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BOXED UP

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Alicia Raymond. BOXED UP. (Under the direction of Dr. Steven Faulkner) Department of English and Modern Languages, December 2010.

The purpose of this thesis is to conduct an examination through creative nonfiction of the definition of home and how I personally define and apply this definition to my own life. In the nine essays serving as my thesis, collectively entitled "Boxed Up," I have delved into the definitions of home and how it applies to my family, my experiences and encounters with people around me, and the twelve times that I have moved. The sense and definition of a home has a strong tie to where someone grew up and to what culture one acclimates oneself. There is also a strong tie to a culture of people without one specific culture and without a singular place where they grew up. Military kids find themselves living a transient lifestyle because of the constant need to uproot where they live and follow one or both parents. The "melting pot" and cross-cultural effect that finds itself not only affecting America, but affecting the world, finds individuals having one culture they are "supposed" to call their home and yet discovering their own identity in a completely different culture. I find myself with a transient lifestyle and yet neither of these reasons applies to me. I choose to uproot myself and the focus of this body of work explores reasons why. I have looked closely at a myriad of works, roaming across America with John Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley*, where I too found "the urge to be someplace else was on me," and accepting Walker Percy that "it is possible to live in both cultures without being suffocated by the one or seduced by the other" in *Signposts in a Strange Land*. I interviewed friends on their definitions and feelings toward home and researched not just my past homes, but the homes of my parents and siblings before I was born. I found that for a large majority of my friends, they had a definitive home, a definitive location. I also found that for a large majority of my upbringing I let others' depictions of what home should be, dictate how I called home for myself. Through this process, I even began to accept in humility that perhaps Phillip Lopate, author of *The Art of the Personal Essay*, was right in saying that "with middle age also comes a taste for equilibrium...it is hard to think of anyone who made a mark on the personal essay form in his or her youth." While I am still not as emphatic as Lopate about this assertion, through the direction and study of this thesis, I have become aware of my own youth and my bland equilibrium. Lopate argues that "a young person still thinks it is possible—there is time enough—to become all things" and that the "personal essayist" - undoubtedly well into his forties- "looks back at the choices that were made, the roads not taken, the limiting familial and historic circumstances, and what might be called the catastrophe of personality." The direction of this thesis is to recount my youth, the many roads that I have already taken, and where that has led me today, where it has allowed me to define a home for myself. Well, Lopate, I am still in my youth and I do still think it is possible and I hope that well into my forties I will still find it possible. However, the roads I have already traveled have brought me to a place where I can define home for now, but I would be naïve to think I have it all figured out and that this will be my home forever. I still have the urge to be someplace else and I welcome every signpost and every strange land on the way until I run into my own catastrophe of a home.

BOXED UP

By

Alicia Raymond

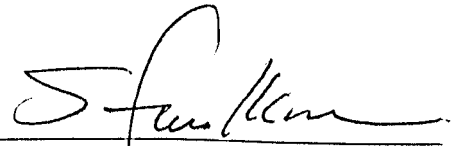
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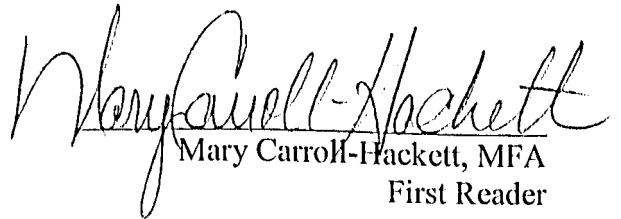
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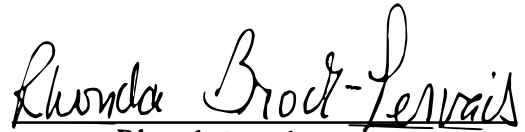
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Dedication

Eli,
Thank you,
for making it all make sense.

Acknowledgements

I would like to both acknowledge and express my gratitude to all three members of my committee, Dr. Faulkner, Mary Carroll-Hackett, and Dr. Brock-Servais. It has taken several efforts and many minutes, hours, and days of work to get to this point, but I made it. I only made it, however, because of the work and care that my committee members put into it. I took my first creative nonfiction course with Dr. Faulkner and signed up for a course every semester after, even when my major wasn't English. He always took interest in my writing and allowed me to feel that this was a craft where I fit in, something I could call my own. He always critiqued with compassion, but also never shied away from the truth. And for that, I owe him the success of this thesis. I also want to express appreciation, love, and respect to the woman who allowed me to see what I was meant to do and that it was okay to follow a different path. Mary Carroll-Hackett is not only a presence in the classroom, but a presence I hope to have in my life forever. If it wasn't for her, I would have never finished with a degree in English as an undergrad, and I would have never attended graduate school in hopes of attaining my Master's. Thank you for teaching me that it's okay to break the rules, as long as you learn them first. And to Dr. Brock-Servais, while our encounters were more limited, she allowed me to always look at literature and writing from a different angle, an angle that I feel only she could provide. I also want to thank my parents for always standing by me during my twelve moves, and at times, my tendency to be a bit indecisive. While we might not have always understood each other, they always supported me one way or another. Thank you to my siblings and friends, who whether they know it, helped me put together this thesis

and thank you for allowing me insight into your worlds and homes. Thank you all so much.

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The Box Labeled Home

Another 'For Sale' sign pegged into the ground marked yet another promotion; the moving truck would arrive soon after. The cardboard corners of moving boxes were no longer sharp, but frayed, soft to the touch. 'Living Room' crossed out with 'Sun Room' crossed out with 'Alicia's Books' and that crossed out with 'Donald's Model Cars.' Trenton, New Jersey crossed out with Prattville, Alabama crossed out with Franklin, Virginia crossed out with Richmond, Virginia crossed out with Lexington, Virginia crossed out with Washington, D.C., and about six others.

Questioning where someone is from allows for a simple conversation starter, but it also demands an individual to choose a specific location. People who have been born and raised in the same city and the same house have an easy answer. They know where they are from, they know where they came from, they know their background, and because of that, they can easily associate with a culture. Southern culture, northern culture, working class culture, middle class culture, European culture, and native culture are all examples of a system of beliefs and traditions shared among a group of people which serves to maintain and encourage the group's survival and persistence. But if you don't have an answer with a nice neat bow on it when asked, 'Where are you from?' then how are you to identify with a specific culture?

Maxine Hong Kingston is designated as a Chinese American author who, in her memoir *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girl Among Ghosts*, recounts her struggles

with identifying with two vastly different cultures, Chinese and American. She is also a forerunner in the women's rights and feminist movements. Her memoir addresses whether a Chinese woman can separate herself from her inherent culture and consequently choose one of her own; whether any woman, or man for that matter, can truly detach his or herself from a culture that has been designated as his own.

Kingston has the opposite problem from me.

Kingston's heritage, her family, and her background all stemmed from a rich Chinese culture. Her parents shared their Chinese heritage through intricate, modern tales with accounts of her mother's and grandmother's surreal childhoods. My parents read me *Goodnight Moon* every night. Despite her lineage, Kingston spent most of her childhood developing a sense of her own in America, not knowing whether to stand up for herself as a Chinese American, or an American with a Chinese background. I spent my childhood up and down the east coast of America, not knowing what I am or where I'm from.

Ultimately Kingston tried to live an American life with the weight of carrying the Chinese culture on her back. She classified herself American-Chinese, knowing she would never simply be Chinese or American. Instead of trying to choose one over the other and deny either her family or herself, Kingston embraced both cultures and combined them into one and celebrated it as her own. Kingston pieced together a culture tailored just for her.

But at least she had a choice between two cultures.

Like Kingston, I always struggled with finding my culture, feeling forced to identify with a specific one, whether it Southern, Northern, working or middle class. Was I supposed to eat spicy foods, be open about my feelings, or understand what it meant to work an honest day's work? My culture seemed a culture of not having a "culture". Military kids grow up living in a series of boxes, having to pack up and move at the general's order. They aren't seen as flighty because there's a reason for their moves, a reason for packing their lives away in boxes. I, however, choose to pack. I choose to box. I choose to continually uproot my life and travel somewhere different, somewhere new. That's what I have come to consider a part of my culture.

When individuals or families move to a new home, whether it the first time or the twelfth, they pack up their belongings, usually with bubble wrap, tape, and packing paper. Breakables are designated in their own boxes specifically labeled "breakable" and given a particular spot in the moving truck. The kitchen dishes are packed together, the vases in one box, the picture frames in another. People's possessions are important to them and their possessions become part of what make their home, *home*. The actual foundation, drywall, brick siding, wood floors, and electrical outlets are just an encasing for their home; it's just a box.

My home is mobile, packed into boxes. I like my stuff. One would think at twenty-five-years old and having had twelve addresses, I would have learned to travel lightly. Instead, I keep everything. Every picture, every wooden giraffe piggy bank, poster, stuffed animal--mostly with tag still attached, every pointless, trivial collector's item I decided to collect along the way. I kept my dad's Hobie sailing t-shirt, my copy of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, and my VHS of *Life with Mikey*. I have every birthday,

graduation, Christmas, and Just Because card ever given to me. The ex's cards are in a separate box. My stuff travels with me, in designated boxes. I always unpack everything the very same day I move, usually taking me well into the night. Unpacking my boxes is a way for me to see the little pieces of me, unearthing my home piece by piece. My dad taught me well.

Always label boxes by name and categorize by room; never store candles in the attic or anywhere warm, unless you find particular comfort in having your favorite waxed figurine unable to stand up straight, complete with melted face; newspaper works best for wrapping breakable items, bubble wrap gets way too expensive; tall, slender canisters are best for packing posters; anticipate clothes you want to wear for at least a month in advance, the storage unit may be needed for a while; never use oil-based paint, always latex: a satin finish for bathrooms and an eggshell for bedrooms or any other interior room; anticipate the inevitable 'Welcome to the neighborhood' casseroles and the 'Your fence crosses my property line by 0.2 inch's stare; it is very hard to transport a thirteen-year-old fish across four states, but still possible; always pick the seat next to the window; never pack a large box full of books or movies, especially when Dad is already tired from another business trip when said boxes need to be taken to your room, two flights up; pianos need to be thoroughly tied down and carefully watched when the brake pedal is pressed too quickly; always wrap large furniture items in blankets to reduce the risk of scratching; everything, and I do mean everything, must go in a box; it is very easy to cross out one box specification for another; make sure to carry a pillow at all times.

My dad taught me these lessons, lessons I thought I needed to find my home, but instead I needed them to realize that home was with me the entire time, in a box.

Welcome House

Who we are is a compilation of where we come from. My parents still say they are from Maine because they each spent their entire childhoods in one house, one city, one dooryard where they built one set of snowmen every winter, one backyard where my mother would help her mother hang up laundry to dry in the summer months, and where my dad would help his dad fix cars; one dining room where they each sat down with their families and ate dinner at the same time every night, my mother with a plastic tablecloth, and my dad at a table he personally fashioned so that his mom could easily sit at the table with her wheelchair; one bedroom where they collected books, dolls, marbles, tools, letters, outgrown clothes, and memories. Their families were there, born there, married there, buried there. Their first day of elementary school and the last day of high school were in the same place. When my parents talk of home, they talk of Maine. They don't talk about the other seven houses they have lived in since Maine. They don't talk about the hot, humid summer months in Alabama, or the flood of 1998 that brought sixteen feet of water to Franklin, Virginia. They don't talk about the dooryard, or driveway as we called it in Virginia, where I swerved off and straddled my parents' car over the curb, sinking the right two tires about three feet into the yard my dad had just spent thousands of dollars re-landscaping. They have different memories, each from a different home, a different house. My mom talks of her pea soup-colored, three-bedroom, one-bathroom house on 7 Glenhaven East, Portland, Maine, and my dad talks about his original New England country house with an attached barn, two-bedroom and one-bathroom as well, Box 27, Phillips, Maine. That was it, just a box, no street address.

I knew the first house on my list wasn't my home. Number two held its own, but as I got older, memories prior to age seven began to blur a little. Number three was a strong competitor. I hated number four. And after number five, I stopped hoping for a conventional home. I used to think I could call number three home. That I was from a place called Franklin, Virginia. But when I go back there, I don't have a home to visit; I don't have a high school hallway to walk down and look at old pictures of my prom and past accomplishments, and I don't have a cemetery plot to take flowers.

We had all piled into our eight-passenger blue van: Dad in the driver's seat, my mom in the passenger's holding a map, my brother, Donald, with a seat to himself in the back, and me and my older sister, Dorrie, confined together in the middle seat. Five-plus suitcases loaded in the back. We needed the space, though. Always traveling. Always moving. Always packing everything we owned into a van, a moving truck, a box. My sister and I always had to share the front bench seat and my brother got the back seat to himself. Never seemed fair to me until fifteen minutes into our regular three-day trip when I passed out and only woke up for bathroom breaks. We went through at least three of those blue vans. The first my parents bought and sold before I was born. That one came equipped with a white sink that sat right behind my dad's seat, the driver's seat. A fully functional, water-running sink. I think my parents sold it right around the time my sister broke her nose. They were leaving my grandparent's house in Maine and my dad had slammed on the brakes for one reason or another. My sister, the rebel that she was, wasn't wearing her seat belt. Combine those two events with a kitchen sink in your vehicle and it's bound to end with a broken something.

Once when my family and I were about three-fourths through our trip to Maine, my parent's number one, we visited mine, my brother's, and sister's first in Princeton, New Jersey. I think it was at the end of a cul-de-sac. It stood one story high with beige plastic siding. I tried to imagine all five of us, all of our stuff fitting into that tiny box. It didn't seem possible. It took only ten giant steps to get from one side of the front yard to the other and there couldn't have been more than three, four rooms tops inside. Someone else lived there now, locks had been changed. My brother and sister started remembering their bedrooms and when they would fight over who could turn the knob on the television. My dad started to remember his commute to work every morning and how whoever designed the New Jersey road systems is a complete idiot: "Who would want to have an exit to get to an exit; a roundabout every three miles?" he said.

My mom began thinking of all the meals she cooked in that tiny kitchen, though I can't imagine every pot, pan, and spatula she has now realistically fitting in there. It would explain however, the butterball effect that plagued Dorrie and Donald while they were kids, always a little rounder than the other kids. I avoided that somehow, grew up differently.

While they all reminisced, I stared out the side window, large enough to frame Pollock's *No. 5*. I had never seen this house before; at least I don't remember seeing it. Just like I don't remember spending my first night there, eating my first mushed meal there, or the first time either of my siblings held me, changed me, or were jealous of me. And yet it's my very first house. Top of the list. I left it at twelve weeks old. I had fewer boxes then.

I have better memories of the three-story house in Prattville, Alabama. It planted itself on the corner in a small neighborhood and arched itself over the same hill my dad tried to teach me to ride a bike. “Okay, Pumpkin, I’m going to hold onto the back of your seat until you start peddling on your own.”

“On my own? You’re going to let go?” I asked in a panic.

“Only if you’re ready,” he said.

Parenthood is really all about lies. It starts with Santa and then inevitably leads to the bike trick. I continued to pedal until my dad felt it was time to let go. Minutes later, my dad’s bloodied palms and broken glasses proved it wasn’t his best engineering decision. I never did learn to ride a bike outside that box, I learned when we moved to box number three instead.

The Alabama house stood three stories tall on one side and only one on the other. Up until age seven everything looks bigger, but this really was a huge house, at least until we boxed it up, then it was just the boxes that looked huge. The main floor had a ridiculous number of rooms, a box for every activity possible. There was the kitchen box, breakfast room, living room, dining room, sitting room, and a long skinny box for the foyer. Each activity demanded a separate room in that Raymond household.

Three bedroom boxes were upstairs. My sister got the room with Care Bear wallpaper and I was stuck with that awful vertically striped, brown-flowered crap. We shared a bathroom. My parents had their master suite across the hall from us. Their queen-sized bed sat directly in the middle of the room. Across from it sat a dresser and the perfect location for a television, except my dad vetoed televisions in any bedroom. Right next to their bed sat a perfect circle of pillows, at least it sat there until our maid,

Rose, cleaned it up and I had to rebuild it. Also across the hall from my bedroom was the laundry chute.

“Just get in,” my brother said.

“Get in? Get in and go where?”

“Down I guess. Just do it, c’mon don’t be a wuss,” he said.

I tucked my head to fit in this rather tiny box and began to crouch my legs up to my chin.

“That’s it, just a little more.”

My hands held on to the edge of the box, waiting for a signal or strong push from my brother indicating that apparently I was ready to go, down.

“All right, you ready?”

“Donald Richard Raymond! What in God’s creation do you think you’re doing?” our mother yelled. The footsteps behind us should have clued my brother this wasn’t his best idea. Though, neither one of us really had good ideas when we were growing up.

Downstairs was the playroom box, complete with an orange shag carpet, laundry room, my brother’s room, and the “Christmas wrapping station,” another long and skinny box. Who has a designated Christmas wrapping station in their house? No one. Not even the Raymonds really. When I got older and started thinking about all the unnecessary rooms in that house, I realized it wasn’t a Christmas wrapping station at all, but more like an unwrapping station for certain tasty beverages. A bar made for bringing just as much joy to an adult’s face as unwrapping gifts on Christmas morning would to a child’s. The childhood deceptions continued. Our material possessions weren’t the only thing that the Raymonds boxed.

Since we lived on the corner, we had a huge backyard, a size of yard that all three of us grew accustomed. My brother's and sister's expectations were met well into their adulthood. My accommodations were later altered. We had a full-size pool behind one side of the house and a plethora of trees behind the other.

"Mom, stop her!" my brother screamed and almost started to cry. All of his fifth-grade friends were over for his birthday pool party and the last thing he wanted was anything to ruin it. That was the only thing on my mind.

"Honey, what are you talking about?" our mom asked.

"Alicia! She's on the deck!"

Birthdays are all about giving the birthday boy or girl complete satisfaction and attention on his special day, and only the birthday boy or girl. My brother happened to be said special birthday boy and was getting too much attention. After having almost thrown me down a laundry chute and another time having left me hanging on a pull up bar which was clearly too high for me, I decided that he had had enough attention and perhaps the whole party needed to refocus on something better. Something more natural at the age of five.

"Look at her! She's naked!" he screamed.

Attention accomplished. I didn't stay long, just long enough to refocus the birthday a little and gift my brother with an unforgettable experience. It's not every day that you turn eleven, best it be memorable.

The front corner of the house hid behind huge fern bushes, the kind that if you pinched your fingers at the stem's root and pulled really fast all the way to the tip, you could strip each little leaf off and watch them drift to the ground. Also the kind of bush

that makes dads furious when said pinching and stripping occurs. The fern bushes weren't just grounds for mindless activity but also the perfect hiding spot for my sister's devil cat, Mittens. An adorable name for an all black cat with white paws, but I swear it hid there every day and waited for me to turn the corner, the opportune time for it to race out from under the bushes and pounce on me, digging its devil claws deep into my bare feet. I never did wear shoes: one less box.

I remember sleeping in that big box of a house. I remember eating there, swimming there, and having my brother and sister cart me in a laundry basket there. I remember the laundry chute and the pull-up bar. I also remember my brother's fist accidentally running into my front teeth and knocking out my first baby tooth. But once again, seven years later, the multitude of boxes came through to pack up our one big box. Dad packed his engineering books and Star Trek paraphernalia. Mom packed up her sewing machine, piano sheet music, and murder mystery novels. Donald packed his baseball card collections and soccer trophies and Dorrie packed her horse ribbons, plastic horse statues, and textbooks. I packed my favorite pillow and stuffed animals. My brother's dog, Astro, was sent to Maine to live with my mom's best friend. My sister's dog, Cinnamon, brother to Astro, came along for the ride. My sister's thirteen-year-old goldfish also made the cut. Thank God Mittens didn't. We left her with Rose, the maid.

We piled into our newer-modeled blue van and drove from Prattville, Alabama, to Franklin, Virginia. Address number three.

* * *

I can't remember the first time I walked, but my parents who were there to catch me when I fell can, and my brother and sister who were there to trip me remember. I

can't remember the first time I spoke or ate solid food. The first time I tied my shoe, picked out my own outfit, and styled my hair are there, but a little fuzzy. But I do remember the first time I rode the school bus by myself when I had just moved to Franklin, Virginia. I sat next to my soon-to-be-best friend, Ashley. She was a compact version of a best friend; I was more stretched out.

"Tell it to me again," she asked as soon as we sat down on the bus for our less-than-thirty-minutes ride home, "I promise it's the last time." It never was.

At that point, I knew the story by heart and knew she would ask for it every day. Now, I can hardly remember it. I know it was a ghost story and it had something to do with a bony hand. I also know that Ashley never tired of it, and me trying to pretend to sleep against the plastic bus window wasn't going to fool her. So I told it, every day. Sometimes the story stopped once I got to my house; other days it continued as we both went back to hers. The same smell surrounded both houses.

Smell is often noted as the strongest trigger to link one to memories. Franklin, Virginia, a small paper mill town, definitely had a smell. You always know when you're approaching a paper mill town. The air begins to thicken and it becomes harder and harder to ignore the stench of rotten eggs mixed with a hint of burnt hair and a dash of acid; the car vents merely strengthen the smell as it circulates, and re-circulates. Like most paper mill towns, with a few blinks it's gone, but the smell lingers.

Franklin's smell doesn't dredge up memories of my crinkled nose and teared eyes, however. Instead, that smell I would describe as how a bonfire might smell the morning after a rain, dried ash mixed with soaked wood, reminds me of my father's

business suit, his car, and an overall sense that I was coming to a place where supper was served on the table every night at seven, a place that contained memories of Christmas trees falling over, setting gift wrap on fire at Valentine's dinner, and a place of blowing yolks out of Easter eggs. A place titled home for seven years.

My friends and I remember Franklin's smell getting stronger while meeting each other at our J.P. King Elementary School and circling around in a tire swing to the point of nausea, and that one girl who broke her arm every time she swung on the monkey bars. We remember the smell as a bit distanced from S.P. Morton Middle School's football games with enough cheerleaders to line the entire length of the field, the school board and acting cheerleading coach too afraid to turn any girl away from her dreams. The smell went unrecognized when we passed notes in class, passed notes through the vents in the lockers, passed notes under bleachers. We remember growing up with the smell and how we couldn't wait to paint our designated college square on a barn that sat right across from the high school; all of our brothers and sisters had painted it. Then we remember the disappointing smell when Franklin's City Council tore down the barn because of its dilapidated state. Years and layers of paint couldn't hold it together. Once again growing up with the smell, we remember only being allowed to go bowling during the day, because our parents didn't want us to associate with whoever socialized in the parking lot at night. Once we got older, the smell hardly even recognizable, we became the ones socializing in the parking lot at night.

The smell of ghost stories I told Ashley on the bus paled in comparison to the smell of our first attempt at being independent.

“Why did Ashley just call the house crying?” my brother asked while he nudged his head through the door and yelled to me through the shower curtain.

A million words went through my mind. None acceptable to be said, written, or thought in the Raymond household.

My parents are devout Christians. My mother cries at Hallmark commercials. My father reads the Bible on Friday and Saturday nights to my mother’s sobbing. The only skin my mom showed at her wedding was covered with blush and mascara. My father accompanied her with blue and white ruffles. Growing up, they had the right intentions for their children; it’s just that those intentions seemed to confine us as if there were always four walls of approval constantly surrounding each one of us.

Moving around a lot, you become used to being the new girl, and in search for new friends. I had met Ashley on the bus. She was a short, freckled, red-haired girl with enough energy and sparks to fill the Fourth of July. I was the tall, lanky, skinny new girl with blue-and-black speckled glasses and absolutely no sense of style, thanks to my mother. We were perfect for each other really. Ashley and I grew up together, went to school together, wrote secret notes to boys together, watched movies together, went to dances together, and got into trouble together.

Together, in middle school, we decided we didn’t want to be the only ones not having fun anymore. We heard the crazy party stories, the drinks, the sex, the drugs. We wanted our own story to tell. So one night, with our wine coolers in hand, we sat on Ashley’s bed contemplating our future. We were growing up so fast and we didn’t want life to run away from us. We had just finished eighth grade and that meant high school next year. Next thing you know we would be picking out a divorce lawyer and

retirement homes. After the first two drinks slid down our throats without a care, a slight burn, but not a care in the world at that moment, we decided to make a pact.

“Girl, seriously, there are like no good guys out there. I don’t know what some of these boys are thinking, but they are so like, like so not cool,” Ashley said.

“Yeah, totally, so not cool,” I said.

Another drink slid down.

“We should make a pact, just between us. Let’s not have sex until we are married,” I said.

“Dude, that’s classic. Not like there are any guys worth me anyways,” Ashley said.

“Then it is settled, no sex till we walk that aisle,” I said.

“Oh girl, and you know that right after it happens we just have to call each other and be like, ‘Guess what?!’,” Ashley said.

With three drinks down, we both laughed hysterically for about an hour after that one, and the fourth and fifth wine coolers were chugged.

Word leaked out about our crazy night consisting of five wine coolers each and some popcorn. Being those wild children we were, word spread fast around school. Our wild and crazy night that now had turned into a rave with high school boys didn’t just spread across school grounds. One of Ashley’s friends told her mom and that mom, being the responsible adult, told Ashley’s mom. After Ashley’s mom found out, she punished Ashley by having her tell my mom.

My father wasn't so creative with his punishment. My punishment included the standards: no television, no phone, no interaction with anyone but himself and the pastor at church. We were in the sitting room box upstairs when I told him.

We sat in the Sunroom box when my parents told me that my Granddaddy had contracted cancer. We sat in the downstairs living room when my parents told me that both my great grandmother and granddaddy had passed away on the same day. We fled from the kitchen every time my dad and brother had a fight. I sat in my bedroom when I first remember crying, when I first got my period, and when I first decided I had a crush on a boy. Different boxes, different memories. Still wasn't sure if it was *the* home.

For the first time, I lived in a place where my memories had extended past the shiny box we lived in and the tortures my brother and I put each other through, though it always was a pretty impressive box. My dad bought the Franklin house with only eight finished rooms. He sold it eight years later with twelve; we still had a box for every activity. He built a sunroom off the back of the first floor, big enough to house my mom's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gift, a Steinway grand piano and our annual Christmas tree. As swim team members at the local YMCA, we sold Christmas trees every year and my dad let me pick out the biggest and best one every year. So big that one year it toppled over, barely missing the piano. We had to tie that one down, nailed a piece of rope around it to box it in.

Upstairs, my dad built me a room to my specifications, a bright pink carpet and a skylight. I wanted a hole in the top of my box. He also knocked a hole in the wall to build my sister's room in an existing unfinished room down the hall from me. My brother lived at the very end. We all three shared a bathroom.

The day International Paper first bought Union Camp in 1999, the cause of yet another new set of boxes for moving, also had a smell all its own. I was fourteen. My brother and sister, twenty and twenty-one. After International Paper bought Union Camp, they closed entire divisions and severed numerous employees from their jobs, including my dad. It was almost as if we had moved all those boxes for nothing. And yet the boxes came once again. This time, my brother's and sister's were sent to different places. It was time for them to start a search for a home separate from mine.

* * *

Between me, my parents, brother, and sister, we have had fourteen abbreviated letters designating seven states, seventeen phone numbers, seventeen mailboxes, and seventeen times of settling into a new place at seventeen addresses. Ten of those seventeen came equipped with backyards we could call our own. Three of those seventeen we all shared as a family, five I shared with only my parents, one for my brother and his wife, one for my sister and her husband, and four I lived in alone. Seventeen houses, but not one home. I don't have a 7 Glenhaven East or a Box 27. I don't have a husband or a wife to start a new home. I have too many memories that exist in too many different houses.

Single Lens Reflex

Once, for a high school assignment, we had to use a pin-hole camera to take a picture of any scene we could find behind the school. That left us with choices of fallen leaves, twigs, and the occasional beer can. The camera was nothing more than a wooden box, where the front slab slid open to allow passing light through a hole as thick as a needle's eye. Attached on the inside of the box was a piece of photographic paper that engraved the image with light. The longer you left the box open, the longer the light shone on the piece of paper and the darker your image would appear once developed. You could open it as little as five seconds or as long as five minutes.

The day we went shooting happened on one of those days where you don't think you'll get sunburned because it's cloudy, but instead you get burned even more. This meant our pictures would need even more time to suck at any light available. I had to leave mine open for nearly a minute, which doesn't seem that long until you have to make sure this wooden box stays completely still for sixty seconds without the slightest shake or obstruction of light through its eye. After the picture was exposed, I slid its door shut and started the developing process in the darkroom. As soon as the paper hit the liquid developer, the images began to appear. The outlines of leaves and trees began to intertwine with the outline of the parking lot. I had captured time, with the simple use of a box.

In 1838, Louis Daguerre took a photograph of one of the busiest and most populated streets in Paris, France, but his photo appears to portray a deserted town. A town whose tall buildings stand idle next to one another, lines of trees greet no one along

the sidewalks, and the cobblestone roads show no signs of traffic. If you are like the average person who looks at a piece of art for less than five seconds, you probably wouldn't notice the only man who sits in the bottom left-hand corner, his foot propped as he awaits the finish of his shoe shining: the first photograph of a living human being. Daguerre's "Boulevard de Temple," captured a moment in reality within four walls, except his moment expands time. Because of modern technology for that time being used, the exposure time lasted ten minutes, long enough for fast-paced traffic to escape the light embedded onto the print and therefore it seems as if the busiest street in Paris is actually a deserted town. Daguerre captured a reality that existed beyond the four walls of his frame, beyond the photographer's responsibility to the rule of thirds, depth of field, exposure time, and aperture setting, with the use of a box.

In order to remember my first home, I have to look at a photograph. To remember what three out of four grandparents look like, I have to scavenge through photo albums. To remember where my first school was, I'd have to do some serious searching in an attic, or a storage unit for an old Polaroid. My high school and college are a bit more accessible for now, but I'll eventually have to use a photograph for them as well. In order to remember what my sister looks like, I look at the pictures from our yearly visits.

I try to visit my sister, Dorrie, in Boston, Massachusetts at least once a year. She doesn't visit me. With every visit comes a new way for my sister to condition me within her culture. She always picks a new play or art exhibit for us to attend. Once we went to a murder mystery play.

After I had covered every possible limb and surface of skin susceptible to the glacial temperatures of Boston in November, we drove to a local parking garage and walked the ten blocks to the theater. While on our way, a couple approached us.

“Excuse me, but do you know where the Stuart Street Playhouse is?”

“Hey, we’re actually headed there ourselves. Why don’t you just follow us?” I asked.

My sister crowded close to me. I thought the cold was actually getting to her despite attempts to prove she had acclimated and twenty degrees below zero didn’t bother her.

“Dude, you don’t just invite strangers to follow us. This is Boston, kid,” she whispered.

After a few blocks and breaths of icicles, we walked down the final alley leading up to the theater, small and homey. We immediately followed an aroma that led us to the bar. My sister checked her coat, but I decided to hold on to mine until the feeling of my entire body returned. We sat down with our cocktails and waited for the play to begin. Once some cigarette smoke cleared, we could literally reach out and touch the stage, but didn’t want to risk spilling our drinks.

The entire play seemed like a life game of Clue. Someone had been murdered and it was up to the cast and audience to figure out who the culprit was. Toward the end of the play, the actors completely stopped and turned to the audience in a way that acknowledged us by acknowledging that they were acknowledging us.

“So, who do you think the killer is?”

The audience, stunned at first, began to shift in their seats and turn to one another to discuss the possibilities.

“Mr. Plum!” one audience member suggested.

The actors then turned back toward the stage and resumed the play exactly where they had left off and concluded it with Mr. Plum as the murderer. They connected all the loose ends and every audience member believed that Mr. Plum was the killer. They then reset the stage to the original point where they had first asked the audience.

“Okay, now who?”

They asked several times and every time an audience member chose a different character; that character was then played out as the murderer. And it always made sense.

I felt as though my sister was trying to make up for the lack of culture she felt our parents had denied us.

My sister and I were never really close until I was in college. Growing up, when my brother and I were trying to discover something new to break or a new way to annoy Mom and Dad, my sister was either locked in her room stifled behind books or socializing with flies and horsetails at the barn. The seven-year gap between us made her more experienced and prepared to tackle life, and Dad. Sometime during her sophomore year in college, Dorrie, the stubborn, opinionated, and mirror image of our father, made it very clear that there was no more relationship with the man who had raised her. I got close once to uncovering the truth behind their relationship. Along with the art museums and local plays came drinking cosmopolitans, lots of them.

We sat in her living room, me cramped in the small spot that Calvin, my sister’s rescued greyhound, had allotted me on the couch and my sister comfortably reclining in

the brown, plaid chair she inherited from the man she swore she would have nothing to do with. She fit quite well in that chair actually; it suited her. Despite my mother's stature at 6'1, my sister only rounded out at about 5'6. And despite the fact that I can almost wrap two fingers around her upper arm, she's quite strong and scrappy. At one point, she had a faint green pallor to her skin, all the years of eating vegetables and never a poor, innocent turkey. Like the one she made a gravestone for and hid one Thanksgiving. She has the same eyes as me, though, dark around the edges but lightening to almost green around the center; they even change color. Same hair too, except a bit straighter and more striped once she discovered the art of highlights. But still, the 1970's brown plaid chair, that had a matching couch at one point when my dad had bought the set for him and Mom when they were first married, suited her.

“So, what is it with you two?” I finally decided to ask between sips.

“Hmm, with who? Calvin? Santa? Stalin?” she said and tilted her head. Calvin tilted his as well. I was beginning to crowd him.

Stubborn and sarcastic, this woman clearly didn't inherit anything from our father.

We each had another sip.

“Seriously though, what went wrong with you and Dad? I mean, it's Dad.”

“Yeah, see, back in college--” she started.

And that's when the cosmos kicked in. My sister's recipe for cosmopolitans had the perfect combination of vodka with just a hint of cranberry juice that protected her apathetic judgment of our father, completely blurring together our conversation. I have faint recollections of the word *feminist* resounding a bit in my memory and something

about my dad bribing her to keep a 4.0 GPA, but other than that, Calvin's hot breath triggers more of a memory for me.

The truth is my father and sister haven't had an actual conversation since she was in college. I don't know why my sister has estranged my father, my mom doesn't know, my brother doesn't know why, and my father claims not to know. And we as Raymonds, don't really talk about these things, so we just go with it. But my sister didn't stop there. A few years after college when my brother took my dad's side on a particular argument, she ousted him as well. I have to believe she has good reasons, but I've never grasped them as well as she did to completely reject our father. And that was that. Her murder mystery play remained just that, a mystery. I never again was an audience member who yelled out a suggestion for her to explain and she never offered the information. I only know that for every Christmas, my sister sends my Dad a tub of peanuts and he's lucky to get a birthday card, maybe a call.

He's given up trying to call her.

* * *

During one yearly visit, instead of going to a play, Dorrie decided to take me to an art museum in downtown Boston. They were having a fashion show exhibit and she had already bought us tickets. I wrapped every inch of my body in scarves and layers of clothing to endure the Boston air. I have moved twelve times, but all have been below the Mason-Dixon Line.

After surviving the Boston traffic, and my sister's driving in Boston traffic, we parked below the museum.

This particular art museum was full of period work, Renaissance Art, Medieval, Romantic, Neoclassic, Contemporary, and Modern. We finagled our way through the installations until we reached the fashion show. After following the knotted path toward the entrance, we found ourselves standing in the dark, with the hope of some light in the distance. Once our eyes adjusted to the lack of lighting, we realized it wasn't quite what we were expecting. Instead of models my height and 100 pounds lighter stomping on a runway, there were cases of stationary plastic models wearing the collection. Each plastic box housed about three girls, each wearing what the fashion industry decided to call fashionable that month. It didn't take us very long to walk around the show, but still, to my sister, it was culture.

My own conditioning began once we exited and let our eyes begin to readjust. Right outside the fashion show exhibition room stood a canvas the size of an entire wall. The colors were vibrant and chunked with no obvious pattern but still a pattern existed. Stripes, splatters, webs of color, and even footprints all mixed together in a way that looked as if mayhem had been captured within four walls, but you had to look past convention.

I couldn't help but stand there and start to place the painting in a house. Where would it go best? What would compliment it? What room would it work best in? How could I fit it on the plane back to Richmond? My sister wanted to move on, but despite my head telling my legs to continue walking on with my sister, I stood still, experiencing art.

My body understood what my eyes inhaled. I didn't move, I couldn't move. My eyes wanted more. They jolted up, down, side to side, craving every drip, every smudge, every planned accident. My body was responding to a Jackson Pollock painting.

He stood above his paintings, stood in them, swatted paint at them, and then stood back in the presence of a masterpiece. His work goes beyond just an image. The bands of paint interlace with each other accidentally on purpose. The size of the canvas is daunting enough to literally capture a moment's breath and to raise hairs on an arm. If you were to step into the picture, not just glance by it, but actually step toward the canvas as any true masterpiece demands, your eyes cross over the actual movement and motions of his hands and feet. The footprints are embedded among the stripes and mounds of collected paint, squandered just enough to leave an impression, a memory of something that was once there. If you only glance at it, it looks like a representation of nothing, as if a child had been left unattended for five minutes in the kitchen, but if you really look at it, really take a moment to stop and appreciate the intrinsic mess that is before you, you see that each blob, each splatter, each monstrosity that is his artwork, was placed on purpose.

How is it possible to marvel at something so splattered yet so intricate? Some look at it once and continue walking to the next piece of art, even though they feel their pace stumble a bit. Most people look at a piece of art for less than five seconds and then move on to the next, speed-dating their way through history.

* * *

Like Daguerre was able to do years ago, I look at the world through an invisible frame and at the potential within those four walls, within a box. Unlike the witty,

melodramatic cliché that “Life is not the number of breaths you take, it's the moments that take your breath away,” life cannot be a series of moments. If you took a snapshot of that moment, there would be a beginning, present, and future narrative of that moment unuttered despite the technological advances photography has made since Daguerre.

At first a single synthetic plastic sheet that instantly polarized light, then in later years, paper coated in matte, satin, or high gloss finish that's developed from film, and now pictures can be viewed with the touch of a button. Because someone had the right timing, shutter speed, and aperture, I have either a Polaroid, print, or digital image of each box I have lived in, or pictures of the smaller boxes on the inside. Each one carries a different timeframe, a different importance, and different memories. When I look at a photograph of my house in New Jersey, I don't even recognize it as once being mine. It remains completely foreign. The white siding doesn't stretch very far from side to side until it reaches the end of the box and the front yard looks almost nonexistent. The photograph of the box in Alabama looks more familiar. The pink azalea bushes in the front remind me of my Granddaddy when he would visit, a strong man bending to the delicate flower. Pictures of Franklin, Virginia are more abundant, too many choices. Pictures that go beyond just the box I lived in, to boxes that my friends lived in, boxes that they actually called home, having spent their entire lives in a single box. I have pictures of my elementary, middle, and high school boxes, pictures of my church box, and the streets that led the ways in between. Pictures from boxes number four through twelve, look just like that, big boxes that belong to someone else. Then there are the pictures of the memories inside those boxes. I can see my dad's happiness while holding me on his denimed lap; and I can see that my sister and dad weren't always estranged

from one another, but instead were friends, family, with a sense of home. Pictures worth more than five seconds.

My sister doesn't give our dad five seconds. For something as splattered and intricate as their relationship, it deserves at least five seconds before the next stumble.

Bubble Headed Derelicts

Home: birthplace, residence, domestic environment, familiar, when in one's element.

She limped toward our car as we stood still in New York City traffic, forced into gridlock while she and others approached the comatose cars, asking for one thing. My family and I were on our way to another fun-filled family vacation in Maine. Three summer months, spent with one brother, one sister, and two parents. No TV, no connection to civilization, no cell phone reception, no hospital within one hundred miles, just us, the moose, and the occasional bear. Before we could reach this destination of complete ecstasy, however, there was that woman.

She pulled back her tattered wool sleeve and rapped on our windshield, asking if we could help. My dad, the clever and outgoing man that he is, a Chemical Engineer for twenty-five years, decided to take charge of the situation. He rolled down the window and confronted the woman, from within the barrier of the steel doors.

"I'm sorry, but we don't know where we are either."

Directions. He thought the woman was asking for directions and responded in all honesty that he didn't know where he was either. We were lost, after all.

Even at about age ten, I knew that woman didn't want directions. She wanted papers all right, but ones with less dots, lines, and keys and ones with more faces, buildings, and statements proclaiming a trust in God.

Society has diluted homelessness to a lengthy list of causes and statistics, including: automobile-related, decline in public assistance, divorce, domestic violence, drug and alcohol-related problems, illness, job loss, lack of affordable housing, lack of child support, low wages, mental illness, natural disasters, physical disabilities, post traumatic stress disorder, poverty, roommates, severe depression, and tragedy. If being homeless can mean falling into a social category of people without regular housing, and a house can just be a place where one's domestic affections are centered, then to be homeless could simply mean to have lost that sense of centered affection.

My sophomore year in college, my photography teacher made sure to center us around limited affections. She had given us an assignment where we had to complete at least five rolls of film within one block of Farmville, Virginia: a town with less than 7,000 people and its biggest claim to fame being the last city to desegregate its public schools. Complying within the restraints of one block in any city is pretty limiting. Confined to one block in Farmville, however, was taking it to the extreme. Downtown only lasted about five blocks until you reached pastures and open fields on either side. I chose a downtown block at random and began shooting.

Along with being limited for space, we were also limited with our technology. In Photo 101, you had to use a fully manual camera. Meaning that everything had to be manually set before the picture was taken, and given that I was in 101, I limited myself even further with my ability and knowledge of said manual camera. First the shutter speed had to be set, then the aperture needed to be gauged depending on the amount of light that was available, then you were supposed to use a grey card, literally a grey piece of cardstock, to set up the final settings for one picture. This wasn't a modeling session

where 100 frames can be taken within minutes. I was lucky to get one frame in ten minutes.

As I walked along, however, my model appeared. I knew that I needed to immediately set my camera and just start shooting before he became aware of what I was doing. There he stood, just at the corner before meandering over to the next block.

His small, squat stature was reminiscent of a gymnast, but his striped shorts would never have passed the fingertip rule. His tattered tank top flattered his pot belly and his arm muscles, flexed to hold his Confederate flag. High tops planted him wherever he stood. Today he stood with his back to me, not knowing that I spent about ten minutes situating my camera before I began taking almost an entire roll of film just of him, standing proud. He looked out over the streets, watching everybody go about their business. No one gave him a second thought.

Over my four years at college, rumors were always exchanged about 'Captain Farmville' with every new class of freshmen. Some said that he only came out to the streets when he didn't take his medicine. Others suggested that he only came out when he was released from jail. And others professed that he fought in a war and returned to no family and no home, all burnt by fire. During my four years in Farmville, however, he never harmed, threatened, or came close to frightening any student, parent, or Farmville citizen. He minded his own business and attended to what was familiar to him. The streets of downtown Farmville, the same outfit, and his tattered Confederate Flag were, apparently, all the affections he needed and what were familiar to him.

Homeless: abandoned, banished, deported, derelict, desolate, destitute, disinherited, displaced, dispossessed, down-and-out, estranged, exiled, friendless, houseless, outcast, refugee, uncared-for, unhoused, unsettled, unwelcome, vagabond, wandering, without a roof.

By the time I had reached my seventh address in Washington, D.C., to work for a lobbying engine oil company, I had already encountered two people prone to the word, 'homeless.' If nearly one out of every five D.C. residents live at or below the poverty line, odds were that it would happen again at some point. In a large city, there is always an eclectic variety of people. There was the man who played his radio beside a bench in the metro station and danced to the music. Didn't have a hat down for money, didn't coerce bystanders to join him, he simply loved the music and loved to move. Then there was the woman who stood at the corner of my metro stop and asked for money on behalf of herself and future child. Four months later I saw her again, just as pregnant. And of course there were the people who stood right outside fast food joints, watching you pay for your sandwich in cash and watching you being handed the change. The minute you walked outside, "Do you have any spare change?" It's hard to say no when you're dropping bills and change from your hands while trying to rush back to your nine to five. These were everyday occurrences for people living in a city. My everyday occurrences, however, were never typical.

Desperate not to spend my lunch hour within the corporate walls of engine oil licenses and lawyers, I decided to take advantage of the nice day that preceded me with a bit of a breeze, the sun begging for a shoulder to braise. With my first homemade lunch

in hand, packed in the striped lunchbox my mother insisted on buying for me, insisting it would keep my sandwich both cool and fresh, I ambled over to the nearby park and found a concrete wall to sit on with the perfect combination of shine and shade. I plunked myself right next to her. I practically begged for a friendship to spark.

She seemed perfectly harmless at first, beginning with a series of mundane questions; quite good at striking up a conversation with a complete stranger actually. She asked about my lunch, how my day was going, where I worked. All while the religious background music blared from her pocket radio. She didn't seem completely estranged from society at the time. Between questions she managed to keep in beat, a hand wave here, fist pump there.

“Do you have any money?” she asked.

I stopped listening to her music and looked up from my mouth-watering turkey and swiss cheese sandwich, light on the mayo.

“No, actually. I'm sorry.” Which really wasn't far from the truth. I never carry cash on me. Once I had to sign a form stating that I would mail in the seventy-five cent toll due to the lack of my cash-carrying abilities.

Having the questioning turn from harmless to fruitful began to strike me as odd, but I turned back to my sandwich. Another bite. Probably worth at least seventy-five cents.

“What about traveler's checks?” she asked.

“What are—no, sorry I'm fresh out.” I never understood what those were. I hoped that by this point I could once again return to my sandwich and she would continue to clap and tap.

“European coins?” She had officially abandoned the practice of harmless questioning and this religious music-loving, hand-waving, fist-pumping woman now had my complete attention.

That’s when it hit me.

I looked around at other people in the park. Layers of newspapers were matted next to one bench, men with knitted gloves sans the knitted fingers stood around in a circle next to one tree. The gentlemen to my lunch buddy’s left wore at least three jackets and had several plastic grocery bags gathered at their ankles. And they had not just been shopping. I looked once again at her, hair mangled in certain areas, a few strands of pine needles acting as accessories. Her crocheted wrap fell loosely around her shoulders, large holes left certain areas of her body completely vulnerable. I had sat down next to a homeless woman, eating my entire juicy, homemade lunch in front of her.

“Oh, well, I don’t even have a passport, never have. So, the chances I have any spare European coins clanging in the bottom of my purse are unlikely.” I looked at her face turn from friendly, to fruitful, to now embarrassed. “But I can check.”

She turned up the volume on her radio. I knew I would need to find someone new to eat my lunch with tomorrow.

It is hard to pinpoint the particular reason for her current situation. Upon first inspection, I didn’t know otherwise. Perhaps a seasoned city-goer might, but I like to remain confident that she seemed merely a bit flighty, before asking for European coins. But she probably fell between the lines of a cause or a statistic. She probably could not fight the decline in public assistance where the current TANF benefits and food stamps combined are below the poverty level in every state; in fact, the median TANF benefit for

a family of three is approximately one-third of the poverty level. Perhaps the only means she knew for relief could not actually provide relief from poverty.

Flighty: lingering, meandering, wandering, fickle, irresponsible, airheaded, bubble headed, capricious, changeable, empty-headed, frivolous, impulsive, inconstant, lively, silly, thoughtless, unbalanced, unstable, unsteady, volatile, aimless, having no goal, accidental, blind, careless, casual, directionless, drifting, erratic, fanciful, indecisive, pointless, stray, undirected, unguided, unpredictable, wandering.

Still in D.C. a few months later, I woke up to another day, late again, of having to run down the stairs just in time to catch the shuttle, ride said shuttle to the metro, grab a seat on the first metro, and then parade my way through the hoard of like-minded metro travelers who always felt it necessary to squish in at least seven more people after the metro computer man claimed the doors were closing. After the second metro ended, it was another day of walking the four blocks to work. Every day. One hour in, one hour home. What did not occur during this routine of humans practicing rat mazes was just that. A rat. That day it did.

Like any other day, I had exited my metro stop and thought that if I cut through the park diagonally, I wouldn't be as late as I would if I took the sidewalks. I passed the woman who claimed she was pregnant, I passed the CARE charity people handing out flyers, and I meandered my way past benches, newspaper patches, and people who already needed a nap at nine in the morning.

With only one more block to go before I could begin my day of data entry, a gentleman who looked as if he was only minutes away from laying out his own newspaper patch for a mid-morning nap, spotted me. I looked at him and thought to pass him just as I had passed the others. And then I looked at his hand: his emaciated, ashy hand where it dangled a dead rat. Hung by the tail. Apparently he noticed the customary astonished look that one must adopt when presented with a dangling rat, and he felt it necessary to use this to his advantage. He seemed to enjoy the horror I registered and began to come toward me. At first, I didn't want to jump to any irrational conclusion that this deluded man might actually think someone else would find joy in his pet, so I decided to continue with my normal pace. Then the waving began. The taunting. And swinging. It hung by its leathery, spiny tail. It was at this point that all rationality was put aside and my meandering quickly turned into a pace matching that of the business women in suits and tennis shoes.

I had made it to the sidewalk where he now stood only feet in front of me. His arm began to pull back. He really was going to do it. Weekday mornings weren't the best for trying to find a hole in D.C. traffic to cross the street, but it was either dodging traffic or risk being pelted. I chose my time and so did he. We both missed.

Places signifying home: abode, address, apartment, asylum, boarding house, bungalow, cabin, castle, cave, co-op, condo, condominium, cottage, crash pad, diggings, digs, domicile, dormitory, dump, dwelling, farm, fireside, flat, habitation, hangout, haunt, hearth, hideout, hole in the wall, home plate, homestead, hospital, house, hut, joint, living

quarters, manor, mansion, nest, orphanage, pad, palace, parking place, place, residence, resort, roof, rooming house, roost, shanty, shelter, trailer, turf, villa, where the hat is.

During graduate school, I decided to commute from Richmond, Virginia to Farmville, Virginia. The few blocks of Farmville seemed far more limiting the older I got and the more my friends graduated and moved on to cities with blocks in double and triple digits. I had just gotten out of my night class and wasn't exactly ready to drive the hour to my eleventh address.

I came to a stop light and obeyed all traffic laws before proceeding. A group of people huddled around a collection of popped hoods in a parking lot on my left. As I passed the group, a woman marched into the middle of the street, clad in what most would accept as normal attire: faded jeans, solid-colored tee-shirt, tennis shoes, and a cloth shoulder bag. I never would have associated her with the outburst to come.

Her long black braid that almost kissed the top of her jeans began to sway first. Then she began pacing across both lanes of traffic, ultimately stopping all cars. We were pawns in her game. Luckily, I found my vehicle first in line. I knew for sure this time she wasn't asking for directions, and my dad wasn't there to not give her any.

The screaming began.

“Hit me! I hope you do fucking hit me!”

I rolled up my windows, leaving just enough of a crack to hear.

“Come on. Hit me! I wish you would!”

The pacing and the screaming and the waving seemed to feed off one another and the cars in front and behind me began to increase. She paced from one side of the two-

lane street to the other. The opposing car made a few attempts to slowly drive past her, but she made sure to walk in its path so he either wouldn't move, or she would in fact get hit.

I looked down at my phone and then looked back up to the middle of the road. I think she saw me and inched closer and closer to my car, now looking straight at me. I wasn't sure if car windows were the same as windows in a house at night. I could see her, but could she see me? Still, I didn't dare make any call on my phone; she might assume I was calling the cops.

"Someone fucking hit me!!" She began to pull at her hair now, still pacing. She carried a large striped, tattered bag and threw it in the middle of the street. A few notebooks flew out and she began kicking and scattering them further.

"Hit! Me! Fucking hit me!" She screamed right at me this time.

I did not roll down my window and I did not tell her that I couldn't help her.

Cars still lined behind and in front of me. I hoped that someone who wasn't within her direct line of sight had called the cops. Ten or so minutes later, I saw the flashing lights coming toward me from the opposing hill. She didn't run, didn't fight them. She just kept screaming as they pinned her arms behind her and moved her to the side of the street. I continued driving.

* * *

Address eleven came to a halt when my roommate decided that she wanted to live on her own. Actually, she admitted that she didn't want to risk living with me because she said I was too "flighty." She moved to an apartment of her own, her fourth address I believe, and I moved on to number twelve.

Most associate homelessness with poverty, blaming the homeless because of their laziness or inability to provide for themselves and families. They negate the other seventeen options and jump straight to poverty. It's a fair assumption that in all my encounters, society and the average person would write those people off as homeless. Saying they were abandoned, banished, desolate, destitute, estranged, friendless, houseless, outcast, unwelcome, and without a roof. It is also a fair assumption that my roommate is not the only one that finds me flighty, bubble headed, capricious, empty-headed, frivolous, impulsive, inconstant, unbalanced, unstable, unsteady, volatile, aimless, having no goal, directionless, drifting, indecisive, pointless, stray, undirected, unguided, unpredictable, and wandering.

Captain Farmville was in his element and familiar with standing on sides of streets holding a Confederate flag. My lunch buddy clearly wasn't friendless. I don't know where my rat fiend friend was born, but he had lived in a community. He established himself at a location and developed means of entertainment.

Why is the connotation carried with the word homeless more negative than ones associated with being flighty? A homeless person isn't 'bubbleheaded' but is instead cast as a 'friendless, desolate refugee.' The only difference between these two words is that one has a choice. I had the means to move twelve times, I had the background to support myself through a series of part and full-time jobs in seven different cities, whereas the people I have encountered during those twelve times, did not. They had to make a home for themselves where they were and because of that, they are labeled and judged. I chose to wander and was merely labeled as being flighty.

I have just moved to my twelfth address. At twenty-five years old, I have lived in six houses, five apartments, three college campuses, in three different states, and seven different cities. My first home was for the first twelve weeks of my life and the longest duration was seven years.

My home is not where I was born. My domestic affections have no center and the thing most common to me is cardboard moving boxes. To visit my homes, you would have to span almost the entire eastern shore. I carry my home with me.

Kid

Growing up, my brother was the closest thing I had to a home.

* * *

“I bet you can’t hang on that pull-up bar for more than thirty seconds,” my brother dared me when I was five where we were living in our second house in Prattville, Alabama. Conveniently, I stood up to the challenge just as my dad walked by, and conveniently he saw me on the bar that previously had been established as a no-hanging zone. My brother’s fault, and I was five, so I won.

Hallmark suggests that best friends have those special moments that take your breath away. My brother and I write our own cards. I lost my first tooth because of my brother. He swears that my face ran into his fist, but I choose to believe otherwise. Despite the numerous bones we have broken together, the headaches we have caused our parents, the lies told, the lies covered, we are best friends through it all. He even taught me to drive my truck, in downtown Richmond, at three in the morning. Though he didn’t find it necessary at the time to share with me that the red stoplights were located at the sides of the street, or that the speed limit read 25 mph. Five red lights later, I would have appreciated the insight; so would have the Domino’s pizza delivery car that I almost hit. Almost isn’t hitting, so I win again.

Best friends also don’t tell on each other. So I didn’t tell my dad when Donald got his first speeding ticket. I was with him when it happened, the one laughing hysterically. One of those moments that takes away your money and television privileges. My big brother, a blond-haired, blue-eyed, six-foot role model.

* * *

“Kid! You did it, your first ticket, how does it feel?” my brother said over the phone.

“Peachy, really. Yet here’s the thing, how am I going to tell Mom and Dad?” I asked him, foolishly hoping for a serious answer.

“I dunno. I told Dad the morning of my court date. Don’t do that,” he said.

I received my first ticket in Richmond, Virginia. A place I found myself coming back to with moving boxes, and a place I found myself making new cop friends.

Usually if you find yourself late to a meeting, appointment, or let’s say, a 7:45 morning class in high school, the general assumption is that if you drive faster, then you will either make it just one time, or not too late to be noticed. The thing that isn’t assumed, is that if you get caught speeding, you wind up being later than you had originally planned, and about \$100 poorer.

I was only sixteen and had only had my license for about a month. As usual, I was late to school. The thought of learning something at 7:45 in the morning still doesn’t make sense to me.

The scene was a quiet residential street in Richmond, Virginia, and the first time I ever had seen blue flashing lights in my rearview mirror. They don’t exactly go over the proper procedure for being pulled over in driving school, so I wasn’t sure of protocol. I pulled off to the side of the road and saw a friend drive past me. I guessd she wouldn’t be late that morning.

Like a scene from a movie, a blue-clad officer pulled up to the side of my car and motioned for me to roll down my window.

“Ma’am, do you know why I pulled you over?”

“No, sir.” I had a pretty good idea.

“I clocked you going forty-five in a twenty-five. That is too fast for a residential street. May I have your license and registration please?”

Dammit. That stupid plastic card with my mug shot is somewhere in my bedroom. Couldn't really tell you where. So I just handed him my registration.

“Ma'am, I am going to need your license as well.”

He was more observant in the morning than I was.

“Oh, sorry, I must have left it at home,” I said.

He took what documents I had with him to his car and began the twenty-minute process. Another friend drove past me while I sat there. The cop's blue lights were still flashing. He turned to me and gave me that look of, “Sucks to be you, but don't worry, I have been there too.”

The police officer returned and kindly offered me a formal notice of my legal infraction.

“I am just going to write you a ticket for the speeding. But just so you know, you always need to carry your license with you. It can warrant another ticket as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

He was one of the nicer cops.

A month later when I attended my court date, the court sided with the cop, and soon I found myself in driving school on a Saturday morning at 8 AM.

I decided this should be my first and last ticket.

I had been ticket-free for almost a year, I thought, while I waited to meet my dad in the parking lot of our current location at the Appomattox County Courts, a local abandoned school building, on account of my second ticket infraction. The funds from recent ticket fines were currently renovating the court building. We walked through the metal detectors and into the old high school cafeteria, which still smelled like old corn and hard spoonfuls of mashed potatoes. Luckily, numerous rows of cold, hard, gray plastic folding chairs awaited my arrival. The choices for company looked like sitting next to Billy Bob and his entire patriarchal side of the family, a family who decided dressing up for the occasion meant wearing grass-stained shirts and fishing boots. Or there was the option of sitting next to a woman wearing a fannipack, scrunchi, and huge, gold, plastic earrings. She had brought little Susie and Barbara Ann along for the family outing.

Five hours passed and the entertainment was memorable. From the back left corner, three cops escorted a strapping young fellow, two cops on each side and one behind. I guess one was behind in case he decided to do back-flips out the door. The strapped fellow tried to maintain looking like a hard ass despite the fact that he was wearing a giant orange jump suit. The suit was nicely accessorized with handcuffs, two on the hands and two on the feet.

Aside from the jump-suit man, a blonde girl all dressed up with Daddy's money had a look of disgust on her face, no doubt due to the fact that she had to sit next to common people. Her expression changed from disgust to apathy when the judge told her, "Sweetie, I think it's time that you find a new mechanic, and I am going to pretend that I

didn't see this notice." Apparently her defense rested on a piece of paper that showed her speedometer was five miles per hour off, in the wrong direction.

Finally, five hours later, the judge called my name. A little old man sat above me draped in black, precisely adorned with turtle-shell glasses at the tip of his nose. He looked at my papers.

"Ma'am, I have here that you were speeding 77 in a 55. How do you plead?"

I had to say guilty.

For this ticket, I had been driving for hours and getting nowhere. Lost, I decided to call my brother.

"Hey, Donald, how long am I supposed to be on 81 South?" I asked him, knowing that having to ask him in the first place meant I was lost.

"Only about twenty minutes, why? You're lost, aren't you?" he asked.

"Well, here's the thing, I've been on this road for about an hour now, and I'm pretty sure that sign just said Roanoke. Scale of one to ten, how bad?" I asked.

"Yeah, you're lost. Gonna be about two more hours. Way to go, kid." He always did know how to boost my confidence.

"Gee thanks, love you too," I said.

I made pretty good time until I passed a sign that said, "Welcome to Troutville." Suddenly, blue lights appeared in my rearview mirror for the second time in my life. Probably had been flashing for a while; maybe I could get a ticket for resisting arrest while I was at it, two-for-one special.

"Are you kidding me? No really, seriously, kidding me?!" I yelled to myself.

I rolled down my window, looked at the cop and read his name badge: Walter.

"Ma'am, can I ask you why you were speeding?" Walter asked.

"Well, to be honest with you, I'm completely lost, tired of driving, and I just want to go home." I blame my brother for that comment.

"Well, my speedometer read that you were going 77 in a 45."

"I honestly didn't know it was 45, sir; I thought it was 55," I said, knowing the limit was 45, thinking twenty-two miles an hour over the limit wouldn't seem as bad. I also knew I wasn't driving that slow when I had two more hours to go.

"Well, ma'am, I am going to have to write you a ticket, but I am going to reduce it to 77 in a 55."

"Thank you sir," I said.

He walked back to his car, lights still brightly flashing just in case I forgot I was pulled over. When he came back to my truck, Walter handed me my court date.

"Donald, I might have gotten another ticket," I said when I called my brother again that night.

"How did you do on this one, better than the last?" he said, with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I did pretty well, 77 in a 55, well 45, but he reduced it so I wouldn't go straight to jail," I said, humor seeming the best coping mechanism at the time.

"You make me a proud brother, but be careful on the way home, I don't need a call saying you hit a tree," he said. Protective for once.

The judge was a little less protective and forgiving.

"I am going to write your speed of 77 in 55 off as a mechanical malfunction and give you a fine of \$90 and twenty hours of community service. You can see the clerk to the left to assign your community service according to where you live," he said.

They don't go over community service in Driver's Education either. Clearly, they need to rethink the syllabus for teaching teenagers how to drive. Since I was currently in college in Farmville, Virginia, the clerk conveniently assigned my community service to be served there. I adopted the attitude that community service couldn't be so bad. My optimism quickly vanished, however, when the smell hit me of the Alcohol Safety Awareness Program building. After opening the broken and holey screen door, fumes of old, dirty rags mixed with stale paint and Windex suffocated me. The smells paired with dried coffee stains on the floor, which I cleaned up, and about a five-to-one ratio of dead to alive bugs. The smells and the atmosphere paled in comparison, however, to the good news: working side-by-side with convicts. Yes, my favorite handcuffed, police-escorted, and orange jumpsuit-clad friends.

Bertha, the woman in charge of ASAP, was also in charge of me. At first glance, I'm not going to lie, Bertha pretty much scared the hell out of me. She seemed to have just climbed out of the sticks and looked ready to wrestle a bear. She dressed in her flannel plaid attire, complete with paint-and-coffee-stained jeans.

"You can start upstairs, tear up the rugs and paint the baseboards. The others will be here soon," she said to me acting as if I knew what she was talking about.

"What others?" I asked hesitantly.

"They're coming from the correctional facility. They've been working here for a while," she said. She didn't hesitate.

Fabulous, always looking forward to making new friends.

One of my new friends named Brian mostly stared at me across the room and smiled with what teeth he had left. I tried to focus on my brush strokes but as soon as I

turned my head, there he was, orange and handcuffed. I should thank him really; never have I ever been so motivated that early in the morning to finish my work.

After I finished the work, I had to call my brother, to brighten his day a little.

“Kid, you have the worst luck of anyone I know. But did you at least get his number?” my brother said.

“Thanks for the pep talk, Donald, I cherish these moments we have, really,” I said.

“Hey, you called me, Kid.”

My mistake.

Brian might have motivated me to work harder in the morning, but he wasn't enough motivation for me to stop getting speeding tickets.

For my third ticket, I walked into the Cumberland County courthouse with my mother, and it hit me that you have too many speeding tickets when you show up to court, in a different county, and get the same judge. I got the same exact little old, black-draped, nose-tipped man.

"Mom, that's the same judge as the last one," I told her with a little worry.

After a few hours of waiting and switching my legs back and forth, running my hands through my hair at least forty-eight times and realizing there really were more incoherent people in this world than me, a familiar voice called me to the bench. Luckily there were just enough incoherent people in the world so he didn't recognize me.

"Ma'am, I have here that you were speeding 67 in a 55. How do you plead?"

I decided to go with no contest. But I had a good reason.

Two weeks had passed since my last ticket received in Troutville and I was now in Cumberland County, where the town is a little bit bigger, but the blue lights and the flashing all look the same.

“Why were you speeding?” the cop asked.

“I honestly didn’t realize that I was speeding, sir.” The fact that it was late at night and the raining did not help my case.

“Well, I got you going at 67 in a 55; I am going to have to write you a ticket.” I found his proclamation a bit unnecessary. I mean, why would he pull me over if he weren’t going to write me a ticket? Maybe to chat a little? I could think of other conversation topics.

Again I waited. Pissed off mostly. Still waiting. Still pissed. Got the ticket. Got the court date. I dialed my brother’s number, speed dial.

“I did it again,” I told him, a little less amused this time.

“Please tell me you are not talking about another ticket, cause if you are, I’m hanging up,” he said.

“Ya know, you’re supposed to help me in these situations. It’s not like I’m intentionally going for a record here, although, I might consider it,” I said.

“Listen kid, go get a calibration; the truck has oversized tires so the speedometer is a little off. That will help you in court. Now when you tell Dad, you’re pretty much screwed. But don’t forget to call me afterwards,” he said.

So naturally, taking my brother’s advice, “No contest, sir,” I answered.

"On what grounds?" he asked. His overlapping wrinkled face with two raised brows, wide eyes, and a slightly opened jaw drop suggested he thought I looked too much like a dumb blonde college student to even understand why I stood in front of him.

"I have a calibration for my truck, sir," I said and handed the document to the officer who handed it to the judge. The documents showed that my truck was five off.

"Officer, would you like to make any comments on this ticket?" Now why did he have to ask Steve that?

"Sir, she was very compliable but I would like to point out that it was late, rainy, and very foggy," he said. I swear the officer said this to completely kill any hopes of me getting out of this one. Steve's thank you note will be much shorter than the others.

The judge considered the facts, shuffled around a bit, similar to my anticipatory shuffle, but the black robes seemed to make his shuffle more authoritative.

"I am going to give you a \$66 fine for speeding 67 in a 55. Darling, you need to be careful when you are driving, especially in those conditions."

"Yes, sir." I was careful to say nothing more.

Back in Richmond, I had once again been clean for almost a year. The crowded box I found myself sitting in, however, wasn't looking any more promising than the first three. The room packed with row after row of a selective pack of speeders from the lower, middle, and upper classes; the upper class looked absolutely shocked they have to interact with either of the other two. The woman to my left kept smiling as if good karma was going to get her out of this, even though I knew it was too late. The couple in front of me looked like they had had some rough days, and some even more rough days ahead

of them. Then the elite stood in the back with their briefcases and lawyers; the lawyers get you out faster. After a few cases of speeding, driving without a license and damages to property, a list of names was called to go next door. As a lucky winner, I got up and walked over.

This room was relatively empty so I sat down in a pew that luckily wasn't next to anyone. My name was called. Here we go.

"Ma'am, I see here that you failed to obey a stop sign; how do you plead?"

Had to say guilty again. Personally, I felt that I had a good reason to roll through it, but I could see that the judge wasn't going to agree with me. My officer didn't, so why would he?

Even when I was driving to work at eight in the morning in my mother's pale blue Ford Taurus with the license plates reading UMO, and even at a stop sign at a dead end road, I saw the blue flashing lights. Are you kidding me?

I pulled over, rolled down the window, and even got the registration out before Patrick asked, "Ma'am, do you know why I pulled you over?"

"Probably because I rolled that stop sign back there," I said. He looked quite stunned at first. It was early. Maybe he was expecting blubbering and tears, but it seemed useless to waste time lying or acting dumb. I'm used to this; just give me my ticket and I will see you in court.

"Yes ma'am. Have you ever gotten any tickets before?" Wrong question. Wrong person to ask.

"Well, I mean, I have had some speeding tickets in the past," I said, since he was not likely to believe that all the "mechanical malfunctions" on my record were simply because I had faulty windshield wipers almost monthly.

"Ever been in an accident?" he asked, continuing to prod.

"No sir," I honestly and confidently said.

"Well obviously, there is something wrong if you have had so many tickets before and now this one. I suggest that you change something. I am going to ha-", --I could have stopped him there, but being the nice person I am, I let him continue, "have to write you a ticket."

I dialed my brother's number.

"Hey, Donald-

"Kid, don't even say it," he cut me off.

"What, I can't just call to say, hello?" I asked.

"You could, but you're not."

I mean, he was right.

"At least I am improving, only a stop sign this time," I said.

"You're lucky I like you as a sister, or I just might give up on you today," he said.

So guilty it was.

"Guilty, sir," I said, straightforward, short and to the point. Give me a fine, please not community service, and let's go.

"Have you ever been to driving school?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." He obviously didn't know me very well.

"For what?" he asked.

“A speeding ticket,” I said, crossing my fingers that he wasn’t going to say community service. Brian was the only orange-suited friend I need.

“I am going to give you a \$66 fine for failing to obey a stop sign.”

A few years passed and I actually felt as if I was gaining ground without being pulled over in the last few months. I went to Lexington, Virginia, for the weekend to see my parents; they had always been quite understanding through my tickets. For Christmas that year my dad had wrapped an envelope in a box, then a bigger box, and then a bigger one. It took me through at least six boxes to open the envelope. When I did, it was a present for the funds to be paid off in full for all of the fines incurred for my infractions. Best Christmas present to date.

We were all sitting in the kitchen my father built hoping to add on to his retirement home one day. But for now it stood as the wooden box he had hand-built and labeled as a living room and kitchen on the first floor and more wood upstairs completed the bedroom. While we were sitting there, contemplating how to put more wood in, the phone rang.

“Don’t worry, guys, I’ll get up and walk all the way over to the other side of the room where you are already standing and answer the phone. I got it,” I said. It was my brother.

“Hey, Alicia, let me talk to Dad,” he said. That was it, no joke, no sarcastic comment, and he didn’t even call me Kid. I had never even said I love you to him. I wanted to say it then.

I gave the phone to my dad and then sat on the couch to watch as a series of emotions raced across my father's face. First his eyebrows rose, then his forehead crinkled, his face paled to white and his eyes glazed over with tears. I waited impatiently, able to listen only to one side of the conversation and unable to hear my brother's voice to know that everything was all right.

“Son, it's okay, we will worry about the car later. I can drive down there now if you need me to come get you. Have you called anybody? Is there anybody there? I love you, son,” my dad said.

My brother had been driving his yellow, 1995 Toyota Celica GT, complete with illegal neon lights, matching interior, sound system, and lowered just enough to clear a pebble. He was driving on an unfamiliar country road at about 100 mph, lost control, swerved, and hit a light pole. It's one of those pictures you wish you could forget. The front of the hood scrunched up far enough to meet the windshield, the encasement around the headlights had almost completely fallen off. The entire side of the passenger windshield was shattered, complete with a hole where something had forced its way out, nothing on the driver's side. Both airbags had deployed and now hung there as an afterthought.

My brother, the confident, sarcastic, smart driver, could have lost it all because he was speeding. To that point, my habit of speeding had always been a joke between us. But at that moment, I had almost lost the only home I had known, and still, it wasn't enough.

* * *

By ticket number five, I had stopped calling my brother; he now had a wife to protect.

For the sixth one, I didn't go to court or call my brother. I didn't want to wake his sleeping beauty. He would have answered otherwise.

I updated my Facebook status one afternoon, simply stating, "Number Eight." Those who knew me, understood what that meant. My brother texted me a few hours later.

"Seriously, Kid. Another one? What did you get it for this time?"

"Speeding. I'm trying to get a ticket in every place I live," I texted back.

"Awesome. Hey, you wanna meet for dinner sometime before I leave?" he texted.

"Leave?"

"Yeah, I'm moving to Arkansas."

It wasn't an accident this time and he was moving to a place I knew would be good for him and his wife. But I also knew that I was losing my home for the second time.

"Yeah, sure. Maybe I can get a ticket in Arkansas one day."

Do Us Part

Three years after my brother got married, his wife received a job promotion that would move them both to Arkansas. I don't know what number of addresses that was for my brother, but it was still less than mine. He was going to buy a new house, with his new wife, start a new job, and hopefully a new family. He was going to start a new home.

"Kid, you wanna meet in the middle and have dinner before I leave?" he asked me.

We were supposed to drive together to Arkansas so that I could see his new place, but then his wife decided to fly back to Virginia to ride with him.

"Yeah, sure. Where do you want to eat?"

We met halfway between my address number eleven and his house that was currently being boxed up. My brother and wife had chosen an Italian restaurant that resembled Olive Garden, trying to ease the transition by buttering me up with a faux version of my favorite restaurant. We ate, we talked, we reminisced.

"There's still time to get out of this," I said and pulled up my strapless bridesmaid dress. "I mean, let's consider your options here. I really don't think this is the answer. You're only twenty-seven, so much life to live. Why are you doing this again?"

"Well, usually people get married out of love," Donald said. He slipped on his freshly polished black shoes and started tying the laces.

"Okay, but what's your excuse?" I asked.

Donald looked up from over his knees and rolled his eyes at me. “Hey, it’s not my fault that you know nothing about love. You can’t even tell a guy that you like him while looking him in the eye,” he said. “Actually, you never look anyone in the eye, really.”

“Thank you, Dr. Phil. I’m actually signing up for eharmony.com next week, true love with no physical interaction.”

“That sounds about right for you.”

“And I still can’t believe you didn’t make me the best man, your own sister, your own partner in crime. And who did you get to replace me? A nobody, that’s who.”

“Alicia, the best man is Dad. Know him? Kind of tall, brownish-gray hair, conceived you when—“

“Okay, okay, I get it. I’ve seen him a time or two.”

Donald had been ushered into the groom’s prep-room, a small prayer room with olive-green carpeting and pink walls. The cherubbed, mahogany furniture flirted with the white-and-pink-striped love seats and chair sets, the perfect ensemble for opening your heart to the Lord. I was supposed to be in the other prep room, but there were too many women tearing up at the sight of yellow roses and white this and that, so I crossed over to the other, darker side.

The wedding coordinator knocked on the door and came in with her pink clipboard strapped to her left arm. “Ready everyone?” she asked. “We have about thirty more minutes before the happiest day of your life!”

“More like the last day of your life,” I said. Donald pushed me onto the couch and gave a quick shush sign.

“Thanks, we will be out on time,” Donald said. He picked up a pillow and threw it at me. He almost knocked off a cherub.

“Hey, you’re going to ruin the cute little ruffle on my dress and then your wedding will be ruined,” I said as I brushed my hand across the seams and folds of the yellow chiffon.

“I mean, even if the ruffles aren’t intact, you’re still in the wedding,” Donald said.

“Cute. So, you’re really going to do this, huh? No more good times with just you and me, good being a relative term there,” I said and pushed myself up from the thrown position. I had waited long enough and escaped out of my ‘big-girl shoes’ Jill, the bride, insisted I wear for her wedding and tucked my freed feet under the billow of my yellow dress.

“Hey, I get to spread the joy that is Donald around, you’ve had plenty.”

“I believe I spread more joy, my friend.” I continued to adjust and readjust my dress, trying to find just one position where I felt normal.

“Prove it then. What’s your favorite memory that proves I need Alicia-joy more than you needed Donald-joy,” Donald said.

“Fine, I will. Remember Ellis? I brought you two closer together. And you say I know nothing about love.”

While living in Alabama we had all learned to swim in our backyard pool. Once we had passed the floatie test, with adequate parental supervision, we were allowed to invite friends over to swim. My brother always wanted to invite Ellis.

“No running around the pool, you guys. And only one person on the diving board at a time. Donald, look out for Alicia, she’s still learning how to swim properly,” our mom called from our Alabama house deck.

Donald, my older brother by six years, supposedly older and wiser, raced down the flight of wooden stairs and through the gate that entered into our twelve-foot-deep pool, making sure his pace passed for walking. Ellis, the same age as my brother and the next door neighbor, had come over for a quick swim and she waited by the pool in a lounge chair.

“Aww, look, your girl wore a tasteful one piece for you,” I said.

“She’s not my girl, stop saying that,” Donald said. He sucked in his stomach a little and straightened his posture.

“Why, ‘cause she might hear me?” I said and poked my head out the door, speaking in the direction of Ellis.

Donald climbed up the blue steps and started walking toward the end of the diving board. He glanced at Ellis then darted his eyes toward me. With three bounces he made a graceful cannonball into the pool, enough splashes to cover the entire Ellis-clad lounge chair.

“Hey, Ellis, you want to go next?” I stood at the bottom of the ladder motioning for her. I looked around our yard carefully, surveying the fenced-in backyard, deck, and tried to peer around the huge elm tree that leaned over the entire right side of our three-story house, checking to see if any parental unit was standing at the windowed wall of the breakfast nook.

“Sure!” Ellis said. She carefully stood up from the chair, making sure not to let go of her breath and stomach. She walked over to the diving board and scaled up the same steps. Once she tottered to the end of the diving board, she stood there and looked down at Donald. He treaded water directly under the board.

“Here she comes!” I yelled. I ran down the diving board and shoved Ellis into the pool. A worthy splash.

Now, Donald glared at me and then looked back in the mirror to adjust his tie.

“That was not the joy of Alicia. That was the joy of a neck brace for two months after the attempted joy of Alicia,” Donald said as he rubbed the back of his neck and sighed with a groan through his breaths.

“However, I did manage to get you two closer than you ever had been before, did I not?” I smiled back at him, imitating a hug.

“Sure, but it doesn’t really count if two months afterward I can’t even sit up on my own. Real romantic. Besides we moved like a couple months later anyways.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. You name a memory.”

Donald rolled his eyes and turned his back toward me. “Hey, you should probably do a few touch-ups in the mirror over there, make sure everything is straight, proportioned, you have two of everything,” Donald said.

“My eyebrow, you shaved off my eyebrow!” I screamed while I ran toward my brother and jumped on his back, slapping and kicking at every possible angle. Donald threw me off and onto the couch.

“Hey, someone has got to improve your image. Apparently you don’t own a mirror, so it wasn’t going to be you,” Donald said.

“My eyebrow?! You think one less eyebrow is going to change my image. I’ll tell you what you need one less of.”

“You really think that you can beat me up, your—“

I rushed to stand up and slapped the back of his neck, enough to leave a reddened print of my hand, every fingertip included. Donald flipped around, took me by the shoulders, and slammed me against the wall. We had only lived in Franklin, Virginia a few months and I was still getting used to the swirled sandpapered wall. The vibrations as my head hit were loud enough to hear, and hard enough to knock off Mom and Dad’s copy of the Declaration of Independence. Framed freedom fell down the wall and sliced both light switches off. We stood bruised and assessed the damage.

“So now you have managed not only to bruise my entire body, but you broke Mom and Dad’s 100-dollar frame and two light switches. Impressive,” I said.

“Yes, and I did all that alone. If you didn’t think that you were such a bad ass and could beat up someone twice your size, then we wouldn’t be in this situation,” Donald said.

“Twice my size, huh? So that would make you the older, more mature sibling. The one who should know better and not succumb to his little baby sister’s nagging, when he clearly knows—“

“Shut up and start picking up the pieces. We have to go to the store and find replacements.” Donald turned to find his keys.

“Seriously, why do I always have to pick up the pieces?” I asked with a trash bag in one hand and a slight cut on my other.

I stood up and walked over to the mirror, making sure the dress hadn't grown any more ruffles since that morning.

“Everything still attached over there?” Donald said.

“Yes, I still think the left one is a little less full than the right. You're lucky I have blonde hair.”

“Yeah, that was a downfall to my whole plan. But face it, you couldn't get enough of me, always following me around. You wanted to be just like me,” Donald said.

“I didn't want to be like you, I just didn't always have something better to do. Besides, there was no way I was going to the barn with sister Dorrie, and her horses.”

“Like she'd let you anyways,” he said.

Despite having found the ultimate best friend in Ashley, living in a paper mill town didn't lend itself toward an excess of activities to fill one's day. So, when I couldn't go over to Ashley's, I did the next best thing. I followed my brother around.

“Hey, Mom, I'm going over to James' house to play some basketball,” Donald said.

“Oh, I want to go. Can I go? Please let me go,” I asked.

“It's up to your brother,” Mom said while she probably cooked or cleaned something.

“Mom, she’s ten-years-old. How can a ten-year-old play basketball with two sixteen-year-olds? I mean look at her.” Donald shoved me into the plastered wall, the same wall with 3-D swirls that felt like sandpaper. The swirls ground the end of my elbow and the blood began to trickle.

“Mom, look what Donald did,” I said. I held my elbow with one hand, wrapped the other around my neck, and stuck my tongue out at him.

“Well, congratulations, Donald. Now, after you bandage up your sister, you have to take her with you. Have fun, you two. And don’t push your sister again, this better be the only Band-Aid she needs today.”

“Hehe, guess you’re stuck with me now. Too bad, though, it’s a shame to have to show you how to really play basketball in front of your friend,” I said.

My eyes were getting tired with the combination of greens and pinks, and yellow bridesmaid’s dresses. And I could swear that the cherubs were starting to follow me around the room. I looked closely at one resting on the corner table that clutched a Bible, one of his wings was missing.

“Hey, look at that! This little guy’s wing is gone. Funny how easy it is for a wing to come off. Even when I had nothing to do with it,” I said.

“You were supposed to catch the ball, not let it go right past you and break that stupid Snowbaby.” One of the many porcelain figurines I had decided to collect.

“That was the first Snowbaby I ever received. And besides, we glued it up pretty well.”

“We had a lot of practice gluing things together,” he said.

“Hey, did Mom ever find out about that one?”

Donald still stared at his reflection in the mirror, continuously adjusting the yellow rose in his pocket.

“Yeah, she asked me why mine were different while she was dusting one night,” Donald said.

I walked over, pulled the rose out a little, and tilted it toward the left. “What did you tell her?”

Our Franklin house had too many rooms, too many boxes to try and fill with entertainment stemming from boredom. Once my brother and I turned the air conditioning down as far as it would go, forgot about it, and then left the house for the rest of the afternoon. Our parents were thrilled to come home to an icebox. One of the many incidents.

“Hey, Alicia, hold this end of Dorrie’s baton and let’s see how long you can hold on. I bet you can’t make it past thirty seconds,” Donald said. We both stood in the upstairs sitting room, directly underneath the ceiling fan.

“With you at the other end, I think I can make it past thirty seconds.”

In a pointless battle to see who was stronger by each holding on to one end of a baton, Donald started swinging the stick left and right, harder and harder. My arms swung around in the air until finally I had to let go and the baton swung into the air, clashing with the globes surrounding the ceiling fan lights.

“Huh, that worked out well. You think that was longer than thirty seconds?” I asked.

“Well no, but you better figure out a way to fix that broken glass in thirty seconds,” Donald said.

The glass from the globes lay in big chunks on the floor. Three left on the fan.

“Me? Excuse me, but who is the oldest around here. You really think that my little arms and my adorable face could have broken that glass. I suggest you better start timing yourself,” I said.

“Get the glass off the floor and put it on my desk, then go get the glue from Dad’s workshop.”

“Great. And you are doing, what?”

“I’m going to save you from getting grounded and unscrew these globes and switch them with the globes from my room,” Donald said.

“Save me? Adorable face here, adorable face. Your face, not so adorable, and definitely not so innocent.” I pointed toward my now pouted lip and wide open eyes.

I picked up the glass shards and ran down the hallway into Donald’s room, jumped over the bed and watched mom’s car pull into the driveway.

“Mom’s home!” I yelled.

I looked at my watch and paced around the room. Donald started winding the program in and out of his fingers, the printed name of the church on the front now almost worn off.

The coordinator burst back into the dressing room, announced the ten-minute countdown, and left again. Her glasses held by a beaded string resting on her chest, right above her stop watch and trusty clip board.

“She likes that movie, *Titanic*, you know,” Donald said.

“Who, your coordinator?”

“No, Jill. She likes those kinds of movies. Therefore, I’m going to have to put up with the tears, the Kleenexes, the annoying sniffing and puffiness.”

“So you picked a crier type, huh?”

“Oh please, she’s a girl,” he said.

“Yeah, so am I.” I stared at my feet, knowing that soon I would have to put on black pumps and walk down the aisle before my brother. Walking past hundreds of wrinkled faces, puffy and red.

“Hey, you want to watch a movie tonight?” Donald asked.

“What, you couldn’t find another girl to trick into going on a date with you tonight?” I said.

“No, that’s really never a problem for me. I mean I can go out and do something else, actually I heard about this party—“

“Oh fine, I’ll watch a movie with you so you don’t have to make excuses. What’s on TV anyways?”

Donald flipped through the channels, leaving the screen to flash on every channel just enough to get the highlights.

“Hmm, looks like we have a nice array of sap, crap, and the talented sap, crap. Hey, *Titanic* is on. You’re a girl, shouldn’t you like that movie?” Donald asked.

“Oh, please. *Titanic*. Girl. You know me so well,” I said.

“Too afraid that you might cry, don’t want to ruin your makeup. I think you would cry. How could you not cry? I mean, they all—and then the old couple—and when he’s holding on to her at the end, it’s sad, it’s—“”

“Predictable?” I chimed in. “Seriously, it’s *Titanic*. What do you think’s going to happen at the end? They build a fire on the iceberg and wait for a helicopter?”

“You think they had matches for that?” he asked.

“Oh, just keep flipping through the channels and pretend you care about what I want to watch, but really you are just waiting till the Rocky trilogy comes on,” I said, holding a pillow tightly to my chest.

We both stared out the window, blue skies and white puffy clouds, perfect day for a wedding. The procession of guests began to thin.

“Guess that means it’s time for your grand entrance,” I said.

Donald fastened the final button, tied up his laces, and looked at his yellow rose one last time. “Guess it is, huh?”

“I’m telling you, there’s still time, I’ll create a diversion and you start-“

“Alicia, you need to come with me, you’re the first bridesmaid to enter into the sanctuary,” the coordinator said.

I scurried around the room to find the black pumps I’d thrown off when the coordinator had left a hundred times ago, slipped them on, added some chap stick and followed her out the door. Donald walked out of the dressing room and closed the door behind him. He walked around to his own entrance door, went in, to stand beside the preacher and best man. The best man who wasn’t me.

I stood at the main entrance, clenching my bouquet of yellow and white roses and lilies. Jill's side of the church obviously more full than the Raymond side. Neither were enough to fill the entirety of the sanctuary. My eyes darted back and forth between the preacher and the congregation. My eyes never once looked at my brother, knowing I wouldn't be able to keep a straight face. Once the spectacle of me and my sister in yellow wore off, everyone turned once again toward the main entrance.

The bride, Jill, now stood in the doorway in her pure white dress, her diamond-studded veil, and her faultless bouquet of white roses. "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" began to play. As she started to walk down the aisle toward Donald, I looked once more at my brother. This time I didn't look at his rose or remember when I pushed Ellis on top of him, when he shaved off my eyebrow, or when we shattered glass together. I looked at his eyes, looked closely at them while they led straight to Jill. Jill finally reached Donald and took his hand while I began to release the clench on my flowers, in case I needed a free hand. They both walked up to the preacher.

Vows were said and promises made.

"You may now kiss the bride."

Donald stood tall and confident, waiting for the one he had chosen to start his new life and home with, waiting to lift her veil. I stood to the side.

An Interview for Home

Eleven of them sit on a beam suspended in the air, floating above skyscrapers, taxis, businessmen in their suits, and women hailing cabs. They sit in mid air above the smog, above the hurried nature of nine to fives, and above interviews. You cannot make out their exact facial features, but you can see some smoking, some drinking, some looking in their lunch boxes, or at rolled up pieces of paper. Most have hats, a few without shirts, some are talking to their neighbor, and others sit in silence. Charles C. Ebbets captured these eleven men while on their lunch break, sitting on a steel beam while constructing the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center; Ebbets captured the reality that these men existed in. They are working men on a break. Nothing else matters to them except this exact moment in time, whether it be a sandwich, a drink, a smoke, or a conversation. That much is clear from the image. What isn't clear from the image that has become an iconic piece of poster work on dorm walls and an image people turn to after a hard day of work, is where these men are from, where is home? What isn't captured in this photograph are the moments leading up to their job building the RCA building, the moments of their interview and what they were asked. Are they from New York? Have they always lived in New York? Do they understand the importance of what they are building and what it means to those native to New York and those who claim to be from New York? Where are they from?

“Where are you from?” It's a simple question that generally acts as a conversation starter, but also demands a prompt, simple answer, demanding you pinpoint a specific location.

I recently polled a group of my friends, friends that if they were all locked together in a room, I doubt very many would survive. I first asked them, “Where or when are you at home?”

Several answers were void of any specific location. Ranging from: “when with friends;” “when with family and friends;” “while eating barbeque with family;” “with best friends no matter where we are;” “wherever my mom, brother, husband, are;” “with my husband.” Others were more specific but still void of location: “it’s when not where, when I’m with fam and friends, not a place, a feeling, smells and sights, patchouli, the smell of fire ashes where my dad is from;” “whenever doing anything or somewhere in my comfort zone;” “see/feel/am at things familiar, not a place but a feeling.” One even admitted, “when alone.” My friend from Germany said, “around family, but where I have a job and purpose in life.”

I then asked them, “Where are you from?” The answers became much shorter and more specific: Kentucky; Franklin; Richmond; Delaware; Fairfax; Connecticut and New England; Germany; Virginia Beach; Suffolk; Romania; Woodbridge. Only a couple responded with any sense of flexibility: “Richmond but currently live in Nashville;” “born in Atlanta but live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.”

I asked my brother. He said the house he lived in now, and “New Jersey, by way of Alabama, and Virginia.”

Then, my sister. She answered her apartment where she was at home. I asked where she was from. “That is tougher...let’s say Alaska.”

My brother and sister were the only two to choose a specific box for home. A box that both have managed to push everyone away from. I haven't even seen my brother's house and my brother has never seen my sister's, after eight years.

Nine times out of ten, 'Where are you from?' is the ice breaking question. But, what if there isn't an answer?

* * *

"You have to wear a suit to an interview. God, I can't believe you would actually think about going to an interview without a suit," my sister said as we walked around the mall on one of our annual shopping trips. It was becoming clear that Boston was becoming more and more her home.

"I just feel weird in a suit. It's not me. Can't I just go in my normal clothes, hair back, and some chapstick? I mean, I don't want to get their hopes up or anything, setting unreachable precedents for myself. What if they expect me to wear a suit every day?"

"Then you wear a suit every day." My sister turned and walked over to her section of clothing, less than a size two and no need for extra length. My section was a bit more limited.

After sifting through racks and the multitude of options the fashion industry provides for women over six feet, despite the demand for models to be over six feet, I finally found a suit that I didn't hate. After I tried it on, my sister almost teared up at the sight of reaching her ambitions for me as an independent woman. We both looked at the price tag.

"So, call Dad?" she said.

Once the two of us coerced my dad into paying for my very own power suit, using the angle that this would be the suit to officially propel me into the world and living independently from his bank account, he agreed. My sister now felt that I was prepared for an interview in Washington D.C., the latest location.

Mornings. I never comprehended the whole fascination of waking up early to get the worm. I especially didn't understand women's fascination with getting up even earlier to primp, shellac, and then iron press a suit that most likely will make their day even more uncomfortable. However, I had an interview to go to, so just this once, I decided to be said woman, at least I did after another few swats at the snooze button. I finally rolled out of my bed with enough vigor to walk the three feet needed to land in the bathroom to start the morning process.

I currently was house sitting in Richmond, Virginia, for a family with an eighteen-year-old dog that was blind, deaf, and losing bladder control by the day. I had gotten a call for an interview from a local temp agency who promised that they had found my dream job. I put on my power suit and went outside to let Molly inside. Despite her decrepit state, her master assured me that if you let her out in the morning, she would be there thirty minutes later to come back inside. Another morning person. Molly had proven this ritual three days in a row now, so I had no doubt in my mind that if I just slept that extra ten minutes, I could then let her back inside and make the easy drive to D.C. Of course, today was the day that she decided to walk the quarter mile out to the mailbox and develop dementia. After finding her and slowly limping her back into the house, I jumped into my truck and headed north.

Given that I was driving a full-size pickup truck at the time, I decided to save myself the traffic accident or parking ticket and drive to the nearest metro station and ride the metro the rest of the way into the city. I figured my directional skills were good enough to read a map with colored roads and big dots indicating where it was time to exit. Once I arrived at the first metro station, I realized I may have underestimated the power of the power suit.

About the only place that you can put over fifty people in one room and maintain complete silence, is on a metro, at eight in the morning, when everyone realizes that when the metro reaches their stop, they have to get off, and when they get off, they have to make the walk to work. That reality at about eight in the morning will shut anyone up. Real fast.

After walking a few blocks and realizing that I was headed, not Northwest, but Northeast, I changed direction, removed my big girl shoes that were blistering my nude-loving feet, and walked until I found the American Petroleum Institute, a place where young college students' dreams of making it big in the real world are crushed by the mind-numbing experiences they provide. With benefits. Aimed toward educating the public about oil provisions, providing health and safety regulations, and supplying statistics to the biggest pocket-sagging suits in the business, the American Petroleum Institute provided a service.

A twelve-story, concrete building stared down at me, literally blocking out the sun and presenting a bleak, sinister indentation on an otherwise sunny block. Three men crowded in a corner, chain-smoking and a few others exited a small café with barely standing room available, tucked beside the massive doors leading inside. I re-clad my

feet and walked through the doors and past security, where security promptly stopped me and asked a series of questions.

“Ma’am, what is the reason for your visit?” the rounded security officer asked.

“Oh, I’m here for an interview with Mr. Ferrick.” I hoped that was the right name. I didn’t want to risk slipping my hand inside my purse to check the name to be misconstrued.

The security guard made a call to the high powers and nodded me through. I signed his little form with my name, date, and social security number and began my journey up the elevator, along with about five other people who all were stopping on a different level, all before mine.

I finally reached level twelve and exited into the main lobby that was clean, neat, and almost clinical. Everything had a place. Vases of flowers strategically placed and plasma screens planted on the walls broadcasting API news and commercials. I told the receptionist the reason for my visit and was ushered to the waiting room area. I felt very corporate and important sitting there, almost as if I actually had a purpose in this giant box of a building. I started to go through my interview material and the material the temp agency had given me about the company.

When meeting with the temp agency, they had asked me what type of work environment I would enjoy. I explained to them my need to multi-task and interact with various people and my hatred for staring at a computer screen all day with relatively no impact on anyone but the data and numbers mindlessly entered. They assured me this particular job would be the perfect fit, with creative design opportunities and travel.

Having agreed to the interview, I now waited in an office area that had a series of conference rooms for standardized meetings and a receptionist with a headset.

“Ms. Raymond?”

“Yes, that’s me,” I said while standing and approaching the bench.

“Mr. Ferrick is ready now. Here is a visitor badge for you to wear. I’ll take you down to his office.”

I followed the receptionist down two flights of glass-encased stairs. Apparently, API occupied three stories of this high rise and therefore was entitled to their own fancy staircase. We went to level ten where Mr. Ferrick’s office was located. Here I had to part ways with the receptionist and was greeted by a Ken Barbie doll and an office man in a suit. Each greeted me with a handshake and asked me to have a seat. We exchanged names as I looked around at the different oil paraphernalia located on the walls of an office with a window that overlooked the streets of D.C. There was a potted plant sitting in the corner behind the door.

“So, Ms. Raymond, where are you from?”

I didn’t quite know what to say. I knew answers to my work experience, my work ambitions, or rather ambitions that I decided would sound good in an interview. I knew my typing speed and my computer proficiency; I knew my educational background and why I had chosen the major I had. I knew which skill sets I felt would best compliment this position and I knew a brief history of the company. But, where was I from? Where would they want me to be from? Would they want my whole life story and an explanation as to why I was now on my ninth address in twenty-three years? Or would they want me to give a clean simple answer that the question most commonly demanded?

“Richmond,” I said. I don’t know why. It’s the place I had left that morning, from a house that wasn’t even mine.

We then went on to the formalities of the job specifications, descriptions, and my personal and professional qualities. They mentioned the same thing the temp agency had mentioned: creative design, a chance to do some editing work given my English background, and travel opportunities to places like Las Vegas, Atlanta, and Florida. It all seemed ideal on paper. We then shook hands and Ken escorted me to the elevator. By the time I had made it back through the metro--I managed to walk about ten blocks instead of the three blocks it took to get to the temp agency--I was told that API wanted to offer me the job. Given that this was my first real job interview and a chance to be completely independent, I accepted on the spot. Maybe I could be from Washington, DC.

A year later I decided to interview again. Actually, about a month into the job I decided that I wanted to interview again. By creative design they meant informational handouts that had to be all business within a reasonable, standard format. Editing was boiled down to making sure that numbers were entered correctly for data and that each company’s engine oil license was spelled correctly. They did send me on travel, but on one trip my plane had to emergency land due to an unfortunate encounter with a flock of geese. On another trip I fell asleep on a red eye flight. My feet had swollen from the walking and standing all day, and I broke the nerve endings to my toes and lost all feeling. On one trip I tripped and showed up to dinner with a bloody elbow and one time I was sent by myself to stand alone at a trade show informing those who passed about the importance of purchasing certified engine oil. Actually, the standing and informing was

the primary purpose of all these trips which is what I did for eight hours straight, while in Las Vegas, Atlanta, Savannah, and Indianapolis. But I had a yearlong lease on my apartment, address number nine, so I decided to stick it out for a while.

The following next two years I went through a series of interviews. One interview for my first graduate school, though after a semester at Mary Baldwin I decided graduate school should mean more than just showing up to class to get an A, so I then interviewed for my second graduate school. I had an interview for three part-time jobs while I lived at address number ten and two more for the ones I held onto while at number eleven. After graduate school classes came to an end, I was yet again faced with a need for a move and an interview. The prospects of grabbing a job in a city after just having completed the coursework for my Master's had seemed probable when I started graduate school, but reality slowly crept up and when school was over, I was left with an apartment, a roommate who wanted to move out on account of my flightiness, and no money. I therefore gritted my teeth and conceded to moving to address number twelve, back in with my parents, at least a building that was built and furnished by my parents, but not actually inhabited by them, just free housing. Free housing in a town that hailed Robert E. Lee as their god, still had horse-drawn carriages in the streets, and a place where it took thirty minutes to drive to a post office juxtaposed next to a rope-and-wooden-planked foot bridge, complete with a sign warning death to anyone who crossed. Prime job opportunity location.

About two weeks later, after moving to address number twelve in Lexington, Virginia, I found myself interviewing at Washington and Lee University. An elite, small,

private institution that straddles a mountain. Students quickly lose any ‘freshman fifteen’ they may have gained by simply walking to and from class, the dining hall, and the on-campus, fully-functional movie theater. The student body consists of daddy’s girls and trust fund sons.

My interview was at one on a Friday afternoon, so that gave me plenty of time to wake up, become coherent, and prepare. As I went over the job description, and highlighted certain bullet points I felt I could fulfill best, I made a list of questions and printed out a graphic portfolio of recent book cover designs I had made, thinking it would give me a slight edge over the competition. My bank account statement or alma mater weren’t going to suffice. I was prepared.

“What are you going to wear?” my mom asked, this being the one week my parents were on vacation from their temporary home in Richmond. She stood outside my door to the most recent box one could call a bedroom. Unless someone buys this house by the end of the year, my dad will have put himself into bankruptcy by having built a million-dollar house with state of the art appliances, beautiful design, copious square footage, but I swear not an ounce of insulation. You could hear everything that was happening in that house. But at least this was a question I was prepared to answer.

“Well, I have narrowed it down to two choices, a white skirt with black sweater, or black pants with a pinstripe blue blouse.”

“You have such pretty skirts, Alicia. I just love your skirts.”

“Well, good to know if I was interviewing with you, my wardrobe would win it over for me. But just in case I am not interviewed by fashionistas, let’s ask dad so he at least feels included in this whole process,” I said.

Risking interrupting my dad's monthly marathon of tivo-ed "Star Trek," I displayed before him my two options.

"Which one?" I said with a little twirl in each. After twenty-five years, still a daddy's girl.

"Are you being interviewed by a guy or a girl?" he asked.

"A guy I think."

"Wear the skirt."

Interesting to hear this information coming from my unemployed, doctorate-holding father, but I decided to go with it.

"Do you have any shoes? Shoes that aren't flip flops?" he asked.

Almost a nearly unprepared moment. Having moved all my stuff in three car loads from address eleven to this bustling town of cows and twenty-five max speed limits, I had included one pair, my only pair, of grey peep-toe shoes. I hadn't really remembered to pack them. The last time I wore them, I took them off as soon I had gotten into the car, replaced them with flip flops, and had never taken them out of my car.

The hour was approaching and I gathered my resume, portfolio, myself, and my shoes. Clearly I didn't need to put them on until I actually walked up to the building.

I was prepared.

I drove and parked in the parking garage just as my mother had instructed, and literally drove me through the process, the day before. I took the stairs to the top floor and exited barely to the left of the parking garage, careful not to stray from Mom's instructions. A mountain of my own to straddle stared at me. I climbed 100 stairs before I got to the building I thought was my target location. I reached the top, out of breath,

and beginning to glow around my brow, back, chest, armpits, and pretty much anywhere sweat likes to accumulate. It was then I realized I was in the wrong building. Looking at my options, I chose the path to the left. Somehow, I picked the right one.

In spite of almost missing the interview completely by getting lost on a campus of only 1200 students, I arrived ten minutes early to my interview. I have always been one to never set unattainable standards, but being on time once couldn't hurt. I had received about five texts from friends that morning and afternoon reminding me not to be late. All from the big city I had just left.

I sat in the lobby waiting, sweating, and started to review my material. I was prepared. I swear I sweat more post activity than during the climax of the event.

“Ma’am you may go ahead into the conference room down the hall and to the right,” I was told just as my body was gaining dry ground.

I walked as per instruction once again and stepped into a room where my interviewers, one man and one woman, arrived shortly after. We sat around a rounded table and I slid my legs past one another to cross them. After introductions were made, the woman, whom I later found was the co-director of the bookstore, turned to me.

“So, where are you from?”

Dammit. The one question I’m never prepared to answer.

Jigsaw

My mom can assemble a puzzle if all the pieces are turned upside down. She also can complete about ten Sudoku puzzles in an hour, read a 500-page book in a day, and piece together hand-sewn quilts within weeks. My dad wants to engineer the puzzle and decide on the best strategy for assembly before he begins. He has a PhD in Chemical Engineering but takes about an hour to solve one Sudoku, reads only Science Fiction novels, and builds displays for my mother's quilts. My mom always wanted to live by the beach, calling home a place where she can dip her toes at the crest of the ocean's mouth. My father always wanted to live in the mountains, calling home a place where he can be reclusive and only has to answer the rising and setting of the sun over the tops of mountains. My mom settled.

I hate puzzles. I hate Sudoku. I generally only read books when something strikes my interest, never if someone tells me to, and I never fold the quilt my mother hand sewed for my graduation present.

My family dynamics are like five puzzles, with all the pieces dumped together to make one giant puzzle: forcing pieces to interlock with one another where they don't belong. The Yankees, Dr. and Mrs. Raymond, wanted to put the puzzle together upside down and their Southern-raised children were only interested in the puzzle for about ten minutes until another activity sparked their interest. Still, relationships were interlocked and some of the pieces have stayed together.

My dad felt that he always knew exactly what was best for me. Exactly who I should date, exactly where I should work, exactly where I should live. His puzzle pieces

and my puzzle pieces are the ones that you swear should fit into a particular spot, but never do.

The first puzzle pieces began to fall together around that time. That time in every girl's life that she looks forward to and anticipates with glee. Health class had done its best to prepare us for the inevitable, but ultimately we were left to deal with the consequences of our own bodies. Some of my friends had already started theirs. It wasn't something we really kept tabs on, but we all knew who had and who hadn't. Up until seventh period science, I hadn't. I excused myself to go to the bathroom and realized this was going to be a longer trip than expected. Sitting there on the toilet, staring at who had hooked up with who and who was in a fight with who, I started to realize my own body was in a fight with me and I would not be hooking up with anybody for at least a week. Ultimately longer than a week, but at that age, you try to remain hopeful.

I went to the nurse and told her I had started my period and needed provisions. I don't think I even needed to finish my sentence as she began walking to her locked cabinet mid-sentence and reached into a package of maxi pads and grabbed a 'super strength' pad for me and directed me to the bathroom. That was it. She diapered me and then sent me on my way as if this moment bore no significance to her. I was finally a woman and she just handed me my chastity belt and returned to her clipboard. I don't remember whether I expected a different reaction from my parents, but I do know that I should not have expected anything different.

We as a family were never overly talkative at the dinner table, though my parents would discuss the latest breaking news with each other or my dad and brother would yell at each other because my brother had achieved another speeding ticket. So, I decided to wait after dessert to spread the good news of my maturity.

The next morning my alarm buzzed, and just like every other morning, I flailed my arms around to hit the snooze button, unable to see anything until I put on my glasses. After three or four strikes to the clock, I finally clad my face with glasses and looked over onto my nightstand. It was a wooden Ethan Allen piece that matched my entire bedroom set. You could usually see the ring where I had left a glass of water and several dents and divots in the wood. It reminded me every morning why I wasn't allowed to touch the Steinway piano. This morning, however, the ring and dents were covered by a green-and-white package, attached with a note. It was a package of pads. The note attached read, "Love, Dad." No discussion on what this meant to me on my journey to becoming a woman, no flashback stories of my mom's first period embarrassment, no precautionary methods to take, and absolutely no instruction on what to do with these padded, taped, and flappy contraptions. Just, "Love, Dad." I was late for school that morning. Love you too, Dad.

* * *

For some reason, I found myself always turning to my dad during medical procedures, which provided plenty opportunities for my dad's pieces attempting to fit together with mine. They always got close, but it was always that last little corner that wouldn't fit.

Warts. Braces. Wisdom Teeth. All doctor's offices, all with my dad.

“I’m sorry, sir. But you can’t hold your daughter’s hand during the procedure. You might be electrocuted,” was actually what the doctor said in front of me while holding his torture stick that he foolishly anticipated sticking into my two planter warts without a fight. Up until this point, I sat on a hospital cot with the infected hand resting on my thigh, now covered in hives, and the other hand death-gripping my father’s. Both our knuckles had begun to turn white.

When the first wart had spread to another location on my hand, my dad decided Compound-W wasn’t going to be enough and took me into see Dr. Bundy, my parents’ dermatologist at the time. Normal seventh-graders only had to be embarrassed about which boy was going to write a note to put in your locker that week and who would break the awkward silence while girls lined one wall and boys lined another at every dance. I never dealt with the embarrassing note situation because being six inches taller than every guy seemed to eradicate that problem altogether. Instead, my embarrassment branched from two planter warts that had taken hostage of my left hand.

Dr. Bundy said that because of the nature and size of the warts, they would need to be burned. What Dr. Bundy didn’t say is that that meant sticking a needle into each wart in efforts to numb the bastards so that when the torch, the actual torch with streaming fire and everything, bore into my skin, I wouldn’t feel a thing. Well, I did feel a thing. Not only did I feel the ten-inch numbing needle as it injected its imaginary numbing fluid, but I felt the electrocuting fire as it dug a literal hole into my skin. Apparently, I was supposed to tell him if I felt any pain, but at thirteen-years-old and with a large man boring holes into my skin, I relied on my dad to tell him when it hurt too much.

After having reassured me that the procedure would electrocute my dad if he held my hand, Bundy said that it would take several attempts before the wart was removed. He dug in one for about ten seconds and then retracted, almost as if digging for oil. After every retraction, I experienced an automatic extension, stretching my right hand out to my dad's. I made sure to hold his hand in between every strike.

After it was all over, I refused to speak or look at anyone; I did look at the bleeding holes that were now on my palm and thumb. My dad held my hand all the way home and let me stay home from school the rest of the day. That night I heard him talking to my mom, yelling that Dr. Bundy was never to touch his daughter again.

Braces were next and Mom took me this time. It was supposed to be a three-hour procedure. The three hours included top and bottom braces, a full set of matching reasons not to go to school the next day. Since the doctor told my mom about the three-hour time limit, she, like any other loving mother, left the doctor's office to go grocery shopping. The nurse led me back into a huge room where a line of chairs stood facing a window that looked out across a serene landscaped yard complete with a fish pond. Several chairs were already filled with teens adorning their smiles with alternating color-patterned rubber-bands and metal. Luckily, one was reserved for me. I sat down, received a paper bib, and then the process of shoving different metal objects, puffs of air, and squirts of water into my mouth began. The doctor successfully began to glue metal bands around my bottom row of teeth and completed stage one.

I don't know whether it was my nerves or a general disgust with the activities occurring in my mouth, but after one last, "open wide," I threw up all over my attending

doctor. I then informed him that I did not wish to continue and wanted to go home. An hour had passed. My mother was nowhere to be found.

We went home that night with a scheduled appointment for a month later to finish my braces.

“I want Dad to go with me next time,” I told my mom. Not because she had completely abandoned me during my time of need, but just because it was Dad; it was a doctor’s office; it was what we did.

A month later, my dad and I went to the same office, waited in the same waiting room, and were called back to the same chair-lined room. I walked into the room and looked once again at the teens who sat in them, bravely opening wide without anyone but doctors and nurses by their sides.

“I want my daddy to come in with me,” I told the doctor.

The nurse went into the waiting room and asked my father to join me in the back. I lay down once again in the chair and after I was bibbed, I extended my hand for my father’s. He held it for the entire procedure and every opening wide thereafter did not have adverse effects. I went home that night with a complete set of braces.

* * *

Finally, wisdom teeth. The surgeon said that if I came in on a Friday morning that I would be fine to go back to school on Monday. All lies. Friday morning at 7:45, the only appointment they had available, my father and I drove to the hospital. Not one word spoken.

The nurse came into the waiting room and stuck out her latexed, bony fingers and waved me to follow her into the back. I looked at my dad for approval and followed.

I remembered the steak dinner I ate the night before as I walked toward my impending future. Mom cooked my favorite, steak, mashed potatoes, and corn on the cob.

My brother had said, “Better enjoy it. Could be your last.” He hadn’t looked like a blowfish after the procedure like I did.

Each attendant wore thick, plastic gloves that stretched thin over their fingers as they snapped them into position. I immediately asked the nurse if my dad could come back into the room.

“Yes, but only until the anesthesia takes effect. Then he will have to wait in the waiting room.”

I thought for a moment about the adverse effects this could not only have for me, but for those working around me, and decided since I would be knocked completely out, what is the worst that could happen.

I woke up, choking. I couldn’t breathe, so naturally, I started to cry.

“Her eyes are watering,” one nurse said.

No, you idiot, I can’t breathe and I’m freaking out and a normal response to that would be called crying.

“Her heart rate is racing. We need to get her heart rate down,” I heard another one say.

Clearly in medical school, bedside manner was never approached. I looked around for my father, crying harder, choking a little less. The nurse finally escorted my dad into the operating room and he sat down beside me. He took my hand and held it and finally air filled my lungs, my body now having adjusted to the tube that had to be shoved down

my throat during the surgery in order for me to keep breathing. My dad sat on my right, holding my hand. I looked to the wall on the left the entire time.

By the time I was ready to venture to college, I thought that my calling on Daddy would have come to an end. Instead, the calls were just more spread out.

“Daddy, can I come home?” I asked my dad one night during my freshman year in college. I was already walking to my truck in the middle of the night.

My roommate had just finished telling me why I thought I was better than everybody because I didn’t drink. Why, since I was a Christian, I wouldn’t fit in and why I always tried to impose my beliefs on everyone else. It seemed as if the upbringing my parents had fought so hard to instill in me was now the reason for some pieces falling apart.

I didn’t say anything back to her. I actually questioned for a minute if she was right. If everything my parents had taught me had *not* made me independent and a strong person, but instead had given me an excuse to believe that I was better. That I was raised better and that I deserved better. My dad would have believed that. But I didn’t honestly know what to say.

I turned to my dresser and opened the drawers, tossing only the necessities into a small bag. I left the room, walked down the hallway, and into the elevator. While I made the walk to my truck, I called my dad, “Daddy, can I come home?”

“Why, what’s wrong?” he asked.

I don’t know what it is about that phrase, but it never fails to make someone cry.

“I dunno, I just wanna come home,” I managed between homesick sobs.

He immediately jumped to assumptions. “Was it a boy?”

“No.”

“Did someone hurt you?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to come get you?”

“No. I can drive. I just wanna come home.”

He waited till I arrived home at some point in the middle of the night.

“Hi,” I said.

“Glad you’re home safely. Have a good night.”

We both went our separate ways and went to bed.

I managed to make it the rest of the way through college without having to call on my daddy. Made it through graduation, despite sleeping through my alarm the morning of, telling my passed-out boyfriend at the time that he had to make sure all the liquor bottles were cleared out before my parents got there. I made it through graduation, making Daddy proud. I even made it to my first big girl interview and landed a job in Washington, D.C. after I graduated. Didn’t need daddy to hold my hand or anything. I did have to call on him, however, a few times throughout that year. Our interactions were now over the phone.

The first, Vegas. Many things come to mind when Vegas is mentioned. Many different things come to my mind when Vegas is mentioned. Two phone calls in particular.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hi, Pumpkin. How’s Vegas?”

“Daddy, how much do you love me?” It’s always best to go in with an angle.

“That depends. What did you do?”

It’s never best, though, when the one you learned how to use angles from, is the one you’re talking to.

“Nothing really, it’s just that I might need you to put a little money in my account. Just twenty dollars. That should cover me until my next paycheck.”

He put in 100 dollars that night. That was the first phone call. The second didn’t exactly have the same angle.

Since I had never been to Vegas, I decided I wanted to do everything Vegas had to offer and I would sleep when I got home at the week’s end. One of those events was attending a Cirque du Soleil show, hence the call for extra cash. The last day while in Vegas, I decided to see all the sights since I didn’t have to work that day, just catch a flight at six. So, I did. I walked the entire SEMA show, an automotive show home to hundreds of cars, I walked through casinos, through M&M world, and through the shops underneath Caesar’s Palace. I walked from eleven that morning until I boarded my red eye flight to New Jersey, where I would catch a connecting flight back home. It wasn’t until I landed in New Jersey that I felt it.

I had fallen asleep on the red eye and once I had found a position, I stayed in it, for almost three hours. When I finally stood up to exit, the pain began. In order to get to my connection, I had to take a shuttle, walk through several gates, stand in the security line once again because I had made a wrong turn, and then wait two hours for my flight’s

departure. By the time I got to my gate, I couldn't bear the pain any longer. I immediately had to call him. It was roughly 5:30 that morning.

"Hi, Dad," I said trying to pretend nothing was wrong.

He knew better.

"What's wrong?" he asked knowing it was 5:30 in the morning.

That's when I couldn't fight back the tears any longer. "There's something wrong with my feet," I finally was able to spit out while trying to catch my breath at the same time. The couple sitting across from me stared at me and then immediately down to my feet.

My dad then tried to understand what was happening while waking up at the same time and resisting the urge to immediately get into his car and drive up from Virginia. I tried to explain to him everything I knew, even though I had no idea why I was in so much pain.

"See if you can call the emergency people to take a look at your feet," he said. I obeyed.

The emergency team arrived and my feet were still in excruciating pain. They had swollen to twice their size and you couldn't see any of my ankle bone. They decided that while nothing dire had happened, it would still be a good idea to visit an emergency room. While the thought of visiting a New Jersey hospital was tempting, I asked my dad if he thought I should go. He said if I thought I could withstand the pain, wait until I got home. I waited. My dad tried to find a flight connecting me closer to him, but when that failed he called my roommate to tell her what happened. I finally landed in Washington and my roommate picked me up.

“Dude, your dad called me. I hid all the liquor just in case he decided to show up to our apartment,” my roommate said.

* * *

I had reassured my father that he was needed. That during tough times, I would turn to him, that I needed him. But those were the good memories, the memories I wish were the only memories. These weren't the memories of when my dad and I stopped talking for three months in high school because I had broken up with one guy to date another he disapproved of and “never thought that he would have a daughter do such a thing.” *Such a thing* was breaking up with someone who was taking things way too seriously and I never really loved. There was also the memory of my father telling me that he couldn't trust me, that I made him cry, something he hasn't done in years. There was the memory of the fight we had where he grew so angry with me he slammed his fist on the table so hard that he broke his watch. There were the numerous memories of him shouting at me because I wasn't smart enough to figure out physics problems, because I wasn't the perfect Christian, because I was unmotivated, because I didn't know what I wanted to do with life, because he wasn't proud of me.

Our family doesn't talk about why my dad and sister don't have a relationship anymore. But I wonder if the same thing happened to her. I wonder if he told her that “You're too sarcastic, that's why your relationships never work out,” “Why do you wear your hair like that, it makes you look like an old woman,” and “Well, with an attitude like that, you will never have a successful relationship.” I wonder if he followed up on her bills and financial status and took it as his prerogative to pay off old debts, but then reminded her every day of the guilt of her owing him money. I wonder if he scolded her

of a bedtime when she was twenty-five and tried to tell her to clean her room every morning before she went to work. He did with me.

All Daddy's little girls have to grow up and decide for themselves what is best for them, where they should work, where they should live, where they should call home. And I knew that our pieces for that puzzle would never fit together.

After I had landed that first job in Washington, D.C., my dad decided to ride with me on the metro into work the first day to make sure I didn't get lost. I found it a bit overprotective at the time, but the morning of, I decided that reading metro maps and dodging the locals wasn't as easy as I hoped. It didn't stop with my dad riding with me on the metro, however. He got off with me and walked with me to my building. Then he rode the elevator up with me and escorted me to my cubicle. I showed him around and introduced him to my boss, officially now being known as the big corporate girl whose father had to walk her to work. Once I sat down at my desk, my dad realized that it was no longer him in the suit and office and that it was time for him to journey back to my apartment on the metro.

After my dad left D.C. and left me to my own devices, my mom emailed me.

“Oh, your father just thinks that you are exactly where you need to be. He said that this job is perfect for you and is exactly what you need. He is very proud of you.”

This is when I first realized that we were putting together completely different puzzles.

After twenty-three years, my father thought that I would benefit from sitting in a cubicle, typing on a computer, and having next to no interaction with anyone but in

deciphering broken English emails. He thought that the corporate world was best for me. The corporate world is what he knew best. The suits, the offices, the windows, the potted plants, the lunch meetings, and business calls; that was him. That was the first fifty years of his life and instead of letting it go, it brought peace to his mind to think that someone else was going to live the life that he once had.

I didn't see the corporate lifestyle, meetings, offices, and potted plants, but instead saw freedom, living on my own, and making my own decisions. I saw no lecture against staying up late or drinking six cans of Mountain Dew a day. I saw a place where I could live and not hide the fact that I drank from time to time and decided to have affectionate relationships with the opposite sex.

My freedom, late nights, and Mountain Dew lasted about a year until I moved back in with my mom when I decided to go to graduate school.

A year after living with my mother, I took another stab at independence and moved to an apartment about thirty minutes from where she was in Richmond, Virginia. This was it. A move that would stick. Once again, a move that allowed me freedom, late nights, drinking, and the occasional overnight guest.

I didn't even make it a year that time. I ran out of money, had no job prospects, and lived with a roommate who wanted to live on her own without the risk of my flightiness.

"Alicia, I can't keep floating your credit card bill; I should have cut you off a long time ago," my dad said.

This is when my dad tried to look directly at me and I stared harder and harder at the floor.

“I know,” I said. I clutched a pillow even tighter to my chest. It was a familiar pillow. I think my parents bought the matching couch when we lived in Franklin. My dad wanted a couch to go in his office, but clearly he shopped merely for aesthetics and not practicality. With two, six-foot women in his life, neither of us fit on this love seat.

“I just don’t have the money. If there’s a way for the world to screw us over, it does and I have run out of money.”

There it was again, an excuse for his cynicism. For twenty-five years my dad had headed up divisions of a paper mill. Once he had established a division at one mill, they moved him on to the next. This continued until International Paper bought Union Camp and my dad was severed. Now, without a cushy lifestyle and corner office with a potted plant, he had become a cynical man who blamed everything on the world and spent my mom’s hard earned money on lottery tickets and glasses of wine a night. A bit different then I remembered him.

“I know you don’t have the money,” I said as my voice got softer and my clutch got tighter.

“But what I can provide for you is a home, free of charge.”

He should have said house.

I knew that would be an option, an option that my parents both wanted to see happen, but an option that I had thought about and only wanted to consider as a last resort. Still, it was my only option and it was time to move again.

Without work, there wasn’t much to do, especially in a town like Lexington, Virginia. A town known for Sherman’s March and the burial place of Stonewall Jackson. Even though I had completely failed at being independent and making it on my own,

away from my daddy, I couldn't fail at my health as well, so I went for a run on one of the many mossed-over trails. Running on these trails wasn't like running at my last apartment. There were no cars to look out for, no street lights to tell you when to cross, or people honking horns. Instead, a babbling brook streamed on one side, complete with intermittent little bridges, and just good nature surrounded the other. One of the many advantages of nature included wildlife, for me, three deer, a mother and two babies.

I stood about ten feet away from them. There we all stood, still, motionless for about ten minutes. I didn't want to move and startle them on account of the notion that I had never witnessed a frightened deer before and wasn't sure as to how abrupt their ambush might be. And secondly, because it almost seemed as if the mother was looking at me asking why I infringed on her territory, on her home. We stared each other straight in the eye and it was then that I realized that she didn't seem frightened of me at all. She stood there confident and poised and looked at me as if I should be the one frightened. I was the one without a home. I was the one who wasn't sure where I was. She knew exactly where she was with her two children and was questioning my place in her world.

* * *

Aside from Maine, Lexington, Virginia is the one place that my parents feel that they can call their home. My dad feels that this is his home. And if it is good enough for my dad, then it should be good enough for me. I should want to live here. I should want to call this my home. Telling my dad that I don't want to live in Lexington is like telling the three-year-old version of my dad that there isn't any Santa Claus, or telling the college version of my dad that there are no more spaces left in the engineering class. Me not wanting to make what he would call home, my home, upsets him. Unfortunately, I

can't leave him a package of pads on his nightstand, hold his hand, or wire him some money to make it all better.

“Do you ever think about bolting?” my mom asked as we drove back to the Lexington house from Richmond, Virginia.

I stared a little harder at the road in front me. I always did think better when driving, or running. Always better when I'm on the move. “Honestly? Yes,” I answered. I felt that she, if anyone, might understand. She had settled, but I hoped that she wouldn't want the same for me.

She gripped the handle to her door a little tighter. “You'd be okay with just leaving and not repaying your father the money you owe him?”

I wanted to say yes. And I may have overestimated the extent of which she would understand.

“I'm going to repay Dad. But honestly, I wish that he hadn't paid off all my debts. He doesn't have the money and now I just feel more pressure to repay him than I would a credit card company or doctor's office.”

“So you would have rather just paid all the interest on your debt? I don't think that you really understand how interest works.”

I gripped my steering wheel tighter, realizing that I was in control of an object moving at roughly 70 mph and according to my driving instructor, any moving car was a weapon. “You seriously believe that I don't understand how it works? Did I not live completely by myself in D.C. for a year without yours or dad's assistance?”

I couldn't exactly see her, but I knew the facial expression she was making.

“Look, I know that you’re unhappy here, but it’s your fault that you owe Dad all that money. So, you stay here for a while and pay it off and then you can go off and move wherever you want and play with your friends and do whatever it is that makes you happy.”

Condescension was a Raymond family trait. I kept driving over the mountain and realized that no matter how I explained myself to her, she wouldn’t understand. My dad’s and my puzzle pieces weren’t the only ones that didn’t match.

“You just don’t understand,” I finally said.

“I won’t mention this conversation to your father.”

And that was the end of it.

My dad has offered me a place to live, a house where I don’t have to pay rent. He offered me *his* home. It’s his kitchen table, it’s his living room furniture, and his picture frames on the walls. Not mine. And though there was no rent check attached to it every month, it still came at a price.

I accepted the terms of living in this house. I accepted his request of paying him \$500 a month. I accepted the realization that he built this house to sell and so I had to keep it clean. I silently accepted that living here meant that I couldn’t drink, couldn’t have overnight guests, and couldn’t enlist in any other activity unsuitable for a Raymond. I also have accepted every fight we have had since moving here. How I should live, how I should sleep, what I should drink, who I should not associate with, and that I am not really an adult to him, that I cannot make it on my own. The memories I had wished to forget were all repeating themselves.

Sometimes I do consider bolting. I could sell everything I own that isn't essential, pack whatever fit in my Jeep, and drive away in the middle of the night without telling anyone. I would drive to a place where it's warm, laid back, and plenty of beaches and oceanside. I would live for me, live by my rules, never do the same thing two days straight, and live a life that when I looked back on it, I'd smile.

Lexington, Virginia is the perfect puzzle for my parents to put together. It is not, however, even remotely close to one I would choose to put together. None of the pieces here fit.

Welcome Home

My brother has moved to Arkansas to start a home and a family with his wife. My sister lives in Boston with her husband and greyhound; they've had the same address for almost eight years now. I know I can't be a daddy's girl forever. So it's only natural to realize that eventually I will want a home of my own, with someone to come home to. This, however, isn't like picking out the cutest puppy at the pound. This requires a process of careful consideration and many, many nights of boredom, humility, and the inevitable mascara-soaked pillow case.

Of course there were the winners in high school. There was this guy from Leader's Club, a club at the YMCA I had been in since Franklin. Once I found out he was actually interested in me, I thought sure I could be interested in him. He was also the one man my dad felt was the only "real boyfriend" I have ever had. He was also six years older than me and talked about marriage when I was only sixteen. He was the first candidate to be eliminated. Then the one after the first elimination, whom my dad despised, ended the day after I went to college. Long distance, in the form of a whole hour, wasn't going to work for him.

In college, there was one potential candidate, another one hated by my father. But after the fourth time that he broke it off with me, I decided that perhaps his inability to be stable, his obsession with lying, and the fact that he once broke up with me over an away message on my Instant Messenger, that perhaps he wasn't the best candidate.

My senior year, however, I met someone new, someone I had known about almost my entire college career, someone who was intriguing, smart, attractive, athletic, and a genuine person who cared more about his friends than what the latest gossip was. I

remember the first night we actually were together, his first interview for candidacy. We had seen each other at the bar. It was my twenty-second birthday and we were both a little less than sober. With the bar closing at 1:30, but our intoxication predicted to last well into the night, I received a text message when I got back to my dorm.

“What are you doing for the rest of the night?”

Thoughts of sleep had crossed my mind, but you only live your senior year in college once.

“Not sure, maybe a movie. Care to join?” I think I replied.

About thirty minutes later, I received another text informing me Eli waited for me at the front door of my building. It is important in any interview to always make a good first impression. Whether it a crisp appearance, excellent eye contact, or a strong handshake, people remember the first time that they meet people. Eli knew how to make an entrance.

When I opened the door, there he stood. Attractive when I first met him and even more attractive now. He stood almost as tall as me, long, dreadlocked hair, and as my brother would say when he was five, a man made of chocolate. He had a longish face, dark eyes, and facial hair framing his lips. His lips plumped just enough. A mole rested a bit below his left eye. He was perfect. Then, however, he stood with a small white towel held tightly to his hand and I believe there was a bit of duct tape application. I could see some red coming through the white.

“What happened to your hand?” I asked.

“Oh, that. Well, there was this knife.”

Again, you only live out your senior year in college once, so it's best to just leave the little details as a blur.

Once we finally got to my dorm room and picked out a movie, had some small talk, I turned around only to find that Eli had passed out on my bed. I mean really, what better first impression could you ask for?

The next morning I had an interview in Richmond, Virginia, because of my impending graduation in about two months. I decided to leave sleeping beauty in my bed. I managed to drive the hour and a half to my interview, have the interview, and drive back to Farmville all while Eli still slept peacefully in my bed. There was a brief scare for him when he had woken up at some point in the morning and wasn't exactly sure where he was amidst the puppy-and-flower posters. I took him back to his dorm shortly thereafter and we have been friends ever since.

About a month after our first interview, we decided we would start dating. Two weeks before I was going to graduate college. He still had another year to go as an undergrad. For the next two weeks, I felt more at ease than I ever have with anyone. He was kind, sensitive, understanding, there when I needed him, and allowed me to be there for him when he needed me. We partied together, we studied together, worked out together, went on random road trips together, but still were okay to spend time apart from each other. Two weeks later, a bottle of tequila, a bottle of whiskey, the eve of my graduation, and our relationship was over. At least the title was.

We remained friends, but each went our separate ways. He returned to Longwood in the fall and began dating someone else and I moved to Washington, D.C. and began dating someone I thought might be an excellent candidate.

Jeremy was supposed to be a candidate for a mature relationship. I was out of college, had moved on to my next destination, started a big girl job, and felt as if I was finally the adult that I was supposed to be. Plus, I had known him since the tenth grade, so I felt that it would be a great story to tell the grandkids one day.

When I had first moved to Richmond, Virginia from Franklin, Virginia, I was the new girl and Jeremy's father was the youth pastor at the church my parents were interviewing as a candidate. Because his father was the youth pastor, he more or less shoved his track star, six-foot-tall, dark-haired, privileged white son in my reluctant, uninterested face. His girlfriend at the time had already betrothed him and picked out the wedding date, the day after her twenty-first birthday, so that she could drink at her own wedding, and she had decided on the names of their children, all beginning with the letter J. All cons on my candidate list.

Jeremy and I had always kept in touch, updating each other every six months or so, nothing that would have suggested what was to come. Eight years later, he came to visit a friend in Washington, D.C. and joined my roommate and me as we celebrated her birthday. That's when it started. Conveniently, he lived in Florida and I lived in Virginia. So after our drunken stupor of a night where I first learned the term, definition, and application of "whiskey dick," I escorted him to the airport and figured we could meet up again in another eight years. Instead, I flew down two weeks later where he picked me up and offered me a single-stemmed rose.

As a new adult and still learning about the whole independent lifestyle, I felt entitled to make a few bad choices. Three months after that single-stemmed pick up from the airport, I flew down once again to visit him for Valentine's Day. After boarding my

D.C. flight and exiting in Florida, I bumbled my way through the crowds of people and finally found him standing by the baggage claim. No single-stemmed rose in hand. Days passed. Gifts were exchanged. Another plane was boarded.

A month passed and I didn't get one text, message, voicemail, or status update. He was supposed to make sure I had made it home okay. Instead, I heard nothing. Not a great three-month impression.

When he did finally call, he told me he was happier when I had left than when I had arrived. He told me he didn't think he would ever be able to love me. He told me he could now see why all my other relationships had failed.

It was time to move on to the next.

After another move, I decided to give another candidate a chance. A very brief chance.

His name was Dave. Against my better judgment, I decided to take a chance on him. Match for a pair. I should have known that things weren't going to end with us hand in hand far off in the distant sunset, after that first date. Having accidentally planned to arrive late, I presented him with a decision: wait for me or grab a table. He grabbed. I walked in, saw him sitting at a small table by the bar, and sat down with him. He smelled stately. He was cute, unaware, or at least acceptingly confident, about his receding hairline. Shirt buttoned to his neck and his jeans accenting without flattering his oversized and muscular body. He instantly complimented me, which was clearly necessary after the twenty minutes I had laboriously put into my shower and attire. We started with a few drinks, cleared the air of any inhibitions and then precariously stepped into the debates. I enjoy a good debate. Whether getting a rise out of your debater from

utterly demolishing his argument and general outlook on life or simply playing devil's advocate, either one works for me.

It began with guns. As a soldier who had recently returned from Iraq, he had grown quite fond of the little suckers and admitted that he always carried one with him. I ordered another drink.

"I don't think that just anyone should be able to carry a gun," I said. I took a sip from my drink and set it down gingerly, adding a little salt to my napkin.

"So, you wouldn't want me to protect you if someone came and attacked you," he countered.

"Are you trained to protect or to kill?" This seemed to send his hairline back a little further.

"I would do what I needed to do. If it were my kid, I would kill whoever it was on the spot," he said.

"You must understand that for you a gun is like a pencil, an everyday object. I didn't grow up around guns and therefore, I am a little apprehensive around them. You don't think that's normal?"

"I joined the Army because of the way I am. I didn't get all into guns because I joined the Army." I knew then that I shouldn't have tried to play it cool and order a beer like he had. I should have gone straight to the liquor.

After the wings arrived, we began to talk about frivolous things: family, school, jobs, his desire to become a fireman because he wanted to be a part of a team again. I got that. And that if he couldn't make the cut as a fireman, then he "might as well" go back

to Iraq. Clearly, there were no other options. I did have an option, however, between another beer and tequila.

“What religion are you,” he asked. “I am pretty strong in my faith.”

Okay, something I can relate to. “I’m a Christian. Baptist actually.”

“I hate Baptists,” he said.

I chose tequila.

I just needed to pause here. Pause did its best.

“And, do you have a reason for this or did some kid throw a rock at you in front of a Baptist church when you were three?”

“They don’t really accept people,” he said.

He then went on to talk about his one experience of going to a Baptist church. His main complaint resting with the snubbing of noses.

A basket of wings later and two or three drinks, we somehow wove our way into sexuality. It remains a little fuzzy mostly, bubbles mixed with an undeniable desire to deploy him myself. It started with a debate of whether sins should be weighed equally. He made the astute observation that to him, adultery was weighed on a scale all its own. I suggested that all sins were weighed the same and then made the foolish mistake of bringing up homosexuality. I started that one, begging for him to drain me with his rationalizations of where he stood on the matter.

“Oh, I could never be friends with a homosexual,” he said.

One date and already a need for two pauses.

“Uh huh, and what if this was your best friend that came to you and just decided for himself that he was gay?”

“Then I couldn’t be his friend anymore.”

That must have been the true acceptance he was looking for in church.

His candidacy didn’t last much longer than that.

That following spring, I started graduate courses at Longwood, back in Farmville, Virginia, for a while. Eli was still there. We were inevitable. It started slow, one night here and another a few weeks later. The feeling in my stomach, though, never went away. Once while dating Jeremy, I think Jeremy had figured it out as well.

“Do you still love Eli?” Jeremy asked me over the phone one night.

I had to hang up on him. I decided that Jeremy didn’t want to hear the truth and Eli didn’t either, on account of his new relationship, and an unfortunate drunken night at his apartment where I may or may not have slapped Eli. The only person I have ever physically hit, other than my brother.

As the semester went on, we began to interact more and more. Then the summer came and we only hung out maybe twice. Then came fall and our nights together became more frequent and before I could realize it, a candidate that I had interviewed three years ago and had known for six, should have been where I had stopped.

When I started living at my eleventh address in Richmond, Virginia, visits turned from monthly, to weekly, to spending every weekend together with the occasional week visit.

On a night where we decided to make dinner, which meant more him making dinner and me cleaning up the dishes, we went to the grocery store to pick out the food.

“Is this a little weird?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Walking through a grocery store together. I feel like this is something married people do,” I said.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. Doesn’t really feel weird though.”

I agreed.

While walking through the produce section of fruits and vegetables, Eli spotted a delectable treat in the form of a habanera pepper.

“I dare you to eat this.”

This wasn’t the first time that we had dared or bet each other to do something. I was still waiting for us to follow through on an athletic competition that we had actually made and signed a contract to a few months back. He had argued that he would kick my ass in almost any sports activity we played, thinking that he was some great soccer superstar. I argued that I had actually made it through college playing a collegiate sport and he had stopped after his freshman year.

It also wasn’t the first time I had made a bet with him that I lost.

“You want me to eat a habanera pepper?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

He was just about to put the one pepper back in its little box, “Okay? Really? Are you serious?”

Unfortunately, I was.

Almost an hour later, we had managed to pick out enough for exactly one meal, and made it to the checkout aisle.

“Well, if we were married, our kids would probably starve to death,” I said.

When we got back to my apartment, we started to unearth everything we had bought for dinner.

“Okay, now where are your spices?” he asked me.

“Spices?”

Six years of knowing each other didn't mean that we knew everything about each other. I grabbed my keys and went back to the store to grab some spices for the chicken.

After dinner was over, and a few glasses of wine had been devoured, we both started to look at each other in that way that you knew someone wanted to say something but they were holding back on account of what the other one might say in return. Also in a way two people looked at each other after a few glasses of wine.

“Why won't you just say what you're thinking? I know what you're thinking,” Eli said.

I was lying on top of him at that point, my face inches away from his.

“Oh, you think you know what I'm thinking?”

I knew what I was thinking, but I wasn't sure if I wanted him to know what I was thinking. I remember telling him what I was thinking about three years ago when I had to overcome one of the hardest things I have ever endured; breaking up with him was a feeling that physically made me sick and uninterested in anything for weeks. Obviously, I never got over it.

“I love you,” I said.

Eli smiled right at me. One of those smiles when you can't help but smile back. I loved to see him smile. One of my fetishes is straight teeth. I cannot stand anyone with crooked teeth. I also cannot stand leaving the house without brushing my own teeth. Some people like eyes or lips, I like teeth.

Eli's bottom row of teeth was completely disheveled.

“I love you, too,” he said.

Perhaps the greatest feeling I've ever had.

Now we were both smiling. And about thirty seconds later, we had both had enough tender loving moments we could withstand for the evening.

“So, about that pepper,” I said. I should have hoped that he had completely forgotten about it.

“Yes!” he said.

Eli went to get the pepper. It's a tiny little thing, didn't look like it could hurt that bad. Still, I decided to eat only half of it.

Never in my life have I experienced pain like that. I thought for a second that my throat was going to completely close up and cut off any hope of oxygen to my brain. I lost completely all sense of smell and every orifice on my face was leaking with something. The choking began amidst the burning sensation. Eli had told me he loved me, I figured I would be okay with dying at that moment. Three popsicles, a few glasses of milk, and about thirty minutes later, my eyes were still watering.

Being the chivalrous man that Eli is, he felt bad for me and decided he would eat the other half. Uncontrollable laughter while your mouth is on fire is a very hard feeling

to endure. I utilized popsicles to soothe the pain, but Eli just stood over my bathroom sink drooling, frozen there for about ten minutes; his eyes, nose, mouth, all oozing out.

This was the man I loved and this was the man that loved me back. He always was one for first impressions. I couldn't have asked for a better one that night.

A few months passed and Eli and I did everything together. Went to his soccer games together, ate together, cooked together, even went to our first movie together, six years after knowing each other. But the time had come that I had to box everything up yet again, and move to a new house. And it was probably the only time that I didn't want to put anything in a box. I had gone to pick up Eli from his house for one of our last visits at my apartment. We turned into my parking lot and were pulling up to my townhouse.

"It's weird, 'cause sometimes I feel like when I come here, it feels like I'm coming home," he said.

I wasn't exactly sure what to say to him. I knew that my stomach began to turn a little, nervous at the thought of sharing with him that I didn't feel the same way about the actual building we were pulling up to, my eleventh address, but instead that I felt the same way every time I was with him, every time I drove to his house to pick him up, every time I woke up next to him, and every time that we went to soccer games, bars, or out to eat.

"Really? Well, you are over here a lot." It was as good a response as I could mumble at the time.

What I should have realized is that for me, the process was now over. It wouldn't be the same as my previous attempts to find home and it wouldn't be the same home my parents provided, my brother provided, any relationship I had spawned with the nearest homeless person, or the home my dad still tried to provide. It wouldn't be easy, it wouldn't be perfect, and I had to anticipate every fight we would have as to how to make it a box we both wanted. But still, I wanted to label boxes with him, bubble wrap things with him, fight over colors of paint and thank you cards to neighbors, and for once, not put the intangible in a box, with him.

I should have said that I didn't want to live with him, but that I wanted to come home to him and finally unpack.