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## In Retrograde

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# **IN RETROGRADE**

Erin Gunther

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree at Sarah Lawrence College, May 2019

## A Simple Harmonic Motion

### *Tortoise and the Hare*

I crave the sound of this place, the crunch of the fine gravel underneath my feet. Crunch, past the stone bleachers, like stairs made for giants. Past the statue, the turtle and the rabbit, the tortoise and the hare, straight out of Aesop's fables. Too slow, too fast, or just right for today? I'm too old to remember the lessons from silly children's stories.

I pray it won't rain, but by the looks of the clouds I don't think I will be that lucky. Some days are one foot in front of the other. Some are high knees, light feet. This is a one foot in front of the other kind of day. All I have is the crunch, my footfalls, my breathing. Run to the park, run to the tippy top of the Bronx, two big loops around the park's perimeter – across the bridge and through the backwoods – and then back. A little over 20 miles. I carry gels, but hate the taste, the texture, the consistency. I am supposed to take one every 45 minutes into the run, but I usually only take one for the duration of a three and a half hour run. I get a high from the struggle, from running my energy to near empty. I can feel that deep kind of tired working through me, that physiological tipping point, all the stored sugars in my body, burned. Burned like propane. Burned like dinosaur bones.

A man I was seeing at the time told me, *I think you just like to hurt*, after my first marathon. I said I was planning for a second.

*But I would have months to recover.* I imagined the first marathon in terms of childbirth – once you've had the first one, it can only get easier from there, right? Weren't expectations and experience worth something? Maybe it was true that I did like to hurt. But at least while I was running, I was claiming my pain.

John Trudell, a philosopher-poet, once said he didn't trust anyone who wasn't angry. This is something I feel uncomfortable believing, but I think I understand. Anger. Frustration. Fatigue. The cycle. It seems so many times I have been directed to silence with my anger. My father's mantra growing up was, *if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all*. Maybe running is a silent response to anger I am unable to express. I was brought up not to be angry, but passive. "You'll never be my equal," my father once told me in an argument. I don't even remember the context of the argument now. "I'm the *father*." It was a declaration of his right, his earned right, won in blood and years. I learned I didn't have a right to feel angry, to verbalize it.

*Run it off*. That's what I've done for years. Run until I am numb. Maybe I am self-absorbed for losing myself in the miles, the hours. *Run until I am anemic*. Until there is no more energy left to burn. Run like there is something to prove, but I run in circles. *In circles and circles of sorrow*, as Morrison said.

But where does the elation come from? I ran the streets of Philadelphia. From the center of the city to the outskirts and back. 26.2 miles of it. My body begged, but I could not cry. I felt a hand on my back as I walked up the hill. *You can get back in it*, a man said as he trotted alongside me. And I started again. I never thought there would be a race I could not finish. Not after logging hundreds of miles in preparation. But this, this was different.. Move, one leg, and the other, and I will go. People were lined up, screaming, cheering, on the side of the road. At each water station it was too easy to stop. Drink. I knew I should have taken a gel, but I felt ill. The Gatorade was enough. I moved past the crowds and it was quiet again. Another stretch of pavement, endless pavement. I needed to walk. Another hand touched my shoulder. This time an older woman. How many marathons has she ran, I wondered. *Come with me*, she said. *I'm coming*, I answered, and my legs went again.

At mile 24, I felt a rush in knowing that I would finish. The crushing disappointment from the moment I had started running, the tightness in my chest and the weakness in my legs, dissipated. The burst of energy was something beyond the body, the only proof I can muster that there is – beyond a shadow of a doubt – a spirit or soul housed within the body, a force of will that can be experienced in full color at the fringes of deprivation. Not quite out-of-body, but mind-body dissociation, the sense of elation sparkling in the synapses of the brain like a short-circuit.

When I crossed the line and stopped, I breathed. I saw the volunteers with the medals and paused, waiting for the chubby-cheeked boy to put the red, white and blue colored medal over my head. Another volunteer gave me a heat blanket with the Philadelphia Marathon logo stamped across it that I draped over my shoulders and pinched tight to my chest. The tent beyond me was filled with food. I remembered being ill at the thought of the candy and the beer they had handed out along the race – who would eat or drink that during a marathon? – and the carcasses of orange slices I had dodged along the way. A little boy was handing out the food under the tent. I took a peach fruit cup and a water and worked my way through the masses to the periphery of the action.

I sat on the cold ground by shuttle buses. I peeled the top of the fruit cup open and slurped the syrup and the chunks of peach. I saw my sister walking towards me, and I told her how I'd been faint on the starting line. Not nervous, but depleted. *This has been a while in the making. I don't know why I thought training for a marathon in grad school would be a good idea*, I laughed. The joke was on me. *But you did it*, she said. I stood up and we locked arms as we walked back to the hotel. *I can feel you shaking*, she said. *Put my coat on*. She gave me her coat and by the time we made it back, I flopped on the bed. I needed a shower. By nighttime, we

would be back in New York. It would all be over, this thing I had poured so much energy into for months. *Let me go get you something to eat at Starbucks*, she said. She clicked the thermostat up past 80. I was still shivering. She took my hand and pinched the tip of my pointer finger. The coloration remained milky white underneath the shield of keratin, the blood failing to pool to the surface. *I'm sure it's the anemia again*, I said. She looked at me, concerned. *It's like there no blood left in there*, she said giggling strangely. *It'll be fine*, I said. She left for food, and I made my way to the shower, peeling the salt-crusted clothes from my body. I let the water wash the salt and mud and dirt from my skin. I would be cleansed, new, by the time I came out.

Ready to do it all over again.

Because that emptiness that needs filling never leaves.

### *Lives in Motion*

It is dark walking beneath the underpass. Its rounded roof forms a crescent of light at the other end. Droplets fall from the high ceiling. I dodge them as if I know where they'll fall without looking up. Echoes of cars passing through are amplified, chamber-like. The bus stop is ahead, a tired traveler slumped on the bench. Garbage is scattered around the base of its bin like it has been disturbed by scavengers in the night. Not anyone's garbage, but all our garbage. A collection of unwanted cartons and cups, the wreckage left behind of lives in motion. I hold my breath until I reach the other side. Usually I focus on the cracks and the blemishes of the sidewalk until I pass through. Today, I glance up to see the perched pigeons staring down at me with their black eyes, inquisitively, like I may have something to offer.

I have taken this walk too many times to count back and forth from home to campus. The underpass connects north and south, east and west, traffic above and through. I have learned the pattern of the stoplight, so I know when I should rush over the crosswalk. I have learned how to be a savvy pedestrian. I have missed being a "driver," having a vehicle at my disposal, so much so that I still carry one of the keys to the Jeep I used to drive before I moved here. It was never my vehicle – it was my father's – but after two years of driving it, I had developed an attachment to it. I felt sour at times for my situation without it because that attachment felt that it justified my entitlement to it.

I used to drive the same routes, from my parent's home to Ithaca College for class, blaring the same playlists through the speakers imagining being anywhere else than where I was. I held onto the promise that education was the ticket out of that place, a place characterized equally for me by its geographic and emotional disconnection. Geographically, nothing was accessible without a car. Roads cut through fields and vast expanses of places between other

places. Emotionally, the disconnect between my mother and father tainted my sense of that place. Communication seemed rarely to achieve compromise or understanding, if that was ever even the desire to begin with. The week-long battles turned to year-long wars. Periods of intense outbursts were followed by misunderstood silences. My sister and I would attempt to avoid, as much as possible, getting caught in the crossfire.

My mother sought escape from the chronic dysfunction in the sugar-laced wine she filled her glasses with and took refuge in the fictitious lives projected on the television. My father receded into a backdrop consumed by nostalgia and loss in his fixation on the brokenness of our family “unity.” Both of my parents carried their scars from their own parent’s shortcomings. Divorce, poverty, neglect, violence. Histories that I would never be able to fully access or understand. I never met my mother’s father, and when my grandmother slowly withered from cervical cancer in her ‘60s, something changed dramatically in my mother. My father’s parents divorced when he was in high school and he fell out of touch with his father for years. Like my mother’s situation, the bond was rekindled when his father developed lung cancer. And after his death, my father, too, became even more of a stranger than before. The relationships were re-established based on need, on intimate care, carving out a space for understanding and love that had been lacking before.

Driving had been an escape from trying to understand, the effortless moments where my thoughts could come and go with the mood of the music. It took until my junior year of college for my parents to finally separate physically. The lack of language for any of us to express needs or desires without inciting accusations, anger, shame, or a cocktail of them all had created an environment in which isolation and non-communication was key to survival. Driving, running, any means of staying in motion – keeping my mind in an even, steady flow – provided comfort.

When I have access to a vehicle now, it is still therapeutic. The need to stay in motion is one that I feel the pressure of almost constantly. I sometimes dread the silence of my apartment, the length of the sedentary, lonely night that will ensue. I do not look forward to the thoughts that tumble in, those that will keep me awake, memories of arms wrapped around me, of warmth that was not my own. I miss the laughter in the silences and am simultaneously comforted and haunted by the squeals and pitter-patter from the children that live below. The sounds of life in its purest form are soothing, although I cannot, or perhaps try not, to imagine myself with any of my own.

I ought to close my eyes, to let my mind sink. I ought to rest this restless mind before the sun rises, as it always does, right on time.

## *Hole*

I wonder how long this hole, this open wound, has been in the side of the house. At one point it must have been a functional window. The skeleton of an air conditioner lies dejected at the foot of the hole. Cardboard had been taped over it, a child's solution, as though maybe we would forget. The cold made it hard to forget. Even when it is hot, there is no use for a broken air conditioner and a hole in the wall.

I had moved in out of desperation, initially. But I had been hopeful. The space is so big, the room is so big. It's such an easy walk to campus. *How many lies do I tell myself?* The duct tape holding up the light fixture. The green and black floor panels that peeled up when I mopped. The carpets, still pungent with the memory of felines and former tenants. The bathroom, black mystery on the ceiling. The broken thermostat. All the small things. Neglect. I never met my landlady. I never had a signed lease. But she still cashed the checks. A tenant came in, tenant moved out, a rotation of faces. *But this is what it's like to be a student.* An overpriced slum, a depository for past tenant's unwanted junk.

The hole was shoddily covered with plywood after we made enough of an issue of it. Supposedly, wonderful new renovations were coming. I had wanted to believe that. I did not want to move again. The first apartment was a one bedroom where I slept in what would have been the living room. Busted pipes forced the situation to a close before the year was up and it was almost a relief. The second apartment was a tiny office space in a cute one bedroom. The owner's cat would curl up on my bed. We bonded through the day, but when I needed time to myself, which the fat cat did not like to grant, I had to usher him away. He developed a terrible habit of leaping through the clothes I hung on a rack at the end of my bed, leaving a trail of his hair behind. My clothes and my shoes had become prized possessions. The only bits of my

identity that I had to remind me I was not homeless, I was not failing, I was just struggling towards greener pastures.

*How many lies do I tell myself?* I liked to believe that by moving to this place – to further my education, to “better” myself – I would embrace the opportunities that this urban sprawl in New York city and its outskirts would offer. Instead, as I thought back to my previous ordeals and that shoddily covered hole in the wall, it seemed more-so that my inadequacies taunted me. Was I afflicted by pride? *The lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: they will not go unpunished.* This decision was never supported in my family. It wasn’t practical. The city was always an impossibility, which is maybe why I wanted it. I made a choice and I stuck with it. I dreamt and was determined to hang onto every last tuft of that dream even if I was meant to lose it. Doubt was a tumor I needed to remain benign.

The hole made me feel exposed, naked, like the clothes I worked so hard to keep clean, tidy, and free from pulled threads. Was I an imposter? A failure? I straddled an in-between-ness, one night sitting in the darkness of this apartment with smoke rolling from my lips – who will care – listening to the neighbors arguing below me adding up the bills I don’t know how I will pay, and the next, I am at a formal dinner party in midtown. I wear shoes with four-inch heels because I know I will not need to walk – a luxury. An impractical red jumpsuit. It is an open bar, suits, so many suits, and dresses I would see through the windows on Fifth Ave that I would never dare to walk in. Bright faces, bright clothes. It is overwhelming. I am served a steak with potatoes and a dinner roll. I haven’t had to pay for a thing. Waiters and waitresses, with stiff shoulders, and painfully careful movements so acute, weave gracefully and efficiently between tables. I repeat “thank you,” “thank you,” so many times. But I am thankful.

I lock eyes with a young woman when she asks if I'd like the steak or the fish. I feel far away, maybe from the wine. My glass keeps filling as if by magic. And I keep drinking. I imagine myself in her uniform, looking down at the table of pretty, blurry-eyed people, laughing, lipstick, drinks – I imagine watching anxiously for things to be dropped, spilled – the trick is to hardly exist but make it seem like the food put itself on the table – to meet every desire seamlessly. To serve, that I understood. But this was more like a play and I was inhabiting the skin of someone I did know, someone I was not. Was this what I had imagined when I moved here? The sprawling, sparkling playground for those who could play, the clinking of fine crystal, and half-drunk laughter, like the world was there for the taking in one hasty gulp. No fear, no anxiety, no doubt. The fruit was there for the harvesting.

I had only imagined the gushing possibility underneath the orange beams of the sunrise, gleaming like a promise on the sleek buildings that cut the sky. This was not me – I lived daily with fear. And the anxiety that hole in my wall, that gentle break between me and the rest of the world, reminded me of. Did I even consider the essence of the shadows underneath the sparkle of those flawless industrial faces? I think of the body underneath the lump of blankets on the park bench when I exited the Bowling Green subway on a February night. I think about clean sheets against my skin, the comforting body beside me, laughter, fist-full's of cashews and raisins to share. What was the price for the touch of another's skin, for walls, locked doors, cabinets full of exotic liquor and a stuffed fridge? Simple pleasures, complex securities.

I thought about the hunched-over figure across from me on the subway, hoodie pulled up, legs limp to the side. The body curled on the vents to catch the heat rising from underground. Would anyone notice if he died like that on the street? What was the cost of a place so simultaneously breathtaking and disgusting? When I experience it – driving down the Henry

Hudson Parkway just after nightfall, the river dusted with light, past the upper west side, over the George Washington bridge, looking back on the famous skyline – I am filled with a sense of wonder beyond anything I can or maybe ever will understand. *How many lies?* I ask, and I don't know, but the city seems stripped bare in front of me underneath its mechanical lull.

## Pulse

The earth moves underneath me in blurred, semi-controlled chaos. My even footfalls and breathing are in my ears, the rhythm that dictates my body's motion. My eyes are focused on the trail just ahead. I anticipate the slick rocks, lift my knees for the roots. I drive forward with my arms, my core. The terrain dictates my course. I am present, calm, my senses tapered. The damp scent of New York soil, the smell of green and brown alike, are heavy in my nostrils, my lungs. I see what is only a few feet ahead, although I remember the way. I listen to the crunch of gravel and leaves under my feet, the *clack* of an upset stone seems so loud against the backdrop of stillness. Geese fly above in formation, migrating? – or have they given up migrating as the seasonal changes become less defined?

It feels fast, too fast to move in a place like this. Like I'm running from something. And maybe I am. Maybe it is no physical predator, but one that has taken root in my mind, more like a parasite than something with jaws. But it is primal, this need. It is control, self-control, the animal side of human nature. It is about mind and body aligning in a burst, a breath, of time. I am in constant competition with a shadow of myself, a flash of the running clock on my wrist. I chase down a recent past not forgotten, motivated by the vision of some prospective better future. That is what is on the horizon, as the sun comes up, as my heart beats in my throat, in my ears, pumping adrenaline through my body. It is spiritual, and for the morning I am cleansed. My body has taken and given, my soul has been nourished. I go into this new day cleansed, rebirthed, with the strength to believe in a greater sense of purpose. The understanding is beyond me, somewhere in the microfibers of these trees, the grass, the moss – in this world I am in and of, but never above. I am alone – this reminds me – these woods, this womb – the same way that I came into the world, and the same way, I am certain, I will leave it.

\*

It started on the treadmill in my parent's room. I had begged and pleaded with father to buy the machine and I am still surprised that he did. There were some days, I started off with a bowl of cheerios before I had to leave for school, I would fast through lunch, and would get on the treadmill as soon as I got home. Sometimes I would leave the lights off, at whatever pace I could muster, the music from my iPod blaring loudly enough in my ears to drown out the hum of the machine and its whirring belt below me. I made sure the door was shut at all times, and at most I would crack open the chipping, white farmhouse window with a butter knife. I tried to find things to look at other than the time, the time that ticked away so slowly on the florescent console.

I started by running three miles a day. I had no love of or connection to the sport of running, having always considered myself an unathletic child. I knew that running burned fat, and fast, which is what made it appealing at the time. It was my unrestrained love of food and the resulting dissatisfaction with my body that first drove me to running. I did not inherently dislike the way that I looked, but in the eyes of my peers my size, it had seemed, singled me out into some category of lower order. My physicality was going to make things difficult for me socially – that much was clear. Not only did I have to be the fattest girl in the class, but also the tallest, and at many times, the quietest. My body was anything but quiet throughout these early years of my development, drawing unsolicited attention, noise that I tried to cancel out by my withdrawal from verbally engaging with my peers. I was painfully introverted and the discomfort I felt from the kind of attention I received merely from my bigness petrified me into silence.

Even the word “fattest” as it appears on the page appears too harsh to me, but that is what I was – fat. The doctors warned my parents about my expanding body and even tried to put me

on thyroid medication as if there was something internal to blame for the fact that I just ate and ate and ate. The shame associated with “fat,” the treatment of it as some kind of “dirty” word, has kept me from simply claiming it as a part of my childhood. But acknowledging the shame that I came to internalize from the teasing, the singling out, and as I got older, the realization that fatness was the equivalent of evil – especially for a young woman – is a difficult part of the story, the part that I always seem to leave out. The loathing I came to feel for my body and the way that it looked – or at least the way that I perceived it – was where my relationship with running and reshaping my self-image began. I had initially thought that running the fat off my body would instantly grant me the kind of confidence and social acceptance that I saw from the thin, white women on magazine covers and in sexy fragrance ads. I bought into the idea that fat was the enemy and happiness came from the work it took to keep that fat from clinging to my hips or my stomach. This was what I was promised in advertisements and I thought that my body was the source of my unhappiness, that once I had reached some end-point of physical perfection, I would be able to claim my happiness like a certificate of achievement.

It would take years, but I would realize that without self-acceptance, there was no bottom to the well of dissatisfaction I could feel for my body. By the time I realized this, running had been subsumed into my identity and had introduced me to a community of people that ran for a variety of reasons, reasons having to do with pleasure and self-fulfillment, not as a physical punishment to satisfy their self-loathing. Running began as an entry point into an endeavor to completely change myself – to make myself smaller, more desirable, more like the girls in my class that playfully teased one another and gained popularity with ease – and as my relationship to myself changed so too did my relationship to running. It has been an enduring relationship – like that of a close friend – that has sped alongside me throughout chaotic phases of self-doubt

and lacking visions of self-worth. Running has been bound up in my conflicted relationship to body image, an element that has been present throughout my attempts to reframe my sense of self over the years. It has been there while I conducted my blind inward probes, looking for the answers that could lead me to self-acceptance – with little idea of what questions I should be asking to get there. I thought I understood the end goal I was trying to reach for a long time: contentment with my physical body. But I failed to realize that I had been buying into a framework that would only continue to psychologically and physically drain me, that I was always looking for affirmation from others rather than accepting that I could love my body for exactly how it is in its present form. It is a recursive process, changing with each day. Sometimes I need to repeat, like I mantra, that I love my body, because it seems there will always be days that I want to scrutinize how a pair of jeans fit or how my stomach looks after a hearty meal. There are still days I feel twinges of guilt when I think about eating a dessert, or if I go out and order fries and a burger. I still fall into that mental trap, and I try to catch myself when it happens. I know that subconsciously I am still documenting what I consume, that it is being scrolled away in a log for the day, for the week, that I am always monitoring. How many miles did I run today? Have I earned this meal? How many will I run tomorrow? I will mark the meal in my mind with a small asterisks, even if unintendedly, to be revisited later. I actively push back against this impulse to calculate the extent to which I submit to an indulgence and the extent to which I know I will use it to motivate me to go an extra mile or two the next day, simply to convince myself I have paid that debt.

I like to think I have pushed through many of the psychological barriers that I have been facing since childhood to harmonize my mind and body. I like to believe that running has enriched my life in more ways than it has promoted grief or struggle in it. Every day, I still

struggle to reconcile if it is something of an addiction on multiple levels, if I am only too scared at the thought of how I might see myself if I had to give it up. I worry that it has become a crutch for me to convince myself I have reached a kind of transcendent level of self-acceptance, when really my tightly wound beliefs would crumble if I ceased to have running in my life. Can I imagine myself as a cyclist, a swimmer, a yoga enthusiast? No. It is an attachment I have always found myself falling back on, a passion that I have failed to find elsewhere.

\*

I still remember in eighth grade when my gym teacher noticed me during the mile run. It was a part of our end-of-year testing, which I usually dreaded. The humiliation of having to suffer on display as my lungs heaved and my body ached, knowing I would have to go around the track for four full loops, had been a source of great agony for years. When I would have to walk to catch my breath, I felt the shame, the stares from the faster, leaner athletic girls that had already finished and now got to bask in the attention of our gym teacher. But eighth grade was different. I had been consistent with my three miles a day and had lost a significant amount of weight from starving my body through the week. It had become a game, the deprivation game, one I would play for years to come. How long could I go without eating before I caved under the pressure of desire? Some days I would go until I quit feeling any desire for anything, until I could sink fully into that numbness on my bedroom floor, listening only to the slow, methodical pulse of my heart pumping life through my veins. It felt, in those moments after I had run and rung out every drop of energy I had left for the day, that I could close my eyes, lie down, and sink right through the floor. It was as close as I could come to transcending my body in life, I thought, something spiritual, and it felt for a second that I became only a heart pulsing through the floorboards.

That year would be different because no one knew my secret, that I had taken up running. I couldn't wait to see my gym teacher, Ruby, all the soccer girls called her – with her shocked expression when I finished ahead of her star athlete soccer players. When she shouted, “go!” and pressed the button on her stopwatch with her thumb, my legs took flight in their familiar motions. I had made sure to eat that day. It was important to me to be noticed, to be recognized for what I had accomplished through sweat and pain and consistency. It was the validation I needed to affirm that I was getting closer to the person I wanted to be, that I no longer had to endure being scrutinized in this open arena under eyes filled with distaste and dismissal so strong its sting continually reinforced the internalization of my shame. When I made it through my first lap, I could tell by the way she read off the split that she thought I had gone out too fast, that I would not hold the pace. I kept my eyes locked on the white line to my left, pushing the straightaways, easing into the curves. “Keep up the pace,” Ruby said as I finished my fourth lap. “Nice and even.”

I was the first girl to finish, and as I stepped off to the side, my gym teacher complimented me, smiling approvingly. “So you're going to join cross country next year, I hope,” she said. “That was a nice time and we've got a great high school coach. I think it would be great for you.”

I was hesitant to commit my afterschool time to an organized sport. It broke my routine, my obsession, and forced me into a social sphere that made me uncomfortable. We would all be on a team, but we would all be competing against one another. The competitive side of running awakened a host of new anxieties. While I still struggled with my body, the way it was displayed – although I was grateful my uniform included shorts as opposed to the spandex tiny racer bottoms some of the other girl's teams had to wear – I was worried about what people might say

if I was the last runner, or “back of the pack,” as they say. I didn’t want to be in a position to be ostracized or made fun of, and it certainly didn’t cross my mind that a sport was something I could take pleasure in simply for the sake of doing it. Indulging in the pleasure of my own body was not something I had ever done, nothing I had learned to do, or seen other women doing. I was an island of anxiety, a site for scrutiny, I hardly acknowledged my own humanity. My body was always a thing that needed fixing. I did not consider the way I felt when I ran, or that it was something I could enjoy. One obsession gave way to another. I gave up coming home after school to run on the treadmill in my parent’s room to run after school on a team, but I began cataloguing my runs, my mileage, my training times, my races. They became numbers I could use to judge myself, numbers to pour over in the quiet of my own room at night. For a while, I catalogued everything I ate in a little spiral bound notebook as well.

Some part of me knew this behavior was obsessive and unhealthy, my urge to write everything down. I became obsessed about timing with my watch, measuring my food, worried that I would be off a second or an ounce. I even sometimes weighed myself on the scale in the bathroom, recording the numbers in the margins of my notebook next to the date. Like a piece of meat with an expiration date. It was progress, I told myself, and if I didn’t make progress, I needed to try harder. What was my goal for the number on the scale, for the number on my watch? I didn’t have concrete numbers, because my mind always seemed to be shouting, *better!*

I managed to maintain being the top runner on our team for cross country and track, I went to the New York State Championships for both sports, and I felt proud of my accomplishments by the time I graduated high school. I had already been accepted to Ithaca College, although I knew I wouldn’t run competitively there since I would be commuting from

my parent's place half an hour away. I still ran on my own time, and even managed to keep a strict training schedule through the week during my first year of college as a freshman. I had hoped college would provide a way for me to start over, in the way I think so many hopeful college freshmen want to forge a new identity for themselves. I wanted to be able to erase the negativity I associated with my younger self, my hometown, and embrace a whole new community of people that shared similar interests. I wanted to "find myself" as though answers would shine down on me like a divine intervention.

But even having the freedom of a fresh start, I fell back on my obsessive habits. I ran the same route from the athletics building every day and as I was no longer competitive I made excuses for embracing restrictive eating habits again. For a while, I rejected real meals, almost exclusively eating some variation of a salad. I got anxious about eating with others, especially if it involved a meal out. I even tried to go so far as to avoid taking on a campus job because I was so anxious it would interfere with my eating and running patterns. My family had attempted to confront me a few times on my behavior, but I had denied that there was anything unhealthy about what I was doing, that there was nothing wrong with not wanting to go to social events or make plans or go out to eat because it riled a noticeable kind of agitation in me.

It was my sophomore year of college when my excuses with denial finally ran out. I had no idea what was wrong with me, but I had been gradually feeling more and more fatigued for months, my skin paling, and on my runs I could not seem to catch my breath. My body ached. I had to walk up hills, and soon struggled climbing a flight of stairs without feeling lightheaded. My mother finally decided that night to take me to the emergency room to get to the bottom of what was going on with me. I had become tired, so tired it felt like everything in my body was tired, and I was convinced this is what dying felt like, my organs just deciding they had no more

mileage in them. Most of the fear was in not knowing what was wrong, not knowing what to do, and thinking this could potentially alter my life forever. I had already had to heavily consider not finishing out my second year because it was too exhausting for me getting to and from class and because it was too hard to maintain focus on my coursework.

They diagnosed me with anemia at the ER, my counts having dropped to half the level they were supposed to be at. They poked and prodded with their questions, wanting an easy answer, a source that pointed to a physical wound of some sort, where I would have easily lost the blood. They asked about my periods – were they heavy? – but the truth was they never had been and I had ceased to have them for at least three months at that point. The nurse eyed me and asked about my diet, if I had been diagnosed with an eating disorder, and I said no. But the ER is no place to handle psychological wounds. It handles only physical. So they never were able to clearly establish “causation,” but they considered a blood transfusion and decided against it since I was clearly losing no blood, and they decided I should be able to make a recovery because of my age, although getting to my regular levels of iron would take months. They gave me a list of foods I should eat and told me to start taking liquid iron immediately.

This emergency room visit forced me to critically re-evaluate my relationship to my body. While I knew that it would take patience and diligence to rebuild my body’s strength, with each swallow of the metallic tasting liquid I had to consume, along with the disappointment in myself for the state of my condition. What had I accomplished with my obsessions, my attempts to minimize myself, to buy into the belief that these cycles of self-loathing and punishment would lead to a healthy mind-body relationship? I had allowed myself to become consumed by an unrealized ideal, by the promise that I would deserve love if I could not only change myself but become someone else entirely. I was driven by a passion to purify my body, to cleanse

myself of desire. I plunged into a state of total self-absorption, pulled under by a current that would carry me out to a sea with nothing but miles of my own delusions. My reflection seemed to be everywhere, although I had never made plans to follow in the footsteps of Narcissus, to become infatuated with my own image. But my infatuation was driven by the promise that I too could fall in love with my own image, and others would fall in love with it – it was an attempt to raise social standing, although I did not see it that way. I loved the attention I got for my thinning body, the comments, being noticed at all in gazes of admiration rather than pity or criticism. But I feared what would happen if I lost all the “progress” I had made – what would happen if I picked up a soda or tasted that ice cream, what if went through a fast-food drive-through and ordered a hamburger and fries and ate the whole thing? When I was alone, in front of a mirror, I would see not a reflection of someone beautiful, but a reflection of the things that I did not like, a reflection of my younger self, an unsatisfied girl that had really come to believe she was unlovable for her body.

But this was something I had never questioned. All the women around me seemed to put so much effort and emphasis on physical appearance. As a child, I had always tended to be more introspective, more concerned with imagining new worlds I could put to paper, making them into pictures I could fill in with color and later put into words. I would get lost between those inky blotches on the page, opting to read a book over socializing. But as I edged towards puberty and questions about what it meant to be a woman took up more of my headspace and I began to process the expectations around me, my perceived inadequacy felt crushing. Rhythms of denial, deprivation and hurt consumed me for years, and running was the obsession I had taken on to feed this other obsession – my poor self-image and my need to put miles on my legs forming a messy codependency. By the time I realized this was an issue, that I was not really in pursuit of

health or positive body image, but self-annihilation, I had been admitted to the emergency room.

I needed to accept that I wanted to heal and to claim the pain I had inflicted on myself before I could change my mind-body relationship. I needed to accept my denial and the lies I had told myself, to confront that I had been addicted to these obsessive behaviors that had led to such a downturn in my health. I am not the kind of person that likes to think I live in blinded by the bubbles of my own delusions, but this forced me to reassess who I was at my core level. Perhaps it took being broken down physically for me to realize that my mind, too, was just as much in need of rebuilding and in many ways starved of the kind of the kind of oxygen that allows the soul to flourish. I had become isolated and closed-minded. Looking back, I regret the way I stunted my personal development by becoming so consumed by numbers, measurements, my own mirror image. I regret that I could not will myself to enjoy a meal or to take pleasure in a run without feeling that I needed to go faster or farther, weighing myself with self-prescribed pressure to be “better.” But running has been a vital part of the process of healing, an activity not inherently destructive. I allow myself to breathe, feel, to embrace the feeling of the blood pounding from my heart through my body, fueling me with that “runner’s high” and by the time my legs stop moving, a sense of accomplishment, to move to a pulse beating for pleasure and not punishment. I take pride in what my body can do and am thankful daily for my health, knowing that if I do not nurture my mind, body, and soul, it can so easily be damaged, like tearing a petal from its stem. I have learned that healing is an ongoing process, that I am always learning new things about myself, and seeking new ways of being.

## Inheritance

I talk to my father most mornings on the telephone, the most likely time of day he will be able to answer. We usually never talk over half an hour and it's hardly ever anything pressing. And yet when I am agonizing over how to quit the last retail job I needed to cover a few months of my graduate college's semesterly lull, or when I need to rationalize the fact I'm here at all, my father is the one that I call.

Sometimes I hear the Fox News anchors in the background, coming from the TV at a volume just loud enough to drown out the children upstairs. My father partitioned the upstairs of the house back into an apartment to rent after I had moved out. He had anticipated renting it to a single older man, hoping this arrangement would be quiet, drama-free. In actuality, the old man babysat his grandchildren almost daily, and the noise "from the circus" – as my father would say – reverberated through the old floorboards. There was a time I thought he would never actually convert the upstairs back, but I think with the allure of the extra monthly income, and the fact the spacious old house had once accommodated four, and needed now only to accommodate one, the thought of downsizing came as a relief. After he and my mother went through their sloppy divorce, and I had announced that I was accepted to the grad school of my choice and planned on moving, he had acquired all the empty rooms to himself.

My old childhood room in the house had become a space to collect the dressers and drawers and some of the clothes that I had abandoned, as well as all of the other random items that didn't quite have a place anywhere else in the house, like what was left of the Christmas ornaments after my mother had gone through them, and the NordicTrack treadmill I used to spend hours on. Inside the dressers were binders filled with the accumulation of what amounted to four years of schooling at Ithaca College, textual evidence of an education valued at roughly

\$200,000 dollars – one I still felt unworthy of having received, and stacks of all the old cross-country t-shirts I still had from high school.

My father had always said that my education was the equivalent of a \$50,000 yearly raise for my mother, since her job and commitment to the college had made me eligible for a child-benefits tuition remission program, although I didn't quite understand how he could see it this way. My mother certainly did not benefit from my going to the school, and had I not been able to take advantage of such a program, I don't know what I would have done. My sister had worked through high school, although "saving for college" had never been a discussion I remember anyone having. She took out loans, commuted from home, and worked through her years of medical schooling. I ran all throughout high school and could have gotten a scholarship at a relatively local SUNY school. My coach had encouraged me to call the cross-country coach there, but I never did. I submitted my early decision application for Ithaca College and gained admittance. I commuted from that house for the first two years of my college career, but after the divorce, I tried staying with my father for a while, but ended up practically living with my sister towards the end.

I had signed up for the Ithaca Gorges Half Marathon, but now that the time had arrived I had conflicted feelings about committing to a visit. Since I had moved to Yonkers and started my graduate program, it was the first time in my life that I felt like I could – in absolute clarity – focus. I had stopped drinking almost completely – reserving the luxury of liquor for social occasions only – and I embraced the sport of competitive running again, which I had fallen out of love with during college with the onset of a few chronic illness and a few bouts where excessive drinking and partying had overshadowed almost anything else. For a while, alcohol had been an

easy crutch to fall back on to escape the lived reality of being enmeshed in my parent's pre and post-divorce worlds. Now, even working multiple jobs, going to class, and paying all of my own bills, I didn't feel the need for it. I was sometimes stressed, but never did I experience the kinds of anxiety or depression that I had while living at home. Even two years living in situations without my own room, in one slum house, three moves, and pulling twelve hour days of work here and there to get by, I still never felt an inkling of the depressive impulses that drove me to drink before. I did not hunger for that numbness. Although some days were long, I found comfort in the people that I worked with and went to school with. I felt that I was investing my energy in the people and things that gave me positive returns. Even through the struggle, each day was a practice, a learning experience. I finally felt that I had the room to nourish myself, to reassess the person I was trying to be.

Although my father is the person I always put as my emergency contact on forms, and although his cell phone number is the only one other than my own that I have memorized, there was a time that I questioned if I would ever speak to him again. When I preferred sleeping on my sister's couch to going back to that house, I found myself perpetually angry with him. I was angry with his conservative politics, angry when he talked poorly of Ithaca – the place that I felt had given me new life – and I was angry when I felt he took his frustrations out on me for lack of anyone else around to direct them at. My solution, and the only one that seemed to remotely ease the tension, was absence. For a while, it felt that my entire value system was in opposition to his, that my beliefs by their nature secured his disapproval and disappointment in me. The person I was becoming was not the person he had wanted me to be, and this departure from the way he had imagined me – as a child, as a living extension of himself – had been jarring, difficult for

him to accept. My assertion of my own identity was in and of itself a trial. This, combined with the post-divorce instability, had put us at what felt like insurmountable odds.

I stood at the kitchen sink, phone pinched between my cheek and shoulder.

“I – I have a shift this Saturday and I know I’ll be quitting Macy’s in a few months, but I don’t know if I can call in honestly,” I said over the phone, turning the hot water knob and soaping a sponge. I let the water run over my fingers until it burned.

“I said I’d help with the ticket,” my father said. “I mean I don’t think Macy’s is going to shut down if you can’t come in for a shift.” He paused, “You know, I think no matter what Trump does the media is going to paint him in a negative light.” Fox News had become the third party to our conversations, the instigator of arguments.

“I appreciate that,” I said, disregarding the politics. It was easier to evade his political provocations over the phone than it had been in person. We were two disembodied voices that could go about our lives after the conversation ended. It was a low stakes game. “Because otherwise I really couldn’t do it.” I scrubbed at the oatmeal residue that had crusted onto the bowl. “Mom said she would cover the other half when I told her you were willing to help so that’s really not a problem.”

“Good,” he said. “I’m glad she’s willing to help. I’m not saying this to make you feel bad or anything but I’m still paying so you can be on her insurance... you would think she could pitch in once in a while. And with what I pay her every week, I know she can afford it.” My father was still embittered about the alimony he was forced to pay after the divorce. He got the house out of the divorce, and in exchange acquired what was left of my mother’s student loan debts. *I was the one that had wanted her to go back to school in the first place*, he had said to me.

I squeezed the excess soap out of the sponge and worked away at the remnants of food left on the prongs of a fork. “Yup, anything helps.” The first time I had been old enough to vote was the 2016 presidential election. I had gone to the voting booth with my father at the Owego Moose Lodge. We drove together. It might have made more sense for me to vote in Ithaca, but I wanted to cast my vote in my hometown, knowing that at least one ballot that day – and probably the only ballot in the upstate conservative town of 19,000 residents – would offset my father’s. He never asked me for whom I had voted, but after just so many heated conflicts, he knew he didn’t need to.

“I actually just heard the other day that the divorce rate has gone down eighteen percent with millennials,” he said. “I’m the first to come down hard on the millennial generation, as you know,” he said with his joking intonation, “but I will say, I think they’ve actually got the marriage thing right. I think they’re marrying later and... getting it right.”

“Or just not getting married... I don’t know if there’s a right way to do it.”

“I wish I could argue with you,” he said. “I used to be one of those people that would have said you’re wrong. That people could still marry for the right reasons and they could work through things, but I just don’t believe that anymore.”

“It takes the right circumstances, I think.” I placed a clean plate in the drying rack and turned off the faucet. I was still covered in a layer of dried, salty sweat after getting in from a run. It was 9:30am. I needed to get ready for work. “I should probably let you go,” I said. “My shift starts at 10:30.”

“Alright,” he said. “Don’t worry about the weekend, either. Just come up and don’t sweat the ticket. I’ve got it.”

“Okay, I won’t. Thank you.” He said his cordial, *I love you*, and I responded dutifully with, *love you too*, as we did after almost every conversation.

I left the Port Authority Terminal that Friday on an express bus to Ithaca. I had gotten up at 5am that morning to get a run in through the dark, empty streets of my neighborhood, hoping to wear myself out enough to make the four-hour ride tolerable. I caught the 6:30 train into the city and took the S to Times Square. Emerging from the subway on 42<sup>nd</sup> my mood was already as curdled as the air from diving in and out of the manic commuters and confused tourists. I ducked into the Starbucks on the corner by Port Authority to fill my coffee mug. Even there, the floor, the windows, the counters seemed to shine in the greasy residual filth that I had come to associate with Times Square, its cigarette-butt covered sidewalks and tacky chain restaurants. I got my coffee and escaped to the relatively quiet fourth floor of Port Authority in front of my gate where I popped my earphones in and read to occupy my mind.

The bus turned out to be relatively empty. It was foggy and drizzly, and I curled up in my seat, staring at the drops of condensation collecting on the windows. The bus inched down the ramp in the heavy morning traffic. For a while I watched out the window just for the sake of it. I thought about when I was a child, counting the cars that would pass by the front window of our farmhouse, like I was in the process of making some great discovery. Once Manhattan was out of view, I searched my playlists and found my favorite driving mix from my last year of Ithaca I had labeled “feeling great,” an assortment of songs I relived those private moods with through my earbuds.

When I opened my eyes again, the green rolling hills were framed by the streaky bus window, like a moving picture of something innately familiar, but far removed. We drove

through my hometown, over the bridge still lined and decorated with the unlit snowflakes from the holidays, the tired buildings on their supports leaning into the riverbank, the tacky sign for “Redneck Boot Shop & Western Wear,” and the jailhouse converted restaurant. The courthouse, the most central landmark of the town, had remained as unchanged as ever, a stark contrast to the morphed and warped shop-faces I had known growing up. The aesthetic of the houses on Main Street, I had assumed, were probably just as preserved as the courthouse. That is the pride of the small town I grew up in: the safeguarding of tradition, of one historical memory, of stasis.

I got off the bus at Ithaca College, where I planned to meet my mother. I walked through the natural science building to her office. Returning to this campus lulled me into a sense of comfort – of home. It made me, for a second, want to be that shy girl too scared to talk to anyone during summer orientation. The girl that had been so anxious about sleeping in a dorm for a few nights with a stranger, too anxious to go out to the parties on campus, hunkering underneath the thin twin sheet, fan blowing full blast on her face, with the window wide open in that stale, hot room, listening to the sounds of unburdened, intoxicated cackling from the dark outside. Hardly enough years had passed to make that girl seem so unfamiliar.

I stepped through the doorframe of my mother’s office. “Hey kid,” she said when she looked up at me from her screen. The same way she had said it a thousand times. “Let me finish this up and then we can walk around the commons or something before we grab *Sunset* with Ash.”

“Okay,” I said. “That works for me.” While I waited, I noticed her bulletin board of photos on the wall. Some were photos she had taken, of flowers and wildlife, that she had printed off. Others were photos of my sister and I she had evidently printed directly from Facebook,

photos of the two of us we had taken on our trips to New York City and Maine together. It made me uncomfortable, but I opted not to say anything. I could not help but be annoyed that she took our photos, our memories, and put them on her wall as if she had some claim to them. The only real correspondence I had had with my mother since moving had been a phone call I made to her to straighten out an insurance issue. Our relationship, like our family, had been tired for a long time. What did she tell people about the photos, about what we were doing, when I felt half the time she probably didn't remember the name of the school I was going to.

She drove in her new Nissan Rogue, proud to show off her new car, emblematic of the shiny exterior of her post-divorce life. "See, it's even got one of those backup cameras. It makes things so much easier." The last time I had seen her, she was still driving the Chevy Impala my father had picked out for her from his Uncle's used car lot. She'd never much cared for the Impala, which we'd started calling the *'mpala* because the "I" had fallen off at some point. Along with the new car, my mother had built a new house built out on a secluded back road, with the help of my aunt and her husband. I questioned if I knew my mother well enough to know if building this house had really been something she had thought through and wanted to do for herself. Even the location she had chosen on a back road reminded me more of my father than of her. I wasn't sure how she would keep up with it, or what it must feel like to be isolated there with only herself and this house, everything new a reminder of what had been lost.

"I want to show you the vintage clothing store a coworker showed me," she said. "It's really cute." The place was called *Petrune*, and I had not intended it, but she insisted on buying a navy-colored dress I had tried on. After inquiring about what I would wear for shoes, she agreed to drive to the mall to look for something at DSW. "I really don't see you anymore," she said. "I am glad to be able to get you something," she said. I could tell that it relieved her to buy a few

items, to show, *this is how I care*. She told me how she felt so much better not drinking, that she had a personal trainer at the gym and she was considering kickboxing classes. She left out so, so many things, as though she thought my sister and I never talked. The masks she wore for my sister and me privately were never the same. I played along, as though I believed her.

I found a cream pair of shoes to go with the dress. I watched as she slid the plastic through the card reader, her absolving ritual. Later, I would feel guiltier for being complicit in the ritual, the lie that it was “all okay,” but how was I – how was anyone – to know that within only a few weeks she would flip her new car off the road and get processed for driving while intoxicated? It would be in the local paper, my sister would call me in the middle of the night to tell me, and I would be in my apartment, both grateful and guilty that I was a few hundred miles away. There was not much I could say to comfort my sister, when all that came to mind was, *well this is our inheritance*.

It was written in the neglect of our childhood home our father now lived in, with its chipping paint, its overwhelmed, weedy flower boxes, the old wallpaper and sagging furniture. It was written in the newness my mother had saturated herself in – new car, new house, new her – but all the unresolved issues remained firmly rooted, a disease, symptoms ignored and unaddressed. Written in the lack that it seemed we were always unable to overcome, entangled in one another’s webs, enough love to still answer telephone calls, but not enough to ask – “how have you been doing?” – and anticipate getting an honest answer back. The post-divorce reality that I had held such high hopes for, that I had idealistically thought might set all of our family free from the burdens the marriage had put on all of us, felt like it had resulted in a leap and a stumble. I had invested in my own lies, even when I had known better. I worried that possibly once broken, some things remain that way, that even with enough love some fissures cannot be

fused. But if I did not lie, even if only to receive a dysfunctional kind of return, then what was I left with?

And any time I stopped to think about it, no matter the miles between, all I could feel was shame.

### On Being Erin

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror, alone. I have unhooked the clasp on the back of my bra, taken my panties off. I hang them off the towel hooks on the back of the door. I am uncomfortable in my own body. It seems alien not to be able to love oneself, like it should come naturally. And yet I practice, studying myself, reshaping my truth. It is work.

It is a sad angle looking straight down at one's own body. I've always thought the perspective was too close. That is why I stand back, looking into the mirror, taking in all of the lines, the curves, freckles. My most intimate details. Like I am a painting worthy of hanging on a wall somewhere. This is me. A body, an island. I am boundless when I embrace this feeling. I am like the soil, thawed, after the long winter. Churning, invisible hands sifting fertile ground. I close my eyes. I imagine what seeds I will sew here. When I learn to cultivate this land, to love this body, as my own.

\*

I woke up early out of a heavy sleep. My friend and I had gone to a function in Midtown Manhattan the night before and stayed at her parent's place on the Upper East side afterwards. It was the sort of place I could not imagine calling home, possessing qualities I would associate with a luxury hotel. I scanned my phone, looking through the part-time job applications I had submitted. The waiting game. Idle time was not one of my strengths, and how hard was it to land another job to get me through school?

I slipped out of bed and slid across the hardwood floors. I went to the kitchen for a glass water, expecting to take in the solitude of the morning alone. Instead, I heard the scuffling of feet in the kitchen, and found my friend's mother in her robe making tea. She offered a genuine smile when she saw me.

“Good morning,” she said, looking me up and down as though seeing me for the first time. She had an alert gaze, always, under which I always knew one way or another I was being measured. “I’m not used to anyone else being up. I’m definitely the early bird of the family. Can I get you anything? Coffee, tea...?”

“I would take a cup of coffee,” I said. This family had to some extent adopted me into their New York ways since I had moved here. My friend and I got together at least a few times a month and her family, for whom trust did not always seem easy to come by, had accepted me.

She reached for a mug from the cabinet, stretching from her tip-toes, telling me about the opera they had gone to see the night before, asking how the party we had gone to was, asking about what I had been up to. She clicked a few buttons on their coffee machine, a relatively new addition that had been built into the kitchen to satisfy her husband’s desire for authentic Italian espresso.

“How’s the boyfriend?” she asked.

*Boyfriend?* I was taken by surprise, until it flooded back to me, the night that I had enough wine to feel just a little too honest and had confided in her about my Ithaca romance that had fallen flat post-graduation. I had decided to wear a slim-fitting bright red jumpsuit for the occasion, one of those outfits that was just showy enough to make it difficult to find the right venue to wear it at. What struck me was the way she had looked at me that night before asking, “Do you have a boyfriend?” And on that night with that question, I realized she was trying to gauge what kind of woman I was. We had bonded in that moment, even despite the loud music that had interrupted our conversation, as I explained that if there was a “one,” he had felt like it, and that there had to be a reason we seemed unable to let one another go. We were two romantics

all too willing to consume each other's love stories, hers a rags-to-riches tale of success and mine the college lovers bound for different futures.

"It's really... been... I don't know, I've been trying not to really think about it much and just focus on what I've been doing here, I think." I studied the deep red speckles in the countertop. It was much harder to talk about my love-life sober. In my sobriety, I was really not certain of anything. "What kind of set the whole thing off in the first place was when I tried to establish what we were doing once I was done with this program. Was I moving out to him? Was he coming here? But I guess there wasn't really a *we* in mind."

The coffee machine gargled and spit into cup. She handed it to me. "See if it's warm enough," she said. "Do you take milk, sugar?"

"Just milk," I said, sipping. She turned to the fridge and sat the milk on the counter. "It's perfect. Thank you." I tipped the milk carton slightly, watching the trail of white plunge into the frothy mocha-like coffee.

"You know when Greg and I were first out of school – do you want to stand, sit down?" She motioned to the sunporch, so we moved in there, and I sunk into one of the velvety couches. The stumpy bushes outside were decorated with blue, purple and green Christmas lights. "Do you like the lights?" she asked. "Some people have complained about the color scheme, but I liked them."

"I think they're very pretty."

"But, what was I saying..." she paused, holding her tea to the side while she placed her socked feet on the edge of the coffee table, leaning into her bent knees. "When Greg and I first moved to the city, it was straight out college – he had just gotten out of law school. New York had always been my dream, and I was determined this was where I was going to go to start a

career. And Greg told me, he said we need to go together and we're not going to make it work. And we did, and of course my mother was not so happy about us living together, but we came to New York and I'm telling you we were broke – *broke* – he was struggling to get cases and I was trying to get work as a writer. I'm totally not advocating doing what we did at 22 – I mean, if my daughter had done that I would have been furious..."

"I feel like it's usually up to the women to follow the men, wherever *his* career goes," I said. "But I told him I already made this commitment with grad school and I'm seeing it through." I had submitted my applications to schools in New York, close to the city, early on in our relationship, had made my mind up I was going to take the plunge, if I got accepted. The thought of changing my plans, of changing course, had not even been a consideration before I met him. He had told me about his job interviews in New York over the summer when we were still together. Even now, from his home city, he claimed to be trying to get clients in New York, to keep some thread of connection.

"It is, it is," she said. "And I'm glad you came here and you're doing what you have to do. We used to live in Chappaqua, as you know, and I will tell you I did *not* fit in with the mothers there whatsoever. They were content being stay at home moms – and they didn't even really do that – they hired nannies, went to the gym two, sometimes *three* times, a day. And they would offer for me to come with them, but I *didn't* hire a nanny and I did work, in between trying to raise my daughter, and that really isolated me from the rest of the women my age. But I couldn't imagine – I had my own byline – I wasn't going to change my name when we got married or give up on my career. I need work, I need *purpose*, to do something for myself and that's what I hope for all young women. To empower themselves and go after their dreams and their careers."

She used sweeping hand gestures and seemed to deeply feel everything that she said. She was passionate and unapologetic, and even when I wasn't completely sure that I agreed, I still appreciated her. I grew up in a home where it was still the expectation that the man had the career, made the real money, where the woman adhered to the mold of domestic responsibility and, for the most part, remained passive. So many times after their divorce, my mother has said, *I should have stood up to your father. I should have left sooner. I should've gotten you girls out of there.* I had understood that these feelings stemmed from my mother's comparison of her parent's marriage to her own, to images of her mother fleeing an abusive husband, a man that I would luckily never meet. Deep down, I think she felt that she had failed her motherly duty to protect her children, had failed to be brave as her mother had been. But her marriage was not her mother's marriage. My mother and father were just two people with a history of bringing out the toxicity in one another. It was not me or my sister she had failed to protect, but herself.

I had hoped by ending the marriage, my mother's depression would clear like a fog. I thought the marital dysfunction had been the root cause of her descent into alcoholism. My mother, after all, had not always been an alcoholic. I thought I had understood, but I was naive and hopeful then. I had imagined her like a plant in poor soil, the way that I had felt. With new soil, a new environment, I thought there would be hope for all of us to produce new buds of growth, to soak in the sun unperturbed. I had thought without the confines of the repression she expressed was the catalyst of the drinking, she would have the space to cultivate her own dreams and ambitions. Instead, the drinking only worsened when she was settled into a place of her own. She never admitted that she was fundamentally unhappy, and I realized that no one really knew my mother. She lied, and this made it difficult to be close. The lies she told herself were what ultimately made her unknowable, unreachable. Each time I thought I was making progress with

her, her actions would prove me wrong. She isolated herself to the point she had nothing left to turn to but alcohol, to push down whatever feelings and memories were tormenting her, whatever words went always unsaid.

I had envisioned my mother becoming a different kind of woman, the sort of woman I realized I wanted to be. I wanted to educate myself, have a career, have aspirations beyond marriage and children. I wanted to indulge in the freedoms that a genealogy of women I hardly knew had suffered for. I knew very little about my grandmother on my mother's side. I knew she was abandoned by her birth parents at a young age to live with her aunt on a farm. I know she was abused by someone close to her. I know that when she left her husband, she stressed to her three daughters that they needed to work and they needed to educate themselves. She didn't give them much, but she gave them more than she'd had.

I didn't want to be a different kind of woman because I did not respect my matrilineal heritage. I had been given so many options. I had not realized how lucky I had been to be able to get into a four-year institution, to become the first woman in my family to put herself through graduate school. At first, I had wondered if maybe my mother's refusal to allow both of her daughters to be close to her in a motherly way had just been resentment, resentment that she had had to drop out of college to care for a family she may not have wanted, she had had to embrace this life that she had not wanted. It occurred to me that maybe she had been disappointed with herself, disappointed that she had felt like she hadn't gone as far as she could have.

I was a different kind of woman, and I made mistakes, and I pushed forward. It was not a betrayal of my matrilineal heritage, but a service to it, to take ownership of my own body, my own course.

I missed the way he said my name at night before we fell asleep. “*Goodnight, Erin.*” There was no comfort in waking up in my own bed with my small bubble of heat underneath me and the cold feel of the sheet against my cheek when I rolled to the other side. I still claimed the right side of the bed for myself, and the left was a no-man’s land where I imagined him to be. In another time, another space. Sleep should come easy in a quiet room, but it never does. I missed the small intimacies, the feel of his skin, skin I touched gently as if it would tear as easily as tissue paper, something sacred. I missed the way our conversations wafted unknowingly like smoke through an open window. The way it filled the darkness until we receded into our own dreams.

I wasn’t sure what still kept us tethered to one another. We did not make it long after moving to different cities before deciding we should not see one another. I am the unfortunate kind of person that does not know when to quit. I had not wanted to write it off, but after prompting what we planned to do after I graduated, things fell apart in the ungraceful way that they inevitably always seem to do. In my rage, I tried to erase him from life, deleting contacts and cutting all ties. It would prevent me from lapsing into moments of weakness, sending out a text or reaching desperately for his attention, for the little rush of dopamine I would get from an incoming text from him.

And yet we had history, something so difficult to create with someone new. Maybe that is why he did not let me go. I wished many times that I could be stronger, that I did not waste the small moments in between doing things thinking about him – like when I would walk from the kitchen sink after filling my glass to my room to continue folding my laundry. Any yet in those moments staring out at the kitchen window, or folding my clothes and stacking them in organized piles, I could sometimes feel an intense loneliness stir. While I was out among other

people, I hardly gave him a thought. But in my domestic space, without company, I would retrace memories over and over in my mind, cautiously, not always daring to recall them in entirety. At this point, I thought, what good would it do me. For a while, he had at least brought a spark of joy, but I had a feeling Marie Kondo would have other things to say.

I had to consciously put him out of my mind to focus on myself. I had allowed myself, for a while, to believe that our relationship had held so much value that what I was doing academically and in my career was not as important as focusing on him. In all fairness, this was not his fault. I had willingly led myself into this trap. Had believed we would make plans, continue to see one another, would be in the same city again. But I had been the one trying, feeding off of a self-procured romantic fantasy, believing that we could be something he never had any intention of having us become. If our paths crossing had been worth anything, it was worth learning that love was not self-eradication, as I had seemed bent on believing. Love was not an excuse to abandon self-reliance and personal ambition. I did not need the sigh of my name at night, as much as I missed the sound, like I needed to inhabit it, swim in it, like a mystery as vast as the ocean.

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I wonder what Erin would look like as a heartbeat, captured on a monitor, sharp valleys and peaks keeping time to the rhythm of a rising and falling chest. The more I repeat it, the more I feel it roll over my tongue like a tonic, the more I know it. I claim it as though it is apart of, within, my body – it is loose and solid, like sand and rock. It is like standing at the edge of an island, a world I hardly know – a power, always just out of focus.

### Untold Stories

The diner was located near the bottom of the hill that Ithaca College had claimed for itself, on route 96 just past the Coddington Road sign. The business was on a small plot, along with a gas station/convenience store singlehandedly supported by the college students and blue-collar workers that passed through, as well as a small liquor store with insultingly marked up prices for its convenience. A flag reading “OPEN” fluttered in the unceasing wind that funneled through the valley, whipping off of Cayuga Lake, the scenic centerpiece of Ithaca, which one could view clearly from the elevated vantage point of the college, as well as from the parking lot where this triad of businesses had collected. Adjacent to the diner was a clump of student housing, which eventually converged with local residential housing. Over top of it all, a large American flag snapped to the rhythms of the wind, hung from a thick, white metal pole.

My mother and I began frequenting the diner for lunch around my junior year of college, shortly after my parents divorced. We had gone there a few times before, since she had learned about it through luncheons at the college, but never in such a ritualistic manner. We started going once or twice a week. I had not had any interest in confronting the finer details of the divorce with her at first. But after a time, it became clearer to me that there was no reason to suppress honest discussion – there was nothing to lose. The façade of our fully functional family dynamic had dissolved long before the marriage ended. The politics of the game had changed and what had stifled our ability to communicate for years – namely, that I was siding with my father over her in most of their arguments – was no longer such a devastating detail. There was nothing left for them to fight about, no way for my sister or I to get caught up in the middle of it, for the blame to shift, for the story to change so many times it all felt like a complete fabrication by the end. Validation and power no longer mattered in the same context.

At the diner, we could, for what felt like the first time in my life, be a mother and a daughter without it feeling like we were characters enacting a role in a familiar script. We were two people, and the dysfunctional familial dynamic no longer dictated our relationship in the same way. We talked about school, work, life. And we talked about my father who had, after all, been a part of her life for the past 25 years and would continue to be in some shape or form, via us children, for the rest of it.

Walking through the front door, the blonde hostess greeted us with a smile. She always asked, “Hey ladies, how are you? Good to see you again!” as though we belong here. She almost always worked the lunch shifts when my mother and I came.

“Sit anywhere you like,” she said. Not many people came for lunch through the week. Only students, retired couples, or professors.

The place had an eclectic feel. The only thing that changes are the specials written in chalk on the blackboard hanging next to a lighted red and white Red Stripe beer sign. Underneath the sign, there is a framed clipping of an old Ithaca College football championship, a year in ancient history that the team had actually won. Photos of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean are placed next to a poster for *Gone With the Wind*. A collection of ‘50’s style metal signs decorated the wall in front of a row of booths by the kitchen with sayings like, “Practice safe lunch. Use condiments,” and “Drink coffee, do stupid things faster with more energy.” White men and women with big, open smiles give away the era – a pre-60’s “innocent” America. Seemingly reminders that the diner is where not where we go to uncover uncomfortable truths. It is where we go to be comforted by the food and a familiar narrative – an ironic place for my mother and I to choose to have our weekly lunches as we tried to rebuild our connection post-

divorce. What more appropriate and fraught place than a diner could we have chosen to pretend things were okay between us over coffees and circumspect conversations?

We picked a table for two along the perimeter of the room. I sat in the booth seat and my mother took the chair on the opposite side. The usual arrangement. The chipper hostess brought us water and asked if we needed menus, although it was clear she already suspected we knew what we wanted by not bringing them over in the first place. Sometimes she would even guess our order, as we tended to get the same thing time and time again. Me, a hot coffee, cream only, and a Caesar salad with grilled chicken. My mother, a Pepsi or black coffee and the Buffalo chicken wrap. I noticed she began taking her coffee without milk or cream after the divorce, but I didn't ask why. For some reason, I fixated on it. I assumed had something to do with when she moved in with my aunt and her husband after the divorce. My aunt did not drink coffee and her husband took it black. That was something that never surfaced in conversation – the night she had left and why. *Did she remember that night?* I sometimes wondered. But how could she possibly forget?

I vented about the papers I had due and how I was fumbling through graduate school applications, gulping water from my plastic cup whenever there was a silence. We talked about the upcoming presidential election, offered our musings over what a “Trump America” would look like.

“There’s nothing to worry about, mom,” I said sarcastically, “he promised to ‘make America great again.’”

She rolled her eyes. “Who runs on that campaign slogan? It sounds more like a Budweiser ad. I can’t believe your father is drinking that cool-aide.”

“Dad and I really can’t talk politics anymore,” I said. “It’s way too personal at this point.” I stared at the empty table behind my mother. I looked for any excuse not to make eye contact. It had been this way for years. Throughout most of my childhood, I stomped around frustrated with her over something – that she wouldn’t listen, that she wasn’t understanding. Not like my father. Through my teens I took up arguing with both parents about different issues, but being angry with them both at the same time was too exhausting. Now, I struggled looking at her straight in the face not because I was angry necessarily, but because I felt a mixture of fear, disappointment, and guilt.

“It’s a shame,” she said. “He just changed at some point. You know, sometimes I really miss your father. And then I tell myself, no, I miss the Jack I married. Not the Jack he is now.”

“I think we always remember people the way we want to,” I said, rearranging my fork and spoon on their napkin. “It definitely wasn’t good for a long time.”

“I was always scared to leave, honestly,” she said. “I didn’t know what that would mean. I guess I just kept thinking things would get better. They didn’t, and I don’t know why I thought they would. But in a lot of ways I was scared to leave.”

It almost felt that we were having two separate conversations. I did not say, *So your answer was to allow alcohol to consume you.* We all had our versions of the truth. The truth was what was between us, so much of why I could not look her in the face. Because when it had come down to it, the catalyst for the divorce had been my truth versus her truth. What happened during that July day was something that will always be between us. Something that both of us will always have to live with and will probably never talk about again. She never acknowledged that day, or what I had done, or what she had done.

We had gotten back from a walk – me, her, and my father. Nothing was out of the ordinary, and in fact we had made it through the entire drive and walk without either of them lashing out at the other. By all accounts, it had been a good day. I had gotten on the treadmill for an afternoon run when we returned home and my father had left to run an errand. When I came out of the spare room where the treadmill was kept – after only about a half an hour run – I could see by her eyes she had been drinking. I was uncomfortable, but I walked past her to shower upstairs. I assumed she would do her usual and plop in front of the television in the living room, mug of wine in hand, to drink discreetly as she inevitably slipped into her own world. We had all ignored this a thousand times. We had all confronted her a thousand times. She promised she would slow down. She promised she would stop. And we went back to ignoring it, as though we didn't know it was there. But this day, she followed me out to the screen porch after I came down from my shower. She seemed agitated about the fact my father was gone as she stared out with a hazy stare into the front lawn. It was green and lush, the way it always is in the summer. The flowers she had planted around the patio sprawled, picturesque, like lazy beauties in recliners.

My heartrate had spiked as soon as she came out. She babbled and I agreed, and then I went silent. I tried not to breathe, as though if I exhaled, the moment might burst, she might burst, and do what? I didn't know what she was capable of so drunk and so angry. I just knew I wanted to be anywhere else. She tried to stand up, swayed, fell into the screen door, and I inched away on the wooden bench I was occupying, hoping she did not fall. I repeated, "oh my god," over and over, hardly utterances. My hands shook, and I ducked in the house quickly, grabbed my keys by the door and rushed down our driveway. I got in my car and drove. Something gave way that day, the pressure like water against a dam – lies that had built up one on top of the other

until I had no strength left to hold back the flood. I drove down my childhood road, took the route I had taken thousands of times before, until I got to the park on the other side of town. I had called my father hysterically while driving. *I'm not coming back with her like that*, I had sputtered, repeating myself, like a promise I knew I couldn't keep. *I'm coming back*, he said. *I'm almost back. Just park and stay put for a while. You shouldn't be driving like this.*

It is one of those memories that remained painfully vivid. One that I try not to often recall. When I broke down in the car in the middle of that park, wondering what this tipping point meant. Wondering what in the universe had decided to cave that day and why I needed to be at the crux of it. The following hours, the discussions with my father – what to do, because something had to be done at this point right? We could no longer ignore it, this danger we did not talk about, the reality that no one could keep pretending that we were functional under one roof. He called her sister, for lack of anyone else to call, and she came over with her husband. My aunt asked me, *do you want your mom to go?* and I had to say, *yes, I don't feel safe with her here.* Meanwhile, my mother was incoherent in the bedroom while my aunt, my father and I decided her fate. She left with them, seeming to have some recognition that something was very wrong, upset about going, leaning on my aunt as they walked down the sidewalk to her car.

Sitting across the table from her at the diner, the weight of this history always felt present.

For both my mother and father, I do not they think they ever saw breaking up our family as an option. Although they both came from broken families, for a while I think they took pride in having created what outsiders perceived as the picture-perfect family. Somewhere, in the bottom of a dusty box tucked in the back of a closet, we have pictures to prove it. Staged

Christmas photos taken professionally. My mother, her permed hair, huge smile, and frumpy sweater, and my father with the sort of dazed smile one can get from being trying to look photogenic for too long. My sister, her long, brown hair and eager pre-teen smile, and me with my blonde ringlets and blissfully unaware gaze towards the camera. Our carefully curated all-American family image provided my mother and father with validation that they needed that they had succeeded, even against the odds, in a way their parents had not. The poverty and alcoholism that had torn both of their families apart had not ruined their chance to do something better, and those seeds of faith were sewn in the endurance of our family.

At a certain point, when faith in the marriage faded, so too did faith in the family. The vision of this comfortable, straightforward life they had worked so hard towards was no longer attainable. What was life after the family? Where I had imagined it as a rebirth, for my parents, it seemed more like a death. The death of stability and surety, of traditional values. Even when their relationship had reached a point beyond repair, what was waiting beyond that horizon was far more daunting. It was a place where my parents would reinvent themselves, to rebuild from the bottom up.

The fear of uncertainty is what my mother and I tried to avoid at the diner, while we ate our comfort food in plush seats and didn't talk about what we were really thinking about. I wanted to believe that things between us were healing, but I had no idea what that meant. She was not prepared to start over, to face her demons, or to be the mother that my sister and I had wanted her to be. We did not resolve anything over our multitude of meals at the diner, or even scratch the surface of what our mother-daughter relationship was or ever would be. But they were attempts at connection. Even if my mother was an untold story, she was one I would continue to try to understand.

3/15/19

*Good Morning Kid,*

*Wanted to send a quick hello and send a little grocery money. I'm sure every bit helps at this point. You are getting really close to graduation but I bet you are so busy with everything. Hope you still find the time for a good meal.*

*I've been hitting my meetings a lot lately and have met some pretty cool people. I'm finding that the meetings help so much more than my counselor. I liked her a lot but as far as alcoholism is concerned I didn't feel she was very helpful. Probably should have shopped around a little more but I guess it worked out ok where I am right now. It will take time but at least I feel the results this time.*

*Contacted my gym and paused my membership for a few months. Really wanted to get myself on solid footing before not going to as many meetings. I'm not taking any chances on slipping back into old habits of negative patterns. I figure I'm finally on a true positive roll and don't want to take any chances. The gym was fine (didn't give them details... just that I needed to take a break) and I figure I'll know when it's time to start working that in again.*

*Work is good. Enjoying the fact that it's Spring Break this week. It is so quiet. I can't say that I've been super productive... but I've loved the quiet. It is in the '60s today. I might try to sneak out of work a little early and take a walk.*

*I hope you buy a nice meal or something good for yourself with the \$50. I'll drop some extra money your way when I can. I am so very proud of everything you are accomplishing. I know it's probably not cool for a mom to have her daughter as a positive role model... but you are! I think about your strength, determination, independence, intelligence and power every day. I look up to you a ton!!*

*Have an awesome day! I love you very much.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

## Where the Ocean Begins and the Sky Takes Over

### I.

My sister's apartment looked different, even though in reality very little had changed. She had new curtains in the living room, the Christmas tree was up in its corner, and the bookshelves had been rearranged, adorned with a few relics that she'd acquired from our childhood home when it was carved and split after the divorce. *And who is going to notice anyways?* she had said. And no one had, or at least hadn't cared enough to mention it.

She had saved a few photos, those memories that had somehow become more precious after the split. Photos of the two of us: when we had gone to Hawaii – our last family trip with my mother, father, and us – right after she graduated high school. There was a photo of the two of us in front of an icy, frozen Taughannock Falls back when I was still a full head shorter than her. The picture was still displayed in a frame we must have gotten in Maine, in a time so foreign to memory it was like it never happened. We had gone to Boothbay Harbor with our grandmother, her husband, and our parents a few times to see the lighthouses and walk the rocky, cold coast of the Atlantic. And underneath that photo is an image of my six-year-old sister holding a bundle of blankets with a red-faced, closed-eyed newborn me. Memories inked deeper into the glossy paper than in the discourse of our shared histories. Stories about Maine would not be relived to avoid dredging the memories of my grandmother's betrayal, that one day that our lives pivoted – no more crayons and drawings of princesses on her coffee table, no more lazy Saturdays in her living room watching old James Bond movies and doing one another's hair, no more Christmases with the vibrantly wrapped presents in her overstuffed house, no more soft velvet holiday dresses and little black shoes. These were such distant memories now they felt like dreams.

But then again, it was difficult tracking the reality. When I came back to this place, the whole thing felt like a dream. Like it had given me very little to hold onto, fuzzy memories with questionable coherence. I tried to patch together a story of how I came to be, of how this came to be, but making apparitions into characters is no easy task. Can I even remember the faces, the smells, waking up in my aqua-painted room? The room where I kept the purple dresser, the one that had been my father's when he was a child, the closet where I kept my dolls, the desk we painted one year in the tacky paint that I peeled off in strips when I was bored. Out of my childhood window, I could see the barn directly across the street. Farmers put hay in during the summer with the loud hum of their baling machine, over which they would bark orders at one another over. I imagined the routes I used to run when I was brave enough to step outside of that darkened blue room.

Solitude was what I sought out on those endless country roads. They were well-suited to my love for distance: rural, winding, limitless. Rarely was there anywhere to run that did not involve laboring up a hill and coasting back down it. Always a view of some expanse of woods speckled with lonely-eyed houses below me. I had no concept of what it would be like to live somewhere that I could look around and see only buildings and sidewalks instead of those generously vacant hills. I was infatuated with the way the land curved, the way it could be scooped like melon, what it felt like to meet the sky at its peak and look down – to see a place shrunken to pointillistic proportions.

Now, when I visited, I ran only from my sister's apartment in Ithaca. I ran from her development, own the hill, through Cornell's campus. I ran past the freshman dorms, glimpsed Beebe Lake, ran over the bridge, past the falls, past Ho Plaza, glanced up at that tall, looming Cornell tower, and snaked my way back. Ithaca was "home," what gave me life. But I did not

grow up in Ithaca – I grew up in Owego, half an hour away from Ithaca – a town built over an Iroquois village, its name meaning “where the valley widens.” I have never felt the same kind of yearning to go back to this town in the way I have yearned for Ithaca. Thinking about this town, my place of origin, I remember knowing, feeling, that it could never sustain me. I did not know where, how, or when, I would find home, but I knew this was not it.

Owego was a town that prided itself on its historic elements, the Victorian style houses along Main Street, the family-owned businesses on Front Street, and the ever-watchful old courthouse at its center. The vision presented purported that its strength was in its smallness, in the tight-knit families and friendships that made it so comfortable, so knowable. Voted the “coolest small town in America” – the sort of place I was convinced could only seem appealing to those passing through it. With a closer look, the lack of education, lack of work, lack of hope, was there just at the outskirts of town – the abandoned shells of cars, tired houses with caved in roofs. It was the kind of place that I had decided, having seen too many cases of it, that swallowed youth – losing it to drugs, alcohol, and boredom – and offered nothing in return. The only hope seemed to be moving away, as the stories of this place seemed to tell time and time again. Another suicide. Another drunk driving accident. Another drug bust. What scared me was the belief in its innocence, its quaintness, and the excuse this provided for maintaining a status quo. It was the small-town myth, oozing with “pureness” that I could never buy stake in.

Ithaca was a window to somewhere completely new. It opened possibilities, introduced me to people and lifestyles, completely outside of my small-town world. I understood my body, myself, in new ways. I felt invested, like I belonged. I focused on building myself up by making new memories, by embracing having the freedom to carve out an identity for myself that was not somehow pinched between the glass and the back of the frame in those photos at my parent’s

house. I think that my sister felt that too, that Ithaca was hope. She had a job here, her very first apartment, and on many of the star-scattered nights we set out to obliterate the stains on our memories. We intoxicated ourselves with the possibility of being free, of transcending the mundanity and the bleakness the past had seemed to promise. We went out, subsisting on the perfume of our collective high, on credit, driven by an appetite for something we had not quite articulated. An appetite to explore, to experience, to soak in every taste, sight, smell and then dull it to a hazy blur. We allowed ourselves to want, to chase desires, two whitecaps on the surface of a churning ocean, at the mercy of the wind.

## II.

The church bells chimed like a past life. I was in bed, but in my mind, I was in Ithaca. I thought back to the campus with the tower and its hands and the bells that rang once per hour. Like an hour meant something at a day's end. My sister and I had climbed the stairs of that tower, having snuck past a tour, just in time to squeeze through the open door. It had hardly been a choice in the moment – I had known this was going to be the only chance to see the city from this man-made peak I needed to conquer. I had always wanted to climb those stairs, and there it was – an open door calling.

We laughed like children all the way to the top, fueled by the knowledge that our joy did not need to know the hour. From the top, the sheen of the sun on the lake and the way the green valley kissed the feet of the hills featured a familiar distorted beauty. It looked like a birth place – dark, alluring, inevitable. A place that had taken my heart before I had consented. A place that had instilled a deep loneliness in the craters of my impatient soul. Home. Callous to time. I knew I would not stay here. There was an immediacy that felt detectable in the smell and feel of the air. But what did it mean to leave? What stayed and what went. The memories of the bells would stay with me, would transport me back to so many singular moments that blurred to one. But I could not take the memories that erupted in the shadows, moments that came and went like a spring thaw. Some things had to be left – in the way the sunlight penetrated the fabric of the blinds, in the way the salt bleached the sidewalks, the trees pitilessly lost their leaves. I felt more than ever like a quilt patched with memories, a blur of past present and future. Nostalgic memories ringing like chimes in the hills.

But these were church bells from the seminary nearby. I had lived in this apartment for three months and it seemed that only in the past few weeks I had taken notice of the hourly

chiming. And now I couldn't stop noticing. The bells added to the fairy-tale quality of the place. I would wake up with my coffee, sipping it from under the blue comforter on my bed. On a sunny morning, I didn't need to click my tower lamp on. There was something magical about a room that could catch the natural light on its walls like this. And hearing the bells would remind me of the lazy mornings watching old movies with my sister on weekends when we were children. Every old movie must have had a church bell scene, like *The Sound of Music*. So many moments resurfaced I started to feel plant-like in that room. Like a memory-stimulating photosynthesis. The things I left never really left at all.

Place had become a way of remembering. In the year I had been on that hill with the tower, every corner of that city had become imbued with a sense of warmth, connection, security. My sister had gone from a sliver of moon to a planet I came to know by heart. She had practically taken me in that year I finished school, the two of us in that one-bedroom basement apartment. Nothing felt real – no real reason to worry, to take much seriously. It felt like being suspended in shallow water, hovering just below the surface, eyes closed, feeling the sand in my hair, the current pulling like a gentle ghost – the moment a wave crashed on the surface – that pure submission to forces greater than myself. I had trusted the current, been able to submit to joy without the fear of it dropping out from under me like warped floorboards.

This kind of suspension, in-betweenness, not needing to know where I was going or what I was doing felt good. It felt justified. Late nights in loud college bars, one drink after another, until everything became closer, more urgent. Until the walls came down, when nothing mattered but the fact that I was there and so were these people I didn't know, united for more or less the same reasons. It had felt like responsibility would never catch up. I had never been so aware of my youth. Using it like a weapon against the fists of a palpable reality. Nothing was impossible

when I believed I was beautiful, I was enlightened, I was free. Fooled by the ripples in my own watery reflection.

This place would be an empty shell without these nights. Going back would always feel like playing a reel of a near historical past – this was the bench where I had met the man I had fallen in love with, there was the hill I had climbed so many times in the dark cascade of laughter, that was the street I once kissed a man in the rain. I felt the selfish pleasure of excavating my past selves, feeling a smile seduce the corner of my mouth with a whiff of fresh coffee, the taste of crisped and salty steak fry – remembering the hangovers that had been cured in these booths with one bite. The songs that played in the car with the rolled down windows, when the words had felt so true I drowned out the night with them.

### III.

The clarity of the night takes me to my window. Two planes rush in opposite directions, their wingtips pulsating like two beating hearts in the sleeping sky. They look as though they might cross paths, but I know in truth they are far from one another. I am at a crossroads – caught in the folds of a seam in time. These quiet nights make me restless.

I smell the candle burning on my desk. Ocean breeze. It feels that I am far from the ocean, but the truth is the Atlantic is not so far. Over the summer, my sister and I rode the Q train all the way to Coney Island to see the ocean, to have a patch of beach at the far end of the boardwalk. We wore our new brimmed hats and sunglasses, lounging at the edge of a continent like there was no need to go any further. The sun dyed our skin the color of honey and we listened to the faded music further down the beach. By the time the sand was tinted with a rosy light, we left, thirsty and sun-drunk. The subway took us back into Manhattan, where we ate seafood in a cramped Soho restaurant, and wandered to Washington Square Park, feeling no rush to leave the moment. These times seem so short now, where only a few years ago, I would have taken her company for granted. Now they were like pressed flowers between the pages of the dwindling youth.

I looked at my wall, to the painting I had hung only recently. I had asked my mother to keep it while I lived in my undecorated first apartment, the one-bedroom basement where I made my room into the common area. There was no point in decorating there. It was dark, I had no privacy, and the landlady lived above us and made her presence known often. When a pipe burst and forced my roommate and me to have to find new apartments immediately, we were both relieved. I lived out a hotel for two weeks, found a place to live for a couple months – and then moved into what was supposed to be a more permanent place, but what turned out to be slum

housing. My sister had helped me move every item that I owned each time I had to try, try again. She cried when she saw this place, and I think we both knew it could be a home.

The canvas is mostly blue – blue for the ocean and the sky. The white flowers, little globs of paint, grow along an imagined pathway that runs out to the ocean. I cannot always tell where the ocean begins and the sky takes over. The brushstrokes free and intentional, beautiful and infinite. I imagine tracks through the sand, waves crashing over the gentle depressions, pulling them back under the frothy surface. I think about staring out at the blue water, lulled by its movements, its constant pulse. Like the pulse of the lights on the highway at night, their headlights winding like a river.

Like the pulses that drive my sister and me to talk endlessly with stemmed glasses about planning ways to abandon our lives – creating escape routes to more immediate lives. My sister and I are linked in that supernatural way sisters are – even separated by distance I feel that strong sense of connection, the one that can only come from the fact we were birthed from the same womb.

## Love Language

### PART I: DIVORCE

#### *On Dating: Conversations with a Father*

My parents had been divorced over a year and a half before my father began opening up to me about seeing other women. This was new terrain for me in various aspects. For one, I still was not used to seeing either of my parents as single entities. After over twenty years together, it still seemed that they were both defined by one another, that in the course of a conversation with either of them, something was always bound to come up about the other. It seemed that after being married so long, from such young ages, there was no way they could ever truly have each other out of one another's lives completely.

My relationship to both had in many ways grown out of opportunities for mutual bonding over the shortcomings of the other. Still, the ghost of the un-present parent would usually arise in conversation somehow, I suppose as my sister and I were the physical thread of connection still between them – reminders of their failed venture together. The difference post-divorce was that the stakes had been lowered. It no longer mattered if I was on one "side" of the argument or the other, they no longer had to inhabit shared space or to answer to one another. It was in many ways refreshing when my father opened up to me about meeting new women to have something new to talk about, to experience a new kind of openness in communication about our lives, and to practice moving on from rehashing old marital baggage. I thought, this is a step in him moving towards building a new life, a potentially happier life more suited to him – this individual I had not considered independent of my mother for the entirety of my life.

I began to see and experience my mother and father, for the first time, as individual human beings with their own confusions, ambitions, frailties, and strengths. They started to transcend their role as parents – and I thought more radically perhaps I was become more than “their daughter” – as we shared our thoughts and feelings more frankly and openly with one another.

My father and I were on the side porch of my childhood home one night, the summer before I left for graduate school. He had just started seeing someone new. She was a veteran, around his age, and her father had been a family during my father’s childhood. By the way he spoke about her, I could tell he genuinely liked her, that he thought there was potential for something to come of it.

“You know what they say about dating bartenders,” I joked.

The end of his cigar glowed red as he pulled on it. He exhaled the pale smoke in the darkness. “She’s a bartender for the Vets though, I think that’s a little different,” he smiled. My father had gone to the Vietnam Veterans Association of America with his father since birth and did not stop going even after his death.

“As long as she seems nice. Does she have any kids?”

“No,” he said. The last woman he had tried dating – and the first that I know of since my parent’s divorce – had two or three children from a previous relationship. She was significantly younger than my father, which didn’t necessarily bother me, but when I had come back to the house one afternoon when he wasn’t there, a large empty bottle of wine sat cork-less on the counter, little purple streaks running shamefully down its sides, sloppy droplets staining the counter. Opening the refrigerator, which was devoid of any food, there was an ample supply of beer and an open bottle of Brambleberry with a playful pink bottle stopper. I imagined him with

someone more mature. And with my mother's alcoholism still hanging heavy in the air over their split, all the bottles of wine in the fridge triggered something close to an accusation within me and I knew I had no desire to meet her and no ambition to like her.

"Good," I said. "I never pictured you with someone with kids. At least not little kids. Ashley and I are grown and independent at this point. It's just different."

"It is," he said. "I think the age difference really was an issue more than anything. I am glad the divorce is over, but I really don't want any more drama than there needs to be right now. Smooth sailing," he said as he exhaled another plume of smoke.

I wasn't sure how to tell my father that nothing about dating was "smooth sailing," but maybe at forty-three dating was just vastly different than it was at twenty-two. This was new territory for us to discuss as it was, since he had never been open to discussions about dating whatsoever while married. Or maybe he would have been. It just seemed that he was a great deal less approachable when we had to function under the same roof.

"It's hard to find someone you can click with that," I said. "I would just see where it goes. It sounds like you really like her."

"I do," he said. "It just makes it a lot harder when you really want it to work with someone. When you think it really has potential of working out," he said. My father always maintained an attitude of indifference towards women and the fact he might need or want them in his life. It was strange to see him vulnerable, admitting that he wasn't sure, that maybe this woman might be worth bringing into his life.

Yes, I wanted to say. When everything seems to feel a little lighter and you realize that you are scared to submit to these feelings after you have already submitted to them. I want to say, yes, dad, I know exactly how you feel. I know the courage it takes to try again, to share

those tenderly guarded pieces inside of you and offer them up to another, knowing full well you risk having to fill that gifted part of you back up alone if they walk away. That space you create for someone – because you have just enough faith left it might be worth growing into them – around them, like a root system running deep.

“I understand,” I said simply.

## *Sunset*

After the divorce, my mother and I began frequenting what became “our” diner in Ithaca, *Sunset Grill*. I was in the writing program at Ithaca College where she worked in the Environmental Studies department, and *Sunset* was just at the bottom of the hill, a convenient location for an hour lunch. My mother lived with her sister and her family for about a year after my parents physically separated, so her office at IC was the only place I would see her.

“Hey kid,” she would say, looking up from her computer screen as I would step into the frame of her office door. She kept an orchid in the window that overlooked the chapel and the small pond where the geese would flock. She had always had a green thumb. She had plans to build a house of her own and one of the first things she wanted to put in was a garden. She’d always kept the aging white farmhouse I grew up in looking youthful with flowers in the spring. I still hadn’t gotten used to the grave-like flowerbeds that housed only the corpses of the plants that had grown there the year before, among the weeds that took over.

We exchanged the small pieces of our day as we walked from her office to the parking lot and drove down the hill to the diner. I was usually stressed out about one project or another or talking about my graduate school applications and usually throwing in a justification sales-pitch about why I ought to further my education and put off the workforce. Of course I had no idea what I really was getting myself into, but I had known for some time I needed to leave. As much as this place had given me love, I was vehemently opposed to staying post-graduation. I had lived in the isolated region of upstate New York my entire life. I did not appreciate the solitude, as no one appreciates a home that they have never left, and I longed for the connectivity that I imagined the city would offer. My sister and I had visited the city over the years to quench our

curiosities and see what there was to see. But family had lived here since they immigrated from Ireland and Germany to farm the land and make it their own. The thing about people that work the land is that they don't leave it, they cultivate it. But I had always been more intellectual – I wanted to cultivate my mind and Ithaca had given me what I felt I could take from it.

The waitress at the diner knew us, greeted us at the door with a, “Hey ladies!” and a smile, and said “Sit anywhere you'd like.” We would usually take the same table. I would sit in the booth-side and she in the chair opposite in the main dining area. I ordered coffee, she ordered Pepsi.

She was sometimes curious about what my father was up to. He usually would arise organically in the conversation as I would vent about our latest argument, a spat over politics, or my choice to apply to graduate school, or over something trivial that had struck one of us the wrong way. My father, of all people, it seemed, would understand my ambition to do something beyond the expected. He had, after all, gone into flight school with a young family and very little money. I was young with no commitments and seemingly much less to lose.

“I don't even think he knows how he sounds sometimes,” my mother said shaking her head lightly. “You know after all this, sometimes I still miss your father.” Her eyes were glimmering with the wet reflection. “When I get like that and I start missing him, though, I realize that I am not missing the Jack I know now, I'm missing the Jack I married.”

I had been overhearing and witnessing their fights since elementary school, had been watching them grow to live separate lives under one roof for most of my life, and yet I did not doubt for a second that she did still love him. I did not understand it, and I knew that it was not a romantic love, and that it might have been that kind of love one can only have for another when their lives have been intertwined the past twenty years, raising a shared product of flesh and

blood. It was the first time I had believed that a failed marriage did not necessarily signify a failure of love. I did not know if it was forgiveness or freedom that had breathed this belief into me and allowed me to see with new eyes, but I felt I understood something simultaneously tragic and beautiful.

I did not have a response to offer. I nodded my head in understanding and took a sip of my coffee. “Do you want any of my French fries?” she had asked, knowing that I would not take them.

“I think it really is for the best that you guys are doing your own thing,” I said, considering my words. “I know it has been a transition, but I think it will be a good thing when you can get settled in your own space and start doing what you want to do.” *A new beginning*, I wanted to say, but it didn’t seem right to say it.

“I feel a lot better now,” she said. “I definitely wouldn’t go back.”

“That’s good,” I said. And it was.

### *College Graduation*

I never told him much about my family. We had met early on in November of that year, just at the very end of the fall semester. It was a blind date, and I still remember waiting outside of the coffee shop on Cascadilla Street, nervous, because I just wasn't good at these things. The small talk and idle conversation still did not come easily at that point, and I still – to a degree – was uncomfortable in my own skin. I recognized him when I saw him from the photos. He was tall with broad shoulders and a lumbering walk – a distinct, stiff-bodied lumber – with an out-toeing gait. He had a long black business coat on and this kind of crooked, shy smile I thought was endearing. He bought our coffees, we took a walk, and after our brief encounter, for no good reason at all, I was determined that I wanted him. I suggested, later that evening, to bring over a bottle of wine, and that was that. We had an inexplicable familiarity with one another, one of the first times it had just felt “right” to me. He was a graduate student, noting our age differential multiple times, six years, but I was used to dating men older than myself. “I feel like I’ve known you a lot longer,” he’d said early on in our dating experience, as we lay in bed, my head on his shoulder and my arm resting comfortably over his ribcage. And that is exactly how it felt. Familiar, comfortable, safe.

I was trying so hard not to think about what came after Ithaca. Everything felt safe and contained here. I was living mostly with my sister at the time, only ten minutes from his apartment. I would get in my red jeep Cherokee and take the familiar route to his place, the new and expanding housing for Cornell graduate students at the bottom of the hill. I parked on a side street. His sports car would be parked in his building's garage, next to the new, beautiful vehicles with their out-of-state plates. Ithaca was a temporary place, where people with backgrounds

similar to mine and vastly different from mine coalesced into an unlikely pool, all here for the intellectual capital, most with the desire to take it elsewhere. In any other life, we would have never met, and I knew that. I had been sheltered by the rural hills of upstate New York and had not had much opportunity to wander outside of those. My mother had gone back to get her four-year degree later in life, and my father had a high school education, but had put his time in flying and worked his way into the white-collar world. I came from a humble world.

He grew up in Chicago and his family was successful in business and politics, and everything he described about his world made me feel small. We did not speak the same language in so many ways, as far as where we came from and where we were going – and yet we laughed, we shared, we connected, on that plane of existence that transcends time, place, money – that deeply human need to feel wanted, nurtured, cared for. We spoke the same love language and we were both in spaces in our lives that there was plenty of time to devote to synching our needs and indulging in one another's company. The simplest things were what brought me the deepest level of satisfaction – being curled up together watching TV, going out to dinner, running into him at the grocery store. Seeing him for that very first time, I felt something inside of me crack, like callous hands in the cold. I trusted the way that I felt and did not give much thought to the fact that in July it would have to end one way or another. The feelings I developed outpaced the finite window of time within which they would be able to exist.

I had not known how to express the way that I felt – that I didn't want our relationship to be as limited as it seemed that it had to be. He had gone home for winter break and I stayed. It was agonizingly long and I expected to be in contact daily, to get my words of affirmation via text if I could have nothing else. The time away put me into a panic, a possession of self-doubt

and insecurity. I had become dependent on our time together to feel wanted and secure. I was lonely over break, lonely in the sense that I was looking for something I was sorely missing. I missed the way that I felt with him, my window into another world. I missed the escapism.

When he came back from break, I sensed that we would not go back to the way things were. I offered to come over to talk, and he suggested we meet at Panera for coffee.

“I don’t think we’re going to end up in the same place,” he said vaguely, which I took to mean geographically – that he would be back in Chicago and I would be in New York for graduate school.

“I don’t see why we can’t just see how it goes,” I had said.

“No,” he said, scrunching his face, shaking his head. I wanted an explanation, and I was denied that. I just looked at him while he avoided eye contact, holding my coffee with both hands, until we both resolved to look out the window at the cars in the Panera parking lot.

“I guess that’s it then,” I said.

“I guess so,” he said.

I managed to stay calm until I drove out the parking lot, shaking with rage, unable to figure out exactly what it was that he had taken from me so cruelly, and how I had been so blind to give it willingly.

I was angry and felt that this justified a self-destructive reaction. So I drank and foolishly seemed to think that if I could get other men to pay attention to me I would feel better, but it didn’t help. He texted, apologizing, and threw in a few *I miss you’s* but we did not rush into reconnecting. I did not know if I wanted to obliterate my feelings or to get them back, or what exactly I was trying to accomplish. I was confused. How had I lost my rational mind so easily? It

was easy to blame him for everything, to be angry that he could toss something we both clearly cared about aside so thoughtlessly.

It was my birthday, March 8<sup>th</sup>, and I had gone out drinking at one of the sleazier college-town bars. As the night wore on, I was more and more determined for him to have me over. We bantered back and forth and when he conceded, I cabbled over. I stepped into the familiar apartment, too drunk to untangle myself from my purse and my coat. I had had enough to drink that my veneer of composure that I usually tried so hard to maintain was as easy to see through as the vodka that had compromised it. I gave up trying to get my cross-body over my head and get out of my coat, and like a child, stuck my arms out for him to remove them for me.

“Your breath smells like vodka,” he’d said while we lounged in bed.

“Well that’s my poison of choice,” I said. “Why are you smiling like that?” I asked. He had a stupid grin on his face I was just buzzed enough I didn’t know if I should be irritated or flattered by.

“I’m content,” he had said.

The next morning, I slipped out of bed without a word, gathered my clothes and dressed in his living room. Once I was dressed, I slipped out the door and speedily made my way down the red carpeted hallway, into the cool open air to get ready for the day. I was exhilarated, despite the lingering buzz and dehydration, the tightness wrapping around my skull. None of it mattered with the thought of him waking up alone in bed, none of our usual morning coffees or sweet good-byes. I had never been a vengeful type, but I felt like I had gotten even, and I felt good about it. I felt a weight lift off of me, as if I had taken control again. I even had told myself, there was no need to see him at all after that. I had gotten the upper hand – what more could I

want? It should end right there, with me on top, before he had a chance to hurt me again. For just a while, I relished in that feeling of being a powerful, ruthless woman.

*So I guess I was just a booty-call*, he'd sent to me later, and I felt that childish, sadistic pleasure flourish inside of me. Was it some spark of feminine empowerment that I felt, or just a reversion to adolescence, the kind of insane thing that love, or infatuation, or obsession can make one more inclined to do? I was definitely not in control, but I liked to pretend I was. Despite my power play, I was still deeply in love. I wanted everything to go back to how easy and how natural they had been when we were first met. I wanted them to stay that way, having forgotten we were two people in temporary situations in a temporary place. As much as I wanted to love and hate him simultaneously, I could not accept at the time that he had a point – we did not know where our futures were going and that the closer we got, the harder it would be when things did not work out. I just thought he wasn't trying hard enough. I liked to think that as long as we had a next time, one more night, I would be okay.

We had a whole summer to look forward to after graduation. He told me he was applying to jobs in New York, and of course other areas as well. I nursed his wounds with each job rejection that he got, I encouraged him, and I was still deluded enough to hold out hope that he would get some job in New York and we could still keep living this college mirage together. After seeing my own parent's failures at love, I had thought I knew better. It was so much easier diagnosing where they had gone wrong, passing it off as though they should have seen it from miles away. I had been so quick to pass judgment that their love had been warped so terribly after twenty-five years of marriage that they should have bounced back from the divorce their lives had never changed. I had thought years of displaying what appeared to be a fierce repulsion for one another delegitimized whatever had put them together and kept them together in the first

place. But I realized that I did not know a damn thing about love, and I was no longer so sure about anything I had assumed about them or their marriage or what they had to endure with the divorce. I did see that what can be mistaken as love can lead one to do crazy things, to conjure logic from the most illogical places in the mind. I wanted something to be something else so badly that I had not chosen to be honest with myself and open my eyes. And maybe my parents had wanted to see different things in one another, and it had just taken twenty five years to realize that it was all illusory.

## PART II: LETTER TO THE ONE IN CHICAGO

It wasn't the first time I told you I loved you, to be fair. It was actually the second, neither in person. The first was on New Years. We had only known each other three months and it seemed like the thing to do. The second time was because I knew it wasn't going to be reciprocated and I needed a reason to let go. I was always trying to reassure myself with your physical absence that since I missed you, you must have missed me too. The moments when we were both physically present assured me of that for a while, made me so comfortable getting caught up in our myth. The first time I told you I loved you, when you got back you tried to end it and failed. The second time I confessed to you and you denied me, I let it fall apart. It was much easier to do when we were living in different cities. I tried to clear you from all my social media, the only remaining thread of connection, and the only power I felt I had left with it. I was wounded. I felt stripped, torn, helpless, wasted.

There was something about that time and place, that last year of undergraduate school, my parent's divorce, wondering what was next. How was I going to pull off graduate school? Should I have just gotten a job in Ithaca, not moved, not taken a leap of faith? The memories, the longing, might have killed me.

You were a gauze for a temporary wound, although I had hoped it was so much more. As you told me about all of your New York City job applications, like we were going to be close, like this was never going to need to end, and I bit so hard into that hook like an unseeing fish going with the current. *Had I really believed that?* I suppose I had needed a fantasy to hold onto, with everything spinning so fast, to feel grounded in something, anything. And even though you did not move to New York, and in fact moved back to your home city, we kept the fantasy alive

for a few more months. We were still in contact almost every day and I wonder now why you didn't just let it go. You still have not let me go.

For some reason, that last trip out to see you, I knew that this needed to end. My pining, my fantasies, the longing for moments we would never have back. I wanted our Ithaca love, and that was already a memory. Just one I had failed to reconcile. On that last trip to see you, I remember thinking, *I wish you would just say it. Just tell me you love me.* instead, you had looked at me in the crook of your arm and I looked back, and all you could say was, "You're so pretty." Something gave way, and I realized I couldn't make these stories from your eyes anymore, I couldn't believe them. I thought about our last night in Ithaca, how you had smelled like Irish spring after showering when we had settled into the bed. I thought about how I had been keeping my emotions at bay so well through that last day until the WiFi went down and cut out whatever movie we were watching. You had pulled me to your chest and the few seconds without white noise made something burst inside of me without warning. *This is what happens when you don't have WiFi*, I mumbled, trying to laugh, and you half-laughed too, telling me it was okay. And it really was okay, it was just the crash of that wave coming down on me, knowing that these things – whatever kind of beautiful chaos we were living in – would never quite be like that again.

That day you decided to text me again, after I had purged you from my phone as though that childish process of erasure would clear you from my memory, I had talked to a coworker about you, the first time I had been forced to talk about the fact we were no longer seeing each other. He opened up to me about a girlfriend he'd had in the past – the one that got away, he said – and he told me how he wished he could go back and things differently. *We never seemed to be talking the same love language*, he had said. *Love language*, I had thought, and my

understanding felt so full and so tangled at the same time. I thought of you and the words we had said and not said, the love language I had thought I understood but had not.

Was love language something beyond the physical affirmation I had felt, the bond that had brought us together and made it so difficult to let go? Was it saying *I love you*, and having it parroted back, was it a kiss goodnight, or the arms that pulled me into a familiar scent? Was it the affirmation of longevity, the guarantee that this never needed to end? I don't know what kind of love language we had failed to cultivate, or what that year had meant, or why we just never seemed let go. I know that I did love you, and still do in some capacity. Perhaps love is so engrained in the memory, it is something we can try and try and try to forget, but can't. In the same way I cannot understand how my mother could still love my father after their divorce, I cannot place the reason or the way I still love you. It is something, maybe, I do not need to fear, I do not need to hide from. Perhaps accepting that love is the permission that I need to let go.

## Ripple Effect

Around my junior year of high school was when I began to consider myself a “runner.” I joined the cross-country team my freshman year and did not go into it with any competitive ambitions. I didn’t know much about the sport or what it took to train, to get stronger, faster, fitter. I had been drawn to the sport initially since I had gotten into a routine running every day after class since middle school, but this provided a way for me to join a community and push myself out of my comfort zone – something I have never been apt to do without a gentle nudge. I didn’t accept the brand of “athlete” for myself until that breakout junior year when my life began to take shape around the sport. A great deal of my time and energy was spent reading about the latest training and diet trends, gathering tips to get stronger and faster. I used pace calculators to track my times and online GPS maps to track my distance. My transition into competitive running seemed to inform the rest of my life. I developed an infatuation with time after being gifted my first Timex watch, I developed a sneaker brand preference, and I kept up on the latest news with the great female athletes in the sport.

I followed the American distance athletes like Kara Goucher and Shalane Flanagan, women often featured on the cover of *Runners World*. Flanagan has appeared on the covers of multiple issues of the magazine. On the May 2014 cover, she is pictured running at the camera, a neutral but focused look on her face. She is airbrushed and smooth, not a hair in her blonde ponytail out of place. She is wearing a sports bra and Nike spandex shorts, showcasing her lean physique. But I specifically remember getting the November 2010 issue in the mail, encased in the clear plastic wrapping to protect the brightly inked pages from warping in the rain. Flanagan again has her hair pulled back, but this time is positioned in a static power pose, her gaze still straight at the camera lens, but her body offset just slightly. She is again wearing similar Nike

apparel, this time with her hands on her hips, standing tall, assertive. She is an embodiment of feminine power and ambition in this photo, her intent face conveying an all-business-no-play message, or, maybe “just do it,” as the mantra of the Nike apparel she is sporting goes. The only accessories that stand out against her tanned skin are on her left, her left hand placed prominently on her hip to showcase her glittering wedding ring and her white racing watch wrapped around her wrist just above it.

I read about her latest athletic accomplishments, the food she kept in her cupboard, her training tips and race-day rituals. She offered visualization techniques, like imagining her legs as the needle of a sewing machine when she began to feel fatigued in a race, to mimic the mental image of the fast and repetitive up and down motion. She emphasized the importance of personal achievement in the sport, to measure her performance according to her own standards rather than comparing herself with other elite female marathoners. I was hungry for any insights into breaking through the psychological barriers the body mounts to prevent physiological pain. These elite female distance athletes understood something about this line straddling the power of the mind and the body, how to fine tune them to work synchronously, how to heighten their pain thresholds and test the limitations of their endurance at this precipice.

When I first joined the sport, I had only cared about becoming a “runner,” a competitive athlete, as a way of looking more like these women and less like myself. They were thin, beautiful, and confident. They had everything that I wanted and I was determined to become a woman like the one I saw on the magazine cover. I was shameful of body and felt that running would force my body into the shape I wanted it to be, to make it smaller, toned, to shed all the fat I came to associate with displeasure. I realized that my body was not ideal when I was young, and my peers reminded me of this as well. I felt alienated because of it. On the playground, I

envied the carelessness of the thin girls whose bodies were still pre-pubescent skin and bone. Running seemed to be the fastest way to pound the shame out of my limbs. When I became engrossed in the competitive nature of the sport, however, I began thinking less about the way my body looked and focusing more on the way that it felt. Although I still was focused on the way that running made my body leaner, I had no choice but to also take note of how I was changing internally as a result of the sport.

Distance running, in my experience, was rich in its interiority. The sunniest days were the sweetest, although they were few and far between in New York. I would set out running from the school, past the softball fields, across the gravel parking lot, and onto the salt-bleached asphalt. This was how I first learned the roads in my hometown, by running them, and it seemed that any direction I went would inevitably lead up a gradual incline, sometimes with a view of the glacially carved valleys below. I never listened to music regardless of the distance, which often evoked a similar response from friends when I would tell them this. There seemed to be this idea that running mile after mile was boring or somehow pointless, that it offered nothing in the aftermath of the work that had been done – other than fatigue, sore joints, maybe a sprain or tear here and there, and at best, weight loss.

I experienced myself in a new way while running on these long country roads and even while I was running intervals on my high school track, focusing on the white line in my lane as I sometimes counted down the meters left to keep myself focused. Although I did not have the term at the time, I practiced “mindful running,” focusing mentally on all aspects of my body to feel my cadence and rhythm, to experience the flow of energy between both, and on the best days, to feel my mind and body working together to achieve the goals I had set for that run. In my bodily discomfort, running forced me to be mentally present and aware of my body, its

capabilities and limitations, my own capacity for pain, and for personal achievement. It afforded me a confidence that was infectious through all areas of my life, and I began to believe that with the right mental conditioning I could achieve whatever I set my mind to. The euphoric sensation of finishing something I had not done before, of having pushed these boundaries of my physical and psychological limitations, made me feel that limitations existed inasmuch that I allowed myself to believe in them. I gave myself permission to inhabit spaces that otherwise felt exclusive, I took risks despite my fear of failure, and realized that personal growth often requires the mental strength to try, try, and try again.

During this time, I was drawn to the female distance runner Molly Huddle, who became my premier running role model. While women like Shalane Flanagan were inspiring, Molly Huddle's story spoke directly to me. She was a mid-distance runner, setting the American five kilometer record in 2014. Huddle began competing at Notre Dame high school in Elmira, NY in 1998, three years after I was born. Elmira is only half an hour from my own high school in Owego, NY where I first found my love for the sport. Huddle was an extraordinary standout athlete during her high school career, despite the fact that she was the only member of the cross country team for Elmira throughout the four years she competed. I often wondered at what motivated Huddle and how she managed to evolve into such a standout athlete without the support of cross country teammates and a coach.

Huddle's introduction to competitive running began through familial influence, as is often the case with any sport. Her father ran marathons and local races and slowly but surely she was drawn into his running orbit. She began running with him and he served as a coach and mentor. In a blogpost on Running for Real with Tina Muir published in 2015, Huddle reflects on the way that running and training allowed her and her father a way to bond. She writes, "[often]

fathers use sports as a way to spend time with their kids, and sometimes for a Dad it's one of the few interests he may have in common with his daughter." Huddle's father encouraged her to invest herself into the sport, despite the fact she went a school too small to put a team together. As she experienced measurable improvements in performance, it became clearer that racing was a passion that would not fade.

The father-daughter connection through sports is common for many of the families I have had contact with in my life, and in my own experience my father also encouraged my participation in athletics and it became a way for us to bond. He had wrestled competitively in high school, had worked various physically laborious jobs throughout the years, and had maintained a connection to fitness even later in life when the commitment was much more difficult. Through 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, my father and I also would go out for runs together, although he carried out a run-walk program. I would run up ahead, run back to him, and when he felt like running we would run together for a while. Even before I competitively ran, he would challenge me to sprints. He was the one that instigated my sister and I playing baseball in our backyard yard to encourage my older sister to continue with softball. These are some of my earliest memories, gripping the fat orange plastic bat as he would serve a plastic white ball underhand to me (until I was old enough to use the skinny purple bat) and I would race around the "bases" when I elatedly made contact with the ball. I remember holding onto his hand at my sister's softball games at the high school, eating the ice cream sandwiches from the concession before the sweet vanilla melted onto my fingers. This was far before I had much appreciation for sports, but my immersion in them at a young age laid the groundwork.

Growing up, I never bonded with the women in my family in the same way over sports. Where my father encouraged a competitive spirit, my mother taught me how to properly fold my

clothes, how to separate the dry and wet ingredients when I was making cookies, how sew a popped button back onto a shirt. My mother, my aunts, my grandmothers, all seemed to have very different relationships to their bodies and to sports. None of my familial female role models had played sports competitively, whereas all of the men in my family had at some point. My mother gravitated towards walking and at one point got involved with karate and tai chi, but competitive exercise had never been a priority in her life. My grandmother, with whom I spent a great deal of time as a child while my parents worked, had never exercised in her life and was not shy about her abhorrence for sports and physical exertion in general. Instead, her coffee table was always littered with *Allure*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Elle* and a young woman's interest in sports seemed to be a direct violation of these beauty codes. It was more the norm, I picked up early on, that women put a great deal of energy into the way that their bodies looked, not the way that they felt. This involved crash dieting (my grandmother's favorite diet to begin and quit cyclically was *Weight Watchers*) and investing a great deal of time and money into makeup, fragrances, jewelry, and fashion. Sports were reserved for the men, whether they were playing them or watching them.

Before I began running competitively, I found myself falling constantly into the pitfalls that I had unconsciously inherited from the women in my life. I would practice restrictive eating habits, never giving any thought to the way that my body felt, having already internalized that I constantly needed to battle its inherent exterior flaws. The women on the magazines looked effortlessly thin and beautiful, smooth and glamorous. It seemed that these were the women all the women I knew wanted to be, and these were the women I should want to emulate as well. This mindset had nothing to do with self-love, confidence, or strength, but put me in a position of "lack" that I was always fighting against, a lack that I came to accept was simply the condition of

being a woman. I was unaware of the implications that this positioning of what my female identity should consist of was tied in with so many issues of inequity – of race, class, and gender – that would shape my view of myself in relation to the rest of the world.

As a competitive female athlete and runner, my psychological experience of my own body changed very dramatically the more entrenched in the sport that I got. For me, I was not focused on my body as an object, as though I was mentally estranged from it, judging the aesthetics as a critic scrutinizes paintings in an art museum. Running and training, I inhabited my mind and body in a way that brought the two into a harmonious relationship with one another. I was not perceiving my body as a deficient entity, but instead as powerful and filled with potential. Before my immersion into running culture, I had internalized a much more problematic model of my female identity, one in which I agonized over my physical attributes, one in which my self worth was directly related to my failure to attain them. As a female athlete, I entered into a new contract with my body, one in which I learned to properly nurture and care for myself in my entirety, to embrace the network of tendons, ligaments, muscles, joints, etc. that worked in unison to make my body follow the will of my mind. I came to appreciate the smallest elements of myself that allowed me to run, to live, to be human.

I cannot help but wonder how my relationship to my body, my sense of self, would have been different had I not invested myself into the sport, had I not found female role models like Molly Huddle (who coincidentally was recently credited with the push for a female emoji runner for iPhones). How much of a difference did it make for me seeing women like Shalane Flanigan power-posing in *Runner's World*, strong and determined, rather than the women in so many of the other magazines aimed at a female readership, like *Cosmopolitan*, which features virtually of its star female actresses on the covers clothed skimpily in bikinis or dresses, almost always in

submissive or sexualized poses, or *Marie Claire*, *Allure*, etc. that operate on one condition of feminine value – that is one standard of female beauty – that has nothing to do with any kind of interior life or comfort in the condition of “being.”

Competitive running offered an alternative to the active male versus objectified female dichotomy I had been consuming since a young age. I was more concerned with the potential for what my body could do than how my body should look, which in and of itself was sometimes translated to my peers as unfeminine. Running is a gross sport. It involves sweat, mud, rain, messed up hair, blistered feet, occasional scratches and bug bites from being out in the elements. It requires that one becomes comfortable with the unsightliness of physical fatigue and dirtiness, which runs counter to the standards of beauty that seem to be everywhere: billboards, magazines, advertisements, etc. To live up to the feminine ideal, I had grown up believing that I ought to strive to look effortlessly clean, made-up, and styled, that my hair should be straightened in order to contain its natural unruly state. Everything about my natural state needed fixing, altering, maintaining. Embracing being a female athlete not only forced me to throw this idea to the margins as a necessitation to satisfy my feminine adequacy, but it taught me that my body in its natural state is still beautiful, even when I was makeup-less in my running shorts and a t-shirt. It is not that I banned makeup and styled clothes, or that I saw this kind of self-presentation as problematic in and of itself, but prior to my participation in athletics, I had accepted this kind of value system for my self-worth without an alternative standard.

Young women need role models that encourage this kind of internal strength and confidence. For me, having female athletes like Molly Huddle to look up to encouraged me to develop a broader definition of self-worth, one that created a space in which I could enjoy psychological and physical harmony. Not that competitive running or athletics will yield this

result for all young women, but my own experience running changed the way that I perceived myself in a more wholesome, healthy light. As we live in an increasingly visual culture, I do think we need to consider the way that women are presented in media outlets especially if female empowerment is still a social goal that many of us care deeply about. The relationship of mind to body, body to mind, is a fraught one for many young women – including myself – and for me, running offered me new terms for understanding myself and my own potential. The same limitations that I had set for myself were the ones I became determined to break through. Like a ripple effect, the disturbance of a calm surface was what I needed to push myself to see beyond what I thought was possible.