essay 37: Divorce.

Essay 38: High school graduation.

Essay 39: Vacation/service trip.

Essay 40: Tension between child and parent(s).

Essay 41: Death of grandparent.

Essay 42: Death of parent.

You pause. You hold this essay – this essay about the death of a parent – in your hands. Of your eighty students, there is always at least one who has suffered this tremendous loss, always, without fail, and as you read this particular essay, a slightly different version year after year after year, you consider it naive: to think that, from a six-

to-eight page essay, you can really know or completely understand this particular student's experience. Or for them to know yours. But you steam ahead and consider the similarities anyway. You always do.

Does this student know, for example, that once your mother stretched out her arms to you and said, "As long as you are alive, Bubby, I will not die"? And do they know that just a little while after that: the hospice nurse took you aside and told you the liquid food – Osmolite 1.5 – was the only thing keeping your mother going, that Osmolite was sustenance and that yes, you were a diligent and wonderful daughter to keep opening the cans, measuring and then adding potassium, and then connecting the gravity bag to her feeding tube, day after day after day, but the Osmolite was doing little but bloat her tummy and increase her suffering – *Can't you see how bloated her tummy is, Daughter?* – and then the hospice nurse put her hand on your wrist and said you should tell your mother all of this, you should be open and honest and just get it out on the table, and so you did, in the same meandering way. It was your mother who was concise.

"Stop the food," she said.

Do your students know that this is how you've packaged your grief? That you've compartmentalized it into an English Composition course? Usually the parent-death essays appear late in the semester (usually your students lay bare their vulnerabilities no earlier than this) and how appropriate, because you've already laid the groundwork, it's all been built up: your in-class stories, ostensibly composition-related (who could argue they're not? *Process over product! You *do* have something to write about!*) but really this is how you bring your mother back to life: in class, in retelling your stories, in which Mom is sometimes a tangential and sometimes a major character. And now you read

about the death of a parent, and you remember the death of your own, and in your office you start to cry (this is the only time you allow yourself this; once, at each semester's end; this is the only echo you allow to return, for how else would you get through each day?) and you ask what you always ask: *What did this moment help you learn? About yourself?* And you forgive this one telling statement, which you say out loud, in your office, alone: My mother was the greatest love of my life.

There is a knock on your office door. You look up from Essay 42, quickly wipe away your tears. It is Brittany. "Do you have a minute?" she asks. "To talk about my draft?" For half an hour, you get lost in her yarn about an adulterous boyfriend, about a back-stabbing best friend. You look at her tight brown curls, her plastic spectacles, and forgotten are the twenty-four unopened cans of Osmolite 1.5. Forgotten are your mother's last moments, when you remembered that hearing is the last viable sense so you shouted at her as loudly as you could: *You were the best mom! The best!* Forgotten: that the last time you spoke to your mother was the first time you put her in past tense.

A half hour later, when Brittany leaves with a "Thank you!" you barely remember your own narrative at all. You have put your grief away. To return next semester. You know it will return. It always does.

But until then, it is back to the usual.

On the first day of class, you start with a Getting to Know You and, at the end, you can recite all of their names. Most are impressed and clap, but you have been doing this for years, and by now, it is old hat. You know all the tricks.

Some names are difficult – the Laurens, the Katies, the Amandas – because how many Amandas have you known? You have at least one each semester, so as you look at this Amanda right now, you note what makes her special – her wire-rimmed glasses, the way her styled hair dips to the left, the polka-dotted koozie on her desk. You think: Amanda. Polka-dotted koozie.

Other names are easier.

You remember Dana: the same name as your childhood best friend.

You remember George: in 1988, you were George Michael's number one fan.

You remember Ardené: you have never taught a student with that name before.

You remember Christine: that was your mother's name.

VITA

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