

12-2021

## Shatter and Tar

Jacklyn J. Hopper  
jhopper2@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hopper, Jacklyn J., "Shatter and Tar" (2021). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2941.  
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2941>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

Shatter and Tar

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Nonfiction

by

Jacklyn Hopper

BFA Southern New Hampshire University, 2015

December 2021

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Foreword.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Shatter and Tar.....	2
Vita.....	130

## Abstract

*Shatter and Tar* is a memoir about the author's seeking of freedom and authenticity, and the high hurdles such an endeavor entails coming from a background of poverty and abuse.

Keywords: class; counterculture; family; abuse; poverty; freedom; authenticity; relationships

## Foreword

This thesis, *Shatter and Tar*, is a condensed version of what I hope to ultimately be a larger work. For the purpose of sticking to the required page count as much as possible, I have brought the focus more on family and, therefore, collapsed time. For instance, on page 81, there is a five-year gap between discovering my default divorce and painting my ex-husband's house, as the discovery of the divorce and seeing him again are brought together. Similarly, between 92 and 93, my grandmother's death and my brother's death are brought together, but there is a five-year gap between those occurrences as well. Within these years, some stories would include:

- Walking the streets of Portland and meeting a man who was from my home state, bicycling around the country after his wife died of cancer and his daughter subsequently committed suicide.
- A trip to Madrid, New Mexico, where a tarot reader read me spot on, saying I struggle between what my heart wants and societal expectations. After the readings, my friend asked her where she lives. She said, "Quite literally, in a van down by the river." I told her my dream is to convert a van and live on the road. She beamed and said, "It gives me hope hearing people of your generation say that. I worked in corporate America making over \$100,000 annually for years and was miserable. I've never been happier than I am now."
- A relationship with intense chemistry, but being left for not being rich.
- A two week stay on the oldest running commune in the United States.
- A travel job, driving from school to school across the country as an awareness event host on drunk and distracted driving, transforming the vehicle into a virtual reality simulator.

Ultimately, with the repeated movement between the freedom of the open road, and the heaviness and stagnancy of a dysfunctional family and dead-end jobs, this thesis is about the search for freedom and authenticity in a world in which it could be argued is unachievable. Simultaneously, it is about what that means for people coming from backgrounds of poverty and abuse, and what they stand to lose in the system and society in which we live.

## Introduction

“I have a deeply hidden and inarticulate desire for something beyond the daily life.” – Virginia Woolf

“My soul comes from better worlds and I have an incurable homesickness of the stars.” – Nikos Kazantzakis

The following thesis, *Shatter and Tar*, is a searching for freedom and authenticity amid what has felt like compounded displacements – family, time, town, country, system, world. It is an exploration of what freedom and authenticity are in a world in which one could argue they are unachievable. This thesis also looks at what such endeavors mean for people coming from backgrounds of poverty and abuse, and what they stand to lose in the system and society in which we live.

## Shatter and Tar

My mother said dandelions were weeds and told me to rip them out by the entirety of their roots so they wouldn't grow again. Dandelions are part of the sunflower family, are medicinal and cleansing, every part of them full of purpose. My little brother's dad, Gale, who called himself mine, spent a great amount of energy spraying the yard, poisoning the dandelions from becoming. The flower as the sun, the orb of fluff as the moon, and the dispersing seeds as the stars, they are the only plant to represent all celestial bodies. He smothered their possibilities. Dandelions would cling to the fence line in bunches between the yard and the open space of the park, but he'd trim them down before I ever got to make a wish.

In astrology, dandelions are ruled by the planet Jupiter. A Sagittarius, so am I.

I was seven and had just tied my address to a balloon string hoping for a pen pal, a presence beyond my displacement. Standing in the middle of a narrow street of a tiny southwest Michigan town, I watched like a shedding stem as my balloon drunkenly stumbled down the street, my address trailing clumsily behind.

My mother, watching from the wrap-around porch, turned to the neighbor couple sitting on our porch swing and warned, "If you find that balloon in the park, don't you dare tell her!"

My mother, on the surface, was an enigma. She said this in a likely honest attempt to protect a sensitive child, whose bus driver saved fire drills for the days she was absent; a child who came home almost daily with tears in her eyes after being bullied, but who wouldn't stick up for herself because she "couldn't hurt their feelings." My mother told everyone that she'd die for her kids, that she'd kill for her kids. Gale looked at me when I was three and told her I would be legal at eighteen. In front of my mother, he yanked my older brother, Jon, who had been hit by a drunk

driver at ten, out of his wheelchair and beat him for showing off an attempt to stand, in hopes that he may someday again walk. My mother didn't cut him off. Sometimes, I was his punching bag. Someday, I would become hers.

When a dandelion is pulled from its place, bits of the roots, which can reach past six feet in the ground and down to fifteen, rip off, recede and rot in the dirt. Somewhere, my biological father, Danny, was locked in a cell, this time for the reception of stolen property. From memory's beginning bloom, I didn't want to know him. A wish doesn't want to know its past.

A dandelion flourishes in untilled areas and wastelands. The globe of parachute seeds is called a "clock" like it's only a matter of time.

I stood there imagining all the places this balloon could go from the too tiny, too chaotic world I never wanted. However, despite my wishing and vivid imagining, the balloon wasn't making it over the trees. I sighed and looked at the neighbor kids and my two brothers, Jon and Adam, playing in the yard, and then at my mom and the adult neighbors sitting on the porch downing their Budweisers, staring with skeptical eyes.

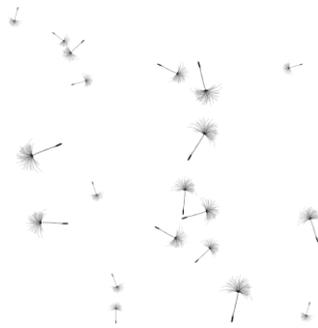
"You never know," I said confidently, city lights I'd never even seen and the hopes of something bigger roving through my mind as they so often did, "it could go all the way to New York!"

"Yeah, right!" They laughed.

When the balloon had somehow shimmied itself out of sight, I let the idea go, a trickle of hope wading softly somewhere in the back of my mind.

The key to a dandelion seed's flight and descent is in the space between; air flows between the bristles which creates a low-pressure countercurrent to carry it. Somewhere within the glue stick and crayon preparations of second grade, the grass-stained knees of baseball rounds with my

brothers, and the glory of dirt and ice cream marking my skin; somewhere between getting my tire swing to its highest heights and yelling goodnight to Neverland with my little brother out the window, sometimes against the background of partying, screaming or crying, I received a letter on balloon-themed stationery from a retired English teacher in Buffalo, New York. The balloon, which had appeared so weak struggling over the tree line girding our neighborhood, was found by her son on a walk in the woods after a storm.



What do you do when you have always felt like you were born into the wrong time, wrong skin, wrong name, wrong family, wrong town, wrong system, wrong world? I'd say you try to create your own. But first, I got married in secret to a man who didn't know dandelions were for wishing until his thirty-sixth year.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the magistrate announced through her practiced smile, as if behind her smile may have been the assumption that I would also be smiling under any different circumstance, like if I were gowned and we had not been standing in a bland, beige tile, beige brick room of the Kalamazoo 8th district court building. Or if there had been more people there for us than the two witnesses we didn't know who we found at the mall we worked at together, to whom we offered dinner afterward for the favor. But it wasn't quite just that.

Ali was groomed and his hands were shaking and he smiled like we finally made it, like it was a grand occasion in which we bore our love and a grand life we built around it before a beloved

crowd, rather than an empty room with two strangers. Tears rimmed his eyes, which I'd never known men to get but in private moments or life transforming occasions. His love saw past my undone hair, drab off-white winter coat, old brown tennis shoes and my heart dragging at my ankles. His expression touched me with the youthful charm that originally drew me to him, but all I could say was, "Good, I'm hungry." Ali laughed. The words tripped from my mouth over a hesitant, joking giggle, but they carried with them some truth.

It was not him. It was me; I never wanted to be married but wanted him with me. Those who knew us thought he was my boyfriend, and I wanted it to remain that way in truth. But it wasn't quite just that, either. I loved him, yet I felt as if I had just sold myself like a prostitute without even removing my clothes. I felt, somehow, like I had just gone against some unsurfaced but steadfast ideals and beliefs, which were now nothing but shatter and tar in place of what might have been a rolling forever wind. I looked at the gray and brown sodden snow and wanted to dissolve with it from this somehow deceptive "I do" and step into my own spring.

I was eighteen when I met Ali. He had a rasp in his giggle and a softness in his eyes. The moment I looked at him, I knew I would know him. He and his bolder friend invited themselves to sit with me and my friend while we ate a late lunch in the food court of the local mall. The audacious friend, apparently feeling smooth, asked us if he could have a nibble of our food as an ice breaker. They sat and Ali stayed smiling quietly, top teeth pressed lightly to his inner bottom lip. Black curls curved up from under the rim of his hat. He had a hawk nose, which I always have had a thing for. Sometimes, we'd catch eyes.

It's common credence that a person will be drawn to people who are similar to their opposite sex parent. Gale, who had called me his daughter the entirety of my life, had recently left. Somewhere, Danny was locked in a cell, this time, again, for breaking and entering with intent. It

was like a blank slate. I liked to brag that I wasn't attracted to "bad boys" like my mother; due to the types of people she was attracted to, I already felt long versed in what begs for a broken heart.

Later, when the audacious friend asked me and my friend if we wanted to hang out, I noticed Ali leaving out the double glass sliding doors into the mall parking lot. It was like I wanted to speed up the process when I ran after him into the rainy evening.

"Aren't you coming, too?" I stood in the downpour like I needed the yes.

He looked back and smiled. He looked back like maybe he knew, too.

"Not tonight," he said in his thick Lebanese accent, "but soon."

Soon, but we hadn't even exchanged contact information.

Walking by the restaurant he worked at turned to chats. Chats turned to working with him, which turned to coy glances and smiles. Glances and smiles turned to subtle flirtations. Subtle flirtations moved into rides home. Rides home moved into a kiss in the driveway, when I stumbled in trying to conceal any sign from my mother, who might have tried to destroy it. I had already seen her fists strike the faces of other men I had spent time with, had already seen her head laying in the lap of one I had called my boyfriend when I was fifteen and he was twenty-one. She also wouldn't have been too keen on the fact that I was eighteen and Ali was thirty; I had never been attracted to people my age.

In my room, I took out the CD he had given me right after running up behind me in the mall parking lot and pulling my drooping pants up before giving me a ride home.

"Listen to number nine," he said as we headed to his car.

I looked at the CD.

"Celine Dion?" I smirked at him.

"I love Celine-ah," he said, "Just listen, listen."

I personally never knew a man to outwardly love Celine Dion. It was quirky, and I liked it. Though her music or the song was not at all my taste and nothing I'd ever otherwise listen to, from my room repeated cheesy cliches over and over again: *I love you, please say you love me, too - these three words, they could change our lives forever...*

Sometime before we were quietly married, I had run from home, whatever that was, to Ali.

“Call in and quit,” my mother yelled during an especially difficult rage. It had not been the first time she insisted on me quitting a job. My first job had been at a movie theater and her excuse was she didn't want me driving her car across town on the ice slick roads of a Michigan winter. My second job had been at a department store, and I no longer remember what her excuse for telling me to quit was. Though unverbilized, I assume this third time was a lack of control and a fear of losing. Not long before, she, Jon, Adam and I were sitting in the living room of the ranch-style suburban house we had lived in since I was twelve when she was served papers. She read that Gale would be taking Adam and evicting her, me and Jon from our home, and I watched something break in her similar, I'm sure, to when she saw Jon's ten-year-old body lying in the road after being hit by a drunk driver, or, I imagine, when her first-born child, a daughter, was taken from her when she was sixteen at her parents' insistence the baby be put up for adoption.

My mother's insistence, if met with resistance, was almost always followed by furious threats. This time, as she pushed me to quit, I had gone quiet and agreeable. She continued to scream and threaten. Outside of her sight, tiptoeing past the angel art she plastered the place with, I grabbed a few things, holding my breath, heart pounding in my ears.

I snuck from the living room, through the stairwell that led to the basement, out into the garage, freezing up at the sound of the smallest creaks in the floor. She stormed through where I had just passed.

“I mean it! Call in! You’re not going anymore!”

“Okay, I will.”

“Now!” she screamed.

Just as I opened the garage door, I yelled, “Okay!” in hopes of stalling her while I jumped on my bicycle and pedaled down the short driveway, down Romence Road, toward the mall as fast as I could. She gathered my older brother, Jon, who suffered from a high functioning brain injury after being hit, into the car and drove after me.

I pushed against those pedals so hard and so fast, my feet kept slipping off. As the typical Midwest suburbs trembled by me, my mother passed me, stopping in a driveway ahead to block my path. I skidded and veered into neighborhood side streets to avoid her.

When I got to the mall parking lot, she pulled in near me. I pedaled past her, determined to ride my bike into the double sliding doors of the food court. Jon had jumped out of the car and, as I neared the entrance, he almost got a good grip on my clothes, and then on the bike. I let the bike fall and ran through the food court, behind the restaurant, and into the safety of the “employee’s only” hallway. Ali flung the back door of the restaurant open.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Jon attempted to get into the hallway. I pushed against his push. A tragedy in itself, since I still could still see, from the back of the brown Buick when I was four years old, my mother collapsing over his near lifeless body. Now, in an ever-growing interdependence, he pandered to my mother’s every whim. He was just another casualty to the domino effect of dysfunction.

“I’ll be back,” I told Ali and I kept running. I ran through the unfinished primer-spotted drywall of the back hallways. Then I ran out into the shiny, open center of the mall, hoping my mother and Jon wouldn’t be scouting the building for me. I ran down an escalator, into a store, and dived behind the desk of a man I knew, Chandler, from where he sold mattresses and pillows. From his desk phone, I made some phone calls, arranging temporary stays with friends. On the other end of the line, one of the neighbors who sat on my porch so many years before watching me send off a struggling balloon in the tiny neighboring town, said, “I’m glad you’re doing this and you’re welcome to stay here for a while. It’s sad, you know -- I always thought you’d be some kind of well-known, successful artist if you hadn’t grown up in the environment you did.” I was heaven bent on never going back.

Ali, at the time, was my greatest friend. Four months after we started seeing each other, I had sex for the first time with him. That month, we moved in together. Two years later, I married him to prevent his deportation. We lived in an empty place, but his love filled it. It was quenching. It was empowering. The years acted as a meditation, and I relished the quiet. My mother would try to hurt us, be it a threat or insult, or be it her fists to our door or her keys down the side of his car, but it was the first thing that felt untouchable. It was mine.

Sometimes, he would come in our door swearing on everything in him that his newly graying hair and accelerated aging was from living in this country. Despite the bomb shells he’d find in gardens as a child etched with the words “Made in the U.S.A,” and despite the war-torn streets he’d describe, he insisted he would have never aged so fast elsewhere.

“You work hard here for absolutely nothing,” he’d say. “It’s not like this in the countries I’ve been.”

In Lebanon, he'd say, unlike here where neighbors are strangers, families and neighbors would gather for breakfast and conversation in the morning to watch the sunrise together, and do the same by dinner to watch the sun fall.

"And when someone is in need, it is provided," he would say, "Neighbors, family, people provide. People never go without there. Here, you do and just trade your whole time for nothing and everyone is a stranger."

Agreeing, as it had been much of what I felt from a young age being spoken aloud, I might have just slung a plate of food in front of him and, though we often cooked together or he cooked for me, I'd say, "If you don't like anything about it, get in the kitchen and do it your damn self. Just because I don't have something dangling between my legs doesn't mean anything's missing."

He'd laugh, putting his hand up for a high five. We'd sit on the floor and eat together, a mini trampoline doubling as a table. He'd flash the look that many times garnered the comment from friends or other onlookers, "I will never forget the way that man looks at you."

At night, doing something as mundane as brushing our teeth, we'd break out into spontaneous dance, followed by laughter and hugs.

Still, a deep seated unrest lingered, a constant inner knocking. On drives, I'd stare out the window at the buildings, the trees, the grass blades, ill-inducing in their abiding imprint, seemingly every square inch memorized. College kids crisscrossed campuses backpacked and mission-like and I wondered if I felt I was missing out after Ali's lawyer informed me that I'd be rejected for financial aid for getting married. I wondered if it was because I didn't want to stay in Kalamazoo, where I was born. I didn't want to live the same day daily. The thought of the years ahead of me in the same place, doing the same things, would suck the breath out of me. I would beg him to move with me to California, Oregon, anywhere. I wondered if it was because he was comfortable

with routine and I was not. I wondered if it was because I had met him so young, if I would have felt different if I had met him later, if I had experienced more.

In his attempt to assuage my turmoil, we'd go to Chicago or the Detroit area almost weekly for a change in scenery. One overcast day walking the time worn streets of Dearborn, outside of a Middle Eastern bakery, crumbling brick buildings on either side of us, Ali asked, "Are you gay?"

Taken aback, I laughed as silly as I could and asked, "Are *you*?"

"Well, are you bi?"

Again, I gave my silliest laugh, asking, "Are *you*?"

He rolled his eyes and laughed. He gave the look. I hadn't been able to adhere to a solid label, had not thought of myself as gay, bi, or any particular thing at all. Moreover, I had grown up in a time and place where such a thing was not represented and, in the rare cases it came up, looked down upon. The question had also caught me by surprise. When my interest in sex with him had waned, so sweet was he that he attributed it to intelligence, to having other things on my mind.

It seemed no time had passed and I had gone from eighteen years old to twenty-four years old and, not knowing where six years had gone, I'd still not caught on to how to be a standard wife or girlfriend. I didn't know if I simply didn't fit the position. I did know that I could not settle with the common or the traditional, something as inherent and a part of me as my brown eyes, the freckles on my chest, my heartbeat. I couldn't settle into the repetitive cycle of dishes and toilets, Comet and Spic & Span. I could not find entertainment in the television when the trees dance as the sun strobes through them, birds sing and the sky paints a new picture for us every evening. I couldn't do stagnancy when I ached for momentum. I couldn't do narrow when I ached for expansion. I couldn't give a nod to the hamster wheel of the status quo when I knew there was so

much more. I had always felt this. There had been, from a young age, an inner calling to peel back the layers, peel back the constructs and I could not identify with the physical world as it has been built. I was in a different kind of prison, it felt, than my biological father. I felt myself suffocating, dying to live while surrounded by a sea of people I felt were merely existing to die.

I felt like I was imploding when I asked about someone's day and they would talk about what they did for a living or tell me they watched TV or paid bills. I had never been impressed by paper achievements, couldn't be swayed by advertisements or fashion magazines, and found only catastrophe in the immensity of a spirit being tampered down to a repetitive cog. Every cell in my body raged against the idea that the way things have been set up systematically are the way things are meant to be if there is anything beyond this plane. I desperately looked for the spark in the conventional, but, for me, it was nowhere to be found. I felt that the magic must be in the hidden back roads and dusty cubby holes of life: on highways and back roads, in hostels, in shabby, smoky cafes. I imagined such enchantment would be discovered in remote forests, and people in trees, around fires and drum circles, under hand-knit hats and streetlamps reflecting gold on rain-soaked pavement. Somewhere, they dance while others unknowingly dangle, vibrantly singing the songs that get jumbled and stuck in the subconscious of others who only wish to catch tune. Their uncommon experiences touch hearts through a wink of their eye, the stories stitched in the holes of their shoes, invoking a longing for the unknown, taking others to a place of missing what they've never even had - they do not settle, they do not compromise.

For the last year that Ali and I were together, I slept on the floor in the barren bedroom of our small apartment while he slept on the queen-sized mattress on the living room floor. Mental excuses included his loud snoring, the intensity of body heat, a need for space. My love for the person he was exacerbated the confusion in my discontent. My mother had always taught me that

happiness is fleeting, and so the best thing one could find is contentment. I wondered if that was a poor woman reminding herself not to want. I couldn't find contentment. One night, as I dozed off drained and wet faced, Ali quietly tip-toed in, bent to the floor, kissed my forehead, and tip-toed back out.

During that last year, when I slept, I began having vivid dreams of women. They started innocently enough. First, I was sitting on a brick wall with a woman. She said, "Close your eyes, I'm going to show you something." I winced, wondering what she could show me with my eyes closed, but obliged, anyway. As lucid as if I were awake, I felt her lips on mine. When I opened my eyes, I told her I understand this is a dream and I wonder if she's somewhere in the physical world. She told me yes. I woke up.

The dreams became far more sexually explicit. When I woke from them, I'd try to force myself back to sleep. A cruciality rested in returning to those dreams, a risen mourning when I could not. It was a war waged between mind and heart, and I'd lay there, guts feeling like a towel being twisted dry, silently insisting I'm lying to myself, that I'm convincing myself of such things. But the heart said this was fair to neither Ali or myself, that so many instances throughout my life had begun to make sense.

From the time I was three, when the discordant rhythm of my footsteps shook my laughter running upright under the tables at Michael D's, a bar no longer in existence. I don't remember if I was wearing my ruffled Osh Kosh B'Gosh overalls, my corduroy dress, or my pink Converse. I don't remember the biker woman's name who was chasing me from the outer edges of the tables. I remember her giggle mingling with mine, and the way her long, straight blonde hair brushed her face before splitting into soft strands before and behind her shoulders.

When bar duties called her away, I sat on the floor under a pinball machine. I somewhat remember the soft, speckled light of a disco ball in hushed daylight. I clearly remember watching the only couple dancing. When they caught sight of me watching them from under the pinball machine, they scooted their embraced dance closer so they could coo at me. I wondered why they cooed at me. It felt dumb. But butterflies took over my belly watching the woman dance, as she sometimes glanced over to smile at the baby sitting under the pinball machine. I remember the feelings I got from being chased by the biker woman and watching the dancing woman as if they transcend time, something nameless and familiar.

It began to make sense from then to the time I was a teenager, when on the TV in the living room, Jewel sang live at a festival. Her beauty wasn't the manufactured kind. She looked like she stepped on stage from the Alaskan frontier or the car she lived in in California, and I loved it. She trilled a line my heart knew, the camera caught an angle that accentuated her hawk-nosed profile and she flashed a snaggle-toothed side smile and I giggled aflutter. I giggled like I didn't giggle at the sight of men or barely touched boyfriends. My mother, passing through, saw this. She told me straight girls get girl crushes. I hadn't consciously considered it a crush, but took what she said as fact. A hawk nose and snaggle teeth remained the only physical features that could turn me on.

"I don't think I can be in a romantic relationship with you anymore," my voice quaked as I stood one morning before Ali in our hollow home.

I saw his heart swell in his throat, well in his eyes. It was the closest thing to impending death with the disgrace of physical continuity, I was sure, looking at the face of the kindest being I had been blessed to meet, and bidding the break.

“You know,” he said, calmly, “I understand we got married under the agreement to divorce after two years, but in my heart I married you because I really love you and wanted to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Several months later, I returned to Kalamazoo from a month in Ohio after having been with a woman for the first time, whom I met online and had been exchanging novella-long letters with after I cut the romantic relationship with Ali. Ali stood waiting for me in a parking lot, arms outstretched. With a pained but loving smile, he held me silently, knowing but pretending not to know.

“If there’s anything you want to talk about, I’m here,” he said into my long, wild, perpetually undone hair.

I laid next to him one night, having said nothing, and he held my head so gently, as if with the slightest shift it might break.

“If there’s anything you need to talk about,” he kept repeating in the month we spent going to Chicago, Detroit, Columbus and Ann Arbor. I just kept looking at him, bursting into sporadic tears. It was a selfish thing to still want him in my life. He denied the permanency of his pending departure, but every day he gave me pep talks for the rest of my life.

“Above everything,” he’d say in his soft, scratchy Lebanese accent, “live happy.”

He’d go on tangents on how without the poor, there’d be no rich and the system is designed to keep people at the bottom. He’d repeat how some people spend their whole lives saving for nothing because they could die tomorrow. “Life is not guaranteed,” he’d say over and over, “So live for the day. And live happy.”

Then he'd point out things he felt I need to personally work on. "And you, you have good ideas but people aren't ready for them, so tone down. You are such a dreamer. And you are so soft and so sensitive that people will take advantage of that. Don't ever be afraid. I know it's hard for you, but try to stick up for yourself. Be strong."

On a looped exit from the interstate in Dearborn, everything felt like it was collapsing, the space in the car shrinking. Wanting to jump from the car, I was in a full-on panic attack. He repeated, "I'm here."

Heaving for air, I said, "In Ohio. I was with Brandi."

His eyes filled with tears.

"Do you feel better now that you told me?"

I shrugged. I didn't know what to say to that, looking at the face of my last six years, the closest thing to normality I had known.

"When someone has a curiosity," he broke the silence, "nothing will stop them. And if you had kept it inside, it would have eaten at you. I always had a feeling."

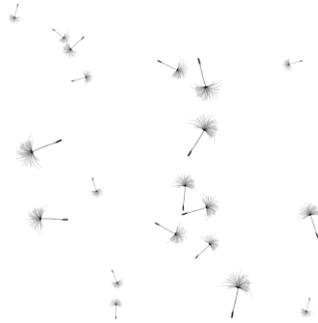
We went for a last walk together on the Portage Creek Bicentennial trail, where dandelions grew wild and free, their moonlike orbs of fluff abundant. I picked one and blew. I picked one for him and told him to make a wish. He scrunched his face, curious.

"You didn't know about making wishes on dandelions?!"

He shook his head, face still scrunched but smiling.

When I told him that you make a wish, then blow to try to release all the seeds, he ran into the tall grasses, a 36-year-old man and the boy he once was, picking and blowing as many as he could in gleeful laughter.

One morning soon after, from the third-floor balcony of our empty apartment I was to clean and close on, I watched him drive away. I never knew a parting could be so tender.



I met Julius, my first craigslist rideshare, at the liquid mercury inspired Cloud Gate, a giant bean-shaped reflective structure in Chicago’s Millennium Park. In its reflection, the tall buildings of the city beyond the structure curved claw like into the sky with a loose grip on the bustling crowd and the surface on which they stood below and between. Running up to the structure from the closest parking space I could find near the lakeshore, uncertain that the space or my lack of payment was legal, I was relieved to spot him quickly in the crowd. He was slowly spinning in place, scanning the thousands of faces around him with the smallest travel bag possible, his chiseled features and shaggy, dirty blonde hair an exact match to the driver’s license photo I had seen before picking him up. He caught sight of me weaving hurriedly through the crowd, waving to him.

We stood face to face, wide eyed and awkward. I hurried off the silence.

“So. Um. Are you going to kill me?” I hoped he couldn’t tell I’d been sobbing the whole way there as I took the backroads for the first time, playing State Radio’s “Keepsake” on repeat.

He shook his head, “No, are you going to kill me?”

I shook my head.

As if this short exchange was enough to ensure our safety, we headed to the old, little blue Mazda Protege Ali had signed over to me, ready to begin our journeys, together for a time. I had anticipated I'd have to make adjustments with the canned food Ali stocked the car with and what little I owned to fit Julius' belongings, but his tiny bag slumped on his leg and slid to the center console. I pulled out the directions I had written in a notebook, turned the keys in the ignition and looked ahead, between the small red Buddha glued to the center of my dash that a childhood friend had given me in grade school, which was the only thing I had consistently kept, and a small bouquet of dried flowers that hung from the rearview from when, a month or so before, Ali and I walked through the Park of Roses in Columbus and he picked each color he saw in his immediate surroundings and, knowing everything, presented them to me with a bow. Julius raved in excitement that we'd be traveling over and near the faded mother route of yesteryears, Route 66, on our way west. I quickly learned he had a zigzag agenda on this route with plenty of stops in mind. I had a direct mind to get him to Los Angeles and myself to Desert Hot Springs to kick off the first leg of this journey. My friend, Kyra, who lived in Los Angeles, suggested I stay with Rebecca, who lived alone and lonely in the desert. I had a loose estimated time of arrival and didn't want to rudely stretch it and keep them wondering, since I didn't carry a phone. Plus, I needed to step on it with finding a brief gig so I could make my way to Portland, a city I'd never seen but had been raving about. Even the kind of dirty long-term wandering Julius was doing, the kind where one has time, it seemed, was a luxury.

Julius, the son of Lithuanian surgeons, was studying to become one himself, and also making his way around the world several times over. At 21 years old, he already had a travel record over which any avid traveler would drop their jaw. He told me travel stories that made me bubble over with envy, travel being the only thing I ever felt envy for. I listened to his countless stories as

the hot air pushed through the car windows, jostling his shoulder length hair, which he had pulled back by a thin headband. A dandelion seed blew into the windows from the fields outside and, thinking of Ali and of the wishes it may carry, I moved from its path to allow it to fly out of the other window, careful not to disrupt its travels. Burning away, further and further behind those tires, I hoped, were all the memories Michigan carried in its palm.

“You know, Jackie,” Julius said, “I will always have the travel bug. But it doesn’t matter where you are. All that matters is that you are surrounded by people who love you.” I gripped the steering wheel a bit tighter and nodded, staring straight ahead down the road as far as I could, past the horizon, biting my lip and holding back tears.

\*\*\*

Before leaving, I was driving with my mother under a dilapidated bridge around the wide curve of E Michigan Avenue when I felt a wave of anxiety come over me. I looked over at her. She didn’t keep secrets, she kept weapons. A secret was just another tool in her arsenal, something to later use against people in what seemed like a bottomless appetite for drama. I had nobody to talk to.

“I want to tell you something,” I hesitated, “but am so afraid because you don’t keep secrets, you just use them against people later.”

“Oh, Jack. Nah. I’m getting too old for that shit. People change as they get older.”

I knew better.

“I was with Brandi. In Ohio.”

“As in slept with her?”

“Yes.”

“More than once?”

“Yes.”

She gagged. Tongue out through her scowl, I watched the gag rise from her belly and out of her mouth.

I turned my focus out the window. Something about it felt so similar to the night she ruined my aunt Jo’s wedding reception in a drunken stupor when I was eight. After the scene was made and the damage done, she, my brothers and I were sent away in a taxi. Riding through a silent dark, she slightly turned in the passenger’s seat toward my two brothers and me in the back and slurred, “I hate your fucking guts, Jackie.” I stared silently at the swift passing silhouettes of tall grasses, trees, and far off distant houses against the stationary stars.

That night marked the final break from my extended family. Gone was our place at any family gatherings or holiday dinners, the warm, booming voices of my uncles, the uninhibited silliness and laughter of my aunts, and any connection to cousins.

It would not be the last time she said such a thing to me.

“Do you hate me?” I asked my mother after having told her I was with a woman, moving past the gut punch of her gag.

“I could never hate you,” she said. But she couldn’t love me. At least not how I needed. Sometimes, I wondered if it was because I was the near spitting image of her. *Dolly wasn’t the first clone*, she liked to brag in my grade school years, in reference to the first sheep clone, when she’d walk into the school and, before any introduction, everyone knew she was my mother by looking at her.

It wasn’t long before my confession became that predictable ammunition. We were at her boyfriend at the time, Rich’s, where she and my older brother, Jon, lived. Rich, perpetually red faced and sluggish, would crack a beer open as soon as he woke and continued until he slept. He’d

go to work drunk and, when he was at his place, he and my mother would retreat to their bedroom and argue relentlessly, for hours in their slow drunken slurs.

Between Rich, my mother, and Jon, the fighting was a venomous, unbreakable circle. Rich and Jon went from once being friendly to, living in the same space, loathing each other. Jon hated the drinking and the way Rich treated our mother. Rich hated that Jon would likely always be with our mother. Jon hated the resentment over something he could not help. I got the sense they were all in survival mode, constantly raging about things that trickled down from something larger.

My mother wanted me to do a pill run for her. Triggered from some of the worst moments of my past - the pill runs she'd send us on, the food lines she'd send us to - and all I had vowed to get away from, I vehemently refused. As I was sitting in the living room with Jon, his friend, April, Rich, and a couple other people I didn't know, my mother waltzed into the living room yelling, "Do you want me to tell everyone what you *did*?!"

I glared at her, unwilling to let her have the satisfaction of hurting me that way, outing me before I was ready. I stood up and announced for her, "I fucked a woman."

Holding back tears, I ran out into their back yard and hid behind an old tree going bare, like I had so many times before.

Around the year we were cut from our extended family, I'd play 4 Non Blondes' "Spaceman" on repeat. I'd imagine the prominent drum beat was something akin to the separate drum my mother said I'd always marched to. I'd stand on the hilltop near a scraggly tree at recess and pull my overshirt over my head on a windy day, wishing I might be so light the wind would catch. *Subtle wind blow me gone / Let me rest upon your move...* Swinging from a tire supported by a dead and broken tree in our back yard, I'd watch my hair dangle from high off the ground and look up to see the sky spin through the skeletal branches above me, and reach up with a hand I

*imagine was the size of my palm now – A new world is over me / So I'll reach up to the sky / And pretend that I'm a Spaceman / in another place and time / I guess I'm looking for a brand new place / Is there a better life for me?*

I felt, for me, there was no place.

\*\*\*

I told Julius I want to live forever on the road, to just be. To move solely with what my spirit and body needs at any given time. To make art, although I grappled with the idea of contributing to gluttony and hoarding, the mass of ultimately needless things piling in landfills. I wanted to write when that urging hit. I wanted to take pictures when that urging hit, to sculpt clay when that urging hit. I wanted to work when I want, where I want, but certainly not do one thing every day for the majority of my brief life. I valued my time, my one fleeting life, too much to trade it for stagnancy and barely getting by. I wanted to wake to a new back yard each morning. Experience something new each day. But I didn't know how I'd go about it. I knew from Ali that I might get lucky, here and there, if I asked truck stop employees if a trucker left their shower ticket behind, but that's about it. I didn't know how I would make it sustainable for the longer term.

Julius told me how Europe is set up for travelers with showers and all sorts of amenities that make it easier to have a free spirit like mine. It felt like a kind of theft. I visualized the United States as one narrow river that never quite reaches the sea, those not on it with everyone else stranded on murky shores.

“Isn't it something,” I said, just skimming the surface of the diatribes Ali insisted I simmer, “that there are systems around the world that work better for everyone than others, but, regardless, we subscribe to an invention? Like we invent this terrible thing then become mentally enslaved by

it, like we can't invent something else? It's fucked up. It feels unnecessary and pretend. Fake. I've felt this my whole life, like I'm in the fucking twilight zone."

"We gotta get you famous," he smiled.

\*\*\*

Some of us fourth graders with bent knees and locked fists in anticipation, some of us side-eye peeking to our peers with clenched-toothed smiles, some of us standing loose and aloof with indifference, some of us with our hands pressed together, fingers to lips and noses like prayer, we crowded around the speaker for the announcement. I, the kid who was teased for the mole on her nose, for her broken tooth, for her last name, for her sensitivities, for her oddness, the kid who was never picked for the team or the partner or the assistant of the visiting magician or zookeeper or chemist, stood, still on the loosely bated breath of maybe.

Third place's name was called. It wasn't mine. Looks of hope and suspense crossed the crowd, hugs and high fives given. Second place. Same response. I stood outside the crowd around the announcement speaker, behind them and closer to the area where we fourth graders hung our coats and Mrs. Roth would have a weekly contest where students would guess the amount of objects in a container. I had already started mentally training myself to never get excited, and at this point was starting to let the maybe go. I was already teaching myself to change my mind, to search for other perspectives, reminding myself how bizarre it is that we do such things as place humans on a rating scale, anyway.

"First place..."

The class froze for the name.

It was mine.

I don't remember much of anything except stumbling out into the hallway away from the crowd around the speaker, in shock not for having won something, but having been picked for anything at all. What I saw as soon as I entered the hallway and looked up was a sight that will stay with me for the rest of my life. Mrs. Roth was already bent forward running toward me with her arms outstretched and tears in her eyes, a look of adoration and faith I had not been exactly familiar with. She held me with a palpable joy, crying.

I would be going to finals for a speech I had written about what I wanted to be when I grew up. An actress. It was a half-truth, since I couldn't write about the full truth – that I didn't want to grow up. It already looked horrifying.

Since I could remember, when children were asked what they wanted to be, I cringed. Without language, it felt like indoctrination, just as sure as the mandatory pledge of allegiance. While other children around me answered *cop* and *princess* and *doctor* and *marine biologist*, my answer remained emphatically the same: *I'm not*.

\*\*\*

The sun had long slipped behind the red ochre mountains of New Mexico. Julius slept, slumped as easy as his little travel bag, leaning into the passenger's door. The only lights in the long stretch of black were the stars and the here and there flickering glow of some far distant place. I imagined from the stars' perspectives, I, too, looked something like a star, my headlights gliding through a yawning darkness. I wanted to be in that space, the in between, a kind of brink of everything but nothing at all, forever. Free from egoic pursuits and their pressures, free from the illusory bullshit of the system, free from the constructs and the petty urgencies and judgments and cyclical arguments that arise from it all. The breaking of families that arise from it all. The breaking

of people that arise from it all. *The highway, the unknown*, I thought, *this could be home*. Though I missed my grandmother.

\*\*\*

Before leaving with Julius, I would fix my grandmother toast and coffee or a light lunch. I would serve her favorite daily snack, milk and cookies. I would bring her blueberries, ginkgo biloba tea and herbal tablets. I would bring her books so she could exercise her memory. I would tell her to change her mind, hoping for or resigning to the power in one's beliefs and what one tells themselves, clinging with urgency to the idea that these things would save her from forgetting.

Still, she confused the difference between her remote control and phone, between razors and nail clippers. Still, she began losing the names of her six children and several grandchildren. Still, I'd walk into her apartment that carried the same sweet smell of the house she and my late grandfather had shared for decades, the one she had several years before. She still acted as if she had waited an entire lifetime to see me even if it had only been a day. She'd still respond wholeheartedly each time I shared something with her as if I had just told her the most amazing thing she had ever heard. She'd still throw her hands up and laugh an infectious chuckling body laugh if I told her a joke or a humorous story as if I had told her the funniest thing ever. It was vivifying, having grown up where anything I had said, by one caretaker, was disregarded or perhaps met with a slap to the head, and by the other, unheard and the subject changed into something about herself. And my grandmother and I would play. I'd tell her to do a homie stance with her arms crossed over her chest or get her to do the moonwalk or some other silly jig with me, and she would, both of us laughing.

Before I left, on one end of my grandmother's landline phone was my mother telling me to get the fuck out of her mother's house or she would go over there and beat the living fuck out of

me. On my end, my grandmother was squeezing my hand as her eyes got wet and her tiny voice shook, “I will miss you so.”

Watching it all in my grandmother’s living room was my aunt Jo, who hadn’t seen me since her wedding day all those years before, with a look of shock on her face. I was no longer the eight-year-old girl she and my aunt Patti stopped in to see that night, telling me to remember Jesus and walking out of my life for good.

Before leaving, my aunt Jo gave me a card with some cash in it. I told her it was completely unnecessary. In a restaurant I had stopped at for a Wi-Fi signal to check my email before I got on the highway, she had sent a lengthy email. In it, she wrote:

*Hey Jack-Jack,*

*That's really the least I could do. I've been thinking about you all week. I feel I owe you so much more - not in money, but in life....I've been sitting here crying for the last hour worrying about you and wondering what I could do to make you not hurt and feel so lonely. You can't imagine how awful I feel about your childhood. The fact that I couldn't be there for you and knew what a bad situation you were in...I'm pretty sure you felt abandoned by us - maybe you don't even remember me being in your life. I hope you realize that I just couldn't be around your mom anymore for obvious reasons. We did try to get you kids away from there - but that turned out really bad...It's hard because your mom holds it against everyone if someone has a relationship with her kids. I really didn't need anymore threatening messages... I liked spending the little time with you that I did this week and wish I could spend more time with you...I feel so comfortable with you and really missed you. I could spend hours just being with you and looking at you and listening to what kind of person you have become. So now you are leaving and my heart is broken to think*

*that you think you have no one that loves you and no one there for you - and part of that is my fault. I love you and would absolutely do anything for you...*

\*\*\*

I dozed off. The tires drummed over the rumble strips, startling Julius from his sleep. I reflexively gripped the steering wheel tighter in alarm as he also reflexively grabbed the wheel, trying to ensure the car was swerved back in place. Exits in the desert were few and far between. Heads bobbling, we turned the music up, sang to it, rolled the windows down, stuck our heads out the windows, anything to stay awake. Eventually, a rest area sign, as if suspended, reflected off the headlights in the dark. We found a parking spot and pulled our seats back to sleep. And there I was, trailing a lifetime of morbid nightmares and insomnia, in the middle of nowhere sleeping in a car next to a stranger, and everything was as okay as it could have been.

We awoke early to the view of gravel, cacti, and abode restrooms in a gentle desert sun. Stepping out from the reclined driver's seat, I checked the engine to notice that the coolant was low. Julius insisted that I could put water in. Hesitant, I asked a truck driver in the parking space next to me if that was true. From his window, the truck driver shook his head, putting his index finger up. He hopped from the high cab of his semi and, from a side compartment grabbed his coolant and generously filled my coolant reservoir past its fill line. Several rows away, a dog hopped in a vehicle after a good stretch and pee in the open space of the desert, ready to share the joy of journeying with her human.

\*\*\*

My childhood dog, Max, spent his life outside in my small town, a black and white blur kicking up grass. We moved to the ranch-style suburban home on a cul-de-sac, he moved into a kennel in the back yard along the fence. I moved in with a welt the shape and size of Gale's hand

across my back. I thought I was helping. Gale thought I was in the way. He'd still come to pick us up for the weekends sometimes. Jon was left out. Sometimes I would go, sometimes it'd just be Adam. Once in a while, Max would come inside and spend time with us and the two bulldogs that were decidedly for the home, giving him brief access to all the same toys and treats. Gale, who was a landlord and owned a heating and air conditioning company, said he was going to adopt me. Said the three of us would each be millionaires by the time he is dead. Left flowers and a white stuffed gorilla when I had nobody to go to a dance with me, a teenager who preferred the company of older people, and a card with his chicken scratch penmanship assuring me I'd always be his little girl. He got tears at a country song called "Butterfly Kisses" with the thought of giving me away someday. Said he loved me and I thought I saw it sometimes when he told stories about me with soft eyes and a side smile. Max would always get antsy to go back outside, his blue and brown eyes staring intent and eager out the windows. He wanted to run. The yard was smaller, so he wasn't kicking up grass anymore, wasn't a blur. Gale told Adam and me we were going to go to Chicago. He hyped it up, watching my fevered excitement rising. I had always dreamed of bigger, of cities I never saw. Of a something else I didn't know. I was on the white paved driveway talking about how excited I was for the trip. Gale said, "I didn't know you were going." He took Adam alone. Max would dig holes under his kennel, sure of something better though he couldn't see it. Sometimes in the middle of the night, I'd wake with fear that he had been forgotten. There was a long winter when I'd get up and make him a bowl of hot food, push through the deep, heavy snow, sit with him a while, and apologize. Mostly, he just paced until I came back from school one day and he was no longer there.

\*\*\*

Julius and I were back on the road through the hot dust and rust hues of the desert. I wanted to help accomplish the travel dreams of this boy who had experienced so much of my own travel dreams, so when he asked to drive off course to view a meteor crater in Arizona, I did. Between all the conflicting emotions at the time and the principle of refusing to pay people who took a cavity in the earth they didn't create, but which happened 50,000 years before they existed, and charged people to see it, I elected to stay in my car.

When he asked to drive almost a hundred miles off course to view the Grand Canyon, I did. He had been eyeing where he could sneak in past the payment booth to see it and succeeded in doing so. To my later regret, I stayed in the car to see if I could fish out a Wi-Fi signal at the nearby shops. Ali had stayed in contact briefly after he had driven away, and, after he said he'd keep in touch, the last I heard from him he said, "I forgive you but what you did was unbearable." The phone had cut out at that moment. Guilt consumed me. We were also still legally married, and I didn't know where he was. I wanted to see if he had written. But he hadn't.

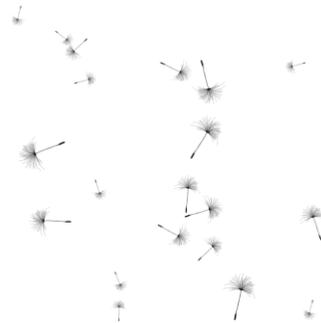
When Julius asked that I drive hundreds of miles off course to explore Death Valley, I disappointed myself by disappointing him, when I refused and tears came to his eyes. I felt like a miserable human. I explained to him that I must make good time for the people expecting me as I had no phone. I tried easing his disappointment by reminding him I was still taking him to Venice Beach, my favorite place and a must see for anyone passing through Los Angeles.

When we got to the California shore, he showed me his personal tradition of having photos of himself taken around the world standing on his hands, so I took one for him on the shoreline of Venice Beach, wet sand pushing through his fingers, bubbly water wrapping around his wrists. I wondered what it felt like to feel like time was on your side, to feel so free on so many surfaces of the world we were both born as naked to. We spent a beautiful sunny afternoon there before I took

him to the train station in downtown Los Angeles, where he departed on a late-night train for Seattle.

I circled downtown Los Angeles by myself until four in the morning, scared out of my wits that I'd never find my way out, looking for Interstate 10 East. After much circling and getting lost within the unfamiliar blocks, I finally happened across the entrance to I-10.

Beginning to drift off on the highway, I found a truck stop. Feeling like I was floating and head buzzing from exhaustion, I asked the cashier if any truckers left their shower tickets behind. She shook her head, so I walked out and slept a while in my car before continuing East to Desert Hot Springs.



I dug around the miscellaneous remnants of a past in my car to grab a few items of clothing, a quilt my grandmother had made for me as a child, and my laptop before heading inside, where Rebecca turned from a hurried primping of her mass of dark curls in the mirror above her fireplace mantle. She smiled, her top lip slightly turning up to reveal a gap between her two front teeth, and offered me some hash. I declined, sitting across from her on her mod-design rug to chat, observing the large photos of Rabbis, Torahs, Jewish literature and art around her beautiful home that her parents had gifted her in the midst of a breakdown.

A gray-striped cat raced through the living room from an orange cat and ran up to a black flat-faced Persian cat lounging on the coffee table, provoking her to partake in the mischief. She promptly slapped him.

"The gray one is Moshe and the orange one is Anshul," Rebecca said in her mousy, barely audible voice, "They are the boys. And this here is Moxie. She's a princess."

I turned to look at Moxie. She snuffed, paws crossed.

"She's not one for mishigas," Rebecca continued.

I winced at Rebecca, confused.

"You know. Crazyness," Rebecca smirked with her eyes, "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

Without a response, she stood and walked into the kitchen. I followed, to find the thickest stone marble countertops I had ever seen and the most intricately beautiful mosaic walls. Rebecca went to a cupboard and grabbed an orange prescription bottle of pills. Closing her eyes, she mumbled a prayer under her breath before throwing her head back with a sip of water.

"My family is more on the non-practicing side. I am the first to really put it into practice. I try to keep a kosher kitchen," she said, opening the refrigerator. "And I know you are vegetarian. I have left-over potatoes and carrots. How about I heat you up some?"

"Okay," I replied. "Thank you."

"Help yourself when the microwave beeps. If you would like to connect to the internet, the password is 'paneena,' p-a-n-e-e-n-a. It's the name of an old cat and my own made-up word for 'pussy.' I'm going to take a shower," Rebecca said, strolling out of the room.

I opened my computer and immediately checked my email. Ali hadn't written. My friend, Kyra, wrote, asking how everything was going at Rebecca's. I let her know I made it safely and

thanked her. My aunt Jo and I started exchanging emails, in which she'd keep me updated on my grandmother and on my mother's latest outbursts. I applied to a few jobs in the area, then continued on to my long-time habit of writing in blogs, pouring my whole being out to anyone – any elusive one – who might read.

Rebecca returned with her hair dripping wet, droplets of water falling from her head and spotting her t-shirt. I looked up at her and smiled as I continued to write.

She broke the silence with a small sigh.

“Do you want to watch a porn?”

I stared for a moment, feeling my jaw drop a little as I scrambled for a word. I had never watched porn before except for a brief moment when I stumbled across my mother's as a teenager, and then there was the stacks of magazines I had seen in passing at Gale's as a child. I wasn't sure about the idea but didn't want to offend.

"Uh, sure," I said.

I followed her back into the living room.

"I haven't been laid in some years," Rebecca said. "I feel like a freak."

She found a video and slid it into the DVD player and joined me on the couch, sitting at the opposite end.

It seemed off to me that I was wrapping up in the quilt my grandmother made for me to watch a porn with Rebecca. My grandmother had said a prayer for me each time she tied the yarn pieces that kept the quilt together throughout before she lovingly handed it to me on one of my birthdays as a young child. I had even thrown the blanket off the bed when I was having sex. Thinking about what I was soon participating in, the blanket fell a little looser from my body and closer to the leather couch I was sitting on.

Rebecca, at the other end of the couch, sat entranced with wide eyes and a semi grin only a hypnotism could bestow, barely blinking. But then a girl spat on the other girl's vagina. Then one of them started making a strange vibrating sound as if she was sitting on a washing machine, the noise reverberating through her gaping mouth. For the first time in a long time, I laughed out loud from the depths of my being. I laughed until tears were streaming down my face. I laughed so hard I fell off the couch and onto the floor.

Rebecca's trance broke. She looked at me in uncontrollable hysterics on the hard tiles of her floor, the earnestness in her trance morphing to unruly laughter.

When night came, she showed me to a guest room, at the end of the hall across from her room. It was filled with books, among other things.

"If you'd like to read any, feel free," she said, scanning them with her fingers.

She handed me *Valencia* by Michelle Tea, then a graphic novel.

"I really recommend this one!"

I flipped through the graphic novel, inundated with endless illustrations of tits, dicks and pussies, cock rings and cum shots.

I looked up from the book at her.

"It's great," she grinned.

In the mornings, Moshe would trill at the sliding door in Rebecca's living room. She would put him in a harness and take him to the back yard, inviting me to walk the small circles in the enclosed space with them. The yards were not the lush grass and dandelion lawns I knew in the Midwest, but gravel and sand. Moshe would prowl the gravel, then leap up onto the gray brick walls enclosing her home, then onto the roof of her house, as high as he could go confined. Rebecca had filled the small gray outdoor space with art. Mosaics, a metal heart sculpture, paintings, and a

framed panoramic image of a line of dildos adorned her back yard. On the roof, Moshe would swat at the birds flying free.

\*\*\*

At Gale's, when Adam and I weren't taking torches to beetles on the leaves of corn stalks or riding a four-wheeler through the field or target practicing or eating the loads of gas station junk food and candy Gale would let us stock up on for the visit, we were hauling sticks to a fire. If we weren't fast enough or good enough, we were met with sharp words and a stinging palm to our heads.

One day, I walked in the house to find Gale sitting at a window in his living room shooting birds out of a tree that invited them with feeders, their little bodies dropping from the branches to the ground for his entertainment alone.

It wasn't so unlike the time earlier, somewhere up north, when I held a stranded baby bird in the palms of my hands. Scanning the trees for its nest and wondering how I might reach when I found it, Gale walked up and asked to see it. He held out his hand. Trusting he'd find the nest, that he'd reach it, I somewhat hesitatingly let the tiny bird slide into his hands. Like a hacky-sack, he kicked it into the fire nearby.

It was as if he was determined to stop what could fly.

\*\*\*

I rode with Rebecca to Starbucks in the luxury car she'd been gifted. The Starbucks sat within a widespread cluster of buildings, and was surrounded by planted palms. Heat waves blurred the foundation. Distant mountains blocked the horizon in each direction, speckled with cloud shadows.

We sat at a tall table outside, trading stories over iced coffees. She told me of the prestigious colleges she went to, making it clear to never bring up the art degree she obtained, for which she held a strong resentment. She wished so badly she had, instead, studied to become a lawyer. She was obsessive about the recent stock market crash, and didn't feel optimistic for the future. She worked the repetitive cycle of retail, though she didn't have to, and whatever amount of money she had was never enough, though she came from it. She told me about a woman she was seeing in her college years around a decade prior in northern California, and how the relationship ended badly. Tears streamed down her face as she shared her certainty that the woman was trying to get to her through a section on craigslist and that she'd sometimes mess with her garbage cans. Though I doubted this, I could feel her hurt emanating from her.

It seemed, in large part, like she was fighting within the same structure I was fighting against. We both were, on the surface, miserable. Her sadness seemed deep rooted and impenetrable. My sadness had been situational -- while I was afraid, and any desire felt out of reach, and while my wanting of love, family and belonging was intense, and while I cried all the time, I still felt, within me, simultaneously, an internal sense of deep happiness. It was as if the sadness came from one plane, the happiness from another. And in the openness and vast unknown and its possibilities was the closest I became whole with the latter plane, from which the former, the physical plane, can shut from us.

On the drive back, she pointed at my right wrist marked with raised scars, which I made a concerted effort to cover with cuffs, but the cuff had slid back.

“Where are the scars on your wrist from?”

“I wiped out on a bike before coming here. I have them on my hip bone and elbows, too, from the same wipe-out.”

“And why do you hide them? Haven’t you heard the story of the boy who liked the girl for her scars because they made her all the more interesting?”

I smiled.

\*\*\*

Jon and I were riding bikes, coming up on the hill next to Crane Park, where he was conceived. Crane Park had made the news once for all its stolen flowers, only for my mother to wake to her car full of them. Danny had stolen their gardens to give to my mother. Riding my bike ahead of Jon, I worked up as much speed as I could before letting the bike fly down the hill to feel the momentum, to feel the wind on my skin. I couldn’t have imagined the curb at the entrance to the park wasn’t lowered for pedestrians and bike riders. When the tire hit the curb, I flew over the handlebars and slid down the pavement long enough to wonder when I’d stop.

“Jack!” Jon screamed, letting his own bike drop, “No! Oh my god! Oh my god!”

He ran over to me, falling to his knees.

“Are you okay?!”

He held a kind of exigent despair he had the day he was driving me to school my freshman year of high school and someone on a phone in a truck slammed into us and I ended up with a concussion and he vowed to never drive again. I walked to school in six-inch heels, fishnets, a mini skirt and a spaghetti strap top, ready for my role in drama class as a New York waitress but ended up in the hospital under MRI machines. Jon ended up in a lifetime of guilt for something he hadn’t done, and never drove again.

Winded and blood soaked, I managed to get up. The bike wheel was too bent to ride, the bike broken. I had to carry it back to Rich’s. Limping with bike in tow, blood dripping down my

face and arms, seeping through the waistband and knees of my pants, we walked by a cop who said nothing. Through Kalamazoo and all the way up into the next suburb, Parchment, we walked.

Upon entering the house they lived in, my mother saw me and dropped the phone in a rush for first aid supplies. Cautiously and intently, she cleaned and bandaged the wounds, like she had so many times, years before, with scraped toes and skinned knees. She applied a transparent dressing to the wrist wound that kept it watery, telling me if I kept it soft and continued to peel the layers until it heals, it shouldn't scar.

It was these moments when I'd dig past the layers of what this world has done to her to something more soul level. I'd try to set aside the violent woman, the woman who lashed out, the woman with the cutting tongue. I'd try to look past the hitting, the threats, the insults. Past all of it, I'd find the woman who'd send my fighting brothers and me into fits of laughter by insisting we sit on our hands and say three nice things about each other, the woman who animatedly read us Dr. Seuss's *Starbelly Sneetches*, the woman who tucked us in each night as small children with prayers and kisses. I'd find the woman who regularly tried to permeate empathy in us, and always reminded us if we hurt one person we ultimately hurt many. Past the woman who bought cigarettes and beer on the last dime when there was no food, I'd recall the woman who acted like the last little bit of fries and ice cream that may have been left over in the freezer for dinner was an exciting treat because there was nothing else. I'd recall the woman who was incredibly generous when she had enough to give. Past the woman who we watched attempt to gas herself in the garage, I'd find the woman who told me that a short drive with me down Bronson Boulevard, a curvy but very typical Midwest street in Kalamazoo, was one of the very best days of her entire life. I'd find the woman who tearfully told me she had the most realistic dream of me. I was a toddler, waddling up to her with my messy crown of curls and a piece of toast with jelly.

“And I told you, ‘Don’t drop it, Jackie Joey.’ And you did.”

Sometimes, when I look hard enough, I see so clearly the small child she was who grew up in a time when a girl was told her worth didn’t extend beyond being a wife and mother. I can see her as a girl dreaming of becoming a mother, unable to imagine it’d all end up like this.

The scar on my wrist remains.

\*\*\*

I loved accompanying Rebecca on the various bits of her daily routine that she mostly hated. They were a far cry from the spirited, long-term, long-distant road warrior adventures I so vividly dreamed up each day, but, from the trips to the cat store, to the trips to the pot clinic, they were, to me, still adventures. I imagine I was quite a shake in the routine she loathed when I showed up houseless outside of hers. When she’d come back from a day of folding clothes and ringing up customers, I’d tell her a new story.

“You’ll never believe what happened today!”

I had decided to take a walk in the high heat of the desert’s day to the store. As I walked back, just ahead, a van pulled in front of me and two men hopped out. Intuitively, I weaved between traffic to the opposite side of the main street I was on. They returned to their van and followed me up, trying to block my path, when I crossed back over and behind a large advertisement. I continued crossing the traffic-filled street, making whatever their intent was as impossible as I could, until I walked up to a random building and they drove away.

“I warned you not to walk around here!” she said.

I told her about my trip to the coffee shop in the high desert that she suggested.

“I never made it to the coffee shop,” I told her. She waited for the story.

I didn't tell her that as I was driving into the high desert, I was thinking about what a large stretch of lonely it looked like, with anything else too far to see. That it looked to me like a wasteland of tumbleweed dreams, pebbled crumbs of lost time.

I told her how my brakes gave out, producing the most excruciating screech. I had been so afraid I'd end up stranded. In my imagination, the screech of my brakes spiraled to the image of my skeleton slowly being buried by shifting sands, the hollowed orifices that once held my eyes facing ongoing traffic.

Of course, the brakes had stopped working, and it was only by luck that, upon rolling into the tiniest town I had ever seen, there was a mechanic shop to my right that I managed to squeal into, almost unable to stop. A man in an oil-stained uniform jogged out to take my information.

"All I wanted was to get to Portland," I blurted out, trying not to cry, "I have nothing and now this."

He looked at me with something like confusion and pity and offered a discount.

"Now if you'd like to just go have a seat in the waiting area. Help yourself to some coffee if you'd like," he motioned toward the waiting room.

I had a seat, skipped the coffee, worried about the bill to come. I stared at the tiles, following the lines of the grout, as if in a mental maze. Eventually, when called to the desk, I was told, "That'll be \$54 today, ma'am." I hated that word. Ma'am.

My chest tightened. As I dug through my pockets and handed the payment to him, the man said, "You know, there are churches. All over along the highway. Wherever you're headed, whenever you're having this hard a time, you just pull over and go to one. He'll always help." He pointed up.

"Thanks," I said, as the transaction was finalized.

Walking back to my car, the man came out and stopped me.

“Here,” he said, “Have this.”

I turned around. He handed me a small, folded piece of paper. I got into my car and unwrapped it. It told me all about Jesus and the path to salvation.

Rebecca didn't know what to say to that.

“And you think that car is just gonna keep carrying you across the country?”

When Rebecca and I would part ways for the night, I'd thank her, telling her I wanted to do something for her for allowing me to pause there in my inability to stop anywhere.

“You are,” she'd smile. “Sweet dreams.”

In the evenings, I'd catch up on emails and apply for more jobs amidst the incoming rejection letters. I grew anxious that I'd end up overstaying my welcome.

Sitting in my inbox was an email from the Kalamazoo police department. I recoiled. Upon clicking it open, I had found that, despite knowing where I was and how to contact me, my mother had put an all-points bulletin out on me in several states. In the email, the cop informed me that he was just making sure I was okay and asked if, by chance, my mother took Klonopin. We'd end up exchanging a few emails back and forth, where I let him know she drank quite frequently and abused pills, including Klonopin. He wrote back to tell me that people who take Klonopin often lash out and treat people horribly, then wonder later what they did, and why people don't talk to them anymore. He wished me safe travels.

Rebecca and I chased the sun. We went to high desert cafes, to the Palm Desert Holocaust Memorial, to Orange County art fairs, to Laguna Beach galleries, to Los Angeles gentlemen's clubs, to West Hollywood gay bars. We would drive for hours while Stevie Nicks' voice blared

into the hot highway wind. Rebecca would stomp her brakes, laughing at how my body moved forward.

“You would survive an accident easily with how relaxed you are.”

Her road rage would hit and I would laugh in amazement at how her tiny voice would suddenly bellow several times louder out the window, “Get out of my way you stupid fucking cunt!”

We’d drive to visit Kyra.

I had met Kyra through a director’s Facebook page in the earlier days of the internet when I spouted off some unconventional idea and she decided to reach out to me. Ali and I had once met her in person, and briefly Rebecca, on a road trip to California.

Walking around Santa Monica as we headed to the mall to meet Kyra, Rebecca looked at the grass, clearly perplexed. She bent over to feel if the grass was real. Before her hand hit the ground, I told her it was fake. She had been away from what grows for far too long. She proceeded to feel the grass to be sure.

Just then, always late due to the juggling of a million things in her life, Kyra speed-walked up to us. So upbeat, talking on hyperdrive with high enthusiasm no matter what was going on around her, flipping her long blonde hair from side to side, Kyra was a light. Rebecca and I followed her to her car as she recounted her day’s experiences as the maternity ward nurse manager at Cedar-Sinai Medical Center. Rebecca and I would be joining her on a trip to a retirement facility in Santa Monica so she could pay a visit to Pete Yorn’s 99-year-old grandfather, affectionately referred to by those who knew him as “Pop.” Rebecca sat in the passenger’s seat, while I laid down in the back seat watching palm trees and power lines pass above against the backdrop of a clear blue sky, laughing at their exchanges.

“Ew, that man just smiled at me,” Rebecca said.

“Calm your ass,” Kyra retorted, laughing her wildly, awesomely loud laugh, “at his age he’s lucky to be alive and is probably smiling at everything!”

When we entered the retirement home, Kyra raced up to Pop and gave him a hug. Pop, on a nearby railing, proudly showed off his push-up skills before we all sat to visit. However, all I remember then is watching these old people in this large, beautiful place leaning against their walkers, walking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, on repeat, within the confines of those walls. I wondered if their repetitive actions mirrored their minds, if they were stuck in there, too, going back and forth like caged animals. I wondered how similar the courses of each of their lives were to each other and what they wished for most at this point. I wondered what their biggest regrets were. I wondered if they were loved and if anyone came to visit them. And...

“I’m so sorry, can you excuse me?” I said to Kyra, feeling my heart careening about.

“Of course,” she said. I swiftly exited out the door into the courtyard, dizzy and unable to breathe, only to find another old person circling within the gates, barred from the ocean directly outside. I turned and walked to the other side to hide from the pacing elderly woman, and, muffling any sound pounding out from my gut, worked my way through another panic attack.

They were becoming frequent visitors. When my mother had them as I was growing up, I didn’t understand them. They looked impossible, irrational. The only one I ever had before they became so intimately familiar was in my earlier years with Ali, when I heard news from around the world of a young girl’s body being bombed into a banana tree.

When Rebecca and I would leave the patch of facade and false pretense of Los Angeles en route to the desert it is underneath, I always knew we were close to her house when rows upon

rows of massive white wind turbines rotating simultaneously appeared, looking as though we had suddenly been transported to an alien planet.

I was writing one evening at Rebecca's when everything hit me at once: the rejection letter after rejection letter for mediocre jobs telling me I wasn't qualified or educated enough, the worry of overstaying my time at Rebecca's, the fear that I'd weigh on her and that I was taking up too much space, the wondering where Ali was and if we'd ever get a legal divorce, the missing my grandmother, the feeling I'd never make my dream of seeing Portland or anywhere else, the life Jon was trapped in, the helplessness with my mother. My mind spiraled into it all and rose back up through my body in an overwhelming wave. I ran to the guest room hoping Rebecca wouldn't see and curled up behind the bed, sobbing. I sobbed so hard I swore my chest echoed in my head. When I could catch a breath, I looked up and the blur of Rebecca that I could see focused to her sliding down the wall slowly, wide eyed, visibly dumbfounded and speechless.

"I honestly don't know how you've made it," she said, "If I had gone through half the things you are, I wouldn't be here. I'd go absolutely out of my mind. I couldn't do it."

I decided to leave for Michigan, where I dreaded the potential of getting stuck. But where my aunt Jo said she gets lonely and could use the company, and my grandmother could use some extra help. A semblance of family sounded nice.

Before leaving, Rebecca and I were sure to visit the Castaway, a mountainside restaurant in Burbank I had raved to her about after having seen it some years prior. We grabbed something to drink and walked out to the long deck, lined with palm trees wrapped with string lights among other lush tropical plants. We took a seat beside one of the crackling fire pits and gazed out over the expanse of the illuminated Los Angeles. I watched every miniature car light make its way down the miniature glow of streets, every distant lamp causing some unexplainable expanse from my

chest into my throat. I imagined every experience I could going on in that city, and I wanted to experience all of them. For every person sitting on a roof top searching for a hint of starlight, every person driving out to the desert with their lover and a mattress in the back of their pickup, every adrenalin shot of stepping on a stage or movie set, every hand and breath casting music into the night, every kiss that felt like the first, every breath stealing glance, every dance, every burst of camera light, everything – I wanted to do it all. I was a moment chaser. I didn't want things so much as I just wanted moments.

I took the long way through the desert on my way to Michigan and when I, to my surprise, happened upon the famous massive Route 66 sign painted on a highway, I thought of Julius, wishing he could have seen. There stood an old tree with seemingly as many pairs of shoes tied to the limbs as there would have been leaves. A line of bikers standing over the Route 66 sign saw my car coming up and parted to each side of the street, some with slight bows and an arm stretched toward the direction I was headed. I smiled, thinking *what the fuck, you only see this kind of shit in movies*. I drove on through, setting off on a thirty-four-hour drive in a car that no longer had a working radio, with nothing but the changing landscapes and my thoughts.

Everything that I had hoped to discover and take on blurred past me, becoming distant in my rearview mirror as most of what I had hoped to leave behind drew closer. I drove in the silence through Texas pasturelands crowded with miles of cows on standby for their deaths, and I drove on through the rolling prairies of Oklahoma and Kansas, until I found a rest area to sleep in. I lowered the seat, made sure the doors were locked, grabbed the quilt that my grandmother made me, pulled it over my head so I could not be seen, and wrapped it around me as tight as I could.

The sunrise that following morning, in all its glorious colors, accentuated the vast distance of everything around me. I had never felt so small.

I was flying through Missouri and hit a speed trap and noticed only too late when cop lights flashed in my eyes. I lost my breath and heard my heart. A larger man with a mustache, resembling Wilford Brimley of the Quaker Oats and Diabetes commercials, walked up with the standard quick man lift of the pants. He scanned my clothes, blankets, art supplies and everything else that was filling the back half of my car.

“I pulled you over for speeding. Where are you coming from and where are you headed?”

“California to Michigan, but please, sir, I recognize my mistake. The speed changed so suddenly, without warning. You caught me before I even had a chance to slow down.”

He didn’t budge. I begged some more, telling him I didn’t even know where I was going. He walked back to his car for a moment and returned with a \$142 ticket.

I repeated my situation.

“What you’re gonna wanna do is call the number at the bottom of that ticket.”

“How do you expect I might do that when I have no phone and no idea where I’m going?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Can I take you out for lunch?”

Wondering how many lunches \$142 would buy, I declined, and drove off, soon crossing the Mississippi River. I recalled, heavy-hearted, the beautiful moment in all its simplicity a year or two prior when Ali and I had crossed it at 4:00 in the morning heading west.

The first thing I did when I reached Kalamazoo was pull into a Walgreen’s parking lot near my grandmother’s and called her on a payphone just to hear her voice. Then I went across the street to a Middle Eastern restaurant Ali and I frequented. I asked one of the guys if he had seen or heard from him. No. I went to the 24-hour-coffee shop and emailed Kyra and Rebecca to let them know I made it to Michigan safely.

I opened an email from Rebecca that read “I burst out crying when I saw your car wasn’t in front of the house. I hope you are alright. You really need a cell phone. I really like you. Come back any time. I have to go walk Moshe now. Bye.”

And later, “Jackie, I realized you gave me a beautiful gift. You gave me the ability to travel.”



It probably would have been awkward to lay my head on my aunt Jo’s lap or hug her and not let go for a while. But I relished sitting with her on the floor of her lavender living room on opposite sides of a bowl of M&Ms catching up, sharing stories and comparing features. It was a glimpse of something I didn’t know I ached for for so long.

“I can’t believe how long your fingers are! All of us have such stubby fingers. Let’s see,” she said, putting her hand up for comparison. I put mine up to hers.

“My mom always said I get my long fingers from you, which doesn’t make much sense, since you’re my aunt,” I said.

She shook her head, “No, definitely not true. My fingers are short. And you’re even taller than everyone. Taller than Danny, I’m pretty sure.”

“Always wished I’d find that maybe she had an affair with a decent man.”

Maybe she saw the utter loneliness of not having much of a family, of figuring life out completely alone.

“I promise there is nothing you can do that will ever make me not talk to you again.”

I believed her.

She reiterated how much she wanted to get me out of the house I grew up in but felt powerless to the manipulations and threats of my mother. I spoke of one of my earliest memories of my mother. It was on Christmas Eve, when maybe long after my brothers and I had set sugar cookies out for Santa and veggies out for the deer, there was a commotion and I snuck from my room to peek down into the kitchen from the top of the stairs. She was face down, passed out on the off-white tiles of the kitchen floor.

I do not remember how I ended up at my grandmother’s that night. What I remember clearly is my mother barging through my grandmother’s door, followed by a neighbor who had given her a ride.

She stormed through the kitchen, past me and into the dining room, overturned my grandmother’s dining room table, swiped the nativity scene from my grandmother’s china cabinet, put her second favorite finger in my grandmother’s face and said, “You took one baby from me, you will never fucking take another.” She lifted me up into the smell of booze and leather, her jacket’s fringe wings waving as we headed back to a kind of small-town hell.

“Your mother’s behavior started long before you were born,” Jo said.

On following nights when Jo returned to her house from her morning to night career as an accountant at a research organization based on animal testing, she would make business calls to China while I worked on my resume, which had proved unimpressive to any semi decent employer. I read her my attempted objective statements, which impressed her.

“You’re so talented, it just takes time,” she said, “I think you should settle for something you don’t want for now.”

I wracked my brain for loopholes on how to be self-sufficient but at the same time preserve my one precious life. Knowing I didn't want the lifestyle that was modeled to me, and not having guidance, nobody ever told me, so long as this system remained, that a free spirit is similar to an entrepreneurial spirit. However, from the time I was very young, I was so energetically or spiritually averse to this system; I knew on a soul level that society and the status quo, the system, is unnatural and unnecessary. I knew a better, kinder world. In the world I knew, the term free spirit would be redundant.

She told me that my grandmother would take her to the bank when she was little and that all she really knew was numbers, so that's what she figured she would do. She told me she thought that's all there was and never had the chance to see what else is out there. A tragedy, I thought.

"All I really want is to travel and write a book. And if I knew how to go about it, I'd really love to perform and maybe direct a film," I told her. I didn't dare get poetic or sentimental and tell her I want my life to somehow be an example of the "more than this" that I've always sensed, from which the unspoken could be heard, the unwritten read. I didn't tell her how much I wanted to find a woman with a nomadic spirit to share life with and all the things I dreamed of doing for and with her. I would never tell her that, despite her having sat on her front porch with me telling me she believes sexuality is born into people.

I didn't want my grandmother to know.

\*\*\*

My aunts, Patti and Jo, and I became quite a team, I thought, in caring for my grandmother. They would bring groceries and other essentials and take care of her appointments and scheduling. I would clean her apartment, do her laundry, prepare her meals, trim her toenails, help her change her clothes and get into bed.

One night, when everyone had left and it was just my grandmother and me, she couldn't lay down because the pain in her leg was so strong. It started in her leg and radiated throughout her body. Scurrying back and forth grabbing anything to possibly make her comfortable, feeling panicked in my complete helplessness, she asked, "Where's that sweet man you'd spend time with?"

"Huh? Oh, Ali. He, uh, was twelve years older than me and sometimes I, uh, was scared I might end up dying alone." It was a lame improvised excuse, as I was still much more drawn to older people.

"Oh, honey," she said through her pain, "Life isn't guaranteed. An accident could happen tomorrow that could kill you and such worries would be rendered useless."

I looked in her eyes and saw sincerity and sadness. She had been without my grandfather for decades and never moved on.

After much frustration and pacing into the night, often with the aid of my arm, she decided it felt slightly better to be sitting in a firm, uncomfortable straight-backed chair. After I had made her some chamomile tea, she fell asleep somewhat hunched over. Worried about a possible kink in her neck but relieved that she was at least finally getting some sleep, I adjusted her lightly the best I could and sat next to her on her couch watching her through the night to make sure she wouldn't fall over or hit her face on the arm of the chair.

I knew her from the very beginning. At three months I was taken to the hospital because my heart monitors were going off and I was having difficulty breathing. The nurses unwrapped me to check everything as I regained some breath. I could not stop crying. As I sobbed and they tried to console me, my grandmother's voice broke through, and, to the nurses' astonishment, I

immediately stopped my crying, my head turning in her direction. “Wow, she sure knows you!” the nurses exclaimed.

In my adulthood, she often referred to me as her little one. But then, she sometimes didn’t know how I “came into the picture,” figuring I may have been her daughter or a sister. Watching her, through all the effort and the grasping for anything to reverse this decline in her, was an unsuspecting pull to worlds away.

\*\*\*

I was sitting in Fourth Coast, a 24-hour coffee shop in Kalamazoo, one day when Derrick walked in. Derrick had grown up around the corner from me in the small town I grew up in and, though he was babysat across the street from me and I have a photo somewhere of us as small children sitting at the same picnic table, we never really talked. I did, however, have a crush on him as a child. I remember my sixth-grade year peeking over the bus seats from the back all the way to the front at him, admiring his eighth grade goatee. He once tried to connect while I was with Ali, telling me we seemed like kind people and that he was looking to surround himself with people more like that. Then, he tried to make plans to do something with me again in that very coffee shop later on, right after Ali and I split, as I told him I was leaving for California. There we were, after all that time, talking hours away, in which he revealed to me he, too, had little family and was losing his apartment -- the grocery store he worked at wouldn’t pay him decently or increase his hours.

It was that grocery store’s deli I got a job at as Derrick made his way from his apartment to his truck. It was not surprising to me; I recalled Brandi, the first woman I was with, telling me how she spent time with the homeless and took them to lunch and listened to their stories through one of her friends’ organizations. “It’s hardly ever what people assume. The biggest reason people

tend to become homeless is that they have no family or support system,” she said. She sent me a list of the most common reasons and it really wasn’t anything people assume. I got chills.

I tried desperately to keep in mind that this was a temporary blip in time and reminded myself that I would feel the openness and promise of the highway again. The owner was an heir to a small chain of local stores, and from what I heard, lived in extravagant excess on a lake. For as long as anyone worked at this store, spending the largest chunk of their lives to keep him in excess, they never once received a raise. I worked with a boy who had been there eight years and was still at the same minimum wage level as when he had started. To make the most out of the situation, I became the clown. When chicken grease from the rotisserie spilled on the floor, I ran in place over it as my feet spasmodically jumped from each stationary slide, joking that it was a makeshift treadmill. Sometimes I’d have a slippery one-person dance party. My coworkers would laugh when I was cutting turkey and shards of it started raining on me and I made a face at them or did a little jig in the storm of it, because they knew it was sarcasm in my disgust, being a long time vegetarian. Laughter, when we can bring ourselves to it, is sometimes all we have.

Walking in one day, I caught eyes with Derrick bagging groceries toward the front and mimed a robot, then a marionette, arms dangling and elbows high. Derrick shook his head, smiling.

As I walked into the deli, a tall boy who washed dishes smiled and said, “I knew you had walked in the door. Just a couple minutes ago the whole energy in this building shifted and I knew you had arrived.”

I had rushed there late despite my always impeccable timing because when I worked at seven, I hardly slept for fear that I wouldn’t wake on time. I had been up at two, then three, then four to ensure timeliness. The phone where I was staying rang. I jumped from the couch thinking

*You gotta be fucking kidding me* and it had happened. It was forty minutes after seven. I had thrown on the same clothes I always wore. Unable to find my bandana, I grabbed a hat and left in a panic.

I arrived and, according to the owner who dropped in, I was not cutting the cheese right or switching the bowls right, despite having done it the same way I had always done it before, the way I was told to do it. While the owner nitpicked and nagged, I heated some chicken for a man who, licking his lips, scanned my body and said, “You’re going to make someone a good wife someday.”

“You gotta change your hat, Jacklyn, the owner says you look like you’re in the military,” the shift manager said.

“How different is the military,” I mumbled.

Just then, the owner told the supervisor to tell the boy at the dishes to shower or wear deodorant. I clenched my jaw, infuriated at not only the entire context but that he couldn’t tell him himself. Seeing the boy standing in all the hot steam of dishwater with his head low, I walked up to him, nudged him softly and whispered, “Tell him you can’t afford it, huh?” He smiled just enough and nodded, seeing someone on his side, but the sense of hurt remained with him for the day.

Derrick and I left that place defeated and appalled. We giggled about the people who said things like “A job’s a job!” Derrick followed up with, “Oh really? I just did not know that! Just like a tree’s a tree? And grass is grass?” He then used that opener to freestyle a Sesame Street like song.

Derrick and I daydreamed of show segments we would do together. We would be John and Jane, overly done up and expressionless, reminding each other never to smile and that such things invoke faulty human emotion. We often discussed how when you meet people, you are

immediately sized up with the question of what you do rather than who you are, a phenomenon that's huge in the United States but not so much in other places like Denmark or Russia. We daydreamed segments of him leaning against a nice car all cool like and waiting for girls to walk by, only to pop a cigarette from his mouth with a ring or two of smoke upon seeing them, saying, "Heeeey, ladies, wanna go for a ride in my Mus-taaaaaaaang?" They'd look confused, saying, "Um, that's ours." So he'd keep trying and, eventually defeated, end up at a broken down car asking some ladies with another smooth pop of his cigarette, "Hey ladies, wanna go for a riiiide?" Only for an old homeless man to pop up from his nap in the back screaming, "Get the hell away from my car!" We daydreamed an endless number of skits. We wanted to collaborate with music and spoken word. We wanted to cross dress and perform on the Venice Beach boardwalk.

Ending up at a small party with my grandmother at her neighbor's house, we dressed the best we could as how we imagined John and Jane to be. He wore a button up shirt tucked into his black slacks and parted his hair sharply. I slicked my hair back as tightly as I could, which was a feat, and fastened it in a bun. I finished the look with a long black dress coat borrowed from my grandmother. Both of us remained stiff and expressionless. We grabbed some plates and gathered some of the food, putting on our most proper nibbles, and sat in the small living room with large windows overlooking the street, stiffly squished in among everyone. He cracked a grin. I, quoting Buddy Wakefield, a spoken word poet, said, "Don't smile, John, smiling is for girls and gays and certain kinds of fish who are smiling by accident."

"So what do you do?" a little old woman with a red updo sitting nearby with her plate asked Derrick.

"Why, I am the CEO of the Chattel Corporation down in Indiana..." Derrick started improvising quite an incredible story.

Her face looked more impressed the more he went on. She looked at me assumingly and exclaimed, “You’re *lucky!*”

Derrick, though feeling defeated, said that in that moment, he felt liberated. He knew that if we announced that he bagged groceries and I sliced meat, these people would be less than impressed. But they couldn’t have known otherwise. I saw that in such environments, the culmination of who you are would, either way, be discarded as matters little to none.

\*\*\*

My grandmother came home from surgery on her leg completely out of it, swinging swiftly in and out of sleep while I helped Patti and Jo with lifting and adjusting her as she needed. As she became more lucid, she said to Jo and Patti, “Where’s my little one?” I got up to see what she wanted. Jo looked up at me. “I’m her little one.”

It was strange. I had never doubted this fact and had only seen my grandmother referencing me that way as a term of endearment. I sensed, anyway, that the energy had been changing with Jo for a while, even before she told me it was maybe best I not be there so much anymore. On a morning when Derrick was visiting me at my grandmother’s, I could feel this shifted energy grow especially thick and I started to cry. Jo stood in the kitchen slicing muffins in half and putting them into freezer bags, not acknowledging or talking to me.

\*\*\*

At one point, the problem of the day at the deli was my hair. One of the older ladies that took over as top chef walked up to me when she couldn’t find anything else to pick at and told me I have to tame it better.

“See the other girls, how they secure it tightly to their heads?” she swept her hand in our coworkers’ directions.

“I try and it’s too thick - no matter what I do, there’s going to be looseness.”

It was long and wild. It fell and it flew.

“Your hair is not our problem.”

*It really isn’t mine, either, lady, I thought. As if I was sitting in my mother’s womb in cahoots with the cosmos concocting the recipe for thick wild hair because, boy, oh, boy, I just knew I was going to be chasing pennies in a degrading place wanting to twist the panties of the people there who worried about such small, petty things.*

I saw a coworker roll her eyes at the lecture.

I whispered to her, “I know what I’ll do. I’ll dread my hair to control it. Only when they’re used to my hair being tamed in this manner will I stop shaving my armpits and I’ll hover over the food and tell her, ‘You thought the hair on my head was bad.’”

When I left the deli that night, the roads were snow covered and slick. I sat at an empty intersection while the light skipped me five times. “The World Spins Madly On” by the Weepies played from the radio. I felt flattened. Seeing the light was going to continue to skip me, I finally just made a right turn from the left turning lane into an empty parking lot and pulled some donuts in an attempt to laugh.

\*\*\*

I was making coffee and toast for my grandmother one morning when I shared with her my travel dreams. I told her that I wished to convert a bus and live on the road and always wake up to a new landscape, a new day, new experiences. I told her I believe that what we’re doing with the capitalist system and society is just not how it’s meant to be, and I can’t make myself believe otherwise. I told her that I pictured this bus with shag carpet for nostalgic purposes or hardwood floors with Chinese lanterns along the windows. The bed would have drawers underneath and there

would be a desk for art and magnetic frames on the inside walls with pictures of the people I hold dear to my heart, and that maybe I would have people I met along the way sign the outside. I would sleep on the top under the stars sometimes or sit up there with someone in the desert sipping wine, laughing and gazing at the immensity of the illuminated western sky. Or I would drive down into South America. I'd stay in cities I love and make just enough to go across seas and explore the world. I mused about how there are no borders looking at this beautiful planet from space and we are all born equally to this world, and I would always be a part of those burst-like Zen garden skies, the laughing confetti trees, the expanse.

At that moment, she saw my soul. She stared out the window, her eyes overlooked emergencies as if her lost self might appear before her on the other side of that glass.

“I never knew myself. I did it all out of expectation.”

\*\*\*

After I had packed my grandmother's things in her friend's vehicle and hugged her goodbye before she left on her annual trip to Florida, I went into her home to discover that all the toilet paper had been removed from the apartment. I found this small act of obvious passive aggression strange and emailed my aunts to ask about it. Jo was soon on her way to talk with me. I wracked my brain in an attempt to figure out her drastic shift in energy toward me and this bizarre move. I figured it could have been overeating or helping myself to an old bottle of vodka nobody was drinking. Maybe I unintentionally said something wrong.

She showed up in the doorway lightly tapping two rolls, one in each hand, together, her icy gaze piercing from under her honey-colored hair. She told me she discovered I had been talking to my mother again, since my mother and I hadn't spoken in quite some time, making this sound like the reason. Having felt the shift in her energy toward me for quite some time and her oncoming

actions, I cried, telling her that I had hoped all that she had said in her e-mail and in her living room was true. She shrugged coldly. She told me she thought I would struggle my whole life. I didn't argue with her. We saw the world differently. She struggled for a largely vacant house, I struggled for authenticity. She then accused me of fucking my friend, Derrick, in my grandmother's apartment, something I would never do out of decency and respect, let alone the lack of interest. But my mother would have done such a thing, and did, in her younger years. The possibility occurred to me that Jo's lifelong, immense hatred for my mother blinded her to who I was and that maybe her punishments were in some way satisfying her desire to punish my mother. I just let her have it. I knew, at that point, she was going to believe what she wanted to believe.

She moved on to tell me I trashed the place, despite neighbors saying I kept it immaculate. She said I was getting my grandmother evicted by being around so much, despite the maintenance man, office personnel and the lawyer who lived below my grandmother telling me it's not true.

Around that same time, Patti walked in smiling and chatting with me in a friendly manner. Too soon, though, did I see the slotted green eyes of a cat, the mane of a lion and the air of a harpy as her kind demeanor morphed into something aggressive. She suddenly dropped that I am very much into myself.

"Oh, that's strange, because anyone who truly knows me would tell you the opposite, that my confidence is shot. You never knew me. You have no right."

"You're right, I don't know you. I was never in your life," she said, still fuming.

Through shock and a near inability to speak, I looked her straight in the eyes and said, "Thank goodness for small blessings."

"That was rude!"

"What's rude is making character judgments on someone you don't know."

Patti and Jo had taken power of attorney without anyone's knowledge. They cleaned out my grandmother's apartment while she was in Florida and never let me know where they moved her. I never heard from Jo or Patti again.

\*\*\*

Derrick and I walked down the skid mark of Westnedge Avenue, another stretch of corporate America advertising proudly, in all its solemn lack of glory, another Anywhere, USA. The bitter cold winter that we managed to endure nights spent in our vehicles was a thing of the past, though no amount of time or effort would ever cease the reverberation of our supervisors: "We don't know what to tell ya."

In fact, as Michigan's cold early spring arrived, I was spotted one morning by an employee sleeping in my car in the parking lot so as not to be late. The employee had reported this, and I was called into the manager's office.

"You may not sleep in the parking lot, it looks bad on the business," the manager said.

"I mean, I give all my time to this place, but seven dollars isn't going to afford a home, let alone food and living essentials."

"Well, I suggest maybe going to a mission."

The walk down Westnedge with Derrick was warm, barely a cloud in the sky. Early spring flowers peeked out where they could. Dandelions were just budding, but would be mowed with corporate lawnmowers in no time.

"Look!" I squealed, pointing at an oil spill on the pavement that had taken shape, "An angel!"

"Leave it to you to make angels out of oil spills," Derrick smiled.

“It’s just my luck,” he continued, “that you felt you had a crush on me as a kid and now I have a crush and you’re not into dudes.”

Awkward.

“Well, uh, shit happens, huh?”

\*\*\*

My mother and Jon no longer lived with Rich. I walked into their tiny, cramped apartment one evening. The guy I called my boyfriend when I was fifteen and he was twenty-one was in her bedroom. During the time that I knew him, he was having family troubles and gave his guitar to me, only to later ask for it back. This had been around the time that my mother had taken my saxophone, guitars and amplifiers that were gifted to me and sold them for herself without my knowledge. The noise in the bedroom stopped when my mother heard me.

She stumbled out of her room in her panties and old stretched T-shirt, completely intoxicated, holding that guitar, yelling and slurring, “I was only trying to get this back for you, Jackie!” She started beating it against the walls and floor until it was nothing but pieces, nothing but a memory of a guitar. I had an idea, though not yet clear, that it wasn’t her arms that beat what once could sing, that took from me what might someday, but her heavy heart; she once said that even the Rock of Gibraltar had ten thousand holes. She was screaming to be heard but, in hearing only that in all its obscurities, I was helpless.

I’d try to trace the roadmap of my mother’s life to find exactly when whatever went wrong went wrong. I put together her life like this:

She was only three when she wondered why nobody noticed the blood in her underwear after the nights that her brothers called her into the basement for a secret game she had to lay on her tummy for.

By her school years, she formed imaginary friends, Sammy and Shickabuck, who she swore she could see. She'd stare out the window in the backs of classrooms, watching herself running. She told her teacher she had a sister that died, which wasn't true. She ran through woods barefoot, thorns cutting through her already weathered heels, to discreetly peek down her pants, wondering why she hadn't grown a penis yet.

She laughed in Mass with her three sisters at her grandmother's falling stockings and crooked skirt as her two brothers served the altar. They laughed harder when her grandmother looked down with the Eucharist between her lips, mumbling under her breath, "Well shit..." while her mother, who never swore, stood by irritated, rolling her eyes at the profanity.

She was sixteen when she met a boy with black hair and green eyes, who used the word love too soon for his own surface desires. She didn't know the difference and remembers the glow of his cigarette most when he came inside her. From then on, she'd always refer to herself as a selfish lover, with a façade of giggles because she could only fuck on her back in the dark.

As her belly grew rounder, her parents would send her to the basement when company came, deciding it would be best that she let the baby go. She gave birth a week and a day before her seventeenth birthday. Her baby let out the shortest cry before scanning the room with wide eyes. She unwrapped the baby, smelled her skin, counted her fingers and toes, kissed her head trying not to cover it with tears. She couldn't let go when the nurse came to pry the newborn from her arms. But then she had to.

Her son was born two years later. She learned to line her windows with coke bottles to hear her husband coming in. Her jaw popped when she chewed. Bottles clanked and fell with slams of windows and doors and, whether her husband was there or not, her body remembered the cuts and

the bruises, the impact of fist to face, the brutal thrusts forced into her, knife to neck. Her dog barked at shadows.

She was most afraid to tell her parents that she was pregnant again six years later, after a visit from her imprisoned husband – a girl, she had learned. She filed for divorce two months before giving birth. Her daughter was left in the hospital, born blue and unable to breathe. Her mother told her that the baby's fists were clenched, assured her that the baby was fighting.

Her youngest, a boy, was conceived on a countertop in the kitchen because his father would not stop asking. He just would not give up, she says. The boy's father claimed the baby wasn't his until he saw how pink the baby was and how white his hair, unlike her other babies. And those Elmer Fudd lips, just like the rest of the man's family, she says. There'd be earrings in his business truck that weren't hers. She stayed. She kept the house immaculate. Visitors said it looked like something out of a JC Penney catalog.

Her two younger children watched from the backseat of the brown Buick one Mother's Day after a trip to the ice cream stand. She collapsed over her ten-year-old son lying like a heap of clothing in the road. A priest read last rites to the artificial beeps of his heart. Her father prayed nine hours for the boy's life, in request that it be spared, even if in exchange for his own. Her son recovered with lifelong damage and her father died of a heart attack. She hit the bottle and the doors of pill dealers when she ate her prescriptions too soon.

\*\*\*

After leaving the deli, I worked at a gas station, where, twice, I had seen Gale. Going through the motions of beeping transactions, lamenting my place through the mindlessness, that lifelong familiar voice broke through.

“Well, hey there,” he said.

I looked up to see him smiling as if nothing ever happened. As if eight years of deciding I was nothing after calling me his daughter for seventeen hadn't passed. As if we were long time buddies. The first time he came in, I kept my face down trying not to let him hear the tremble in my voice or see the tears rimming my eyes. The second time, I couldn't handle it.

"Can you take my place?" I quietly asked a nearby coworker.

"Of course."

I ran to the back rooms.

It felt like I had been erased. It hadn't mattered to him that I slept on his burly chest as a newborn or that I adored him as a small child. In grocery stores, I'd look up at every stranger pointing to Gale, telling them in the mysterious Southern accent with which I spoke, "That's my dad." I mimicked his language – "To the moon, Alice!" and "Outta my way, assholes!" My mother would look out the window to see me following him, copying his every movement. He looked up at the trees. So did I. He put his hands on his hips. So did I. He scanned the grass. I did, too.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked my coworker up front.

\*\*\*

The Protege was my first car and, though older, the service engine light and the noises it was making had me feeling like it was broken. Unbeknownst to me, my mother set it up for Danny to fix it.

Jon and I were sitting on the steps of Danny's sister's porch. Danny walked up from the gravel parking lot. I braced my cringe. Never once did he ask about who I am as a person. Never once did he ask what my life was like. Instead, he said in his gruff voice, "I heard my genes is strong -- both my boy *and* my girl luuuuuuuuuuh da pussy!"

Word got around far and fast.

I couldn't remember the last time I saw him. I remembered one of the first. I stood behind my mother in a small room. She held a phone receiver to one ear and on the other side of the plexiglass between them, my biological father, Danny, held the other receiver to his. I didn't know him. I wanted to be elsewhere.

My mother said, "Oh! Danny, look!" It was as if she'd remembered something crucial. Turning to me, she said, "Jackie, take your shoes off!" I just looked at her. I didn't want to. "Take your shoes off and let us see your feet!" I didn't want to, but, slowly, I did.

"She's got your sister's feet!" she exclaimed, turning back to him as he peered over the counter at me standing next to my shoes in the middle of the barren room facing the visitor booths.

It hit me so hard. I had never wanted to have any part of him. Bereft, I kept telling myself *No, I have my feet. I have my feet.*

Around the same time, I was asleep in my sandbox, woken by a gruff voice and a light nudge. I startled to find Danny bent over me, shadowing the sun's rays breaking through the tree branches. Scurrying to my feet, breathless and without word, I ran across the yard, up the stairs of the wrap-around porch, through the front door of the 175-year-old four story house, through the blue-carpeted living room, the kitchen with the teal floral wallpaper, up the brown-carpeted stairs and dashed into my pink wall-papered room. I opened the door to my messy closet stuffed high with clothes and toys and dived in, submerging myself beneath it all. I was devastated when he unburied me.

There in his sister's driveway, he made his way to my car cracking jokes. Jon's knees buckled in laughter. I studied the swagger in Danny's walk, the lines down his cheeks, the way they creased around the slightly upturned corners as if he was always on the brink of another lewd

comment, the dead glazed over eye from his many fights. I considered his past. Dubiously, I asked, “Are you sure you can fix it?”

He looked at me and said, “I can fix anything but my own fucked up life.”

\*\*\*

I had to leave. The urge to get away and feel motion was stronger by the breath. First, though, I drove to the mechanic shop I heard Adam worked at to see him.

Walking into the lobby, I saw him at the counter. His hair was no longer the white it was when he was a baby, or the blonde it was as a child, but a light brown. He kept it short under the hat he wore because it was thinning like his dad’s did at an early age, which seemed to irritate him, but truly, he was as adorable as ever. He looked up at me from behind the counter and said, “I’ll be right with you.”

I stood still, hoping he’d recognize me. His head shot up when recognition hit.

“Oh my god!”

He turned to his coworkers.

“This is my sister!”

At least our blood would say so. We had been inseparable as children. When I started school before him, he’d wait for me, elfin features peaking over the windowsill, to get off the school bus. When we were in school together riding the bus back home, he’d see the tears in my eyes from another day of being bullied and throw his jacket over both of our heads, announcing, to make me laugh, “Houston, this is mission 9826709!” We spent countless hours climbing trees and making up games. I’d draw him mazes and write quizzes. We’d watch Looney Tunes at night, then yell good night to Neverland together out the window. He’d call me “Second Mom.”

*Can you comb my hair, Second Mom?*

*Can you make me oatmeal, Second Mom?*

After Gale took him, Adam and I still attended the same high school. He'd walk by me without a word. His sense of being better was palpable, the gulf dry and wide. While I rode the bus to school, he drove the vehicle I had been promised a year prior. Weekly, he'd show up in brand new clothes; I did my best to assemble the illusion of quantity from little and to conceal the wear. His holidays seemed full and happy; the last I ever had was hungry, watching my mother support a weight beyond herself on the counter, sobbing to me and Jon, "I'm sorry, I have nothing to give you." A social worker bought me a Victoria's Secret bra and panty set my mother had picked out and Jon a CD and we spent the day assuring our mother everything was okay. I will never be able to put into words what it is to experience a class divide between siblings. That last high school year was the year Adam's hair had started going dark like our mothers and the first time someone said we looked like twins. But the familiarity was gone.

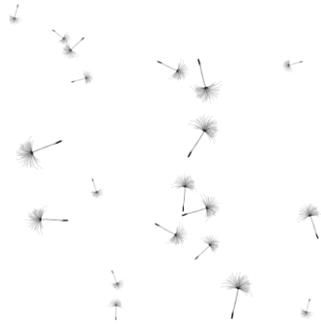
In the tire shop as we chatted, he said, "I have to show you something."

He led me through the door behind the desk and out into the back of the service garage up through ramps of tires to where my giant senior picture hung in its frame, looking over the shop.

"Yeah, the guys definitely don't mind it," he smiled, "but you're always with me. I don't even know how it ended up with me, but it's here."

I told him he's probably heard somehow that I came out and let him know I was going to California.

He told me he's getting married on the shore of Lake Michigan to his high school sweetheart.



I arrived in the small town of Morris, Illinois on a late Wednesday evening. The two guys who had taken me up on a rideshare post through craigslist were not there as I had expected, though I was pretty sure I was in the designated place after having mapped it out precisely on a routing website before leaving, each detail meticulously copied to notebook paper. I paced a bit between the unaligned, slightly rickety homes, a desolate field ahead of me with a water tower boasting the town's name. Slightly worried, I stayed there longer, unable to believe that they would have begged for this ride or have been as excited as they were for nothing.

I sat in my twelve-year-old Protege on the street of this typical small midwestern town, the kind I spent my whole life wanting to forever leave, with curious eyes staring from a couple porches, trying to make sense of the stranger in their neighborhood. I took some wallet sized photos I had printed before leaving, cut them, and glued them along the inside edge of my car. Most of them were of friends I met in the seven months in my hometown at a gay bar Derrick and I spent a lot of time at. One of them was of me and my first rideshare, Julius, somewhere on the side of Route 66.

The people in my hometown were worried – between their confessions that they yearned for the same freedom, that they wished they could do it, too, they also called me crazy for just heading across the country with two strange guys, no phone, and no set destination.

“You need a phone,” they’d say.

“No I don’t,” I’d say.

“What if you get yourself killed?” they’d say.

“I’d rather live a short full life than a long repetitive existence,” I’d say.

“I wish I could do that,” they’d say.

I waited, scanning the glued photos and the little red Buddha on my dashboard. No longer were the flowers hanging from my rearview after Kyra had insisted dead flowers are cause for bad luck. I started thinking I would be heading to California by myself.

Derrick had taken a bus ahead of me and I would figure out how to meet him somehow in the Venice Beach area when I arrived.

Suddenly, as I waited in Morris, a car pulled up and two guys jumped out. As soon as I saw them, any minute drop of hesitation I may have had about riding across the country with two guys, confined to the same small space for around 40 hours, fell away. They ran at me, hugged me immediately like we had always known each other and thanked me profusely for still being there, as they realized they had gotten the time mixed up. Eagerly, they started pulling their things from the car they pulled up in. A girl named Claire, who had driven them there, was helping them pack my car with all their things and asked if I had a rack or something to help secure John’s bike to the roof of my car.

“Oh, I’m sure my dent will hold it on fabulously,” I grinned, “I love my dent.”

On top of my car was a deep dent the width of the roof from many spontaneous parking lot dance parties outside of bars in my hometown. As soon as we got all their traveling gear packed in and they securely strapped John’s bike into the dent, the guys hugged Claire goodbye and we were on the road. Of course, they began sharing stories of their experiences, where they were

headed and why, and a surreal feeling took over, like on one side of a clandestine veil lied all I ever wanted, tribe and all, but I had spent my whole life on another side believing that's all there ever was.

John, who once baked for a cult in Boston, planned on staying in Venice for a while and hoped to later backpack up the coast to spend some time working on a sheep farm before departing to whatever else life might hold for him. I found it incredibly cute and endearing, as he actually was reminiscent of the stereotypical sheep herder seen in movies walking in the pastures with his stick, being a smaller guy with shaggy brown hair, shorts, and a loose button up shirt, sleeve cuffs wide open. Dakota also seemed to me straight out of a story. He was a soft-spoken vegan Jewish boy with blonde dreadlocks that hung straight down to his butt, accentuated throughout with multi-colored duct tape, colored string, and one giant wooden bead. He had a nose ring, a wide, shining grin and cordial eyes. He wore only black overalls and a red bandana around his neck, sometimes accessorized with a cowboy hat. Dakota, who had a sister named Sky, was on his way to Venice hoping to find a girl who he described as also having dreadlocks named Aurora, who he had met some time before at the drum circle, where an enormous amount of people gather with their drums, beat in synchrony, chant and dance as the sun sets over the distant Topanga Canyon. He was only passing through, he told me, but if he found her, she was the only thing that could keep him there longer.

He would gush about how amazing Trader Joe's is as he dug through his vegan treasures of peanut butter and jelly, granola bars, fruit snacks and bagged Indian food.

“Want some?” he'd always ask, to which I would thank him and pass.

Somewhere in the flatlands of Nebraska, Dakota took the wheel. The other side of the highway whizzed past, along slanted telephone lines. Beyond them were interchanging fields of

corn and grass, some dandelion speckled. A once in a while semblance of a mountain seemed to show in the distance, perfect cotton like clouds floating through the sky.

Dakota hung his foot out the window. A joint hung from his teeth as he spoke through his smile.

He decided to press the horn clear down the highway until it finally blew, giving out for good. In my mind, at that moment, the value of my car increased and I was most in love with life.

“We need some bluegrass or Dylan,” they were saying as John took out a guitar in the back seat and started strumming and singing, putting on a mini live music show in the back seat. I wished I could play; I always had wanted to learn. Dakota continued driving a highway that looked as though it stretched forever with his foot still out the window, I with my arm out the other window, following the waves of wind.

It was dark in New Mexico, but John, Dakota and I saw the landscape changing. Passing through Santa Fe and Taos, I had taken the driving duties and stared wishfully out the windows, disappointed that I couldn't see all that was there, trying to make out what the art-filled pueblo buildings might look like in the light, wanting desperately to explore. But we kept moving. Driving further, until we couldn't drive through yet another night, I found an exit and we discovered a small hideaway area among trees and bushes somewhere. They decided to set their camping gear up outside, Dakota's simply being a sleeping mat, while I figured out which of the front seats in my car leaned back the farthest. I told them if anything arises, we could always make room in there. But John stayed in his little tent and Dakota slept out in the pouring rain. In the morning, he walked to my car soaked and smiling, hopping in and letting the overalls dry on his body.

We drove on through the desert and I wondered what it would take to just replace an engine when I run it gone. Even if I didn't ever get the customized bus I dreamed up repeatedly in my mind, if I could be free and have these experiences, I'd downsize my dream. I just could not want what I was expected to want – that standard, conventional shuffling through the same. It had been a soul level understanding since I was a toddler, without language, something I am still learning how to articulate. The usual idea of stability seemed to lie in routine, but I felt most stability in the open and the unknown. Maybe because anything else could shatter. I thought of how we project need on things we don't, how much things can actually weigh us down.

The open road and the unknown, nothing anchoring me, was where I was happiest and most secure. It was most affirming as I glided, even momentarily, across the belly of this earth with people like John and Dakota who risked all we're taught is comfortable and right in trade of something more vast, who knew our core and lived solely for the purpose of unmediated experiences and love, from which purpose itself is born. Not merely the idea of life, love and purpose dirtied by constructs. It's the truest heart's calling that kept John on the road years after we met and what told Dakota, even after he found out he would be going back to Illinois soon because his sister Sky found out she had cancer, that just by conviction he would run into Aurora at the drum circles on Venice Beach.

We made it to Venice by evening. One of them let me use their phone in order to find Derrick, who was somewhere on the boardwalk. He was working at a vintage clothing store right off the boardwalk and slept in the same vicinity – in the grass, with friends, wherever – so with a few landmark descriptions and little navigating, we were running to each other in no time for a tackle of a hug.

“I was just talking to some guy who talked of a borderless world and said that he wasn’t homeless, but that this was his home. He was simply keyless,” he said as we caught up. The vastness in perception is immense. My convictions were not carried as far as his, as that was not something I ultimately wanted. I knew I wanted something more comfortable than that while somehow maintaining freedom.

I introduced Derrick to John and Dakota as we walked to the shore. The four of us sat in the sand. As the sun went down, a guy we didn’t know with a guitar and a girl sat near us. The guy started playing a song about being in love with his lesbian best friend.

“Maybe it was our excuse to grow up together,” was the only lyric I clearly remember as the whooshing of waves made its contribution to the song and the sun slipped slowly behind Topanga Canyon.

I awoke early to the sun blaring in from all directions, through every window of my car. I laid there in the back seat for a few minutes, a light dew on my skin, listening to the world around me awaking, listening to the world around me becoming, and smiled. Warm with California’s June heat, I slid out from the quilt my grandmother made me. I stepped outside to dig through my trunk for something to wear while Derrick was in the front passenger seat making his languid transition from sleep.

Standing at the trunk, as I would many mornings in the months thereafter, I discreetly changed my clothes, slipping each item of clothing under or over the other so as to remain covered while I changed. I put the clothes I was wearing in a bag in my trunk that separated them from the rest of the clean clothes, then poured bottled water on a toothbrush to brush my teeth. After, I went to the front driver’s seat, pulled down the visor mirror and applied some makeup to my face.

I hadn't had much to drink in three or four days, so Drake and I walked from the circle we parked off of, took Main St. all the way to Rose St. in Santa Monica, then up Rose to Lincoln to a Whole Foods next to a laundromat, where we'd end up doing our laundry. I ran eagerly through Whole Foods to the cold drinks and grabbed the biggest grapefruit juice available, fully intending to drink every bit of it as soon as I left the store.

As we were walking out the door, a uniformed cop said, "Ah, grapefruit juice! You should put some vodka in it – it's a real kicker, just like Red Bull," sending Derrick and I out the door laughing at the perceived oddity.

I found a hotspot to let people in the mitten state know I was safe, that my rideshares did not kill me. I got several messages from people in my hometown. "To the girl who lives a year in a day," they'd say. "Are you fluid? Are you breathless? Are you the inescapable truth yet?" they'd say. "Hold the rudder true," they'd say. "Don't ever waver from your course. Do not wander into these stormy waters, do not let yourself forget what's true, keep that warmest blue above your crown and listen to those murmurs of life's most precious joys unfurl before you," one note read.

"Keep investing in moments, my dear – they're yours to keep forever," said another.

Soon I was walking the crowded boardwalk of Venice Beach, my favorite place in the Los Angeles area, barefoot, in a tank top, a skirt, no underwear, and a smile on my face. Nobody knew but me.

In the parking lots and side streets along the boardwalk were VW vans, converted buses, and other various homes on wheels.

Venice was a slight contrast from Los Angeles proper, where you might see a woman with \$20,000 tits, a face frozen in place by Botox, wobbling with her \$4,000 Gucci bag right past a child with a sunken belly and exposed ribs encaging a heart too weak to scream. Venice is where

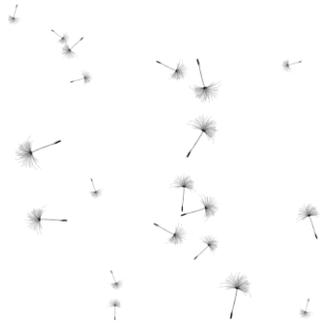
people drag their art from their wheeled dwellings, living off and from their hearts, through canvas and performance and various forms of craft. It is where the eccentrics gather, the human tree on stilts, the bearded man in a turban playing electric guitar on rollerblades. A little bubble of sorts within a city of superficiality and excess, conforming and commodifying, Venice seemed to attract the greatest of the “weird” and the down-to-earth, unmolded by Hollywood and magazines. Sure, those from Hollywood made their way there too, but in Venice, it seemed everyone blended. It seemed everyone, perhaps, if only briefly, glimpsed our common core.

In a single walk, I saw a guy skateboarding through the crowd with a small dog shaved to look like a lion perched upright on his arm, another guy flying down the boardwalk on a bike with a parrot on the handlebars, a Chihuahua at a dining table with sunglasses on his face, and a group of guys riding bikes with a boombox blaring “Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting” by Carl Douglas.

On the boardwalk, music was everywhere, and the smell of incense and marijuana swirled and mingled through the air. A girl with wild, dark curly hair stood outside of a medical marijuana clinic wearing sunglasses, a bikini and a marijuana lei around her neck, making grand sweeping motions with her hands, yelling in a slow, laid back manner that might convince passersby that she was high herself. “The doctor is in! The doctor is in! Come get your medical marijuana card today!” she regaled with a sinuous wave of her arm.

A guy sat across the boardwalk on the sand pounding at his drum, looking as hippie-like as one possibly could, then suddenly paused, popped his head up, and whipped out his cell phone and slapped it to his ear. Belly dancers shimmied and acrobats flew over crowds of people gathering to watch. A man spray painted completely silver performed as a dancing statue. Another guy was drumming on pots and pans, creating a song on its own, surpassing many a conventional





Rebecca picked me up for a visit to the desert and I was thrilled. While driving through the desert, she recounted her mini adventures and all the people she'd met, the chicken's head she cut off for a religious holiday, and the hot tub sex gatherings where she was fingering someone only to fondle a diaphragm. Meanwhile, I was absolutely in awe with how amazing the desert was. Time and a new frame of mind changed my perception of this environment. With a deserted caboose sitting in the middle of nowhere, the old, abandoned pioneer town with a saloon and old sheds of decaying wood, rusted carts among various old village buildings, it was a photographer's dream. I could've wished on a million mental dandelion blows to explore every bit of it.

As the same Stevie Nicks songs and Joanna Newsom songs pounded into the heat, we ventured 6,000 feet into the mountains to explore Idyllwild. We went to high desert galleries. We went to the first Joshua Tree Pride.

Outside Joshua Tree Pride, old cars lined along a crooked wood fence. Gravel crunched under our feet as we walked past an old wood totem of simplistic but emotive faces. We followed the cement walkway with circular stone shapes blended into it, past a green building, into the area the small Pride was being held. A red plastic geometrical dog sat beneath a green cone of a doghouse, an old man with a straw hat and a beard sat swinging contentedly in a wicker chair hanging from a patio roof, a shed adorned with string lights that had a sign saying "Art Queen" sat

in front of the picturesque mountains, and against the door of another building leaned a sign that said “Hi Neighbors - We’re Gay!” However, most of the small crowd was not.

A beautiful older woman, who lived in Desert Hot Springs with her partner and daughter, wore a massive floppy sun hat and a big rainbow boa as she went around taking pictures and blowing kisses to everyone. Perhaps she had organized the event and it had been an excuse for everyone else to celebrate together. Rebecca and I were watching a poetry reading when up walked a man in a very colorful shirt, tons of jewelry around his wrists and neck, half of his shoulder length gray hair in a ponytail, and a bandana around his head with a feather tucked into it, pointing skyward.

“Oh, you’re, like, totally invested in this poetry reading, sistah! Shah!”

“Yes,” I smiled, “but taking in the surroundings as well.”

“What. Everrrrr. I’m Stodder, by the way. That’s red dots backwards.”

He said he was a musician and asked if I was going to be dancing later. I shrugged, smiling. He looked over at Rebecca and continued, “You betta be dancing tonight, sistah! Shaaaaahhhhhhhhh!”

I said, “You’re really decked out there with all that jewelry, huh?”

“Yeah, what you got,” he pointed at my little bit of jewelry, “is bling. I call this pling. Post bling. Shah-de-dah.”

He told me his daughter’s age, guessed mine spot on based on the proximity to his daughter’s age, and said, “I’m 58. And a half. What. Everrrrrrr.”

Rebecca and I just stood there amused.

“You know what I’m feeling? Besides a little drunk?” he asked.

“What?”

“That you guys rock.”

He invited us to come listen to music that he supposedly made with Jimi Hendrix’s daughter, April Hendrix, though I can not find any record of Jimi having a daughter by that name. But it’s okay. We walked through the little gathering over the crunching sand and gravel and opened his little truck, where he threw around his messes to make room for us to sit. It smelled of incense. Pictures of men in turbans were stuffed in his visor. Hindi prayer cloths hung in a row down from his rearview mirror. Eagerly, he turned his music on, though he continued, at first, to chat through it. After Rebecca and I had assumed he was gay, he told us how his wife of 20 or 30 something years had cheated on him not too long before. He toned down the chatting the more the music played. It was really good. He kept urging, proudly, “One more song.” We happily obliged. He played one he called “The Jelly Roll,” asking if we knew what that was.

Rebecca and I shook our heads.

He explained that it’s the Armageddon and all the contradictory militant religious folks are going to take their little trams to the top of the mountain and look down and everyone else is going to be fucking.

“And that’s what we call the Jelly Roll! Shah! Shah means shit yah, by the way.”

Soon, the song came on with this supposed April Hendrix and her voice was jaw dropping. Rebecca and I sat there visibly stunned, mouths slack and eyes popped. The song and the mingling of both their voices, the music, was all incredible. He looked at us and said, “I know, isn’t she amazing?! I’m sandpaper and glue and she’s honey and sun!”

Months later, after many new days and mini adventures, and after finding a job at a juice shop on Venice Beach, I was lying in a hammock in the Mojave desert one night gazing at the

expanse of the Milky Way, feeling the magnitude, taking in the speck that I am, when Rebecca walked up to me and said, “Look who I found!”

I sat up.

It was Stodder, who I thought I’d never see again.

“Shah!”

He came over, on a tangent about the patriarchy, going on about how everything should be brought back to the matriarchy. He tried to sit next to me in the hammock, almost overturning it, but somehow regained our balance.

“Sistah, I want to give you something,” he said, taking a thick, silver, beat up ring off one of his fingers and putting it into my hand. “Cheapo Depot but not Home Depot. Shah. What. Ever.”

“It’s time,” Rebecca said.

We wobbled off the hammock. Stodder followed us to the Integratron. The Integratron, on the outside, casts live projections of space and, on the inside, offers sound baths, or meditation sessions accompanied by quartz sound bowls. The people who run the Integratron describe it as “acoustically perfect,” since sound is distributed evenly and if someone on one end of the dome says something, it will be heard in equal measure on the other side.

“Everyone needs their chakras flossed sometimes,” Stodder announced.

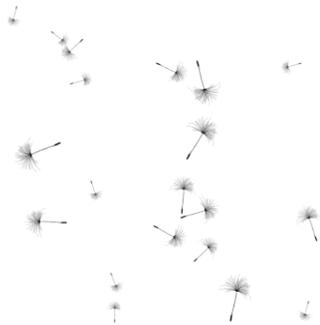
We walked in, then up a set of stairs so steep they nearly were a ladder, to where the sound bath took place. The women explained that the Integratron itself was located on a powerful geomagnetic vortex. As we took our place on scattered mats, they told us to be as quiet as possible, since the slightest noise would be heard with equal measure on the opposite side of the room. Stodder laid on his tummy, situating his face over the small hole in the center of the floor, directly below the top center of the dome where the outer wood beams came together.

Just as the lady requested as much silence as possible, Stodder lifted his head from the hole and the massive collection of necklaces around his neck hit the floor. “Oh, gotta tuck my pling into my boobs,” he said, stuffing as many as he could into his shirt.

“Sistah,” he whispered to me, “if I start snoring, hit me. I feel like if I talk in here everyone knows my fuckin’ DNA count and shoe size.” He then promptly placed his face back over the small baseball sized hole in the wooden floor.

I laid on my back over the mat. Covered in a knit blanket, I closed my eyes. A woman began sounding the numerous differing sizes, and thus pitches, of Tibetan sound bowls as I drifted somewhere bordering on sleep. Stodder snored into the hole next to me, this dream chaser, this take up spacer, this non rat racer, this in your facer, this single-trail blazer. Him or the sound bowls – I can’t say which was more invigorating.

Rebecca, the rallying traveler she had become, got me back to my car in Venice by 4 am so that I could return to the juice shop the following day.



One day, when I clocked out of the juice shop, I walked around the corner to meet Derrick at the thrift store where he worked. After he clocked out, we walked to Abbot’s Habit, our usual hang out on Abbot-Kinney Boulevard.

After ordering my usual extra-large iced coffee and piling it with raw sugar and vanilla and Derrick got his drink, we sat near the window nearest the front door, on one side of the double

arched entry wall to the other side of the room. Nearby where we sat, a woman with most of her head shaved bald except for a patch she had pulled into a little side ponytail with a button, was talking about her experience as a teacher.

“Kids are fucking assholes and they’re made to be! After teaching, I never want kids because this is seriously the fucking world they have to grow up in? Fuck that. Fuck that. And whoever invented money is the fucking devil.” I thought of what a gem she was in the city of Los Angeles, where sometimes you get scanned from your shoes up, a prerequisite to the option of looking at your face. Where it’s said that people’s spirits tend to be feet outside their bodies.

Going through emails, I found out I was divorced. Jon and my mother had written to inform me that, after a year of not knowing where he was or whether we’d get a divorce, Ali had divorced me by default.

By instinct or reflex, I shot up from my chair, arms in the air, shouting, “I’m divorced!”

Then, in the most enigmatic mix of emotions I had ever felt, with no line between complete happiness and utter sadness, beginning or endings, I sat down and cried.

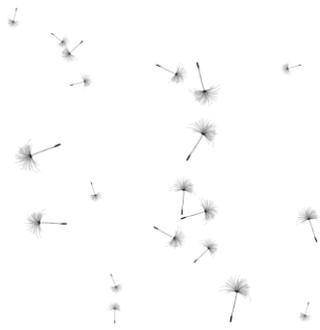
“I hope he at least took something good, something positive from our time together,” I told Derrick.

“Oh, I’m sure he did,” he said.

Derrick and I walked from that coffee shop, everything buzzing around me as if floating through a dream, all the way to the primmed lawns of Santa Monica College where dandelions don’t grow. I decided to apply for filmmaking since I had always wanted to express myself somehow through that medium. He applied, too, despite having dropped out of high school. We walked back to Venice, discussing our hopes for the future, how maybe we could be comfortable

someday in another situation, uncapped, unlimited and not living paycheck to paycheck, restricted and unable to move, which we were, either way, unwilling and unable to settle for.

Affordability, especially in Los Angeles, especially from backgrounds like ours, would be, as with most things, an obstacle.



It seemed like no time had passed and I had gone from twenty-four to thirty. I was the age Ali was when I had met him all those years ago, painting his house and helping him to avoid foreclosure before I boarded a train to Albuquerque. He recently had contacted me telling me he was trying to get out of the hardest year of his life, beginning with the death of his mother and his sudden departure to Lebanon. He was in the Detroit area coming out of a relationship with a woman who had kids and with whom he had bought a home with in an upscale country subdivision where children made dandelion bracelets and smeared the yellow across their faces like war paint. With vague details, what I could put together is that she used his credit cards, maxed them out and put him deep into debt. One thing led to another and now she and her kids were gone and he was facing foreclosure.

“I need your help, Jackie,” he said, “even if you can help me sell or get rid of everything because I don’t have the time. You can have your own room and all the time to yourself. I know how very badly you’ve needed that to write and do the things I’ve always had faith you can do.”

Ali still looked relatively the same, though his black hair, which he kept short, had receded noticeably and was speckled with quite a bit of gray. I no longer saw the happy, playful boy that I once knew; he seemed to have turned angry and bitter. Once non-religious, I could hear from down the hallways at night Islamic hymns playing as he slept. He no longer uttered anything the likes of Celine Dion, but was obsessed with the rapper Rick Ross. He had become consumed with wanting only money and power. When he wasn't selling used cars, his place of choice was before a slot machine or at the blackjack table at the MGM Grand Casino in downtown Detroit.

Accompanying him on a drive to the casino one night, I asked him if he'd gotten a foreclosure notice.

"Not yet, I don't think so."

"So you're just going to let it foreclose?" I asked.

"I guess," he said.

The next morning, between paint layers, I wrote to realtors, asking about the possibility of saving him from foreclosure. That day, I received a quick response from a realty firm, confirming he could do a quick sale to avoid foreclosure. I put Ali in contact with the firm so he could begin the process of getting it sold, while I continued to paint his home and get his things sold, and, of course, write.

In a Mexican restaurant, Ali preached to me about God, which was also a new development. He told me he cared about me, but that homosexuality is against nature and against God's will.

"It feels pretty natural to me."

He told me God burned a town of homosexuals.

"Why am I not in flames?"

He told me that the man and the woman complete each other.

“Well, that’s strange because I feel pretty complete on my own,” I argued.

“Maybe due to how you grew up,” he said.

There was a pause as we crunched on pre-meal chips and salsa.

“So no man for you again?” I saw a hint of the look he’d give me so many years before.

“Probably not.”

The conversation turned to family. I hadn’t talked to my mother in several years. When I got on Facebook one day, I saw that a man had asked her what her knight in shining armor would do, and she said slay the dragons. He said there’s no such thing. She asked if he’d ever heard of Jackie. I decided it best to be done.

“Look, Jackie, despite anything, you need a family. I don’t want anything to do with your mother or the drama. But she is your mother.”

“She said she hates me. That I’m dead to her.”

“In the depths of her, she doesn’t mean it,” he seemed to plead.

Somehow, I knew that.

He brought out his phone, showing me photos of his family in Lebanon, mostly of his younger brother’s beautiful toddler son. He sighed. I looked at him.

“I try so hard,” his voice cracked, “and in this country you don’t get anywhere. And I think of all these years and you see these pictures and the love for my family and the love for this little boy and everyone is asking me why I am not married at my age. And I wonder where the time goes. And I could have had that.”

Tears slid down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Ali. I am so sorry. I really hope you don’t hate me for how it all turned out.”

He shook his head.

“No. You were always honest with me. You’re the sweetest person I ever met.”

“I’ll always love you, Ali.”

“I do really – I’ve always loved you, too, and I always will.”

At his place, we retreated into separate spaces.

One night, I awoke shaken from a dream. In the dream, I was in a hospital when I received a text from a cousin. Because I never hear from my cousins, I knew immediately that my grandmother was gone. Some of my grandmother’s kids and their kids showed up in the hallway where I was standing and confirmed it with solemn nods. I collapsed.

Awake, I was full of anxiety. The air was eerily still and felt especially lonely. I called a friend and told her the dream, how I feared my grandmother’s time was coming, and wondered if there was any way I could get to where she was to see her, now being across the state, even if it came down to sneaking.

Two weeks since the dream had passed. One evening, between writing and painting Ali’s house, I was laying down chatting with my friend in Albuquerque and exchanging silly videos. A notification from a cousin I never heard from showed up on my screen. Writing from the hospital she was working at, the message read, “Jackie, I thought I would let you know that grandma just passed.”

My body shot up and I winced, at first in shock, then I collapsed again, screaming into my pillow. I sobbed until 3 in the morning, when the moon shone possibly brighter than I had ever seen in my life through the shades. I stared through swollen eyes in silence until I fell asleep.

That morning, I awoke crying and couldn’t stop as I looked into when and where the services were. I hadn’t been to a funeral since I was five years old, when my grandfather passed. I

remember trying to lift the stubborn weight of his hands thinking if only someone would get him some water he would wake up, only then to truly realize the permanency. I didn't know how a funeral would be. I didn't know the proper attire. I asked online. As a huge source of relief, two women, Ambikā and Sarah, offered to attend the funeral with me so I would not be alone, and another friend, Celine, said she would accompany me to her wake.

I contacted my younger brother, Adam, who I hadn't seen in years. He responded back, shocked, letting me know he would be attending both the visitation and the funeral.

Since I no longer had a car, I booked a car rental to drive across state, despite not knowing what to expect, whether my aunts would react to my attendance, or if I would be allowed in at all. I kept a five dollar and two-dollar bill on me that were in my grandfather's pocket when he died, which had somehow ended up in my art supplies. I wanted to leave them with my grandmother along with some photos, but I was terrified they might take them from her casket if I got past the doors.

The day of the wake, Celine, Adam and I sat in the rental car and cracked some beers open, sending off some cheers in honor of my grandmother before walking in. I was shocked by how much the years had changed my little brother already. I was taken aback when he lit a cigarette. It was strange having known him and held him in my mind as an elfin child, big brown animated and mischievous eyes glinting from a head of what he once called his "golden" hair. He had a blank gaze when he spoke now after a long addiction to Vicodin. His thinning hair had turned light brown, crowned by a bald spot like his father.

He had shown up in a stained work shirt, loose pants and he smelled vaguely of a car repair shop and certainly of a long day gone by. I appreciated this, despite having worn a black blazer, a

crisp white shirt and black pants; many people I had asked online had said that my grandmother would have preferred people being themselves and I think they were right.

Soon, inside, we signed the guest book and, not knowing where my grandmother was, guessed our way through the crowds and peeked in different rooms. I heard Celine say, “She’s over here.” I froze, not really wanting the last time I saw my grandmother to be in a casket. I walked in, though, and saw her body in the box across the room and it was as if I was floating through a tunnel of blur and echo before I fell at the prayer bar where she laid.

A woman named Kitty I had only known in my childhood, who was married for a time to my grandmother’s brother and remained one of my grandmother’s closest friends and hairdresser, immediately walked up to me to greet me with a hug. I could barely comprehend anything looking at my grandmother laying beneath a photo montage in the lid of her casket of her in various stages of her life, from infant on. I hadn’t expected her to feel like a cold wax sculpture when I went to lay my hands over her hands, which had a rosary glued between them.

I lightly took my finger down the bridge of her nose, remembering when I was young and told my mother once how odd it can feel knowing so many babies come into the world with two humans comparing whose features the baby got and I just – came in. With none of that. My mother said it’s not completely like that; my grandmother was there and noted that I have her nose.

“Hello, Jackie Joey,” a voice broke in. I looked up to see my uncle Steve, my grandmother’s third child and second son.

A couple years prior, when I was trying to locate my grandmother, I had written to him to ask how I could see her. I was met with emails telling me how a sniper does not raise bunnies, emails with closings like, “Regretfully, your uncle.” It took me message after message of

remaining kind and consistent regardless of burn after burn to prove myself as my own person before he responded kindly to me.

“Hi.”

“Well aren’t you going to give me a hug?”

I gave him a hug, telling him I’d like to give her the two-dollar bill and the five-dollar bill that were in her husband’s pocket when he died. I told him since she was to be buried with him, it seemed symbolic to me, part of bringing them full circle.

With a small twinkle in his eye and a crack of a smile through his brown and gray beard, he said, “Well, I’ll tell you what. I think you should put them on this side of her jacket,” pointing at her right side, “because she and I used to bet on Notre Dame and look what’s on this side of her jacket –” He lifted the left side of her light purple jacket to reveal a dollar bill.

I thanked him as he patted my back and walked back into the crowd. I scanned over the crowd and saw Jo and Patti, who glanced quickly in my direction. Relieved they were ignoring me, I hoped they were far enough not to see me leaving anything with my grandmother. I turned back to my grandmother and tucked the two bills so far into her jacket they were nearly in her sleeve. Then, I pulled out three photos – a copy of one of us on my 21st birthday, one of us when I was a toddler, and one of her and the last dog she had since she deeply adored her dogs – and I slid them toward the bottom near her legs, since that half of her was covered.

I turned to walk toward where Celine was when my grandmother’s second child and oldest daughter, Candie, greeted me.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Better than you’re doing, it seems,” she smiled.

I sat on a couch next to her. She always had sweet, smiley blue eyes.

“It’s good she’s gone,” she said.

I felt sucker punched. Sure, it had been a long struggle for my grandmother, but the comment was odd. I understood where she was coming from but couldn’t bring myself to seeing it as being good she is gone.

It’s sad it happened.

“I think more of the person she was before this illness got her,” I told her.

“Yes,” Candie said.

“I dreamed two weeks ago she passed,” I shared.

“I had a dream about that little girl,” she said, pointing at my grandmother as a child in the photo montage in the cover of her casket.

Adam walked up as Celine stood nearby.

I introduced Candie to Celine, then said, “This is Adam.”

She said hi to Adam as if I was introducing her for the first time to another friend.

I told her, “This is my brother, your nephew, Adam.”

Visibly surprised, she jumped in her seat a little and greeted him differently.

They chatted briefly as I stood and walked toward my grandmother. I saw the glue on her lips. I still couldn’t believe how her skin felt. I wanted to run out of my own. Adam and Celine walked up next to me. I leaned over and kissed my grandmother’s cold forehead and Adam did the same.

As we left the building, Celine piped up for the first time, saying, “I just have to say that is the absolute coldest fucking group of people I have ever seen in my life.”

Shocked and relieved that she was acknowledging this, I gave a little nod.

“Even aside from that, you were the only one crying,” she pointed out.

As I drove Adam back to work, I told him and Celine about how our grandfather was a gardener and the clear memories I still had of him carrying me through his garden putting flowers in my hair.

“Though he grew up here, Polish was his first language, so his English was a bit broken. When it rained, he would say, ‘It’s set-ling my urt.’ His earth. The day he was buried, it rained. I guess Steve announced for him that it was settling his urt. Wouldn’t it be crazy if it rained the day Grandma is buried with him?”

It was a gorgeous, sunny day as I went to pick Ambikā up for my grandmother’s funeral. I thanked her over and over again as we drove to the beautiful church that my grandmother had attended for years. As we waited in the parking lot for Adam and Sarah, I also shared the same story of my grandfather’s “urt,” and despite the sun, told her it would be so strange if it rained that day when she was buried.

Sarah walked up and immediately enveloped me in her arms and held tight for a while. She kept hold of my arm until Adam joined soon after, when we all headed inside. Standing inside the first door, we were unsure of what to do and where to go. Steve’s daughter, Alex, who notified me of my grandmother’s passing, walked up and told me that family would stand to follow the casket and other visitors would take a seat inside. I looked to where Patti and Jo were standing and found it unsettling that I suddenly didn’t know whether to stand or take a seat. Ambikā and Sarah told me to stay in line with everyone, pointing to the pews where they would be. I stood next to Adam, who kept a great attitude. Jo quickly peeked over at me and looked away.

The casket passed, at which point I was so grateful for Kitty, my grandmother’s friend and

hairdresser, who must have gathered how I was feeling. She took my hand and held it down the aisle, giving affirmative little squeezes, until we reached the pew where Ambikā and Sarah were sitting.

The service was a long religious service which I understand was probably in line with my grandmother's wishes. I couldn't help but fume a little, though, at how impersonal it was. The only thing that was said about my grandmother was about how Alzheimer's was probably her pathway to God.

I thought of her comment about not knowing herself, of doing everything out of expectation. I wished I had asked her more questions. I wished I could do something more personal that would have brought a smile to her face. I wished that I could play guitar for her. I imagined throwing a celebration for her, making personal acknowledgments for her, reciting poetry for her, releasing doves for her, pouring wine, which she loved, for her and my grandfather. Something.

I had been doing relatively okay through the service. I figured after seeing her cold, lifeless, waxy body, I could get through this closed casket funeral. I could get through anything.

The Priest called people up who felt like partaking in the Eucharist. I recalled back to my early childhood when our extended family talked with us and we actually had holidays, back when they weren't so lonely, when I looked forward to the taste of the Eucharist. How I saw it as a treat to look forward to, a delicious wafer with religious art cooked into it, and nothing more.

Adam leaned over and whispered, "Would it be so bad if I went up there because I am hungry?"

"No you didn't," I said, though it got me to smile a bit. His mechanism was humor.

After the people who went up for the Eucharist returned to their seats, an altar boy prepared

incense contained within a metal ball at the end of a chain and handed it to the Priest. The Priest swung it around my grandmother's casket, trails of smoke swirling about, as he sang the farewell song. I broke.

Steve was among the men carrying the casket outside to the hearse and, as he passed the pew where I sat, reached out his hand to me. Adam sat close, absorbing it all in his own way. Sarah and Ambikā kept reaching out as I scanned the castle-like place with all its stained-glass windows, high painted ceilings. Briefly, I could see myself in a pew ahead as a young child, looking up at my grandmother singing.

Outside, Patti and Jo greeted Adam, but didn't acknowledge me. As they were chatting, Steve pulled up with his wife and daughter and told me I could ride with them to the burial. I squinted toward him under the bright sun and told him I would go on my own after her burial, when it is less awkward for me. He glared in my aunts' direction with visible irritation and said, "I understand."

Right after she was buried and everyone was gone, I stopped by my grandparents' grave.

It was raining.

\*\*\*

Ali's house deal came to a close sooner than expected. As he looked into an apartment closer to his job in the Detroit metro area, I looked into stopping by my hometown before taking a train to Albuquerque, and then to Los Angeles. Thereafter, I planned to remain open to the possibilities in the unknown.

Online, as I went between browsing and writing, Jon popped up on Skype, writing "Hi favorite sister!"

I responded, so he video called me. We chatted lightly, cautiously. There came a long pause.

“Be right back, I have to go to the bathroom,” he said.

“Okay.”

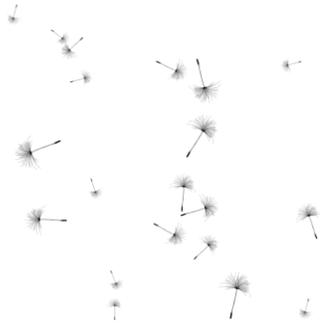
He got up and I sifted through the endless amounts of notes I had in front of me. Then, on my computer, I saw my mother sit down.

Visibly, she only resembled the woman I once knew. Her face was paralyzed with palsy and one eye, which had a dog-in-a-photo kind of reflection from cataracts, sat only slightly different from the other. She told me she had a stroke.

Living near the graveyard where my grandparents are buried, she described falling to the floor when she saw the hearse drive up to my grandmother’s final resting place. She told me she wouldn’t be surprised if the whole complex had heard her screaming, and that she had never screamed so hard and so long.

Then, she said, “Ya know, I recently told an 80-year-old woman that I have a daughter who can live out of a bag if it means seeing the world. And she beamed and said, ‘I always wished I could do such a thing.’ I want you to know, Jackie, that more than anything in my life, I am so proud to be your mother. I know I have done things throughout your life that have left you kids hurt and feeling incredibly alone and it was all in my inability to deal with,” her voice shook as she pointed to her chest. I knew what she meant. She hated herself.

“I am so, so sorry.”



The first thing my brother, Jon, did upon meeting me for the first time was push my middle finger up to the world. He was six. This story has been told many times with laughter.

My mother had heard him from down the echoing hallway, winter boots clomping, as he shouted, “*Where* is she?!?!” My grandmother, the only other person present at my birth, followed close behind him. Stomping into the room, looking left and right, on a mission, Jon spotted me laying in the knee crooks of my mother’s folded legs, heart monitor leads stuck to my skin. After the briefest scan, maybe finding familiarity in the silent scowl with which he too was born, he grabbed one of my hands and pushed my middle finger up to the life around me.

He was a first grader who insisted on attending school with a briefcase rather than a backpack, Superman’s “S” curl of brown hair curved down the center of his forehead. He had already seen far more than many kids have several times his age -- long, ice covered roads from the arms of an already worn-down teenaged mother, Christmases bought by robbery and torn apart by rage, fists to his mother’s face, coke bottles lining the insides of bedroom windows for fear our biological father, Danny, would enter. Jon had been held hostage by his own father, had seen his father eat a pair of glasses, so cops would not come near. By two years old, he was waving goodbye to people with his hands behind his back, in a handcuffed position.

The nurses had looked at my cracked hands at a stable moment with my heartbeat and told my mother I have an old soul. I like to imagine that when Jon pushed my finger up, I telepathically told him, *Believe me, brother, I know - not this shit again.*

I can see my astral self floating through this world laughing and questioning why everything is done the way it's done here, when Danny got out of prison for a bit and banged Sue and I got pulled in physically against my will. My spirit felt the tug, protesting with a foreboding "No." As I got sucked into this world like a dissipating tornado, the water swirl above a bath drain, smoke on rewind, or a genie being vacuumed into its lamp, each "no" became a crescendo until the final, long descending "nooooooooo...."

My opposition to coming here can be loosely confirmed by my nearly month late arrival after minimal movement, giving in and breaking water only during a snowstorm, cracking my mother's pelvic bone and inhaling meconium on the way out, ending up with blue and gray skin, heart monitors, and an extended stay in the hospital.

In the hospital, where my newly divorced mother held me, my grandmother commented that I had her nose. Gale called from Texas to tell my mother, "I hear we have a baby girl." Somewhere, my biological father was locked in a cell, this time for breaking and entering with intent, while my brother, pushing my finger up, showed me the ropes on how to deal with coming into a pre-broken life, and I laid there in a skin suit turning pinker in its certainty, despite my best efforts, thinking something along the lines of *fuck.*

\*\*\*

In his adulthood, Jon slept like a watchman, his bedroom door open. He'd often be in his jeans and the shirt he had worn at least the day, often several days and nights, before. Sometimes, tattered boots were still on his feet. He didn't wrap up in his blanket and, despite the weight of his

large body and being a side sleeper, he didn't seem to sink into the soft surface below him, almost making it appear hard. He often slept with one eye open.

Sometimes his sleep, be it in the morning or later in the day, would be broken by a shrill slur of his name. Our mother, enduring the slow breakdown of her body in another room, would want coffee. Or medications. Or something to eat. Jon would stumble out groggily, pieces of his hair standing choppily depending on its length. Scurrying to put his glasses on through a shaky effort due to a tremor in his right hand, he might have said to me, "Good morning," or "Hey, favorite sister!" or "Whaddup gay person," followed by an awesomely infectious belly-shaking cackle. My mother might have beckoned him again and, depending on the day and mood, he may have walked to her door and greeted her or he may have screamed something along the lines of, "I'm fucking trying!"

Their days and years moved in small circles. By the time Jon was in his forties, the only things that changed for him and my mother were their homes and their bodies, downgraded. I imagine my random drop ins between long years were odd for them, after a period of estrangement or failed efforts to improve my life. With each coming and going of mine came some sort of transformation. Right before my first long departure, they discovered the boyfriend I had for six years had actually been my husband, that I'm attracted to women, and, by the way, I'd soon be leaving with rideshares off craigslist to cross the country. I moved from what I saw as the stagnancy of an empty apartment to what they saw as the danger of living in my car in Venice Beach. Then came another reconnect, my waist-long hair gone and mohawked, colorful attire turned black and gray.

There was a constant flux between my leaving Michigan, then dropping in, then leaving Michigan again, and again and again. I could not sit still. I was so afraid of the American capitalist system in which I did not fit, of trading my one precious life for existence, of doing the same thing

day in and day out over and over again, how narrow that was to the infinity of our spirits, how fake and anti-human it all felt, how disconnected it was to the “more than this” I always sensed from the time I was a child. I also feared my chances in that system and lack thereof having come from my background. I was eager to only breathe in as much life as I could, to chase moments, to fill my one short time in this world with as many memories as possible.

While I was on the highway with a stranger playing guitar in my backseat, Jon, on any given day, could have been being accosted by a random neighbor.

While I was dancing in drum circles on the Pacific shoreline as the sun set behind Topanga Canyon, Jon may have been friend-requesting everyone he could on social media. Or sobbing into his pillow, asking why nobody likes him.

While I was skinny dipping in a lake in New Mexico, Jon may have been catching up on daily episodes of *Young and the Restless* or *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* with our mother.

While I was staying in a commune in Oregon, Jon was walking to the same stores, to the same pharmacies, to the same food lines, to the same grounds to find cigarette butts for our mother to smoke.

While I was hiking dunes and camping cliffside in Colorado, Jon may have sat on the couch near my mother asking her if he was dead, if he was a ghost and if that’s why the world was going on around him without him.

While I was running from a system I did not believe in or want to be a part of, Jon was trying to save people, sending them natural cures for their ailments (cherries are apparently good for headaches), playing binaural healing music for our mother, giving a helping hand to the neighbors who were kinder to him, assuring me it was all going to be okay, favorite sister, in my lowest moments.

When I would visit Jon and my mother, mentions of my potential excursions would almost inevitably be met with warnings of the current dooms and pending disasters of the desired destination -- what the latest headlines may have read, or the earthquakes, hurricanes, floods or fires, depending on the locale. Never mind the high per capita crime rate of Kalamazoo, the recent floodings, or the tornadoes, one of which left the small city wrecked and devastated. They'd tell me I could get myself killed bringing strangers in my car. I'd tell them I can't "what if" myself into a boring life.

When I would use the bathroom at their place, sometimes I'd end up asking where the toilet paper was. They'd tell me they'd been using old socks.

I would come out of the bathroom and Jon might have said, "Want to know what to do if you're ever constipated?!" He would then stand with his knees shoulder-length apart, bend as if he were sitting on a chair or a toilet and walk in that position, demonstrating what he would call the "yoga shit walk."

Despite having been in the background of everything, Jon always held a fierce loyalty to everyone he knew. But especially to our mother. When my mother asked me what she did that led to nobody talking to her, allowing me to tell her she was toxic without getting defensive for the first time, Jon sat squirming and shaking his head like a pot lid holding the boil. When we'd walk in the door and she was hunched over, unresponsive due to eating too many pills, with food spilled down her shirt and a bowl of cereal overturned, or a cigarette burning through a blanket, and I'd jump in fear that she was dead or I'd become angry by triggered memory, he'd say, knowing better, "She's just sleeping."

Jon might have then excitedly asked me, in the perpetual darkness of their living room, if I wanted to see the latest HGTV Dream Home, which he spent years trying to win. If it wasn't the HGTV Dream Home, it was videos on other things he had his sights set on winning or something

to do with natural remedies. Several times during a visit or extended drop in, he would ask me if I wanted to go for a walk. As my need for the road became more and more saddled by debt, deadlines and bills, I felt zombied with panic and worry, more often than not turning him down.

But when we did walk with his mastiff, Otis, it was in the same direction of the same small circles of the same few blocks. The talks remained relatively the same. He would ask why our brother, Adam, and the rest of our family don't talk to them. I would say I don't know, though I did. He might have mentioned Gale touching him, to which I wouldn't know what to say. The accusation had been a development in our adult years, when Jon would display signs of paranoia or hallucination, maybe as a result of his injury, such as asking people he had spent time with in a public space if he had just punched someone in the face when he did no such thing at all. On our walks, he might have busted out singing one of the many vulgar, yet brilliant song parodies he had made up on the spot, being his cheery joking self. He might have talked about a girl he had seen on his walks, and how lonely he is. I would suggest a class or a volunteer position, when he'd tell me, "I can't, I gotta take care of mom and Otis." I'd insist it wasn't true, that they could manage a few hours a week without him, never taking into consideration the different thresholds we all have, or what was going on with him internally that I could never know. Oftentimes, his body odor would be too much and I'd ask him if he had showered. He'd tell me, again, that he's "too busy taking care of mom and Otis."

Sometimes, maybe at the sight of a leaf parting its branch, he would ask, "Remember the tree star?"

"Of course," I would say.

Several years prior, we were walking one fall and he extended a leaf to me with the zeal of a child saying, in the spirit of Disney's *Land Before Time*, "Look, Jackie, a treeee staaaarrrr!!" Handing me a leaf that was indeed almost the shape of a star, he proudly told me that it was just

for me and that he wanted to find one in the perfect shape, that he had been looking and tried, but could not. I knew at that moment that had we had any holidays and birthdays all those years, that still would have been the greatest gift.

If a visit warranted a stay on their couch, Jon would tell me “Five” to say goodnight. The first time I heard him say it, I was tucking myself in on their light blue couch shortly before I took a train to Albuquerque. Jon exited the room, saying “Five, favorite sister.” I winced, positing that it had been something he and my mother had been saying to each other. I knew what “Four” was, a shortened way to say our early childhood nightly prayers - “Good night, God bless you, see you in the morning, I love you.”

“What is five?” I asked.

He threw a stiff counting on his chubby baby-carrot fingered hand that he often did while explaining something like a verbal list, beginning with his index finger, saying, “Good night, God bless you, see you in the morning, I love you, and,” the first four counted fingers fell away and a flash of heartbreak fell across his face. With a pointed toss of his index finger he said, “thanks for sticking around.” My mother echoed the sentiment from the other room.

\*\*\*

When I left to New Orleans for grad school, I left with Andie, a woman I had been seeing for a short time since running into her, but who I first met when I was seventeen. The summer before my senior year of high school, she had spent a lot of time at Boogie’s Cyber Cafe in downtown Kalamazoo with me and Jon, walking the suburbs with me and Jon, and watching creepy movies with me and Jon. Jon referred to her as “Krissie Perlez,” instead of Krissie Perez; she had started going by the name Andie in the years before I ran into her again.

With me and Andie were our two chihuahuas, Bacchus and Lola. Jon adored them, but was afraid to hold them because of their size.

In New Orleans, Jon texted me daily. It always began with his seemingly copied and pasted script, "What's up and how are you?" My life now moved in small circles, so I gave him the usual responses - I am doing homework, I am worried about all of my suffocating debt and bills, about keeping a roof over my head, that I miss my spirit, how I don't know how I'm going to make it through school in this position, how, soon, I was tied in a lease for a studio with my ex-girlfriend, how I want a life, not an existence. I'd tell him these things constantly, but he never stopped asking. He would always tell me it's going to get better soon. That he was starting a business. That he planned on suing Gale. That he was entering to win all kinds of great things. He'd tell me about all the sweepstakes and contests in which he'd entered me, our mom, and Andie. He'd ask me if I looked at all the links he sent me to help me out. Occasionally, I would remind him he'd been starting a business for almost twenty years. That even if he had proof of wrongdoing, the statute of limitations when it came to suing Gale had long passed. That winning is not a guarantee, and is closer to impossible. That the links he sent me were scams and get rich quick schemes.

More and more, we talked about finding a way for him and my mother to somehow move to New Orleans. He would ask about specific neighborhoods he'd looked up and send me ads for potential places. For what seemed so out of reach, I was still excited at the thought for them, since the only place they'd ever really been was Kalamazoo.

On April 10, 2019, my mother called me in hysterics. Through heaves and sobs, she managed to say, "Oh, my god, I believe him." In a manic kind of talking in circles, she told me after all the years Jon claimed Gale had molested him, she believed him. In high pitched inhales, she said he shared a detail that, as a victim of sexual abuse herself, she felt confirmed everything. She mentioned the cots in the half-finished basement we slept on when we went to visit Gale as children, though I have no recollection of Jon going to Gale's when Adam and I did. She said something about the upstairs room across from Gale's mother's room, the one I remember as

containing a lot of the color yellow, antique toys, and blankets with a musty smell I never liked. It was one of these spaces Jon told her he woke up to find Gale rubbing himself on Jon's backside. "They test their limits," she cried, "they push to see how far they can go."

She mentioned the time my brothers and I went up north with Gale, how I had told her about the Disney movies we watched, the framed photos on the panel wood walls, playing on a frozen lake with a rottweiler named Murdock, and evening bowls of ice cream, but I don't recall where I slept. She told me to try. I told her all I remember is him constantly hitting me and calling me names, that I don't recall any other such thing, but had anything like that happened, I wouldn't want to remember. She reminded me that when I was three, he'd joke that I'd be legal someday. Her limited phone minutes cut the call short. Jon texted, "She ran out of time, but thank you so much for talking with her. She knows she isn't having a heart attack now. Thanks again. Do you wanna talk with her on my phone?"

"No problem. If she needs to talk." Then I added hesitantly, "I am falling asleep though and haven't even finished my homework sadly."

"Ok," he texted back, "thank you so much again. I hope you get your homework done pretty soon but try to get some good sleep tonight favorite sister."

"Aw thank you Jon," I replied, "You too. I'm sorry for everything that has happened to you."

"Mom and I are laughing now, but get ready to be a millionaire."

I hadn't figured out what he meant by "laughing now." It turns out after she and I talked, her panic had simmered some, and they ended up looking up fart videos and funny high school yearbook quotes.

My mother ended up in the hospital with severe panic bringing on stroke-like symptoms, her words no longer making sense.

On April 14 at 11:21 pm, 12:21 am their time, Jon texted me to tell me they were at Bronson Hospital.

On April 15 at 4:30 am, they were waiting for a ride.

I must have been sleeping, since at 7:01am I asked how everything went. He responded that she was still bad off and they were still at the hospital, “which is making it worse.” He said, “and my phone is almost dead and their charging station doesn’t work.”

At 10 am that morning, he let me know they were back at their place.

At 7:27 pm, Jon texted me about some Roku channels he was excited to have found that tell how to make tons of money that he can share with me and Andie when he and my mother come to New Orleans. I asked him if they were going to come to New Orleans. He responded, “Hopefully.” He added, “Unless I win the house in Texas.”

On April 16 at 3:50 pm, Jon they were at Bronson Hospital again and had been waiting a while. Jon told me last time they had waited eleven hours.

At 10:19 pm, he told me he was terribly worried about the large spans of time Otis was spending alone and that they were finally being discharged.

At 12:13 am on April 17, though, “Still waiting.”

At 1:34 am, “Still waiting.”

At 4:56 am, he let me know they were back from the hospital.

At 8:16 am, he let me know how tired he was. Seven minutes later, he texted that he can’t believe how good it felt to be back at a place they loathed.

At 2:26 pm, he let me know they were at Borgess Hospital this time.

At 3:31 pm, he told me that Borgess wanted her to stay the night and he didn’t know what to do because he was so worried about Otis. He said if he could get a ride, maybe he could go take care of his dog and return to our mother in the morning.

But at 7:26 pm, almost four hours later, he told me they were finally in a room at the hospital.

At 7:40 pm, he was worried that her vitals kept dinging but they had only checked her once.

At 10:51 pm, almost midnight their time, he let me know he finally managed to get back to his dog.

The next day, on April 18, at 1:25 pm, he told me she was finally being discharged and, almost three hours later, that she was finally back at their place. In the many hours in a waiting room, they were asked if they were homeless. In the many hours waiting with homeless people and other impoverished people, they also contracted lice.

The next day seemed something closer to normal. Jon sent me a text at 11:30 am to ask me if I ever saw *The Time Traveler's Wife*. I told him yes, and reminded him that my friend Tom's niece wrote that book, that it's based on his parents. He responded, "Oh, alright. She's snapping out of wheezing and stuff." I wrote back, "That's good." He wrote, "Yeah."

April 20, 2019, was Jon's beloved dog Otis' fifth birthday. I was sitting on my bed in the otherwise empty studio apartment reading a book for class when my mother's friend, Laura, called. I squinched at her name on the screen of my phone and almost didn't answer, figuring she perhaps made a mistake. But then I thought *what if something happened to my mother*.

"Hello?"

"Hi Jackie, it's Laura. I think you should get a hold of your mom. Jon died."

"What?"

"I'm so sorry."

Those are the words I remember. I do not remember if she told me that he was revived and on life support. I do not remember if she told me he had a heart attack. I remember feeling as if I had been pulled into a vortex, air being sucked from my body, going completely dizzy. Everything

was static. Shaking, I called my mother to confirm what I thought I had just heard. I remember her saying he is on life support in critical condition at Bronson Hospital. I said, “But Laura said he died.” She told me he did, that she watched him take his last breath. She tried to perform CPR, but could not get his large, limp body to the floor with her own broken body. The ambulance took a while to get there, then they took a while to revive him. I remember or imagine her making it sound like there might be a chance.

I collapsed. Face down in the middle of the floor in the empty studio, sobbing, the words “I’m so sorry, Jon,” careening from me over and over again. My dogs, confused, circled around me, sat on my back, pawed at me, and tried to nuzzle under my neck. When I managed to peel my face from the soaked carpet, I texted Andie that Jon was in critical condition. Then, I went to Facebook to find my younger brother Adam’s wife, Amanda, who had been on my friend’s list for years with no contact. I hadn’t heard from Adam in five years and my mom hadn’t heard from him in around ten. Amanda read the message and, in expressions of shock, said she would put Adam in contact with me. Andie soon walked in the door, having left the salon where she worked early. She’d called her manager to ask permission to leave with me for Michigan, but she had not received a response.

While waiting to see if she could go, I accepted Jon’s Facebook friend request that had sat for years with no response. I felt sick in what ways tragedy can mirror us. Under his name on his page, it read “who wants to go on a permanent vacation with me?” His “friend’s” list numbered at least 4,700. On April 19, his last post was “Please send love and healing to my chest.” Seventy people reacted with various hearts, thumbs up and crying emojis. Forty people commented. “PRAYERS,” “Prayers sent,” “Healing prayers,” “Sending,” “May our Lord Jesus Christ administer healing and renewal into your chest. Amen.” They kept coming even as he laid in the hospital, after he had a heart attack. I couldn’t help but wonder if they actually stopped and prayed.

And if so, if there was feeling to back the prayer or if they typed obligatory words and swiped to the next post. My heart sank. I hadn't seen it. I wondered why nobody took into consideration that he was heavier, poor, made no secret about his stress and loneliness, and was complaining about chest pain. There was no suggestion of the hospital.

Andie meditated on whether to go or not, since her manager did not give an answer. By 3 am, I told her I needed to go. I packed my bags into my car, grabbed Bacchus and Lola, and their food and treats. I sat in my car in the dark of the parking lot near the pale illumination of my dashboard, texting my mother that I was leaving and asked her if there were any updates, hoping Jon's condition improved. Her counselor, Leigh Ann, texted to tell me that she had just spoken with my mother and that my mother was unable to text and asked Leigh Ann to update me. I told her I was just getting ready to drive up and was asking my mother if there were any updates on Jon and thanked her for reaching out and for being there for my mother. She let me know that they were unfortunately only keeping Jon on life support until I got to Michigan, to drive safely and that she was sorry. Andie came out with one last thing I needed to pack into my car and to say goodbye. I told her about the text I had just received. She ran inside and grabbed herself a handful of random clothing, hopped in my car and said she was coming with me.

It took me nineteen hours to get to Kalamazoo. On the drive, I went on and on to Andie about how angering it is that if I had money, I could be at his side within two to three hours rather than trying to keep it together for the most torturously long drive of my life. I lamented on what a bitch I was to him, how I only contributed to his dire loneliness, how when he texted me about his business and his winnings, I should have seen it for the escape it probably was. I should have dreamed along with him. I should have asked him what he'd do once he wins or gets his businesses running. I should have asked him more questions.

“If this is goodbye, I, for some reason, want to capture photos of his hands,” I said.

My mother's home was a Hazmat situation, even worse than just a couple months prior, far worse than when she could walk some. She had been a clean freak while I was growing up. Cleanliness had been so important to her that one could assume it was obsessive compulsive. Within the dirt, hair and dust, garbage was everywhere. Old meal trays, some empty and some partially empty, and milk cartons were piling next to her. Mail and trash stacked and strewn across tables. Dishes and scraps and crumbs and wrappers covered the kitchen counters and stove. Garbage bags piled, which Jon hadn't yet taken to a neighborhood dumpster, since they could not afford the trash bill. Dog food and filth caked the floorboards and the cupboards and splat across the floor. Shit clogged and crammed the toilet to its edge. My mother said it had been that way for a while. My phone was ringing and dinging, ringing and dinging, ringing and dinging as people attempted to get a hold of my mother through me, because her phone, the last in a string of temporary numbers, was out of minutes. Andie and I began the process of cleaning her place, not knowing where to begin or how it might get done. I told my mother in order to do a good job, she'd have to let us throw a lot of stuff away. Brows furled, she asked, "Like what?"

"All the stuff you don't use."

"Like what?"

My dogs, zipped safely in a stroller from their scavenging tendencies and from Otis, a much larger dog, were whining. From the bathroom, we heard Andie gagging as she tackled the toilet first. As I was picking up garbage, my mother asked me to take Otis out. She had been telling him to use the basement. Already, with a racing pulse, I was thinking I wasn't cut out to take all of that on, let alone my injured brother, who had for years. It crossed my mind that he'd still be here had she or they each had a caretaker. The state knew. But Jon had legs that worked.

After I took Otis out, she asked me to find him a treat, maybe make him a peanut butter sandwich. Her requests seemed to come at once. It occurred to me if society was different, if the

American system was different, I'd be where I should have been at that moment already - with Jon. Or none of this would be happening at all. I asked my mom if she was going with us to visit him. She said she had no clothes. I started dashing through her place, digging through the piles of laundry thrown on the backs of the furniture stained with dog loogies, in baskets in various places, stuffed to the brim in her drawers. I brought a few pairs of pants to her to try on. She reached up to me. I pulled her up, her strained gasps pushing against mine. She, leaning on my shoulders, had gotten much bigger than I remembered. Or her body had remained mostly hidden in the chair she had been confined to for so very long. Her knees hurt to look at as I tried to maneuver some pants up over the severe swell of her legs. She said she couldn't go.

The hospital is labyrinthian and everything seems to move in slow motion as Adam, Amanda, Andie and I make our way through cold, sterile halls, guessing our way until we reach the intensive care unit. We are buzzed in and I immediately see Jon laying in a room ahead just past a circular counter of employees, which float by two dimensionally as we move to his room. His head is shaved, a look he always feared after the accident and subsequent operations altered its shape. I am surprised, after all his expressed self-consciousness, how handsome he looks despite it. We all mention it through welling tears and horrified expressions. I hope he hears. I wish he knew. Monitors are held on his head with gauze. His tongue hangs out of his mouth beneath the tubes. His eyes are closed. His hands are swollen, like inflated latex gloves. I walk around to face him from the window side of the room and, briefly, I am four again, facing him from this same direction, looking up at the outline of his tiny body, which had appeared to me so long. I hold his hand and stare at his heart and brain monitors, which are both moving. I ask him to squeeze, to give any sign at all. I will ask him every day. Over and over again, I tell him I am so sorry. Outside of the room, I see a female nurse and a male doctor putting on gowns before coming inside. They are joking and laughing, the laughter vibrating through their bodies. The nurse catches sight of me

watching them and they immediately put on sullen faces. When they enter the room, they inform us that Jon's head had been shaved due to the lice issue he and Mom acquired from the long waits in the hospital and ask that we put gowns on, too.

After we are all gowned, Dr. Nichols begins apprising us of the damage Jon had incurred as he performs a contorting act with his lips. He twitches them downward between words, as though he might cry, telling us Jon's outlook would be at most a tracheostomy and feeding tube. They walk out and, just like that, the twitching is gone, prior mood restored. The nurse side-eyes me, knowing, and looks down. I look back at Jon and his eye is open, blinking. Adam, Amanda, Andie and I take turns holding his hands, touching his head, and letting him know how much he is loved. Tears fall down his cheek.

When Adam takes his turn, he tells Jon a pedophilic joke and my insides are screaming. I wonder if Jon's are. I wonder if he hears and he's stuck in there. I want to tell Adam off, as he laughs at his own joke and the rest of us sit silent. I want to tell him the catalyst of this moment. But the last thing Jon needs is tension and chaos if these are his last days. I know Adam is the type to blow up, then ghost people if someone calls out his wrongs. I know my mother would be devastated to go more years without him. I go to Jon and continue whispering more affirming, loving things in his ear.

I hold his hands up and scan his palms and fingerprints, a testament of his being. I slide my phone from my pocket to capture them. A different nurse comes in to check his vitals. She tells me no photos are allowed, that they don't know if the patient would agree to it. When she leaves, Adam says, "Get the photos." He, Amanda and Andie stand between the door and the bed to block me, keeping watch.

I think of Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery," where nobody second guesses the stoning ritual. Everyone has forgotten how and why it started, but go about it as if it's a natural part of life,

even arguing for its necessity. I think this system works in the same way. We don't question it, we just go about it as if it's a natural part of life, and we inadvertently throw stones according to our illusory conditioning until, and maybe after, someone dies of a broken heart. I should flip his middle finger to the world. But I have photos of his limp swollen hand, and of mine holding his.

The next day, I can't stop crying and keep forgetting where I am. Andie and I are cleaning my mother's place while my dogs cry from their stroller, my phone won't stop, my mom is asking me to get her food, asking me to take Otis out, asking me to get her walker, asking me to find her medications, asking me to make phone calls all at once. At some point I help get her dressed in some of the pants I brought her and we are able to hold her up to walk her to my car. I don't remember the drive.

At the hospital, I park and run for a wheelchair near the front entrance of the parking garage so I can wheel her into the hospital. As we approach the room where Jon is, a doctor immediately wants permission to write my brother down as a do not resuscitate in the event he has another heart attack. My mother jumps to "yes." I bend to quietly say in her ear to hold off. She looks at me with an unfamiliar pride. She takes the "yes" back. The doctor and surrounding nurses look at me oddly. I tell them I need to talk to her about it. I want to be sure, since they are pushing her to make a final decision, that they're not making moves to simply clear out the room of a poor person.

In the room, my mother reaches toward Jon's legs, where she can manage to reach, and says, "My baby." When a nurse comes in to tend to him, my mother tells her what to do and how to do it. I see that it makes the nurse uneasy. I understand that my mother, who was once, briefly, long ago, a CNA and assisted elderly people as they died, is trying to retain a sense of purpose. I also understand she's on edge. I still tell her to let the nurse do her job. My mom tells Jon that she loves him and that nothing is his fault. It is the last time she will see her son.

Over the following days, I am crying into his hand. The nurse I saw laughing the first day rubs my back and asks me if she can get me anything. I am pulled into another room by another doctor, who tells me that, while Jon is not brain dead, his brain went more than 45 minutes without blood flow and if he were put on a tracheotomy, he would maybe have the capacity of a toddler and likely not remember his family. Jon's eyes begin to glaze. What I can only describe as the smell of death comes from his breath.

At some point, I walk in and the staff has left his robe up and his balls are exposed for any potential visitor to see. I wonder why, again, I could not photograph his hands. At some point, a high school peer of Jon's visits. She tells him nobody will be able to hurt him anymore, and I scramble to change the subject and see to it that less final things reach his ears. She asks me who Danny is, tells me she received a message from someone who knew him. It occurs to me Danny knows but is not there for Jon.

I remember how recently Jon walked in their door from a visit with Danny, too high after having smoked weed. He pushed back into a recliner in a highly paranoid state, crying, "Am I dying? Oh my god, am I dying?" As I ran back and forth trying to find things in his fridge that might help him come down, attempting to talk him through it, assuring him he wasn't dying.

So many times I had asked, "Why the fuck do you two keep in contact with him?!"

"Gale never liked him," my mother would say. "He's so lonely, he needs some kind of friend."

At some point, a business card is lying on his windowsill from a person who had claimed to be a friend and wanted to visit. She told me she did energy work. On the card are her rates. I am offended and throw it away. Lola is perched on the edge of my dogs' stroller looking up at Jon, barking. I keep nudging her back into her stroller, terrified she's going to get us kicked out after Adam had gotten permission for my dogs to be there with me. It occurs to me that my five-pound

dogs with heads the size of my palms have more cognitive abilities now than my brother. At some point, I ask Adam if he's going to visit Jon more. He says it's too much. I want to tell him if everyone thought that way, Jon would lay there alone. But because he could ghost out of our lives for years at any point, and at such a suggestion, I let it go. At some point, Jon begins seizing. At some point, my mother calls the hospital and gives them the go ahead to take him off life support.

My dogs, Andie and I are the only ones in the room for this event. After the morphine drip, they ask me if I'd like to stay or step out while they remove the tubes. I don't necessarily want to leave the room, to leave him, but I don't want to see it. I look behind me where there is a nook with a toilet and a curtain. I stand in it, facing the corner, while they begin removing the tubes and balloon from his throat. I cross my arms over my chest as if I could hold myself from breaking. Andie rubs my back. Jon moves into what sounds like a slow suffocation. When I step back from behind the curtain to see him, his tongue is out and his breaths sound like a loud sputtering engine around it. His mustache is pressed up from the bands pressing on his top lip that have kept the tubes in for a week. I tell the nurse this is when assisted death should be legal. She agrees. I ask her how long this could last. She says it could take hours or it could take days, they never know. Andie and I hold his hands, rub his head, whisper in his ears any loving, comforting words we can think of. I text my mother that he is off the machines, that he is not yet gone. His breathing softens to a snore. I want to crawl onto the bed he's on and hold him until he goes. My dogs are hungry and crying. Andie is there. What if it's days? Trying not to get my tears on his face, I tell him, "Five, favorite brother," in case I never say another word to him.

The next morning, I text my mother from a hotel that Adam booked for us to see if there has been any word. She tells me no. I jump up and start getting ready to go help her and go see Jon. As I am packing my bags, she calls back. "He's gone," she says. Jon died in the hospital he was born in. He died alone on Gale's birthday at 7:30 am.

\*\*\*

The funeral home could at least use some updating, considering what they charge for dying. Established in 1934, it seems the finishes and furnishings, all faded, have remained in place. It has the smell and feel of a church charity organization. Adam and I sit across from the funeral home director as he takes down information for Jon's death certificate. Adam feels like a stranger and I can't believe this is all real. Dann the director looks up with his unwavering smile telling us that no cremation will take place, all that Jon is getting but didn't want, until we produce \$1,645. Somewhere in the building, I can see my brother clearly. He is naked in a body bag, gray and blue. His mustache is pushed up. His eye is open. Someone's baby, but with what feels like a ransom, they weren't trying to rid that space of a poor person.

Jon's friend from high school puts up a GoFund me account. She urges people online to show up for him, stressing he would have done the same for anyone. As some funds start coming in, Andie and I are pulled by the constructs of existence. She is feeling uneasy with her job. I have deadlines to make.

Adam finally goes in to say hi to our mother. He recently lost his dog and says he will take care of Otis. I tell them I am so sorry, that Andie needs to get back to work and that my school is in Louisiana. Adam tells me he'll take it from here. My mother hugs me and tells me it's okay, but it's really not. We are leaving and Jon is still in a freezer.

We get on the road and shortly past Chicago, Andie is told she is fired. She loses her job for doing the right thing, the human thing. I send her manager a message, letting her know we left my brother specifically for Andie to return not knowing what would happen with his body, asking her to reconsider. She remains cold to it.

If things were different, it wouldn't take over fifteen hours to get there. If things were different, my mother would be coming with me, back to New Orleans. For the first time in my entire life, I miss her.

Andie looks over at me and says, "You may be the most sensitive of the people you grew up with, but I think you're also the strongest."

\*\*\*

In New Orleans, I'm back to attempting deadlines. Looking for my brother's urn. Writing his obituary. Making him a montage. My mind is spinning into implosions with the thought of Jon in a freezer as my mother begs for his body back, the thought of him being ushered into a fire. The thought of how cast aside he is in death as he was in life. The thought of the next decades without him. His thereness then goneness haunts me.

My mother tells me that Adam is helping a lot, but he is helping himself to her things. These things include a phone that showed up after Jon died that he won for her and a couch her friend gifted her. She begs me not to mention it, says she's terrified of losing Adam again.

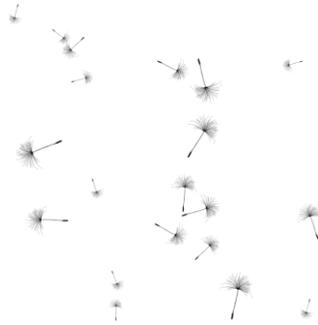
I am biting my tongue when people tell me that Jon has gone to a better place, that he's with Jesus now. Under any other circumstance, I'd tell them I'm Jewish or Buddhist in an effort to remind them everyone is just as convinced in their beliefs as the next, but now I am freezing up and nodding. I am holding back tears whenever I try to talk. I am having a hard time focusing. I am forgetting. I am forgetting tasks, forgetting things, forgetting words. I am getting honked at, yelled at, as I float through my days absorbing how different the world feels. I am almost getting hit by a car. I am repeatedly locking the keys out of mine. I am bracing every time an unknown "269" area code shows up on my phone. I am realizing after that last drive, I will have no family.

I am getting a text from my mom that she's moving from the place where Jon collapsed, that Gale transported the ashes, that he claimed he'd pay for a lawyer against her shady landlord.

She talks about Gale as if nothing was said or happened. I tell her fuck Gale, you said you believe he hurt Jon; he was an impetus to so many problems. She tells me not to tell Adam. She can't bear him not talking to her.

I am sitting in the office of a therapist for the first time in my life. The only one Medicaid could buy, it seems. I bring up my brother and she yells at the ether to him that I won't let him rest, smiles at me with a smug sense of self satisfaction, and changes the subject.

I am stumbling through LaFreniere Park inebriated when I am stopped stunned, dizzy and small, at the burst of fire and bruise across an ineffably distant watery sky. Breathless, I am taken back to a car ride with my mother to Gale's. My feet do not yet touch the floor. As we make our way between the blur of cornfields, the most vivid array of color and light bleed into the world above us. I look up at my mother, then healthy, vibrant, and a near physical clone of my future self and I say, "God's a show off, isn't he?" She smiles and agrees.



My dog has been in places where there's no wind, where I have sworn there's no air. Through empty apartments on a razor's edge of nowhere at all, through spare rooms, through hotel rooms, he runs, tossing his head back like he's willing wind through his hair. No, through the lion's mane he rocks on his five-pound body because everything under his shoulders is alopecia fuzz. He

doesn't care. He brings the breeze, haphazard paws in spite of his deteriorating knees as if he's still a puppy, and he clings to me like the last place he'll ever call home.

I want to be like that again.

"Thank you," I whisper into my dogs' ears, where I still smell remnants of the puppies they once were. They keep me going. When my days are silent, when I look around at my empty apartment I don't know how long I'll be able to stay in, when one of the fourteen bills in a month that is part of a sum larger than I make comes in, when another assignment comes in that I can barely muster the energy to tackle, when I look at the photo of my dead brother propped on my desk, when the futility of it all hits hardest, my dogs are what I look to for gratitude. It's odd, really, in that they are more anchors than propellers.

Lately, something someone said to me many years ago has been replaying in my head. I was walking through a bar when he walked up through the crowd with such palpable zeal and said, "Hey, Jackie, I don't know if you ever get tired of hearing me go on about it, but I really can't say enough how you have impacted me. Every time I see you I think of that girl who was so fed up with working at the deli for nothing and getting meat shavings in her hair, and walking out and saying 'Fuck societal expectations, I'm gonna just be me and my hair!' But, no, seriously, that moment really impacted me. And then you picked me and Allie up and took us to Columbus and I didn't even know at the time. But it set the wheels in motion and I have been there plenty of times since...what I'm saying is...there is this moment that clicks and life makes sense and that moment came with you...and replays in so many interactions since then because I think the universe starts attracting more of that moment to you...so I will be talking to people or something will happen and I will think, 'Yeah, that was her.' And I know you do these things and don't even know you

are doing it. I know you don't know the impact. But I want you to know that whatever you're doing...whatever you're doing...please don't forget it's so important."

That, to me, was more fulfilling and meaningful than just about anything I can think of. I think, if we have a calling and a purpose, that was mine. That was my success. And this tells me that we can grow blind to our own purpose even if we're walking in it because we feel forced to conform to society's idea of a purpose, and for that purpose to have any value, a piece of paper needs to be exchanged. Yet, hearing that, or that I bring out a forgotten childlike side in people, or that I've shown someone a different side of life, or, as a lover once said, "revolutionized their worldview," will forever be more important to me than getting a grade or a productivity score. I will never be able to wrap my mind around why we attribute the idea of purpose to climbing an invisible ladder, or to a single thing. I wonder why we can't we accept that purpose can grow and change with time, like we do and should, and that our larger purpose can be found in daily moments. Society, as it currently stands, would not survive if we stopped pushing people to find a single purpose and, instead, urged them to be purposeful. The current society would collapse if we started acting out of purpose rather than out of programming.

At night, when I lay down, my two dogs will burrow under my blanket and press their tiny bodies on either side of me. Oftentimes, I will watch TikTok for a semblance of company.

During the 2020 lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, a massive number of people took to the social media app TikTok. Initially, I thought it was a silly app where people got on and just showed off their dorkiest dances. I had already been doing that for years on Instagram with a hot sex therapist in Finland, so I disregarded it. Later, going through it on a whim, I realized that's not what it is at all. Instead, there are whole communities of people having conversations and exchanging information. It ended up being everything I'd hope social media to be, rather than the

mindless scrolling that comes with other social media platforms. Moreover, it's an app where the conversation extends beyond our own circles, offering a wide variety of perspectives, rather than those of just our familiar circles. But what stood out to me most is that so many people, in a time that felt borderline apocalyptic, began evaluating the meaninglessness in much of what we do as a society, as well as the harmful things, and started peeling back the constructs and asking deeper questions. I found that thousands upon thousands of people, including doctors, healthcare workers, teachers, mothers, are saying things that I have said for the majority of my life, for which I have felt isolated, for which Ali used to tell me to simmer down, for which I have only skimmed the surface here – that this system is sick, that we are not supposed to be living (existing) this way, that they no longer want to partake in the problem, etc. There are people who, like me, have felt things were a bit too amiss their whole lives and there are people who just started seeing things the same ways because of different occurrences surrounding the pandemic. Many of these people say this stuff and call it a spiritual awakening. They refer to what we live in as a kind of “matrix.” I don't know what it is, but I wish I had found such a community earlier, where, even at a distance, I feel seen. Things would have been different for me.

It's said that you know you're doing the right thing, your soul's calling if that's a thing, if you can't not do it. I couldn't not move and explore and do all the things, which means I couldn't settle or compromise. And I miss her. At some point, I internalized the idea that the only way that someone might love me is that I acquire. At some point, I also fell for the lie that we are sold that the pathway to that idea of success is to get a college education. When I got the acceptance letter, the only way I was able to move to New Orleans was to take a loan out to pay off a financed car, sell the car and use that owed money to move and live off, and slowly pay that loan down. When the program proved to be too time consuming for anything else, and wages too low, anyway, I

started relying heavily on credit and student loan excess. Now I'm looking at a lifetime worth of debt for a piece of paper and no promise of a comfortable life. And even if I am to find what likely will be some adjunct position, student loan payments bring any take home back down to something like minimum wage, anyway. To me, it feels like a trap. I wish I had kept traveling and feeding my spirit.

While I got through my comprehensive exams homeless, I discovered in places such as Denmark, students are paid to go to school, which equalizes the playing field for the financially privileged, those who have the leg up with old money, and those who aren't financially privileged and don't.

While my brother laid dying, it never escaped me, and weighed on me, that if he lived in, say, Spain or Portugal, he and my mother would both have had caretakers and all their health needs taken care of, even as poor, disabled people, alleviating a stress he could not take on. Nor does it escape me, while my mother sits impoverished, sick and unable to walk or shower, and I am wracked with guilt for not taking care of her.

While I struggled my way through school and felt pulled in a million directions with deadlines and bills and anything other than my heart, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, advocated for universal basic income. He said he would have not gotten to where he is today if he had not had the safety net and privilege of old money that allowed him to sit worry free and code all day, pointing out the tragedy in all the wasted potential when so many people are pushed into survival mode, giving all their hours to someplace, their open hours used to run errands, take care of the home, or prepare for the next day. During that time, Andrew Yang ran for president advocating for universal basic income with similar sentiments. It is fucked up to think of all the

geniuses chopped and cheapened to factory workers, potentially incredible artists into tired taxi drivers and shelf stockers.

While Jeff Bezos flew to space in a dick-shaped rocket and laughed that all his customers and poorly paid employees paid for it, I was reading even more on Jacque Fresco, the man who founded the Venus Project, who brought together behavioral therapists, journalists, economists, etc., proving, from his experience in the Great Depression until his death at 101 years old, that the world can exist without money and as common heritage. I learned that some countries, under a devastating, crippling embargo, still manage standards of living like those of most European countries, complete with high quality free health care and education, green sustainable agricultural systems, a home and more as basic human rights, etc. Their crime rates are some of the lowest in the world, all this was achieved in an economy of scarcity.

Let's not get started on Big Pharma or the for-profit prison system.

Once upon a time, the system here worked better. Income to life expense made a bit more sense and college was far cheaper with a stronger possibility of doing what it's meant to, landing you in a better quality of life. But the noose seems to tighten with time and most of my generation can't afford houses, vacations, or to entertain the idea of having children. "That's just the way it is," people say – a sigh and turn the page culture. But it's not the way it has to be, or could be. It's certainly not how it should be.

People are quick to jump to the idea that if it's not this system, it has to be another unfortunate alternative. This signifies a large lack in ingenuity and imagination.

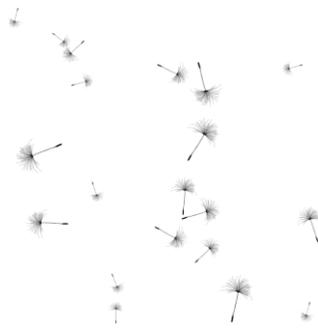
In a different system, I would have had a family. Where values are different, focus is. Maybe someone would have listened to my mother at the specific moment where she needed it most and the whole trajectory of her life would have changed. Maybe her family would've gotten

her help. Maybe her family wouldn't have shamed and shunned her and made whatever was going on with her worse because she could no longer function enough to go out and chase money. Maybe in a different system, she wouldn't have hated herself so much that she sought out an abuser. Or maybe my biological father wouldn't have been abusive. Maybe he wouldn't have been shuffled through a for-profit prison system and could have gotten the community, acknowledgment, direction and care that he needed. Maybe there'd be a stronger focus on honest, uncorrupted mental health and rehabilitation. Maybe my mother wouldn't have been so desperate to survive in a system that she otherwise could not that she relied upon Gale, even if abusive, for a roof, food, clothing, and a sense of stability. Maybe in a different system, she'd have stood on equal grounds and hadn't had her self-esteem so shot. Maybe then she'd have been more present. Jon would've gotten the care he needed, those closest to him wouldn't have been more focused on their own lack and survival, and he would be alive today. I think I would have always been a restless, free spirit, but maybe I wouldn't have felt the need to run so much. I wouldn't have felt so out of place no matter where I turned – a family whose lifestyle I never wanted, and a college lifestyle I was never prepared for, two worlds I couldn't feel a part of. I wouldn't have experienced such an intense chemistry with someone only to be left for not being rich. I would've learned music. And on and on.

When I am tired and my body hurts daily, when I can't see myself ever dating, when I can not formulate a thought, when I lose words, when my biggest dream becomes an off-grid animal sanctuary far from people, or a shack in the woods to cuddle my dogs and watch my days pass, or nothing at all, my mother sends me a photo of a little girl upside down on a ballet bar in a row of girls in proper position. She sends me a video of a girl putting on her own performance next to her classmates singing stiff in unison. She tells me, "I know my little girl is in there somewhere."

She tells me, “We need more people like you. We need more kindness. We need more people with the courage you have. I wish I had told you how I felt when you were much younger.”

I ask her what she wished on as a child. She tells me she rarely wished on dandelions, mostly bones.



Your coming into this world was not, on my end, all test tube, hormones, blood panels, and petri dishes. It was not sterile of thought or emotion.

To me, you are the reach beyond my grasp, the testament that good things can come from untilled areas and wastelands. You are simultaneously the breaking of cycles and continuity. You are new beginnings, even if outside my witness.

As a teenager, I caught a glimpse of a movie in which a boy tracks down a woman and surprises her with the fact that he was the result of her egg retrieval. Similar to the tinge of knowing we get when we meet certain people that we will know in some significant way, I had the smallest tinge of knowing that I might someday be an egg donor.

I would have begun the process earlier than I did. A friend had adamantly advised against it, insisting that a highly sensitive individual such as myself wouldn't be able to mentally and emotionally withstand the thought of you as an unknown entity somewhere out there in the world. Considering her input, I gave it time. Still, the idea of donating my eggs resurfaced and intensified. After a few more years, the thought would still not go away.

I want you to know that it has been one of the most gratifying things I have ever done.

You might think of it as a dandelion wish. By now, you have likely mustered as much hope as you can into your deepest inhale and then into one long blow, sent the seeds of your wish on the wind for them to scatter where they may and flourish unseen, eventually becoming a wish, too.

When you had become your parents' wish and my awareness, I was standing at the end of the baking aisle of Meijer, a midwestern grocery store, with my roommate at the time, Nik, and I told her there will be a little one in this world in part because of me. Her response bounced like a reflex: "Oh god, it's gonna be traipsing into the land trying to ride a unicorn or something."

"Aaaaawwww," I laughed, "why do you say that?"

Immediately, she paused from whatever shelf she was grabbing toward, hand still in the air, darted her eyes to mine, wide and firm like a mother's who talks like she's from Fargo, cocked her head and retorted, "Have you met you?"

Walking through the grocery store with her, I smiled with a sense of pride at her comment and gratitude for what, I think, is among the sweetest possible gifts: to kindly show one to oneself, to say "I see you" in sentiment, even if silly on the surface.

"Anyway," she continued, "I will never know what it's like. I dream about it all the time. I would love to know what it is to throw everything aside like you do and drive across the country, bury my toes in the sand and watch the sun. Just because I want to."

We returned to her apartment in which I was renting a room before taking off again. I retreated to that room, where Nag Champa burned into a tarnished metal sun that was not mine and rolled along the walls I had painted red. I checked my email to see if I had gotten a response on whether the pregnancy was successful. Outside, Nik stormed down the old, creaky, narrow hallway with buckling infrastructure yelling, like she often would, "I'm Jackie H! I fart rainbows!"

I'm Jackie H! I shit puppy dogs and sunshine!" Sometimes she'd follow that up with the more senseless, "Jackson H! Omaha Financial!" I clicked on the email that was waiting from the agency. I was informed that it was – that the first surrogate was carrying a boy and a girl. In a reaction I had not expected, I sobbed the entire night. I cried not out of regret or grief, but out of impact, an intermingling of enormity and release.

In the creation of the donor profile, I considered environment vs. biology.

"Does your family have any history of alcoholism?"

A rushing river of it.

Click: No.

"Does your family have any history of depression?"

A result of unmet needs.

Click: No.

Then came the phone screening, where a psychologist called and asked:

"Tell me about your childhood. What was growing up with your parents like?"

This is where I left the "bad" things out, like not knowing my biological father nor wanting to because he was in prison the entirety of my life, and my mother's pill addiction, alcoholism and depression. The truth by omission sounded pretty wholesome as it went something like:

"I think my favorite part of growing up was that there was no expectation on us to be anything other than ourselves. So I was encouraged to perform, since that's what I wanted to do. I'd entertain guests whenever they'd come around by dressing up as various characters and putting on little shows. There was never any pressure to be their idea of who we should be, but, rather, always an embrace on our own individual processes of becoming."

I wasn't going to let society tell me that I can't do yet another thing I wanted to do.

It is something that I carry a lot of guilt for, based on how the larger world might see it, although it is not something I see as a lie. Jiddu Krishnamurti wrote “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.” An unhealthy society can cast unhealthy assumptions on people that, in the deepest sense, at a heart and soul level, aren’t true. It’s how it upholds itself. We live in a sick, disordered society. There is a reason as to why the United States is the third most depressed and anxious country in the world after China and India. It will breed such things as depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns, through its unnatural and unhealthy structures, hand you some pills with countless side effects so someone can make their commission, but won’t look at the source of the problem – itself.

This is to say that, from what I have witnessed up close and in the most intricate ways for almost forty years, any depression, anxiety, alcoholism and what have you that has reared its head within my bloodlines has only been those who’ve been hit the hardest as a result of environment, of a preventative system, a crying of needs unheard and unmet. Anybody under the sun would act outside of their highest self if they were in constant survival mode, struggling to have basic needs met. I know my worst self has come out only in a real or perceived survival mode, and it isn’t far-fetched to surmise that if we were to take someone thought of as high-functioning and even-keeled from the most privileged population of society, strip them of all they have and throw them into a poor existence, we would see their worst selves come out, too. Put the likes of Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos in a preventative place of need, which is exactly what a poverty state is in this arbitrary, unnecessary system, and you would see something monstrous. This is why we see so much egregious behavior and illnesses within the poorer communities and less of those same behaviors and illnesses in the more affluent communities. Nobody’s choosing to be in such a bad way; just as a seed sprouts from being hugged by earth and grows through elements and photosynthesis, it

is a law of nature that everything is pushed through environmental cause and effect. This society acts like a gaslighting, projecting, abusive relationship. It is anti-human, a sickness that breeds sickness, but by design, points fingers at those who can't fit or function within it as being sick. It is, after all, true that the *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, in its ever-shifting science, includes the rebellious, even if of good character and having no malice, as having a disorder. While it offers good insights and is most certainly helpful in many areas, it's also easy to wonder how much we're told simply to keep people compliant – how many disorders would simply be personalities in a different kind of system. How much depression and anxiety would diminish in a different kind of system. I think it's important to always peel back layers, to distinguish what is true and what is meant to prop the machine I think it's important to always peel back layers, to distinguish what is true and what is meant to prop the machine, where everything is a bit inverse and nothing is immune to corruption.

It is not radical to say we are but tadpoles, if not eggs, in our own evolution, and that the worst behavior or the saddest comes from an inability to articulate something dormant, but very much there, a world we know but don't know, because it's gone unmodeled and unseen. History has seen how very pliable the mass human psyche is, only later for the majority to realize the barbarism and catastrophic error - women burned at stakes because they were independent and so believed to be witches, black people being written into law as only  $\frac{3}{5}$  human, blood-letting and lobotomies seen as successful sciences when the results said otherwise, depression and anxiety thought to be cured by an ice pick being jammed into the eye socket, the sale of humans, female hysteria, and on and on. I believe someday, if we make it, people will look back on this society and the American capitalist system and see the barbarism and catastrophic error. This is why I

have always believed it is always best to approach people as if they are doing their best with what they know and have at any given time.

This is to say that if I didn't believe with everything in me that you would be healthy, happy, high functioning, awesome individuals in the right environment with the right resources and access, with open doors readily in front of you, and with all your needs met, I would have never moved forward with the process. But I believe with everything in me that you are vibrant, healthy, high functioning and happy.

My mother's first daughter is, by societal standards, successful – she is wealthy and travels the world frequently with her husband and children. Had she grown up with us, her world would likely look entirely different. Adam, because of the leg up given by his dad, has experienced a much different world than me and Jon. Had Jon and I grown up with the same resources, things would have been different for us. Likewise, if my mother had grown up in an environment more conducive to her needs, she would have been a different person.

It is a constant reality for someone growing up in lack and the dysfunction that arises from lack to look at the realities of others and wonder who they could have been if their circumstances had been different.

As I write this, the first three of you are around seven. When I was around that age, a song called "Toy Soldiers" by Martika was released, a starkly different kind of sound than today's music. It was one of the last years I remember having any kind of family. The song comes to my mind so strongly right now because at that age, it was on the radio often and, running and playing among such a crowd, having your face kissed by every other one of them, and feeling the warmth of their embraces, you can never imagine that one day you will be the last one standing. It is really

the only circumstance I can think of in which one doesn't want to be the last one standing, and I hope that your families are large, expansive, always there.

Some may describe me as a hardcore idealist, though I feel as though I have always felt and functioned in accordance with two worlds or planes. In the closest way I can articulate this, when I am on the highway, when I am moving, it is the closest to a spiritual experience for me – I feel closest to the plane of nothing and everything, to the world where everything is possible, not prevented. In the world in which we partake, the invention, I feel trapped. In one world, I want to live forever, in the other I don't want to be at all.

In this, though, it is you, as unknown entities, who have helped me with the best times of my life, and helped get me through the some of the worst, acting as my accountability in some ways when I had none. I never knew, and probably still don't know, just how much I missed out on until I went to grad school. It was like trying to push myself into a conversation I could never be a part of – the loving and supportive families, the world travels, the studying abroad, the financial, emotional and mental space to continually put out excellence, the open and trustful approaches to the world, and so on and so on – countless things I had never considered as a concrete reality and I could not help but, for the first time in my life, compare and internalize. Even when they'd talk about the enormous amount of books they'd read, I only found myself in awe of how they ever had the time and space. I couldn't do my homework in high school. I couldn't read in the environment I was in. Often, I was given drunken guilt trips for trying. I graduated high school on D's.

When you grow up around people in survival mode, you become a caretaker from the time you are a child. Nine times out of ten, when you are thrown to the same low wage cycle, you end up in survival mode yourself, never getting to spend time with your talents, never getting to know

your desires or what you like. Studies show that the stress and burden of these cycles decrease cognitive capacity significantly, then society shuns for that, too. It's like breaking your wings and insisting you fly.

When my brother died, and the COVID-19 pandemic started taking people's lives and pushing everyone else inside, I found myself asking if it were my last day, would the places I was sitting at any given time be where I'd want to be sitting and, each time, the answer was no. But I didn't know where, and I didn't know if that feeling was temporary. And the debt trap had frozen me in place. What I did know is that I wanted to finish school only because I told your families that's what I was doing. Come hell or high water, I was going to do it for you.

When you were around three, I was in class as the sun set and a symphony of birds rose as they fell to their spaces in the courtyard trees for the night. I imagined you somewhere with round bellies and crowns of curls, giggling at bedtime stories, pointing at pictures in manipulative inquiry to provoke impromptu personalizations and later bedtimes. Directly out the window beneath the dying out choir of screeches, a squirrel sauntered slowly. I wondered who saw. I wondered if any of you, like me, would someday carry the note "daydreams too much" home on your report card. That night, we had learned that the word "weilschmerz" is a term that describes a weariness and feeling of loss in the mismatch of one's ideal world and how it is. I saw it as an understanding wink from the universe, something I needed to hear. My defiant heart found, for the moment, its place back in its cage, where there's always a knocking. I looked back out the window and, where the squirrel had been, a cockroach scurried. I imagined it having shapeshifted. If ever you grow up and find me, I will hopefully be able to offer, on paper, truth in what I had once forged my path to be. But if just one looks at me with fiery eyes, believing nil and so believing all, desirous of nothing but everything, adding to a slowly growing population chipping away the confines to something

more inclusively expansive, and perhaps with more resources than I ever had, then maybe I had done something bigger than I ever thought. The dandelion is named after the lion's tooth. Wherever you go, whichever direction you choose, I hope you are unbound by societal expectations, untethered by its constructs, unsullied by its illusions. I hope you are wild. I hope you are free.

## VITA

Jacklyn Hopper was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in English and creative writing from Southern New Hampshire University in 2015. She joined the University of New Orleans nonfiction creative writing graduate program to pursue an MFA and has since had her work published in a smattering of publications under different monikers.