Lying and Other Fun Habits

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LYING AND OTHER FUN HABITS

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FORWARD

Personal Experience, Fiction, and How they Collide in Lying and Other Fun Habits

A little autobiography and a lot of imagination are best.

- Raymond Carver

Write what you know. According to Nathan Englander, this is the best piece of advice for writers, but it is also the most misunderstood. Growing up in a Jewish Orthodox community, Englander talks of how most his afternoons consisted of playing video games and sitting on his couch. Hardly Pulitzer Prize winning content. However, Englander points out that one does not have to leave their couch to experience a myriad of emotions, and that is what engages readers.

Admittedly, “write what you know” was a phrase I struggled with while worked through my collection. The phrase was taunting, condescending even. How simple, to write what you know, and yet so egocentric. What could I possibly know that would different enough or profound enough to interest you, my reader? In many ways, Englander’s understanding of this common advice gave me a freedom to explore my own world, while also using my personal experiences to imagine other’s. He helped me realize and accept that writing what you know isn’t just writing a purely autobiographical story about my relationship with my parents or my first breakup. Englander asserts that writing what you know is empathic advice. It’s about knowing and understanding your first heartbreak and then being able to shape that into fiction. It’s about being a college-aged girl and imagining heartbreak as a forty-year-old-man, as I attempted in “How to Survive when You’re Forty and Love Dies.” It’s about recognizing my emotions about admiration and love when studying my parents, and imagining life without that, as I tried in “Descent.” Writing what I know did not mean I was limited to my experiences as a
middle-class, twenty-one-year-old woman. Rather, it meant that I was liberated to tap into a deep emotional well, and then craft those emotions into the fiction I wanted to write.

The setting of all the stories in *Lying and Other Fun Habits* is in a small, fictional town called Fieldbrook, which is based off my own New England hometown. While this setting is more important in some stories than others, it helped me ground my stories in a place I knew intimately, so I was free to explore the common idea that thematically ties this thesis together: identity. I realized that I held a strong interest in how people felt, grew, and reacted in the spaces that they found themselves in. I left a small town and went to a small school, and this coming summer I will be moving to a big city. While there were similarities and differences in all these places, one common thread is how we hold such an emotional stake in what others think of us—be it a neighbor, our mother, or even a stranger passing on the street. That idea of such an emotional and unstable sense of identity helped inspire me as I wrote this thesis.

The idea of exploring and understanding personal identity is also evident in the various forms and style I explored in this work. This collection, in many ways, embodies the themes of identity with the different constructions of each story. One is written in the first-person plural, some are dialogue heavy, and some have namely any dialogue at all. With this being a cumulation of all my work as a Creative Writing major here at Trinity, I wanted to fully embrace and explore all the different varieties of style that I could. That being said, I believe that in order to fully grasp what this collection is attempting to convey, it is important to know my influences.

I’d always found the best short stories to be the most mundane ones that focused on understanding something about human relationships. It always astounded me when ten pages later, I realized that we’d yet to leave a living room. Or to read an entire dinner conversation, one that spanned from domestic abuse to cheese and crackers, only to end with the sense that nothing
had been communicated at all. Raymond Carver, in his simplicity and wit, has always been able to achieve all this and more. His stories take the seemingly ordinary and minimalistic and oftentimes add a perverted twist. Take “Fat,” for example, from his collection *Will You Please be Quiet, Please?* Extremely boiled down, “Fat” is about a waitress telling her listener, Rita, about a big meal she served to an obese consumer. The plot, seemingly simple, gives way to horrifically grotesque and yet strangely beautiful imagery, and leaves readers feeling haunted.

In all his stories, Carver does an excellent job of looking at the world around him and the people in it and transforming all of that into wonderful stories about how we communicate and understand one another, a tendency that I was hoping to replicate in my own collection. In his story “They’re Not Your Husband,” Carver notes the way we react to other people—both our loved ones and complete strangers. There are undertones of these dynamics in all of my stories, be it the us versus them tension of the in “The Bardot’s Situation,” or the desire that Frankie Lee feels to be acknowledged by her mourning mother in “Descent.” So much of how we see ourselves is through the eyes of others, and in many ways this collection attempts to comment on that. Carver has been a strong inspiration for following along with that theme.

In addition to Carver, I looked to the work of contemporary writer Joshua Ferris. The influence of his debut novel *Then We Came to the End* is obvious in my first story, “The Bardot’s Situation,” for which I looked to see how he maneuvered the challenge of writing in the first-person plural. In quick summation, Ferris’s novel is about the office-workers in a Chicago advertising agency that, according to the back of the book, are “coping with a business downturn in the time-honored way: through gossip, elaborate pranks, and increasingly frequent coffee breaks.” His work, both hilarious and refreshing, did more than just help me familiarize with the point-of-view I’d wanted to use. It was even more integral in helping me conquer the tricky task
of conveying the voices of individuals, while also portraying those individuals as a singular organism: the town of Fieldbrook, Connecticut. The fluidity through which Ferris moves in and out of perspective, as though we were studying each scene through a microscope, turning the knob to zoom in whenever we see something of particular interest, is impressive to me and was something I wanted to mimic in my own writing.

While our shared point-of-view choice is evident in his impact on “The Bardot’s Situation,” the sharp wit and interesting characters that mark his novel were also used as a guide in shaping two of my other stories, “Not Your Type” and “How to Survive when You’re Forty and Love Dies.” From erratic copywriters to neurotic accountants, the way Ferris describes and crafts his characters is enviable and was particularly helpful when imagining my characters in the aforementioned stories. The way his characters interacted—both in what they said and did in space—was both real and efficient. Ferris, in this efficiency, is somewhat similar to Carver. They are both able to say a lot, to set a scene or establish a mood, with less. Take this quick quote from the first few sentences from the novel as example:

“We were fractious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise. At least those of us who smoked had something to look forward to at ten-fifteen. Most of us liked everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two of us loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled.”

In five short sentences we are transported to this office, and we can clearly see the environment that this novel will take place in. That is the type of efficiency in writing wonderful simplicity that I hope to one day master.

Carver and Ferris aside, when I first started writing Lying and Other Fun Habits, I didn’t know what it would shape into. Sometimes I was inspired by a place, like my hometown, which
led to more concrete storylines, like in the story about the Bardots. I’d wanted to better understand how people could live on the same street, pass each other daily on the sidewalk, eat at the same restaurants, and then brutally talk about one another behind each other’s backs. Others were more of a risk, like imagining myself as a forty-year-old-man in “How to Survive when You’re Forty and Love Dies” or a half-orphaned girl in “Descent.” In these I had to channel shared feeling and use my imagination to create fiction.

Regardless the story, however, I throughout writing this collection I found myself returning to the words of Nathan Englander. Write what you know. Not simply the autobiographical—no one enjoys reading a Facebook status update of everything they’d done since ten in the morning—but everything you have access to when utilizing the deeply emotional. The human. Lying and Other Fun Habits moves past concrete spaces and events that have shaped who I am as a person. The collection moves past that as it instead attempts to focus on what Englander claims we all know, and what is really important: the shared experiences of love, loss, longing, and all the more.
To my parents: who have been constant pillars of support.

Thanks for making it cool to be an English major, Dad.
The Bardots’ Situation

The Mainstreet Café was the only shop downtown with a large, billowing awning. We all joked that the awning was as big as the Café itself, and that it was a wonder the little place didn’t just blow away. This, of course, would be impossible since the Café was one of many small shops and boutiques sandwiched together on Main Street. If one shop were to go, they all would. Still, that awning was pretty awful, and while we joked that it was going to blow the little coffee shop away, what we all really hoped for was that one day the awning would catch a gust, rip right off, and fly far off into some other town. That or that our next mayor’s platform would consist entirely of awning reform and refining the attractiveness of downtown Fieldbrook.

Not that that awning kept any of us from going to the Mainstreet Café. Certainly not. For as much as we didn’t like that awning, we all loved the Café. It’s where we would go to congregate before work, after work, or on our lunch breaks. Some people, like Jane Ryan, would go there whenever the opportunity arrived. The Café was our social hub, and all types of Fieldbrook residents came together there. You’d find Geoffrey King the lawyer and Philippa Costa the doctor. You’d find old widows like Irene Hutchinson and construction workers like Tommy Knight. The Café had relatively inexpensive coffee, great little tea sandwiches, and even coloring books with yellowing pages for our kids to scribble on while we chatted with one another. Because that was what we loved most about the Mainstreet Café. More than any iced latte or poppy seed bagel bought there, we loved the opportunity to sit down and talk with one another.

And talk we did. We’d talk about how Lucy and Evan Patterson’s son brought two pot brownies to school and was expelled for the rest of the year, until further notice. We’d talk about how that girl Frankie Lee ran away. It shut the whole town down for a day, but the police
eventually found her camped out in a yellow slide at the town park. After we found her, we talked about what a bad job her mother must be doing, losing a little girl like that. We talked about how those two married teachers at the elementary school got caught together in the janitor’s closet. Because that was something that you didn’t do: you didn’t cheat, and, if for some reason you couldn’t resist, you didn’t get caught. News traveled incredibly fast in small towns, and there were really no secrets to be had. You abided by certain rules or else you ran the risk of becoming *that* person. Everyone would know you, and everyone would talk about you. So, we didn’t cheat on our spouses. We kept our lawns mowed. We did our best to stay on our neighbors’ good side. We tried to stay on the right side of all the gossip, and for the most part we did our jobs well. Then the Bardots moved to town, and that all went to shit.

The Bardot family moved to Fieldbrook from somewhere in upstate New York a few years back. For a long while, that was the extent of personal information that we knew about them. From the outside, they seemed to be ideal newcomers. They had moved into the new Holden Developments up in the hills on the edge of town. They had two young boys that were well behaved, but rebellious enough to not get teased in school for being too goody-goody. From what we saw at our children’s baseball games, school events, and via general outings, the wife Cecilia and the husband Richard never fought.

It also didn’t hurt that the entire family was gorgeous. Each had tanned skin and dark hair. Richard was tall and imposing with his wide, muscular chest and deep voice. We had all come to the conclusion that he’d been an athlete in college—maybe football? Lacrosse? And then there was Cecilia. Cecelia Bardot was stunningly beautiful in a way that even the most judgmental of us respected. Her makeup was always simple, and her dark curly hair was always worn back in a loose bun. Even her stray hairs seemed to be artfully tucked behind her ears or
haloing her petite face. She was the definition of pristine. The men among us couldn’t resist turning their heads when she walked by, and the women among us didn’t really blame them. We would sit and wonder where she found the time to go to the gym. We couldn’t decide if we loved or hated the Bardots because we wanted to be them so badly. They were normal, they were happy, and it made many of us itch with a desire to find something, anything, wrong with them.

Our wish was originally granted in the form of Jane Ryan. Now, Jane Ryan was something of a town gossip. She was mother of triplet thirteen-year-old boys that got themselves into large amounts of trouble, and most of us theorized that she so heavily involved herself in town buzz simply to distract herself—and everyone else—from the messes that her own kids caused. Usually it worked, though we tended to take everything she said with a grain of salt. When it came to the Bardots, however, we were all starving for any nugget of information we could get.

“Have you heard the newest about the Bardots?” Jane Ryan was standing with Philippa Costa in line at the Mainstreet Café.

“What?” said Philippa Costa. It was a Friday, and the peak time for the usual morning crowd. The café was loud and packed with costumers, eager for the weekend. “I can’t hear you.”

“I said, have you heard about Cecilia and Richard Bardot?” Jane asked again, this time significantly louder.

Philippa shook her head.

“Well,” Jane Ryan was nearly yelling by now, despite the fact that she was standing barely two feet from Philippa, “and don’t tell anyone this, but I could have sworn I saw Richard Bardot getting cozy with Jeanie Duxbury outside of Frankfurt’s the other night.”

“At Frankfurt’s?” Philippa repeated.
“What?” Jane Ryan called out.

“Next,” called out the barista, Rachel Douglas. She was a young girl that graduated from Fieldbrook high school a few years ago. None of us could remember if she had dropped out of school or was taking classes part time at the local community college. Too much time had passed, and now we were all afraid to ask. She had a nose ring, a tongue ring, and her hair was dyed pink. She was otherwise a pretty nice girl.

“I’ll have a red eye, Rachel,” Philippa said. She reached into her lab coat to fish out her wallet.

“That’ll be three seventy-five,” said Rachel. “Extra espresso—long day ahead of you?”

“Yes, and it’s Sophie’s birthday this weekend. Trying to plan a sleepover party for a ten-year-old is proving to be even more difficult than a twelve-hour shift at the hospital. Don’t have kids for as long as you can,” Philippa said with a laugh as Rachel busied herself behind the counter.

“She’s only half joking,” Jane Ryan added from behind Philippa’s shoulder. “And a large house for me, Rachel. But, yes, Philippa. Frankfurt’s.”

“That bar just a few shops down the road?”

“Almost certain it was them,” Jane said. “Isn’t that something?”

“Sure is,” said Philippa. She itched her chin. “But you’re certain it was Jeanie Duxbury that you saw with him?”

“Your coffee is ready, Philippa. I put it on the counter. Jane, yours will be another second.” Rachel paused for a second to wipe her hands on a dirty towel tied around her waist.

“And also, I’m sorry I was eavesdropping, but if you’re talking about Jeanie Duxbury and
Richard Bardot, I think saw them last weekend at Mario’s Pizzeria. But you want to know something even weirder? I’m pretty sure it was Cecilia that dropped them off.”

Cecilia dropping them off? We decided that Rachel was not taking classes at the community college because it took a certain level of stupid to even propose a rumor like that. It was one level of incredible and unbelievable for the perfect, aloof, and, perhaps, slightly pretentious Richard Bardot to be accused of getting caught up in an affair—with Jeanie Duxbury, no less. Jane Ryan’s rumor was palatable, but it was still hard to swallow. A scandal like the one she was proposing involved the most private and marveled at family with a particularly undesirable woman: Jeanie Duxbury. While some of us may have been able to get onboard with a rumor that the Bardots’ marriage was on the rocks, hardly anyone believed that Richard Bardot would cheat on Cecilia with someone like Jeanie Duxbury. And the only thing less believable than that? Rachel Douglas claiming that Cecilia Bardot was so dumb that she could be tricked into dropping off her husband and his mistress on one of their date nights.

Jane and Philippa acted shocked by Rachel’s news, and then mocked it later with us. Jane Ryan told the book club, which met at the Mainstreet Café on Wednesday afternoons. The book club had a terrible propensity for gossip, since most of the club members usually didn’t find time to read any of the books and wanted to put off faking that they had for as long as they could. It was also (mostly) a huge rumor mill because of the fact that Jane Ryan was a member. The first person Philippa Costa told was her mailman, Bob Hackers. The mailman was well liked by everyone in the community, not just Philippa Costa. However, the two of them had become particularly close after one spring when Philippa’s neighbor, Anders Weber, kept getting delivered strange packages. Over weeks of speculating what could be in those packages—an online shopping addiction? Maybe he sold drugs or had a long-distance girlfriend who kept
sending him gifts out of fear he would forget about her? —the packages were anticlimactically revealed to be small wood carvings that Anders’ father had been sending him from Germany. By then a great friendship had formed between Bob and Philippa. Also stemming from this event came a newfound nickname for Anders’ father: Geppetto. Anyways, Bob Hackers was slightly heavy set, balding, and had a great smile. The combination of all these characteristics tucked into a USPS uniform? Well, that made him downright adorable. It was a challenge to not be his friend.

The book club reacted to the news as expected: receptive to the idea of an affair, on the fence that it was with Jeanie Duxbury, and completely unbelieving that Cecilia knew anything about the two of them—never mind the idea that she could be so blind that she would unknowingly drive her husband and another woman to their dates. Stranger was the reaction from Bob Hackers. Later that week, Philippa told Jen Feinstein about how the mailman had seemed personally offended by all of the rumors and had shut Philippa down immediately once she’d brought up the Bardots.

“He goes to me, ‘Why would anyone believe that a woman like Cecelia Bardot would get cheated on? Richard has got more sense than that. Besides, they’re a lovely family. Just leave it all alone.’ Leave it alone? How are we supposed to leave a rumor like that alone?”

“Yeah,” Jen took a big sip of coffee. She was between nursing shifts at the ER and had on scrubs with little pugs that were also wearing scrubs all over it. She yawned. “Maybe he has a crush on Cecilia.”

Philippa laughed. “Well I think everyone in town has a crush on Cecilia. The woman has the best fashion sense, her makeup is always perfect, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen a hair out
of place on her head. Of course, sweet, little Hackers idolizes her, too. That doesn’t mean I don’t think the whole thing was weird. He was downright defensive.”

Jen Feinstein hummed. “I think the weirdest part is that out of everyone in town, it’s little saleswoman Jeanie Duxbury that gets to be in bed with Richard Bardot.”

It was weird, and it made some of us mad. Sure, we were intrigued—captivated—watching the potential destruction of such an elegant and grandiose couple. We were not as eager to watch Jeanie Duxbury as the reason for its downfall. Some of us that didn’t like others, and usually it was for silly reasons—like their daughter got more playing time on the softball team or because one time they were sitting in our seat at the café. But for the most part, everybody got along with just about everyone in town, or least made an effort to. Jeanie Duxbury, however, was the one person universally disliked by everyone in town.

And while we might have been prone to gossip, we weren’t senselessly malicious. There were reasons why we couldn’t stand Jeanie Duxbury. Her obnoxious, bright pink Mary Kay Cadillac for example. She was a beauty consultant for a company called Mary Kay, and we’d cringe when we saw that horrible car because we knew that it meant that Jeanie Duxbury was near and that soon she’d be trying to sell us blush or mascara or something. And who wanted to be pigeonholed for fifteen minutes into talking about cosmetics? The woman was always trying to sell us something, and for that we hated her. Even worse? She was good at it. Most of us had such an awkward time saying no, so half the time we ended up buying some crap we didn’t need just to finish the conversation. It was a vicious cycle, and even though we hated Jeanie Duxbury and her Mary Kay products, we couldn’t stop buying them. The idea that a woman this annoying could be seeing someone like Richard Bardot? He was practically George Clooney in Fieldbrook. Handsome, confident… and he had an equally beautiful wife and children at home.
It infuriated us. We became equal parts jealous, insecure, and patronizing. We suddenly cared way more about Cecilia than we ever had before—how could she do this to Cecilia? How could she do this to their marriage? Their kids? Jeanie Duxbury went from being annoying to the devil.

As always, after Jane and Philippa broke the news, more and more people started coming out of the woodwork. One night, Jen Feinstein had gone on a date with her boyfriend to a movie theater in the town over. While there, she swore that she saw Richard and Jeanie there, holding hands as they waited for popcorn. Grace Rogers said she spotted Richard’s black BMW driving around up on Second Hill, far from his home in the new Holden Developments and suspiciously close to Jeanie’s house. Philippa Costa swore she saw them getting breakfast one Saturday morning. She’d said they were trying to hide, tucked all the way into a back-corner booth at the diner. Then the rumors started to get weirder. Like Geoffrey King’s allegation, a lawyer in town who specialized in family law and had taken a particular interest in the Bardot storyline. He swore he saw the two of them steal a quick kiss once after getting out of a car right in front of the Mainstreet Café. C’mon Geoffrey, in broad daylight? we’d said. In such a public place that all of us go to? He caught a lot of shit for that one, and the rumor didn’t even end there. Apparently, the car Richard and Jeanie had gotten out of? Apparently, it’d had another couple in the front seat. We still thought he was being ridiculous, but suddenly, we were all giving Rachel Barton’s story a little more thought. Just to, you know, make sure we had all our bases covered.

“When you saw them at the movies,” Sarah Hill started, “did they really look that cozy? Maybe this is all just one big coincidence. Maybe they just like the same movies? And they’re people that like to go alone? These are big allegations after all.”

A few of us were sitting at book club, but Cecilia had walked in about five minutes into the meeting, and we hadn’t been able to move past the topic of the Bardots since. Sarah Hill,
pregnant with her third child and an overall apprehensive person in general, was having a hard time getting on board with an affair at all.

Next to Sarah, Jane Ryan rolled her eyes. “That’s a pretty big coincidence, don’t you think, Sarah?”

“They looked extremely cozy,” Jen Feinstein assured her. “I remember looking at how they were acting, holding hands and cuddling in public like that, and thinking not even my boyfriend touches me like that. Who I am supposed to be dating. It was kind of offensive.” She paused for a moment. “I also don’t get it. Do we really think that Cecilia knows? Or would support something like this? God, I would be so mad at the thought of Joseph even looking at another woman—”

“I don’t know,” Grace Ferguson interrupted. “It sounds like they’re in an open relationship. Could be sexy. Do you think they all sleep together?”

“Grace!” yelled Jane Ryan. “That is disgusting.”

“All of them? You think?” Sarah Hill asked. It was difficult to tell whether she was more mortified or curious.

“Derek, what do you think? You’re a guy. We need a guy’s opinion on this,” said Jen Feinstein.

Derek Moore was a tech assistant at the hospital. When Jen had found out he also majored in literature at college she had invited him to join the book club. He and Irene Hutchinson were the only ones who actually read the books, and he flushed when Jen asked his opinion. “Well—I mean, I think it’s hard to say considering we don’t know a lot—”

Jane Ryan snorted. “Objectively speaking, though, Derek. Would you find an open marriage sexy?”
“I guess—”

“Disgusting,” Jane Ryan cut in.

“Really?” asked Jen Feinstein.

Sarah Hill was as red as a tomato. She sat at the end of the table, anxiously rubbing her pregnant belly.

“I agree with Derek. Maybe I wouldn’t have done it—I didn’t do it—but I do find the idea interesting,” Irene Hutcheson said. It was the first thing she’d said about the Bardot situation since the group had started talking, and everyone sat in awe as she continued. “An open relationship. Probably quite the trip.”

Quite the trip. Whether or not we said it out loud like old Irene Hutcheson, we all thought it was quite the trip. We wondered what the rules of open marriages were. Was Richard just dating Jeanie? Enjoying her company? Surely he was sleeping with her as well. Were they all sleeping together? Was there some sort of quota? Was Cecilia seeing someone? Wives and husbands next to one another, we lay awake at night and thought about the Bardots. We thought about the handsome Richard and the gorgeous Cecilia Bardot. We wondered if there was space in their bed between the two of them like there were spaces in ours. Did they snuggle? Was Jeanie there? Did she sleep between them or off to the side? We imagined who would be next if Jeanie was a standard. Another woman or a man? Were relationships in open marriages long term, or was that taboo?

No, no it was all taboo of course. All of it, and while we may have permitted ourselves to think about the innerworkings of an open marriage at night—while we may have even imagined who we’d have invited into our own marriages—we very openly condemned it in the daylight with one another. One of the easiest ways to do that was by continuing to deny that idea that
there even was an open relationship to begin with. Despite many sources who’d claimed to have seen all three of the suspects together, there were many of us who simply refused to believe in anything more than the average affair. Still exciting and still disapproved, but much more agreeable than an open relationship in terms of believable scandal. One of the more conservative was the ever-worrying Sarah Hill who, now more anxious than ever as she entered her third trimester, started voicing her doubts in book club meetings.

“You keep saying, ‘Oh I saw them here, Oh I saw them there,’ and I just don’t believe that you see them anywhere,” Sarah said to Jane Ryan one afternoon. Though usually quiet, Sarah was practically bursting at the seams, and she’d spent the earlier half of book club talking about her swollen feet, so she was probably very irritable. “I mean I can understand cheating. It’s happened before, even to perfect women. I mean, come on, Jay-Z cheating on Beyoncé? Ridiculous, but not unheard of. Richard may cheat on Cecilia, but there is no way that there is any type of open,” she groaned, “I can’t even say it. I mean, come on people, they’re from 

upstate New York. That’s like three hours from here. They’re not some weird gypsy people or Californians or something.”

“So, you think I’m a liar?”

“I’m not saying you’re a liar. Maybe you really think you saw Cecilia, Jeanie, and Richard when it was really someone else in the car with them.”

“Like who?”

“Ladies—”

“Shut up, Derek,” Sarah Hill snapped. In her hand, her plastic water bottle crinkled beneath a tightening grip. “Jane, any single other person. Anyone else would be more believable than Cecilia Bardot being in that car with them.”
“You want evidence?” Jane Ryan’s tone was threatening. It was surprising her kids weren’t more well behaved when she could achieve an inflection like that.

“I want everyone to stop acting like the world is falling apart just because of some stupid rumor.” By now that water bottle was concaved, and Sarah was holding her stomach not anxiously like she usually did, but in a protective, mother bear way. Like at any second, she was going to throw down that water bottle and smack Jane Ryan right out of the Mainstreet Café. Instead, she said, “Marriage is between two people. It’s between a husband and a wife, a wife and a husband, a husband and a husband. You know what? I don’t care what the pairing is. I just care that it’s a pair. What I will not stand for, and what I will not have you all talking about as I prepare to bring this child onto the earth, is more nonsense about this open marriage bullshit.”

Sarah Hill didn’t yell, but she may as well have. The Mainstreet Café was hushed. Even Jane Ryan didn’t have anything to say, choosing to open her book and busy herself with the acknowledgement page than reply because at the very moment of Sarah Hill’s outburst walked in Cecilia Bardot. And to top it off? Just as though all the townspeople of Fieldbrook were in some type of in a terrible romantic comedy, Cecilia Bardot came in holding the hand of our favorite little mailman, Bob Hackers. We stared. We stared at their intertwined hands. At Bob Hackers’s bald little head. Quickly, we looked around to see if Jeanie Duxbury or Richard were anywhere in sight, and when we realized they weren’t, we went right back to staring at their hands. We wondered what size bed the Bardots must have to fit four people.

To his credit, Hackers looked incredibly uncomfortable. Certainly, it had been Cecilia’s idea to come into the coffee store. The woman looked no more fazed than if she were taking a nice stroll on the street. She whispered something in the mailman’s ear before he nodded and went up towards Rachel Barton at the barista station. Rachel was probably the only one in the
whole shop who looked happy to see the couple. Actually, smug was probably the better word.
When retelling the story to Philippa Costa the next day, Jen Feinstein said that she swore she saw
the young girl stick her tongue out at Jane Ryan when the two of them walked in. As Hackers
ordered two iced coffees, Cecilia made her way towards the book club. She was wearing a long,
black skirt that flowed ominously as she walked. Everyone in the store held their breath as they
tried to watch the interaction over their drinks and magazines.

“Cecilia.” Jane Ryan, of course, was the first to break the silence. “How nice to see you.”
She paused. “And with Bob Hackers.”

“Hello, Jane! He’s a lovely man, isn’t he?”

Oh, Cecilia. Was she taunting us? Jen Feinstein and Sarah Hill exchanged a look across
the table. Perhaps she and Richard were, in fact, divorcing. That’s why they were both seeing
these people. Now that we were staring her—them—right in the face we couldn’t even entertain
the idea of an open marriage. It was ridiculous. The stuff of fantasies. How silly that we would
take the word of a young girl with pink hair and a tongue ring. How silly that we would ever
believe something like that.

“Yes, the best. Is he your mailman as well?”

Jane, no. No, Jane. Jane Ryan’s resolve was steely. She never broke eye contact with
Cecilia, but we all knew her motivation was Sarah Hill. She was proving a point. That and that
week one of her triplets had pantsed a kid during gym class, and it was also likely the care that
she was trying to stir up some new drama to take our attention away from the whole fiasco. It
was not a bad tactic, albeit probably unnecessary. We would probably have talk about just about
any before mentioning Michael Ryan getting detention for the billionth time that school year.
But, leave it to a mother to cover all bases for her child. Anyways, it was evident that everyone at
Jane Ryan’s table wanted to die. Everyone else in the shop wanted her to keep going, so long as they could continue to watch at a distance.

“Oh, no. We actually met via Jeanie Duxbury? Wonderful woman. She sells Mary Kay product. I actually got this lipstick from her—Anyhow, she introduced Bob and I, and now we are here on a little date.”

“A date? Like friends?”

We all held our breaths. Imagine the Mainstreet Café condensing with the sudden intake of air like in a kid’s cartoon.

“Like dating,” Cecilia said. Another breath in. “We have been seeing each other for a few months.”

Our exhalation then may have been strong enough to finally blow away that awful awning at the front of the store. There it was. There was the confirmation. Sure, it wasn’t about Jeanie and Richard, but it was just as good. The Bardots and their happy, little marriage wasn’t what it seemed. They were done. They were so done that they were dating other people, and, even though these people were significant downgrades—Jeanie Duxbury and Bob Hackers, really? —they were neither involved in an affair or in some strange polyamorous new-age relationship. We’d over reacted. We’d all fallen victim to our own deranged imaginations and propensity to talk. For a moment, we really were just cliché little small town.

Then, Jane Ryan said, “Oh Cecilia, I’m happy to hear you’re together, but I didn’t know you and Richard were getting a divorce.”

Cecilia giggled. A grown woman giggled. She shook her head and looked at us like we were all little children, and she was an adult about to say, “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”
Instead, she said this: “That’s because we aren’t divorcing. We have an open marriage. I know it’s not very common, but we find it extremely enriching.”

Bob Hackers snuck behind her then with two iced coffees in hand, dwarfed not only by her physical height but also by Cecilia’s newfound presence in the room. She’d always had a rather captivating aura, but she’d just gone from mythical creature, to divorcee, back to mythical creature. So, we couldn’t really blame Bob Hackers. She was an enigma, and next to her we were all feeling small. Then again, Bob Hackers was also refusing to make eye contact with any of us, so naturally that, mixed with his small stature, wasn’t holding up well against all of our accusatory stares. We couldn’t really blame him, but we still would.

“Thank you, darling,” Cecilia said, noticing the mailman behind her. “You put soy in this right?”

Hackers nodded. Sarah Hill choked on the sip of water she’d been taking.

“Perfect. Well, it was wonderful seeing you all. See you soon.”

Iced coffee with soy in hand and Bob Hackers in tow, Cecilia Bardot left the Mainstreet Café and us in it. Speechless. What was there to say? The open marriage had been confirmed. What some of us suspected, what some of us feared, what some of us hoped for—it was all true. Actually, there was a lot to say.

“I told you,” Jane Ryan said.

“No,” Rachel Barton called from across the shop. She didn’t even look up from wiping the counter. “I told you, Jane, and Philippa. You guys mocked me.”

Geoffrey King entered the café, nearly breathless. “Did anyone else just see Cecilia Bardot and Bob Hackers walking down the street holding hands?”

“Join the party,” Jane Ryan muttered.
“I told you guys,” Geoffrey said. Threw a first into the air like he’d just won some sort of competition. “I told you I saw something fishy.”

“I was the one who said it first,” Rachel called again.

“So, what did she say? What’s going on?”

Jane Ryan retold the whole story, although the others in the café filled in whenever she went a little off script from what had happened. Bob Hackers, for example, did not “practically bow” when he handed Cecilia her coffee, and no, Cecilia did not look pregnant.

“She did look happy, though,” Jen Feinstein inserted. “She and Richard… They always look happy, don’t they?”

“Don’t go there, Jen.” Sarah Hill held her hand up. “Do not go there. It’s was weird. All of it was and is weird, and now, everyone is going to go off and start sleeping with everyone now that the Bardots have gone off and broken all the rules.”

“I’m just saying,” Jen continued. “They looked happy enough. Maybe they’re doing something right—”

“Stop that.” Then, with the tone and tenacity of a budding mother, Sarah Hill gave out an order. “We’re done talking about the Bardots. We are done talking about Jeanie Duxbury. You’re not even going to speak to me about Bob Hackers. This is over. She’s gone and confirmed it. We are going to let them live their screwed-up lives, and it will no longer interfere with mine, and I suggest you not let it interfere with yours. Open marriages are weird, and I know this is going to end in disaster.”

All of us in the Mainstreet Café nodded, even Jane Ryan. Sarah Hill was right. There were some things that just were. The sky was blue, the grass was green, and marriage was between two people. When those lines get blurred the word falls apart. When those lines get
blurred you start to envision your mailman in bed whenever you see him, or an envelope, or even a tiny package stamp. Whenever you put on your mascara or see the color pink you’ll think of Jeanie Duxbury, a woman who you’d never given any thought before, and wonder if her belly button is an innie or an outtie. You’ll wonder what she brings to the table. What she has that Richard or Cecilia Bardot could want. You wonder if you have it. You wonder if you want to have it. You lay beside your own sleeping husband or wife, and wonder if they want it. That’s why those lines aren’t supposed to blur. There’s much too much uncertainty in all that.

Life continued after we found out about the Bardots’ situation, despite what we’d thought at the time. For the most part, we followed Sarah Hill’s advice and stopped talking about them. We moved onto other things. Some were good, like the news that one of Jane Ryan’s triplets had somehow managed his way into the National Honor Society (although we’d only ever heard this from Jane, and some were beginning to question its legitimacy). Some was not so good, like the announcement that the Mainstreet Café was up for sale. Word was still out on if the new owners were planning on keeping the place a coffee shop. We hoped, at least, that whoever bought the new place would finally get rid of that awning. Jeanie Duxbury still drove around that pink Mary Kay car, and a few times Bob Hackers was spotted in the passenger seat, though no one thought that there was anything romantic going on between the two. No, all of that ended when the Bardots left, and now only Hackers and Jeanie remained. Sure, they still lived in Fieldbrook, but now they lived on the edges of the community. The mentioning of their names now come with undertones of promiscuity and scandal. They had no one left but one another. Hackers was outcasted, and Jeanie would surely lose her car soon. After all, there was no one willing to look her direction long enough for her to successfully sell any products.
That was the only time we broke our silence about the Bardots. It was for a few weeks, just a little while ago, when Jen Feinstein saw that their house was for sale. After only a few years, they were leaving Fieldbrook. And good riddance, right? Goodbye, Cecilia. Goodbye, Richard. Goodbye to their poor little boys that were going to grow up extremely confused and unsure about how relationships and marriage work. We were not going to miss them, and we welcomed the fact that we would no-longer run the risk of passing them on the street or in the grocery store. It was exhausting feigning friendliness when we saw them, which we’d had to do. We couldn’t cut ties when there were no ties to cut. After all, we hadn’t been already harboring a disdain for them like we’d been with Jeanie Duxbury, and the Bardots hadn’t betrayed us like Bob Hackers had. Even Philippa wasn’t talking to the mailman anymore. But the Bardots? They’d been strangers. Perfect, idealized strangers. They’d owed us nothing, and we’d expected everything. We weren’t going to ignore them on the sidewalk now, just because they’d turned out to be nothing we’d imagined.

But now, now that they were gone forever, we didn’t have to worry about that anymore. We didn’t have to deal with the shock to our systems that inevitably occurred whenever we saw them. How we felt like middle schoolers all over again, our hearts racing, our minds going a mile a minute. We didn’t want to feel that way anymore. Because even though we’d made a pact to stop talking about the Bardots, nothing could have made us stop thinking about them. Still at night, beside our sleeping spouses, but also sometimes at work, while we twirled a pen between our fingers. We would wonder whether it had been Cecilia or Richard that had first proposed polygamy. We’d watch our kids on the playground, pretend to read our Kindles and books, and wonder what she’d meant by “enriching.” We’d Google “open relationship” and then exit out of
the browser and clear the history before even reading any articles. Maybe tomorrow we’d garner the courage to click a link.
When I was eight-years-old my mom got me my first journal. It was dark blue. Bound. Hardcover. It was leather, and somehow it smelt like dirt and sweetness all at the same time. It had cream-colored pages with dark speckles on them. The pages smelled like old attics and musk. I remember that I used to stick my nose in the journal to breathe them in, and when I did that it felt like I was breathing in the whole earth. At first, I was afraid of that journal. The pages scared me. I thought that I needed something profound to write on pages like those, and I had nothing profound to say.

She gave it to me on my dad’s birthday. On his birthday it was tradition that we go to his favorite restaurant, and it was there that she took it out. It was wrapped in a newspaper. As she handed it to me she said that she had seen it and immediately thought of him. Then she thought of me. He was a writer, she’d said. I remember the journal shaking in her trembling hands. He wrote in his journal every day and every night about the people he’d seen, the places he’d gone, and the things he’d heard. I thought you would like to try it, Frankie Lee. I thought maybe you’d like to be a writer, just like your Dad. It would make him proud. When she said that, I realized that I’d yet to ever wonder if I was making him proud. I was young, after all, and I didn’t know my dad for very long. He died when I was a newborn, and his opinion of me hadn’t yet crossed my mind. That said, at eight-years-old, I was already an impressive child. I got good grades, or as good as they can be at that age. I was reading at elevated levels. I was told by my music teacher that I was something of a protegee, and, even though I hadn’t known exactly what protegee meant, I was excited about it. I wanted to be a child that someone was proud of, and I
was eager to please my mom. So, I took the journal. It would be a few years until I’d actually used it, but looking back, I think all that mattered to her was that I accepted the small gift.

Mom was busy. As a nurse she worked a lot. A few weeks after giving me the journal, she missed a violin recital because she’d worked a twelve-hour shift the night before, and she’d slept right through the performance. When I tried to wake her, she just rolled over, muttering a man’s name. One more minute, Gabriel, she’d said. I tried again, and, once more, she muttered a man’s name. It was hauntingly familiar, but I couldn’t place where I knew it from. So, I gave up trying to wake her and called my best friend, Alice. Her mom came to get me. We got there right before I was supposed to perform, and I won a ribbon. When I got back, Mom asked where I’d been. She looked like she hardly slept at all. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her skin was nearly translucent. She looked like she was ready to crawl back into bed at any minute, but there was a coffee on the counter. In a few more hours, she would go back to work. Mom, I asked. Who is Gabriel? Already pale, she became paler. She took a slow sip of coffee. Gabriel, she repeated. Gabriel was your dad’s name. Why do you ask, Frankie Lee? I’d only ever seen my dad’s name on his gravestone, which we didn’t visit it often. It always made Mom a wreck for days afterwards. We only ever went on special occasions. I think we went once on Christmas. That, as you could imagine, was a particularly shitty Christmas. I hardly ever heard his name before, and for some reason, hearing it then caused me to lie. I told her that I had gone to Alice’s house for the day. I also told her I didn’t want to play the violin anymore. She was tired, and we were always looking for ways to save money, so it took hardly any convincing to get her on board. Violin lessons, while enriching, we not a necessity.

That night I tossed my violin in the back of my closet. It was the first night I took out my blue journal since receiving it, and I wrote for hours. I didn’t care if what I wrote was profound.
A story about a girl whose dog ran away, I think I even tried to practice some of the things we were learning in school at the time—metaphors, similes, and things like that. I thought that if I quit the violin, I could focus all my being on becoming a writer. I could focus all my being on becoming a writer, and I would make my dead dad proud. I would become a successful writer, and I would make my living mom proud. I would become so successful, and I would make so much money that she wouldn’t need to work. She could relax and read what I wrote, like she used to read what my dad wrote, and maybe then I would remind her enough of my dad that she would want to be with me instead of dream about him.

I used to think that I could remember what it felt like to be held by him. The way his beard was itchy against my cheek. How his laugh was booming. How his breath always smelt like peppermints. It took me too long to realize that those feelings, those memories, had been made up in my mind. They were fantasizes brought to life from things Mom had said, pictures I’d seen, and books I’d read about other little girls who had living fathers. It was their dads who really had the booming laughs and scratchy beards and breath that smelt like peppermints. But those are the things you can imagine, the good stuff. You can dream about. You can dream about love, happiness, and fathers with open arms. As a child, it was easy for me to fantasize when I heard other girls talk about how their dads won’t let them do something. *My dad would have let me*, I would think. *My dad would have been the best. Better than all your dads.*

Once I was old enough to start writing more cohesive stories, I started to fill the pages of my journal with them. I wrote ridiculous stories, and in them my dad and I were superheroes. Capes and everything. We could fly, and we would fly all over town. We were always superheroes, but Mom was the one we were always saving. We saved her from practical things, like financial problems or the stresses of an overtime shift at the hospital. *Have no fear, Mom.*
We come bringing lunch and an empty room, so that you can take a nap! While I could imagine my dad a superhero and myself his sidekick, no amount of naivety spared me from the reality of how thin Mom was and the circles that always hung dark and bloated beneath her eyes. I remember sometimes drawing little pictures of her and I standing together, me holding her hand as I tried to save her from an angry patient or a giant load of laundry, and my dad flying over us. I’m sure as a child I was portraying him as watchful and protective, but if I were to look at them now, I would probably just think he was the most unhelpful superhero of all time.

Yellow Slide

I thought that my Mom’s favorite color was yellow. She never said so, but the walls in her room were painted yellow, and that’s a strange color to paint your walls. Most of the scrubs she wore to work were yellow. I loved the color too, because it was bright and warm, and it reminded me of my mom. It was why when we were planning to run away, I suggested to Alice that we use the yellow slide as our shelter.

Alice was my best friend growing up. She was chubby, and we had the same music teacher. She played the trumpet. Her mom was Korean, and her dad was Swedish. She was about as ethnic as it got growing up in our little town. Alice was loud. She was the girl that liked comic books and playing with Pokémon cards. She always wore a denim jumper to school, and that’s what the other kids knew her as, the denim jumper girl. We were destined to be friends. We stuck out like sore thumbs. Alice was the chubby, Asian girl in the denim jumper, while I was the sad girl with no dad. Which everyone knew, since parents had felt the need to warn their kids about me when I was young. The girl Frances in your class? Yes, Frankie Lee. He dad died a
long time ago, and she is probably still very sad about it. So, make sure you ask her to play with you on the playground today, O.K.?

She was denim jumper girl and I was Frankie Lee, the girl with a dead dad that everyone’s parents forced them to invite to their birthday parties. Alice was the only girl that treated me normally. Funny enough, it turned out that was because she didn’t know. Alice, though funny and animated, was not the smartest. One night, while playing dolls at my house, she asked if my parents were still together. What? I’d asked. Are your parents still married? I never see your dad around, she’d said. I didn’t know what to say because no one had ever asked me that before. I went with the blunt response. He’s dead, I told her. She immediately flushed. I’m sorry, Frankie Lee, she said. We sat in silence for a moment before Alice reached out to touch my arm. That really sucks, she said. She was right. It did. I nodded in response, and then we kept playing with our dolls.

Throughout most of our childhood, Alice was the rebel, and I only ever got in trouble because of her. I was much more cautious. Reserved. I was the kid who had one parent who was barely making ends meet, and that made me tentative. Alice, on the other hand, could literally afford to make mistakes. She was the only child of two doctors, and I was the daughter of one exhausted, over-worked nurse. I wasn’t jealous of Alice, but I always had a bad taste in my mouth when I left her house. I couldn’t help feeling guilty about how much I loved sitting at their table for family dinner, a dinner with two parents present and a big bowl of Kimchi with rice in the middle. How much I loved how they accepted me like their own daughter. How, before I’d quit, they would have roses for me after violin recitals. I hated loving those things. I hated wanting more than my mom could give, but that didn’t stop me for looking for them during
recitals. Or asking to go to Alice’s on the weekends for dinner to avoid eating another bowl of SpaghettiOs alone.

Once I started journaling and writing stories, however, I became more rebellious. I was the one that started dragging Alice into trouble. I started chasing stories. One night, I went up to my mom’s room with my journal, hoping to catch her before she left for her usual night shift. She was still there, tucking in her scrubs and tying her hair back into a clumsy ponytail. Mom, I said. I’m having a difficult time thinking of things to write about. She stopped running around for a moment to look at me. Oh, Frankie Lee, I didn’t see you there. You still have that journal? Yes, I said. I write in it every night. Oh. She had resumed her fiddling, heading to the closet to look for shoes. That’s good. Really good. Yes, I said again. But can you help me with things to write about? She hummed in thought as she nearly tumbled back out of the closet, her hand on her heel as she wrestled with getting the lip of her shoe over her heel. She said, I’m not sure, Frankie Lee. Maybe you can tell me what Dad used to write about? I asked. I was certain that would get her to talk. I was right. She finally stopped bustling about, and she turned to face me. She ran a hand through my un-brushed hair in a weak attempted to tame it. Looking back, I think about how silly I must have look, a young girl, staring into her mother’s eyes, waiting for her words like a baby bird waits for its mother’s regurgitated crap. Your Dad, she started. I watched her lips move. Your dad used to write about butterflies and rainbows. She told me that he took her to places like Madrid and Paris, and then he would write about how dazzling she looked in the moonlight. He would write about the worms that came out the earth when it started raining, and how crabs sound when they’re skittering over the sand. She talked for a while, telling me about all these beautiful and poetic things that he would fill his pages with. I soaked in every single word. Then her phone rang, and she swore, kissed me on the forehead, and told me she
needed to go to work. I had what I’d wanted, though. I had inspiration. I just needed to go places and see things.

I came up with the idea during a hot day in June. We were sitting in the park. School was almost out, and we were itching to be 4th graders. I was reading a *Magic Tree House* book. Occasionally, I would stop to scribble notes in my journal. By now, I had become an avid journal-er and was writing down anything and everything I saw fit. I was going to be a writer. I was going to be a writer. Meanwhile, Alice was throwing woodchips at parked cars. In my book, Jack and Annie just arrived in 18th century Austria, and were just about to meet Mozart when I had an idea. I looked at Alice. Wouldn’t it be funny if we did this? I motioned with my head to the book in my hands. Did what? she replied. Asked to run away. Like Jack and Annie. They ask their parents to go to the tree house, and then they go on amazing adventures. Look, that yellow slide over there can be our tree house. It’s covered. It’s warm. Good shelter. Alice looked at me skeptically. Please, I asked. It would make for a good story. Alice looked at my journal and thought for a moment before responding. Okay, she said. Let’s do it.

We decided to ask Alice’s mom if we could run away. Partially because my house was farther from the park, and partially because I had a feeling my mom would be home asleep. It was one thing for me to see her passed out in bed, but I didn’t want Alice to find her. I’d felt embarrassed just thinking about the possibility of that happening. So, we went with Alice’s mom, who practically brushed us off when we asked her if it was all right for us run away. I didn’t blame her. It probably sounded ridiculous. A joke. How could she’d have known what we were planning? She probably thought we were asking to go play in the woods or something. After all, what child asks to run away? Sure, she’d said. Just be back for dinner. Except, we weren’t back for dinner. We’d left with Alice’s mom’s permission and had gone straight back to
the park with some provisions. A wool blanket, a bag of gold fish, and two red Gatorades. We had officially run away.

I remember writing about all of it in my journal. Stupid details, like how strange it felt walking towards the park at nighttime, as opposed to our usual morning or afternoon visits. How spongy the grass felt beneath my feet as we set off on our adventure, how loud Alice’s breathing was beside me. I wrote about how cold the yellow slide felt when we first snuggled in, Alice tucked up against one curve and me the other, our small legs folded at the knees as we crammed to fit into the tight space. Jammed up like that, the blanket was big enough to reach our necks. Personally, I felt rather comfortable.

Unfortunately, my partner in crime did now. She lasted a few hours, but by the time 9 o’clock hit, Alice was ready to go home. She was cold, tried, and hungry, and our adventure camped out in the yellow covered slide was not shaping out to be as glamourous as the Magic Tree House books had made it sound. She wanted to leave, but I wanted to stay. I was dedicated to the idea of running away for the night. I was convinced it was going to be the inspiration for my breakout novel, which I would write by age of fifteen. I told Alice all of this. Even in the darkness I could make out her quizzical look. She was a good friend, though, and she didn’t say my idea was dumb. Instead, she gave me a hug and told me that my dedication was what made me the writer and her the writer’s friend. She left. I didn’t make it the whole night. I made it however long it took Alice to walk home, her parents to find her, grill her about where we’d gone, get the information, and then call my Mom. Who had, unfortunately, already called the police upon waking in a sleep deprived haze and realizing I was still gone. They all found me in the yellow slide, half asleep, journal in hand, at about ten thirty that night. I’d run away for about seven and a half hours.
Now, I can barely remember anything about the commotion of being found in that slide. There were people everywhere. Police sirens and everything. I do remember one thing, though. Begging my mom to let me stay for one moment longer, as I looked up at her from the slide’s entrance. You look dazzling in the moonlight, Mom, I’d said. Please let me write about it. It is going to go in my novel.

**Zombies**

Sometimes, when you meet your hero, it’s magical. It’s all it was cracked up to be. When I was fifteen, I was in love with the bassist in a boyband called Eating Your Heart. They were a punk rock band, and I still think the love I’d had for them was the truest, most devastating love I’d ever experienced. So angsty and raw. It made my chest hurt to listen to their music. Then Alice got us tickets to go see them for my birthday. After the concert, they came around to the front of the venue to take pictures with fans and sign autographs, and when we were about five people away from meeting them, I started to cry. I cried the whole time, even while I shook hands with the band members, even my love, the bassist. I continued to cry while they signed our tickets. I still have pictures from that night of Alice, the band, and I, tears streaming down my cheeks and a big grin on my face because I was the happiest girl on earth. We’d said probably five worlds total during that whole exchange, and it still had been the most wonderful experience in my young adult life.

Other times when you meet your hero, it’s devastating. Like when Dorothy finally met the Wizard or when Luke found Yoda. Or how I felt when I discovered that my Dad wasn’t a famous novelist, like I’d allowed myself to believe in my childhood ignorance. Like I was led to believe. In reality, he was a struggling writer who had sold out and started writing young adult
books about zombie lovers in the hopes of making a few extra bucks. Eventually, he killed himself, and left my mom and I behind.

I think I was less embarrassed by him than I was of myself. By the time I turned fifteen, I was in love with books that my teacher at the time called “brain candy.” Basically, they were the trashy love novels of young adult fiction. You know the type. The ones that take place in worlds where vampires fell in love with humans, and where werewolves by night were men with glistening, six-pack abs by day. He said the books were rotting my brain, and that I was much better off reading about things that would challenge me or educate me. He gave me a list of novels to read. Most of them were famous classics, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Pride and Prejudice* were among the top five. I took the list gratefully, but I preferred my brain candy because they were the easier ones to read, not just because the content wasn’t challenging, but because I didn’t have to think while I read them. I didn’t have to question life or society or relationships. The most philosophy I got out of brain candy books revolved around Edward’s conflict over whether he wanted to live immortally with Bella, his human love, by turning her into a vampire, or if he would do the noble thing and protect her eternal soul. If that wasn’t mind numbing enough for you, then I don’t know what is. It was easiest to escape from my world. Regardless of how stupid, I found werewolf and zombie love and easy refugee from my own reality, where I didn’t have a dad. And the parent I did have was nearly as absent as he, inattentive, busy with work, and slowly withering away.

Then I found it. *The Zombie Bridezilla* by Gabriel Anderson tucked away in a back corner of the library with all the other brain candy. That was the most embarrassing part. I’d stumbled upon it. I hadn’t been smart enough or curious enough to even Google his name. That even by then, fifteen years old, I was still blindly
believing in his infallibility. What if I’d never seen it? What if I’d listened to my teacher and halted with my guilty pleasure? How long would I have gone on idolizing him? Trying to be him? I was so mad that I didn’t even cry when I read the short obituary that had been featured in some off-beat literary journal. *A good writer and a better man, Gabriel is survived by his wife and newborn daughter.*

That afternoon, I flooded the school’s third floor bathroom trying to flush all my journals down the toilet.

It turned out that Mom was the best story teller out of all of us. When I confronted her about it after school that day, she looked me dead in the eyes, and she shrugged. What does it matter whether he wrote zombie books or American classics? she asked. It matters a lot, I replied. She was even skinner now that she had been when she’d given me my first journal. She chewed loudly on a piece of gum. I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell at her that it mattered because I could live with being overshadowed by an incredible man. I could live with existing in the memory of a famous writer. No, he didn’t even have to be famous. Just noble. Kindhearted. Gabriel Anderson? The good writer and better man. He’d published one book about zombie lovers, so what kind of man did that make him? The man that had killed himself. That left behind my mom. That left behind me

But I didn’t say any of that. I didn’t know how. Instead, I went upstairs to my room. I sat on my bed, took *The Zombie Bridezilla* by Gabriel Anderson out of my backpack, and ripped out all the pages one by one.
They were sitting at the lunch table in the cafeteria. There were three of them: Laura Richards, Bradley Philips, and Kasey “Kat” Littleton. They’d already talked about why Brittney Harrington wasn’t going to get homecoming queen, placed their bets on how long Hank Snow and Kelly Ferring would last (the longest was two weeks, they were doomed), and discussed how disgusting the school pizza was. Not they were trying to figure out which type of friend they each were.

It was fairly easy to assign both Laura and Bradley a type. Take one look at Bradley Philips, and you know that she was the “athletic” friend. Bradley only ever wore a t-shirt and jeans, except for the one time when her mom made her wear a skirt to Easter dinner. Her long blonde hair was usually tied back into a ponytail at school, but once class ended and dress codes went out the window, she would let her hair down and immediately toss on an old Boston Bruins baseball hat. Back when she was a child, and right before her parents’ divorce, her dad had given it to her. It was torn on the lid and had a white paint stain on the side, but she always had it with her. Even when she wasn’t wearing it, she’d have it in her backpack or tucked in her back pocket. She told everyone it was what made her run fast. The hat must have worked, too, because Bradley was a superstar athlete. She started varsity on the soccer team every year since starting at Fieldbrook High, and she was an All-New England sprinter. Last year, she became the only girl in their high school’s track team history to qualify for nationals in more than four events. So, yes, Bradley was the athletic friend. Then there was Laura Richards, who basically filled the definition of princess, minus the crown. She was the “girly” friend. She had a bob hairstyle cropped short to fall right below her chin, and never was a piece of brown—highlighted blonde at the top—hair out of place. She was a self-proclaimed shopping addict, and her favorite color
was pink. Every other Thursday, she made Kat drive the three of them to the mall, so she could get her nails redone. Sure, Laura was the girly friend.

But then what was Kasey “Kat” Littleton? What friend type was she? Kat was harder to assign. She wasn’t good at sports like Bradley, and she didn’t care so much about, well, things, like Laura did. The most striking thing about her was her bright red hair and bright green eyes, but those characteristics had already got her the nickname Kat, which came from all the way back in the third grade. Her family had just moved, and she’d been struggling to make friends. Then one girl had come up to her, grabbed a handful of her hair, and smiled. “You look like a cat,” she said. The girl was Laura Richards, and the name stuck. Even then she hadn’t particularly liked it, but she’d been so excited that someone wanted to be her friend that they could have called her anything they wanted. As she got older she tried to salvage her birth name as best she could by insisting that everyone knew it was Kat with a “K” and not a “C”, but even her own parents called her Kat now. So, when it came to the allocation of which type of friend she was, she would probably try to avoid both her hair and eye color, lest she live another decade with another nickname.

“You’re the ‘artsy’ friend,” Laura finally proclaimed after about fifteen minutes of weighing Kat’s various personality traits. A quick recap: she wasn’t as stubborn or as sassy as Laura, and she wasn’t as smart as Bradley, who was surprisingly book smart for being such a jock. She was kind of nice, but she was too quiet to actually be assigned the nice friend. Kat suggested that perhaps she was the shy friend, to which both Bradley and Laura vehemently said no. It was too boring.

“The artsy friend?” Kat repeated.

“Oh yeah.” Bradley was nodding. “I like that.”
“How am I the artsy friend? What does that mean?” Kat said.

“It’s because you loved ceramics so much,” said Laura.

“You were, like, really good at it,” added Bradley. “No denying that.”

Kat frowned. “I wasn’t any better than you guys.”

“No, you definitely were,” Bradley assured her. “Plus, you’re super quiet and zone-out a lot. Artsy people are like that.”

“I zone out a lot?”

“All the time, Kitty Kat,” Laura said. “You’re also kind of weird and distant, and your music taste is so random. That makes you artsy.”

“ Weird and distant,” Kat repeated. “I’m weird and distant?”

“Not, like, in a bad way,” Bradley clarified. “You like your space.”

“Yeah,” said Laura, “to do artsy stuff.”

“You guys suck,” Kat said. She pushed her chair out from under the table and started to pack up her lunch. “I’m not the artsy friend.”

“Oh, come on, Kat,” Bradly said.

“Don’t be so sensitive. We did one for each of us,” Laura told her.

“You guys have much better ones than I do.”

“Well that’s rude to all artsy people, Kat,” Laura said. “You’re saying it’s better to be girly or athletic than it is to be artsy?”

“What? No, I’m saying I’m not—”

“That’s messed up. My brother plays the saxophone. He’s artsy. Does that make him any lesser than someone else?”
“First, your brother is not artsy. He’s in the sixth grade. Everyone has to take band in sixth grade. Second, I’m not saying artsy is bad. I’m just saying artsy isn’t who I am.” Kat looked to Bradley for help. “Don’t you agree? I’m not artsy?”

Bradley looked back at Kat then to Laura. Then she looked back again to Kat, and then once more to Laura. She weighed whose wrath would be worse to face. “I don’t know, Kat. You’re pretty artsy.”

“Oh my god,” Kat pretended to slam her head on the lunch table.

“See, there you go. You’re being weird,” said Laura. She pointed to Kat Vanna White style. “Ladies and gentlemen, now presenting, Kat Littleton, the artsy friend!”

Bradley pretended to clap and cheer. “Woo, Kat! Go Kat!”

“I hate you guys,” Kat said. “I’m not artsy, but I am leaving.”

No way was she going to sit there for the rest of lunch, only to get made fun of. She decided that getting to class early would be better than staying there. As she opened the door to leave, she heard Laura call after her.

“Don’t forget, Kat,” she said. “Mall today. It’s Thursday!”

In class later that day, Kat had tried to weigh the pros and cons of being the artsy friend. She made a list in her notebook. Pro: she was good at ceramics. Con: she was weird, zoned out a lot, and apparently Laura didn’t like her taste in music. Also, Kat wasn’t entirely sure that she’d been that good at ceramics. One of the mugs she made had exploded in the kiln because she’d forgotten to check for air bubbles. The worst part was, it didn’t just destroy her work. The pieces from the explosion took about half of her classmates’ mugs as well. Laura and Bradley had both found it funny, but, while funny, the exploded mug didn’t make her good at ceramics. And it
definitely didn’t make her better than either of her friends. So, ceramics might be a con as well. She erased the list she’d been making and drew two circles in its place. A Venn Diagram. She wrote “ceramics” in the middle.

Bradley was sitting next to her in class and looked over her shoulder.

“Are you serious right now, Kat?” she whispered.

“I just don’t understand why I’m the artsy friend.”

“Right now you’re being the weird friend.”

“I thought part of being artsy was being weird.”

“Well right now you’re just being weird.”

This conversation got them shushed by their teacher, Ms. Weddleton.

The friend thing wasn’t talked about for the rest of the school day, even though Kat had another class with Bradley and her last class with Laura. Their fights—if you could call what had happened during lunch that day a fight—were always funny like that. Someone’s (usually Kat’s) feelings (might have) got hurt, due to other’s (usually Laura’s) teasing. Afterward the person whose feelings had gotten hurt (usually Kat’s) will internalize it and act like everything is fine even if she (Kat) was mad at the other (Laura) person. The day would go on until eventually enough time had passed for the person (Kat) who was frustrated moved on. All of this will have transpired without the acknowledgement or apology from the aggressor (Laura). Apparently, last period was enough time for Kat to have gotten over being dubbed the artsy friend, and she nodded when Laura reminded her for the second time that day that it was Thursday and that they needed to go to the mall. Yes, she remembered and yes, she was still taking them.

Kat didn’t mind being the designated driver for their mall trips. In fact, she actually enjoyed the small amount of power it gave her. Thursday mall trips had become a tradition
because she was the one that was able to drive them. And although she didn’t have a nice car—
she drove her mom’s old, red minivan—it was her own. She’d been born early for her class, so
neither Laura or Bradley had even their licenses yet, let alone a car. It made Kat feel good to
know that she had something that neither of them did, regardless of how temporary that may be.

All joy stopped about five minutes into any respective mall trip, however, because Laura
and Bradley were the worst people in the world to shop with. For starters, Laura always refused
to leave the nail salon without being certain her nails were dry, which usually meant waiting at
least thirty more minutes even after the manicurist had told her she was fine to leave. Kat had
asked her once if she wanted to get her nails done after shopping, so that way they could dry
while in the car, to which Laura replied with a flat no. She had a very particular order to things
that she insisted was best. First nails. Then she would walk through all of her favorite stores
without buying a single thing, no matter how much she liked it—just to see and plan what would
be the most efficient way to spend her money. Then, and only then, would she go back buy
things after they’d been practically budgeted out. The most frustrating part was that it wasn’t that
she didn’t have money. No, Laura’s parents had plenty of money, and they gave her a healthy
allowance. Kat always though that Laura just liked to be in complete control—both of her wallet
and her friend’s schedules. Bradley, on the other hand, was just simply indecisive. The girl had
more money than she knew what to do with—her great, great grandfather had made a fortune on
a project that introduced hydroelectricity to the town—and she was neither frugal or sensible
when it came to money. She was a huge sneaker head, and it always took her ages to choose
between shoes that usually looked exactly the same. She usually spent ages going back and forth
on which pair of shoes she liked more before deciding that she would just buy both. It was
painful shopping with either of them and going with the both of them? Nightmarish.
Still, Kat liked to drive her car. She tried to focus on that whenever Laura and Bradley were being particularly diva-ish. She liked to drive her car, and it also allowed her to get a lot of homework done while her friends shopped. Sometimes she’d sit and work at the food court, but this particular day she’d gone back to the minivan. The food court was too noisy, and she needed to focus if she was ever going to get her calculus homework done. They were going to have to apply to colleges next year, and her current math grade wasn’t exactly where she would have liked it to be. It wasn’t really fair. Bradley was a natural athlete, and she was smart. She’d gotten an A in calculus last year, and Kat was pretty sure she’d skipped half her classes. It was during the same time that Dan Starr, the starting varsity basketball point guard, had study hall, so she’d always left math to go flirt with him in the library. Even Laura had it easier than Kat. Yes, she had to work much harder than Bradley too, but she was much more secretive about her work than Kat. She would never be caught dead leaving the mall to study in a car, for example. Still, Kat knew that Laura had been published every year in the school literary journal since they were freshmen. The only reason that didn’t make her the artsy friend over Kat was because of the way she very much downplayed her own academic accomplishments. She didn’t want people to know she worked hard. She’d much rather talk about her hair and nails and be known as the girly friend than run the risk of being the “weird and distant” artsy one. Kat knew that if Laura wanted to be the artsy friend, she would be the artsy friend. Instead, she’d thrown the identity off to Kat, who apparently didn’t have any other special characteristic worth noting. But, that was beside the point. The point was, calculus was easy for Bradley and hard for Kat. It was hard for Laura too, but she had other things going for her. Kat just had her car. That was the one thing. The one thing that she had that neither Laura or Bradley had, and it would only last a few more months.
Then they would have the athletics, the academics, and the ability to get to the mall with needing Kat at all.

Kat was in deep debilitating, soul hurting, and self-esteem crushing thought when someone started to pound on her passenger side window.

“Unlock the door, Kitty Kat!” called Laura.

The car started to rock, and Kat looked in the rearview mirror to see Bradley behind the car, pushing it back and forth. Kat unlocked the doors.

“We decided that we are abandoning the type of friend you are thing,” Laura said as she climbed into the passenger seat. Bradley sprawled out in the back. The girl never wore a seatbelt. “We are the spice girls now. Way more applicable. Brad, obviously, is Sporty Spice. I’m, well, guess which Spice Girl I am?”

“Scary Spice?”

Bradley barked out a laugh from the back seat. “I actually like that better, Laura.”

Laura did not look amused. “No, idiots. I’m Posh Spice.”

Kat resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Okay, who am I?”

“Ginger spice!” Bradley called out. She grabbed a chunk of Kat’s hair and let a few strands slowly fall. “It’s much more you. Exactly what you wanted.”

“Hurray!” Laura cheered in feigned excitement. She pulled Kat into a tight hug. “How happy are you, little Ginger Spice?”

“Um, not happy at all,” Kat replied, her voice a deadpan. “I told you guys I did not want to be referenced as the artsy friend. That doesn’t mean I want to be the ginger friend. Or anything red for that matter.”
“Correction,” interrupted Bradley, “you aren’t the ginger friend. You are Ginger Spice. She sold, like, million jillion records. That’s cooler than being just a ginger friend.”

Kat ignored her and instead focused on wiggling her way out of Laura’s death grip of an embrace. “Whatever,” she said. “You guys suck, and I don’t want to be an artsy friend or a Spice Girl. No one even knows who Ginger Spice is.”

“Um, yeah, they do,” Laura said. “She’s the red-headed one. Duh.”

They spent the ride home talking about Bradley’s new sneakers and arguing over whether or not the guy who’d been working at the pretzel stand was hot. Kat thought he was, and Bradley had sided with her. Laura kept insisting that he had a weird haircut, but Kat was pretty sure that she was only saying that because it had been Kat that brought up his good-looks in the first place. She’d already lost too many battles that day, though, and she wasn’t about to give up the Hot Pretzel Guy one. She was the middle of giving a detailed argument as to why he was good-looking when Bradley interrupted her.

“Fat,” was all she said.

“What?” Laura asked.

“You interrupted m—”

“Look how fat that guy is,” she explained. She pointed to the car next to them.

They’d been sitting at a red light as they waited to exit the freeway to enter onto one of the main roads into town. In the car idling beside them was a man. He had on a dark green t-shirt with a large, lime green shamrock screen printed on the front. The shamrock had a winking face on it, and beneath it read Kiss Me, I’m Irish. He was nearly bald and fat, extremely so, and he looked even bigger in the tiny wagon he was driving. His eyes were squinted, and the way he sat
hunched over the steering wheel weirdly reminded Kat of an old grandmother, despite the fact that the driver was clearly a middle-aged man.

“Huh,” Laura said. “You’re right. That guy is huge. He kinda looks like Mr. Williams.”

In the backseat, Bradley squinted her eyes. She pressed her face so close to the window that her nose was squished up against it. “Is it Mr. Williams?”

“The science teacher?” Kat said. “No chance. That is definitely not Mr. Williams.”

The man must have felt their relentless stares because for a moment he looked their way, just long enough to catch Kat’s eye, before inching forward and away from their gaze.

Laura shook her head. “No, that’s totally Mr. Williams. He’s got God-awful posture, just like Mr. Williams does. It’s got to be him.”

“I literally just made eye contact with him,” Kat said. She glared at Laura. Why did she always have to argue with her? “It is not Mr. Williams.”

Laura snorted as the light turned green, and the man in the wagon sped off. “Okay, whatever you say, Ginger Spice.”

Cliché? Maybe. But in that moment, Kat wasn’t just red. She saw it too. She remembered every stupid thing Laura had ever said, ever called her, ever did to her, and she slammed on the gas. The other girls yelped as the force of the acceleration pushed them back against their seats, but Kat pressed her foot down until it hit the floor, and then she left it there. She was going to catch up to the fat guy in the wagon, and then both Bradley and Laura were going to see that she was right. He wasn’t Mr. Williams. He didn’t look anything like Mr. Williams, and Laura was stupid for even thinking that it could be him. Because it wasn’t.

“Whoa,” Bradley said. “Easy there, Kat. What’s the rush?”
Kat watched as her miles per hour climbed on the speedometer. She heard a click from the back seat. Bradley must have put on her seatbelt, probably for the first time ever.

Laura also adjusted herself in her seat and sat up straighter. She cleared her throat.

“What, are you trying to see if you can break 100mph in your mom’s old mini-van, Kitty Kat?”

“No, I’m going to catch up to this guy and prove to you that he is not Mr. Williams.”

Bradley groaned from the backseat. “Oh, Kat. Why does it matter?”

Kat didn’t respond, but she kept her foot down heavy on the pedal. She felt more and more confident as they got closer and closer to the fat man, who was driving pretty fast himself. Probably in an attempt to escape the strange mini-van filled with ogling teenage girls that was speeding after him. Kat didn’t blame him for that, but she needed one thing before she was going to let him get away. She just needed to prove that he wasn’t Mr. Williams. All she had to do was drive a little faster, maneuver through a few more cars...

“Just give it up Kat,” Bradley moaned. “I’m getting car sick.”

“Seriously. You’re going to get in an accident. Someone is going to get hurt,” Laura added. In the back of her mind, Kat wondered if she sounded more scared or annoyed.

“You’re just scared that I’m going to catch up to him and prove that you’re wrong.”

“You’re delusional, Kitty Kat. Stop this, and let’s just go home.”

Just then, the fat man put on his blinker. He was turning off the road and headed up to the Holden Developments. The Holden Developments were new to town, having just been finished getting built a few years back, but a lot of the roads were still unfinished and had yet to be paved over. She didn’t know anything about the area except that it was filled with those new houses and apartments and that was it. The rest were hills and forests. She took a quick moment to
process how fast she’d be able to get around on those roads in the minivan. She turned on her blinker.

“You’re got to be kidding me,” Bradley said.

“Kat, this is actually so stupid. You’re being ridiculous,” Laura said. She stuck her arm out to catch her balance as they turned the corner and hit a gravel road.

“Ridiculous? Not weird?”

“You’re kidding. This is what this is about?”

“Guys,” Bradley called from the back. “I am seriously going to be sick.”

“No, this is about you thinking that guy is Mr. Williams.”

Laura snorted. “No way. This is about you being pissy that we said you’re artsy. Well, hate to break it to you Kitty Kat, but you’re not going to get much better than artsy. Especially not after pulling this stunt.”

“It isn’t about that. You think you’re always right, Laura. You think you’re better than everyone else, but you’re not.” Kat’s eyes were starting to water. She wasn’t crying. She’d been too focused on the road. Her eyes were strained. She wasn’t crying “You’re not better than everyone.”

Bradley, meanwhile, was not doing so hot in the back. She called out again, “Guys—”

“Where is this even coming from, Kat? This is so unfair. You’re fine all day, and then you pull this stunt? Trying to be a race car driver? You’re such a freak.”

“I’m not a freak. I’m not artsy. I’m not Ginger Sp—”

In the next millisecond, a great deal of things happened simultaneously. For her part, Laura Richards saw a great oak tree approaching. She let out a loud scream. Kasey “Kat” Littleton, also saw the tree. Unfortunately, considering the skill level she had as the young driver
that she was and her current emotional state, she was unable to fully avoid the tree. Fortunately, she didn’t hit it head on. Instead, they made impact on the right side of the vehicle, or the passenger side. Bradley Philips, who was (thank god) seat belted in the back, threw up on impact. (Something she probably would have done regardless if they’d hit a tree or not. She hadn’t been lying. She did get rather car sick). Her Bruins hat went flying.

The moments after impact were a blur. It was like in the movies. All white noise for a moment, straight static, and blurred vision. Kat tumbled out of the car. She had a cut on her cheek, and she could already feel a bruise forming on her chest from where the seatbelt had caught her, but she felt otherwise unharmed. As soon as she’d cleared that no limbs were missing or injured, reality set in. Her car was totaled. Her friends here in it, and she was afraid to see if they were all right. What if they weren’t? What if they were? Then she’d be the stupid friend. The car wreck friend. The going-to-crash-my-car-because-I’m-emotionally-unstable friend. The lets-not-talk-to-her-she-almost-killed-us-friend.

She was full on panicking—crying now, real crying, not just strained eyes—when someone called out for her attention.

“What happened? Do you need help?”

No. No. No, she didn’t need help. She did not need help. Especially not from Mr. Fucking Williams.

She turned around, and there he was. Light as day. The winking shamrock on his shirt taunted her. “You’re a real idiot, Ginger Spice,” it said. Behind him was the stupid wagon. The small little wagon. The small, stupid, little wagon that she’d been dumb enough to chase up here.


“My name is Kasey,” was all Kat said.
He asked something else, but Kat didn’t respond. He took out his phone and started dialing. “Hello? 9-1-1? I’m here in the Holden Developments, up by Belmont Drive...”

Kat turned back to her car, but looking at it made her dizzy, so she sat down on the gravel road. She wondered if her friends were still alive. She wondered why the hell it had to be Mr. Williams in that car. She wondered what would happen to her now that she’d crashed her one thing. Her one thing that made her different than Laura or Bradley. She needed it. She needed something. She couldn’t be the artsy friend. She wouldn’t be the artsy friend. Why did they think she was the artsy friend? She wasn’t even good at ceramics. Her mug blew up. Her car blew up. She had a feeling her life was about to blow up. Maybe that’s what she was. The dynamite friend. No, that was stupid. None of it sounded right.

“Do you think I’m artsy?” she asked. Mr. Williams was on the phone with 9-1-1 still. He didn’t respond. She asked again, “Do you think I’m arsty?”

“Wha—one second,” he said to his phone. “What was that, sweetheart?”

“Do you think I’m the artsy friend?”

He paused for a moment. The hand holding the phone to his ear dropped down so that it was resting on his shoulder. He looked at Kat, the car, and then back to Kat. He tried to guess what the hysterical girl that had just crashed her car with her friends inside would want to hear.

“Yes, hun, you’re definitely artsy,” he said.

Kat’s lips twitched.

“Yeah,” she said. “My friends thought so too.”
I had grown up in Connecticut, and my dad was a rugged New England man. He was a “rub some dirt in it” kind of guy. He’d grown up on a farm in Vermont, had four brothers, and two sisters. The only way he could afford to go to college was because he had been a good wrestler. Good enough for a full-scholarship. Growing up, the only thing I’d ever seen him be gentle with was my mom. He was tough with me, told me to suck it up when I scraped a knee. Told me to get over it when I said that other kids in school were bullying me. With mom, he was a teddy bear. Maybe it was because I was an only child and lacked other stimuli around the house, but I’d always loved catching signs of affection between them. Sometimes I’d walk into the kitchen and catch my dad with his arms around my mom while she cooked dinner. Sometimes we’d be in the car and he’d reach over to grab her hand. Sometimes, while we were just sitting and reading in the family room he’d touch her cheek or play with a curl of her hair. I’d grown up hoping to one day love someone as much as my dad loved my mom.

As I’d admired my dad, and as sensitive he was with my mom, he had been a difficult person to connect with. I had really been a big momma’s boy growing up. She was doting where my dad was withdrawn. When he’d tell me get up and be a man, she always told me it was OK to cry. They were my Yin and Yang, and I was the apple of their eye. It was my life’s goal to make them proud, and since I wasn’t about to impress anyone with my athletic prowess, all I had was my brain. I was an excellent student, albeit a bit of a dork. I did everything I could to be the best. That was part of the reason I’d moved out to California. I’d wanted to prove both my manhood and my independence to my parents and applied only to schools out west. When I got into UCLA, it was too late to turn back. I called my parents every day that first year. By the time I’d gotten into Stanford law, the calls were down to once a week. Now, nearly twenty years since
having first come out here, the majority of communication I had with my parents was via Facebook posts. I was pretty sure my mom was obsessed with the site, though she used it as you would imagine a woman nearing seventy years old would. She commented on every post I made, and her status updates consisted of retelling her entire day, from what she ate for breakfast to what the dentist had said about the condition of her molars. As cringy as they sometimes could be, I enjoyed the updates on her life, I knew that I should make more of an effort to get in touch with them.

Not that I would have much to say. I’d kept them updated on the big things in my life. Unlike my parents, I hadn’t had much luck on the love frontier when I went to college. I always prioritized work and school, and when I was an undergraduate I was too much of a dork to do much better than be a girl’s best friend. Years later, after graduate school, passing the bar, and starting my job in corporate law, I met Petra. She was about fifteen years younger than me. We certainly didn’t have the same rustic love story as my parents, which, embarrassingly enough, I used to have my mom tell me as a bedtime store when I was young. The two of them had met in college. Mom came from old money and had barely worked a day in her life. She was instantly smitten with him, and his farm boy charms. For their first date my dad had taken her to a corn maze and purposely gotten them lost so that he could spent more time with her. I’d met my Petra at a bar in downtown San Francisco and was somehow drunk enough to have enough courage to buy her a drink. That was pretty much the end of the story. I’m sure if we ever have kids I would be entitled to some artistic freedom. Maybe instead of the bar, we bumped into each other at the Fisherman’s Warf. We’d both been dying for some crab legs, but we were both hesitant to enter the tourist dense area. As fate would have it, we both gave in and went, and boom, a classic
meet-cute. We’d bump into one another, losing our crab legs but finding true love. Or something like that. I could always perfect the story later. Anyways, I’d met Petra at a bar.

Her parents actually lived out in L.A., much closer than mine, but I’d only met them once since we’d started dating. They were nice enough. Her dad was a banker and her mom didn’t work. I think her dad was skeptical of me, for some reason. I don’t think that he liked that I was a lawyer, but I was sure I could win him over. Petra was a self-proclaimed entrepreneur. She loved dogs, and about three years into our relationship, her dad gave her a big loan to start her business idea. She’d worked on it for five years. It was called Petra’s Paw Pals. If you were to ask, she would describe it as a five-star dog care company. Really, it was a glorified dog walking business. But, it made her happy, which made me happy. Some days I woke up thinking I should propose to her, and some days I woke up thinking I should wait, but that wasn’t anything to call my mom over. That was just your run of the mill indecision. Honestly, I think I was mostly considering Petra as a life partner since I’d come to the decisions that my life was starting to plateau. I had a steady job, a steady girlfriend, an apartment, and a dog. I was forty. Things were certainly stagnant out where I was in San Francisco, and I was wondering if it were time for a change.

And then my parents called. I’d been sitting at my office desk when I saw my mom’s caller ID flashing on my cellphone. It lit up beside a picture of Petra I had on my desk of her walking our dog Puggles. His name was ironic name since Puggles was actually a bulldog, not a pug. Both the name and the dog were Petra’s idea. I didn’t think it was very funny, but Petra found it hilarious, and I loved making her happy. I also ended up really loving the dog, which was good, since I was the one that had ended up taking the most care of it, despite Petra’s involvement in the dog care industry. I answered it by the second ring.
“Mom! It’s been so long,” I said. “How are you?”

We exchanged pleasantries. They asked about Petra and work. Dad talked about how his
golfing had been going, and Mom talk about how she thought she might join a book club.

Then, out of nowhere, she says, “Ari, your dad and I are getting a divorce.”

Wait, what? “You’re what?”

“Your dad and I are divorcing, little guy.”

“Wha—”

“It’s something that we’d been talking about for a long time,” she cut in, “and we
couldn’t keep it from you any longer.”

I wasn’t sure what to say or what to do. All my friends’ parents had gotten divorced in
middle school. Back then, it’d been acceptable to cry or throw a tantrum. When we were twelve,
my friend Barry’s dad, a third-grade teacher, was caught with the young art teacher in the
janitor’s closet at the elementary school. Barry and I had gone off, found her house, and threw a
baseball through her living room window. None of those reactions seemed appropriate now.
Instead, I sat at my desk, staring blankly at the pile of papers that had been building since the
morning.

“We’re pushing seventy, and we are sick of living like this when we know there is more
out there for us,” my Mom added. “Ari, little guy, we know this is abrupt—”

“Yeah, kind of big news to drop on a Tuesday afternoon, Mom.”

“—but you’re an adult. We’re adults. We’re doing what’s best for us, and don’t think that
this changes anything in your life. You have your job, you have your girlfriend. Nothing will
change for you, except now when you visit your father and I will be living in separate houses.”

“Separate hou—”
“Your mom is right, Ari. Your life doesn’t have to change at all.”

There was a strong possibility I was going to puke, so I stood up. Then the cord on my phone caught, so I swore under my breath and pushed the speaker button on the console. I started to pace.

“Have you tried counseling? This isn’t about my life changing. This is about you two. Your lives. You love. You guys are my mom and dad,” I said. “You’re a unit. You’re my unit.”

Mom spoke again, “Neither of us want to try counseling. We’re old enough to know what we want and don’t want—”

“You’re telling me after forty years you two don’t love each other?”

“Don’t raise your voice, son. Keep to together,” my dad said. “Sometimes things happen when you least expect it.”

“I’m sorry that maybe I’m freaking out a little bit. I just can’t believe this,” I said. I might have been yelling. Behind the glass doors to my office, my secretary was staring at me from her desk. “I don’t believe this.”

“Sometimes feelings change, Ari,” my mom said.

No. Not love. Those feelings don’t change. I cried once because I’d heard my parents fighting. I was little, maybe six or seven, and I’d never heard them yell at one another before. I’d had something of a minor panic attack, and my dad found me, crying as I hyperventilated on my bed. He came into my room and wrapped me up in his arms. It was one the one time he was most affectionate with me. I’d asked him if he and mom still loved each other, and I could feel his smile form against my forehead. He said that sometimes adults fight, but usually it’s just to let out big bursts of feelings. He told me that the only things he’d ever loved were me, my mom, his mom, and Vermont maple syrup. He told me that would never change.
“I’m coming home,” I said. “It’s been too long.”

“Ari—”

“No, Mom, I’m coming home. It’s been too long since I’ve seen you guys. Divorce or not. I’ve got vacation days to use. I want to be there with you guys during an important time like this.”

It took more convincing than I would have liked to persuade them to agree to the idea of my visit, but I tried to remind myself not to be offended. They were going through a difficult time. They didn’t want more people to come into it, and probably especially not their child, their only reminder of lost love. But, their little guy was coming whether they liked it or not because this was big. They needed me. I tried to explain all this to Petra later that night, but when I told her I was leaving, she wasn’t happy.

“Petra’s Paw Pals is expanding into four other districts this month, and you had promised to help me.”

“I know it’s important to you, baby, but that’s a business. This is my family. And I’ve been away for so long.” As I spoke I made quick work of packing a suitcase. “I just need to go for a bit.”

“You bought a one-way ticket.”

I sighed and stopped packing for a moment. “It was cheapest and easiest. I don’t know how long I’m going to be there for—”

“See there. Right there. You can’t just leave for an indefinite amount of time when Petra’s Paw Pals is about to hit it big. You always do this.”

“Do what?”
I watched as she crossed the room and flopped onto our bed.

“You romanticize.”

I rolled my eyes and turned back to my suitcase.

She continued, “You romanticize everything. You told me once that you think porcupines are misunderstood. What does that even mean?”

“They’re a lot cuddlier than—”

“You think that one day my dad is going to warm up to you. Here’s the thing: you’re dating his little girl. He’s never going to like you.”

“You dad doesn’t like me? Like really, really doesn’t like me?”

“And you think you’re going to fly home, across the country, and convince your parents that they’re going to fall back in love. But they’re not going to, Ari. People break up. It’s part of life. Even parents do. Hell, my parents have been divorced and remarried four times each.”

That made me stop packing again.

“I didn’t know your parents were divorced.”

“What? Obviously. My mom lives out in San Antonio with her boy-toy of a boyfriend. He’s like fifteen years younger than her.”

“I thought I’d met your mom.” I squinted at Petra. “Have I really not met your mom? Also, you’re fifteen years younger than me.”

She shrugged. “It’s different with us. Also, ew, I can’t believe you thought Barbara was my mom.”

“This isn’t helping how I feel at all right now, Petra.” I turned back to my suitcase. “I’m going home because I haven’t seen my parents in a long time, and they’re going through
something life changing right now. For them and myself. I want to be there. I need to be there. Maybe that makes me a romantic, but I need closure.”

She didn’t say anything for a while, and I finished packing in silence. I looked over to see that she was on her cellphone, her long blonde hair spread out all over the bed. Petra, at least, was pretty. I must have gotten very drunk that night because if I hadn’t been I most certainly wouldn’t have approached her. She must’ve felt me studying her because she looked up after a moment.

“Do you think you can take Puggles with you? I don’t think I’m going to be home a lot to be able to let him out,” she said. In the corner the dog barked from his dog bed. He must’ve heard his name. “You know, with all the Paw Pals stuff I’ll have going on.”

As I walked up the driveway towards my childhood home, I couldn’t help but feel giddy with excitement, despite the circumstances. I was back! I was back after years away, and it felt good. Part of me felt like I had in college, coming back for Thanksgiving break or Christmas vacation, excited to sit down on the couch and let my parents take care of me. Another part of me left like a little kid, itching to see if I still had a bike tucked away somewhere in the garage. But a deeper, darker part of me kept thinking about how that was all in the past, and that it would never happen again. Not just because I wasn’t a boy anymore, or because I was done with school, but because the entire foundation that that all had been built upon was breaking. I didn’t have parents to wait on my beck and call because no more were they living under the same roof. My childhood bike, if were even still here, would get sold or lost with the rest of my old things during the divorce. I hoped that my mom would want to keep it. She was more openly sentimental. Dad would never fight for my old bike.
I tried to push all that from my mind as I rang the doorbell. In his little travel cage, Puggles barked. I hushed him. Mom answered the door not long after. I was surprised to see how miserable she looked after hearing her so self-assured on the phone. I tried to calm the excitement bubbling in my chest. Maybe there was a chance. Maybe this really was just a very big burst of feelings. Maybe they were almost all out.

“Ari, my little guy.” She grabbed me in for a hug. “Come in, it’s cold out, and I don’t want the cat to sneak out. How was the flight?”

“Cat?” I asked. Again, my heart fluttered. A cat? The divorce must really be hitting her hard.

“Yes, he’s a British Shorthair. Named him Snuggles,” she said. She’d pulled me into the kitchen, sat me down, and was already rummaging around. I smiled. I hadn’t realized how much I missed this. She asked, “Still like ham sandwiches best? I went out and got salami yesterday. Also, can you let the dog out in your old room over there? The cat is new, and I don’t want the two of them getting all territorial and fighting.”

“Yeah, ham is best,” I said as I brought my things toward my old bedroom. “Snuggles is a bit of a silly name, don’t you think?”

“Isn’t your dog’s name Puggles?”

“It’s an ironic name, Mom, because he’s not a pug.”

“I don’t get it,” she said with a shrug. “Sounds like Snuggles to me.”

I sighed. I didn’t feel like explaining the inner workings of Puggles’s name, and I was too tired to pretend that I liked the name myself.

“You’re right, Mom,” I said. “What? You trying to copy Petra and I?”
She barked out a laugh as I opened the door to my old bedroom. It was unrecognizable. My once red and blue walls had been painted a sea-foam green. My old racecar bed sheets had been swapped out for some generic Williams and Sonoma comforter. Sure, the pale and yellow complemented the green walls nicely, and I’d moved out nearly two decades ago, but seeing the change stung. It hadn’t been like this when I’d come for Christmas a few years ago, and I’d been long since moved out then. Now, suddenly, she was divorcing my dad and erasing all evidence of my existence from the house? I put Puggles and his treats down, shut the door, and joined my mom back in the kitchen.

“My room looks a bit different,” I said.

She cut my sandwich in half and didn’t bother looking up.

“Yeah, the relator said that it would be easier to sell the house with a nice guest room, as opposed to an outdated kid’s room.”

Now my heart was starting to hurt, and all the hope I’d been garnering started to deflate. I sat down at the kitchen table.

“Yeah. Outdated kid’s rooms. Real bummer when trying to sell a house, huh?”

Mom hummed, slid the plate towards me, and busied herself with getting two glasses of water.

“We had a lot of good memories here though. Like the time you and Dad tricked me that our attic was haunted, and I made one of you sleep with me every night that week, until one of you finally admitted it was a prank.”

She nodded.
“And time Grandma got me that moped, but then I crashed it in the driveway, and I wouldn’t stop crying until you and Dad took me to the ER just to prove to me that I hadn’t broken anything?”

“You were pretty melodramatic, weren’t you?” Mom smiled. It was sad. “Tough kid. To deal with. Not tough, tough. You were a bit of a baby.”

I really looked at her then. Deeply. There were bags under her eyes, and her hair looked different. Limp? Had she been sleeping? She looked thinner. Was she eating? That was it. I was going to go for it. This wasn’t right. She was miserable. She sat across from me with the waters, and when she went to pass one my way I took her hand.

“Mom,” I said, “are you OK?”

She had tears in her eyes. “Honestly, Ari?” I nodded, but she shook her head before continuing. “It wouldn’t be fair for me to talk to you about this.”

My heart was beating out of my chest. Finally. A break through. This was all going to be fine. Petra was wrong. I wasn’t romanticizing. Love was real, and love was strong, and my dad loved me and my mom like he loved Vermont maple syrup, and this all was a silly fight. A big burst, just like they’d had when I was a boy. A really big burst. They’d get over it, and I’d help them. I was done being absent. Look what had happened when I left. Not anymore. I would move back from San Francisco if I had to. Quit my job. I didn’t care. This was what meant most. Family meant most.

“Mom, let it out,” I said. “You were right on the phone. I’m an adult, and I’m here to talk with you as an adult. I’m ready for the hard conversations.” They clearly had some pent-up animosity that had built throughout the years, and it was going to be hard to hear, but it couldn’t be worse than divorce. Whatever she was going to say about him, we would work it out. We
would go to Dad, and we would work it out with him too. They had a love story. It started in a corn maze, and it wasn’t going to end here. “You can tell me, Mom.”

“I think Dennis is cheating on me.”

I think my heart exploded. Right there. In my mom’s kitchen. It was absurd. If I were in a TV show the DJ record scratching sound would have played.

“Dennis? Mr. Milbrook? Our gardener?”

“I think he’s cheating on me. He’s been acting very strange lately, and he keeps liking this woman’s pictures on Facebook. She’s widowed, I think, and I’m just not sure what to do. It’s been so long since I’ve been dating—Oh, Ari, I’m so sorry, little guy. This is probably the last thing you want to talk about. I just don’t know how to do this anymore. Do you and Petra have any difficult times? She seems so lovely that girl.”

In the guest room, Puggles started barking. My ham sandwich sat on my plate untouched. My mom was staring at me, hopeful, but with tears still in her eyes. I realized now that she didn’t look miserable, just tired. Maybe a little insecure. Nervous. She had makeup on, and her was different. It was a few shades darker than I’d last seen her. She’d dyed her hair. She’d dyed her God damn hair, and she’d changed out my racecar sheets for a Williams and Sonoma mattress because some relator had told her to, and she was dating Dennis Milbrook the gardener, and possible cheater. She was my mom. She was my mom, but in that moment, I was feeling a big burst, and I didn’t want to yell at my mom, so I excused myself from the table.

“Let me make sure the dog is OK,” I said.

I called Petra that night to tell her I was flying back home. She didn’t pick up, but I left her a voicemail anyway. I’d told her that she was right. I did romanticize. Porcupines weren’t
cuddly, and apparently, rammed their quills into predators faces. I Googled it. Those shits were vicious. I also told her that I accepted the fact that her dad did not like me because I didn’t like him either, or the weird looks he gave me the one time we went out to eat with her family. One time. No wonder I didn’t know that Barbara wasn’t her real mother, we’d spent less than two hours with her even though they lived in the same state as us. Sure, it was a long drive, but her dad was rich, and it was a hell of a lot closer than Connecticut was. I finished by telling her that I was buying a ticket back, that I’d be home in a few days, and that if my parents relationship was doomed then there was no way ours had a shot.

I might have been drunk when I called her. I’d found some of my dad’s old liquor in the kitchen. It was still in the same cabinet he’d used to leave it in when I was a kid. I found it late that night, after attempting to avoid my mom as much as possible for the duration of the day. I came out only for a very awkward dinner, during which we talked mostly about my job—it was painful watching my mom pretend to be interested in the legality of assisting clients with the appropriate financing for mergers and acquisitions—and avoided all subjects that might have related to marriage, relationships, Facebook, and gardening. I definitely needed a drink after. My childhood might have been dead and gone, but I felt like more of a teenager than I ever before as I smuggled alcohol into my room the moment she’d gone to bed. I was a ball of anger, angst, and alcohol. I woke up to a few missed phone calls from Petra, a haphazardly packed suitcase, an email confirming my plane ticket for a nine o’clock flight back to San Francisco that night, and Simple Plan’s song “Perfect” playing on repeat from my phone on the pillow next to me.

My mom wasn’t home when I finally emerged from the guest room. I left without making the bed, a small form of rebellion. Still, I left a note on the kitchen table. Back to San Francisco tonight. See you next time. I hesitated for a moment before writing, I love you. A part of me also
wanted to write, *Yes, Dennis liking that woman’s pictures definitely means he’s sleeping with her. You should be upset, and you should feel insecure. Also, your hair looks silly,* but I refrained. No matter how mad I was with her, I was her son, and I had to respect her. Also, I’d heard the cat in the other room, but I had been afraid that the noise was my mom and, wanting to avoid another awkward interaction, I panicked, grabbed my suitcase, Puggles’s travel case, and left without writing another word.

I had a few hours before I needed to make my way to the airport. Objectively, I knew that I needed to at least make an effort to see my dad before I left or the other side of the country, and as I sat in the rental car I weighed the risks and benefits. I was scared to see him. What if he had moved on like Mom had? What if he hadn’t? What if he’d moved on from our lives as well? I hadn’t had much luck with one parent, and I was extremely hesitant to see the other. So, I called his cell. He didn’t answer. I hadn’t anticipated leaving this early, and we were scheduled to get dinner later in the week. Mostly likely he was busy—probably out and about and golfing, getting groceries, or whatever it was that he did now that he wasn’t with my mom. I decided I would stop by. He probably wouldn’t be there, and I could write another note, or try calling him on my way to the airport. I would have at least made the effort.

The outside of the place was nice. I wondered darkly if he’d used the same relator Mom was using to sell the house. The relator who’d told her that my room was outdated. When I knocked, he actually answered the door quicker than my mom had. I was shocked.

“Ari,” he said. He looked as surprised as me. “Come on in.”

I wish I could say that when he opened the door there were pictures of my mom and him all over. That there was sad music playing. That there was a cracked glass bottle of Vermont maple syrup oozing on the floor in the corner with a sticky mess on the wall above it, like it’d
been thrown across the room in a flurry of passion and heartbreak. I wish I could say that my old bike was in the corner, and that he’d salvaged it before my mom could sell it off.

“I thought I wasn’t going to see you until the end of the week.” My dad made his way across the near empty apartment and huffed as he fell into his La-Z boy chair, the only thing I recognized from our old house. “This is a surprise.”

“Change of plans,” I said.

Ever the stoic, he just hummed in reply. I stood awkwardly as I looked for somewhere to sit. Eventually I settled on an unpacked box labeled, *de Beauvoir*.

“Are you reading feminist theory?”

“What?”

I pointed to the book I was sitting on.

He looked and chuckled. “Old books from college. Took a class to impress your mom. Turned out to be a bit of a waste, huh?”

Maybe I was a romantic. Maybe I would always be one, because I couldn’t help wishing that I’d seen all those things then I walked in. Even then, sitting in his near empty place, bare aside from a small coffee table in the corner, his old La-Z boy, and the boxes against the walls, I kept hoping I’d see a sign. When he mentioned my mom, I’d hoped he would suddenly break down. That I would have to comfort him. That he would say he didn’t know what to do anymore, that he needed my help to win her back from that God damn gardener, or that he had some grand romantic gesture planned. That he was going to break down. That his resolve was going to crack and that in the absence of my mom, I was finally going to see for myself the loving, affectionate man that he had always been with her.
Instead, he said nothing, and I was the one who started to sob when he started to me around his shoddy place, the blank walls and single bedroom. I cried like an infant, heaving. I couldn’t help it. Maybe a part of me thought if he saw me like this he would take me into his arms, like he did that time I was a child, and he would me that this was a just big, huge burst. That all of it was going to be OK. That he loved me. That he loved me, he loved my mom, and that everything was going to be all right. Most likely, I was just pathetic. The dad that had been so tender and sweet with my mother was gone, just like their marriage, and nothing was going to change that. Everyone knew it. Even Petra, who was thousands of miles away and didn’t know anymore more about love or my parents than one would expect a girl with a rich daddy and a dog walking business to. And yet here I was, the last one to figure it out.

My dad reacted as all other evidence would have suggested he would. Seeing me, his grown man of a son, start sobbing made him uncomfortable. He reached out to pat me on the shoulder.

“It will all be all right son,” he said. Then, awkwardly, “Everything will be fine. Maybe call your girlfriend. Or your mom.”

That made me cry harder. But, eventually, and probably to my dad’s relief, I knew that I needed to leave for the airport. He gave me a stiff hug goodbye, and I held on for longer than I should have. Idly, I wondered how many times I’d ever hugged him in my life. Four times? Five?

He walked me to the door. He put a hand on my shoulder as I left, no more affectionate than he’d been when I was a child, and said, “It was good seeing you, son. Have a safe flight home.”

Then he shut the door and let me leave.
I called my old friend Barry at the airport while I was waiting for my flight back to San Francisco. He didn’t pick up. I wonder if he’d gotten a new number since the last time I saw him. It’d been a while. I thought again about what we’d done back when his parents got divorced all those years ago. There still wasn’t any art teacher’s window to throw a baseball through, and it was too late to find Dennis Milbrook’s house. I wasn’t even sure I was mad at Dennis, anyways. So, I ordered a few shots at the bar, made sure Puggles had enough treats for the flight, and then order a few more shots once I boarded the plane. I was starting to realize what you’re supposed to do when you’re almost forty and your parents get a divorce. You get drunk. Maybe break up with your girlfriend if you need to. You definitely don’t go home. Maybe get drunk again. And then you get the fuck over it. I guess.