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The Youngest Child: A Collection of Personal Essays

Eliza H. Sneed
ehg7@wildcats.unh.edu

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The Youngest Child: A Collection of Personal Essays

Eliza Sneed

A Means to an End

A friend of mine recently compared my upbringing, or what she understands of it, to that of a military brat. After pressing her for more and watching her struggle to articulate exactly what she meant, it became clear to me that her very narrow view of the world—one that comes from a lifetime spent in a small town in New Hampshire—makes it difficult for her to see my childhood as normal and, because it's so unfamiliar, it is seemingly less warm, less inviting, less comfortable and she couldn't be more wrong.

I don't really blame her, not for this particular gap in our understanding of one another. It's hard to grasp someone else's childhood for a multitude of reasons. As college students, we are both inherently selfish and conceited. We wake up in the morning and talk about our dreams from the previous night or our plans for the day, not realizing that the person across the room is mostly just waiting for the other to finish so that they can delve into complaints about their own life. The same rule applies to sharing stories from our past. We're both talking to hear our own voices.

When I say childhood, I'm not referring to my adolescence. The word means something more to me than a stint of development. Childhood is a reel of memories constantly flickering in my mind. It's a place that I return to for comfort and for guidance. It is both a reminder and a motivator, a silk screen of color and thought cast in a warm, glowing light. Most would argue that memories are born from childhood, but the childhood that I speak of is born from memories. It doesn't fit perfectly into the category of nonfiction because my imagination has taken control of the wheel at times. This childhood that I speak of is comprised of memories, what I consider to be the most delicate form of thought. Perhaps this is why it's so difficult for me to share my own childhood with my friends and vice versa. It makes me wonder whether you can really

know someone without understanding their childhood or if you have to really know someone in order to understand their childhood. Maybe it's a two-way street; maybe it's a dead-end.

At first glance, our childhoods (the actual period during which I grew up) were arguably similar: born and raised an hour away from each other in New Hampshire, a sibling or two, healthy parents, public school educations, traveling sports leagues...the works of a textbook middle-class lifestyle. Over time, it has dawned on me that I grew up in a bubble and, while this term so often indicates a severance from the outside world, the bubble in which I grew up, commonly referred to as Phillips Exeter Academy, put me in touch with the world that exists beyond my life in New Hampshire. My bubble acted like a bridge, granting me access to two worlds: a "normal life", as well as the unique upbringing of being a child on the campus of an international hub.

My neighborhood wasn't a suburban development in Brentwood, New Hampshire, within walking distance of the Rockingham County Jail. My neighborhood wasn't the street behind the Walgreens on Portsmouth Avenue, speckled with split level ranches and above ground pools. My neighborhood wasn't tucked away in the snowy woods of Kensington. My neighborhood existed somewhere in between the perfectly manicured crisscrossing pathways lined with young oak trees and wrought iron benches. It was marble steps and Louis Kahn architecture. Like any normal kid, I was wholeheartedly and adorably oblivious to my surroundings, treating the historic grounds more like a playground than an icon of academia, scaling the same brick buildings that housed decade old Harkness tables and the future leaders of the world.

The term people like to use to describe the offspring of faculty, although I've heard variations, is "fac-brat". I've always felt like it yields a negative connotation and sounds ugly as it jumps off my tongue in conversation. I can't help but raise my eyebrows or smirk when I say

it, forcing sarcasm even when sarcasm isn't appropriate—a specialty of mine. Although I see myself as both the child of a faculty member and a brat (after years of resistance), I tend to reject the idea of fac-brats. I can't tell where it places me in the world, both in general and, more specifically, in the different spheres of that make up my life.

During my sophomore year in college I took an English inquiry course called “People Stories”. Because this class was an honors course with less than 20 students, as we read the assigned novels we became closer and more trusting as a group and the discussion soon evolved into a serious conversation centered around the age-old question: *who am I?* I see myself as an uncertain, self-doubting person to begin with, even when I get the validation I want. This is a brutal question for me to even consider, much less answer. But during these discussions, we all came to a similar conclusion: we probably won't ever actually know who we are and that's nothing to get too riled up about.

Nevertheless, this question still nags at me, clawing at the inside of my heart and head, no matter how often I try to justify not knowing who I am or not knowing my place in the world. Maybe it's the actual question itself or maybe it's because I have absolutely no idea who I am or who I want to be. I'm a white, middle class, heterosexual female from New Hampshire with average SAT scores and a predilection for drunken conversations and dad music—I at least know that much about myself.

Once, when asked what my “thing” was, as in hobby or talent, I replied, almost immediately with “manipulation”. It's easier for me to answer in abstractions like that than it is to find a hobby and stick with it or, god forbid, to find myself and stick with that. What's the fun in knowing who you are? I ask myself this every day, even the days that I desperately want to have it all figured out. This, of course, sends me into the darkest of spirals and I wonder if the

people who have it all figured out are bored or if they're just organized. Are they better off than me or are they resisting going beneath the surface? Doesn't that indicate, if I'm beneath the surface, that I'm drowning? Half of me wants to be drowning; half of me doesn't.

The half of me that doesn't want to drown retreats behind the walls of childhood memories where I know comfort already exists. Comfort, something I just can't seem to find within my contemporary self. And that place that I retreat to, the one that seems so cold from an outsider's perspective and so cold to my college friend, is the warmest place I know.

Sometimes I feel like I'm going crazy with a kind of nostalgia that no one else feels. Was it really all as good and honest as it seems in retrospect? Whenever I'm home on break and I can't sleep, I slink down to my dad's study and comb through old photo albums. The faces of my history stare back at me with wide, crooked smiles and rosy cheeks on smooth skin. I've never faced so much difficulty in writing than I have when trying to write about Exeter. There are so many elements waiting to be woven together, begging, really, to be molded into a series of stories: the ultimate exposé told from the deepest insider perspective. But my memories of childhood exist in their truest form when they appear, short and sweet or short and sour, as quick montages.

When did everyone start being so scared of everything? Of knowing who we are, of doing exactly what we want to do when we want to do it? We used to be bold, so unafraid of being hurt—it was like coming out on the other side of the day unscathed wasn't even an option because there was always an abundance of Band-Aids under the sink and the orange juice was free flowing and the bed was always made. Were we really as invincible as we thought we were?

I'm six-years-old and I'm falling through branches of wildly overgrown yews that curl and cling to the red brick walls of Phillips Hall. The white paint on the window panes is chipping

and the sun is setting, leaving the quad cold and empty and quiet. It's fall, and that crisp, talked-about New England air is softly nipping at the tips of our ears. My blonde wisps of leftover baby hair are slicked back into a ponytail, held in place by a thin black headband. I can feel the pressure of it pinching at my temples. It's been a long day of playing. One strand of hair escapes when a small twig whips against the left side of my head. As I tumble through the green, I can only think about lifting my hand and tucking that strand of hair right back into place.

I'm seven-years-old and I'm running through the halls of a boys' dormitory on the South side of campus, hordes of fellow fac-brats in my wake, each of us swaddled in bathrobes, sporting swim goggles. It's armor. We hold small paper scraps in our hands and rubber bands spill over the edges of our pockets. Ammunition. We're playing a game we call Wasp Wars. We've torn pages from our school notebooks and rolled and twisted them until they look like bent cigarettes. Wrapping the rubber bands around our thumbs and fingers, we create little slingshots. Positioning the paper wasp at the right angle on the rubber band, we stretch it back and release, watching as the wasp shoots through the air in a perfect line, striking the target with a stinging sensation.

The students have abandoned the campus for winter break and what seems like a ghost town to the outside world swiftly becomes our personal playground. Elevators are both fair game and a death trap, common rooms are home base, and the back stairwells are a no man's land. We've saved up the dollars that our parents have given us over the past few months for doing odd-jobs and we feed them directly into the mouth of the towering vending machine that breathes and clangs in the far corner of the basement. Pounding on the face of it, I finally retrieve my hard-earned bottle of Mug Root Beer from its depths.

We've taken a break from the game and my guard is down. The basement is gray and cool: a concrete haven where we can let the sweat dry. There's an overwhelming stench of plastic and laundry detergent and I'm lying on the green, ripped felt of the pool table when I hear the door at the end of the hallway being pushed open. In my hands I hold my goggles, blue with yellow stripes. I sit up, seeing only a single paper wasp zipping straight toward my left eye.

At eight-years-old, there's a tea kettle shrieking in the kitchen and I'm in the hallway, standing with my back to it, my hands on my hips and my chin held high in the air. I'm total pain in the ass, or that's what my mom says. For as long as I can remember, our pantry has only housed whole wheat pasta, quinoa, and canned beans. It's so brown, so colorless compared to the General Mills stocked heavens of my friends' houses. I'm searching for a pre-ballet snack. My hair is in a tight bun and my leotard is too big and sags off of my body. There are no Cheez-Its, no Lucky Charms, no individually packaged chocolate puddings or Fruit by the Foot. It's every third grader's personal hell. All that stares back at me is cans of sardines and jars of Kalamata olives. I feel my dad hovering above me, helping me look for something that's not there. Impossible. I'm impossible.

It happened, like most mistakes, so quickly that it seemed to not have happened at all. But that's the thing about mistakes, their existence lives not in the moment that they happen, but in the aftermath. He was holding a white mug, unadorned save for the dangling tag of a Yogi tea bag. Trust creates peace, it read. Or something like that. Something within me snapped as it so often did when I was young. I whirled around while my bun stayed in place and my tights snagged on a loose nail in the floorboard. Flinging my hand in the air like the eight-year-old terror that I was, I knocked the mug out of his hand and the water—the mistake—was unleashed. It was almost graceful, youthful, maybe even a little poetic: me in my leotard and tights, sassily

whipping around to tell off my dad for his incompetence. The boiling water streaming down the right side of my face, snaking along my hairline, over my jaw, and down to my collarbone, leaving a bright pink scar in its path.

Childhood at Exeter left its various marks on me, but they've all faded now. The games of manhunt left their bruises, but they went away sooner or later. The candy from student grill never caused the cavities that my parents promised it would. The branches left their scrapes and we healed them with bacitracin. My burns vanished beneath aloe. The grass stains were washed out of the knees of my jeans.

I do know when everyone started being so scared of everything. It was when the scrapes, bumps, and bruises stopped being quite so literal. We reached that point that happens in every childhood—the one where you stop seeing yourself as a child but you're still so young. That point when you begin to internalize every touch, every word, every look, and those interactions somehow vaporize into different emotions within you, poisoning your brain and your limbs and your extremities until you're just a big mess of teenage hormones and tears.

grew up at a boarding school. And I ended up going to that boarding school, but I still managed to secure all the liberties that a normal high schooler benefits from, like access to my parents' liquor cabinet before school dances and the freedom to ride in my friends' cars without receiving disciplinary action. Those outsiders who think that boarding school is just for kids who were sent away from home because of bad behavior aren't all that wrong. It is, for some, a pretty prison for neglected children with large inheritances and important surnames. And it also is, for many, a completely different world, one in which you must ask for visitation rights to go into a boys' dormitory. One in which dinner stops being served when the seven o'clock bell rings, in

which Saturday morning classes are a very, very harsh reality.

But the worst part, the element that really strips you of all normalcy and any ability to think rationally, is the romance of it all. And I'm here to tell you that that romance, that picture of these hallowed halls and ivy-ridden brick buildings trapped inside snow globes of scandal, is real. Despite it being my home and my childhood and my place of comfort, that romance isn't lost on me. Not in the least. That romance is how I justified every risk I took and every mistake I made during my three years as an Exonian. It overpowered the voice in my head; it seduced me.

You would think that after all those years studying the ins and outs of the place, of knowing the shortcuts and the secrets spots, that I would be immune to its siren call, smarter than everyone else, clever enough to evade its twisted ways. But even so, I, too, fell in love with the idea of the place. I, too, surrendered to the charm of it all. For me, unsurprisingly, it came in the form of a high school cliché: young love. I couldn't get enough of it and, because of this, my time at Exeter almost came to a screeching halt that day that I fell, not from the branches of the yews, but into the clutches of a relationship with the wrong boy.

I was 15 when I met him. It took me a week to decide that he could stick around, three months to fall in love with him, and a year to admit it. We met in the spring of my second year. He was a senior, had just returned from a semester abroad in Grenoble, and people were talking about him.

I remember, quite vividly, the first time I saw him. I was sitting up in the balcony of the assembly hall with my friends, watching the masses filter into the rows of red benches beneath us. We always enjoyed watching the seniors huddled together down below, sharing the kind of knowledge that only comes with time and age. We yearned to be in their shoes. They were the

captains of the sports teams, the heads of the a cappella groups, and the editors of the newspaper. From our perch, it was so easy to assume that they had their futures neatly laid out before them: shimmering brilliantly in the close distance, the next page of their book waiting, even wanting, to be turned.

He stood in the middle of that cluster, but he wasn't leaning in with his eyebrows raised like the rest of them. Hands buried deep in his pockets, smirking, he doled out nods to his classmates as they welcomed him home. His hair was shaggy, his beard scruffy, his hellos empty. He just looked like he had layers and at this point in my life, I'm a total sucker for layers. You know those people who give off an air of mystique? Those people who sit in dark corners and drink black coffee and wallow in a pit of self-loathing and despair? He really had it down to a T and I really, really liked it. "Look," my friend Molly said, nudging me with her textbook, "That's Sam Burns." I was already looking.

Fast forward one year and he's holding me in the front seat of his car. We're dating and clinging to something that's not really there anymore. The love between us, if you can call it that, is tarnished. I'm wearing a blue and white striped shirt with a zipper that begins at the nape of my neck. He likes this shirt of mine, says it reminds him of France, and I hate that, pulling away from him, watching his face come into focus. "You've always been so full of shit," I say. "So have you," he says. Many nights were spent like this: car rides and coffee and endless banter.

Fast forward another year. April 20th, 2012 is a good night so far: a solid boarding school night with a beginning, a middle, and an end. For some reason, I choose to push my luck and I don't go home. He drives me out to the coast and parks the car and takes my hand and begins to talk. I see how he squints his eyes in the dim light of a streetlamp and I smell that thick, earthy

fragrance that I don't know so well. But it's a part of him, that smell, it's like his own personal cologne: Old Spice, wintergreen gum, and weed. I want to leave and he wants me to stay, and then he kisses me and all is forgotten. Purple. That's what I see. Not the flashing blue and red like you'd think, just a purple sheen draped over the moment.

"You can't park here at night," the officer says, and pauses, scrunches his nose.

I'm not certain why I'm here or how I got to this point. Sam steps out of the car and into the headlights of the cruiser; the dust and dirt are visible in the beams of light, circling round and round his head. I see his eyes, glassy, and I see a tear fall down his face, but I know it's not meant for me. A young cop manages to coax me out of the car. He questions me; I'm asked things I've never even considered.

"Have you been smoking?" No.

"Is he your boyfriend?" Not for long.

"Where do you go to school?"

That's when it strikes me how very real all of this is, how it could compromise my romantic relationship. No, not the one with him. The one with Exeter. I'm driven home in the passenger seat of one cop car and he's in the backseat of another, driving in the opposite direction, and I don't know exactly what to make of that because I'm numb, so numb that I'm calm. The roads are winding and the leather of the seat is warm against the backs of my legs. My head is not so clear and my gaze remains distant, but I like how soft my hair feels and how the borrowed dress hangs off of my shoulders, and in that moment I let myself smile because I know I won't be seeing him soon. I smile because I'm going home.

Hi, My Name is Eliza

My grandmother and my grandfather had a shotgun wedding, a term I consider too violent to describe the kind of family that I come from. I don't like the way the words sound as they leave Kate's freckled lips or that she, as my younger cousin, is the one breaking the news. And I hate the way that she tells me, drawing it out, lazily protecting my feelings, forgetting the sting it left when she first found out. I can tell that some part of her, however small, enjoys dangling me in suspension.

The skies are clear and the sandwiches are packed in a blue cooler. The bridge stretches ahead of us, about a mile long, a wooden path leading out to The Gurnet. The bay is a choppy mess of muted green on this day, fueled by a strong, warm wind that dries the water on our skin instantly, leaving traces and wisps of sea salt mapped across our shoulders. We walk, and upon reaching the looming beige entrance sign, we flip off whoever chose the papyrus script for the over marketed and exclusive destination that Duxbury Beach has become over the years. Coming to the first crossover, we brace ourselves for the heat of summer sand on bare feet. We haven't been here for months. We haven't developed the summer soles that we have in past years, the kind leathery bottoms of feet that come from countless cartwheels on gravel driveways.

The straps of our beach chairs press down on our sunburned necks. As the youngest of eight, these are a luxury that Kate and I didn't have growing up. These are the latest addition to the new gear and, had we not been alone on this day, had we not been the only cousins in town, we would have been coerced by the big kids into settling for the thin threads of old beach towels. My family believes in seniority just about as fervently as other families believe Sunday mass.

The beach is uncharacteristically void of the throngs of teenagers that, for as long as I can remember, have polluted the white sand with heavily scented coconut tanning oil and ceaseless

gossip. Their tight knit semicircles of beach chairs aimed toward the sun for maximum exposure was always something Kate and I had envied. They belonged to normalcy, to the town of Duxbury. We belonged to our family, a cluster that had cut ourselves off from the rest of the community. We didn't like anyone but each other, we joked.

We set up camp close to the shoreline, facing the Atlantic, our jealousy of semicircles and local gossip dissolving into the August heat. I crack open a can of Whale's Tale and dig into a turkey sandwich. She sips a seltzer. We begin to go down the list of things we need to cover. It has come to this; it has come to an index of topics that need catching up. We shuffle through our different sets of friends, reporting on their collegiate status and love lives. We tackle our own stories, outlining only the critical events and pivotal moments of our year spent apart, swapping photos to visually aid our narratives.

It's difficult, having not talked every day, to render all that has happened so far. These yearly summaries create an unexpected distance between us two, but within hours it will, just like the leftover scraps of jealousy and youth, dissolve into the August heat. Late summer has this distinct ability to heal these sorts of inevitable imperfections. It's why Kate chose this last Tuesday of the summer to tell me the truth of what happened between our grandparents.

We call my grandfather Sir. On any given summer night, we will sit at the green wrought iron table beneath the Yellowwood tree in the backyard. We will nurse our vodka tonics. He'll appear on the back stoop, a salad bowl full of pasta in hand, and let the screen door slam shut behind him. That comforting sound that I know so well, that crack of wood hitting wood, will echo throughout the property, across the old clay tennis courts and the fields of overgrown crabgrass. He'll set down the mix of penne and vegetables on the table with a stack of napkins, smiling widely, almost sarcastically, in his short sleeved madras shirt, reminding us to keep

applying the floral scented bug spray that sits on the nearby Adirondack chair. He, after all, was the man who taught me how to load a dishwasher properly.

We call my grandmother Goggy. There she'll be, on any given summer night, peering out at us through the black shuttered window from her perch in the attic: Dunhill in one hand, long stemmed glass of Oyster Bay in the other. A single ice cube will clink against the side of her second glass. It will be around 5:00 in the evening and she'll be knee deep in the Sunday crossword. A frustrated stream of "fucks" and "shits" will ride the curling wisp of smoke that leaves her lips. She, after all, was the woman who taught me how to flip someone off before I turned ten.

A sweet breeze of freshly cut grass and brewing coffee will meet at the window, ruffling the curtains, green and yellow, covered in prints of turnips. Sir will sit atop the black and red lawn mower, clad in his old Franklin & Marshall alumni shirt, carving perfect designs into each patch of grass. At noon, he'll appear on the back porch, his thin silver hair slick with sweat and dirt, cucumbers in one hand, tomatoes in the other. He'll walk over to the cutting board, slice open the summer fruit, talking to himself all the while, and pour a cold glass of root beer. Clutching his sandwich, he'll ease into one of the few functioning kitchen chairs. The tomato and cucumber will blend with the mayo, producing a light pink nectar that will dribble down his chin as he bites into his seeping multigrain masterpiece. Although he is clutching his perfectly folded paper napkin, he lets the juice trickle down onto his sweat soaked, dirt stained shirt.

Sir has always found solace among the radishes and basil, taking pride in the meaty heads of lettuce and the bright red stalks of rhubarb. Kate and I, as the youngest cousins and the outcasts, also looked to the vegetable gardens as a haven. We used to sit for hours in our Cozy Coupe toy car, dipping the unwashed stalks of rhubarb into a ceramic sugar bowl balanced

carefully in the car's small trunk. We would gnaw on mint leaves and crush the tiger lilies with our bare feet. Golden hour would come around and the dust in the air would flicker in the light before settling into the nighttime when dew would grace and renew the yard's beauty for the next morning.

Goggy has always ruled from afar. Up in her ivory tower, she dictates her orders through the intercom speaker on the landline phone. She has always needed an excuse to grace us with her presence. When I connect with Goggy, it's over folding the white cotton pillow cases or setting the dining room table for dinner or plucking the weeds from the gravel driveway. But Duxbury, for as long as I can remember, has been this way: Goggy pointing her bony finger from a distance while Sir scurries about the property. It's puppetry, but it works, and every family has a system.

Paper signs have consistently appeared out of nowhere, taped carefully to the broken freezer door or the busted sink, always signed, "Sincerely, Property Management". Crushing lillies wasn't the only damage we did to the acres of land and the old white house. Sometimes I'll stand in the gravel driveway beneath the outstretched arms of the old mulberry tree and I'll wonder how it's all still standing: the bunkhouse, the crabapple tree, the wooden swing. When I walk into the front foyer, I can hear the house shake. I can hear the floorboards creak, the walls quiver, and the candlesticks rattle. The open spaces between the chimney bricks are stuffed with secret notes written in crayon and loose floorboards protect treasures long forgotten.

I have many irrational fears, but one in particular of things disappearing beneath my feet. If I were to knock one brick free or step too heavily upon one board, I fear that the entire house might unravel into threads of memories and collapse into piles of flowers and coffee grinds. Yet it stays together and I must give credit where credit is due: the union of Goggy and Sir. In their

quiet way, Goggy and Sir defend not only the structure of Duxbury, but also the image of the eight cousins in disarray with lime green Popsicle juice dripping down our chins, our hair still crusty from the afternoon dip at Shipyard Lane. They'll still cringe when we trample up and down the stairs or leave the screen door open a moment too long, letting a swarm of mosquitos into the softly lit back porch. They never stop caring for us, for the gardens, for the yard, for the old white house, for summer, each in their own way. They never stop demanding our presence over the holidays and never stop searching for the wittiest birthday cards in the paper shop.

These days, upon Goggy's request, we'll drape a white tablecloth over a long banquet table, drink champagne, and shuck Island Creek Oysters from the bay. By the end of the night, the table is ridden with wine glasses, steak knives, and citronella candles placed dangerously close to the empty breadbaskets. These reunions are mandatory, though it is never verbalized. We all know the wrath of Goggy's arched eyebrow and pursed lips.

Knowing that Goggy and Sir's marriage was born out of something other than the heartache inducing, can't-live-without-one-another, soul mate kind of love makes sense to me. Kate agrees. Their love is somehow sturdier than that. At the risk of sounding tacky, although I suppose this is always a risk when writing about love: Goggy and Sir are a team, and teams don't necessarily form under the best circumstances, but rather under the most pressing circumstances.

They don't know that we know their secret, if it even is a secret. The news travelled down the line, from my older sister to my older cousin, to Kate, and then, finally, to me. I don't want them to know that we know. Goggy and Sir acknowledge that we aren't children anymore, but we don't talk about it for fear of exposing the image of our childhood—the eight cousins in disarray with lime green Popsicle juice dripping down our chins—to the darkness that exists in every family, even in my own.

I've come to realize that I have a strange fascination with the beginning of things. I've never been one to stick with something when things fall into routine; movies become dull, relationships aren't exciting, and classes lose passion. The beginning is the most romantic part of anything, but in the case of Goggy and Sir, I don't like to think about their beginning because the only thing that matters to me is the now. I know that they met in a bar in Virginia Beach. He was in the Navy and she was bored, trying to avoid her drunken aunt and uncle. He tripped her as she walked by on her way to the washroom.

The sturdiness of truth doesn't lie in my grandparents' shotgun wedding or the happy mess of a family that they have created. It doesn't lie in between Kate's freckled lips. It most certainly doesn't lie in the way our family secrets trickle down through the cousins, filtered and molded into something else, like the games of Telephone that we used to play at the kids' table. The truth, if there is one, lies in the attic in the bottom of a cardboard box of Oyster Bay Sauvignon Blanc.

The same cardboard box of Oyster Bay Sauvignon Blanc from which I stole one bottle. Sleek, green and elegant, smelling of sweet vinegar and maturity, home to a pretty little sketch of mountains slapped right across the label. I was 16 when I rolled that bottle up in an old gray sweatshirt and crammed it into my backpack, throwing it into the pile of luggage in my brother's car, merging onto I95 South, hoping, wishing, that I wouldn't hear anything clink against the lone bicycle wheel in the trunk.

The first time I got drunk, violently drunk, I cried for my mother. I cried for her while my head hit the floor and I cried for her as I watched the spaghetti and the Oyster Bay and the Absolut collide and crash into the toilet bowl. I remember almost nothing except for someone holding my hair back. I cried the next morning because I was a high school cliché. I cried

because I saw my friend—his name was Max—sleeping on a pile of clothes on my bedroom floor to make certain I wouldn't asphyxiate on my own vomit. He had been the one holding my hair back. All those sips of red wine and good beer and champagne—my mom's French approach to raising her children—became irrelevant within minutes. I had learned nothing from the space and trust that my parents had given me; I had learned nothing from watching Goggy's stash of bottles rise, fall, and rise again. Even the long history of alcoholism that tarnishes both sides of my family had no impact on my adolescent brain. I want so badly to say that this was the end of my debauchery, but I can't.

As I sit at the bar in my aunt's new beach house, I become an adult. Most people can't pinpoint exactly when they stopped being a child and started looking at the world in a different, colder light, but I think I can. I'm overcome with the worst sense of self awareness as Rahul, a longtime family friend and former alcoholic (is there such a thing?), says to me, "Goggy has a stash," in his quick and direct way of speaking, a look of concern flashing through his brown eyes, second guessing whether I'm old enough. I hear what he says, but it's faint. What I hear is the clattering of pans, the thrum of the washing machine, my uncle readying the Bolognese sauce, Rahul's fingers drumming the wooden table, the Hawkeyes crowd on the television, and the thud of heavy silverware being laid out on the dining room table. I know what he means to say, because I've only seen him look this serious when talking about his own history with alcohol. I know what he means to say because I've heard my own mother say it, only less subtly.

"Oh, she's a total alcoholic. Still lucid, but her brain is always, *always* soaking in alcohol," she says.

I imagine the inside of my grandmother's head. I only picture silver wisps of thoughts drenched in white wine. Truth lies in my deep-set eyes framed by dark brows, features I inherited from Goggy.

"Don't end up like her," my mother says to me, lecturing about frontal lobes and letting her health teacher knowledge shine through, tainting her parenting style.

"You have an addictive and stubborn personality, just like her, but you can spin it and use it to your advantage. You can."

Conversations with my mom tend to follow this strange pattern. First, psychoanalysis. Second, advice. Third, reference to an article from *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*. Sometimes I listen, depending on how motivated I'm feeling or how hungover I am. Most of the time I wonder if I'll ever speak about my mother in the same way that she speaks about Goggy, like life really does come full circle and Goggy is a child again. It's the same tone and vocabulary that my dad uses when he talks about his own mother. Is this what I have to look forward to?

My truth sometimes lies in the bottom of a cheap liquor bottle, in the salt and lime residue of a tequila shot, in the filmy bubblegum sensation of a jäger bomb. In my aunt's new beach house, a black chalkboard is painted directly onto the wall in the kitchen. Our family has decided to update it, creating a calendar using only symbols that represent holidays and birthdays. For Goggy, a glass of wine. For Uncle Chris, an Italian flag. For my dad, a guitar. For me, a bright red solo cup. Goggy and I are the only two birthdays that have symbols relating to alcohol and, however lighthearted it may be, I can't help but see my 80-year-old self, the deep set eyes and dark eyebrows surrounded by a spider web of wrinkles, long fingers wrapped around a wine glass as if it's the last thing grounding me, keeping me from floating away.

It's my junior year of college and girls stumble over the threshold, heels in hand, their curled hair sticking to the napes of their sweaty necks, earrings jingling. A scrawny blonde boy stands in the opposite corner, hands hovering over the spinners and soundboards as the music transitions choppily from Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" to a dubstep remix of Adele's "Hello" that makes it sound like the speakers are about to blow out. As I watch the crowd file in, I become quieter, more observant, more of a writer. A thought flickers through my mind: maybe Goggy *would* be proud. From my perch beside one of the "soundproofed" windows (a posterboard covered in tinfoil and duct tape), I watch. I take it all in. So, this is college? I think back to sitting around the circular wooden table in the kitchen at Goggy and Sir's, flipping to the fiction section of *The New Yorker*. My dad strums his guitar. Cousins return from a walk. Instead of smelling coffee and freshly cut grass—instead of smelling comfort—I smell weed and faint hints of body odor. Man, this is college.

Hands roughly touch my lower back, as if to simultaneously cop a feel and to tell me to get the fuck out of the way. Names are shouted, pony tails are flipped, shoes are sticking to the floor. The entire party moves in one jerking motion along with the rhythm of the cheap strobe light that sits on the shelf. I'm only seeing every other second of the party instead of the whole thing, but some part of me enjoys the mystery. What happens when the strobe is off for that one moment? I wonder what happens in the moments of pitch black. Two people could come together and two could split apart. That flash of darkness is an empty moment in history.

I notice the hardwood floors, the white fireplace mantle, the beams above us. This house is old, and not just old compared to the new apartment developments that have sprung up all over town in the past few years. I've spent my fair share of time here over the last few months, squished in between the boys who live there as we watch Sunday movies to cure the hangover.

The smell of stale beer lingers, always, no matter how much smoke is blown or how much Adderall they take to scrub the floors. There's a streak of André smeared across the ceiling, sticky and yellowing as the days go on. Again, I fear it will all just go away, that if I were to slam a door too aggressively or jump down the front porch steps too quickly, the entire house might unravel into threads of late night memories and collapse into piles of kief and cocaine.

In a dark moment when the strobe light blinks off, the house does, quite literally, collapse. A nightmare come to life. It's less dramatic than I imagined it would be. It happens gradually, slowly, painfully. The floorboards across the room begin to bend and disappear into the basement. I can see the light from the basement ceiling shining through the gap that appears beneath the threshold in the foyer. I can see bodies dispersing into the dark corners, moving away from the sagging floor. The music stops; the yelling begins. The house is breaking, but it doesn't collapse into piles of kief and cocaine like I had imagined. It just falls.

The night lags on. Upstairs, hidden away in a one of the back rooms, a white lighter falls into the crack between the bed and the wall. In another, a lace bra refuses to be unhooked. In another, a rig is lit and a red headed boy coughs, wheezes, and tumbles to the ground, clutching his stomach. "If my mom could see me now," he says, a dopey smile spreading across his face. His blue eyes are made to seem bluer because of the red that surrounds them. It's 3:00 in the morning and the party downstairs has long since ended. There isn't a trace of romance upstairs in this old house, yet I curl up in an oversized bean bag and watch as the night unfolds into morning, waiting for something even more exceptional to happen although I know nothing ever will.

His thought echoes in my head. *If my mom could see me now...* And I think to myself, *If my family, if Goggy, if Rahul, could see me now*, tucked away among the innards of a house on

the verge of disappearing, my hair crusty with spilled beer and my fingernails dirty with the soot of a long night. My mind is foggy and swimming in a curdling mixture of jäger and vodka, numbing the guilt I've always felt. Spinning, I trip down the stairs, out of the old white house with brown trim, feeling the loose floorboards bounce beneath my feet.

There's so much that's romantic and beautiful about my family, so much that I want to write about and so many vivid, loaded images that bring tears to my eyes and make me never want to stray from nostalgia because it's the prettiest, saddest feeling I've ever felt. There are the old and new houses where we convene with warm lighting and soft blankets and olives in ceramic dishes served before dinner. There are the swims at dusk that we take in the bay when the water is just as warm as the air and the beer has gone to our heads and we drift in the glassy current of the Back River. There are the meals that we eat together with homemade bread from the sourdough starter that my dad spent days, weeks, months perfecting. The rich, salty smell of garlic and basil cooking in a cast-iron skillet. There's the alcohol that we drink: the Paper Plane cocktail my uncle has obsessed over for two years now, measuring bourbon shot after bourbon shot. The tinny bells of a martini shaker rattling back and forth, mixing magic and ice shards. The speakers, unpredictable and loud, as we turn the volume knob back and forth, trying to appeal to both young ears and old ears. There are the stories we tell, the stories that made me so vulnerable to any nonfiction and memoir writing that comes my way. The relationships we have formed: my oldest, best friends and confidantes.

The culture that I belong to at college is the furthest thing from romantic, the furthest thing from Goggy and her subtle, even romantic, alcoholism and from my family. I am one in 12,000 drug addled twenty somethings at my college trying to push through a hangover to make

it to office hours on a muggy Friday morning asking themselves all the while if they're functioning alcoholics. I wonder if Goggy knows the answer.

Evidence of the Daughter

I question my place within my own family, more so as the years go by and my siblings pair off to create families of their own and my parents slip into that seemingly wonderful state of empty nesting that they would never admit to loving. This paranoia is heightened now, at 21, when my future is more uncertain than it has ever been. I often wonder if I can't find a place within my own immediate family, what will the real world be like for me?

I look at my brother's face. I look at my sister's face and my mom's face. I see the same thick, dark eyebrows and the Evans' family nose—small and squished upwards. I see the olive skin tone and their round, pie faces framed by dark curls. When I was young and my siblings told me that I was adopted, I used to believe it. How could I not? When you're an impressionable child and you don't see yourself in any of your relatives, it's a lonely, overly dramatic existence. When you're an impressionable child and you're the youngest of three, you believe what they tell you without reservation.

But I don't think that's an uncommon desire. In fact, I think it's natural to want to see parts of yourself in someone else, whether that be a family member or a lover or a friend, whether it be physically or emotionally, maybe in the eyes, maybe in the soul. I think I've always craved that mirroring effect; it's the kind of validation that I know is taboo, but I waste my time seeking it out instead of being happy. I want to know that I'm not alone.

What happens when you see yourself in someone that you don't want to be seen in? Or read something that you don't want to resonate with you, but it does anyway? What then? You're not alone; you've been granted the validation that you crave, but you're still left with a wrenching feeling in your gut, an acidic taste in your mouth, a scar on your confidence. What happens when the validation is negative? When you see yourself in Lena Dunham's character of

Jessa? Not in Clarice Starling, but in Hannibal Lecter? In the girl crying at the corner table at the college bar, a melting whiskey ginger to the left of her?

I like to think that, apart from my cripplingly sporadic self-consciousness, I defy some standards—my favorite being that all of my quirks, habits, and tastes, I inherited not from my mom, like most girls, but from my dad. We've often joked, over the years, about how alike we are and acknowledge that our many, many fights are rooted in our similarities. "We're the same person," we'll say. And when you see yourself in someone else, when you inherit someone else's qualities, there is no guarantee that they're all great, good, or even important. Sometimes they're just the facts of who you are.

I like to make one cup of coffee in the morning in a single serve French press and I don't like to be bothered during this time. I don't like sharing the things that are mine. I hate words that end in -y or -ie when they don't *need* to: yummy, mommy, baggie. I can't write if I'm listening to music with lyrics. I like a dash of vodka in my oysters. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner all take different hot sauces. I'm more romantic than I am practical. I'm sensitive to lactose, but licorice tea always helps. My back is speckled with moles that may not be benign.

Yet, no matter how similar you are to another being, it doesn't ensure that between you there exists an unparalleled sense of closeness. This is the case with me and my dad. This is the map of how I lessened the distance between us and how it ultimately led me to better understand Eliza. I found it in both the art of cooking eggs and in discovering good music and sometimes both at the same time and sometimes I don't think I've found it at all.

For three years, I attended the high school where my dad taught English. Not only was he a teacher on the same campus where I was a student—not only was he within the same one mile radius as me at every waking moment—but he was also somehow verging on celebrity. He embodied that image of the “cool” English teacher, with a messenger bag casually slung over one shoulder, permanently on a mission to write the next great American poem or surf New Hampshire’s next big swell, all the while teaching himself Steely Dan songs on the guitar. Everyone loved him and, at times, worshipped him, so when the day came that I was too ashamed to look him in the eye and wanted to avoid him at all costs, no one could understand. And I was alone.

On a clear night in the spring of my second year, a boy walked me home from the library. The church bell rang nine times, declaring another day’s end and the beginning of check-in for first and second years. As a day student, I didn’t have to answer to any dorm faculty or dodge the self-righteous proctors roaming the halls with clipboards. Most nights, I would walk back to my house after check-in, greeted by a home cooked meal sitting in the still warm oven, carefully wrapped in tinfoil. My parents would be in bed, having already binged on an obscure Netflix original series, and I often wondered if they heard the screen door squeak open exactly one hour past my technical curfew and if they did, why they never said anything.

It was ten past ten and we were both late, or later than usual. We were only walking and talking, nothing more and nothing less, but time had gotten away from us, as it tends to do. It wasn’t serious; I wasn’t fully invested in what he had to say. I don’t think he was invested in his own words either. It was just something to do instead of studying, something mindless to look forward to at the end of a long day full of tasteless dining hall lunches and overly passionate class discussions with my schoolmates, all of them sporting pimples on their faces, crooked ties

around their necks, and pants too short for their legs. It was a guilty pleasure of sorts and at some point, I became so caught up in the nothingness of the conversation that the home cooked meal carefully wrapped in tinfoil slipped out of my mind, my hand slipped into his, and we were walking down Elm Street after hours beneath a cloudless sky.

The soft, slow tick of a bicycle could be heard through the night, gradually becoming louder and more daunting: the sound of someone looking for something. I saw the red handlebars and the full beard, the white converse and the flowered vintage tie. As my dad came to a halt beside us, squinting at me from his perch on the red bicycle, I could hear the spring peepers chirping in the woods behind the tennis courts. It was a sound that he had always pointed out to me when I was younger: his ears perked up along with his eye brows as drove the back roads home from wherever. Listen to that, he would say, It's spring. In this moment, it was almost deafening, piercing through the silent, sour intimacy. My dad's thin lips remained as a line drawn across his face, from which no words escaped. He peered down at us through the lens of his thick rimmed glasses. I felt the redness detonate in the apples of my cheeks, not an unfamiliar feeling, and a twisting disappointment taking root in between my shoulder blades. I didn't even like the kid standing next to me.

I've come to know this feeling so well: this aching obligation to never let my dad down. To make sure that this carbon copy of himself is up to par, that I carry myself correctly because I am the vehicle of his inherited qualities. What a burden to bear. Perhaps this exists only in the parent-offspring relationship, a mutual understanding that if he doesn't embarrass me, I won't disappoint him. Maybe it goes beyond that and exists in the delicacy of the father-daughter relationship, the unexplored depths of how a girl could be more like her dad than her mom. And there's always the possibility that it just existed in this moment of a teenaged daughter

discovering that boys like her, and that she likes that boys like her, and even sometimes decides to like the boys that like her. Maybe it's because we're seen as so similar that I think if I let my dad down, it means I've let myself down, too. But high school seems so far out of my reach these days, like a past life in which every little thing gone wrong felt like it could tear down my entire world, like being caught by my dad, on Elm Street after check-in, holding a boy's hand.

Life is more complicated now; the stakes are higher and I can't say I wasn't warned of this. Things begin to accelerate when you become a twenty-something and now, more than ever, I'm conscious of my relationships with the people whom I most admire. I know I'm still young, but I have seen and I have felt the fragility of relationships—how they hang by the threads of trust and convenience and mutual effort. How they can explode and flourish. How they can explode and disappear. How shared DNA plays no part in the strength of a relationship. How they can be born out of absolutely nothing and torn down by the same exact thing.

Lately I've been thinking about eggs. Bear with me. They're a staple of my diet as a college student who is hesitant to tackle raw chicken, but they're also a fascination of mine. I think eggs are beautiful, against all odds, and I get an exceptional sense of satisfaction when I cook a perfect egg: poached, fried, or soft-boiled. Scrambled is both sociopathic and a disgrace to poultry. I become obsessive when I cook breakfast, a determination that, much to my parents' dismay, I can't achieve in other spheres of my life. I become a perfectionist, throwing away broken yolks when I forgot to add vinegar to the boiling water and leaning down to peer into the pan, searching for runaway rivulets of egg.

To be clear, there are rules. Absolutely no uncooked egg-white (what my mom unapologetically refers to as “spit” and thus ensues my aversion to it). Yolk must be over-medium. Pepper and salt must be in attendance. Pan shouldn’t be too hot to protect the egg from a burnt bottom layer. Poached eggs must be swirled as to avoid stringy egg whites. Cholula Hot Sauce is highly recommended for flavor. Thin, sturdy spatula makes for the cleanest flip.

I’ve incessantly Googled different guides to eggs, scoffing at those who say soft-boiled only takes three minutes—in what world? I’ve spent more time than I want to admit looking at Instagram videos of people cutting into poached eggs, what the internet has, in its innately perverted manner, deemed “#yolkporn”. At the very least, this alleviates my fear of being alone; this assures me that I’m not the only one with this odd fascination.

Lately I’ve been questioning just how delicate they really are. Eggs, I mean. I’m skeptical. Standing in the poultry aisle of Market Basket, I get lost in a little world consisting of brown versus white, organic versus cage-free versus conventional. Orange yolks and yellow yolks. Large, medium, or small. I know what I like: large, brown eggs with a yellow-almost-orange yolk. I like when the shells are thick and don’t crack the first time it meets the lip of the frying pan. It’s what I was raised on. These are the kind of eggs I like because these are the kind of eggs that my dad likes.

Lately I’ve been thinking about an elementary scientific experiment from the days when I used to like classes besides English. Like most elementary science, the experiment is presented in the form of Q and A to desperately evoke some sort of passion from the ADD generation: Have you ever held an egg in the palm of your hand, wrapped your fingers around it, and squeezed as hard as you possibly could? It refuses to break. Have you ever wondered why a hen

can sit atop an egg without breaking it, but a chick can easily crack through the shell at birth?
Turns out, it has something to do with the shape, not the fragility.

Saturday mornings are my favorite time to be home. Saturday mornings used to look like this. My sister is crouched over the kitchen table, her forehead wrinkled in concentration as she finishes a small sketch of our old Beetle Cat sailboat. She pays no mind to the mushy bowl of Cheerios that waits beside her creation. My mom sits, as usual, in the corner by the far window, her mug of Yorkshire Gold in one hand, *The Atlantic* in the other. My dad walks out of his study, perches on the arm of a faded leather chair, and begins to strum one of his many guitars, his long fingernails clawing at the strings to create a simple and familiar tune, probably something of the great Bill Frisell. It's at this moment that my brother's car pulls into the newly shoveled driveway, the roof-rack piled high with surfboards from that morning's session. Each member of my family emerges from their respective moment with the slam of the front door; they squint, they stretch, they return to our shared reality.

My brother reaches for the leftover steak tips from last night's dinner. The soft glow of winter sun comes in through the kitchen window. It's 27 degrees outside and my sister is chopping onions and potatoes into fat chunks and dousing them with cracked pepper and flakes of Murray River salt. My mom is locked into the hand-held juicer, tossing peel after peel over her shoulder into the sink. And I, alongside my dad, am frying the eggs, perfecting the art, trying my best not to fuck up the heart of the meal.

Saturday mornings aren't like this anymore; my family isn't like this anymore. It's not just us five. It's us seven, plus dog, and it's so rare that we are all in the same room, at the same time, functioning as we used to on those soft, easy Saturday mornings. This isn't because of family turmoil or fighting, but rather because adulthood has taken my siblings across the country and for this, I know that I am lucky. I've become closer with my siblings as we grow up and are physically further away from one another. There are less things to fight about because, technically, I can't steal my sister's clothing when she's in San Francisco and I can't bother my brother when he has a wedding to plan.

At this age in my life, where I'm about to be flung into the great unknown, I understand that there is the distinct possibility that I could very well flail and flounder out there. It's even more likely than not that caprice will both irradiate and plague my reality for some time before I have any idea of the kind of life that I want to live. That's why they call it the glory days—because people have the retrospect at an older age to look back at their youth and think, “Yeah, maybe my meals were cheese sandwiches and yeah, I didn't know where I'd wake up on Sunday morning, but that's the price you pay for a reduced hangover and less cellulite and decent vision”. They call it the glory days because they're presently immersed in the comfort of their prosaic lifestyle and the only movie that's playing on their flat screen television is nostalgia.

As time plods on, as I feel myself growing up and learning—I hope—I find myself more comfortable amidst the sinking feeling of pandemonium, in the hopelessness of a hangover, in the throes of layered secrets and missed trains and unanswered calls. Whether it's because these states of mind and body are excuses for me to cry and laugh when I want, or whether it's because I really do just enjoy the turbulence of life, it doesn't matter. I've realized that in simplicity, there is boredom, and in happiness there is nothing to write about. Those Saturday mornings, while

beautiful, are just memories, not stories. My fascination with eggs is both a little gross and wholly uninspired, and a complete distraction from what's really going on in my head.

When did I become such a pessimist? I didn't inherit it, not from my dad and not from my mom; I didn't wish for it; in fact, I don't think I even grew into it. I've always been this way, dissatisfied with smooth sailing, wanting my life to be dark yet colorful, dramatic and ornate, like the baroque paintings I once printed onto the back of flashcards for a college exam. Life should be a polygraph, spiking and plummeting because things might just be more exciting that way. When did I become so addicted to turmoil and spectacles? When did this obsessive rejection of happiness, this dark little seed, take root in my head?

There's this song out there that makes me feel hopeful. There are no words because the melody is soulful enough. I don't understand jazz, but I don't think I have ever felt so sad and so at peace at the same time. It's my equivalent of having a good cry, though the two sometimes go hand in hand. This song—Julian Lage's "Nocturne"—grounds me in a balanced sweetness of all the things I need to push on: it gives me those Saturday mornings, those walks down Elm Street, the drama of youth, and the indifference of old age. It's the only thing I've ever seen myself in that convinces me things will be just fine. My dad showed it to me.

Every year, once a year, I ask my parents if they're happy. I don't mean to be mean, though it does always come off as a little harsh, and I never expect the question to come tumbling out of my mouth. My wretchedness—leftover from adolescence—seeps into today, a subtle splotch on the fabric of our relationship, much like an oil stain on an old pair of jeans. I think it's because I can't understand why my mom is so content with being a middle school teacher to the offspring of the Massachusetts North Shore's wealthiest and most waspy or why she puts up the one hour commute to do so. I can't understand why my dad, a poet at heart, is

still rushing to do dorm duty on a Tuesday night or chaperoning dances to make sure that the 16-year-olds at one of the nation's most prestigious high schools aren't grinding too closely.

I must ask myself, too. If I'm happy. Because that's my responsibility as a human being. The comedown from a high off anything, whether it be illicit or wholesome, is a crisp, painful clarity, like the blade of a kitchen knife cracking down on the cutting board, gliding through the meat of an apple, bleeding juice. It's when my answers come to me. Not sitting in my therapist's corner office or at lunch with old friends or during those theoretical late-night journal entries that everyone wants me to partake in. They come to me on a Sunday when I'm at college. A storm has hit us and the snow on the front porch remains untouched. It looks so clean that, for a split second, I imagine diving into it. I want it to cleanse me so thoroughly that this afternoon, when my dad pulls up to my apartment in our green station wagon, I'll be able to look him in the eyes. I want it to mute the outside world so completely that I can't hear the noise of the university waking up, a din that is so deafening on these days I can't even stand to open my eyes. Once again, I've found myself standing beneath a cloudless sky, too cloudless for a Sunday, but this time, no one is holding my hand and no one is looking for me or worrying about me. He's just expecting me to be standing there and to be ok.