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SCARRERD: A Collection of Creative Nonfiction Essays

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SCARRED:

A Collection of Creative Nonfiction Essays

By

Jason A. Ruiz

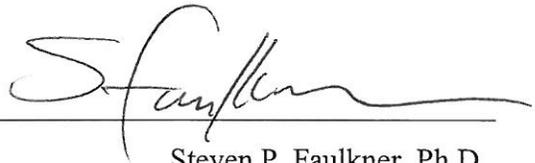
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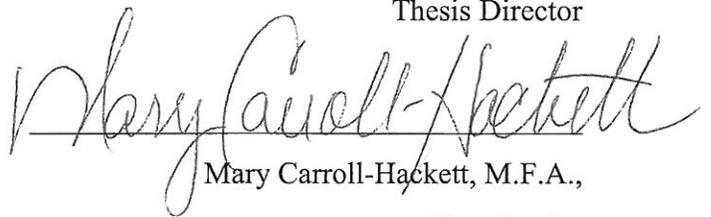
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This collection of essays seeks to explore the need for redemption as a necessary element of the Human Condition, by exploring my experiences as a child, adolescent, teen, and adult. Throughout the collection of essays, I, as the central character of the work, am conditioned by my physical deformity (a massive scar on my stomach) to question my life, values, and relationships. I establish for myself a destructive pattern that nearly ends my marriage. These destructive patterns eventually become touchstones through which I finally come to terms with who I am, what I am, and the truth that my existence is not defined by my body, though I try to prove otherwise. The scar works as a metaphor: it is a mark—an embossing—that is a result of an involuntary catastrophe, the complications of my birth. As the collection of essays progresses, I show how other events in my life have further scarred me: the death of loved ones, coming to terms with aging, infertility. Eventually, I self-destruct. In “Green Again,” I explore the tumult of my infidelity, wounding my wife. The irony of my decision is that I have hurt her, and thereby left her with an emotional scar, perhaps worse than the one I have loathed throughout my life—physical scars can be removed. It is finally though emotional and spiritual healing that I come to terms with my outer, physical self.

The importance of relationships, as well as the desire for fatherhood, is further explored in my career as a teacher. The personas of “Scarred,” “Clipping a Bonsai Tree,” and “Father Less,” for example, admit to the attempt of fatherly acts while exploring the passion I have to see students succeed. My experiences as a teacher contrast those of my actions as a husband. Fittingly, it is my wife who, in “Bonsai,” encourages me to admit the truth for the benefit of my career and for those whom I teach. In some of the last essays, “Blocked” and “Green Again,” the scar causes more physical problems that will require an abdominal reconstruction—and an eventual removal of the scar, while I take extreme measures to have my heart healed and, as a result, my marriage restored. The resolution to physical pain, I discover, is in spiritual renewal. The final essay, “Faulting the Stars,” is a realization: my wife’s cancer scare has renewed my commitment to her. It is this final experience that brings clarity and prospective.

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Scarred

There's a student in my 6th period class who has burn scars on her chest and the upper parts of her arms. The accident happened at the end of last year—she and her mom were in the kitchen, and somewhere between the boiling pot and the sink, they ran into each other. The young girl—let's call her Ally—was ending her 6th grade year. She has a reputation among the faculty for being bright, happy, polite, respectful; she's the kind of person you want at one of your desks. She's the kind of girl everyone smiles at because she's smiling at them; whom everyone says hello to because she said it first; whom everyone talks about because they're taken aback by her maturity and her honest heart.

Last week, Ally came into my classroom and sat down happily. It was the first day of school and her fellow 7th graders came up to her saying how much they missed her, asking if she was okay and wondering, "Does it hurt?" and innocently asking how long she would have to go to physical therapy.

I wondered if she felt awkward underneath her trademark smile, answering everyone's questions. I know from experience that kind of potential embarrassment—I know what it's like to have to justify a scar you never asked for, to wish it would go away.

I trotted gently around the pool and joined my 6th grade school friends on a San Diego-Summer afternoon, complete with the necessary staples: swimming trunks, Gatorade bottles, plastic sunglasses, hand-me-down beach towels, and a Sony Walkman or two (we could share). We dove in the shallow end of the pool, perfected cannonball positions, splashed water in each other's eyes, played boisterous versions of Marco Polo,

all without much attention—our activity seemed to meet the standards of acceptance of moms with their toddlers who talked in groups, slathering their plump kids with sunscreen, always leaving a faint white layer for extra protection. Babies donned tiny fisherman’s hats and floatation devices that looked like thick belts. The moms and their kids never bothered us; we reciprocated. Pool culture was a mixture of groups: moms, single men, teenage girls, pre-teen boys, and shy teenagers forced by their parents to ‘go to the pool’—they would sit underneath umbrellas in shorts, t-shirts, and sneakers, a paperback their only company. Until one person from one of the groups walked to the far end of the pool and mounted the diving board. Conversations stopped. Heads lifted from books’ pages. Splashing dulled down to standing doggie paddles as the collective conscious focused on the performance—or failure—of whomever dared to jump.

When it was my turn, I walked to the diving board and stepped on. I grinned, knowing it was my turn for momentary stardom. When I looked out to meet eyes with my friends, I surveyed the rest of the crowd. They looked at me, their lips tight. Moms squinted their eyes. Young girls looked to the side. Toddlers innocently pointed. And I knew.

Growing up, I never knew exactly what was *wrong* with me—all I knew was that my stomach was lumpy and when I looked in the mirror, there was a palm-sized scar that covered the area where my belly button was supposed to be, right in the center of my stomach. The mirror always told the same story: the scar was thick, and became thinner as it spread itself out towards the borders on my belly. The edges of the scar resembled something like spiders’ legs or a hand’s fingers: its borders formed an irregular pattern that pulled against the skin surrounding it. The result was a lopsided look; the right side

of my entire midsection pushes away from my body. Surrounding the scars are hernias—two golf ball-sized lumps rest above the scar, and a bigger, egg-shaped lump on my right. It looks a lot bigger when looking at it from the front; is that what people see when they look at me?

I was young when I started asking this perpetual question. When you're five, differences are trivial; as you begin to grow up, they can isolate you, even among friends. I was about ten when those differences emerged.

When we took our shirts off at the pool during summer breaks between my 4th and 6th grade years, the questions were always the same. My friends would ask, "Hey Jason, why's your stomach like that?" I tired of answering this question—to me, I looked normal; I wasn't used to looking at other bodies. After years of seeing other kids stare at me and listening to their loud, whispered conversations, my sense of normalcy slowly eroded. I wanted to know why I was different, why I would never look like them.

There's something kids do when they want answers from their parents: they try to act like the questions don't really bother them. "Mom and Dad, what happened to my stomach?" I tried to be calm so they wouldn't feel what I felt every time someone pointed—it wasn't their fault. They began to explain as their eyes darkened and their foreheads lost their lines.

It was one of those moments after school on a weekday, or before church on a Sunday, or after a Saturday morning sleep-in—I can't remember—when we first talked about what happened to create the scar. The dimmed living room hemmed us in from the outside world; the couch, the place where Mom carefully delivered to me her play-by-play explanation. She stood in front of me, just over five feet, her petite frame secured

beneath full, wavy, brunette hair. Her brown eyes darted from me to the floor. Her face, tight with anxiety when the memory she couldn't, despite the passing of any amount of time, stop, seeing her firstborn son delivered to the, "Oh my God!" of the doctor bringing her to tears. Why her? Why her son? She sat next to me and held my hands, rubbing hers over them.

The room was still, seeming to quiet itself as Mom mouthed in slow motion what she remembered. "Gas-tro-SKEE-sis," Mom said. She emphasized the word so I knew what to call it. She told me the story in pieces: "You were born with all of your intestines on the outside of your stomach—you were two months premature—your intestines were swollen, so they didn't fit when the doctors tried to close your stomach around them—they sewed a mesh to close the hole—that's where your scar is." The scar I saw every day in the mirror. The edges of the mesh must be what formed the hand's fingers. "You were in the hospital for over 100 days. Her upper lip quivered. Her eyes closed in long blinks. She sighed to catch her breath. Despite the years that had passed, it was not an easy experience for her to remember. She still cries when she retells it.

I became used to Mom and Dad showing their anguish as they recounted the details whenever friends asked: heads tilted towards the ground; words that barely stumbled out of their mouths; the cracking of their voices; an involuntary tear down a cheek. If it was difficult for me to live with a physical scar, I never knew what it was to live with the emotional ones they bore. They did their best to explain. To heal.

But the bitter taste stayed with me more than did the attempt of what I saw as their pacification—*they're not the ones who've been branded by the searing pain of deformity*. I was the one that had to live with it—the one who had to learn how to. How

was I supposed to know how offensive a lumpy stomach with a thick scar would look to others? How was I supposed to adapt? How was I supposed to feel confident during summers at the beach when other kids my age pointed? I must have looked foolish to them, always looking down when I walked from my beach towel into the waves; from the ocean's water back to the towel; from my claimed spot on the beach to leave.

Adolescence—the normalcy of everyday life compounds with seemingly unbearable pressures: standing (or changing) middle school social statuses, every note to a girl that goes unanswered, or the weight of homework that requires an entire chapter's reading in a night. As a boy, I did my best to manage these, and I fared as well as anyone: I played baseball, enjoyed movies with friends, and laughed with the class when our favorite substitute, Mr. Woody, wore his brown shirt tucked into his way-too-tight white pants—poor guy—having no idea he was committing such a crime. Publicly, I was another boy in a sea of students, but unlike them, I endured a private reckoning, every morning.

With my clothes on, I looked like everyone else. The truth of who I was, however, unmasked itself every time I showered. My hands felt the bumpy terrain of my stomach I tried desperately to hide from others; there were even times I tried to avoid looking at it, but how can one avoid such an obvious tattoo when bathing? There was truth—reality—staring up at me from the middle of my naked body every time I readied myself for another day among my peers, among fellow athletes, beside my best friend Ricky, and, to my horror, among girls. It was a shameful time, my morning shower.

Covered by water, my body automatically did the same things: shampoo, rinse, conditioner, rinse, washcloth, soap. And when I looked down towards my stomach, I

hesitated. Can I have surgery to fix this? Is that vain? Isn't it enough that I'm alive? Should I do sit-ups today in P.E.? The shower's steam enveloped me. As the steam evaporated from the mirror, the dense reality of my protruding reflection became clearer. The confrontation with my raw form was one I faced alone. And alone it would be for a long time. I made sure of it.

In high school, I started gaining the confidence familiar to teenage years. Imbalance began to leave my middle school self, and the once gawky pre-teen found my identity in lunch locations, musical choices, athletics, peer groups, or even the famed high school romance. Having gained a sort of standing through the status of being the trusted tenor lead in our musical productions—a big deal at Fallbrook Union High School, the only high school in our small town of Fallbrook, CA. I dared to dance into the minefield of high school romance. I was sixteen.

She was the star brunette soprano and sat across from me during my favorite class, The Madrigals, a select, twenty-four member choir. Unlike other high school classes, the Madrigals felt like a blended family: cheerleaders, competition pianists, yearbook geeks, and long-haired heavy metal fans never talked about their differences. We could always talk about our music.

“You have a nice voice, Jason.” She held her hands together in front of her, below her waist. Class had ended and we had put away our folders.

“Oh, thanks.” I looked at her eyes. Green. “What's your name?”

“Wendy.” I repeated the name in my head. “I think you're in my Chemistry class,” she said. “Sixth period, Mrs. Thomas.”

I stared at her auburn-brunette hair, a grown-out bob she placed in front of her shoulders. “Uh, yeah. Mrs. Thomas.” I shot a quick glance down to her feet, then tilted my eyes up the length of her body. Then I said something about Chemistry being boring and she agreed and we laughed together.

I’d never noticed her before, but as days passed, I made sure to, and increasingly so. Our small talk turned into lunch conversations, which turned into long talks by phone, which gave way to our first date—a real date by ourselves, at a restaurant, alone, where you laugh and fidget and fumble your way around a napkin to make sure you don’t have food on your mouth, where, in the same breath you mention that you like her shirt you ask her to the Homecoming Dance and she says “Yes.”

I remember the night of the dance vividly—it was the first time I noticed her body, the way it looked in her dress. I was accustomed to hiding my midsection protrusions behind one-sized-bigger shirts, and often looked at others’ clothes to determine if they also tried to conceal any flaws. My eyes instinctively scanned my date’s form: she pinned up one side of her hair towards the back of her head; she wore black hose and shiny black pumps; her lips were strawberry-colored, wet; she wore a thin silver chain with a small pendant in the middle of her chest. I looked down, at her waist, then up at her breasts, her collar bones, at the soft slenderness of her neck, at her chin, at the tiny freckles around her nose, then to her eyes, a vivid green atop the dark hues of her dress. She was beautiful.

After picking her up, we drove, making small talk about dresses and sport coats and who we wanted to see at the dance, and who we didn’t. The car smelled of her perfume. We got out of the car and walked to the venue, an old house turned-venue, and I

slipped my hand next to hers, my fingers sliding against the smoothness of her skin. I could feel her fingers grip. After saying hello to friends and comparing outfits, dresses, shoes, and dinner choices, the upbeat pace of the music stopped, giving way to the first slow dance of the night.

I grabbed Wendy's hand and led her to the middle of the dance floor, where we could be alone, hidden by other couples. With her arms around my neck and mine locked around her waist, we pressed ourselves together and moved, left and right, the green of her eyes occasionally flashing into mine. I felt her push herself into me as we turned in rhythm to the song, her breath on my neck, mine in her ear. And I closed my eyes.

"Walk outside?" The song was over, and she wasn't ready for chit-chat with friends. Nor was I.

We slid out of the french doors that led away from the noise. Outside the dance hall by a gazebo adjacent to a pond, we stood face to face. I looked into her eyes, then down to her lips before I turned my head and moved towards her, feeling the haze of heat on my face as our lips touched and mouths opened. Locked in that flagship moment, I wish I could have stayed there. I was terrified that we'd kiss again on another night; nervous that our high school relationship would bring with it opportunities for half-dressed, passionate encounters on a couch in a den. And yet I wanted those eyes and that body pressed against mine again.

As our relationship progressed, and we found ourselves on that couch, I remember my body tensing up when she touched it: when she untucked my shirt, lifted it over my pants, and slid her hand up my torso; as she placed mine underneath her t-shirt and lifted it to her chest; my hand caressed smooth skin; I could not give hers the same luxury. That

couch—such a revealing and honest place—became the great equalizer as my shower during my middle school years had. When we were together, away from the gaze of others, I couldn't help but compare the completeness of her body with the obvious marring of mine.

On a weekend, a late afternoon at her house, her parents at dinner, we walked silently to her bedroom, sat on the bed, and leaned in towards each other. With our eyes closed, each reached towards the bottom of each other's shirt. Then our eyes opened in abrupt realization. A smile, a quick glance downward, then her hands on mine, helping to undress the top half of her body. When it was my turn, I followed her eyes as they moved from my face down my chest, to my torso, and finally, down to my beltline that rested above my scar. Seconds. Deep breaths. A gulp. A hard blink. And I allowed her hands to remove my t-shirt. She gave me a slight smile and clutched my chest as she moved her mouth to my ear.

“You're gorgeous,” she whispered as she moved to kiss me again.

All through high school, I never shared my anxieties completely with her, although she must have sensed my insecurities on an intuitive level. She never made me feel like I looked different than if I would have offered her gym-ripped abs underneath my shirt when we rediscovered each other after a Friday night movie. She gave me my first feelings of security—my body was an equal exchange for hers.

After our break-up at the end of my senior year, I approached the possibility of romance with newfound confidence. Maybe others didn't necessarily see me as I saw myself. Maybe.

In 1994, I moved from California to Virginia to finish college. My relationship with my high school girlfriend had suffered the casualty of taking on the “long distance” label. I shuddered when I imagined future first dates. And the dates that would follow.

The physical growth of a man causes him to experience an internal one—an earned income, life apart from parents, and a further foray into the enrapturing world of women. High school had passed, and with it, the relationship that defined it. My college experiences included two changes in my chosen major, my first Van Halen concert, and a carousel of roommates.

They also included a chance encounter at a local mall with the woman I would eventually ask to be my wife. I remember talking to her for the sole reason that when I first saw her, I thought she was beautiful.

On a Saturday afternoon, I walked through the mall. Mannequin displays, “40% off” banners, vitamin shops, giant pretzels. The experience was a combination of the sights and the smells of retail, of conglomerates wooing passers-by to spend. I shook my head at the signs and smiled at the smells of the food court. I decided to leave. Until I walked by a middle-of-the-mall store. I looked inside and smiled at the two attendants at the counter; they smiled back. And as I passed the end of the interior building that housed their store, I stopped, looked down, and wondered why I wouldn’t go back and say hello. So I turned around.

“Hi,” I said. The blonde one spoke first.

“Hi, how are you?” Her accent had a slight twang, replacing the “aiee” diphthong I was used to with a straight, “ah.” She spoke with a distinguished Southern charm.

“Fine,” and I cleared my throat, “I’m fine.” I liked her: the way she looked, the way she spoke, the way her friendly eyes caught the light above them and gleamed my way.

“That’s nice.” She tilted her head and looked at me while the other attendant, presumably her friend, giggled and tried to lock eyes with her. “You looking for anything in particular?” Indeed.

“Um...” No. “Sure. You have any...” I had no idea. “Any silver hoops?”

“Sure.” She giggled and made eyes at her friend. “What size?”

“I, uh, dunno.” I glanced around, then at her. Blue eyes. “Medium, I guess.”

“Why don’t you look over here?” and she led me to the far end of the counter.

“Actually, I’ll just take these,” and I pointed to overly-large, gold hoops Cher would have shunned. She and her friend laughed, each of their laughing cadences ending in a high-pitched lilt, as if laughing a question. They definitely knew each other.

The joking continued, with me pointing to heavy chain necklaces, and she laughing in lilt, her blue eyes surrounded by long, blonde curls that hit her mid-back. Two small-ish, silver hoops later, I said goodbye.

“Bye,” she said with her head tilted as she smiled at me with her eyes.

“Bye.” I went home and put the small plastic bag, containing the hoops and a receipt, in a drawer.

On our first date, Melissa and I stuffed ourselves on one side of a Tex-Mex booth and stared at one another underneath light emanating from a painted, galvanized metal bucket. We ate salads and chicken platters and onion petals and drank glasses of sweet tea as we slowly let down our defenses and learned to look into each other’s eyes.

Conversations that lasted into early mornings. Drives to Taco Bell for a midnight snack. A concert of stars by way of her car's sunroof. These experiences seemed to carry over from high school dates; they seemed similar; I knew what to do. But this relationship carried an altogether different weight: Melissa was an adult, a woman. Someone with her own apartment and car. Free from the control of her home. Acting independently from her parents. And she was attracted to me.

Growing up is a forced process. For me, the process included my parents' divorce after eighteen years of marriage, my moving across the county at the age of twenty, paying for college tuition by signing a promissory note, and having a girlfriend who, on a romantic night inside of her apartment, wanted to take off her clothes—and mine, too. I don't know why the idea that my serious, twenty-one-year-old girlfriend might actually want to have sex with me was never a tangible thought, but I had never entertained the idea. Perhaps it was the fact that I was raised not to have sex until I was called "husband" or because I knew people who had too much of it with too many of their high school classmates (they earned proper distinctions as a result), or because I was busy becoming an adult and had a tough time catching up with checkbook balancing and bill paying. But when my future wife indicated we were free to consummate our relationship pre-marriage, I froze. I hadn't told her yet.

Honesty requires the whole of a person, even when they don't have the whole of themselves to give. It asks for brokenness, especially when someone has something to hide. When light enters a room, darkness dissipates.

Our first night together was a mixture of exhilaration and terror created by something like a punch to my deformed gut. On her bed, with her next to me, I made the decision to cross a threshold—to embrace the rewards or consequences that followed.

I let her remove nearly every piece of clothing I had entrusted to hide me. The thresholds disappeared, one at a time. She willingly revealed herself to me and looked me in the eye and kissed me as her hand reached to the bottom of my t-shirt, my last barrier, to pull it off. With our eyes closed and bodies moving closer towards each other, I quickly reached down to stop her. The move was unexpected and instinctive.

Even then, in the quickly moving blur of flesh and her bed's blankets, a paralyzing fear overwhelmed me; a choking lump formed in the back of my throat so that I was unable to speak. Our eyes now open, I looked into hers with adolescent terror, with tear-filled eyes that asked questions of boyhood insecurities and the need for nakedness; hers answered with assurance.

She insisted I let her remove my shirt—she kissed me with her eyes closed as our hands met at the hem of my t-shirt line; we pulled it up over my head. When our arms finished the motion that introduced my nakedness to her for the first time, we opened our eyes together. She looked at me, then down at my stomach. She smiled lovingly, her lips half-pursed and gathered to one side. And in the movement one second allowed, she moved her head to my stomach, looked directly at it, and softly, slowly kissed the scar I had shunned for my entire life. I held my breath as she came up to my face and looked directly at me. I felt the choking in the back of my throat tighten and my eyes well up with tears. With a gentle turning of her body, she lowered herself beneath me, never closing her eyes.

There are still days I deal with my image. On May 23, 1998, I was married to that beautiful Melissa who kissed my stomach—who often tells me I’m the most gorgeous man she’s ever seen, a phrase I’m occasionally uncomfortable hearing, although I’m getting used to it. Sometimes I believe her. She still laughs at my jokes, her voice lilting, and still goes on midnight runs with me for Cheesy-Westerns and fries. Our moments together are substantive; they matter. We have re-stained our porch deck, planted tulip bulbs, dug pets’ graves, redecorated rooms, and painted bedrooms, hallways, and a stairwell.

It’s during moments alone when I sometimes deal with my young self, looking, prodding at my belly, remembering what it was like when it hurt me to do sit-ups in my 6th grade P.E. class and I didn’t know I was straining its limits. I still have that instinct—the one I followed as a child—to cover my stomach with both of my arms as I walk across a concrete poolside before I swim. I still wince a little when I catch part of an infomercial for the new “Ab-Ripper” because I know that no matter how much I attempt to rip them, they’ll never develop. The lumps have permanently taken their place.

The first day of 6th period is underway. As the students leave Ally’s desk, they find their way to their seats and all look up at me. I begin class the same way I do every year, with a “Hi!” and a genuine smile. I introduce myself and tell them how great it is to see them, that this is going to be a great year—that I want for my class to be the best one of their day. I tell them I can’t wait to get to know them. And then I take roll. I call names and ask each student, as their name is called, to raise a hand. I’ll say something like, “It’s

nice to meet you,” or “I’m glad you’re here” as they do. Then I get to Ally, who’s still smiling.

“Ally.” She raises her hand. “Hi, Ally—I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Me too!” she says.

Although she has no idea, I know exactly what she feels when she raises her hand and only gets it above her head before she winces a little. The scars pull against her range of motion. My eyes fixate on her tiny frame and wonder what her experience in middle school will bring her; if she’ll confess her fears to her girlfriends; if she asks her mom about boys and when she’ll be allowed to date; and if she’s scared of dating them.

I watch Ally smile, watch her leaf through her binder, watch her fish a pen from her pencil pouch after she’s lowered her arm and I continue calling names.

Father Less

We were finally ready to do it, to take the infamous plunge we'd heard so much about from our very fertile friends, and try to have a baby of our own. Maybe two. Maybe more. But after eight years of marriage, we were ready. We had agreed four was the magic number, but after four years, we had insisted on doubling the wait time.

"I wanna have a baby." We were having dinner, seated on the same side of a booth, when she said it. A giant bowl of salad sat in front of us, a plastic basket of breadsticks directly in front of Melissa.

I swallowed my food. "Wait. What? When did you—"

"All of our other friends are having babies. I just think...I just think we're ready."

Parenthood was something that we had talked about before, but our last conversation about it left us at an impasse: Melissa's father passed away in 2001, and she was shell-shocked by the experience. "It's not worth it," she would say.

"You sure? You *want* to do this?" As much as I wanted to parent children with her, I didn't want for her experience to be bred solely by my desire.

"Yes." She reached for a breadstick, brought it to her mouth, ripped off a large part, and smiled at me with part of it sticking out. I kissed the side of her face and smelled garlic.

Conversations became planning sessions—when to try to conceive, what color to paint the nursery, choosing baby names, how many outfits to buy (baby clothes are small, so she started stockpiling early), and deciding how to handle discipline issues and methods.

Our days at the mall morphed into wandering into baby-themed stores much the way new couples go shopping for lingerie: there is always apprehension that eventually gives way to sheer exhilaration. When we held hands and looked at toddler dresses, we'd squeeze them tighter; when we looked at each other at dinner, the looks turned into lingers. We were increasingly aware that our lives would be a part of something significantly greater than ourselves, and the feeling of parenthood brought with it a staying happiness. The days were filled with love and affection, which resulted in less sleep. I was happy to oblige.

Twenty-eight days went by slowly, the hours tempting us. We'd wait. When nature informed us we'd have to wait another month, we were undaunted. Another month. Then two. Then five. Then eight. And with a stash of baby clothes slowly piling up in a back corner of the closet and paint swatches collecting dust on the corner of our dresser, my patience had waned. And although Melissa, said nothing, I knew she was worried. Still, she asked gently, "Do you think we should find out?" And just like that, optimism gave way to a painful stab.

I looked at her and nodded, scared.

The next day I made an appointment with my physician. The day arrived, and I checked in at the front desk.

"And what's the reason for your visit?" The clerk looked up at me.

"I'm not feeling very well." I glanced at her quickly before I looked down at the sign-in sheet.

Finally in an examination room, my doctor calmly talked to me, his hands on his knees.

“What brings you in today, Jason?” I told him. “Okay. How long have you guys been trying?” Nearly six months. Then he asked embarrassing questions that required even more embarrassing answers. Questions about my body, if “everything worked normal,” and if I had previous experiences that might contribute to Melissa and me not being able to conceive. I looked at my doctor, then to the picture behind him, a framed memory of him and his children, all sharing similar facial features. They had his smile. And eyes.

“Previous experiences?” I looked back to the picture of him with his kids.

“Are you open to testing?” He smiled at me and folded his hands together.

And then it hit me that in narrowing down obstacles to procreation, I would have to rule out sexually transmitted diseases. He needed to probe my private moments. I felt like I was betraying myself even though I knew the answer. There were no diseases lurking, no potential bacteria in my body hiding behind dark corners.

My physician handed me a business card. “Here,” he said. “I’ll make an appointment with an urologist for you. He’ll want to run tests, too.”

Outwardly, I was calm, but inside, I cringed because I knew that my future included a bathroom, a plastic cup, and five minutes I still keep to myself. How horrid. I wanted immediate answers, not that. Didn’t failing to impregnate my wife already count enough? Wasn’t it enough that I didn’t have what was necessary to help us on to finally painting yellow walls and cussing at the assembly instructions that accompany a seemingly simple crib? I wanted to look at my hands and see remnants of yellow paint in the creases between my thumb and index finger. I didn’t want anything to do with a plastic cup.

At my middle school where I teach, the graduation ceremony tradition is simple: the slideshow shows every 8th grade graduate from their toddler years to their current age. The scenes the photos capture vary—graduates with their friends, holding hands on a dock, jumping together into the lake; colorful sweaters over torsos as hands and arms rip open Christmas presents; family portraits taken on ski vacations; laughter during elementary school years because Dad told a funny joke in the Saturday morning breakfast nook. Each picture on the slideshow fades to black, and in half of a second, the next picture emerges on screen to the gasps and sighs of all in attendance as they ready themselves for the final stage of the graduation ceremony that will officially mark the end of their child's childhood.

I'm not one of the parents in attendance. For me, the experience is much different because if Melissa and I had had children after three years of marriage, our child would be graduating. We would be gasping and sighing, and I, undoubtedly crying. It's what a parent should do at a moment like this.

Out of parental instinct, perhaps, I watched last year's graduation slideshow and wondered what each picture's memory must have been like from the eyes of parenthood. I eagerly stepped into each student's parents' shoes and walked around in his or her memories, placing myself at the end of an eager lens. What was it like to watch that boy and his young friends enjoy a pizza party on a hazy Saturday while they gulped down unhealthy amounts of orange soda? What was it like when that girl and ten of her girlfriends got ready for the dance at her house, dresses and make-up cases strewn about her bedroom?—what did they say, what music did they listen to while their collective

hair was blown dry by a combined wattage that could power a car up a hill? How long did laughter fill the house?

The slideshow played at an increased speed when I considered life on the other side of a wall too high to climb. The pictures morphed together in a blur as I fought to contain emotion. Thank God the room was dark so I didn't have to answer questions my tears would inevitably bring.

I glanced at actual parents of the graduating class: mothers' hands grasped their husbands' arms and squeezed; fathers reached into sport coat pockets and retrieved handkerchiefs, raised them to their eyes, then down to their noses; grandparents sat and leaned forward, then they glanced at one another and smiled. The graduating class, all seated in the front row, whispered into each other's ears and grinned, sometimes pointing to the large screen that showed their stories. I looked at each group's reaction and compared it to my own as I tried to convince myself that my experience with these students was like the ones I witnessed in each picture of the slideshow, but in that effort of self-pacification, I knew that teaching a child differs greatly from experiencing family vacations, taking multiple photos at the lake house, or being a part of a private conversation when they reveal they had their first dance with a member of the opposite sex.

I know that teaching students is not like raising them. I can't relate to what I saw that graduation day—I can only wish I was a member of that exclusive club that answer to "Mom" or "Dad."

Instead, I'm an outsider, a bystander.

There are, however, experiences I have as a teacher that mimic something of parenthood.

I taught high school for the better part of a decade, and threw myself into the 'mentor' part of the job as much as I could: I was a three-term Yearbook Adviser, I volunteered to be a part of teacher-led committees, I chaperoned school dances, I accompanied groups of students to Puerto Rico and The United Kingdom, I coached the junior girls' Powder Puff team to a convincing victory over their rivals, the senior class. The teaching life became a part of my actual life. I think I can speak for passionate teachers when I say that the two tend to weld themselves together: work and home merge into a community that demands care and concern and longer-than-average work days.

The bodies that seat themselves in desks at the beginning of the year take on names with the first roll call; after that, they become much more than names and bodies. Those names on the roster take on personalities that are the first door one walks through when getting to know the real person. Then the transformation begins. The attentiveness of the caring teacher familiarizes itself with the whole of the student: the sound of laughter, the slant of a smile, the rhythm of a gait, the tone of a voice, however high or low, however quiet or resonant. After the initial weeks, students, when they trust their teacher, emerge from behind the facade of student-ship. They confess their secrets, they voice their passions, they boldly state who they're asking to the prom after the dinner date they carefully planned. The teacher-student relationship becomes more than just one of due dates or a distaste for giving them; it becomes more than a relationship of exclusively conference-toned talks. It becomes familial.

Like a coach and star player, the teacher-student relationship fuses two needs: the first having to do with a concise communication of goals and how to achieve them, the second with the execution of those expectations. When the cycle of expectation-execution develops into a routine, a trust is established that supersedes the formality required to establish the classroom routine in the first place. And although the coach can never be the player on the field, nor the player the coach on the sidelines, the relationship between the two serves in concert — the unification of purpose is much more effective because, in effect, two bodies strive rather than one, and the work accomplished more than doubles.

When teachers reach students—when they get past the point of being just another teacher who, in a monotone voice, doles out instruction—they establish a substantive camaraderie. The sense of community established in a classroom can open a student's world. And, when the temperature of the classroom is just right, it can do the same for the teacher.

Classroom atmosphere—what students are really like—is difficult to quantify in terms of numbers on an evaluation rubric. But in terms of the classroom itself, one needs only to walk into a room: students in desks don't lie about their environments. And for all of the turn-offs of educational systems,—the horrors of standardized testing and the evaluation of teachers based on those scores, for example—the turn-ons far outweigh them. The best part of my job is the kids. They bring energy, creativity, curiosity, patience, and a love of learning. Establishing a relationship in the classroom is much like establishing any other quality relationship. There are smiles and laughter, boredom and resentment.

During my last long-term assignment, I taught English to high school students from 2003-2010. And established relationships with students beyond their high school graduations. I still play guitar with Landon. I have coffee with Joy. I went to Hannah's wedding. I visited Ashleigh after her baby was born. I bought Anthony a beer.

When I agreed to volunteer as chaperone to the Senior Prom, I did so with the idea that saying goodbye might be difficult. For this particular group of seniors, I was their 'go-to'—someone with whom they spoke when boyfriends betrayed them or girlfriends didn't tell them 'yes'. They would come to my room to vent, to cry, to ask what their parents meant when they said, "I don't think so" (*Ruiz, I'm so sick of their shit!*). I didn't have the heart to tell them that most of the time, I sided with their parents. But that's not why they were in my room trying to reconcile the pulls of the Teenage Experience with the demands of Ignorant Parenting and its futile attempt to demand their obedience. So most of the time I listened. Such heart-truths can repel or endear. For me, they jarred something I tried to define, but too many times, was left without a name to assign to the feeling that jumped out from me when I read their private feelings. The kids—they mattered to me. I was sure they existed far beyond the realms of 'student.' I was unsure, however, just where.

The night of the Senior Prom brought that undefined feeling with it. It was present as I straightened my tie in the mirror, as I entered the hotel's lobby that housed teacher and parent volunteers checking in glittery, tuxedoed couples, as I shuffled to my assigned 'watch-them' spot near the punch fountain (a predictably light, pinkish color), and as couple after couple approached me. "*Ruiz!*" they would say, "*Look!*" as they twirled and pointed, showcasing dresses and matched tux trimmings. Then the pictures.

Hundreds of poses and smiles, silly faces, angled stances, peace signs, scrunched noses, and fists in the air. They gave hugs and said they'd miss me and thanked me for being there when they wanted to vent or cry or curse their parents or ask questions to which there were no apparent answers. They had asked anyway, and we would just sit there, after a while satisfied with the effort it took to think aloud together in the stale classroom air.

That's how the evening went, with students saying hello in waves of smiles and loud voices over the music and goodbyes and mini-speeches. I smiled when the cameras flashed and choked back lumps in my throat when someone pulled me aside to say, "I wouldn't have made it without you."

As the crowd faded and the punch bowl emptied, I noticed Jennifer, a young lady who had yet to say hello. The peculiarity with which she kept her distance was a bit offensive. She was one of my favorites (despite the talk of how teachers should avoid favorites, we still have them). Her high school career was a series of dilemmas: she broke up with her first boyfriend, then came in the next morning to cry; she embarked on a series of heated battles with her mother, who, according to her, failed to understand teenage girls; she shared her AP Literature papers with me before turning them in to her less-scrupulous-than-me teacher, whose comments were minimal. She was family, something of a daughter to me. I offered unsolicited advice ("He wasn't right for you.") and warned her of teenage dangers teenagers hate to hear about, because just like me, they can see them coming. I took pride in my high-school-father role. And Jennifer acted the part of high school daughter with veteran precision (she even cursed me when I agreed with her mother). Perhaps that's why she waited until the end of the night to

approach me with her boyfriend, Drew, slowly say goodbye, and then hug me while saying, “I love you, Ruiz. You’re my favorite.”

Her words stilled themselves in my ears and made their way past my brain and straight at the history of our relationship. There it was—the moment of definition I tried so hard to force. We said goodbye without fanfare. “Bye, Jen,” as I held back tears that seemed to naturally form at the bottoms of my eyes. A month later when she graduated, we would both cry.

Later, as I helped escort the last student out of the door that night, I was again confronted by that now defined feeling of affection, and a small spark in my heart gave way to full flame as I drove home in silence, and verbalized something else. Unable to sleep, I sat at my computer and typed, “I want to be a father” in an online journal. I finally released those words, although I was aware of their weight. I had a serious heart-to-heart with my wife the morning after, and struggled, through tears, to confess the need I had to father our children. I wanted to be a father, but didn’t care how it would intrude on the household wallet, or my wife’s body, or our already strained sexual relationship, or the time I took to watch football on Sundays. The desire to become a father pulverized those significant cares and transformed them into small, swollen, drool-covered hands reaching out to me through its protective bars. Hands that would one day hold a football’s laces, or reach out for Mother after awakening from a nightmare, or grab for a bottom half of my leg while descending the Sears Tower elevator, or hold the hand of a first girlfriend or boyfriend. Those hands would reach for another’s face when leaning in for a first kiss, or cover swollen eyes after a first college break-up. I wanted those hands to mark fatherly moments: to reach up through that crib during seasonal thunderstorms, to

clench themselves into fists when years later I would say, “No, you can’t have the car tonight,” to embrace me, reaching through a nylon graduation gown, or to give a firm hand shake before driving away to another state because finally, after college, those hands shook another’s in the first steps in a career.

The blend of career and life seemed to spawn a desire for what they so effectively combined: a sincere yearning for posterity, to see someone else succeed beyond myself, and even because of my parenting efforts. I wanted a child and the experiences of fatherhood. But, unlike my teacher experiences, I was now ready to do it on a full-time basis, to not have to say goodbye after a dance and wonder what it was like before the cars left the driveway and cameras flashed in futile attempts to capture a coming of age. The words “son” or “daughter” would flow out of my mouth like a song, as I said good morning, as I asked what kind of cereal they preferred for breakfast,—or, for a pleasant change of pace, dinner—or when I read to them in bed before saying “I love you,” every letter of a seemingly familiar phrase tattooing itself onto my heart. I was ready. *I felt ready.*

The simple, even mundane and looked-down-on task of supervising teenagers while they danced or found love or survived a mercy date’s bad breath, proved to be the impetus to a longing I hoped would emerge, emerge and have facial features similar to mine and hair like their mother’s. In an almost-too-like-a-cliché moment, the desire to contribute to the birth of my own son or daughter was birthed by the process and demands—and pleasures—of my career, spent looking after others’ children. It was time.

As I drove home, however, reality turned my mind towards those students who staggered through the hallways during bathroom breaks and stunk of vodka; those senior

young men who danced too closely with and groped their dates—girls in the tenth grade; those couples who yelled at each other while pointing fingers, their friends looking on from afar; those young ladies huddled together in corners, adorned in awkward hemlines or too-tight dresses that clashed with their over-sized shoes. I saw young, lanky men who showed up alone, tight-lipped, their heads tilted down. They stood around the punch bowl and sipped from pink party glasses.

My mind also wandered to the classroom. To Jon, a tenth-grade student whose body was too big for him. He slouched when he walked and slouched when he sat. His shaggy, wavy brunette hair hid his face, hanging over his eyes. His lips struggled to contain his teeth. He lumbered forward slowly from one place to another, his heels, overcome by the weight of his work boots, always dragging a few inches before they stopped. He was clumsily overweight: not obese, but not fit. He often proclaimed his distaste for physical exercise, so he didn't play sports, and lacked the distinctions that accompany high school athletics as a result. And when he opened his mouth, his words often filled the air with prejudice towards women and non-whites. Jon was a close-minded young man who was overly-sure of himself. There was no righting him. I tried. I talked to him after class, had lunch with him, complimented him in front of his friends, even spoke gently with his mother, insisting it was my fault he didn't succeed ("There must be something I'm doing wrong, Mrs. Divers."). But none of it took. He saw no need for a formal education. He snickered at reading assignments, ignored math homework, and completed creative writing assignments with sarcasm.

He wrote about visiting New York for the first time, something I secretly hoped would open his tightly-closed mind. When he asked me if he could read to the class, I

agreed in hopes that his words would somehow reflect a mind enamored with city life, after, perhaps, a visit to the theater or a museum. Instead, he expressed his thanks that he didn't live in a city of foreigners, filled with people who didn't speak English or know what it was to be American. He wrote of Arabs, Blacks, Mexicans, Jews. His words were a spectacle of ignorance on parade. And they affirmed that, despite my best efforts, I didn't like him. It was worse than that—I detested him because he remained immovable. I wanted my faith in him to be the mustard seed that was his impetus for change. But he was stubborn: his sideways smile when boasting prejudice, his leering eye when a young lady passed by, his trite words slurring past his big teeth.

Every image of Jon was a warning sign, a roadblock. He occasionally talked about his parents, those people responsible for raising the only student of whom I could not say something positive. I wondered what they saw when they looked at him, but also wondered what kind of people called *him* “son.” He made me aware of the pitfalls of parenthood—those potential hazards I ignored when picturing life raising my baby. What would I do if my kids turned out anything like him? Or if my boys befriended him? Or if my girls dated him?

After the incident with the plastic cup (I refuse to name it—“Cup-Gate,” for instance—for fear of finality), I returned to the site of the incident's origin, the urologist's office, with my wife, at her insistence, to finally hear the results.

Waiting inside of the office, I noticed the oddities doctors try to provide for conveniences: wooden-railed chairs with pillowed-cotton seats; stacks of gossip magazines; stacks of parenting magazines; plastic toy sets that sit idly and mysteriously in the middle

of an already crowded seating area. Each image sat in front of me as if taunting me. *We know why you're here.*

“Haha. Look at that picture, the one over there.” She pointed at a coffee table and smiled. On a magazine cover, a picture of a baby with its mouth open. In my habit of taking pictures wherever we went, I sometimes posed the same way, feigning over-enthusiasm. The pose would always earn a giggle.

“Is that me as a baby?” I grinned at her.

“Mmm—baby needs more hair,” and she playfully tilted her head, news-anchor style.

“A *lot* more.” She giggled and grabbed my hand, turned in palm-up, and rubbed it with hers, a familiar, comforting gesture we employed during church, funerals, DMV wait times, or while watching TV.

Melissa sat next to me, her legs crossed, the foot of her dangling leg turning in circles, and looked around the room. I sat up straighter and focused on carpet fibers near my feet, feeling Melissa’s hand massaging my palm. We were crossing a threshold, as if into an old, abandoned, lightless house, wondering if, when we flipped the light switch, light would appear and eliminate the darkness. She didn’t know what to expect any more than I did. I think she knew, too, the emasculating space that occupied the time between our hand-rubbing and the face-to-face conversation with our doctor, an accompaniment to test results: seconds ticked by, each one a part of a countdown. I looked down at Melissa’s hand and saw a hangnail on an index finger, chipped fingernail polish on another, an expensive ring I had given her on an anniversary.

“Don’t look at my hands. Gotta get ‘em done.” She snickered at me and gently smacked my hand away.

“No, I wasn’t—”

“Mmm-hmm.” She eyebrowed me from a side-glance and pursed her lips. I looked at the wall in front of us, grabbed her hand, and squeezed it. She squeezed back.

When my name was finally called, a lady in coral-colored scrubs walked us down a taupe hallway, the worn carpet a path leading to a gallows. Each step seemed to progress in slow motion as we walked through a hallway of wooden-doors that echoed with doctor-office chatter, copy machine grinding, and ringing phones. The nurse slowed her pace and turned slightly right, then opened a door and stood as we walked in. I surveyed my surroundings: to my left was the token patient table-bench, complete with its protective paper covering. To my right were two chairs similar to the ones that occupied our waiting time in the lobby. We quietly veered right and sat down, partly because I didn’t want to sit by myself, and partly because dignity is totally elusive when one sits and is greeted by the crinkling sound of that protective paper.

“The doctor will be with you shortly.” Then a distant smile as she closed the door.

I’m not sure what we talked about as we waited, but I remember the fear that enveloped me as we sat: a blanket that slowly crept from my cold feet to shins to knees to thighs, and then, as if on purpose, stopped at my waist, that powerless and unable region of my body in question—the reason we were there at all. But another emotion slowly began relaxing fear’s grasp: hope. I looked to my wife next to me. I looked up her arm to her delicately sloped shoulders and to her graceful, ivory-colored neck, to the curvature of her chin and to her lips. I looked on her complexion, its smoothness and youth always

gaining my attention, and then to the blue of her eyes. She wasn't scared. No, she wasn't scared at all. Her eyes, a deep and deceptive mixture of blue and green, sat underneath long lashes and gazed at me, held my attention, and didn't let go. I wondered if those eyes saw the fear that I'm sure my own gave away, as much as I tried to muster strength. I saw a slight grin. Hope emerged, and within a minute, stood strongly in front of me as I conjured expectations for words like "chance" and "options" and "common." Sure, the journey to parenthood had proven difficult, but as long as there was a possibility that we might conceive, hope could aid our efforts. Then the noise of the door handle, as I watched it turn and open. My urologist walked through the open door, closed it behind him, and sat on the paper-covered bench-table. After brief hellos and awkward small talk, he got to business.

"I'm afraid I have bad news," he said. "The test results came back and showed no sperm count at all." A hot haze surrounded my eyes and ears. "I'm afraid that getting pregnant is out of the question. I'm very sorry, Mr. Ruiz. If there is anything we can do..." And whatever he said next was totally lost in the haze that quickly became a slight ringing in my ears. As we stood up, my hand left Melissa's grasp and we exited the room, walked down the hallway, walked out of the lobby, and walked outside towards our car. The air was stale around us as our silent steps gave way to reality that we were walking nowhere—that we were entering a reality far less significant than when we arrived not even an hour earlier.

I walked Melissa to the passenger's side of the car, unlocked the door, and opened it. As I closed it and began the trek to the other side of the car, I searched for something to say—what would I tell her? I had failed her. She wanted kids, and I couldn't give them

to her. Was I a man? The meager aspects of my life multiplied, and turned into failure: my meager salary; her need to work a full-time job for bills and medical benefits; even small instances of nail-biting or lip-chewing—habits she hated. The list of shortcomings thrust itself in front of me.

This wife, who when our dating relationship became talks concerning our future, told me she envisioned four children in our keep. She would smile and even giggle at the thought of mothering children with me. Nine years later, I'm walking around our car, looking to its handle before pulling it towards me.

I entered the car, sat, and pulled the driver's side door closed. I saw Melissa's hand, gently placed on the middle console of her car. I looked at the steering wheel in front of me, and raised my hands to it, taking a firm grasp of the wheel. My grasp tightened, and I tilted my head downward so that I looked at my hands through the tops of my eyes. I knew her hand was waiting for me, but I didn't want comfort. I held back the tears that threatened.

"Dammit." I whispered the words slowly, then closed my eyes, pushing tears down my face. "I'm—" and stopped. My fingers were starting to numb, so I loosened my grip and placed my hands on my lap. I then leaned my whole body to the right and let Melissa hug me. And we stayed there as I sighed into the stale air of an otherwise forgettable midweek early evening, closed my eyes, and smelled Melissa's signature perfume as I sobbed into her chest. When I finally sat back up, I looked at Melissa through drying tears.

"I'm sorry," she said and reached for my hand. I turned my wrist palm up, and we began the drive home.

“Wanna eat?” Food was always the elixir. Her slight smile sat underneath raised eyebrows.

“Actually, yes.” I forced a smile and drove on, the steering wheel squeaking from my firm grip.

After dinner we went home.

By the time we turned the key to our front door, I felt a turning of my attitude. There was life ahead, childless or not.

As we entered the house, the smell of freshly-cleaned bathrooms and kitchen floors welcomed me, along with other niceties I fail to notice on a daily basis: spiced-scented candles, chicken-based broths, hints of exotic shampoos drifting down the staircase from our upstairs shower, a spring breeze flowing through opened windows. I stopped at the door and looked at my house and heard the softness of silence. I looked at Melissa, who walked past me, through the living room, into the kitchen, then flipped a light switch. From atop kitchen cabinets, a soft glow shot upwards and spread out over the kitchen and adjoining living room.

“Drink?” She reached for the freezer handle and pulled out her “frosty mug,” a Dallas Cowboys-logo tumbler that contains a freezing gel in its ‘cup’ portion. When the mug exited the freezer, it signaled the slow-down portion of our evenings. “Frosty mug” meant pajamas, jalapeno chips, a piece of cake. Comfort food takes a number of forms.

“Um...sure. A beer.” And when I popped off the cap, we headed towards the television. She turned it on and retrieved a *Law and Order* episode from our DVR cue. Brisco. Curtis. McCoy. Melissa watched, sometimes shaking her head, her hand reaching into the bag of chips.

“Mmm, that guy just got McCoyed!” She looked at me and sipped Coke. I chuckled at her. She beamed at the TV and put her mug on the floor.

When I finally put my head down to go to sleep, my ears strained to hear anything to jar it out of a consistent cycle of thought that replayed the day’s events. But I heard nothing. A quiet hum of silence began to lull me to sleep, a silence familiar to me in that house. That house, where toddlers didn’t run head-first into a gas fireplace; that house, where TV channels weren’t fought for; that house, whose occupants didn’t lose socks or wear through jeans after only two weeks.

The luxury of cleanliness and order was empty. My eyes open, I looked to Melissa, fast asleep, her head facing away from me. The space in between us was just big enough for a two-year old to cram itself into after hearing thunder. Through our open doorway, I looked into the hallway, through the open door of my office, and cursed to myself.

Catching Up

Day one.

I determine to ‘get in shape,’ a goal I have set to offset the mental fatigue caused by the mark of another decade. It’s September of 2013, the fall before my 40th birthday. And while the years have been kind—I have a full head of hair and the genetic gifts from Spanish and Mexican parents—I admit to a colleague during lunch at the faculty table, “I want my twenty-year old body” when asked what I wanted for my big day. Perhaps it’s unrealistic, perhaps it’s too demanding, perhaps (and this is what scares me the most) I lack the discipline to adopt the diet and exercise program necessary to lose weight, increase metabolism, rid myself of an increased midsection, attain lean muscle, wear slim-fit dress shirts again. I have tired of turning sideways in the mirror, watching my growing gut stick out further than my chest. Did I really wear a size-28 waist pair of jeans in high school? I didn’t get taller. I take the drastic step and decide to run. It’s what people do—they run. In bicycle shorts. Wearing hats. With their dogs.

The fall introduces another Cross Country season, and with it, a Friday afternoon email from our school’s Cross Country coach inviting would-be runners to “run with the kids” on Monday. The fall afternoon weather is beautiful, so why not? Sunday night, I pack my stuff in a gym bag and toss it in my truck. I’ll be ready.

The Monday late afternoon heat created by hidden sunlight huddles under cloud cover in the afternoon as I emerge from the school building. Inside of the field house—our gym—twenty middle school students await my arrival, anxious because I was simultaneously taking an interest in our school’s athletic program, and in myself.

As I walk down the small incline that separates the main schoolhouse from the gym, I try to play the same Jedi-mind-trick game I often play—or try to—with my

students: before a test, I'll tell them things like, "You already know the material; don't pay attention to the word 'test' at the top of the paper. Just pretend it's homework."

I attempt to convince myself the same way: "It'll be over before you know it. The kids do this all the time. You're not *that* out of shape."

I begin to believe these suggestions as I walk to our warm-up spot, a small landing adjacent to the field house, where a group of students greet me; they shout my name, "Ruiz!" in unanimous approval and ask if I'll "run with them." Run with them. Sure.

I see the coach, John, and walk to him.

"Hey, I made it." I look at his clothes, veteran-runner articles of clothing: a tank top, short running shorts, and shoes with no logo.

"Jason, glad you made it, man! You're gonna love this." I already hate it. I'm wearing a t-shirt and basketball shorts.

"What do I do?" I purse my lips.

"Just head over there and stretch with the kids." I walk twenty feet and begin stretching, mimicking the students, trying not to look surprised by the stubbornness of my muscles.

I look down at my feet, those blocks of weight that will later betray me. I shift my weight from one foot to the other, trying to appear active. I look to the kids: limber, they warm up with no signs of tiring. Running in place with them, my chest begins to constrict, my heart beating.

When the time comes for the actual running, I force myself to believe the Jedi mind trick by doing the one thing aged would-be athletes should never do: I remember

high school, where I ran track, lifted weights, and ate multiple plates of food at the local Sizzler with friends without counting calories. I was in fantastic shape, a picture of youth and strength.

Fast-forward to my stint on an afternoon with eighth graders. We start to run. I agree to run with the “slowest” group.

Group one. Group two. Group three. Then us.

I look down at my feet, now shuffling along at a commendable pace, and my high school feet appear against the backdrop of a blacktop track. It is my seventeen-year-old self in my shoes, attached to thirty-nine-year-old legs. The problem with remembering high school is that, when recalling the past, one has a predilection for exclusivity: the positive memories—dates, awards, sports triumphs, graduation—never quite tell the truth, and before the near-middle-aged man can call it off, the body sends a high alert to stop whatever has shocked it into the cold depths of reality. After only a few hundred yards, I want to quit. My chest tightens. My arms increase their tug against my torso. My feet begin stomping on the street. Sweat drips into my eyes.

Have I really aged twenty-one years in an afternoon?

Day two.

I am in the restroom located at the end of the hallway from my classroom. I don loose athletic shorts I hope will hide my untanned legs, which in their current state show more blue veins than I'd like. I look down at them and notice they could use a coat of lotion, but would that be vain considering I'm about to make my way to the gym to run? The lotion will have to wait; I need to hurry. Better to get this over with.

I'm still sore from yesterday. I have no idea how students young enough to be my children continually participate in this sport. Students who seem to love the idea that I've decided to practice with them, and even more that they get to be a part of a team that demands so much of them: a daily routine of stretching their young muscles, then running down the suburban roads behind our school.

As I exit the restroom and shuffle towards the gym, I'm not sure what I'm doing. I want to be healthy, I want to get in shape, maybe even to have my dress pants not fit so tight—a new development after this past summer. But the work is hard. Finally I make it down to the area where they wait for me, and am immediately encircled by young voices and arms.

“Mr. Ruiz, you're back!” “Mr. Ruiz!” “Hey, you wanna run with us today?” The students are accepting, happy. I try to seem excited.

“Hey, guys!” My voice lifts as I smile and fist bump some of them, then high-five the others. As I touch young hands and look at faces alight with smiles, I'm forced into a moment bracketed by two, seemingly opposing truths—truths represented by differences: their youth against my middle age; their financial positions as tuition-paying students against my young parents' struggle to pay utility bills; their existence on multiple social media accounts against my longing for coffee shop conversations; their young, care-free daily routines against my duty-bound, alarm-clocked to-do lists. I'm different from them. I feel like I don't belong.

The history of cross country running is as glamorless as its name: in 1837 something called a “Crick Run” was held at the Rugby School in England; its purpose

was to keep track and field athletes in shape for the spring and summer seasons. The Crick Run was held in two phases, the first of which required a group of runners to leave a trail of pieces of paper behind them as they ran; they were the ‘hares.’ The second group of runners, the ‘hounds,’ would then follow the hares and try to catch them.

The following year, the event was held again, and again on subsequent years. The tradition became modern cross country running, a race anywhere from 2.5 - 7.5 miles. It seems now that a cross country race, one which only serves to help time pass before athletes ready themselves for more prestigious events, has little importance compared to more marquee sports. In the spectrum of running events, cross country isn’t included on the top-billing marquee. When I watch the end of a time-demanding, DVR-consuming Summer Olympics season, track and field is the highlight of my two-week commitment to network television, the exclamation point to hours spent chanting a country’s initials or virtually befriending athletes unknown to me before watching the Opening Ceremony. TV has a way of creating pseudo-stalkers.

Olympic track and field events draw the largest demand for tickets, celebrate highlight-reel world records, and feature new camera technology, letting a viewing audience experience stride for stride their favorite athlete, the camera attached to a dolly that keeps the camera moving, its audience’s eye keenly focused on the steady, toned, struggling limbs of athletes who have worked their entire lives for this race, this opportunity for global notoriety.

The end of the Summer Olympic season combines with these displays of explosive strength, to compel audiences—me—to stand and cheer when sprinters fight for thousandths of a second. I watch, leaning forward on the edge of a couch the way a

sprinter leans into a ready ribbon, raise my arms, and wipe tears away when athletes make their way to their waiting parents who envelop their athlete-children in embraces of congratulation and familial warmth.

Distance running events receive no such on-screen sentimental connection.

The middle school students who make up Group #4 have outrun me to the point I can no longer see them. I find myself at an intersection, trying to decide which way to go. The run has taken me into a neighborhood of mini vans and SUV's, plastic playsets and lawnmowers, screen doors and painted shutters. Occasionally, the residents who are outside wave to me.

I'm tempted to hang my head when running down residential roads, alongside the dog walkers and in-shape moms in jogging skirts, who choose to look down at the road underneath them when running by me because they'd rather not have their eyes meet mine. They're running through roads of their own and don't have time for eye contact.

It's the mundaneness of cross country running that bothers me—there's little sense of accomplishment, especially when first starting to train.

Those who have fine-tuned their bodies to run long distances describe their experience when doing so: the first initial minutes, anywhere from ten to thirty, serve as a warm-up. Then their bodies will hit a stride, during which their feet and calves, legs and hips, torsos and arms, all work together in unison, guiding their light bodies over pavement or track. Their feet move steadily, almost gliding, and can keep striding for miles. Runners say that when they hit this pace, their bodies are on automatic pilot, fatigue eludes them, and they breathe easily, in rhythm with their legs. They reach a high, during

which they feel as if they can run for hours. Marathon runners will say that near the end of a marathon, their bodies fatigue, growing increasingly weary, wanting to give up. Runners must fight natural instincts to protect themselves; they must push their bodies to limits of exhaustion and muscle failure; their legs will grow heavy, their feet feeling like magnets to the street beneath them. For the last portion of the race, seconds brutally multiply into minutes, every moment an opportunity to quit.

I have not run a marathon. Not a 5-K. Not even a mile, those four laps my high school self used to cruise through while training for a track meet. After ten minutes, I'd run another mile.

Day three.

Again, I run with Group #4, the group of girls who have promised me, "Don't worry, Mr. Ruiz, you'll do fine!" Looking at them, I sigh. After warming up, the groups begin the afternoon's practice run. One. Two. Three. Then us.

Running only a brief five minutes, I feel the heaviness of my feet, my legs weakening, my lungs tightening and my heart trying to pound through my chest, my heartbeat banging against my eardrums. My hands dangle at the ends of my arms, failing to form themselves into fists—I need to conserve the energy for my legs. My head begins to droop forward and my hips swing from side to side because I think the kinetic energy of their momentum will allow my legs to work less. I've been running for only ten minutes, and my body, with every step, pleads for me to stop. It gets heavier with every step.

Ahead, the group of girls I began running with have kept their starting pace. I am slowing down. I hear them laugh as they talk, surprised they can talk without losing breath. I can barely manage to cuss underneath my gasps.

To my left, brick homes with sedans at the front of their concrete driveways. Their mailboxes vary in design, from brick columns to black tin boxes. Underneath some of the mailboxes are newspaper tubes, some of them stuffed with today's paper, left unattended.

To my right, the flow of traffic of housewife-runners and dog-walkers from the neighborhood. They are isolated from each other, focused on the space they occupy, some of them running with dogs, some with strollers. I stop running and begin a hurried walk.

“Scuse me, son, you mind?” I look ahead and see an old, portly man, dressed in running shorts, a tank top, and head band, walking three identical dogs, something resembling Beagles, which pull him forward. They are all fat, like their owner, undoubtedly fed whenever they paw at his kitchen cabinet doors. I step out of their way and nod, breathing too heavily to say anything. The old man and his three-headed monster walk at a slow speed. He's not even breaking a sweat. The old man and I meet eyes. I suddenly wish I had three dogs. He's old and his only company are his dog-creatures. I have no excuse.

After they make their way away from me, I look ahead. I search for a street name, and finally see a green sign ahead, at the next neighborhood intersection. After sounding it out, I realize I am lost. I turn around and try to secure my surroundings. Wherever I am, I will have to walk back to school; the strength in my legs has gone. So has my will. I

slowly try to find my way back, putting one foot in front of the other, as I look down at my feet. The only sound I hear is me, gasping for breath.

Clipping a Bonsai Tree

On a cloudy, cold-ish day during my two week-long winter break, I survey channels whose limits seem endless during two-week vacations, the words, *The Karate Kid* draw me out of the haze of habit, and I push the “select” button. I am transported to my 6th grade year, during which, after seeing the movie for the first time, I developed an insatiable need to learn karate and a hopeless love for Elizabeth Shue, the Karate Kid’s love interest. Movies always bring me to the gates of nostalgia, be they adventurous or romantic.

I nestle myself into my couch’s familiarity and comfort, and watch. Then comes a scene that drives away any sense of winter break-ness. The movie’s archetypal teacher, Mr. Miyagi, says something that jolts me out of the comforts of nostalgia: in a convincing Japanese accent, he says to his protégé, Daniel, at one of the critical points of the movie, “There is no such thing as bad student; only bad teacher. Teacher say, student do.”

The Japanese cliché of Mr. Miyagi aside, his words stir. I sit up straight and squint at the television.

We’re trained to place responsibility on our students: they earn the grades, they read the assignments or they don’t, they win or they lose. And we assess their progress; we grade the assignments, prepare them for tests, and administer them. “Here,” we say, “Here is the result of *your* efforts.” And sure, that’s the way it works; it’s the nature of education, after all, this cycle of teach-test, teach-test. Repeat for twelve years.

I look to the television—Mr. Miyagi’s mouth. The movie I watch becomes silent and I am once again, as I often am, alone, thinking. Rather than reflect on the role of the student, I reflect on *my* role as one who is responsible for what happens in the classroom. My classroom. And what my students learn. And how they learn. And if they learn at all.

What if their learning is more of a result of my efforts than theirs? What if I’m equally responsible for how my students score on tests, how well they write, or whether or not they understand the parts of the novel I’ve assigned? What if my name was next to theirs on their report cards when they went home, as if to say, “This is a joint effort—this is how *both* your child and her teacher collaborated this grading term”? Would I be ok with that?

Although I wasn’t sure in the 6th grade, I’m sure now: I like Mr. Miyagi because he’s an effective teacher, taking his student to depths even Daniel didn’t think he could swim. Daniel does all that Mr. Miyagi tells him to do, and in the process, learns more than karate. Daniel learns the importance of balance in his young life. He learns how to handle the bad guys who want to beat him up; he learns how to cope with being in love with a rich girl on the other side of the tracks (her country club parents don’t approve of her dating him); he learns how to deal with being the son of a single mother; he learns how to find acceptance as the new kid in school, having moved from Newark. He’d be lost without his faithful teacher. Less of a student. Less of a young man.

It’s not easy, even for good teachers. In the beginning of her educational career, Michelle Rhee, famed former Chancellor of Washington D.C. Public Schools, was assigned to teach at an inner city Baltimore school by a program she enrolled in, “Teach

for America.” She, following her father’s example, would dedicate her life to education. What she quickly encountered was that students who have odds stacked against them can be more difficult to teach—they go hungry, they fight with their parents, they help raise their siblings while their parents are working, or worse, are fighting personal demons. They aren’t encouraged, motivated, or provided the resources to succeed.

In her book, *Radical: Fighting to Put Students First*, Rhee recounts her harsh initiation to public education: “As I dropped the students off at lunch on the cafeteria one day, two boys started to fight. One kid had the other in a choke hold. [...] He was about to pass out.”

How does one teach in such a place?

One popular idea is that kids from different socioeconomic neighborhoods perform differently because of where they’re from—the kids from the “good” schools from “good” neighborhoods are “good” kids, and do well compared to the “bad” kids from “bad” schools in “bad” neighborhoods.

Another opinion is that because the better neighborhoods house families that make more money, more money goes to their schools, so they have more resources at their disposal, which aids their kids’ education. Performance follows money and higher social status.

I read Rhee’s account in Baltimore and shift in my seat. And breathe.

My wife and I attended a birthday party one weekend, where, making small talk, one woman in attendance, a teacher, gave her unsolicited opinion about teaching kids from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

“I don’t care *what* anyone says, demographics plays a huge part in how good students do. It don’t matter *how* hard you try to teach ‘em!” She moved her hands back and forth, her head moving as she talked. She saw I was staring at her. “You might have a different opinion, but that’s how I see it.” I kept my mouth shut, though I wanted to accuse her of not caring enough, of growing too comfortable in her job, of showing signs of laziness. I didn’t want, even by profession, to be associated with her.

Michelle Rhee says, “I have gone through some difficult and painful times in my life, but nothing compares to my first year as a teacher. It was the hardest time in my life, period.” She finished her first year. Then her second and her third.

After a semester of what amounted to a long-term sub post at a high school teaching 9th grade English, I took a job at Paul Laurence Dunbar Middle School for Innovation, an inner city school of sorts (ours is a smaller city without the problems bigger cities can pose). The kids I encountered weren’t what I’d seen in movies like *Dead Poets Society*. They weren’t open to new teaching methods or creativity; they resented me because I didn’t look like them, although they would later be surprised that our backgrounds were similar; they weren’t open to the wonders of literary images and symbols. When I assigned homework, some did it; most did not (one of the teachers later told me it was beneficial to lower my expectations and not assign any homework). After weeks of back and forth with middle school students I couldn’t seem to reach, I was tired. I was mad. I was out of ideas. And I wanted to quit.

My wife and I sat on opposite sides of a Pizza Hut booth, her salad drenched in ranch, mine in oil and vinegar, a plate of pizza slices in the middle of the table. Newly

out of college, most of my nights were spent preparing lesson plans for the next day's classes. Melissa, an experienced retail manager, often found herself alone on the couch watching *Law and Order*, Detectives Curtis and Brisco, and Assistant D.A. Jack McCoy her only company (she now refers to them on a first-name basis). So when we could, we snuck dinner dates in between the strained hours of our professional schedules.

"So how's your new job?" She knew I worked hard to finish college and that I was the first in my family to ever do so, and that I wanted to teach. What she didn't know was how much more the struggle raged once I was in the classroom. Students yelled at me. I tried to correct their grammar mid-class. No one turned in homework. Parents only answered my phone calls half of the time.

"I hate it," I confessed. "I don't like the kids and they don't like me." I kept my head down and waited for her sympathetic response.

"Well, that's because you're a jerk." She said it without looking up from her salad. She picked at it to find a suitable piece of lettuce.

"What?..." I moved my plate away from me and shifted.

"Well, if you treat them the way you tell me you do, no *wonder* they don't like you." She said this in reference to my no-late-homework policy I had previously shared with her over Chinese food. I thought it was a way to instill discipline. She thought—my students shared her disapproval—my policy distanced me from my students. I sat in shock, a pizza slice wilting in my left hand. I looked up from the table, at her. Her blue eyes were sincere. Her job was equally as taxing, perhaps more when she caught shoplifters or was cussed out by a group of adults for no longer having their pant size in stock.

Melissa tilted her head to the other side.

“Why don’t you just be yourself? They’ll like you. I like you!” She grinned, gathering her lips towards one side of her face, and although I was still recovering from the blow her words delivered, I smiled back. She was right.

Things changed. I relaxed. The next day, as students filed in to their desks, I greeted with a, “Hey, guys—what’s up?” They sneered, not used to my relaxed dictum. And I became empathetic: when I walked aisles to collect homework and some students didn’t have theirs, I’d lean down and say something like, “It’s cool—everything all right?” Their response was, at first, shock, followed by honesty.

“I had to help take care of my little brother, but my mom doesn’t work tonight. Can I turn it in tomorrow?” I agreed, sealing a new relationship with my struggling students—they began to trust me. And they began to turn in their homework. On time.

Something meaningful happens between students and teachers who establish a mutual trust. They begin to perform at levels higher than required by state exams and building rules. Community happens, creating an atmosphere where students and their teachers take chances. Chances that pay off. The redundant nature of the school transforms into excitement—who are those rare students who actually look *forward* to going to school? They are those students who have penetrated the crust of minor expectations and uniformed guidelines; they are those whose bond inside a school’s walls gives them meaning outside of them; they are students who have become people, who have popped from the page of a class roster into the heart of an educator who has established something far more significant than the teach-test, teach-test routine.

Bawlin'

Sunday, November 4, 2013. I sit underneath Melissa's favorite fleece blanket and let the soft glow of the living room lamps envelope me as I dip white corn chips into a bowl of salsa, a staple left over from my childhood years. I bring the familiar combination to my mouth. Comfort food. Sunday Night Football brings another Cowboys context, and for three-plus hours, I commit myself to the ebb and flow of another football game full of mistakes and missed opportunities. Incomplete passes. Interceptions. False start and pass interference penalties. It isn't a pretty game; it isn't a fun game to watch; it isn't a game that I'll remember in two weeks. It's a loss that, quite frankly, pisses me off, because I sit through three-plus hours of another Cowboys loss. All season, it's been like this: one win, one loss; another win, another loss. Tonight is another loss after a previous turn.

And as I try to get comfortable on my couch, I try to find a comfortable sitting position. I look down at my empty salsa bowl, and see in it the gallons upon gallons of salsa I've eaten over the years.

The bowl morphs into a thirty-gallon vat and stews.

I look to my left, where the bag of corn chips sits, and I see the edges of tens of thousands of chips from thousands of bags. I smell the combination of corn and salt. Like the empty bowl beside it, the bag grows to accommodate years of chips that suffered familiar fates. Thousands of chips eaten redundantly, out of routine, habit, for the sake of filling time as I live vicariously through years of television sets, living room coffee tables, couches. And as I look down at my watch that reads 11:50pm, I become painfully aware of how much time my relationship with the Cowboys has cost; they are a team who cannot hear me screaming. It all seems silly. I'm not six anymore.

Come. On. You've got to be kidding me—again? Are you serious?

I have invested thousands of hours cultivating, perfecting, and defending one of the most delicate relationships: a serious and problematic love affair with my professional football team. For most involved, it is a torrid and tiresome affair that lasts for decades, perhaps passed down from generations of football junkies who have made widows of their wives and orphans of their children. It's serious business.

A relationship with an NFL franchise spans the entire spectrum of human emotions; the first tear football-men cry often falls involuntarily down their faces after, say, watching their team lose a playoff game. They huddle together in bunches, donning similar football jerseys they paid too much money for, and lean attentively forward on the edge of a hot wing-stained couch as they watch the last seconds of the game—their hands grasp their room-temperature beers as they wait for the final play. For some, these moments result in a corporate celebration of victory. But for too many, they bring unexpected devastation—men stay crouched in front of sectional sofas with wrinkled foreheads and forget about their beers, they forget about the beef nachos on the ottoman *directly* in front of them. They forget about paychecks and cubicles and unanswered emails they promised to address last Friday afternoon, and they desperately try to piece together reasons why their respective teams lost. The emotion that follows is overwhelming. The football-men are never ready for it. I know I wasn't.

I was six when I cried for the first time watching the Dallas Cowboys—my drug of choice—lose. I've cried many times since. It was 1981, and I had watched the now infamous “The Catch” NFC Championship game, where, with fifty-eight seconds left in

the game, the now-heralded San Francisco 49ers' quarterback (Joe Montana; I still have a hard time admitting I like the guy) threw a last minute touchdown to a receiver in the back of the end zone. That play has become football folklore, a staple on famous football shows where the achievements of yesteryear stand in the middle of football's desert wasteland, summer. I've seen thousands of highlight clips of that play. The 49ers won the game and would later win Super Bowl XVI. My Dad steadily rose to his feet, screamed "No!" and placed his forehead in his hands, doubled over. My six-year-old mind wondered why he screamed at high-pitch; I wondered why it mattered so much that the guys on TV we screamed at didn't do what we wanted—wasn't our screaming supposed to help? Surely they must have heard us—why else would we yell, and why do I still? I wondered why the announcer was saying things like, "Amazing!" and "He caught it!" I wondered why in my world of careless, endless kid-fun, it mattered that the guys with stars on their helmets lost a game. My world wasn't like theirs—I rode my bike up and down hills, I chased my friends through playgrounds, I scraped my knees on the street because I fell down when I chased my brother.

The TV screen turns to a color, pixilated haze. Too much time has passed. The bags of chips, the gallons of salsa, and the years and hours and emotions I spend all combine and form a hand that slowly turns my face towards a mirror—I look uncomfortably into a reflection thirty-four years old. I am my dad, yelling at the TV, waving my fists, lost in tradition, if I can call it that. The years of football watching have become a deflated pastime, and as I tug at the remote beside me, frantically searching for the "off" button, I see my father's hands grasping at something for relief. I use my

father's voice when I say to myself, "Well, that was awful," trying to console and convince myself that I haven't really wasted days and months and years in front of a flat television set trying desperately to relate to a game I am too old to play.

Like my father, I am thirty-four years older. I'm not sure if I'm a younger version of him or if he's an older version of me. When I look at him, I notice he's changed. My dad, who now almost exclusively boasts silver hair; my dad, who has trouble reading without his glasses (and still has to hold his phone two feet away when reading a text message); my dad, who has endured two divorces; my dad, who turned sixty-three this year; my dad, who won't live to see another thirty-four seasons of football.

I had played football numerous times with my friends on the street beside our house or at recess during school. It never mattered that much to us then, so I didn't think it would matter now. But it does. And because it mattered to my dad, my younger brother and I followed suit—there in our lower-middle-class living room filled with mismatched furniture, a black-and-tan striped couch coupled with a green chair which sat on either sides of a dark brown, veneered coffee table and a TV that rested on a glorified TV dinner tray with eaten corners that revealed the particle board from which it was made. There I grieved my first significant football loss. And after a minute or so of mimicking my Dad's disappointment, something remarkable happened: my emotions became real. And every season (there have been thirty-four of them since), those damned emotions become more authentic—increasing media presence, TV time, my adult awareness, the internet, have all made the players and coaches my friends—and I find myself again in the familiar living room I shared with my family watching football. The furniture and

location have changed, but it's still the same living room. It pays homage to the image in the center of a black box (now a high-definition-giving, magic rectangle), that box that illuminates the rest of the house, that box that never answers back, that box that has cunningly claimed years.

The game followed me from middle school to high school. In 1992 I started college, and began watching football games with college roommates and dorm walkers-by. The landscape of sports was constantly changing: Mike Tyson, a professional boxer, was accused of raping his wife. Professional tennis star Monica Seles was stabbed during a match in 1993 by a deranged fan. In '94, professional figure skaters Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan made headlines when Kerrigan was attacked by a baton-wielding thug. Harding would later admit to orchestrating the attack on her unbeatable rival. Also that year, national news covered OJ's infamous highway trip in a white Ford Bronco. His trial—and its dividing aftermath that divided the nation—was must-see television for the better part of two years.

Yet, in the turbulent fluctuation of sports news, there was a constant: training camp in the summer, pre-season games in August, and the first game of the NFL season, usually the first weekend of September. The next seventeen weeks were my fall and winter routine, a routine that has, since its inception, beckoned my wife, however forcibly. In 2014, she wore her first jersey. Sometimes love takes time.

Some boys idolize super heroes, while others have posters of their favorite movie characters on the wall. Growing up, I decided that my heroes would be real people—athletically gifted men who were guests in my home every Sunday for three hours. The

Dallas Cowboys, a football team infamous for their fame and brashness and over-the-top displays of ‘look-at-me’ behavior, are an iconic American fixture, good or bad. Their 1970 stadium’s construction included a hole in the roof (a rather gaudy architectural feature), said to let “God watch His team play.” Their new stadium, a brash, gaudy complex costing \$650 million, has the same feature. You can’t say enough for tradition.

The first head coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Tom Landry, dressed every Sunday in a three-piece suit and wore a fedora over his stoic, expressionless face. It was often said of coach Landry that he never praised his players. During an interview, a player was asked, “Did you ever see coach Landry smile?” He replied, “No, but I was only with the Cowboys nine years.” Mr. Landry coached the Cowboys for twenty-nine seasons, pacing sidelines, holding a clipboard underneath his crossed arms, brooding underneath the brim of his hat. Unlike their coach, Cowboys players were famous for being outspoken, rock star-like personas with nicknames like “Hollywood Henderson,” an athletic linebacker who was known for his speed and agility; “Roger the Dodger,” the famous quarterback who served in the Navy for four years after winning the Heisman trophy before playing for the Cowboys and leading them to two Super Bowls in the 70s; and “The Playmaker,” an extremely athletically gifted, flamboyant, outspoken wide receiver who was a part of the Cowboys’ resurgence of the 90s.

I grew up thinking men who played for the Cowboys were the epitome of manhood. I, with my brother beside me, wanted to emulate their masculinity and I tried to every day that I played football with my classmates, but I knew my efforts were futile. The Cowboys played in front of tens of thousands of fans and in front of millions on national T.V.; I played in front of teachers who were forced to watch us during their

supervision duties. I found masculinity, at least of the football variety, taxing. My lack of football prowess (I wasn't cleared to play on official teams by doctors due to my nagging abdominal medical condition) called for me to become more of a fan than a player, so I tried to find kinship with the football players I watched on T.V. as much as I could during the NFL season from September through January.

Sixteen games; seventeen weeks. Three hours per game. ESPN analysis.

Televised press conferences from coaches and players. Newspaper and internet articles.

Serious. Business.

In the seasons that have followed that 1981 debacle—and in the hundreds of hours I have sat in front of a television set wearing a football jersey while watching game after game—I have been faithful, like a spouse who commits to someone even in the face of infidelity. I have stayed with the same team through agonizing seasons of loss: in the 1989 season I watched 'my team' win one out of sixteen games. I have also celebrated 'my team' being the best: four years after their one-win season, they won the Super Bowl three times, in 1992, '93, and '95. Faithfulness has its rewards. I sat next to my brother and father during the '92 and '93 Super Bowls, back-to-back wins. It was redemptive. Cathartic.

But, like any marriage, there are experiences other than one-win seasons and post-Super Bowl championship parades. There exists that grey area football fans loathe, yet often find themselves forced to live through—mediocrity: since their '95 Super Bowl win, the Cowboys have won only two playoff games. The last Super Bowl that mattered to me was nineteen years ago. And still I watch. With the same expectations. Next to people who still hear, "Aw, c'MON!" Even Melissa has chimed in: "That play never goes

anywhere—why do they run it?” If misery loves company, mine needs it. Like any marriage, the highs and lows are extreme points. The in-the-middle stuff, made from, for example, three consecutive 8-8 seasons, is a combination of hope, disappointment. I am the spouse who holds out hope. I am the spouse who has proof of accomplishment and kept promises. So when those promises are broken, I quickly forgive.

We have a history.

The players I watched underneath the starred helmets when I was a boy are now old men. They have grandchildren, give interviews with sports networks about the “glory days,” and spend weekends fishing with their friends off the coasts of Miami.

Thomas Henderson, “Hollywood Henderson,” notorious for his riotous lifestyle, was arrested in 1983 for smoking cocaine with two teenage girls in California. He would later admit to cocaine use during his football career. Now fifty-nine years old, he has lived a sober lifestyle since his 1983 arrest, working with charities, and often speaking with young NFL players about the dangers of the party lifestyle.

Michael Irvin, “The Playmaker,” was found with another Cowboys teammate and two ‘self-employed models’ in a hotel room celebrating his 30th birthday in 1996. Police searched the room and found drug paraphernalia, and arrested Irvin, who, upon the officers’ approach, asked, “Do you know who I am?” It’s a quotation now infamously linked to Irvin in Cowboys lore. He would later plead no contest and serve four years’ probation. Three years later, his football career ended when he was tackled head first into the turf. After leaving the game in an ambulance, doctors discovered a degenerative neck condition. Irvin never played another game. At forty-six, he now works for the NFL

network, analyzing games, plays, and during the summer, predicts how teams will fare in the coming season.

Tom Landry, a name my father equated with deity, was fired in 1989 when the Cowboys were sold to a new owner, oil tycoon Jerry Jones. Landry, who wore an immovable, fearless face on Sundays cried during his press conference announcing his removal from the Cowboys organization. His life after football didn't get easier: in February of 2000, Landry died of leukemia. He was a frail seventy-five years old.

I remember watching news coverage of Irvin's arrest and ensuing court appearances (he wore a mink coat to one); I remember watching as ESPN anchors announced Landry's death, one cried as he read the news.

Age and death have a way of giving a young man perspective and a sense of limited time. Football players allow young men to live in the world of "dress up." Their uniforms, complete with color schemes and accessories—thigh pads, shoulder pads, shiny helmets, eye black—are a masked version of the truth. Football players, on average, begin their careers as twenty-two-year-old boys, just out of college. And for those who enter the NFL draft early, they are younger. An average career expectancy is ten years. In fact, players are said to be "old" when they reach thirty years of age. At thirty, I was just feeling "grown up."

The beginnings of players' careers and NFL seasons share a young, incorruptible, immutable nature. The beginnings of things are always hopeful, and offer the luxury of time. Twenty-year-old young men don't imagine their lives at sixty; they don't, upon signing bonus checks worth millions of dollars, imagine bankruptcy; they don't foresee NFL trading deadlines; they don't understand, after being drafted, why they have to

compete for a starting job; they never imagine their outright release from a team (the NFL equivalent of being fired).

Every April, I sit, Coke and chips in hand, and watch the NFL draft—a coming of age for athletes who have spent their lives perfecting their respective positions and skills. The hype leading up to the draft becomes increasingly media-driven: sports channels spend weeks prognosticating what will happen come draft day. Their “draft specials” feature groups of men seated at news desks, pointing to charts and graphs behind them, listing pros and cons for each player and position. Men dressed in grey and navy blue suits argue with their counterparts why such-and-such a player will make a better quarterback than another, and then go back to their carefully created schematics. It’s all guess work. What strikes me, however, as I watch, isn’t the effort these men take in predicting the future. On draft day, I am drawn to the generational gap represented—players sit at tables with their families, waiting for their names to be called. And I wonder if the boys are waiting see the pace at which their lives will pass; I wonder if the presence of their parents makes them flinch or grasp at their heavily starched collars; I wonder, when their names are called and they walk on stage to shake hands with former NFL players, if it dawns on them that the coach who grabs a hand once held an NFL regulation-sized football in competition. I wonder if they begin counting years. I wonder if they see retirement at the inception of their careers, or realize that the word “career” isn’t thirty years’ work for a pension. In approximately ten years, they will have to change jobs. And even then, job changes don’t stop the aging process.

The Cowboys players of the 1990s are now retired: the star quarterback, Troy Aikman, sits in a booth for Fox and calls games; their star running back, Emmitt Smith,

won season three of “Dancing With the Stars”; one of their key offensive linemen, Nate Newton, was arrested for marijuana possession—police found 300 pounds in the trunk of his car. The stories are numerous, and as I grow older, common. One way or another, players move on. Seasons end. And my watch shows me to the exact second how much time I’ve devoted to their lives as mine moves on.

And no matter how many chips I eat, no matter how often I wear their jerseys, these players continue to age. They continue to retire or quit or move on to other careers or die in droves, their heroic status replaced with the title “ordinary” as they live out the day-to-day grind like mere mortal men, no longer able to sustain running explosive routes against other men—as they try to win a child’s game.

An NFL career lasts ten years if a player is lucky. And if I’m doing the math right, I’ve been watching for thirty-two years.

Damn.

Sunday’s loss was yet another incident. The crime: an assault on an innocent fan who just wanted a night alone with his team. I’ve been faithful. Perhaps too faithful. And to whom?—to what?

Looking at the T.V., I see the same uniform on new players, most of whom I know by name and number. New players wear old numbers: I know the last three players to wear “88”; I know what changes the uniform has undergone in the last ten years. And I know that over the years, *my* uniform—the uniform of the spectator—hasn’t changed at all. On Sundays I can be found holding a bottle of Blue Moon between my knees as I try to turn up the T.V. with my right hand and maintain the salsa’s balance on the corn chip in my left; my white “22” jersey is occasionally replaced by the royal-blue “8”; I can hear

salt crumbles drop down onto my slicky-pants, the ones with the blue star on the side of them, the ones that make a “swish” sound when I walk to the refrigerator for another beer.

As I sit underneath the fleece blanket and close the bag of corn chips, I realize that I have indeed been a part of a team ever since I first watched the Cowboys with Dad in 1981. I am the forgotten fan who holds onto hope for much longer than he should.

I’m not part of a football legacy at all. I’m just getting older. And in the waning moments of that Sunday night, I become aware that the true team camaraderie I feel is found among the faded: retired and aged football players and my father’s silver hair. Now I have grey hair, my back aches after a day working in the yard, I am winded after a brief trot across the parking lot to my car in the rain, I fight sleep after a hearty meal. Time has unforgivingly passed, and now another Sunday evening is wasted. Sure, it would have been nice if the Cowboys won, but it doesn’t matter when I calculate that some of the Cowboys could be my kids.

My sighs echoing off of the hardwood below me, I turn off the TV just as Sunday night turns into early Monday. The room glows a delicate off-white. I get up from the couch, walk to a wall next to a lamp, and turn off the living room’s lights with one flick of a finger, then turn towards the stairwell, my final obstacle to a good night’s sleep. Still in disbelief of the football spectacle I felt forced to endure, I walk upstairs slowly as my knees pop.

Counting Lives

I heard it. The tone was a mid-range scream, echoing off of the concrete basement floor and I wondered if Melissa was hurt. Did she fall? Puncture herself with something? Was there a snake?

As I washed my hands, Melissa had gone into the basement to round up one of the cats for feeding. I turned off the water.

“Jason! Jay-son!” I hurriedly stepped to the basement door and opened it, expecting to see Melissa limping up the stairs. I didn’t see that.

What I did see stilled me; my wife carrying a black, furry bunch in her arms. Was something wrong with the cat? Melissa was trying to speak through sobs, and I took in what was still a blur: a tuxedo-marked cat in her arms, unmoving, and Melissa looking to me. Slowly, the blur of events came into focus, and in one swift motion, I embraced both my wife and our dead Abby, one of our three cats, as I tried to piece together a possible scenario.

“Where did you find her? What happened?”

Melissa tried to explain between sobs. “I found her. She was lying down on her belly...her face was down...with all four legs stretched out from her body. Oh my God!—” Melissa trailed off, inconsolable, her head down in Abby’s black fur.

“Sweetheart—” A choking feeling closed off my throat.

“She was healthy, right?” Melissa’s eyes were wide, bloodshot. “There wasn’t anything *wrong* with her, was there?” A brief silence, and she burst into tears again and placed a limp Abby onto the kitchen island. I kissed her head, then looked at Abby’s closed eyes, and stroked her fur.

In the brevity of a second that seemed to expand, I searched for an answer to her honest and necessary question. Huddled with her over a small dead body, I felt forced to investigate the greater issue of things dying: the sickness of family members, pets suffering from enlarged heart ventricles, as Abby's autopsy would later show.

I'm only a middle-aged man. I felt inept to answer my wife's question as I stood next to her and rubbed the flat of my hand in between shoulder blades. The dead cat my wife held in her arms was the same cat she helped deliver after a frantic emergency phone call to a vet when the birthing process became too difficult for the mother. Her presence at the birth and death of a beloved pet is a microcosm; I watched her, bent over the cat's dead body, stroking its head, whispering.

"I'm sorry, Abby. So, so sorry, little girl," a phrase Melissa's mom used when referring to only daughter. Melissa stayed bent over Abby's body, whispering to her. The other cats walked around the kitchen, walking around our legs, darting their heads up towards Abby.

I looked at them, their tails swishing back and forth, then looked back to the island's top. I winced at the cats on the floor. They forced me into mental contortion: whether or not I want to, I will remember deaths and funerals, the sounds of loved ones crying, the suits I will have to pick out for visitations, wakes, and grave-site services. I'll remember flowers and casket colors, remember songs grief-stricken family members sing during a funeral service at a church I've never been to. I'll remember funeral home smells—perfume, potpourri, shirt starch, carpet cleaner, Lysol—and the grainy voices of funeral home directors and the painted smiles they wear. I'll remember the seemingly trivial things: looking at my watch, seeing shoe laces at the bottom of a pant legs, or a

sheet pan full of ham biscuits someone brought to the house just to be nice. Those details are inerascable. They'll stay, gathered somewhere in my memory, needing minimal stimulation—a song, a commercial—to be recalled and appear like new. They'll bring me back to the sound of Melissa's voice rushing to me from the basement, of tears and crying into Grandmother's lapel, of watching incredulously as a distant cousin throws dirt down on a loved one in a mahogany crate six feet down.

While the death of a pet showcases the continuum of life and death. And while the death of a family pet is trivial when compared to the loss of a family member, it's not insignificant. The sting of death is relevant and plain, swallowing up innocence that once held the form of a wagging tail, a lolling tongue, or a cat's black face bracketed by white whiskers. It's a cruel action to dig a pet's grave—some people have the opportunity to prepare for their end, but animals never see theirs coming.

Two days after Melissa found her dead in the basement, we buried Abby. A year and a half later, we would bury Sammie, Abby's mom, a vanilla-colored Himalayan hybrid with tortoise shell-colored tips. In the fall of 2012 we said goodbye to Angel, a black-and-white Maine Coon we rescued after her owners abandoned her. They lived in the apartment below us, our home before we moved into our house in July of 2002.

The day's move had been hectic. Cardboard boxes, stacks of clothes kept on hangers, the smell of permanent marker on the boxes, friends who accepted pizza as their wage for a hard day's labor. And a near-death experience for Abby. And Melissa. On Moving Day, we kept the cats in our bedroom—they would go last, in Melissa's car. Moving day was stressful enough; the cats must have been especially stressed, according to Melissa. Their constant meows behind the closed bedroom door validated her fears.

“Jason, can you go and get the bedding off of the bed and take it to the truck?”

Sure. The rented U-Haul was nearly full, only needed odds and ends to ensure its contents wouldn't shift around as we drove. In one swoop of my arms, I grabbed the bedding, rolled it, and took it to the truck, tossing it down with a slight heave.

“Jason!” I looked behind me and saw Melissa, walking quickly towards me. Her upper lip quivered. “Where's Abby?”

“Inside.” I stood up and put my hands to my lower back, sore from the day's work.

“No she isn't. I can't find her anywhere.” She put her hands in front of her face, and I jumped down from the truck.

The moving effort turned into a thirty-minute search party, Melissa inside of the apartment, me and my friends searching in bushes, along neighboring streets, underneath cars. Abby was a quirky cat—she was skittish around company, sometimes keeping herself even from me. She would sometimes sleep on Melissa's lap, but tended to squeeze herself into tight places: underneath towels, beside our bedroom pillows, sometimes underneath our bed's comforter next to the edge of the bed. Inside of my head, a light. Click.

“Oh, shit. Melissa!” I threw the front door open. “Come with me.”

“What—what is it?” She ran behind me.

“I think I know where she is.” I ran to the truck, jumped to the rolled bedding, knelt down, and carefully unrolled it. Black fur. Abby, tucked inside of its confines, emerged, looked up at me, and repeatedly licked her cat-lips. I picked her up and handed her to Melissa.

“Abby...you crazy kitty!” Her voice shook, she held the cat to her neck, and we went back inside.

The three cats survived the move. When it was time for each burial, my pick axe fought the dirt-rock mixture. We walk to the graves, occasionally, trimming away grass and weeds. We’re still not used to it.

The cat hair still falling in its wake, the sunbeam coming into our home reveals the indoor bamboo mat on the other side of the glass. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her—a playful calico kitten, chasing her tail as she crashes into the edges of the bamboo mat. I look to the playful chaos and smile. We have chosen to call her Piper, named after a witch on a semi-popular TV program. The nature of our new pet fits the character she’s named after. We were unprepared for a kitten. Piper, the cuteness of her splotchy calico markings are a spell that makes us smile more than we frown.

But there is reason for us to worry: she is a pint-sized tornado of black, white, and orange, jumping from coffee tables to lamps and sending them down with a shatter of a light bulb. This is routine. Our house is slowly acclimating to kitten-life. Each of our houseplants has become a casualty: the ivy in a terra cotta pot was moved to the basement because it nearly became a kitten-noose; two stalky grass-plants in pots flanking the fireplace mantle also had to go because they, contrary to Piper’s definition, were not food; the decorative trees adorning the corner next to the patio door were moved to the other side of the patio door outside, and consequently died. They weren’t made for outside weather, or for inside weather with a kitten as their new nemesis.

“Piper, no!” For her more active treks through the house, sometimes a “Dammit, Piper...” is necessary.

We speak English to Piper. The hopeful expectation is *some* understanding when a plea is made to stop digging or scratching or biting. Whether or not animals have the capacity to understand and utilize language, pets have a knack for disregarding anything they have learned. Puppies will tilt their heads to one side, ears perked, eyes open. They’re taken by surprise when human voices escalate in tone and volume. Cats take on an altogether different approach: they simply walk past their owners, oblivious to voice tones, pleading questions, or piles of dirt left in the wake of their curiosity.

I brought Piper home as a concession—only after a classmate informed us that a “box of kittens” was left at the doorstep of one of her friend’s houses. The term “box of kittens” was enough to evoke both pity and curiosity from the class, and a silent protest from me. Having said goodbye to a cat earlier in the year, I had resigned myself to say goodbye to goodbyes—not attaching myself to an animal would, one, protect me from the label of “cat person,” and two, protect me from the stabbing feeling that comes when things die. Some of the class showed interest after hearing “box of kittens.” Not wanting to seem unfeeling, I feigned a need to visit the restroom. When I returned, it was time for our mid-class break and before I walked through the door, I asked to see a picture. It was impulsive. And foolish. There she was, in the middle of two of her siblings. Her tiny front paws grabbed the bars of the crate that was their temporary home. She looked directly into the camera, standing on her hind legs, eager, expectant, maybe hopeful. The rest of the class hurried by in a blur, and I went home to show the picture to my wife. The next week, the calico kitten sat in a cat carrier carefully secured by a seat belt in the

passenger's seat, my fingers reaching inside of the front of the cage, my voice consoling tiny meows of confusion and fright. "It's okay...you're coming home."

"Home" is the sweet song of ownership, hard-earned—a special distinction bred from familiarity. Our home is not merely where we have staked a claim, but by the hours of work we have taken to make this dwelling our own. Walls are painted, wooden fixtures are sanded, carpet is torn out or laid down, and toolboxes that find a temporary home amid more permanent furniture.

Before the completion of our home, Melissa and I went on a necessary field trip to choose furniture. We chose each piece carefully. We walked around love seats and coffee tables and solitary chairs in silence—we checked the evenness of end tables, the slopes of couch backs, the comfort-level of couch-cushions, the severity of a throw rug's shag. Given the expense, we couldn't afford to choose wrongly. Each choice further made the house ours, the scrutiny and care of their choosing another exclamation mark on a carefully written and revised sentence. We made decisions slowly, calculating how much it would hurt when we finally swiped a credit card that would swipe funds from our meager savings account.

Piper took no such care staking her claim. On her first night home, I opened the cat carrier's door and her tiny claws made a great skittering across the hardwood floor as she acrobatically scampered into the living room and kitchen, then to the dining room, darting back and forth, unable to make a decision where to explore first.

Stop. Look. Eyes wide. Crouch down, repeat through the main level of the house.

Her pace of activity was a frenzy of fur, sniffing out a stray cat toy, testing the strength of chairs' legs, fighting her reflection that emerged at the bottom of the dishwasher as she approached. After a half hour of frantic activity, she was finished.

I had given up vying for her attention (I'm no match for furniture, still) and sat down on the floor, scrolling through emails on my phone, when I felt a soft velvet against my right hand. I pulled my arms slightly away from my lap to find my new kitten trying to push her way onto my lap. When she had the room she needed, she hopped up, walked in two or three circles on my two extended legs, and lay down, her tiny body in a circular shape. She looked up at me, then put her head down and closed her eyes.

Blocked

June 2001.

Friday afternoon. I have ordered beef with broccoli, my favorite Chinese concoction, from a strip mall restaurant just a half mile from my work, a high school. I have completed a temporary, semester-long teaching assignment, and need to clear the classroom of personal affects. I decide food will help.

I eat a late lunch in my room. Chinese spices waft through the room as I take bites, load books into boxes, then eat some more. I don't finish—after eating a full meal, my pace has slowed and I've lost motivation. On my way home, I feel a slight discomfort in my belly. I must have eaten too much too quickly.

The next day, I drive to the school with a consistent pain on the right side of my stomach, like someone has taken the small end of a baseball bat and pushed it into my gut. I keep my right hand on the wheel of my small, silver Saturn sedan, and with my left hand, reach to the right side of my belly, trying to locate the point of constant pressure. The pain remains fixed on the right side of me, and I wonder why it hasn't moved, and why the rest of my stomach doesn't hurt like this. My hand, now flat on my stomach, maybe relaxes me. The pressure lessens for a minute, then quickly returns, this time stronger. I feel the pressure—and the pain it brings—in spasms, waves of something gripping my belly forcefully, then letting go. I curse the Chinese restaurant and chalk the stomach pains up to food poisoning.

I arrive at the school, park my car, and shut the car's door. The spasms' pressure intensifies. And then, one long, strong, wave of pressure, pushes into the right side of my body. The pain doubles me over. I walk to my left and throw up in a patch of grass next

to my car, then try to stand up straight. The vomiting has stopped the spasms. They return and I throw up again. Then a third time. With each regurgitation, I feel pain grip my entire stomach like claws. E.coli? Broccoli that wasn't properly cleaned? Is this going to get worse? I decide I need to find out, and head for the emergency room.

My wife, Melissa, meets me there, surprised, caught off guard ("Did you taste anything wrong with the food?"), and worried. They keep me for a few hours on an IV drip—the vomiting caused dehydration. Melissa grabs my hand, turns it palm-up, and she sits on the edge of the hospital bed next to me. Every five minutes, she turns her head and wipes her cheekbones, nose to ear.

We leave without a diagnosis.

2007.

On a Monday night, I eat dinner with Melissa over laughter and flirtatious exchanges. A couple of hours later, it's time to go to sleep. When I throw my right leg onto the bed, I feel the right side of my stomach cramp. I stand up and with my left hand, instinctively feel for the spot where I feel the pain. *It's where the hernia is.* On the left side of my stomach's scar is a hole, a break in the abdominal wall, the size of a miniature football. I am well acquainted with my stomach's features. The pain, however, is unfamiliar.

"Something's...wrong." I let the words drip out like a shameful confession. I don't want her to worry.

"What do you mean *wrong*?" She sits up and leans towards me. I hear her breathing intensify.

“I don’t know...it hurts here.” I point to the right side of my belly.

“On your scar?” She moves towards me and touches my stomach.

“No, here.” I point. “In the hernia, somewhere.”

“Is it a stomach ache?” She’s feeling around, as if trying to locate the source of my pain.

“No, not all of it hurts, just...right here.” The pain is concentrated, one finger of a claw digging into the hernia. I look at Melissa as she gathers her mouth to one side of her face, a defense mechanism she’s developed.

“What do you wanna do?”

We decide to let time pass before we make a decision, so we go to sleep. I sleep on my right side, hoping that the pressure of the memory foam will alleviate the pain. It does, but the spasms continue, waking me up every hour.

At 5 am, I call in sick, and at 8 am, I call the doctor. Melissa goes to work hesitantly. I promise to call if it gets worse.

My 9 am appointment is marked by the spasms, intense—a constant upper-cut-like feeling. I can barely walk.

In an examination room, I lie down on a table and pull up my shirt. The doctor pokes at the bottom of my abdomen, then works her way right. When she finally approaches ground zero, I let out a yelp. I have thrown up twice, yet the pain persists. The doctor brings her eyebrows together; she is stern.

“I’m going to have to admit you to the hospital,” she says. I call Melissa en route.

I limp my way to the reception desk and give my name. A young lady looks down at a computer screen.

“Ah, yes. Ruiz.” Paperwork. Waiting. More waiting.

When my name is finally called, I’m ushered to a counter where two liter-sized containers await.

“Drink those so we can get an x-ray, okay, hun?” I look at the middle-aged woman in baby blue scrubs. She half grins and pats me on the shoulder before leaving me alone at the counter.

I sit at the counter, open the first bottle, and drink. The liquid chalk is bland and cold as it makes its way down. Halfway through the second bottle, I feel my throat tighten and stomach gurgle. I walk towards the bathroom and I hope I don’t have to down two more bottles. The liquid tastes as bad coming up as it did going down.

Early evening. Melissa is with me in a hospital room, sitting on the edge of the bed, stroking my arm gently so as not to disturb the IV tubes. She looks at me and moves her mouth to one side, her go-to defense when fighting tears. It isn’t enough. She wipes her cheek.

“Does it still hurt?” Her voice is shaky. She’s afraid.

“Yes. A lot.” We remain together, Melissa now in a chair next to me. We watch the hospital television, located at near-ceiling height. I wonder why they have to be up so high. It’s ironic: in an institution dedicated to managing pain and disease, one of the methods designed to distract patients creates an inconvenience that is a bit painful. Our TV experience is interrupted by an opening door. A slender man in a white coat walks in. He is younger, in his late 30s or early 40s, and sports a dark, combed-to-the-side haircut. His eyes meet mine.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Bass.”

“Hullo,” I moan. Whatever relief the television brought has disappeared. The spasms have started again.

Dr. Bass explains the x-rays don’t show him exactly what’s going on. I recount my experience.

“Sounds like something got in there,” pointing to my belly, “and caused a blockage.”

“Blockage?”

Because of my scar, the hernias, the workings of whatever intestinal tracts have rearranged themselves into the chaos enclosed in my stomach cavity, I am prone to the intestinal equivalent of a traffic jam, even to the occasional eight-car pile-up. Dr. Bass suggests that whatever is responsible for causing the spasms of pain is “stuck in there.”

“We gotta go and get it out.” The fix is something like a stomach vacuum. He exits the room and in fifteen minutes, returns with two nurses and a rolling tray of goodies and gadgets, the star of which is a long, chalk-white tube.

What follows is what we now refer to as the “nose hose” incident. I look at Dr. Bass, look at his hands which fiddle with the items on his steel doctor-tray.

“I’m gonna need you to kind of swallow this, and I’ll feed it down. You’re gonna feel a choking sensation. Just breathe and try not to panic.” He approaches my face with the tube and holds it in front of my face, then places an end at the opening of one of my nostrils. He looks at me, then to his hands at my nose. His eyes squint. Then his hands move forward, and I feel the hose violating my nasal cavity before it hits the back of my throat. “Choking” understated it. The tube feels grainy, and I try to fight suffocation.

He is right. As much as I try to muster the strength to believe his actions will *help* me, I swallow the tube and gag-cough to a “Just relax...*goood*...there. It’s done.”

My throat, used to passing food down to my stomach, grips the tube with a feeling like I’m trying to swallow sand. I look to Melissa, who is wiping tears.

Dr. Bass asks if I’m okay. I nod.

“Okay, bud. I’ll come check on you in a bit.” He hooks the tube to a box-like thing, flips a switch, and leaves. The hose will suck food from my stomach and spit it into the box.

I sit up on the bed, relax, and try to talk to Melissa. She walks to me and shushes me, then sits on the bed and grabs my hand.

Two days later, I am nose hose-free, eating broth, now well-acquainted with the hospital’s TV lineup.

I go home the next day, a Friday, and, on doctor’s orders, eat nothing but white rice, apple sauce, and chicken broth for six days. I stare down each spoonful before bringing it to my mouth.

September 2014.

I drive home from work when I feel *it* again, the now-familiar pain on the right side of my body. Since the hospital stay in 2007, this is perhaps the fifth time I have spent the better part of two days vomiting myself to dehydration because of blockages. I stay away from bulky raw vegetables (broccoli has been the culprit on at least three occasions). But this afternoon, I am perplexed...I ate a sensible lunch and didn’t eat until after school...when...apple. I ate an apple. I remember big bites.

When I get home, Melissa waits for me in the ‘hug-ready’ position after a day off. One look at me and she knows.

We quickly head to an urgent care facility. The x-ray reveals a blockage. On the way home, I’m tired of the repeated visits to the doctor, the repeated vomiting episodes, the spasms of pain that punch harder with every visit.

November 2014.

I sit next to my wife in a doctor’s office at Duke University. Dr. Bass has recommended that someone “much more qualified” than he review my case. A CT scan revealed the need for the referral.

“There’s a lot going on in there,” he said.

On a fall afternoon, we wait among office things: *People* magazines, swivel chairs, stainless steel counter tops, and an off-white florescent glow. Soft music plays over the ceiling-speakers. A computer screen shows a loop of pictures, shots of Duke University’s campus. Seated on the bed-bench with protective paper, I leaf through a brochure and try to make sense of diagrams of my digestive system. *I’m sure mine looks much different than this.* I wonder if this appointment will bring answers.

“Theodore Pappas,” he says as he shakes my hand. Next to him is a man of Asian descent, a medical student in his residency. He smiles, then looks down at his pad and hurriedly takes notes.

Dr. Pappas gives us his card. I glance down and read his name, and description: “Distinguished Professor of Surgical Innovation.”

I sigh in hope.

“What seems to be the problem?”

I recount my history from birth to the latest intestinal episode. He stands next to me, one arm crossed over his stomach, the other holding up his chin. He sways back and forth and listens. His short, wavy hair is a mixture of dark brown and grey. If it were longer, it would curl. His face is slender, with high cheekbones that accent his gaze. His gaze is intense; every five seconds, he squints. Every five seconds, I hope he is formulating the end to my faithfully consistent discomfort.

“Well,” he says, “where you’re headed is emergency surgery.” He explains that the patterns of pain are becoming more frequent, and that a permanent fix will require “a complete rebuilding of your abdominal wall.” He explains the details, which I lose in a haze of explanation. I hear words like “mesh” and “plumbing” and “fascia.”

The next words *do* register.

“We’ll have to get rid of that scar, and pull the rest of you together.”

“Get rid of my scar?”

“Yeah, well, you don’t want to continue to have the same problems you’ve been having. We’d have to make sure that when the mesh is finally set in, nothing gets in its way from holding your mid-section together on its own. Right now, that scar is the only thing holding you all together.” He points to my stomach, points back and forth across my mid-section.

While he explains himself, I sit, my hands on my lap. I lift my right hand from my lap and run it across my stomach. My index finger presses into the middle of my scar, where it is thickest. I press my finger inwards. I can’t feel it.

I drive home from Duke University, Melissa beside me, my scar hiding behind two layers of cotton. Surgery will have to wait, which will require a week in the hospital, then a month of bed-rest. “It should take about three to four months for you to heal completely,” Dr. Pappas said. He was candid. I nodded my head slowly at the news, then stared at the floor.

For forty years, I have known a life accommodating a deformity in the middle of my body. Like the unwanted relative that has overstayed his welcome, I’m ready to see it go. But like relatives, it’s a part of who I am—it has defined me. Perhaps for someone seeing my torso for the first time, the scar and the bumps and protrusion that reaches out from the right side of my body are uncomfortable, maybe grotesque. But “normal” has, in its definition, included my stomach’s image—I see every imperfection when I look in a mirror. I’m used to the unevenness of my stomach’s surface. I’m used to looking skinnier in a mirror when I turn right—the hernia on my right side disappears.

After a two-hour trek home, Melissa and I walk through the door and are welcomed by a purr weaving its way through our legs. Melissa picks Piper up and rests the cat’s head on her shoulder, and strokes downward. More purring.

I head upstairs and change clothes, replacing jeans for sweatpants, and take off my outer shirt, and hang it. Underneath is a white t-shirt. I head to our bathroom and face a mirror. I turn left, then right, comparing the thickness of my stomach to my chest (perhaps it’s middle age, but I don’t want to admit it).

I turn and face the mirror directly. I look at my hair. It’s thick, blown back, to one side, still neat after a day of travel. I square my shoulders and puff my chest out. I can see faint muscle definition, a distinct line from shoulder to chest. With my two hands, I reach

for the bottom hem of my t-shirt and pull it towards my back, tight against the front of my body. The whiteness of the shirt accentuates every bump I have tried so long to hide. I pull the shirt tighter and stare down the image in the mirror. I hear Dr. Pappas's words, "lose the scar" in my head, and pull my t-shirt up, relax my body, and stare.

"Could he really fix this?" I hear the words echo off of the mirror, then wrinkle my forehead. It's not that I doubt modern medicine and surgical techniques—in junior high school, I met my best friend's younger brother, who was also born with gastroschisis; his scar was a faint line across his lower abdomen—or that I was scared of the intense recovery required. But I doubted how in a few hours, my physical identity could change. How I could fall asleep, then wake up, the scar gone, the bumps adhering to the surgically implanted mesh, the usual pull of my belly outward hemmed in? Could any amount of time on an operating table fix the years of second-guessing? Of kids pointing at the pool? Of failing a sit-up test for P.E.? Of a shaking of the head when Melissa said, "Gosh—you're gorgeous!" It was difficult to trust that my marquee blemish could be fixed, wiped away by a surgeon's scalpel cutting away dead flesh.

Green Again

October, 2009.

“You signed a lease for an *apartment*?” Her voice was shaky, held hostage by surprise. She took the paperwork from the kitchen counter—I had left it there for her to see—and held it in her now trembling hands. I said nothing at first, partially because I wanted to seem distant, but also because I didn’t know exactly what to say. I thought it’s what she wanted. I looked down at the lease, the death warrant of our marriage, and squinted. I became aware of the potency of black ink on white paper that detailed the requirements allowing me to live in a foreign residence. This was it—the start of our separate lives, although for that past year or two, we had lived as virtual strangers.

In 2007, I admitted to a close friendship I maintained through email with Jaqueline, a woman I’d never met in person. We had used social media accounts to comment on each other’s pictures, book choices, playlists, favorite foods. Because nothing was at stake, we could risk complete honesty, a luxury I did not have with Melissa. Nor she with me. I ended the friendship as soon as Melissa discovered it.

The following year, Melissa attended a New York & Company manager’s meeting in Florida, and four days later returned beaming, energetic; she hated flying, and hated her annual manager’s conferences even more. “I wish they would just let me work in my store,” she would say. Her work—and her place at the top of every list in her retail district—drove her. She didn’t mind working ten or twelve hours if it meant her store was straight, the schedule for the month complete, and the necessary fixtures for the next day’s sale were moved. She was task-oriented, goal-driven, and spurred by challenges. She hated idle time, the category under which she put work meetings. They tired her.

But when she returned from her trip, she showed no signs of fatigue. Instead, she burst through the front door, the blue of her eyes atop the shine of her smile. It was nice to see her happy.

“How was your meeting?” I grabbed her luggage and brought it upstairs. Melissa followed me, stomping her way to our bedroom.

“Great!” She took off her jacket and flung it on the bed. “Can I ask you a question?” She took off her shoes.

“Yeah, sure.” Something was up. That lead-off question was usually reserved for the start of an argument.

“Do you care if I have a gay boyfriend?” I looked at her and raised my eyebrows.

“Gay boyfriend?” And she began. Don, the manager of a NY & Co. in Charlotte, North Carolina, “was just hilarious,” the ‘star’ of the conference mini-group Melissa was placed with during her three days of meetings, get-to-know-you games, projections, and holiday preparations. He was sarcastic, gestured with his hands, swore, drank martinis, and was the father of two children.

Melissa’s friendship with Don moved fast: text messages, email exchanges, internet chats, phone calls during TV shows, and visits. I would come home and find her packing a weekend bag. When I asked her where she was going, she would say, “To see Don,” without ever looking up from her suitcase. My stomach would burn, my jaw tighten. The trips to Charlotte became common. Too frequent.

When Melissa chose to attend Don’s son’s birthday party on the weekend of my birthday, I’d had it. No—I told her she couldn’t go, at which she laughed. We argued back and forth until I told her she needed to end the friendship.

“You don’t want me to be *friends* with him anymore?!” as she walked downstairs, weekend bag in hand.

“He’s all you talk about!—why is he so important to you?”

“—because he hasn’t done anything to *hurt* me!” She stared right at me, tight-lipped, her face red.

She was right.

He was her friend, a title of which I was no longer deserving, a title more important to Melissa than “lover” or “confidant” or “colleague”—even “husband” or “wife.” We had ceased to become all of those. We limited our communication to argument and accusation. Conversations, when they happened, ended abruptly, sometimes one of us swiftly walking out of a room. When it was me, I walked past rooms’ doors, down the stairs, out of the front door, and into my car. Sometimes I would drive for miles, the texture of my sedan’s steering wheel the victim of my firm grasp. The road offered bland collages: golden arches, strip malls’ neon lights, empty gas station pumps, junk yards hiding at a safe distance from the highway. Finally, I would return home. And we wouldn’t say a word to each other. She didn’t find me interesting any longer. Nor did I her. Frustrated with my reality, I wandered into the world of fantasy, my computer screen a stale substitute for affection. Image searches. Seductive poses. Amateur webcam strip teases. Sex. But there was more. More to Melissa’s need for Don and friendship and trust and laughter and weekends away from me.

In the fall of 2005, I had attended a weekend educational conference in Washington D.C. On the Friday night before the conference ended, attendees were treated to a lavish reception. Cocktails. Dinner. Wine. Laughter at tables of white linen.

My tablemates, all pre-conference friends, “liked my style.” They insisted I tag along for after-dinner drinks, a suggestion I would have rejected a year before. In the haze of bar chatter and alcohol-fueled bravado, I let myself enjoy the company of a tall brunette. She laughed at me. I complimented her eyes. She moved to me and spoke into my ear as she placed her hand on my thigh. “Will you please walk me up to my room?” Heat moved through my body, which would later betray me. Her mouth tasted like stale wine and her body was unfamiliar and rigid, not used to mine. We moved clumsily, out of sync with one another, her moans rehearsed and flat, my lips tight and my hands cold. She was too drunk to finish, and I was limp when she fell asleep, her figure clumsily lying against the cold surface of the bed, mine over her as I knelt and stared, first at her, then at what I could see of myself. I turned out the lights and slept on the edge of the bed, keeping to myself. When I left the next morning, she was still asleep.

When I admitted my friendship with Jaqueline to Melissa, she frowned, an expression I didn’t understand, given I had just come clean with her.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” she said, looking at me. I looked down, then back at her. She told me she wanted me to be honest, to hold nothing back. My silence confirmed her fear that Jaqueline wasn’t all I had to hide. When I finally told her, she doubled over on the couch, held her hands in front of her face, and cried from her gut. During the week that followed the confession, she was silent. Finally we sat down, me promising contrition, she begging for my faithfulness.

I saw Melissa’s relationship with Don as a type of infidelity, a notion at which Melissa balked, “You’re serious?!” I signed for the apartment in a “him or me” move, an arrogant strategy for which I had little foundation. But I didn’t care.

“You left me no choice.” I didn’t believe it myself, but I thought I had proper provocation, Melissa would cave. Instead, she put her face in her hands, shaking her head slowly back and forth. I think I heard her cry.

I looked past her, into the kitchen, at the island we ordered a year after we moved in: we had taken careful steps to ensure it matched the existing kitchen cabinets and countertops. My eyes darted around the rest of the interior of the house: on the mantle her stepfather built for us sat professional, family portraits, the most notable of which is a large picture of Melissa and me, both leaning to our right, with her behind me, her left hand on my right shoulder. The marquee items of that photo, her blue eyes and her diamond-and-sapphire wedding ring; both jumped out from the frame, and as my eyes focused on the portrait, I silently wondered what caused the contented characters in that frame to become the mess of a couple we were. Were the people in that portrait gone?

Two weeks later, on a cloudy November Sunday, Melissa at work, I hauled what little personal belongings I could exclusively claim into that apartment across town. Other than the sound of my feet against carpet and hardwood, most of the day’s noise included the clanging together of plastic hangers, the squeak of packing tape against cardboard, the dull hum of a car engine, the creak of freshly painted doors opening. When I was finished, the apartment held a bed, chest-turned coffee table, my bookshelf, my clothes and bathroom necessities, and a couch I purchased that day. Other furnishings would have to wait. Exhausted, I spent the night alone.

And I woke up alone.

I thought I had anticipated what it would be like. Away from the tyranny of matrimony, I would make single-handed decisions and engulf myself in the luxuries of

single life: current-year electronics and gizmos, earth-toned decor, exotic coffees and liquors, unashamed bookshelves spilling Shakespeare and Milton, candlelit nooks in a corner with large cushions for seating, and a bathroom without the intrusion of flat irons or varieties of hair-curling devices. I had envisioned every detail.

But as I would come home from work and slump down onto the unexpectedly firm cushions of my new couch, I would look around: what I saw around me were not the luxuries of bachelorhood. I sat as my hands clawed at my knees and my eyes continually darted back and forth looking for an anchor to settle their restless search.

I spent the following days and weeks and months trying to forget the disappointing disaster that was the letdown of moving. It wasn't home: the fluorescent light when I walked in to the front door of my new dwelling—complete with a two-beep alarm indicator that told me “all is well”—wasn't the sunshine that calmly entered my living room via a solid-paned, glass storm door; the starchy feeling of apartment-grade carpet never softened, creating an ache in the instep of bare feet used to the warmth and stability of hardwood; bare, bone-colored walls lacked the vitality and care shown in the hanging of pictures and drapes, in the painting of a chocolate accent wall behind our headboard (Melissa had said, “I *loooove* it!” in her happy-voice), in the subtlety of a lamp's light in the corner of our living room that glowed a soft vanilla in the evenings, in the bath of sunlight that washed our kitchen in the afternoons. My life took on a plethora of clichés as I tried to smother reality to keep it from smothering me: spending night at bars drinking, attempting drunken kisses with dry-mouthed women in bars' dark corners, making new friends who laughed with me as we stumbled out of dance clubs, and spending weekends at a time locked away, penned in the chamber I chose as my new

home, the dim light of a quiet television coldly illuminating my solitary experience. Apartment-life became a race between fantasy and reality, but who can sprint an entire mile? My fast-paced life quickly became a weary crawl. And it was getting cold. Thanksgiving weekend had come and gone.

And then, Melissa texted me: “Call when you can.” I called right away.

“Hey,” she said, flatly. “I’m just letting you know they want me to run the store in Tyson’s, so...I’m going.” Silence.

“Okay. For how long?” She had waited for this type of “stretch assignment” for years, always upset that they were given to less qualified candidates.

“Not sure. At least through the end of holiday,” which meant the beginning of spring months.

“Okay, so—”

“—you’ll need to take care of Angel, and the house. I don’t want it broken into.”

Her voice was cold, matter-of-fact in tone.

“When do you leave?”

“I’ve already been up there. They got me stayin’ in a hotel.” More silence. “Can you take care of things? I’d rather you do it than have to ask someone else.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.” And she hung up. I put my phone down and looked at it. In the years we had known each other, Melissa had always wanted the ideals of marriage: she wanted to have our children, to make a home, to learn how to cook, to have friends over for dinner, and to have me with her. She was forgiving, optimistic, playful, and laughed with me. She took comfort in what was safe: the trustworthiness of

her career field, a fixed-rate mortgage, my degree in English, and a paid-off car. Now, her choice to live in a hotel for the next months, to leave her cat, her mom, her friends, and familiar job, leave them all behind, was unlike her. But her decision to move herself away from me was a distinct and bold message: she was done.

November. December. Christmas. New Year's Eve. My post on Facebook, "Suck it, 2009!" Record-setting snow. I made a giant pot of soup and stayed inside for a week. I wasn't sleeping. Or showering. On a weekday evening, I walked from the bathroom to my bedroom. I blinked my eyes and the entire living space I had created for myself became a college-like façade, empty. I looked at the wooden frame of my bed, to the matching dresser. I walked into the living room and sneered at the beige carpet, at the couch pressed against the living room's far wall, then I looked at the flat screen LED television I bought to celebrate my new 'singleness'—it sat on a metal and glass stand, on hard, cold surfaces. I hated it. And I hated myself. And then my phone rang.

February, 2010.

"Hullo?" I didn't recognize the phone number.

"Jason! Hey, man, how are you?" The voice was high-pitched and happy.

"Uh, fine...who is this?" I needed a drink.

"This is Ed, remember me?" Ed? I didn't remember an Ed. "Yeah, man, we used to go to church together in Lynchburg." And I did remember. He had moved his family to Danville, but did I remember something about his wife wanting a divorce? I hadn't spoken to him in eight years. Why was he calling me?

"Oh yeah, man. Hey, what's up? How are you?" I looked to a magazine that sat on the makeshift coffee table.

“Great, man. Christy and I are happy, better than ever. I just wanted to call and see how you were doing.” I guess I was wrong about their divorce.

“I’m...I’m fine, man.” I was miserable.

“Oh, yeah? Really?” He was innocently happy, and I felt bad for lying to him.

“Uh...no. Not really.” And I told him of our separation, news that I was sure would make him hang up. But he didn’t. Instead, he told me about him and his wife, about the problems he created for years without being caught: pornography, stealing money from his medical practice, hiring escorts during work trips.

I frowned at a wall to my left. Why was he telling me this? Why was he calling me? How did he get my number, and what the hell did this have to do with me, anyway? I tried to sound concerned. “Are you...all right?” I had no idea what to say to the guy. I was partially pissed at the time the phone call was taking, partially embarrassed for him, and partially glad for the camaraderie of shame.

“Yeah, man. I’m better than all right.” And he told me his story: how, when his wife discovered his dealings, she threatened him with their kids, his practice, their marriage, and their money, unless he did something drastic. So he called a mutual friend, someone I knew, albeit was estranged from, the pastor of the church we once attended. They met, talked, researched the best help for Ed, and then presented Christy with the drastic plan for change she desired. For seven months, Ed would sequester himself away in the foothills of Kentucky, in a faith-based program designed for men like him. For men like me. I knew before he said so.

“Jason, you still there?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “I’m here.”

“Well?—whadda you think?”

“How...how did you find my number?” I looked into the kitchen, looking for a place to focus.

“I got it from the church. Listen, man. I was praying for you tonight. In fact, Christie and I were praying for you guys—she just got off the phone with Melissa now. They talked for a long time!” No. No way. Melissa wasn’t a ‘long time’ talker.

“Wait, Melissa? *My* Melissa?”

Ed laughed. “Yeah, man. Listen, Jason—you need this. You know, my life?—lemme put it this way, man: I made Tiger Woods look like a saint.”

I lost whatever cool I had left. But he wasn’t trying to be witty—he was telling me the truth.

“Ed, you don’t understand. I’ve...*done* things.” I stood up and walked around the living room. “Melissa is gone, I’ve signed a lease, what am I supposed to do?—quit my job and leave?” And as I said the words, my heart settled and I closed my eyes.

After Ed and I said goodbye, I knelt down, frustrated, angry, empty, and hungry. I felt lost, and felt like if I had anything to pray, it would have been fake. So I said the only thing I could think of: “I’m right here. I’m right here. I’m right *here!*” I repeated the phrase until my eyes burned, until I felt the weight of sin and decision and betrayal and loss buckle me, until I was screaming into the cushions of the couch.

April 12, 2010.

I drove onto a hundred-acre-plus property, a combination of small ranch houses, a cafeteria/multi-purpose center, a central office, a maintenance garage, and a small chapel. I packed only what would fit in my suitcase, brought my Bible, a journal, and a camera. I

turned in my cell phone, per the program's request, when I arrived. This would be my home for nearly eight months. A home that provided the peace I tried to forge when I moved. I had taken leave from work, sub-leased the apartment, sold my apartment-purchases to a friend, and had taken what came out of our house back. Melissa had told me, when I called her to explain, "That seems extreme—I hope you're not doing this for us." I wasn't.

If God was real,—if he could forgive me, if he could stop the nightmares and the vomiting, if he could give me peace—I would find him in chapel services; I would find him during walks next to the creek along the campus's perimeter; I would find him on "the ridge," a high landing of grass and trees that led to a hill overlooking the tree line fed by the creek; I would find him while folding the campus's kitchen and bath towels; when Kevin, one of my many bunkmates, asked if I'd buy him food because he was broke; I would find him in 4:30 am wake-up times, in the required reading of specific books and homework that followed, in listening to sermons and taking notes, in committing passages of Scripture to memory; I would find him in the noisy hum of the coin-operated laundry room at midnight, when everyone else was asleep, and I sat on a folding chair, praying.

Melissa chose to visit me. I had called asking for her to send winter clothes.

"Why don't I just bring them to you?" We had talked of finalizing our divorce—I would give her the house, our savings, and leave her alone. Her decision to drive eight hours confused me. "I want to be supportive," she said. She had received my letters, called me occasionally, even sent me a birthday card, "A day full of treats!" the card

read. In it were gift cards to Starbucks, The Olive Garden, Barnes and Noble—places that were ours.

“Melissa, you don’t have to come up here.” I put a fingernail in my mouth and chewed the thing off.

“No, I want to.” She would visit her grandparents in West Virginia, then drive to Kentucky.

Wednesday, November 3, 2010.

I waited outside of the campus’s main house, sitting on a chair, my legs bouncing, my hands underneath both of them. When I recognized the champagne color of her SUV, I slowly stood up. She parked next to the house, got out of the car, and walked to me. She flashed a grin, but I looked down and put my hands in my pockets. I heard her footsteps come towards me, then felt her hands move around my waist. I took mine out of my pockets and hugged her to me.

December 9, 2010.

A small chapel ceremony to mark my completion of the program. I stood at the podium of the chapel and read from Genesis 28:20-21. “And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in the way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father’s house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God [...]”

I drove home the next morning.

Fall, 2012.

“Close your eyes.”

The marriage counseling was weeks old now, every session a tiny reawakening. A rebuilding.

“Close your eyes and picture your wedding day. The preparation, the planning, the people. Can you see it?” I nodded. I felt Melissa’s body, next to mine, move slightly. “Now I want for you to picture the faces of the people you invited, those who were present when you committed to each other. Do you see them?” Another nod. “Now...I want...I want for you to choose the one person who means the most to you—that family member or friend who you wanted to share your wedding day with—that person who gave you the most encouragement. Can you see them?” Another nod. Then a pause. I heard Melissa snifle next to me, and I wiped a tear from my eye.

“Who is it? Who is that person?” Melissa, to my surprise, spoke first.

“My mom.” Her late mother we said goodbye to in June of 2011.

“And you, Jason? Who is that person for you?”

“My dad.” A photograph from our wedding album captures me giving him a “five” in our return down the aisle, after Melissa and I were announced as husband and wife.

“Now, open your eyes.”

May, 2014.

The blue sky of afternoon hovered over me, a seemingly innocent hue of light blue, bright and soft, isolating me from the winter world freshly gone. Over my neighborhood the sky was a thin layer of fragile fabric. Through the Weeping Cherry tree near the front corner of our home, whose branches arched down towards the ground, the

sudden gusts found their path, then turned towards the earth; when one walks by the tree, the spring winds intensify.

Our two-story house faces the neighborhood street flatly, assuming the same ‘about face’ stature as the other suburban houses in our neighborhood. The houses sit on either side of the street, facing one another in predictable formation—at ease. Facing my house from the street, one can see the shape of the property, a perfect square of plotted land: to the left are three medium-sized trees, along the asphalt driveway, planted to separate their owners from the adjacent house; to the right the neighborhood’s drainage ditch. Behind the house rests the majority of our yard—a nearly 4,000-square-foot backyard that intersects the drainage ditch and overflow basin.

The rituals of spring bring with them the same, sweeping series of tasks that accompany homeowners, husbands, and hired hands: houses are cleaned from the inside out, swimming pools are opened for the anxious, and mowers of every variety exit garages, carports, and sheds to perform a seemingly minimal task: the initial mow of the spring season. The task of taming my lawn requires me to carve at least two hours from my schedule per week. From carefully backing the riding mower out of the shed to push-mowing the front yard to weed eating the grass that voraciously grows down the side of the drainage ditch, then, surgeon-like with a carefully tilted weed eater, trimming the grass away from our landscaped areas—labeled “important” with the mulch that adorns their territory—to removing any evidence of mess by blowing away debris with a leaf blower, the process of beautifying my home’s exterior is a source of pride; the work is hard, the steps are calculated and planned, and the result is pleasing.

However, as I rode the mower over the entirety of my property, what used to bring me pride brought shame. Mowing the backyard, dust clouds followed me as I turned to make an adjoining pass over my lawn. When neighbors looked on, as neighbors will do when one does anything outside of their home, I would quickly look down in disgust. And as I took turn after turn mowing lane after lane of a hybrid lawn-mess, I pleaded with time to pass quickly.

In the middle of our front yard, I stopped, seated atop our wagon-red mower, and surveyed the ten foot perimeter around me. I carefully looked left, right, in front and behind me. As much grass as there was on the ground waiting to be cut, there was just as much dead grass beside it, or even an absence of grass altogether—bare ground, a reddish-brown Virginia clay hardened by the sun. I squinted and peered closer at the patchwork lawn that now lay where we so carefully had planted new seed when we moved into our newly built home.

Twelve years.

We bought this house twelve years ago. Twelve years of rain, sun, snow, autumn serenity, and hundreds of hours taking care of a crop that seemed to grow because of—and in spite of—our efforts. I slid myself off of the lawn mower and slowly walked, pacing up and down the length of the front yard. Crunching noises sounded beneath me with every step. There was too much dead grass. Melissa, knowing the rhythm of my mowing routine and worried at its interruption, walked out onto the porch and held one hand at her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun.

“Everything all right?” She stood on the porch, cocked one leg to the side, and shielded her eyes from the sun.

I kept walking, keeping my eyes towards the ground. I quickly looked up at her, then down again. “No...horrible,” and my voice trailed off. “Have you seen this? It’s—” and I sighed. “—this needs a lot of work.”

“It’s okay. We can fix it.” She pointed to the grass. “Just needs a lot of TLC!” and threw a fist into the air. She loved yardwork. The tulip bulbs her mom had given her were blooming.

“Yeah, but...when did it get like this?” I looked back down. Breathe...maybe you’re just being hard on yourself. I looked down. A small, square foot of green grass sat beside a stubborn patch of crabgrass, nearly equal in size. On its other side, a beige-colored patch indicated it had long ago died. I bent down on one knee and ran my hand over the dead grass. It was hard to the touch, prickly and rough. I looked to my wife who was still standing on the porch.

“I’m sorry.” I said it more to myself than to her.

Melissa casually walked back inside, unfazed by the calamity our yard had become. The task of resurrecting half an acre of grass is not impossible, I thought, and will only take a concentrated effort. But that wasn’t the point. The deadness of our home’s lawn surrounded me. I was responsible. I walked around the back of the mower to its left side and slung my right leg over the seat, then put my foot on the brake. I sat, turned the key, and listened to the engine cough to life. Melissa came back outside.

“Hey, look at this,” she said as she walked towards me. She held out her iPhone and I turned the mower off to look at her findings. Melissa walked the entirety of our lawn with me as we surveyed the extent of the damage.

“The grass is thin,” she said. Her eyes moved from the ground to her phone, then back down again. I nodded. She placed her free hand on the small of my back as we walked around the house. We walked inside when we were finished. Melissa’s phone-internet research, concluded amid home-comforts (“Do you like the tea?”), revealed the process of repairing the lawn, and a tedious, time-consuming first step.

I mixed a chemical concentrate and water into a two-gallon garden sprayer, pumped air into the garden sprayer with its attached pressurized handle, then grabbed the flimsy gun at the end of a small hose attached to the sprayer, and aimed down. The gun shot the mixture down onto our lawn. And as I stood in the front yard and began the process, my optimism quickly dwindled: with air arming the canister’s pressure and my ready hand squeezing the trigger, my eyes looked down to my fledgling yard as I assaulted it with its new healing agent. And when I stopped, so did my breath. Maybe ten square feet—a two-foot wide strip that had lasted five steps. Pump the canister. Aim, squeeze the trigger, and walk, backwards so as not to stand on the newly-sprayed yard. After maybe five cycles of this process, the contents of the canister needed replenishing.

I continued the steady process of reviving our yard after the chemical compound took a week to permeate the ground’s surface. Breaking the surface was only the first step.

Dethatch.

With a giant comb-like device attached to the rear of my mower, I swept across every part of the yard, teeth of the comb tearing an inch into the soil, collecting accumulated heaps of dead grass, grass that was a twelve-year collection of discarded

blades, the remaining ghosts left behind after mowing. The dethatching process lifted the clumps of dead grass to the top of the yard, making it look like a spiky hairdo.

Ten minutes. For ten minutes I swept only a part of our yard before I felt the dethatcher lighten behind me, the mower suddenly lurching forward with new freedom. I slowed down and looked behind me. In only a short while, the contraption responsible for creating dead grass was clogging it. I had to stop, walk to the dethatcher, and clear it by hand.

In three hours, I had combed over every part of our yard. To do it again only took an hour. A third time, thirty minutes. With every pass over the yard, the spiky, dead grass overtook its counter living part—there was more dead than alive.

Sweep.

With the mower, I drove a nylon ‘box’ attached to a cylindrical broom over my yard, and swept the dead grass into the box. It filled up quickly. Empty box. Sweep. Repeat until the yard was clean. The process finished, most of the yard was brown fresh soil tilled in the removal of dead grass.

“I’ll just go behind you—you ride the tiller over the yard, and I’ll follow,” she said. Melissa held the handles of the seed-spreader and walked briskly, back and forth, sweeping over the yard, slowly making her way from the front to the back. We worked in tandem, tilling and seeding until the entire bag of grass seed was gone.

Finally finished, we walked the entire space of the yard together, the green grass poking away from the patches of dirt, covered in the olive-green of grass seed that had overtaken it.

Later that night, thunder in the distance. Melissa noticed first.

“There it is—we finished just in time!” We could see the grey multiplying outside our kitchen window, me washing and rinsing, Melissa drying and putting away the tools we used together to make dinner, a house-favorite: burgers on the grill with fresh-cut wedge french fries cooked in the oven. The meal isn’t expensive, yet full of flavor; a meal we can afford to have more than once a week; a meal we want to revisit; a meal that doesn’t leave us hungry. The smell of roasted potatoes and charred meat still lingered in our home as the rain began to fall. We could hear the sound of rain gently pelting the windows of our bedroom as we fell asleep.

Faulting the Stars

I do it without critical thought, much the way TV junkies channel-surf: I browse book titles, first searching through the “New York Times Best Sellers” list, then to “Autobiographies,” before finally scrolling through “New Fiction.” With each click of the Kindle’s right arrow key, I entertain the possibilities.

As an English teacher, I am familiar with two common reactions from people who learn my job. They either assume I have read everything ever written, or that I will be impressed—my life changed—because I choose to read a book they suggest. Gasps follow regardless of my reaction. I rarely respond the way someone thinks I will after reading their suggested books. If I finish them at all. Much to the chagrin of my female students, I’m not tempted by vampires.

My indifference to popular fiction, regardless of medium, perhaps stems from college. I endured professors who declared we would attain enlightenment, a literary Nirvana, after reading Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* or Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in its original language; I distinctly remember a professor speaking Middle English for the better part of a forty-five minute class. No enlightenment.

With a curious finger, I clicked the “buy” button after students suggested I *needed* to read John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, a story about two love-stricken teenagers brought together by the tragedy of cancer. The book earned a cult-following among our 8th grade class. Independent reading times became flurries of tissues balled up on desks, as students peered into pages with squinted eyes, heads tilted downward, one hand holding the book, the other gripping an adolescent chin.

With an open mind, I read. Fiction and reality began to blur lines with images of oxygen tanks, chemotherapy IVs, shiny hospital rooms, and first-name relationships with nurses.

June 1999. One year after our wedding, I spend a Saturday night alone because Melissa is having dinner with her estranged father. She has forgiven him for not attending our wedding—he wanted to be the only one to have his arm in hers, but she didn't want to snub her step-father, who had raised her since the age of eight.

As I tidy our bedroom before Melissa comes home, a premonition: my chest tightens, my mind loses focus, and the comforter on our bed becomes an orange blur as I feel sorrow hug me and pull me towards the ground. I slump onto the bedroom carpet and fall to my knees and say a fervent, silent prayer for Melissa, for her father, for their dinner date—we need it to bring forgiveness, to bring healing.

I get up from my knees and walk around the bed to pull the comforter tight underneath the throw pillows when the phone rings. It's Melissa, on her way home from dinner. Her voice is shaky. She struggles to tell me that her father has cancer; he told her so over dinner. The months that follow are natural-path doctor appointments, morning walks on Emerald Isle Beach in July, Sunday-after-church lunches, and time spent watching TV, sitting together, surrounded by silence.

A brief period of remission was followed by a quick declining of health. On a Sunday morning in December of 2001, Curtis Cook, Melissa's father, was taken by ambulance to a hospital. As nurses scurried to find his veins and secure IV-drip poles, he handed his watch to his daughter. A week later, he was gone, passing on New Year's

Day. He was buried in West Virginia on a hill overlooking his mother's house. At the gravesite, Melissa wiped tears from her face, the sliver of her father's watch gleaming from her wrist.

2004. Melissa's mother is diagnosed with breast cancer and chooses a mastectomy. A year later she develops neuropathy in her right arm, the arm on the side of the removed breast tissue, and wears her arm in a sling. Later that year, Melissa accompanies her mother to the University of Virginia cancer ward for radiation treatments, which are devastating, physically. The week is hollow: both eat very little, and say even less.

From 2007-2010, there is hope, although Melissa's mother has discontinued chemotherapy treatments because she's feeling better, "feels her body responding," and is sure she is in remission. Both her appetite and personality are reminiscent of years past. We laugh in a restaurant, give thanks during holiday seasons, and count our blessings on New Year's Eve.

In November of 2010, Melissa's mother gets a bad cold. We bring dinner to her house. As we approach the back bedroom of her house, we hear her struggling to find a comfortable position in bed, a bed she will never leave. When we finally enter, I ask her how she's getting along.

"I'm on my way *outta* here," she says.

I stare at her, trying to make sense of her words.

We spend many nights there, watching TV, telling jokes, having pizza-delivered dinner, or rearranging pillows or prescription bottles we categorize by dosage times.

Because she is bed-ridden, she has time. During one of our visits, she tells Melissa that she ordered bougainvillea plants for our home.

She loses her appetite. And her weight. She spends long days confined to a bed, oxygen tubes behind her ears, pillows propped up behind her in a wall of effort to try and make her comfortable. She winces whenever she moves. The weeks pass slowly.

We come home one night to find a pair of boxes, large cubes, in front of our door. I open a packing slip and hand its contents to Melissa. We walk inside with the boxes.

“Aw, it’s my flower,” as her voice breaks and tears fill her eyes. She runs upstairs. I walk behind her and find her in the bathroom, huddled over the sink, the packing slip in on hand as her shoulders quietly move up and down.

In June of 2011, on a Wednesday evening, I receive a phone call from Melissa’s step father as I walk into church with her brother, Curtis, named after his father. I grab his shoulder and turn him around, and we walk back to my car. We enter Melissa’s work and she sees our faces. Hers is quickly painted with the terror of loss. She is parentless.

For her mother’s viewing and funeral, she chooses two black dresses that will only be worn on the anniversary of her mother’s death. They rest in the back of Melissa’s closet. On Melissa’s wrist is a charm bracelet given to her mother for her birthday. The bracelet now rests on the same wrist as her father’s watch—heirlooms, priceless connections to family ghosts.

Fall arrives quickly. The bougainvillea survive for a few months in terra cotta pots before they dry out, no match for the extreme Virginia air and fluctuating temperatures. We let their skeletons rest in the pots before Melissa finally empties the pots along the back borders of our back yard.

Winter 2013. I hug my wife. She quickly pulls away, her brows furrowed, her left hand rubbing her upper breast.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “It just...hurts.”

The pain continues through the winter before we arrive at the Radiology wing of Virginia Baptist Hospital. In the early morning, the cold outside hovers over us as we exit the car and enter the wing through the revolving door.

“I hate this place.” She says it more to herself than to me.

We wait, staring at the TVs in the lobby before her name is called. *The Today Show* forecasts the nation’s weather. It’s cold in the lobby, a rectangle room lined with padded chairs divided by cold, metal arm rests. Sitting across from us is a woman who holds a cell phone to her ear. She tells someone she loves her, looks up at us, then looks away.

Melissa’s name is finally called. Melissa, looking up, squeezes my hand before she follows a nurse, away from me. Twenty minutes later, the same nurse comes for me and I follow her past a door, down a hallway, and into a room, where I find my wife lying down on a table, a blanket covering her from the waist down, a pale blue hospital gown attempting to cover her torso. The gown is puckered open and I see part of Melissa’s chest covered by a slick goop. Behind my wife is a small, flat TV screen. I look down to Melissa, who turns her head away and sobs. I hurry to her and hold her. I let her cry and look to the TV screen, a blend of black and white. I try to make sense of the image as tears well up, then fall.

Two weeks later, a phone call. One of Melissa's ribs has been traumatized. There are no signs of cancer. When we finally put our heads on the same pillow, we say a prayer of thanks, through tears. The last thing I picture is Melissa in her hospital gown, crying, her head turned away. The morning's visit is vivid, fresh.

As I feel sleep overtaking me, I imagine her, ten years later, in a similar gown, hooked up to machines, the blue of her eyes fading.

April 2, 2014. I have nearly finished reading John Green's *The Fault in our Stars*. I struggle to reconcile two worlds: that of Augustus and Hazel in *The Fault in Our Stars* and my own. After engrossing myself in the world of two teenagers who, in the course of their narrative, don't know I exist, I accept that they know nothing of my story: the way I love the smell of freshly mowed grass, the ups and downs of a nearly sixteen-year marriage, the struggles I endured during undergraduate work, or the mess of loving a four-legged creature as you would a child (I'm admitting the unhealthy nature of my relationship with Piper, my cat...there, I said it). Fate draws a distinct and forcible line in the sand. Yet, in reading Green's words, I am, however unpleasantly, forced to blur that line. With a giant eraser I was never asked to hold, I rub until that distinct line takes on not-so distinct borders. After a minute or two, I can't even see the edges of the blur.

Tonight, Melissa welcomed me home with a surprise dinner: penne noodles drowned in a homemade vodka sauce. The sauce, a concoction of tomatoes, spices, red sauce, and a dab of heavy cream, is one of my most indulgent pleasures in this life; it serves as a reminder that although I don't live in a castle, I am familiar with the distinctions of kingship. Castles don't have central air. Or modern kitchens.

I walked through our front door to an excited, high-pitched voice that resonated off of the basement walls, eight feet below me: “Is that my friend?!” The excitement was palpable, and as I put away keys, wallet, and a briefcase, I smiled. The voice of excitement was accompanied by the waltz of our calico, a she-devil disguised as a would-be, normal house cat. She looked up at me, awaiting our daily ritual of pick-me-up-and-say-hello-until-I-start-purring. I did. The purr of her welcome was her signal to put her down; as I did, I heard the voice from the basement again asking for a hello, so I walked down. I said hello and hugged her before heading upstairs to change, after which I grabbed my Kindle and walked out onto the front porch to finish reading about Hazel and Augustus. And as stories go, this one was hard to swallow. It hit home.

Melissa is perhaps the strongest person I have ever known. Not because she has to endure my company (I’m a comic in my own mind), but because she has had to do without others.’ Melissa, at thirty-eight years of age, is parent-less, orphaned, and left to herself. There are nights when her silence is my signal to just place my hand on the small of her back as she silently cries. She misses them, sometimes out of nowhere, but always on days when their absence is most noted: holidays and birthdays and special occasions. And on days when the rest of the world is heralding their parents, the sting is potent, lingering for a few days before life lets her breathe again.

It was only a couple of months ago when she let it slip. We were planning a trip — a vacation, a visit to my Mom in California or something — when she said something to the effect that we needed to “do this” as much as possible. I looked at her puzzled.

“Well...I’m not gonna be around forever,” she added plainly.

And in the middle of the eternity that was the following second, I realized that my very much alive and vibrant wife expected the same fate she saw her parents suffer through.

“I don’t want to, but I’m sure I will.”

Fast forward to this evening. I sat at the on the front porch of the house we had built for *us*, and witnessed a world crumbling away as I looked down at my Kindle. Line by line, I read of a fictional reality when it hit me that such a reality is anything but fake. Sure, the names and places might have been changed, but inside of the walls directly behind me was proof of life’s sometimes sinister ways. I have held Melissa many nights as she cried herself to sleep. And I have fallen asleep myself, many nights, praying that she might be saved from the fate she so fears. Because I fear that I would, should anything happen to my Melissa, slump down into a corner, and never get up.

I have pictured it: tubes, beeping machines, nurses who come in to check vital signs and refuse to look you in the eye for too long. It was that way for us when we watched her parents dwindle. Every day brought distance.

Augustus Waters said something (to me) tonight about leaving a mark in the world. About leaving the kind of mark just delicate enough to affect one person for good—to change that person by the very nature of who one is. Hazel was that for him. What Hazel was for him, Melissa is for me. She is more than Hazel, I have decided. She is real, a living, breathing person who walks lightly upon the earth, if I may borrow a phrase from Gus. She leaves a lesser scar. She is my wife—the keeper of my secrets, the knower of all things, comfort and understanding, the maker of security, and the calmer of

storms. Whatever I am, *whoever* I am, it is the direct result of her nudging. Her encouragement. Her smile. My life is marked by hers and I am thankful that her quiet presence has left light scars. And to lose her, even to live with the distinct probability that I could, would take my life out to sea only to bring it quickly back to an ocean cliff, slam me against it, repeat, and continue mercilessly.

I walked inside, with, according to my Kindle, just 5% left of the book to finish. I needed to, so I headed to the round granite table where Melissa and I would have dinner. As I eyed the table, I was met unexpectedly by my wife who heard me come inside. She wanted to say hello. I guess I wasn't prepared for it, still in the haze of a very black-and-white existence, because she saw my wrinkled forehead and squinted eyes.

“You okay?”

I wasn't ready for her question, because the irony and appropriateness of it stung: in front of me stood the possibility of anguish *and* the cause of joy. Her.

For a brief moment, I looked at her and saw thirty years—maybe sooner—ahead. I saw the tubes and heard the beeps. And then I saw her eyes, deep and blue and green and beautiful and welcoming, so I walked to her, put my arms around her and stayed there.

She asked me what was wrong and somewhere in between crying and relief, I just held her, feeling the warmth of her body against mine. I closed my eyes and thanked God from the bottom of my heart.

She was here.

I came in from outside and finished the book as dinner steamed in bowls on top of plates in front of me. Melissa took up a fork and as I turned off my Kindle and left the

world of Hazel's love for Gus, I looked up and stared. Just stared at her in her imperfect perfection: spirally hair that arranged itself around her smooth and lightly-freckled face; she wore glasses, a fancy work shirt that somewhat resembled a tank top, and sweat pants; she hadn't bothered yet to change her shirt. She smiled at me and I leaned forward and stared at the contours of her shoulders and arms and hands before looking at her face, her eyes, her thick glasses that made her eyes beady. I leaned further until I felt her face next to mine. And then stayed there a while.