

Between Joy and Jealousy

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To all those who have shaped me in some magnificent way, thank you.



Preface

I was always a really good kid. I did my homework, ate my vegetables, and made my bed. I was happy and I wanted everyone else to be happy too. So when I began this project, I was not prepared to face the reality of what surfaced.

Quite unexpectedly, I found myself drawn to themes of loneliness and loss, of interpersonal connection, and finding center in the midst of transition. Because, when I really got down to it, I discovered that growing up is often a lonely process. The journey of moving from childhood to adulthood is one that you have to complete on your own. It's a solitary pilgrimage of self-reflection and choice.

Thus, this project sought to examine those moments of seclusion and isolation in some way, digging deep into the idea that every situation is either making a connection or retracting from it. There is conflict embedded in the very nature of this journey.

For me, this has manifested in my navigation of extremes—the reaching out and the pulling in—as I relate to my family and friends. Walking this narrow rope will likely be a lifetime commitment, as I begin to unravel who I am and who I can become.

Sheriff's Office

I am wearing a pair of Mary Janes, white ones that Velcro over the arch of my five-year-old feet. Still small and soft and swinging, not yet reaching the dingy floor below. Whoosh, whoosh, they glide forward and back, forward and back, until my Mom reaches out and places a palm gently on my right knee. The swinging makes her seasick.

So I oblige and snuggle in beside her, leaning my cheek against her as she wraps an arm around my back. She is warm, an island of relief against the bitter cold of the Harford County Sheriff's Office. It is late summer, almost seven p.m., the AC is on full blast, and I'm not wearing a sweater.

We are the only two in the lobby, a small quarantined section between the outside doors and the doors that lead to the desk where a sheriff, positioned behind a glass casing, is always on duty. I can't help but wonder if anyone ever talks to the sheriff. Does he sit there on his own?

Even I know, at my age, that the town of Bel Air is relatively crime-free. Not like the bad areas we drive through in downtown Baltimore.

Outside, the light is just beginning to fade. The lingering beams cast their rays over the courthouse and across the street to where we sit, waiting for my father to arrive. He is usually late. But I don't really mind.

We can always hear his approach. His ancient Mercedes rattling up the otherwise empty Main Street and coming to a halt outside. We watch as he lumbers from the driver's side to the rear passenger's side, to toss the junk that has accumulated there in the past week into his trunk.

"I love you." Mom gives me a kiss.

I want to stay. "I love you, too."

I begin to steel myself for my departure, disengaging from my feelings, opinions, and enthusiasm, all of which are subject to his disapproval.

Mom and I walk to the car and the exchange between my parents is brief. I hug my mom once more before disappearing into the back seat. The door is heavy as I swing it closed behind me.

The light from her headlights fills up the rearview mirror as she pulls away from the Sheriff's office. Sometimes, at the intersection around the corner, we will pull up beside her. I will wave and blow kisses, tucked away in the darkness, out of my Dad's sight. And then we are gone.



The View

Sitting outside of my favorite restaurant, casually occupying a small sidewalk table, it seemed that everyone around me was gathered in pairs. The women to my left. The couple to my right. The group meandering down the street, licking dripping ice cream cones and pushing their bikes.

It was another hot July day in Munich, the kind of day that sends you into the shade and keeps you there until dusk. But I had surfaced multiple times already, walking myself to the museums and the English Garden and finally to Café Gratitude, where I sat, watching everyone else eek by.

This was the first moment of stillness in my day. And in that stillness, I was acutely aware of myself. The chair opposite mine was empty. The opportunity for conversation, nonexistent. I had stories to tell, but no one to listen.

But I had chosen this, and I could not regret it.



Fried Mamoos

It was hot in the kitchen, a late-summer, blistering sort of heat that stuck to you, from the moment you opened your eyes, to the moment you fell asleep. And I was alone, finally, with only a few tomatoes, flour, breadcrumbs, salt, and pepper.

Carefully, I began to slice the tomatoes, wondering how Nina always did it, wondering why I never paid more attention.

In truth, the preparation never interested me. But as soon as I heard the first slice of breaded tomato hit the hot oil, I would be there, in the kitchen, perched on my wooden stool as my mouth watered.

Nina's fried mamoos could not be beat. In her air conditioned kitchen, with afternoon light streaming in through the windows, I would wait with bated breath, the excitement tensing up the back of my throat, urging me closer.

A series of loud oil pops signaled that the other sides had been flipped. We were getting close. And by the time the last one had been plucked from the oil, sprinkled with salt, and set to dry on a paper towel, I would have a fork in hand, ready to dive in as soon as the plate hit the table.

Crunchy, sweet, and savory in a single bite, the way all fried mamoos should be. I did not need to be reminded to help myself to more.

I wish I could have gathered up that feeling, the satisfaction and wholeness that Nina's fried mamoos always offered. But my attempts felt incomplete.



Trautenwolfstraße 6

I lay on my back, a single sheet pulled up to my chin, already trapping too much of the mid-summer heat, as I listened to the bustle of the streets below. Munich was always so vividly awake in these long, hot days that slid into endless, blissful nights. To my left, a trapezoidal window revealed the deep purple of the star-studded sky. It was dark in Gudrun's apartment, but it was darker up there.

My open windows let in the sounds of laughter and cheers, the faint air of smoke sometimes wafting up from the bar on the corner, the place where Trautenwolfstraße met Leopoldstraße and the whole world burst into view.

In the cafes, musicians riffed in lyrical jazz tunes while couples and friends, seated at tables that spilled across the wide sidewalk, shared the events of their day. In the bars, groups laughed, mouths open, heads tossed back to the sky, as they clinked glasses and drank to their health.

In the ice cream parlors, people navigated the closely packed tables, lifting purses overhead to squeeze into the few remaining seats, while waiters balanced towering cones and tiny coffees, never miscalculating a step. And on the streets, lovers held hands and children ran free, delighting in the warmth of the late evening.

I smiled, the effervescence of it all so painfully irresistible. I loved to hear it, but I yearned to be in it.

Joy and jealousy, my closest friends in this place.



Watching

In one quick motion, the fabric band came loose from the face of my watch. Stunned by the suddenness of it, I held the pieces in my hand. Poppy had always been able to bring a watch back from the brink of death.

I would sit at Nina and Poppy's kitchen table. It was white tile, a choice Nina immediately regretted because of the difficulty she had keeping it clean, but I never really minded. I would sit on one side and wait as Poppy found his watch-fixing toolkit: a small, black box that held thin spear-like objects with the power to change time.

Poppy would set the toolkit down and then set himself down on the stool opposite me. He is tall, with hair that stayed black well into his 70's, and a keen mathematical mind. Replacing watch batteries was just another form of problem solving.

He was always careful in these crucial moments, his large fingers cautious with the small parts, while I looked on. Back then, it seemed that there was nothing that could not be brought back into use. But what was I to do with this newly broken watch? This irreparable break that no tools could fix?

I set it behind my bed, to let it tick out its days in peace.



Breakfast

The smell of fried eggs takes me back to my Nina's kitchen. There is something distinctive about the smell. It is yellow and oily, warm and savory, and I am sitting on a wooden stool in the kitchen, watching Nina sprinkle salt and pepper over the pan, while the news plays in the background.

I am eight years old and barefoot, wearing a light nightshirt and dangling my feet around the legs of the stool. Because it is summer. June. Not yet eight o' clock.

Never mind that I no longer eat eggs. Never mind that I am no longer on that stool. The smell knows just where to take me. It never fails.

Nina is wearing a pink nightdress from the Sheep & Wool festival. She is soft and warm and I have already pressed myself into her, feeling safe and loved from the moment I enter the kitchen. The dogs, all three of them, are gathered around her feet. Because they are smart and she is generous.

I will sing for her. I have always sung. And I have always been the baby. On this morning, I am not too far gone from the girl who would put on a pink tutu, let her un-cut curly hair loose around her waist, and jump on the living room furniture, dancing and singing and putting on a show. My mom will join in. Nina and Poppy will watch. And in my mind, I am their star.

I like it this way, so I do not question the fact that no one else I know lives with their grandparents. I am special.

After all, Nina and I share the same birthday. We have a connection that stretches beyond what we can see. I know this because when I am craving her famous spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, and I walk in the door that afternoon, she will be making them. And it's happened more than once.

The eggs are done now. I can hear them calling out to us from the skillet. I mostly like the crispy edge of the egg white. I like the golden crunch and the way it looks like lace because Nina knows exactly how to make it the crunchiest for me. I will not eat the yolk. I will probably give it to Poppy, or one of the dogs, if he isn't interested. Because we are all a part of this cycle, this contained space. We give and take and coexist in this sunny side up egg way.

But now, when I smell frying eggs, I am not home. It is not summer and I am not barefoot or carefree or small. I wear shoes and denounce the egg industry. So perhaps I shouldn't have these nostalgic egg memories so close to my heart.

But it's not a choice. The smell will always bring me back.



Christmas Eve

On Christmas Eve, we arrive at my aunt's house—the house of one of many aunts—as the sun begins to set on another short-short day.

Nina is the pierogi queen, the master of butter and dough and mashed potatoes steaming with cheese. And although she can and does grace the dinner table with pierogies throughout the year, the Christmas Eve ones are bursting with magic, somehow more delicate and delicious than they are on any other day.

My aunt and uncle have music playing in the kitchen—Christmas classics that heat up a fire of nostalgia deep in the pit of my stomach and make me feel whole. Christmas Eve has always been my favorite.

When we arrive, we help Nina fill the pierogies, then fold and fork them, creating little rectangles of soft, pudgy dough. My uncle mans the seafood scampi. He will add too much garlic and Nina will complain to us in a few days, but for now she is busy with her task and he is busy with his. He occasionally peeks into the oven to check on his famous crab cakes. He makes them from memory only once a year. They too, carry their own mystique, their own sense of wonder.

As the pierogies begin to swim in their boiling water and the scampi begins to bubble after a showy addition of alcohol to set the pan aflame, my uncle turns up the music and begins to dance.

Nina joins him, lifting her flour-dusted hands into the air and swaying her hips and moving her shoulders. They bump butts by the stove—each consumed by the experience of the rhythm in their bodies—and laugh.

Sometimes I try to capture the moment in a picture—the radiant twinkle in Nina's eyes, the warm glow of the kitchen. Sometimes I just enjoy



Chicago

My mind is foggy as I sit, half-slumped on the train from Chicago O'Hare Airport, speeding towards the city. We race past soccer fields and suburban homes. The sky, excruciatingly blue, dazzles outside, while the city, all greys and skyscrapers, looms on the horizon.

It was a late night and an early morning and now a faint throbbing has gathered momentum in my head. I recline as much as I can, wishing that this train would slow down, just a little, so I can get my bearings.

This city is so new to me. The people, the customs, the collective history, are all topics that are yet unknown. And I am unsure of how to begin.

The train stops and I disembark, carrying my things to an empty space on the platform. All around me, there are people who know what they are doing and where they are going and how they can be most useful. I am not one of those people. Not yet.



Rigatoni

I sidled up to the kitchen table of my friend Maddie's house, stomach grumbling for our late lunch. The kitchen was dark, but not for lack of sunlight. The pressed board cabinets were stained a deep brown and the linoleum floor was covered in fading pink flowers.

Miss Agatha, wild brown hair piled high on her head, drained a pot of rigatoni noodles, sliding them back into their pot as she popped a jar of tomato sauce into the microwave. A jar, the store-bought kind.

There was something exotic about this jar filled with smooth, red sauce. In my young life, I had grown to know tomato sauce as a special treat that Nina made every August. The process is hot and wet and red, but she has always done it, and it is something she will always do.

Nina's tomatoes are a commodity to be treasured, a thing of beauty to be lovingly warmed on the stove, with a bit of extra tomato paste to get the consistency just right. Never before had the microwave and a jar of store bought sauce been an option. My mind raced with possibility, with the newness that had begun to unfold.



Return

I was hungry and tired. My clothes felt wrinkled and my face, oily. I wanted to shower. I wanted to glide through customs unnoticed and find my way home. But I was far from home, and many days from getting there.

From Munich, I had just spent a whirlwind 22 hours in Stockholm and then boarded an 11-hour plane, headed to San Francisco. We had finally landed. I was finally here.

I shuffled towards customs with the rest of the bedraggled passengers and took my place in line, in sweaty flats with strangers. On the other side awaited one of my friends. More akin to a brother than an acquaintance, he had kindly arrived early. He'd sent me a text to let me know he was already there, seated, with a book, so I shouldn't worry about hurrying through my re-entry.

I sensed the strangeness of my position, stuck in an endless line, yet so close to a reunion.

It had been weeks since I'd spent time with someone I truly knew, weeks since I'd had to connect on a personal level. Suddenly the idea was overwhelming. It was like some small part of me needed rewiring. The pathways of interpersonal connection needed some re-booting.

So I was not sure what to do when my friend, the one who had dutifully arrived early and waited for over an hour, rushed towards me as soon as he saw me come through the arrivals doors.

In that moment, I was greasy and fatigued, but also jolted alive with an overwhelming sense of appreciation.

"I missed you so much," he exclaimed, engulfing me in the biggest hug, the force of which sent my carry-on clattering to the floor.

The sound reverberated in my ears as I laughed. I squeezed him back. I think I missed him too.



I-95 / Harbor Tunnel

Strapped into the back seat of my Dad's car I looked down at my lap. It was summer, a hot, vivid day in the middle of July, and I was still small enough to sit in my favorite seat, the middle one in the back.

I remember exactly what I was wearing as we sped into the Harbor Tunnel, the scenery changing from the blistering highway to the cool, dim passage to take us underground. In an instant, day to night and the car was bathed in that familiar, eerie orange glow.

On top, a green, short sleeve shirt with cap sleeves. It may have been a little too tight, but I was six, maybe, and it didn't really matter. On bottom, a purple skirt, most probably a skort, as I was always fond of those. Made of scrunchy fabric and skimming the tops of my knees. It was a good outfit, one I was proud of.

We were probably listening to the Christian radio station my dad insisted upon playing every chance he got. It always felt so foreign to me. I never knew any of the words.

But as we drove out of the tunnel, the rolling trill of a police siren drowned out the noise. My dad switched off the radio. The siren was trilling at us. So he pulled off to the side, out of the way of the other cars picking up speed to continue on their journeys.

I don't remember the exchange that followed, but before I knew it, I was asked to follow one policeman to his car. My dad was brought to another.

The Harbor Tunnel is right below a several story police station, so the drive to our destination was not long. All I knew was that the police needed my dad. Something was wrong, but no one seemed eager to explain it to me.

When we reached the police station, the policeman whose car I'd been in led me inside. As we waited for the elevator, he turned and looked down to where I stood.

"Do you know your mom's phone number?" He asked.

My whole face lit up. I did, indeed know this number. I had just learned it. How convenient that he should ask! I felt myself swell with pride at my ability to recite such important information.

I knew she would answer. I couldn't help but to imagine how pleased she would be to hear that the policeman had reached her because I had remembered what number to call. This was a success.

We took the elevator to the second floor and I was allowed to say goodbye to my dad.

At first, I almost didn't recognize him, leaning forward on his knees, his head in his hands, crying. It wasn't until that moment I realized I should be scared. I had never seen my dad cry before. It was not something I thought he could do. But there he was, crying. And there I was, standing before him, wondering if I should also cry, or if there was something else I needed to do.

I told him I had remembered Mom's phone number.

Once I said goodbye, I was led back to a big room with a new policeman. All along the wall were TV screens that showed different camera views in the tunnel. There were so many screens. So many different things to see. I watched them for what felt like a second, but what had to have been at least 45 minutes, until Mom arrived.

I held her hand on the way out.

