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## People, Places, Things: A Collection of Instants, Insights, and Inclinations

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People, Places, Things:  
A Collection of Instants, Insights, and Inclinations

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2014

Noah -

I love you the most.

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**smathews/winged:** hahah how do you even find these thingsssss

**yrhodes:** word of mouth

**yrhodes:** and i listen to lots of mouths

## New York

I completely understand, really, I do. I'm having an anxiety attack just thinking about it, about being alone and not surrounded by people.

We bought a house in the suburbs once. A really pretty house. White shutters and a huge lawn with these beautiful flowers growing in the front – ones that we'd have to hire someone to keep up with because, of course, I don't know the first thing about gardening. The house had this driveway that Brian thought we could put a basketball hoop up in for Sam, who was, by the way, so little when we moved that he could barely carry a basketball. Brian thought that the street we'd found would be the perfect place to teach Sam how to ride a bike, and he was thinking about putting a pool in the backyard, but I'm not sure I really would have ever agreed to that.

Really, it was beautiful, but I was just so horrified by the sound of my own breathing at night when I was trying to sleep or when I would go into the kitchen to make dinner while Sam was napping and Brian was at work. I had just found out that I was pregnant with Anna and I swear to God it was so fucking quiet in that house I could hear her heart beating.

I panicked. I moved us back here because there weren't any people out there.

A few weeks after we moved back it was like a hundred degrees and I went to the deli. I was still pregnant, and Sam was so little, and I walked out of the deli and it was loud and it smelled and this homeless man was too close to Sammy. And I just stood there trying to get him back in his stroller by offering him the frozen fruit bar I'd bought and when I'd buckled him in and given him the popsicle and gotten him off that corner

and away from that guy, I stopped in the shade near the steps of this brownstone and I thought *Oh my God, what did I do, why did I move us back here?*

Sam fell asleep in his stroller, with melted strawberry popsicle all over his face and his shirt, and I pushed the stroller to Madison Avenue and watched all the people, and I felt so comfortable. It was too hot and I wouldn't have been able to hear if Sam had woken up and said *Mommy* and I knew that we were inhaling all of this dirt and everything, but I was just thinking how good I felt. I had one of those moments where I was overcome with purpose and fulfillment, or not even purpose, but just contentment, I guess, and this feeling of knowing exactly what I was doing and knowing that I was meant to be doing it, even though the thing that I was doing was just being, I was just existing, it wasn't any kind of temporary project, nothing that I could check off a list. Like I was breathing in all this shit and dirt and steamy air, but I was breathing, and it was so much easier to not have to hear it, like that soundlessness liberated me to breathe so much deeper.

I brought Sammy home and I carried him, asleep in his stroller, up the stairs in front of our building and I left his stroller in the hallway outside our front door and I brought him in and wiped all the stickiness off his face and changed his clothes and felt so happy.

## **Lower East Side**

In January of 1958 I was studying at the University of Wisconsin. One night in the bathroom of College Library I mentioned to a friend, also a New York City transplant, that I'd been having the most intense craving for pastrami sandwiches.

Back at the table where we'd been sitting, my friend told the boy we'd been studying with, another New Yorker, that we couldn't stop thinking about pastrami sandwiches.

"Let's get some," he said.

He packed his things up and started to leave. We followed.

We asked where we were getting them.

"Katz's," he said, and we laughed, and he just smiled. "Let's go," he said.

On the way out of the building, we ran into another group of New York kids, and we invited them to join us. Six of us squeezed into the car.

We were in the city by lunchtime the next day, and we bought sandwiches, and we went to Brighton Beach and ate them and walked on the beach in the snow.

Then we got back in the car and drove back to Madison.



## Upper West Side

I was realizing today, well, here, so —

I had all these things to do, you know? I had to drop off our rent, drop off some clothes at the dry cleaner, get coffee, go home.

Well, you know when it really hit me was in the coffee place. This certain song was playing, and there was this woman in front of me. I walked in, I saw her, she looked at me, I smiled at her, she smiled back, and so on. I thought I might be able to tell something about her by the way that she looked, you know, from her appearance. Then something happened.

She was getting hot cider. She was getting two hot ciders. And she was figuring out what to get on them. So, she's talking to the guy there, and I'm thinking like, *Oh, here's this woman, she's ordering hot cider, she ordering two hot ciders, that's interesting, she's thinking, oh, should she get cinnamon on top, or should she get caramel in them*, which I'd never heard of.

So, basically, she looks like a lesbian, you know? She has a man's haircut, and she's dressed in a way that would go with that, but she's attractive. She's a little older. So, I'm thinking about the song, and then this woman turns around, and she addresses someone. This woman, she's like mid-40s, a light skinned woman. Well, the person that she addresses is this dark-skinned eight-year old girl. She says, "Do you want cinnamon in it like at home?" I thought, *maybe I was wrong about her*, but the little girl had very dark skin, so then I thought, *well, no, maybe she's adopted*. I mean, really, I have no idea. I don't know, I just started thinking about them at home, and I started tearing up for no other reason than that I was finding myself again confronted by the fact that every

individual that one comes into contact with in their public life, every single one of those individuals has their own private life, and each life is filled with these intimacies of the absolute greatest importance, and these moments of private and personal connection (making hot cider with cinnamon in it in one's own home for one's own daughter, for example) go almost entirely unnoticed by the majority of the world, despite the magnitude that they might have for these individuals.

I left the coffee shop, carrying that song that had been playing, like something physical.

(You know, I go to all these places and when I leave, I take something with me. Let's just back up, just briefly. So at the dry cleaner, I'd been talking to the people there, and I leave, and I have something new with me. And then I go into the coffee place, and there's this song playing, and I leave, and the song is playing in my head. This song I don't even know is playing in my head. And it takes I don't even know how long until it stops. A long time.)

When I left the coffee shop, I saw this old woman with a dog, and she looked kind of grumpy. So I smiled at her, and she tried to smile back, but I just felt myself bang up against some terrible experience of hers. You know, you walk around, and if you're open to everything, you see what's around you and you get affected.

I was thinking about that, and then I saw this girl in this very distinctive skirt. She was a young, twenty-ish girl, probably a college student, and she was wearing this skirt that you could look at and think, *oh, that's a counter-cultural, cool skirt*, but it's kind of not. I started imagining her experience with the skirt, and her experience over time with the skirt. I imagined her in a store, seeing the skirt, and thinking that it was cool, and

buying it, and I imagined her imagining the way that she would look in it and the way that people would see her in it. I imagined her maybe bringing it home, and her putting it on this morning and wondering if it was really as cool as she'd thought. And I imagined her still having that skirt one day when it really isn't cool.

I realized that I walk around, you know, like, I walk down the street and bang into these things, these other people, or their experiences, or these experiences of other people, as if they are physical things. Like they are substantial things that affect you, or could affect you, if you let them, or if you're temperamentally prone to that. I certainly am temperamentally prone to that.

In the class that I teach, we talk about the way that people are nested in their experiences. Have I drawn that for you? That's one of the first things that I bring up, in terms of children, how children are nested in their families, which are nested in some larger community, etcetera. We're these psychic balls, surrounded by larger balls. I started thinking about that, and I started thinking about the ways that you can tell things about people if you know someone, but even if you don't. There are ways to tell things about people even if you don't know them. Sometimes I know that the things that I imagine that I can tell are really just projections, I'm aware of that. But sometimes I think that I really can tell things, you know? Because you can look at someone's face and you can see things.

But with a skirt, can you really tell?

When I got to our block, I was carrying all of these sort of physical things (the song, the feelings, all as if they were actually packages that I was balancing) and the coffee. I saw Marvolo, you know, the guy who is always on our corner, the shorter one

who sometimes sings. We talk pretty often. He's been there for awhile – at least fifteen years, maybe longer. I'm not sure exactly how old he is. It's hard to tell. He's got something going on with him, you know, some kind of mental illness, and I can tell when he's doing well and I can tell when he isn't, because I see him all the time. He likes orange soda. I don't feel right handing him cash, and usually I don't feel the need to give charity on the street, but buying him sodas feels like a good thing. So I got to our block and I saw him and I said, "Hey, Marvolo, how are you doing?" And he said he was doing alright, and it seemed like he was doing alright. And I said, "How about a soda?" And he said that he'd appreciate that greatly. So I went into the grocery store that he's always standing near, and I got him a bottle of Sunkist orange soda. And then I went home.

**Manhattan**

When asked about the moments in his life that he remembers most vividly, my son, now eighteen, mentions the following two events.

The first is the death of our first dog, Oliver, when he was eleven. He recalls details that I don't – the way that we coaxed the dog out of the car with bits of salty, sesame-seed covered pretzel croissants from City Bakery, which were my son's favorite, and a Tupperware container filled with congealed fat skimmed from the top of homemade chicken stock; the other animals that were in the waiting room at the vet's office; the fact that he did not eat another pretzel croissant for years afterwards. For seven or eight months he would get absolutely furious whenever any of us brought up the possibility of getting another dog. We did end up getting another one about a year and a half after Oliver died, but until the new dog was actually living in our house, and making its presence known, and doing the type of unique things that dogs do to make you love them and appreciate them, he refused to feel anything towards it. He didn't want to hear anything about its personality when we started looking initially, he didn't want to see its pictures. But he loves that dog so much now. Not the same way he loved Oliver, of course. But very much.

The second is the attack on the World Trade Center, which happened when he was six. This, I remember. Following 9/11, my son refused to ride in elevators, his separation anxiety became much more severe, he started sleeping on the floor in my husband's and my room, in a sleeping bag with a pile of blankets and a pillow and the dog, Oliver, who we'd had for about a year at that point. Now he tells me that his room

scared him. He says that he remembers the shadows that the metal safety grates on his window made, and how aware of his vulnerability those shadows made him feel.

I'd never really heard him talk about it at all, until that question of vivid memories came up a few days ago. I'm not sure how often it is on his mind.

I just recently found an entry from one of his school journals from that year. The page is dated September 20<sup>th</sup>, and contains an illustration of the Twin Towers. They are drawn so carefully, the two rectangles, one with a point on the top. Both have seven rows of rectangular windows, and a door with a doorknob on the ground floor.

Below the drawing, across four large lines, my son printed, in all uppercase letters except for the Ts and one I, "I hope the Twin Towers do not get knocked down again."

## **Washington Heights**

Ladies and gentlemen of the grand jury, I'm here today to tell you about the day that I got arrested. It was my birthday, my thirty-first birthday. December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1982 is the day that I was born. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, my father woke me up before he left for work to say happy birthday. He leaves always around 5:45. We share a bedroom – it's the only one in the house. His girlfriend's kids sleep in the living room. Anyway, he woke me up to tell me happy birthday before he went to his job. After he left, I decided to get up.

I woke up and honestly, I mean, I was just really feeling myself. It was my birthday and I was just ready to party. I just wanted to start the day off right, you know. I got up and I was going to do an eight ball. That's heroin mixed with crack – with crack cocaine. I don't know, you know, what your experience with any of that is, but it makes you feel amazing, it really does. And it was my birthday and I was feeling so good, just wanting to start my day off with that bang. I got everything out – I had the heroin out on the dresser, I laid it out there and I had some crack there, too.

I have to be honest with you all about a few things, though. Just a couple of things I need you all to know. I am a heroin addict. I have been a heroin addict since I was twelve years old. The other thing is that my father doesn't know. I don't want him to think that way of me. I never, never do it in front of my dad. Never when he's around. He knows I used to do it. But he thinks I got clean. I did get clean for a little bit, but, you know, I couldn't stay that way too long. I got this job as part of one of my probation deals. I was doing like janitorial work – you know, cleaning up – at this office building. And they all said I was doing so good. But you know why it was they said I was doing so good? Because I was high. Like, I'd go there feeling so good and I would be just buffing

the floor like you can't imagine. I don't know how many of you have ever had to use one of those huge buffers, but, man, those things, they're hard to control usually. But I would just get to my job and I'd be feeling so good and I'd just be absolutely killing it, you know, because I felt so good and I could control that buffer.

No, sir, it isn't the money from that job that I got the heroin with. I lost that job, sir, I got fired awhile back, and I don't work now. I do a lot of things, sir, for those drugs. No, sir, I can't tell you what I do. Sometimes I'll do trades, or something, if someone needs something. Sometimes I'll do favors. Sir, I know, it's a lot, I do a lot, but I'd rather not say. Because there's ladies in the room, and that's not how I was raised. Well, see, I do different things, you know, different kinds of favors, sexual favors sometimes. If someone says they need something, I'll help him out. I'll do what he asks. Sir, but can I finish, please?

On that day – on my birthday – I was just trying to party. I got out of bed after my dad had woken me up to tell me happy birthday. I got out the drugs that I told you I was planning to do. I had more, too, in the closet, because, like I said, it was my birthday, and I wanted to spend the day fucked up, honestly, and, also, I wanted to be able to offer whatever to my friends, you know, if they decided that they wanted to stop by. I took out those drugs, and I put on these jeans that I'm wearing now, actually, these True Religions. I'm kind of into fashion, you know, like, I like to look nice. I like to dress well. I had everything out, and that's when I heard the banging at the front door and that's when the police came in to my room and they told me, you know, like, *get down, get down, put your hands where we can see them*. And they took me out into the living room and they've got my father and the two kids there, and they've got their guns on



them, and they're saying, like, *are there any other people in this apartment* and *are there any weapons* and stuff like that. Now, I've never been to law school, but I watch a lot of T.V., and I know that when the police search your home they're supposed to have a warrant, you know, and just cause to think they should be there. So I said to them, while I was sitting there and they were starting to go through my house, I said, like, *show me your warrant*. And they didn't show me anything, they just said, *shut the fuck up, we don't have to show you shit*, excuse my language, I'm sorry.

I'm pretty sure these are some crooked cops, too, because I had some money, also, out on that dresser with the drugs that I was going to do. And I had some more money in a pair of white Air Force Ones in my closet, and they took that. My lawyer showed me the list of what was recovered from the apartment, you know, like, what they said they took out of it, and that list didn't have on it close to the amount of money that I had. And, you know what, I think maybe they might have taken some of the drugs, too, because I think I had more than what they said was there.

I never even got to get high that day. It was my birthday, you know, and I didn't even get to get high that once. And now I've been sitting in Riker's this week and I'm getting clean and I'm getting help. I'm a good person, I really am. I never sold anything, I never intended to. Swear to God, it was all just for me, because, you know, like I said, I'm addicted to that stuff. You all will make whatever decision about me you want, but I just wanted to come here today and tell you my story, because, again, I think those cops are sort of crooked, and also, you won't see anything in that police report about my family and about my life. And I just wanted you all to know that I'm sorry, and that I know that I have a problem, and that now I'm trying to fix it. And also, you know, I

realize that I had illegal substances, I'm not denying that, and even though I didn't ever sell drugs and wasn't planning on selling them, I did have them in my house, and I know that's why I've been in that cell this week, but, like, my father, he didn't have a part in any of it, and he shouldn't be in jail, because he didn't do anything wrong and it's not good for him and it's not good for his health, you know, to be in there. Like, he's not well. So please, even if you don't let me go, don't keep him in there. I'll get help, I'm getting help, but he doesn't need to be in there. Thank you for listening.

Yes, sir, that's all, I'm done.

**Bronxville**

At the end of the day we set a butterfly that hatched in the classroom free. I cupped it in my hands and the children gathered around in the yard. I slowly opened my hands and the butterfly hopped to my finger and then flew away. This child kept her eyes on it as it flew high, high up in the sky, landed on a leaf on a tree, and flew around again. She stood very still and said, "I never knew how wonderful it felt to watch a butterfly go free."

## **Greenwich**

We met Carole in Paris, at a dinner party given by the Gierrots. She was beautiful, a girl of about twenty. She told us that she wanted to visit the United States. I said that she should stay with us, and when we left that evening, I reminded her to call and let us know when she would be there.

Soon afterwards, she called, and said "I'm ready to come, I'd like to come visit now." I said, "We'd be delighted to have you. How long do you think you'll be staying?" She said, "Well, I'll need a job." I said, "Of course, you'll come work in the office. Can you type?" She said, "Of course."

I got her a job in the office. She couldn't type a goddamn word. She couldn't do much of anything. She was made the assistant to the woman who swept the floors. It was so wonderful. She made that woman feel so wonderful. She was so kind to her, you know, this cretin...and Carole just made her glow.

Carole glowed. She brought the most incredible energy to the office. Everyone loved her. My wife says it had nothing to do with anything other than the fact that Carole was a foreigner; a very young, very attractive woman with a French accent. But really, she was special.

She stayed with us, and she worked in the office, and she and I would commute together everyday. We'd drive to the train station, board the train, ride the subway from Grand Central, and then do the whole thing in reverse each afternoon. When we arrived home, all three of us – Barbara, and Carole, and I – would have a drink together. I'd look at Carole and I'd say, "What will you have this evening, Carole?" and she'd answer, and

I'd turn to my wife and say, "And whadda you want?" Playfully, you know, but Barbara hated it. She hated Carole.

When we'd left the dinner party that night in France, Barbara had given me a bit of a hard time about inviting this stranger, essentially, to come stay with us. But our kids were all out of the house at that point, so when Carole actually called to say that she'd like to take us up on our offer (or, more accurately, to take me up on my offer), Barbara hadn't been able to come up with an excuse to object.

She told me all the time, "She's got to go." To this day she's still bitter about the whole thing.

One night, Carole went out and didn't come home. She'd gone out in the city with some guy she'd been seeing, and she didn't come home that evening, and Barbara was up all night waiting for her. "I cannot believe that she wouldn't call me to tell me that she wouldn't be home," she'd said.

When Carole finally came back the next day, telling us that she hadn't wanted to bother us by returning so late, Barbara asked her to find somewhere else to stay. Or rather, she barked at Carole to get out of her home, saying that her behavior had been entirely unacceptable, and that she wouldn't have her here anymore.

Carole left that afternoon. Later she wrote to me and said that she'd met an artist while she was staying in the city, and that they were traveling west together. They drove to California in a trailer, or something like that, and she's been there ever since. She's got two kids now. A boy, who must be about twenty-three, and a girl, who I think is twenty-one. Both in the California school system.

She sends us a Christmas card every year. This year we didn't get one from her, so I sent her an email and said, "Carole, I always look forward to getting your holiday card, and missed it very much this year." I attached a photo of our family taken a month or so earlier, and said, "Here's a photo of the family. I hope yours is doing well."

Carole replied and sent this picture of her and her husband and her children. Barbara said, "I don't think she looks so good." I think she's still very beautiful.

## Cambridge

John's saving grace was that he went to Harvard. That's really the only reason my parents didn't just dismiss him immediately. I mean, he was a teacher. He was teaching pre-school when we met. John had been living in voluntary poverty in a garage apartment in Cambridge, where he was working at the Harvard Law School Childcare Center, and then he'd gone and backpacked around Europe for six months, and then he'd come back to Cambridge and come back to the Childcare Center, where I had started teaching. My father worked on Wall Street.

It was his Ivy League education, and then, once when I brought him home with me, they saw him playing basketball in the driveway with my brothers. They saw that he had a competitive side, and it was that slight edge that they saw in him that made them take him at least a little seriously. He wasn't just this soft, skinny, directionless, poor kid.

Really, they were just concerned for me. They wanted to know that I'd be taken care of. John didn't grow up with money, and he didn't aspire to money. My parents lived comfortably. I was raised comfortably.

The first fight John and I had was about money. Or actually, it was about pistachios. I was going to make him granola, and we went to the grocery store. We were wandering through the aisles of bulk grains and nuts and things, and he loved pistachios, and I wanted to buy some to put in the granola, but he said that they were too expensive, and that we should get something else. I didn't see a problem with spending the extra money, because he loved pistachios, and he was going to enjoy them.

Almost every study done on strong or happy marriages says that people who have similar backgrounds are more likely to be successful as a couple. John and I come from

different areas of the country, our religious and economic backgrounds are different, and our families have different political beliefs. But we agreed on the important things. We agree, currently, on the important things. We had the same feelings on how to raise children. The political opinions that we had formed for ourselves at that point in our lives and that we continue to form are, for the most part, the same. He converted to Judaism after he met my grandmother. They discussed things – long-deceased, legendary rabbis, and stories. He prayed for her in the language that she prayed in. Nobody in my family other than my grandmother prayed in Hebrew. Nobody in my family other than my grandmother prayed. Any religious ties of mine have more to do with tradition than with any beliefs in any higher power or any actual allegiance to any structure or group. John's family prays. But they pray to, like, you know, their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Once I read about a study on successful marriages that said that one of the most significant factors in a successful marriage was parental approval, and that there were two reasons for this. The first reason had to do with parental support and the fact that it is nice to have the people close to you backing up your decisions. The second had to do with the idea that parents who disapproved of a child's marriage might have legitimate reasons for disapproving. They might see something that is or that could be a real problem.

When John and I first moved to New York, he was in graduate school at NYU, and we were living in a little apartment near the Borough Hall subway stop in Brooklyn. After we got married, he and I moved into a small two-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. John finished his dissertation. He started paying off his student loans. We had a baby. John was working at a teaching hospital in the Bronx. Just before I found out that I was pregnant with our second child, John started his own practice. He



was doing psychotherapy, mainly with children. And he was being generous, you know, because that's his nature. He wasn't charging anyone through any insurance companies because he didn't want to have to be bound to any specific diagnostic criteria. He wanted to be honest. He didn't want to be treating for someone for something just so that they could have it paid for. He wanted to see things the way he saw them and help people pay for what they actually needed. He was very understanding – creating sliding scale payment options, and being gentle about people being late with their checks. He's very caring, and he loves his job, and does it because he wants to help and because he knows that people need that.

That was the first time he ever made any actual money on his own, and it wasn't that much. He didn't realize that you had to set aside money, so that spring I was really pregnant, about a month from my due date, and we found out that we owed a ton of money, and we didn't have it. I was like, "John, we're going to have to sell this baby." We had to borrow money. He called his brother, who I'm not really the biggest fan of, and we borrowed some money from him and his wife. I called my parents, and we borrowed some money from them. And they didn't say they'd told me so or anything; they just wrote us a check. And we paid it back when we could. We paid everyone back when we could.

We recovered. We paid that money back, I mean. But we still live in that two bedroom that we started illegally subletting twenty-five years ago thinking it was a temporary situation. A few years ago, we thought that we were going to be kicked out, and this time there wasn't a baby that we could sell for rent money. We've been paying the same amount for this apartment since the mid-eighties. Honestly, we can't really

afford to live in the city. But at that time we had a kid in a New York City public high school, so it's not like we could just leave. When I told my parents that we were looking at apartments in case we had to move, they didn't tell me that they'd told me so. They just asked me to let them know if they could help.

They write checks for my children's educations. They give generous gifts for my birthdays, and for our anniversaries.

More recently, I think having to do with the fact that both of our parents are aging with a sort of alarming rapidity, John has decided that he wants to make money. He says that he doesn't want to leave our children with nothing. And now, too, he wants to be able to give them things. Also, now that they've both moved far away, I think he just wants to be able to see them. Plane tickets aren't cheap. Anyway, he's realized that he wants to make some money for our kids, and he's realized that the way he thought about making money when he was younger – not wanting to have things, not wanting to have money, not wanting to see himself doing better or making more than his own father did, which wasn't very much – isn't a realistic way to think, or, it isn't a responsible way to live, when you have people that you're taking care of.

He has the means to do it, too. I'm not saying he didn't work hard before. But he works harder now, and longer. Early mornings, and late nights, and weekends. Before, he'd come home to have dinner with the kids, or to be able to give them a bath, and read to them, and put them to bed. I don't mean to say that he didn't do anything. I don't mean to sound ungrateful. His priorities have changed. The way that he makes clear what his priorities are has changed.

I love John. I would not change my life. I wouldn't have him do anything any differently. My parents love John now. I don't think that my parents would change my decision for me, seeing what my life has been like. But it is not because they were wrong. He loves me, they know that. He has taken care of me when I've needed it most. Our children are wonderful. But when John and I fight, we fight about money. We fight about how much we are spending, or what we are spending it on, or how much we owe, or how much we've borrowed – usually from my parents. We've never gone hungry. Our children have never gone without necessities. I don't want to say that we live without luxuries, but we live without excessive luxuries, and we are very cautious about the luxuries that we allow ourselves. We don't have a lot of money. He doesn't feel the need to have a lot of money. Even now, he's not making money to have money. He's making money to save, money that we probably won't ever touch, or he's making money for specific things, to help our daughter with her car loans and student loans (so that she's not still paying them off when her own child is twenty, the way that he was) and for emergency use should she find herself temporarily unemployed, or to fly our son home for breaks for the next four years and to fly us out to him when we have an opportunity to go. Work clothes, groceries so that they aren't living off of ramen and granola bars. Things that are necessary, in a certain sense. We're very lucky. I'm lucky, I know. But I would be lying if I said that when my brother and his family moved into newer, larger, more beautiful house, I didn't feel unsatisfied with our apartment, especially when there is water dripping into our bedroom from the bathroom of the apartment above ours and we have to move our bed away from the wall and keep all of our other bedroom furniture in the living room until the wall gets reinforced and repainted. Or if I said that I didn't

sometimes wish that I could shop the way that my friend Laura does, for wildly expensive bracelets that aren't even that beautiful or only mildly comfortable but very costly sandals. And who wouldn't feel that way? That is – the money is – by far the biggest source of stress and unhappiness in our marriage. And I'm not saying our marriage is an unhappy one, and I'm not saying that there's an unmanageable or overwhelming amount of stress. I'm just saying that it has mattered, that it matters. My parents weren't wrong.

**Hanover**

You don't have a moment that you just remember so vividly? That you remember everything about? Not necessarily, you know, like, what you were wearing, but the way that the air smelled and the way the light was?

Something that I remember that way is this race in college. You know, like, how chilly the air was, and how foggy it was that day, and the clear, slate grey of the river. The sound of Brian's voice from the front of the boat. "A seat and a half down from Yale, 300 in." The way the blades felt as they entered and left the water. "There's blood in the water, you're hungry for this win." The fog, still. And Brian's voice, still. "Boom, one, boom, two, boom." His voice, "Coming up on the 500-to-go mark." Brian's voice, "You're not here for bronze; you're going for the gold." The way it felt when he announced, "You're at a smooth thirty-six coming into the last 500." The feeling of the five strokes pre-sprint. Twenty strokes, and then Brian's voice, "Easy," and softer, "easy," and softer. "Easy," spoken in a human tone, not a growl, not a shout, as we tried to hold ourselves steady.

They have one long dock for the teams that place first, second, and third to go to, and then a bunch of shorter ones for everyone else.

You can't even imagine the feeling when you pull up to that dock, and you see all of these flags and all these colors around you, you know. You've got, like, Yale, and Harvard, and Princeton, and Cornell, and Navy, and everyone is cheering for you, cheering your name, even. And you're just so ecstatic. So elated, right, because you've done well and you've been working towards this for so long. You're there at this dock, absorbing all of this energy, feeling borderline infinite, and then Harvard comes up and

you're ushered off to the other dock and they're standing there in your place and their school's color is all around them and everyone is cheering their name. They're there, in your place, in this sea of maroon, and everyone is cheering louder than they were for you. You've competed and you've competed hard, and you're riding on this rush of adrenaline and excitement that came with fearing that you wouldn't win and thinking that you could win and maybe even thinking that you had won. But you missed your mark, just by a bit, but by enough that you're essentially irrelevant; you're not standing up there receiving gold medals. And you, with your team, just get the boat out of the water and everything and then it's all over, and you're taking off your shirts and handing them over as Harvard unbuilds their boat, before you finish unbuilding yours.

**Scranton**

Jason wasn't my year in high school; he was a year older than me, I think.

He's on trial now for the murder of his girlfriend's (now-ex-girlfriend's?) ex-boyfriend, Frankie. He shot the kid execution-style, in the back of the head. He had this kid, Frankie, I think, meet him some distance off the highway, and he shot him in the back of the head, and then put the kid back in his Jeep Liberty, and put a rock on the gas pedal, and drove the car off a cliff.

This was, apparently, all in response to a text message that Jason's girlfriend, Keri, had gotten from Frankie, saying something along the lines of like, *I never felt the way I felt about you about anyone else and it took me so long to get over you and I'm so sorry for the way that I treated you.* Apparently Jason was with his girlfriend when she got the message, and even though she apparently reminded him that she'd broken up with Frankie and that she was fully deserving of an apology from him, as she'd spent a solid six weeks dealing with his alcoholism and drug abuse and general bullshit, and that she was currently naked in bed with him, with Jason, and that that meant something or should mean something... Despite all of this, and despite the fact that none of this really seems that serious, Jason took Frankie out and put a bullet in his head, and apparently didn't even look him in the eyes or anything when he did it.

This is the newest reason why I can't go live at home again. I just can't. Because this kind of thing happens all the time. I'm not saying that people are getting shot every day. I'm well aware that I didn't grow up in Compton or anything. But there are just always all of these people doing the dumbest fucking shit. And I just don't want any part of that. It was enough when I was in high school and people were dying in car crashes

when they let their friends drive drunk, or when people were drowning when they thought it would be fun drop acid and learn to jet ski over summer break, or when I found out freshman year of college that my eighth grade girlfriend had two kids already and was pregnant with a third. Really, I don't want to be anywhere near that.



## **Chicago O'Hare**

My family used to take regular trips to California. Once, we were on our way to San Diego, or we were going to go to San Diego, and we were in the airport in Chicago. We flew into Chicago and we were there waiting for our connecting flight. We had like thirty minutes before we were supposed to board, or before the plane was supposed to leave. My dad told us that he was going to go to the bathroom. He said he'd be right back. My sister said that he shouldn't go because we were supposed to board the plane thirty minutes before it was scheduled to take off, and it was almost that time. He said that it was fine. He said he'd be right back. So we waited for him.

Five minutes go by. They start calling people to board the plane.

Ten minutes go by. Most people have boarded.

My sister is freaking out. I am freaking out a little bit also. My mother is trying to calm us down, like, "don't worry, honey, everything will be okay."

Twenty minutes go by and my dad still isn't back and they call the names of the people who are supposed to be on the flight but aren't. You know, like the people who have tickets but haven't shown up. And they don't call our names. We are the only ones left at the gate.

My dad comes back. At this point, the plane has already left. My sister is still freaking out. I'm freaking out, too. She says something about how he made us miss the flight. And he says, "No, don't worry, I didn't make us miss anything, we're going to Hawaii."

I think my sister got excited at that point, but I was pissed, like, "I wanted to go to San Diego."

My parents drank rum and orange juice on the plane and laughed together and told me to stop whining, that it wouldn't do me any good because we were already on a flight that wasn't going to San Diego. They said that they knew that I would like this trip better than I would've liked San Diego.

They were right; Hawaii was incredible.

## Ames

When I was twenty-three I drove across the country. It was myself and three women driving from Cornwall, Vermont, where we were all working at an international summer camp, to San Francisco in this station wagon. We had answered an ad we saw posted in a bookstore. It said, "DRIVE MY CAR ACROSS THE COUNTRY." We paid for gas.

It sounds unexciting, perhaps. But I was in love with one of these women. Her name was Dolores. She was from England, and she was in the U.S. only for the summer, until the camp ended. She'd extended her time here by a few weeks and looked into flights leaving from the West Coast instead of the East so that she could make the drive with us. I decided that this meant that she was in love with me, too, though we'd never discussed it.

On I-90, passing through Pennsylvania, she drove, and I peeled clementines that we'd bought at a grocery store in New York, and we shared them while we listened to sports talk radio and Kirsten and Tree slept in the backseat.

I took a night shift on the highway through Indiana. Kirsten and I tried to recite "Over Sir John's Hill," though there were often lines over which we stumbled, and in each moment of remembering, in each of those seconds of whirlwind silence, I would find myself looking back through the rearview mirror at Dolores's sleeping and shadowed face, tilted slightly back and to the right in the seat behind me.

Just north of Des Moines, the steering rod broke. The man at the garage we found told us that it would take some time to fix it. We asked where we were. He said, "Ames,

Iowa.” He said that there was a lake just down the road. He said that if we went about the same distance in the opposite direction we’d find the main street.

Kirsten and Tree ventured into town while Dolores and I followed the man’s directions towards the lake, delighting in walking on such level ground, as opposed to driving on it, and in smelling the Midwestern summer air at a strolling pace, as opposed to at seventy-five miles-per-hour on the interstate. The sky was flat and the ground was flat and we swam stripped down, our clothes lying out on the grass beside the water.

Dolores told me about a similar lake at her grandparents’ house. She told me about the weeks that she’d spent in that water, and about children that she’d been teaching to swim at the summer camp we’d been working at, and about how much she loved the feeling of floating. She smiled shyly, tilting her face downwards when there was a break in the conversation. Her cheeks turned from pink to red when I reached out to move a strand of wet hair that had fallen across her forehead when she’d looked away from me. But she didn’t pull away when I moved closer to her and she didn’t draw back when I put my hand on her hip and it was with eager lips, I think, that her mouth met mine.

We slept while our skin dried, and we walked around the lake and then back to the garage where we’d left the car. On the way out of town, the four of us stopped at a small diner and ate large bowls of chili and thin slices of soft, white bread.

In Nebraska, Kirsten and I still couldn’t remember all of Dylan Thomas’s words, and I looked back at Dolores through windows of dusk and I remembered how she’d looked through windows of water.

In Utah, Dolores woke me up in the backseat at a gas station with the thickest chocolate milkshake I'd ever had. I decided that this meant that she loved me, also. We still had not spoken about it.

In California, we dropped the car off at the address that we'd been given, and went to stay with a friend of Tree's. Dolores booked a flight back to England as she'd planned to do all along, and I went with her to the airport and I kissed her there, and we didn't talk about being in love, but I could tell, I think, that it was a sad goodbye for her, as well.

I spent a few weeks in San Francisco wondering what I was going to do and how I was going to get out of there before finding another ad, this time in a health food store, posted by a man seeking a driver to bring his car to Massachusetts, meeting up with some friends, and heading back to the North East.

## **Columbia**

Before I left for basic training, my father gave me just one piece of advice.

“You’re not there to make friends,” he said. “Don’t look at anyone straight in the eye.”

I spent sixteen weeks on that base, and I swear to God I didn’t say more than ten words that whole time. I really mean it. I kept my eyes on the floor and I kept my mouth tight shut.

For sixteen weeks I watched these alliances form, and these relationships build, and I kept myself far from all of them.

On the last day, a sergeant came up to me as I was taking all of my things out of my bunk. He said, “Are you supposed to be in here?”

I told him yessir, and he told me he’d never seen me before.

Sixteen weeks, and it was like I’d never even been there at all.

I don’t think I absorbed any more than anyone else did, either. I didn’t learn anything special, or anything deeper.

I tell this story to my kids and grandkids all the time. Before all of their first days. Summer camp, college orientation, new jobs. I know it can be comforting to think you don’t have to be seen, but I don’t know how else to tell them it won’t get you anywhere to be quiet like that.

## Washington, D.C.

The story is that Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, and that Eve was convinced by a serpent to taste this fruit that wasn't supposed to be eaten, and that she then convinced Adam to taste it as well, and that they were punished by God for their disobedience in the following ways: i) both were expelled from Eden; ii) Adam was deprived of the privilege of an easy harvest, of a cooperative earth, of ground that willingly produced sustenance; iii) Eve was denied the privilege of an easy and painless childbirth.

Here's why this is total bullshit:

One – Nobody ever even mentioned childbirth before this. Adam actually had something that he had some sense of (abundance in the form of a garden full of food) taken away from him. Eve would have had no idea what her punishment even really was. She had no point of reference: she'd never given birth, and she couldn't be like *Oh, right, the Miracle of Life movie, shit* or *Oh, those five hundred homebirth videos I watched on YouTube that one time – I'm so fucked.*

One-point-five – Speaking of the women-in-labor videos available on YouTube, what about women who claim to get intense pleasure from childbirth, who are literally moved to literal ecstasy by their body's expulsion of the flesh-equivalent of a bowling ball? What about those women?

Two – Are these really even comparable punishments?

Three – Female farmers. What did they do to deserve being doubly cursed?

Three-point-five – Also, just in general, women need to eat, too. It's not like they're totally unaffected by the grudge that God has asked the soil to hold.

Four – Are we to think of infertile women as being somehow less offensive to God than fertile women? That seems a little fucked up.

Five – Not every woman even wants to have children. There is no suffering that these women are given to make up for the suffering that they are missing out on. What makes them so special?

Six – It's not like animals have painless or pleasant birthing experiences. What did they do to deserve their curse?

Realistically, here's what I think probably happened –

Adam and Eve were in the Garden. The sex was amazing. That's why it took however long it took (months, years, whatever) for Eve to ever interact with the serpent. Also, probably to even notice that there were trees other than the one that she was eating from / getting fucked under.

Adam and Eve spent all day every day making exquisite love and feeding each other delectable and permissible fruits. They were adventurous only in terms of one another's bodies. There was post-coital cuddling. There was intellectual intimacy. There was no wet spot to avoid. Eve was unconcerned about any sort of rotten smell that would grow inside of her if she didn't wash immediately after sex, because such a smell did not exist. She was never sore. Adam truly loved eating her cunt. Adam always came. Eve always came. They could not get enough of each other, and the feeling didn't fade out after a year, or three years, or a hundred years. There was no one else.

One day, Eve woke up next to Adam and admired from close-range the way that his skin looked in the late afternoon light. She found herself, as she so often did, wholly overcome by her desire for him. Unfortunately for Eve, and for all of us, really, all of her



daughters, she had to pee. It was when she went to go relieve herself that the serpent approached her about the fruit, saying that she should taste it. There was a brief struggle, a brief moment of inner turmoil for Eve, and then she ate the fruit. Because she realized that she was actually really hungry. And the fruit sounded really good. And it was really good, she found out as she chewed. Obviously, she brought it to Adam, and told him that he had to try it. Adam, half-asleep but always thrilled to be roused by this woman, hesitated only slightly before opening his lips as Eve brought the new fruit towards them. Adam bit down, and he chewed, and before he'd even swallowed Eve was bringing her own mouth down to meet his. God found out and gave them the speech about the punishments that everyone talks about – they had to leave the garden, food wouldn't just fall from the sky or spring from the ground, and childbirth would be more intensely painful than Eve could imagine.

As Adam and Eve were leaving Eden, God pulled Eve aside and said *hey, so, I just wanted to let you know, all that about excruciating labor, that's not your punishment. That was going to be the case regardless. Sorry. I didn't want to tell you what I'm actually doing in front of Adam. I didn't want to make him feel too shitty. Anyway, have fun teaching Adam how to please you.* And God laughed just a little bit.

Eve appeared to not fully understand what this meant.

God began to clarify, *you know, he'll need to be re-trained, if you're comfortable phrasing it that way, if you know what I mean.* God paused. *Like, sexually.*

Eve interjected, a bit frazzled now, saying that no, she didn't know what God meant, and that she'd never done anything with Adam that she would refer to as "training."

*Right, well, it won't be quite so easy this time,* God said, and then, in a style typical of a Disney villain or a very small animal, was no longer there.

I am fully convinced that any girl who says that she always orgasms or orgasms easily or has not had to actually work at showing someone what she likes and how to get her off is lying, or doesn't know better, or has some disorder that I've been unable to develop myself.

I'm convinced that this is the real story. There is absolutely no way that it would've taken Eve a hundred years to explore the food options in Eden if Adam had been as clueless or as incompetent or just generally as unconcerned as the guys I've been sleeping with.

## Paris

I've always wanted to go to Paris. I almost went once.

I took French all through college, you know, so I was pretty good. I took three years of French, and then, my junior year, my boyfriend proposed to me.

My mother gave me a choice — she said, “You can get married this summer, or you can go to France.” I obviously made the wrong choice, because, not too long afterwards, I divorced him.

He kept saying, “I’ll take you to Paris, we’ll have a much better time together.” He talked like he’d been there himself, telling me all the things we’d do, all the reasons that it would be nicer to be in Paris with my husband.

Well, I bit that hook.

I mean, say that to any twenty-one year old girl, you say, “Honey, wouldn’t you rather go to Paris with your husband?” and you’ve got her. You offer her a nice ring, and a big wedding before the weather gets too hot, and you tell her that she’s still going to get what she wants and what she’s been working for... well, she’ll be bent over the tailgate of your F150 with her dress up around her waist in no time at all, let me tell you.

I left Oklahoma with him that summer after our wedding and went to Los Angeles where he’d enrolled in law school. I’m sure that my mother’s offer had had more to do with keeping me in college than it did with any desire to send me to Europe. I spent six years living in California with him, just, you know, waiting, while he did everything that he was doing there. I began to realize that all my dreams had been put on hold. I’d dropped out of school. I still hadn’t been to Paris. I wasn’t doing anything that I wanted to do. I had a job working at this clothing store called Show Pony. The owner always

made fun of me. I'm not the type of person who should be working in retail or fashion or whatever. After that, I worked at this plant nursery, which was nice, I guess, but I was only doing it to get out of the house a few days a week. I did a little bit of volunteer work at the library around the corner from our apartment. I watched a whole lot of daytime television. I got really good at making pies. I spent a ton of time doing absolutely nothing at all. And then, one day, I packed as much stuff as I could fit in my car and I drove all the way back down to Oklahoma in one straight shot.

You know what? He went to Paris without me. He bought me a pair of ugly earrings and shipped them to me in Oklahoma. Cheap jewelry, that was it. If he wanted me back, don't you think he would've sent me a plane ticket? Don't you think he would've made a trip back to Oklahoma, with plane tickets for both of us to Paris, like he'd promised?

Really, it doesn't matter, though. He's an associate at some law firm in Houston. He's probably miserable. And I've got my husband and my kid, and I went back to school, and I have a job that I love, and it doesn't matter so much that I've never been out of the country. I've still got time.

## Berlin

I've started reading the Missed Connections posted on Craigslist in New York. They often remind me of you.

There are a few kinds. The first is the sort of painfully specific type. "We were married for three days in 1989, and I saw you on the subway," these say, and then continue on, in vague but tangible detail, about the way that "we" met. "I" transferred to NYU, hoping to become a poet. "You" befriended "I" and there was some spark, but "you" wasn't into labels or commitment. "We" were married at City Hall on a dare. "We," after three days, because "we" were worried about what the families would think, got an annulment. "I" spent the rest of the semester in the bed belonging to "you." Then "I" found out that his father was dying in a remote village in Japan. "We" lost touch. Then, this morning, "I" saw "you" on the L train. "You" saw "I," too. "I" misses "you" now. And then the question is raised: Would "you" perhaps like to grab some coffee with "I" sometime?

The second type is written in code. The stories are appealing to me because, even though I've accepted the fact that I'm entirely incapable of imagination, I'm pretty good at empathy. "very tired," these are titled. "Even tricked I can be," they say. "In love with you still I am," they say. "Body beat. Head hurt. Need water. Hope to see you soon." Sometimes, there is an answer. "re: very tired," these are titled. "I love you," they say. "I miss you," they say. "I hope this is not the end," they say. They command, "Remember continuity." They wish, "hope the sun brings warmer rays."

Location: "always right here, you know."

The third is sort of boring. Either they're too factual. ("Blonde hair and jean shorts," these say, "at the Laundromat." They say, "hi." And that's all.) Or they're just uncreative. ("Happy Birthday," these say. "You get one wish." A strong-ish beginning. And then, "I'm not sure what day this month is your birthday," they admit, so that when they finish, "I hope that your wish is that you were here with me," it sounds sort of insincere, sort of lazy.)

I imagine writing a Missed Connections posting.

*You lived next door to me. We became friends.*

*The night that you took molly for the first time, I walked around with you until it kicked in, and then you went to go hang out with other people. Later that night, you asked me to come dance with you. I didn't. The next day, you said it was better that I hadn't, because you would've just tried to grind with me or make out with me. I almost cried because I was so upset at having missed my chance to be with you.*

*You visited me at home that summer. You slept in my bed, and I slept in another bed. I visited you at home that summer. I slept in your room, on the floor. Again, I was upset because you hadn't tried to kiss me and I hadn't been invited into your bed.*

*We had sex for the first time that fall. Someone had chained their bike to my bike, so you walked me to my apartment. You stayed for a very long time. At first, I just wanted you to leave so that I could go to sleep. Then you said, "I want to kiss you" or "Can I kiss you?" I said that I needed to brush my teeth first. We kissed. You spent the night. It was thundering outside. We did something similar to dating for a while. I wanted to tell you that I loved you. Then your cat died and you decided that you actually still wanted to*

*be with a girl that you'd sort of dated for a while a few months before. I was upset, and left town for the weekend and cried to my friends about you.*

*You and I had sex for the first time again that winter. It was freezing. We'd toyed with the idea for a while, talked about it very cryptically, and in your room you said, "I just need you to take the first step," or something. So I came forward with my lips. Afterwards, you thanked me for taking that step.*

*We "dated" or whatever that whole summer, and that whole fall.*

*You were planning to go away that spring. I planned to go away, too. In a sort of I'd-rather-die-than-live-without-you kind of way. There was lot of drama surrounding these decisions, but it can't be characterized by casual-yet-vivid details or described in witty one-liners.*

*That winter, before you left and before I left, you were living in a small top-floor apartment that belonged to your friend who had gone home for a few months seeking medical attention for an illness from her childhood that had recently reappeared. I would often visit you for days at a time, and we would spend the entirety of the visit not really doing anything. We made banana bread, and we made meatballs, but surely that didn't take four days.*

*We watched movies in your friend's bed. There was this very strange window on the ceiling, directly above the mattress. It was rectangular. I told you that it reminded me of this book that I'd seen at a rented vacation house as a child called *The Pop-Up Book of Phobias*. You said you'd seen that book, too, once. The window looked like the page for the fear of death, which looked like you were lying down in a grave and looking up at all these people standing around the hole. We lay in bed and looked up at the dark or*

*grey sky through that rectangular window and I thought about what it must be like for your friend to lie in this bed and look up at it, because she was supposedly actually dying.*

*We broke up two weeks after I left. Two weeks before you left. We kept talking. Then we got back together. Then we broke up. You said you didn't want to be with me. I begged. Then you begged, and I said that I didn't want to be with you. You said you couldn't get over me. Lots of things happened, but none of them were beautiful and none of them involved any symbolic imagery or profound gestures, because they all happened over the phone or the internet and involved one or both of us being a total asshole or a whiny bitch, and nothing came of any of it.*

*Recently, you posted a song to your SoundCloud page about our break up. It was actually really good. It was funny to compare it to the songs that you'd showed me last year or the year before. Those were nice, I liked them. This one was amazing.*

*Recently, I saw on Facebook that your friend whose apartment we stayed in is doing better. She tagged you in a status thanking her fifteen closest friends for being so unbelievably wonderful and supportive this past year.*

*It's nice to know, I guess, that you're still doing things. I mean, literally, that you are still existing, even if I'm not really aware of your existence.*

*My Missed Connection sort of trails off here. Because I haven't seen you in a year now, and we don't really talk because you're not really over me, or you're totally over me – I don't know which, because we don't really talk.*

*But I wonder, when I read about people finding each other after so long, or missing each other and coming to terms with the space in between them, if we will find each other again, after the three-hundred-and-sixty-five-plus days (and despite the many*



more miles) by which we've been separated. And I wonder, were that space to close itself, or were we to close that space, would I recognize the person that I would see?

When I felt in control of the piling up of time and of places and of other things that kept us apart, I was sure that I had no idea who I would find at the other end of that distance.

As the accumulation of those things begins to feel less and less like something that I have any type of power over, I find myself feeling unsettlingly certain that the answer is just "you."

## **Salt Lake City**

Christmas this year. I'm not really sure what word to use to describe it? Weird? Strange? Different.

The days before Christmas were all great. I had fun buying presents. The kids and I had the best time playing in the snow and writing letters to Santa and decorating our tree and making cookies.

I woke up on Christmas Eve and immediately started crying. Literally hysterically sobbing. Like uncontrollably.

Dividing holiday time between families is difficult. Last year Zach and I decided that it was too difficult to go to both of our families' houses in one night. Neither of our kids was even old enough to stay up for one entire holiday gathering. There was no way that they would make it through two. It seemed like a good idea to alternate year-to-year. Last year was a Stansfield year. This year was a Jones year.

I woke up on Christmas and just couldn't keep it together. I continued to be unable to keep it together for the rest of the day. I barely made it through Zach's parents' party that evening. I started crying again on the way home.

In summary: I ruined Christmas.

I honestly didn't think it would be that hard. But clearly I handled it pretty badly.

## **Santa Fe**

Last fall, my mother started exchanging a poem a day with an Italian cab driver.

She'd taken a trip to Italy. She got into a cab (his cab) and they started talking, and she spent twenty-four "hot" hours with him before coming home.

They texted a lot. I'm not sure exactly how the poems started. Maybe the idea came up in the cab when they were talking. They discussed their shared love of poetry. He said he liked Neruda.

She's always wanted to write a novel. I think she's started like five of them. She used to write some poetry, as well. She says she likes having deadlines. I think it's good for her. She found someone who everyday will ask "hey, where's my poem?" So they texted each other these poems for like two months. She flew back to visit him just after Christmas.

She said that her Italian cab driver inspired her poetry, and that this other guy in New York that she started seeing around the same time inspired her prose.

This guy in New York wanted her to do national novel writing month with him. She said that she didn't know if she could commit to writing ten pages a day for a month, but that maybe she would write a page a day for a year or something. I never really thought about novel writing month as a group activity, which is silly because any event that spans an entire nation would be, probably, by definition, a group activity. I never really thought that promising to do anything for a month would feel like too much in comparison to doing something for a year. I guess I also wouldn't necessarily ever think to assume that one might meet their soulmate in a taxi in a foreign country. Although, of course, he's not really her soulmate — he's just her muse for the moment, even though

that moment has been indefinitely extended. And she wasn't really committing to a year of writing – she was just saying that she'd write a page a day for a month, and then perhaps continue the practice.

Unfortunately, her Italian cab driver/poet was much more persistent than her American novelist. Unfortunate, because her novel never even really got started, and she recently went to Italy for what was supposed to be a month-long visit, but one month turned into three, and at the end of the third month, she called and let us know that she was just getting so much work done there in her rented loft apartment and that she was so happy and that she was going to stay for another few months. So we've decided that she probably isn't coming back. I asked her once, early on, like, "So, is he your boyfriend?" She told me I was being silly. She said "boyfriend" was a childish word, and that she just really enjoyed his company.

I guess I'm just not sure what to think, because she met this guy who was just driving a cab, and within like six months she had basically moved to a totally different country to go be with him. And I've been dating this guy that I sort of went to college with and sort of met online, and we've been doing what we're doing for almost a year at this point and recently we've been talking about me moving to Santa Fe, where he lives, and I just went out there to visit him and to look around for neighborhoods that I would want to live in, and I thought that I had decided to move there, but now we've hit this rough patch, and I just don't really know anymore. He's my boyfriend; we're in a relationship. That part is clear. But relocating is such a huge commitment.

## **Surprise**

Last week my brother Spencer showed me some songs that he's been working on. They were so beautiful. He's just so unbelievably brilliant, and it made me think about the musical talent that I used to have, and the ability to write music that I used to be gifted with. That was something that I used to do easily. Now it's incredible if I can sit down for even just a few minutes and play. Actually having the time to compose something? I can't even imagine.

This weekend I went to see my sister's daughter in *The Nutcracker*. I sobbed uncontrollably through probably ninety-eight percent of the performance. Hearing the music and seeing those girls dancing. Thinking about how I used to be up there on that stage. It was really difficult.

The other day I took a walk with Noah and Sophie, and we went past the grade school in our neighborhood. All of the kids were out for recess. I felt like that was just me. Like I was just there. I was just one of those kids. I had one of those moments where I just couldn't even begin to process what I was being confronted with. One minute, you're in school with your friends, thinking that boys are cute and not talking to them, dancing all the time, eating graham crackers and peanut butter and skinless apple slices, watching "Sesame Street." And then, so suddenly, as if it happened in just one single instant, while you were sleeping, or more quickly, while you were brushing your teeth, as you looked down away from the mirror to spit into the sink, you're an adult and you've got two kids next to you – your kids – and you're standing on the other side of the fence watching kids much younger than you and not so much older than your own children do

things that you might still know how to do if you ever thought to try them again. Literally when did any of this even happen?

When I thought that the world revolved around me, everything was much easier. I've learned that this is not at all the case. The world doesn't revolve around me anymore. Life is not about me. I'm not meant to be dancing all the time, or writing music all the time. I miss those things more than I know how to express, but it's not what I'm supposed to be using my energy for. I believe that I had my time in the spotlight, and I'm so grateful for it, and will be forever. Now I just pray that I'm granted time to allow Noah and Sophie their own opportunities to shine and be in the spotlight and do whatever it is that they will want to do.

"Why can't you have it all?" is what everyone always asks. "Why can't you be a dancer AND a composer AND a mother?" Honestly, I don't want that. Nothing will ever be the same, and I'm fine with that. I have memories of how it was, and that's enough for me. Do I wish that I had a time machine that would allow me to go back to that time when I could dance without really putting in effort and have it be amazing and perfect and magical? When I could, in one afternoon, write something truly exquisite? Yes. Completely. But I know that I need to be grateful for the fact that I was given that time, and that I need to move forward and get good at something new.

Being a mom to my kids might be a good place to start. My husband tells me that I'm good at taking care of them, that I do a good job with them. But he's off every day putting his degree in civil engineering to good use, and my music and dance double major obviously isn't getting me anywhere. Nobody is applauding me for either of those skills, now.

I want to be good with my kids, though. I'd like to excel at motherhood. It's just hard. Even though I feel sad sometimes and even though I miss the way things were, I am the happiest now and the most blessed that I have ever been. So... even though I don't feel exceptional or brilliant or gifted anymore, I know in my mind that I am where I'm supposed to be and that I'm doing what I'm meant to be doing. And I try to know it in my heart, too, and sometimes that's easy to feel. Sometimes, when I'm home, and I'm eating graham crackers and peanut butter and skinless apple slices and watching "Sesame Street" with Noah, or I'm listening to The Nutcracker and making Sophie's legs – her little, chubby, beautiful legs – move like the Marzipan dancer, I feel like nothing has really changed at all.

## **South Congress**

I was standing on the edge of a forest, and these bats started flying out of the tress. Thousands of bats. Imagine the way the water would move around a breaking dam. Imagine bats instead of water.

One of them almost hit me, but missed. I hid under a picnic table to try to escape the flood of small, furry, sharp, airborne bodies. The next one flew straight at me, at my head, which I'd poked out from underneath the table so that I could watch what was happening, and it latched on to my face with its feet. It was strange – usually when you see pictures of bats attached to things, they are hanging upside down. This one was standing straight up. Its body was stacked evenly over its feet, which were firmly rooted to my forehead, right at my hairline.

I panicked. I yelled. Nobody helped me. I was with my family – my parents and everyone. Nobody helped. Someone called a doctor.

I had to stay very still so that the bat wouldn't get violent. Every time I moved even a little bit the bat reacted violently. I was scared that my skin would tear more. I was scared that it would get to my eyes. Monkeys can rip human faces off, and they don't even have claws. It hurt when the bat moved.

The doctor took forever to come. When he finally arrived, he seemed unconcerned. He looked at me, huddled there under the picnic table, and then went for a walk around the house that we were outside of. My family went, too. To give him a tour of the exterior. To watch while he admired the architecture. It was an old house. Very beautiful. Brick. Classic.

I stayed there alone outside trying to be very still.



Somehow, I was gone from underneath the picnic table. I was in a bed. I was staying so still that I fell asleep. It was an uneasy sleep, the kind where you aren't actually sure that you are sleeping, and you aren't sure how much time has passed, and you know you won't feel rested when you come out of it. I kept grinding my teeth because I was so anxious and so restless and so angry that I had been left alone and that nobody was helping me. I could feel all of this grit in my mouth while I lay unasleep in that bed. I'd spit, and, with my saliva, I'd expel the powder that I'd made of my teeth.

I woke up. I realized that the bat wasn't attached to me anymore. I looked at the bed, pulled apart the sheets, and the bat's body was there. It had died. Everyone had left me alone with that bat on my face until it just died and let go.

I got up and I looked in the mirror and I had these red marks where the bat had been holding on. My teeth hurt. I opened my mouth and looked inside and my molars were flattened. Leveled. It hurt so much and it was so disgusting to look at. The scars that would stay on the skin broken by the bat's toes were actually sort of cool, I thought. But the teeth really upset me. I felt angry again that nobody has helped me. Also, I didn't want to have to move the bat's body out of my bed, and I didn't want to have to ever sleep in my bed again.

I could see behind me the bat still in the sheet-tangle. It was huge. Not at all the size of a regular bat. More like a large chicken.

I couldn't look at my teeth anymore.

**McAllen**

The same people who don't believe in something bigger, those are the same people who don't believe in the death penalty. They don't think we should kill people for crimes like that, no. But when it's their daughter that gets raped, right, do they still feel like this person shouldn't be punished, shouldn't be put to death? No.

I believe in those things. God and the death penalty.

My grandmother, when I was a child, anything that was wrong with us, she'd cleanse us with an egg. Anything that couldn't be explained, you know, like, we didn't have a fever, nothing like that, it was evil done to us by someone else. Someone looked at us wrong, and cast something upon us. Like if someone looked at us, if they admired us but they didn't touch us. And she'd take this egg, she'd rub it all over our bodies, like this, and then she'd crack the egg into a glass and depending on how the egg settled, you know, like, where the yolk landed or floated, how it separated, she'd say *oh it was that person, they looked at you* and we'd be cured. Mal de ojo is what it is called.

My great aunt, too, my madrina, she can do that, too, all of those kinds of things. Once, I went to go see her, and I told her I had this terrible stomachache. I really felt so nauseous and weak. I didn't know what to do with myself. She looks at me and she starts touching my neck and the back of my head and the top of my back. Her hands came to my forearms and she started feeling the middle of my left arm, just right below my elbow, her thumb was rubbing circles right there. She said, *It's right here, this is where is it*. And I said, *no, I told you, it's my stomach*. And she didn't listen, she just went and she took out some butter and some tomato paste, and she put it together in a pot on the stove and she started cooking it. And then she poured it into a glass and told me to drink it and

she kept rubbing circles on my arm. And I drank it and felt better. The next time I felt like that, I got out some butter and some tomatoes and I cooked them together and I drank it like she had me do, and it didn't do anything.

I don't see her that much. It's hard – it takes a lot out of me. I carry such a burden with me, and she can always see that. It's difficult to say what's really there, what's hanging over me. Most people aren't so intuitive, so it's not very often that I'm asked to acknowledge it. But she sees it.

I have this weight that follows me around. It always has.

I have this dream all the time. I feel this pressure on my chest, and someone choking me with the chain around my neck, pulling my head up with it, like a noose. There's laughter, they say *you know why we're doing this, yes? Do you know why we are doing this?* And I can't answer because I can't breathe, but I'm screaming, trying to scream, trying to stop them. It happens when I don't take the chain off before I go to bed. If I'm wearing the one with Christ on it – I have this one and one other one with a cross – I'm fine, but if I wear a plain one, I have that dream. I told my wife about it while we were still dating. I said, *listen, baby, I have something I have to tell you*, and I told her and now she knows and she'll wake me up when she hears me breathing heavy or trying to yell. Thank God for her because I don't know what would happen if she didn't wake me up. That dream, I've had it for so long, and it's only gotten more intense. It's followed me all over, through lots of life changes, lots of houses. I thought at first that it could be a house, you know, that was haunted. But now I know it's me. They laugh, and they say *you know why we are doing this*, and they pull this chain so tight up around my neck.

## **San Antonio**

I left home at eighteen and went to Chicago in search of something that was both real and unfamiliar. I'd seen friends of mine drop off the face of the planet for things that were new to them, but that were pretend. Unrealities, you know. Chemical and emotional crutches. Disguises, maybe. Blinders.

In Chicago, I studied anthropology and applied linguistics, but at a certain point that became an unreality as well. Because what was I studying for? I was paying for a degree, and then what was I going to do with it?

I left Chicago to travel. I went all over the place – from Alaska to the Amazon. I walked, and sailed, and hitched rides. I slept under the stars alone on beaches and under the trees with exotic tribes in rainforests. I've done all these things that are part of my nature – of our nature, as humans. You know, I've acted in all of these ways that highlight basic survival instincts that, when you look at the general population of this country, appear to have died out. But I've got the same genes, and I'm, to a certain extent at least, predisposed to the same things that everyone else is. I know that there is this sort of flakiness, a kind of fluff, that people associate with me, or with people like me, because there's a certain accepted way of living that I've rejected, but honestly I think I'm so much more down to earth than most people. It's not that I'm more capable. I'm sure that when faced with the challenge and when armed with the proper training most people could figure out how to navigate a boat through a storm, or kill a deer with their bare hands. I'm not better than anyone else in that regard. I'm just more in touch with these essential human skills. We evolved with these inherent traits – strength and bravery and resourcefulness. But while others use their energy to master what is not inherent to us

or to any other species on this planet, and to excel in all of these unnatural fields, I have put effort into uniting myself fully with the things that humans were united with from the very start.

I traveled, as I mentioned earlier, in search of truth. Strange truths: unfamiliar ones. I felt like the truths that I'd grown up on were incomplete. And I was right. They were incomplete. They were incorrect. All of those uncontacted tribes down in South America, do you think they're out there working desk jobs or eating highly processed meat or stressing about how they are going to pay their rent and their cable bill and their student loans? They aren't. There's a reason that they are referred to as being the last free people on earth. Anyway, I'm rambling.

At some point, after I'd done a certain number of these natural, human things, I began to really think more deeply about the experiences that I'd had and that I was having, and to be more aware in a reflective way of what I was doing. I thought, you know, well, I've done all of these things, but what haven't I done? And I thought about the most basic human instincts, after survival, I guess, and I thought about love. I thought, wow, I've done all of these things, things that most people might call outlandish or adventurous, but I've never been in love. I've never had a girlfriend. I started thinking about her, this girlfriend that I'd never had, and I tried to imagine her, and what she would be like, and where I would find her.

Sometimes I'd think that I'd found her, but I hadn't. Unlucky is an understatement. I had a couple of female acquaintances that I was interested in, but none of them returned the interest, so I knew that none of them could be the one. I started

actively seeking her – the one – out. On dating sites and social networking ones, in bars and clubs and dance halls, at work, on vacation. All over the place.

Once, I thought I'd found her at the grocery store, standing in the canned goods aisle, reading the labels on some black beans. I asked her what her name was, and she told me right there that she was not interested. Once, I thought that I'd found her at a coffee shop that I go to quite frequently. She was asking the man behind the counter whether their chai lattes were made with syrup or a homemade chai concentrate. She let me sit with her while she drank the herbal tea with honey that she ordered after she found out that the chai was made with syrup. But she didn't keep in touch. Another time, I thought that I had found her on the street when I went to visit a friend of mine in Sacramento. She was wearing a large, blue t-shirt with a name and logo that I couldn't quite make out. She was wearing a sweatshirt over the t-shirt, and she was holding this clipboard that she kept moving around in front of her body. Her energy was really fantastic. As I got closer, though, I noticed that she was canvassing for Save the Children, and when she approached me, the line that she led with was "do you like kids?" After a certain number of failed attempts, I just stopped looking.

And that's when she came to me.

One night at Big Bend she came to me. I was there, laying out under the sky, and I fell asleep with the Milky Way bright above me. In this dream I had, there was a woman. This truly exquisite, perfect woman lay down next to me and told me all about herself. She told me about her passion for archeology, her interest in neuroscience, the research that she had done with chimpanzees in Louisiana, her pet cats, the time that she spent as a music therapist in a nursery school for children with developmental delays, the

taste for raw fish that she'd developed while studying abroad in Japan, her dream of one day leaving the life we knew for something better and more satisfying. We made plans. She embraced me, but in that moment of contact, her presence felt so much lighter, so much less tangible, than it had when she was speaking. She was fading. She faded, and I woke up, and the sun was rising.

I couldn't get this woman off of my mind. I was sure that she was the missing piece. She was the one thing that I wanted that I didn't have. She was the thing I hadn't yet done. I had been looking for her for so long, and I couldn't lose her. I couldn't give her up that easily. I decided that I needed to find her. I had nothing to lose.

When I got back to San Antonio, I made posters, and I put them up around all the places I thought that she might be. I described myself. I described her. I described the things that she and I would do together. On our first date, I said, we would go to the park and look for pecans. When I was younger, I wrote a book about the modern hunter-gatherer. She would enjoy the knowledge that I'd have to share on the subject. We would climb trees, and kiss while sitting in the top-most branches. We would look for stray cats. I love cats, and she obviously loves cats; she has two of her own.

On our second date, I wrote, we would spend a week camping on the beach. No tents. We would wear deerskins. We would light fires with sticks. We would catch fish and eat them raw. We would spear stingrays at night. We would laugh at the people who could not do what we were doing.

Our third date would last six months, or perhaps longer. Perhaps our third date would be our last, in that it would never come to an end; we would never part ways. On our third date, I thought, we would take a bus to New Mexico, where we would hitchhike

to a wilderness area, in which we would live like animals in a cave. We would do experiments. We would measure the effects of linguistic attrition and visuospatial problem solving dominance on altered states of consciousness and neuroplasticity in the prefrontal cortex.

A friend of mine asked me about these posters. Well, not a friend, exactly. An acquaintance whom I ran into while putting the posters up. He looked at them and he said, “Man, who do you think has time to go on a six-month-long date with you?” And I told him that the real question should be how is it that nobody would have the time for that. How can it be that no one else can find the time to do this? That’s really what we should be asking.

There are over seven billion people in the world and the vast majority of them live their lives according to conventional wisdom that actually has only taken shape within the past hundred years or so – such an insignificant amount of time in terms of the whole history of the world and of humanity, too, even. If flipping burgers to pay your bills, and escaping from the grind of your day-to-day life with drugs (the most heavily abused drugs being religion and television), is all there is to human life at this point, maybe we should go the way of the dinosaurs.

When I find her, I know that she’ll agree. We’ll laugh together about how ridiculous it is that other people refuse to have time for these beautiful things, and we’ll find joy in the fact that we’ve found each other, and that we had the time to find each other, and, now that we’ve found each other, that we have time to do all of these things together.



## **Houston**

Fact: Ten percent of the people in America have, at one point or another, used an internet dating site or a mobile dating app. Fact: Two-thirds of these people have met, in real life, an individual with whom they were connected by a dating site or app. Fact: Almost a quarter of the ten percent of Americans who are dating online or via phone have entered into a long-term relationship or a marriage with someone that they have met through a dating site or app.

Tinder, an app launched in September of 2012, which I will categorize with other methods of online dating but would never refer to as a “dating” app, was my initiation into the ten percent. While not necessarily something one would be wise to use for actual dating (a term I understand to be a clean way of referring to the process in which a person tries on a number of other people in hopes of finding one that fits in that soulmate kind of way), Tinder revolutionizes the one-night-stand, intensifies the randomness of the random hook-up, and allows for sexual encounters so much more casual than was previously imaginable.

Here’s how it works: You download the app. It creates a profile for you using information from Facebook, which consists of your first name, five pictures, and a tagline (“UT Biology major, ’14,” or “Zionist, herbalist, lyricist, skater, debater, creator,” or “I’m Jonathan and this is my tinder profile.”) You are presented with the profiles of people currently in the area immediately surrounding you. You have two options: swipe the profile left to pass or right to like. If you “like” someone, and they have also “liked” you, you get a notification saying that you “have a new match.” Because you and this other

person have both expressed interest, the app allows you to exchange messages via an instant messenger-like communication feature. The rest is up to you.

Tinder was introduced to me by colleagues — all males between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five. They “tindered” constantly and discussed it openly. I downloaded Tinder essentially because I felt left out and also insanely curious, due to the fact that none of my friends had ever actually met in person any of their Tinder matches. How much fun could it possibly be to rate people, find out who had rated you the same way, talk to them, and never meet them? I was fully prepared to join the third of online daters who do it only for the conversation.

After a week of rating and chatting (which was actually incredibly fun, and very addictive) I went on my first Tinder date. I almost wish that there had been something strange about it, but there was not. It was shockingly normal. We took his Vizsla to the park. We got beers. I went home with him. Honestly, I didn’t download the app thinking about finding love or anything close to that. But he was so cute with his dog, and his eyes were so blue, and my heart kind of melted when he told me that he’d actually been engaged to a girl in Alabama, but that he’d had to move away and the relationship had fallen apart, and that this was alright because he was happy to have found out that it wouldn’t have worked because basically he didn’t believe in divorce, at least not for himself. “If you promise to love someone forever, you’ve got to do that,” he said. I was hooked.

I mean it when I say that I wasn’t looking for love. I’d filed the app in a folder on my iPhone labeled “Buying Things” with the Amazon and Zappos apps. I made a rule that I would never initiate a conversation, that I would just wait and see what came my

way. But I'd forgotten or underestimated how nice it is to have someone's attention, and how exciting it is to meet someone that you have an especially great time with, and how good it feels to wake up next to that person and to smell their smell in a slightly disheveled bed in a room dark except for the sunlight coming in around the blinds.

I spent a week pining over the first Tinder date. He was attractive, and it was nice to spend time with him, and even though I hadn't been seeking out that sort of relationship, I found myself wanting to see him again and a lot. Despite this, I refused to throw myself at him (meaning offer myself to him at all without him asking first.) Instead of reaching out to him and letting him know that I was thinking about him, I waited for him to reach out to me. I allocated him the traditional three-day period post-date during which it is appropriate to request a follow-up date, and when he didn't call within that window, I picked another Tinder match and I went on another Tinder date. And then I went on a third.

The fourth worked in software development and had been in the Army. He had good taste in music, made incredibly intelligent jokes, and drove a grey, two-door BMW. He didn't try to kiss me on the first date. A week later, he invited me out with his friends. When his friends asked how we knew each other, he said "Tinder" with a kind of confidence that I lack even when I'm only asked my name. He drove me home and kissed me outside of my apartment, before demanding to know whether I was going to invite him inside, which I then did. He undressed me as soon as I got the door unlocked. He wasn't wearing anything underneath his khakis. We had sex that was far less intimate (my couch was not designed for that kind of contact in any position) and far too sweaty (I hadn't gotten the chance to turn the air conditioner on because of the immediate

undressing and penetrating) than first-time sex should ever be. I can't say that I was surprised when he didn't call me again.

Number five took me out for tacos, then margaritas, and then brought me back to his house so he could let out the silver lab puppy that he was trying to turn into a hunting dog. Two days later, he invited me back and grilled one of the most perfect steaks I'd ever had. He talked to me about books and politics, and he seemed genuinely interested in my opinions. Nobody had ever made me a steak before, and nobody had ever tried so hard to lend me their collection of Larry McMurty books, and nobody had ever told me that they really, honestly wanted to know more about my feelings regarding radical feminism. He kissed me hard against the kitchen wall while the steaks were on the grill, and, despite how worked up he got himself, he refused to do anything more until the steaks were done, so they wouldn't get over-cooked. In the end, he took significantly less time to finish than the steaks had. The next time that he invited me over, he asked me to pick up Marlboro Lights for him on my way to his house. I didn't even know that he smoked. The whole thing felt very strange to me then. It wasn't that I cared that he smoked. It was that I realized that I'd been very intimate with someone that I hardly knew. He felt comfortable enough with me to ask me to buy him cigarettes (because we'd had sex and he'd cooked me dinner), and I had never seen him smoke (because I'd known him for less than a week and, even within that period, hadn't spent that much time with him.) I didn't bring him cigarettes, but I did go over to his house. I told him that I hadn't seen his message until I was already standing at his front door. I apologized.

That third night that I spent on his couch watching horrible television, and then in his sheetless bed listening to him snore, I got a little anxious about the time that I was

spending with him, which was starting to feel like time that I was wasting. I came up with excuses to not see him again.

I spoke to law and med students, Airforce pilots, mixed martial arts instructors, pre-school teachers, and single parents who proudly included their children's pictures in their profiles. I had drinks bought and mixed for me, dinner paid for and cooked. I met men in bars and restaurants, parks and grocery stores, and apartments that weren't mine. I slept in houses that were surely paid for by rich parents, and on thickly carpeted floors in downtown loft apartments, and on mattresses in rooms without air conditioning in questionable neighborhoods. The beginning of each "relationship" (meaning, at most, week-long interaction that might or might not end with a date which might or might not end with sex) was just as exciting as the one before. Each new person was just as intriguing as the last, either because they actually were or because I wanted them to be. And all of this happened within just a couple of months.

I started to get bored. Or rather, I told other people I was getting bored. In actuality, I was exhausted. I'd consolidated what would have under other circumstances taken me a year into less than five weeks. Getting excited about people is tiring. Getting tired of people is tiring. Having people get tired of you is tiring.

A month and a half after I downloaded the app, as my interest in participating in this most-interesting social experiment was waning, I got a "new match" notification and a message, which turned into a conversation. The next night we went out for drinks, which turned into dinner and more drinks. We closed down two bars, and, as we stood in the parking lot of the last one after being told to leave, I did something I'd never done before, and asked him if he wanted to come have one last drink at my apartment. He said

yes, and we spent at least fifteen minutes kneeling on my kitchen floor, our eyes level with the counter top, trying to stack perfectly the tops of the four beer bottles we'd opened. He kissed me goodbye the next morning, and that night he took me out with his friends. The night after that, he asked what my plans were. "I could put on a nice shirt and bring over a bottle of wine or something, if you want," he'd said.

He was going out of town later that week. The night before he was supposed to leave he asked if he could come over for a bit. He stayed for six hours, and then left. Twenty minutes later, after he'd gotten home, he texted and asked if he could come back. "I have laundry to do, but I could do it at your house, if you wouldn't mind. I have to drop my dog off with a friend early, but I could bring him, too." Twenty minutes after that he was back at my door with a bag of dirty clothes and the dog.

It had been so stressful with the others to meet them, to like them, and then to have to either wonder if they liked me as much as I liked them, or to know that they liked me more than I liked them. It was tiring to have to fight for attention, and it was tiring to have to fight attention off. It was sad to watch these possibilities (these futures that I imagined for myself, despite the fact that I was convinced that I wasn't looking for anything long term, or anything at all) come and go, whether or not I even really wanted them.

It was nice that this newest one stuck around, and seemed semi-reliable. It was nice to have some kind of certainty about our "relationship," whether or not we would ever actually refer to it as that. We spent every night together in my bed or his. There wasn't time to wonder if he was with anyone else, or if it was anything other than what it seemed like. It felt like a lot of time to devote to something that wasn't real, or that didn't

mean something. But, four months later, he drifted off the same way that the others had. It didn't matter that we'd slept next to each other ninety times instead of once. It didn't matter that we'd met each other's friends, or that we'd talked about things that were meaningful to us, or that we'd told each other secrets. We got bored, and we'd met via a smartphone app designed to promote the most casual sex and as much of it as possible, so there wasn't much we held in common, or there wasn't much holding us together. We didn't live anywhere near each other, we didn't frequent the same places, and we didn't share the same friends. There was no place that we'd ever run into each other if we hadn't specifically planned to be there at the same time. There was nobody who would consider it their responsibility to see that we saw each other again, to see if anything would happen.

One fortieth of Americans meet their long-term romantic partner on the Internet in some way or another. I wonder what percentages of Americans meet their partners at the grocery store, or in a traffic jam, or in the waiting room of a doctor's office. I mean real partners – not just people that they bring home once and then continue calling for sex, or for company when nobody else is around, or for showing off to their friends who often comment on how they never bring dates around. I wonder how different those percentages would be if we looked for love – real love – in those places, too.

**Alice**

I had this really profound thought the other day. It sounds stupid. I don't want to tell you, not with all these people around.

I'll tell you. It's just, I was thinking like, who do we work for? Like, there are all these people with so much money. And we think we work for the people with the most money, right? I mean, the people that we literally work for actually have so much money. But you think about like how they got that money, you know? And you wonder like, who are we actually working for? Is it the people with all the money? Or is it those smaller paychecks, the people who work for them? Because those people at the top, they have the money they have because of the people they have working for them, you know? That's where their money comes from. Or not even that, though. That's what's crazy.

I think about what I'm doing, and the money that I'm making, and the money that I want to make, and it's crazy that I can do that just by managing other people's money without even touching it. I'm making money by just thinking about other people's money. And it's crazy because these people, these clients of ours, they have more money that I could ever aspire to have.

But if you think about their money, and where it really comes from, it's such a mind fuck. Our biggest client, right? The Subway guy? Do you realize how much money he has? Can you imagine having 1.5 billion dollars that you just sign over to someone and say "Here, hold on to this for me, I don't need to touch this ever, hold on to it until I die?" He has literally over a billion dollars just hanging out in a life insurance policy. And he'll never even see it. When you've got that much money though, what's a billion



dollars? Realistically, what can you buy with five billion dollars that you can't buy with four?

Anyway, he has all that money, and in part it comes from all of those people making sandwiches for minimum wage, those smaller paychecks. But really, if you think about it, it's not even those people. It's the people buying sandwiches. It's the people who make absolutely nothing, and eat fast food, and want to be healthy but live in places where everyone weighs like a million and five pounds.

Really, the sandwiches are only kind of healthy, and only kind of delicious, but there's something about them that is like home to me, because I remember when they seemed really healthy, and when they were really delicious, because I'd only ever eaten Mexican food. Like that's literally all there was to eat. Like that's what happens when you grow up in a small town and there aren't restaurants and nobody ever leaves and if they do, they don't come back. Literally Subway was delicious and I looked like a supermodel. I've told you that, before, I think. About how if you ever want to feel super thin and super beautiful just go walk around Alice.

Anyway, I don't know, that was my thought, you know, like who we work for. And then I got to thinking about what I work for, or what motivates me, and then I had to stop. I don't even know why I was thinking about all this shit, it's so dumb. Like why am I even considering all this deep, philosophical stuff? Like who am I even, fucking Nietzsche? Anyway, shit that happens when I try to stop drinking or whatever. There's no way these cleanses are really worth it, you know? I'll lose five pounds, but the shit that pops up in my brain is just like, why?

## Fort Sam Houston

So the sum of one over  $n$  squared, from  $n$  equals one to infinity... the sum would look like one over one plus one over four plus one over nine plus one over sixteen plus one over twenty-five plus one over thirty-six plus one over forty-nine, and so on. I had a professor incorrectly tell me that that was equal to one. He said that yesterday. That is completely wrong.

Euler found the sum to be  $\pi$  squared over six, which is insane, because here we see  $\pi$ , which really has no place in this sum at all, as this has nothing to do with circles. Why does it appear there? It doesn't make sense for it to. So it's really mysterious and beautiful.

Obviously, because of that, math is so much more interconnected than people would expect. And beautiful. Euler came up with what is generally considered to be the most beautiful equation in mathematics.

So there's this sort of game people play with numbers. To try to manipulate them by conventional means to make them equal zero. And if you can't manipulate them by those particular means, they're considered "transcendental" numbers.  $e$  is a transcendental number. Once again, one that Euler found.

Euler is the one who came up with the formula that just tied everything together. Seriously just changed the game and brought so many important parts of math together to form one equation.  $e$  to the  $i$ -times- $\pi$ <sup>th</sup> power plus one equals zero. This relates  $e$ , which is everywhere, to  $i$ , which is the only way to express complex numbers, to  $\pi$ , and zero... all groundbreaking concepts in and of themselves. But he brought them all together.

I think I just feel really deeply those things that draw your attention to the interconnectedness of all things, and the sort of absolutely endless nature of these connections.

I know it's probably the most famous of all of the things that he ever said, but that Carl Sagan quote about us being star stuff, man, that really gets me. I just can't really understand how anyone can not be touched by that, or how anyone can be anything but happy and cooperative and loving with the awareness that that is what we all are, and that we are all the same stuff. I was telling someone that we're star stuff once. And it led to a huge debate that I did not foresee taking place. I tried to give up. And then they told me that I needed Jesus. And I tried to just respect their opinion and move on, but then they wanted to save my soul.

But that's star stuff, too, I think. It doesn't need saving, probably, because that's probably the most pure star stuff I've got in me.

In Sunday school, when I was little, I used to get a headache trying to think about where God was before he created the world. "A mystery is a truth which we cannot fully understand, but which we firmly believe because we have God's word for it," I was told. But that headache was, for me at least, so much less complex and so much less satisfying than the headache that I got trying to imagine what there was before the universe existed, and how it could be a certain, quantifiable number of years old. And the headache I got after I'd thought about those things, trying to comprehend how there could just be this swelling of the absolute greatest magnitude and speed, and how that one, incredible instant could result in all of this that we see and that we have and that we are. That's crazy. That's fucking beautiful.

## Round Rock

My name is Alice, and my story, or the event that brought me to where I am right now, is as follows —

I started off the night with a single malt scotch, which I enjoy very much, and I ended the night with wine at a friend's house. On my way home, two blocks from my house, I sort of side-swiped a police car. Really I just barely grazed it.

There was a car stopped in the middle lane — the turning lane — that had been pulled over, and a police car there with it, and I moved over on the road so as to not go by too close to those cars, but there was another police car just a little ways up on the other side. I couldn't avoid that one. The damage on my car is hardly even noticeable. But, of course, they stopped me.

They told me to get out of my car, and they had me do some field sobriety tests, which I failed, of course. Then they asked me if I'd do a breathalyzer.

Now, I don't know how I got this in my head, but I think in college someone told me that you should never blow, but that it was okay to do a blood test. Now I know that actually the opposite is true — blood tests always come out higher than breath ones.

Anyway, so I told them, No, I won't blow, but I'll give blood. And they got all excited about that. So they took my blood, and I was arrested.

That was at the end of May, I guess, of last year.

On Tuesday, I'll be going into the Williamson County jail for three weeks. And that's my choice. I have two kids: a seven and a nine year old. I can't explain to them why I have to blow into a thing every day. I do a lot of carpooling and I take clients out. I

do a lot of driving for work. Having an ignition interlock device, being on probation – that doesn't really fit with my lifestyle.

Also, you know, I've been paying the county a ridiculous amount of money for the past few months, and I'll continue paying them for the next two years, so I'm just going to have them pay for me for these twenty-one days. I don't want to give them any more of my money than I already have to give them.

So I'll be in prison for three weeks. Or not prison. Jail. I don't really know what the difference is. I don't know what it will be like.

I started watching *Orange Is the New Black*, but I kind of psyched myself out and I had to stop watching it. I'm sure it isn't really like that, but I guess I don't actually know.

People say it's not so bad. I don't really mean 'people,' I mean like individuals I've met in court-ordered counseling classes. Really messed up individuals. You know, like you'd think they'd been to jail every weekend of their life. This hasn't ever happened to me before, and I can't really believe I waited until I was forty-two to have something like this happen. Not that it ever should, but you know. Anyway, they say it isn't so bad. They say you get three meals a day and you don't have to cook them. But if the food there is anything like the food when I got arrested, I'm going to get real skinny.

People say it's not so bad, because I'm taking three weeks vacation from work, and everything will be taken care of and over with and when I get back, I'll still have my job. I'm telling everyone I'm going on vacation. Everyone other than my kids. Mommy is going on a business trip to China.

So, you know, I think I win, as far as these How-I-Ended-Up-Here stories go. Not to belittle anyone's experience, I know we've all got it rough. But, I think I win. Although, actually, the other car crash was pretty bad. The girl who totaled her car. That might be worse.

**Austin**

After watching Salman Khan's TED talk, we became convinced that there was an effective way of teaching children other than the traditional methods with which both of us are familiar. In discussing Acton Academy with each other, we began to reflect upon what had happened to some of our classmates who were designated as "regular" students and judged unable to keep pace with the more advanced "honors" curriculum. Could some of these "regular" kids have excelled academically if they were given the time to master more basic concepts before being exposed to more complex ones? Certainly the answer is yes. Until recently, we never questioned the morality of the traditional method of classifying children as either "honor students" or "regular students." The fundamental belief at Acton Academy is that every child is a genius. We feel that Acton would give Ben the best opportunity to identify and harness his innate genius.

Since Ben is only two and a half years old, we have not had any first-hand experiences with being parents in either a public or a private educational setting. However, we have begun to educate ourselves through conversations with friends whose children have begun school. We started the process of visiting and evaluating a number of private schools this past fall and we were somewhat alarmed by how similar the elementary schools that we observed were to the elementary schools that we remember attending. Other than access to laptop computers and high-tech chalkboards, the physical classroom and, more importantly, the basic curriculum seem stuck in 1978 (or perhaps even further in the past; this is the earliest point in time that we can speak of from personal experience.) Given the amount that the world has changed in the decades since our own elementary schools experiences, this seems very strange. Learning does not

require students to go to the library to research topics the way it did thirty years ago, but our school visits included tours through libraries that looked identical to the ones that we remembered. Shouldn't the structure and organization of libraries, and of schools as a whole, evolve and change in accordance with the modern developments in education as well as other areas of life? The human race is on its way to populating Mars, building robots that can perform complex surgeries, and altering genetics to eliminate diseases. Certainly it takes more than simply spending scarce resources on high-tech equipment to prepare our children for this future. Housing these technologies is not enough; they are non-traditional materials, and must be used in cutting-edge ways in order to have the groundbreaking effects that they were intended to have. Our son has been using an iPad since he was six months old. He has a real intuition for how these kinds of devices work. The machines in these classrooms need to be used in ways that expand the children's already in-depth knowledge of these kinds of things, and in ways that really take advantage of how well children are able to navigate technological areas and issues. Why spend money on books, and spend class time teaching children about the Dewey Decimal System or how to use encyclopedia-like research books? Wouldn't the money be better spent on things that they can actually use and interact with and learn from in a way that they are used to learning? Wouldn't the time be better spent making sure that they understand the difference between creditable and noncreditable Internet sources? JSTOR accounts must be cheaper than libraries. Will Ben ever need to know how to find something in a book using the index? Why not just give him the material in a format that allows him to find things more simply? Turning pages versus control-F. It seems so obvious that this would be a better, more efficient way of accessing information. The



world has changed, is changing, and will continue to change. Given that schools are the first experience that most children have independently of the world, the education system has a responsibility to keep up with these changes and to prepare any child that enters that system for the changes to come. Any school that does not ready its students for all of the possibilities and opportunities that await them is doing these students a grave disservice.

These changes are exciting, really. They should be embraced. When you turn off the daily news, step back, and actually survey the world that we live in with your own eyes, it is obvious that there is no better time to be alive in this world, there has been no better time to be alive, than the present day. There is less war, less hunger, and less poverty today than there has ever been. We live longer, face a lower risk of disease, and have greater freedom than people have had at any other time in history. America, with its capitalist tradition and established rule of law, still provides a springboard for innovation that is unmatched in the world today.

Ben's mother, Yen, is living proof of these conditions. Fleeing communist Vietnam in 1989, her family arrived in Houston with little more than goodwill from another family member. At sixteen years old, Yen had one aspiration, which was to gain acceptance into college. Once in college, having accomplished that initial objective, her next step was to gain acceptance into medical school. Again, she was successful in meeting her goal. In any other country in the world, would a recent immigrant be given a highly coveted spot in a class of medical students simply based on a four-year record showing academic achievement? America is unlike other countries in her willingness to recognize potential in many different people, for many different things, in many ways, and this dissimilarity is what makes her strong.

I am a regular listener of the weekly EconTalk podcast hosted by Russ Roberts. In a recent episode, Barry Weingast, a guest speaker, ranked every sovereign country based on how long the current form of government had been in place. The government of the United States has been in place the longest of all of the world's nations, dating back to 1789. The most amazing revelation came from looking at this list. The country in the middle position on this list has a current form of government that has been in place for seven years. In other words, in fifty percent of all of the world's nations, the current form of government has been in existence for less than seven years, and, in most cases, this change in government has not been the result of a peaceful process, but rather has been brought about by a violent revolution. Additionally, the countries at the top of this list are the wealthiest in the world. This fact caused me to pause and think about how good we have it in the United States. The rule of law that we take for granted is not the norm in much of the world. There is tremendous effort and inefficiency required to maintain stability within a country. While the democratic process is not always elegant, democracy creates the best platform for long-term stability, and it is this stability that then allows a nation to grow wealthy.

We understand that some traditional systems – the American government, for example – work well. Prior to watching Khan's TED Talk, and to reading his book, *The One World Schoolhouse*, we never would have thought to question the traditional American education system. We were both moved and intrigued by the way that the book called into question the effectiveness of a traditional approach to education. In the book, Khan described an experiment in which a group of children of the same age were exposed to the same self-paced mathematics curriculum. As expected, some children

moved through the material much more quickly than others. Once all of the children reached the same point, the next phase of the mathematics curriculum was provided to all of the students. The expectation was that the same “smart” children would race ahead and the same “slow” children would trail behind. But this didn’t happen. Some of the children who had moved slowly the first time moved rapidly the second time.

Given the experiences of success that Yen and I had with the traditional education system, we just assumed that in any given group of children, the “smart” ones eventually rise to the top and the “slow” ones fall behind. The flipped classroom and self-paced model that Khan describes challenged our beliefs regarding how to determine who is smart and who is not, and compelled us to investigate more deeply why we believed that the traditionally accepted methods of learning and the assessments involved in this system provide a reliable way of making the distinction between “smart” and “slow.” One of our fundamental assumptions about education was disputed by Khan, and we both recognized that our assumption had been baseless, and realized that we had been wrong.

The traditional education system in which we both excelled categorizes students based on a one-size-fits-all model. We were lucky, and were assigned to “honors” classes. Upon further reflection, though, we both came to realize that the way that we had been categorized based on one phase of academic success had granted us access to huge amounts of positive reinforcement, which stimulated us in a way that was conducive to continued academic success in other phases of our education. We were told that we were smart, so we liked school. Because we liked school, we worked hard. Because we worked hard, we got good grades, and received feedback that strengthened our academic behaviors even more.

But what about our son, Ben? We would like to think that he has genetics on his side to keep him firmly planted on the right side of the Bell Curve, but, in reality, there is nothing truly concrete about our belief that he will be successful in school based on the fact that we were successful in school. We know that Ben has parents who care deeply about his education, and that should count for something; even if we can't pass on our ability to learn, we should be able to pass on our love of learning. But what if we are told by his teachers that Ben is not an honors student? Is he a regular student? Or, God-forbid, what if we are told that he is a remedial student? In a traditional system, the institution will judge and classify him based on his body of work the same way that we were judged and classified. We performed well in this system, but will Ben? If he does not perform well, what will that mean for his future? We are living in an extremely fast-paced society. He doesn't have time to fail. We do not have time to let him fail. *The One World Schoolhouse* exposed us to the idea that different children will learn different concepts at different paces at different times in their lives. If he is required to master each concept before moving on to the next, Ben will not need to be judged at an early point in his academic career. He will inevitably struggle at some points and thrive at others. But if he is placed in a system in which he is allowed to be defined by his moments of struggle, and if we allow him to be categorized based on those moments, there is the possibility that he will enter into a negative feedback loop, rather than the positive one that we experienced. This possibility involves a scenario in which Ben is categorized as not smart and not special based on an assessment that may not be an accurate way of rating his abilities or his potential, and we are terrified by it. Struggle is inevitable, and obviously beneficial a few times in a lifetime. It builds character. But character is not built by

failure. And we are not comfortable putting Ben in a situation in which these moments of struggle could turn into moments of failure. Based on our experiences, these moments of failure lead only to more moments of failure. And to have sentenced Ben to a lifetime of failure because he is unable to fully comprehend long division the first time that it is explained to him or because he is slow to remember which state in the bottom right corner of the map is Alabama and which is Georgia or whatever his struggle might be would be much more than we would be able to handle. The alternative that Khan describes in *The One World Schoolhouse* and the set up at Acton Academy seems not only more effective than a traditional model of education, but also more morally sound.

## West Lake

I really think that I could make a living just selling things on eBay. Not a great living, but, you know, enough. If I just became an expert in one area – one brand of watch, or whatever – I would be able to see things wherever they were and judge how much they were worth and how much I could sell them for, and I could buy them and turn them over probably pretty quickly. I'm sure I could make a good amount of money that way.

Now I just sort of sell what I have to sell, and I probably don't get as much as I could for it. But I do it to get rid of things, mostly. I'll sell smaller things, because they're not hard to ship, on eBay. Outdated technology, baseball cards, that kind of thing.

Larger things I sell on Craigslist. When I moved in with my wife before we were married, I had all of this stuff to get rid of. She has very specific taste. So I just put up listings for all of this stuff. I learned that when you buy furniture, as soon as you take it out of the store, its value decreases probably seventy-five cents for every dollar. Or maybe not that much, but close to that. Even something nice ends up being worth almost nothing just by virtue of the fact that you already bought it. So I sold most of the things that I had when I lived on my own.

Some of them ended up in the shed that we've got in back of the house that we live in now. I had a storage unit while I lived in her apartment, which is where I kept the stuff that I didn't have the heart or the time to sell when I first moved in there. She laughed at me when we moved into the house and I brought all this junk from the storage unit to the shed. In the past few years, we've added things that we bought together to that shed. Our son's crib, for example, and his high chair. I guess it's all baby stuff.