

#### **2004: Gave up Spirituality and Religion (Embrace Science and Fables)**

Our parents can be superstitious, but my mom thought I was cursed. It did not help that I was born with a cleft lip and palate with my brain exposed. Kids mocked me for having an ugly lip so I was often mute but enjoyed expressing myself through singing and music. When I got in trouble at 8, mom said my surgery failed to stop the evil spirits from entering my body. My soul hurt beyond repair. In my reflection, I saw a monster. Grounded, I was isolated to my nonhuman books and films. These were my mom's answers to my countless pleas for a pet cat or dog. *Call of the Wild*, *All Dogs Go to Heaven*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Aristocats*, *Fox and Hound*, *Arthur*, *Brave Little Toaster*, and *Spongebob* helped me find my humanity again. I eventually saw my mom as a war-affected immigrant who blamed herself for my abnormalities and used superstitions to make sense of her lack of control on my well-being. I drifted away from Buddhism. I always had a hard time sharing my feelings as mom still reasons with superstitions and any ache of mine is a mere bruise compared to my dad's traumatic childhood.

Then my fondest memories came at 9, when my parents took me to Space Camp and operas. It was then that science, music, and theatre became inseparable. I soon played trombone in orchestra pits while designing instruments for Science Olympiad. I taught math in summer school using songs. I starred in musicals. In 2012, when I adapted my teacher Mr. R's calculus assignments into a musical, he encouraged me to be a musical writer.

#### **August 2014: Gave up becoming a Teacher (Embrace Theatre)**

In 2011-2013, I taught/TA'd English and math for summer school. In 2013, I taught math every other day with another teacher. Most students were amazing. A few couldn't care less, like T and especially M. So rowdy. One time, I was so annoyed I humiliated him in class with my sass. Though, I admired his activism. When Trayvon Martin's case was unjustly ruled in July, M passionately spoke out. But I was horrible, openly believed the jury knew best. He described me as a racist model minority. I tried to be an ally and promised the class if they got an A I'd go on the Rip

Cord with each of them at the Michigan's Adventure Amusement Park field trip. There's a [YouTube video](#) of me doing so. M and T did not make the cut. One day after school, M waited outside. He gave me a note. As I opened it, he swung his knife at me. I explained that I didn't make the call for his suspension letter and promised I wouldn't report him. M and T moved to another school.

In summer 2014, I planned to double major in Astrophysics and Education when registering for college. I didn't teach that summer as I was studying at the Kellogg Biological Station, getting ahead on credits.

On the night of August 2, K hosted a hangout. After midnight, A, I, N, other K, and I went for a joy ride. We stopped by Byron Center Speedway. Two friends went inside, two others and I chilled by the pump, talking about Fantastic Four. Then, a gunshot. While my friends hid between the car and pump, I was on the vulnerable side. I crouched and closed my eyes. When I opened them, there was a hat between our car and the other car, the origin of the gunshot. The backdoor opened, and out came M with a gun directed at me. He gave me a mad look, before hiding it. Then, another kid from the backseat. They opened the driver door. T slumped out. They argued. For whatever reason, N took the hat. We drove back to K's. I went home, angering everyone who wanted to know what I saw. I was upset that everyone told it like a funny story.

Days later, the news confirmed M accidentally killed T. The hat was returned to the victim's family.

I told my partner of two years what happened. Sadly, her family lived by that gas station. We eventually parted ways as I no longer saw a future together in our hometown. She wanted to stay, but I didn't feel safe. We're the only relationship I've had. She went thru the cultural obstacles of not being Asian but accomplishing academics much as though she is the child of immigrants. So, I've felt bad for betraying her love, time, effort, and support.

Weeks before, I was counseling my friend A. Her family found human remains in her backyard woods which led to the police chase of the murderer. My superstitious mom told me to never see her again. I believed my mom

would push my friendships away for what just happened. Since being born with a cleft lip and palate, my mom believed I was bad luck. So, I hardly speak on it, for fears other folks see me as a bad omen too. I was hurt at the thought that my parents immigrated from war-torn Vietnam only for me to get a fraction of this trauma on US soil. August 2-3 are when I spiral or the days leading to it, but I stay strong for my sister's bday on the 6th. My sister had her own traumatic memory in 2012 of seeing a toddler get killed, falling off a float in our annual parade that got disbanded soon after. I wished things were different, from me reporting him to never teaching at all. I know it's not anyone's fault, but like most humans, we make sense of it thru self-induced connections and stories that aren't correlated.

While weighing my dreams of being a teacher, I looked through past assignments from high school. I read Mr. R■■■■'s note: "you should consider being a musical writer." Soon, I called my college advisor. I removed my education major and filled my schedule with theatre classes instead.

#### **Dec 2016: Gave up Completing College Degree (Embrace Family Stories)**

##### [Story Collider January 2025 Performance Draft](#)

Long story short: I took 26 credits in the fall 2016 semester. I was unlikely to graduate in 4 years. I failed chemistry and blundered all theatre auditions. The political landscape stressed me out. I thought that seeing the aurora borealis would clear my mind and get me back on track to being the first member of my family to graduate college. I spontaneously planned a spiritual journey to Norway, but settled for \$700 cheaper Sweden. I didn't tell my family and left behind my phone. I wrote 50 individual letters and hid them in my dobsonian telescope (in case I didn't return). My housemate K■■■■ somehow found them and thought the worst..... :(

Anywho, I trekked north on foot, living off the land and my scout training. When I reached a small town days later, the local read a runestone from the parents of a deceased Viking. I changed my mind and returned to Stockholm and got in touch with my family from a nice hostel resident. When I said I was in a country they didn't know called Sweden, my dad said: "I know

Sweden cause my sister lives there." My mom was like: "What? Your sister disappeared from your life long ago." Basically, she ran away from Vietnam when dad was an older teenager due to a family tragedy. I sort of did what she did. Dad forgot to tell us she reconnected with grandma in 2014. He got in touch with grandma and she got in touch with my aunt. She got me a train ticket to Malmo. I took a 6-hour train ride down and met her, her husband, and three cousins. The oldest T■■■■ is finishing up her master's in mathematics and empathizes with the weight of being the first to graduate college.

I returned to college and completed my degrees on time. While my little sister worried about my well-being while in school, my old calculus teacher Mr. R■■■■ shared to her that I once wrote musicals. When I came back, she encouraged me to write them again. I started writing familial stories to make sense of what I just went through.

#### **July 2025: Gave up Theatre (Embrace Filmmaking Way Harder)**

##### ["Thank You for Bringing My Stories to Life and Goodbye" Letter](#)

It's frankly painful to feel like I betrayed the person I'm most connected in all intersections: STEM, dancing, parent problems, spontaneity. Losing a one-in-a-billion friend takes a toll on me.

I had the worst mental block in my life. I didn't write anything new or advance any projects. On a random morning, I woke up from a nightmare and texted several people I was quitting theatre and wrote a letter stating so. I almost sent an email to 140 past collaborators until my mentor and another friend called (M■■■■ threatened to beat up my family if I sent it).

I was already obligated to go to the Asian American International Film Festival where V■■■■ was a lead volunteer. She checked up on me and made sure I eat cause I went days without food. As a complicated Vietnamese American whose family can be estranged due to unresolved trauma, it helps me open up a bit.

I relapsed in pain on August 2-3. I told 2 friends of that tragedy for the first time in so long. I decided to write this to make sense of it all.