

HE

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Table of Contents

Somewhere Else.....	3
What They Don't Tell You.....	13
Needed.....	26

Somewhere Else

My mother and father separated when I was just a baby. From that point on, my father would pick me up every other Friday night to spend the weekend with him and be returned to my mother on Sunday evening. We went fishing often. In fact, we typically went every Saturday morning on the weekends he had me. After dinner on Friday night, he and I would go out to the small shed in the backyard and get the boat that rested against it during the week. We'd mount it onto the top of his truck and strap it down for the next morning. He had a small green john boat that he bought from my grandfather's neighbor. Before he got the boat, the two of us would go fishing at local parks and ponds and catch small sunfish. On one occasion I stuck my lure down a hole in some rocks, bored because the fish wouldn't bite in shallow water and my small arms couldn't cast far. Suddenly, I felt the tug and I set the hook. Come to find out, I had discovered the hiding place of a catfish, and triumphantly pulled the black fish from its lair and made my father take it because I refused to touch the slimy, scaly body.

All of our equipment--tackle boxes, oars, life jackets, the motor and battery for it, the seats that slid into brackets in the boat--were placed in the trunk area. I prided myself on my ability to help my father take the boat down and carry it to the water. We would spin it so that it fell perpendicular to the truck, slide one side down to the ground, pull it off, and lug the boat down to the shore. I also took very seriously my job of carrying items down to the boat while my father did the harder tasks like hooking up the motor to the battery and sliding the seats into place.

He would come into my room at 6 o'clock in the morning to wake me up. On most of those mornings, the sun would only have turned the sky a grayish yellow, and it wasn't until we drove down the street to the reservoir that the sun would rise up to warm us. To adolescent me, this was incredibly early.

I always dreaded being woken up, and my father would have to come into my bedroom multiple times to make sure that I stopped falling back into my peaceful sleep. The covers were warm and, being a night owl staying up late watching TV, while he and my stepmother dozed on the couch, I'd be tired in the morning. Once I pulled myself from my bed, I put layers of clothes on, struggling to make sure that my socks didn't bunch up in my sneakers, and braved the chilly gray of morning. He at least bought us breakfast sandwiches, a coffee for him, and coffee milk for me at Dunkin' Donuts on our way.

When we would head out onto the water, the sun would start to warm my skin. When the morning air warmed into the afternoon, we would hear the sunfish surfacing to grab insects that had landed on the top of the water. In the lily pad-filled inlets, we would hear the *pop, pop* of sunfish and not much else. I'd bob my line up and down, making the rubber worm jump on and off the bottom of the reservoir. Sometimes, I would fall asleep sitting in the boat, my feet up on the ledge in my green sneakers, my fishing pole in my hands. Like a cat in the sun, I'd warm myself and let my eyes slowly close, drifting off into a nice half-nap I hoped my father didn't notice while I rested my chin on the top of my life jacket. As much as I hated getting up early, braving the cold morning, and sitting around, trying to catch a fish, I didn't want him to feel as though I didn't want to partake in his hobby with him.

I have never been particularly good at speaking with others. Even as a child, I felt anxiety at the possibility of running into others who would want to try to make conversation with me. Carrying our equipment gave me protection against having to converse with those kind of people when we went fishing. I once came across two men who were fishing off the shore and they talked to us while we unloaded the boat. When my father was at the truck, they tried asking me about the fish we had caught, but I pretended my father had called me and left as though I in fact wanted to talk to them, but had to go help. I had to help my dad, not tut around with anyone else on the shore who wanted to chat. We were on a mission. I was his left-hand man.

But of course I wasn't really, because I'm a girl.

There weren't many other girls who we saw fishing with their dads, not that I remember at least. Sometimes, I felt odd, like I belonged somewhere else, among all the usually older men who fished like my father did. Most of them fished with other guys their own age or their sons. They would hang out on shore, and the young boys would run around and play with each other along the water and in the parking lots filled with boat trailers hooked up to trucks. As the years went by, I felt like more of a rarity as I pulled my hair back into a pony tail and through the hole in the back of my baseball cap and trudged faithfully back and forth to the truck to help my father.

My father's father also liked to fish. Out of the five children my grandparents had, my father was the only boy. Of the three grandchildren they had--two girls and one boy--I was the only one who fished. My older boy cousin never did, so I was always involved in the fishing stories at family functions. My grandfather also loved horses, like me, and would tell me about

growing up around them. Those were the best stories, much better than trying to understand what my aunts and grandmother were talking about. Shopping, cooking, and designer brands were not for me. Large mouth and small mouth bass, plastic lures versus rubber lures? *Those* I could understand.

I often wonder if my father wanted a son when he found out my mother was having me. The doctors told them that my fast heart rate indicated that I might be a boy, but they didn't find out what I was until I was born. My father has never been the kind of person who talks about his feelings or relationships, or is particularly affectionate. I wonder if he feared having a little girl who might desire all of those things from him.

So instead, I was a boy. He took me fishing and taught me about lures and types of fish. Sure, he attended my dance recitals, but he showed off pictures of me and my four pound largemouth bass, not me in my bright orange tutu. I don't believe that he really wanted to avoid my girlness because he didn't feel as though he was compatible with that kind of functioning. Like many things that he did, I think it was unconscious.

On these fishing trips, I often had to go to the bathroom for hours on end, stuck in his little green John boat on the water, but I refused to go to the bathroom on one of the small islands on the local reservoir where we spent much of our time. If my dad had to, we'd just pull up to the shore, and push the boat with our oars until it crunched onto the pebbly bottom of the pond. He'd disappear into the trees to go about his business. I couldn't imagine pulling my pants down to go to the bathroom, even if the only creature on the island was a bird or a water snake. I felt odd

thinking about my bare bottom out for all to possibly see, especially with my father waiting in the boat on the shore. So I waited for hours until we got home instead.

Perhaps I didn't complain about having to go to the bathroom for hours of the day, waking up early, or being brought on all these fishing trips because I don't really complain about anything. In my mind, to complain is to hurt people's feelings, and I didn't want to hurt my father's feelings. Having a relationship with my father has always sort of been like grasping at straws.

There was a time when he called me every week, but once he and my stepmother got a divorce, the calls lessened, then stopped. Later, I found out that she was the one who would make sure that he called me every week.

Looking back, I try to find something I actually enjoyed about fishing. Being outdoors was fun, but I could be outdoors in other ways--ways I was more inclined to like. I liked seeing the beautiful flowers on the lily pads, the green algae decorating the top of the water in little green dots like confetti, and the turtles and dragonflies sunning themselves on rocks. I was thrilled by the excitement of reeling a fish in and the feeling of accomplishment when I could take a photo with my prize. But there weren't any intimate or profound conversations, just me talking about school.

Much like the phone conversations we would have when my father called me on the weeks I didn't see him, I talked endlessly to fill the space and he said little. I asked what was new with him after talking about my spelling quiz and gym class and the movie I watched that week. He'd reply with "nothing" or "not much."

The only thing I really liked about fishing was the door it opened to my father. If I made him think that I didn't like getting up, bundling myself, carrying oars and tackle boxes around, and waiting for the right moment to set the hook, what would we do together? What would make me special? I'd be like every other little girl who asked for shopping trips or wanted to talk about designer brands. If that was the case, how would we connect?

We had a plastic minnow lure that we lovingly called "Old Faithful." Over the years, the black paint on its back and pink spot on its belly became scratched with use. It was one of the smallest, most generic lures you'd ever see but it always caught the fish worth telling stories about. I caught my first four pound largemouth bass trolling with Old Faithful around a rock patch in our usual reservoir near the apartment. I caught my first and only northern pike with Old Faithful in a pond much farther from home. Its sharp teeth made it look scary considering how small and thin of a fish it was. I also caught two fish at the same time with that lure, a sun fish and a small perch. I named them Sonny and Cher.

I would make my father hold each fish up for me since I didn't like touching them. He'd hold it out in front of himself, I'd put my face next to it and smile, and he'd snap a picture of us. Before throwing back all of our fish, I named them. I'm not sure why, but I think it made me feel a little bit better about having put them through the terrible experience of thinking they were getting breakfast, but instead getting a metal hook shoved through their lip and being pulled out of the water and into the cool morning air. I remember asking my dad to name a fish once but I don't think he would. Instead, I took the responsibility of coming up with creative names for all of them. Besides Sonny and Cher, I forget what all of them were.

I used to have a forest green life vest with a big fat gray fish on it for our boat trips. It was a kid's vest, that had a zipper instead of buckles like the bright orange adult ones. I loved that vest and the little pocket on the front of it which didn't fit anything in particular, but I still tried to fit things like chapstick in. Once I reached a certain age, it wouldn't fit anymore. I was forced to give in and start wearing a neon orange vest with black buckles just like everyone else, and I didn't like that.

Sometime around that time was probably when I got my period for the first time. I had always wanted it, probably because my step sister and cousin were 10 years older and I wanted to be just like them. They had braces, I wanted braces. They had glasses, I wanted glasses. They wore bras, I wanted a bra. They got "it," so logically I did too-- until I actually got it. It ended up that instead of feeling mature, it felt dirty--too mature for a little girl, which was how I still imagined myself. What would happen if I got my period at my dad's apartment and I didn't have anything? It would be too embarrassing to ask my stepmother for something. And what about going fishing? I'd have to try to last hours on a boat even when I felt like I wanted to lay in bed and watch a movie while eating brownies like my mother would do with me when it was "my time of the month."

I certainly didn't have friends who fished on Saturday mornings with their dads. The girls I went to school with were more the "Daddy's Princess" type than the fishermen type. I could've felt special because of this, because I did something different with my dad than the other girls did with their fathers. And I did at times. I felt as though I was the kind of daughter dads wanted

because I did stuff they liked. I went fishing and watched hockey with my father, just like a young boy might be expected to. But at the same time, I wanted a dad who did things that I wanted to do like horseback riding or going to the beach.

There was only one instance in which I felt like other girls probably felt. I don't remember many feelings that I had as a child, but I remember being in a restaurant with my father and stepmother and sitting next to him in the booth. They were talking to each other when suddenly, I was overwhelmed by a need to hug my father. I leaned over, pushed myself under his arm, wrapped my arms around him, and rested my head on his fleece pullover.

I remember worrying that he would push me away after a quick hug, a childish affectionate thing that he didn't usually partake in. But he didn't. He let me lean there, cuddling against him, and he put his arm around me. In that moment I felt a sense of completeness that I didn't quite understand at the moment. I thought to myself that it was so neat how much I really loved my dad. It was so easy, I didn't have to try at all like I sometimes had to do with other people I loved. In fact, it was harder to think of not loving him.

There was a magnetic pull that I seemed to have to my father, even as I got older and our relationship became relatively nonexistent. I wanted to be angry at him when he failed to keep in touch and we only saw each other on holidays. But I wasn't really. I projected nonchalance when people would talk about how sad it was that my father and I weren't close in any way, but in reality I was hurting. I told myself that a father isn't just a person who had a role in making you, he is someone who takes care of you, teaches you, and is present for the difficult parts of life as well as the good ones.

Regardless of that, I still felt an attachment to him. He was my one and only father who gave me his crooked teeth and mischievous smirk. And I deeply wanted to be his one and only daughter in another way than just being his only offspring. I wanted a deeper connection, one of admiration or communication or having something special just between the two of us.

In our society, girliness denotes weakness, particularly when it comes to masculine hobbies like fishing. In order to be good at fishing, I'd have to be more like a boy, wearing baggy T-shirts and sweatshirts, and not doing my hair or wearing makeup. For a long time, that's what I did.

As I got older, I embraced my femininity more and also stopped going over to my father's apartment and fishing with him on Saturday mornings. I simply found myself going over less because I needed to be somewhere else--work on Saturdays or church with my mother on Sundays--and because he didn't call me. This began a decline into not seeing each other at all, except for holidays and family birthdays.

I wonder if he felt as though I had left him behind. I never thought of myself as too cool for my father, but it is possible that he saw it differently--that because I was getting older, I would figure out that he was just an average guy living a boring life. Perhaps he saw growing up as an inevitable path away from things like fishing trips and wanting to hug him in a restaurant booth. I think he still wanted to go fishing and to have me over, but he didn't know how to tell me or ask me.

After his divorce, I came over and helped him shop for groceries and plan out meals for the week. I wanted to help, to fix things, and to make sure that he was taken care of, but I felt

like he didn't appreciate it. Looking back, I'm sure he didn't want his 16 year old daughter feeling responsible for marinating his chicken and buying his milk. Or maybe he found it too hard to tell me things like *thank you*, *I need you*, or *I'm lonely*.

When I was 21, I called my father to wish him a happy birthday. He was drunk and told me that he thought I was mad at him, so he didn't call me. I didn't know what to say because we had always pretended that a rift didn't exist between us when we talked to and saw each other. All I could do on the phone as I sat at my kitchen table was cry, say goodbye to him, and hang up.

In truth I was angry at him, though I didn't want to be. I didn't want him to feel like I had outgrown him or didn't love him, just as I didn't want him to feel like I didn't want to go fishing as a child. But I had in fact outgrown what he had to offer as a father. Other girls I knew had fathers who were around to talk to about life, to help them move into their first apartment, to walk them down the aisle. But I hadn't walked down the aisle, and my father hadn't been around for some of those other things. He didn't seem capable of being around for others in the future. He was still in the days of getting up with the sun to unpack a boat and catch fish. He existed in the space in which I wouldn't need him to be around to move me into an apartment or walk me down an aisle because I was a ten year-old in a forest green life vest, carrying oars and naming fish she refused to touch. I was somewhere else now, someone else now, needing something else entirely.

What They Don't Tell You

I met him on the steps of the media center the first semester I transferred to Rhode Island College. It was an early fall day, one where there is enough chill in the air to wear a large sweater like I was, but the sun still warms you while you're walking around campus. I had just been hired as photography editor by the school newspaper and was looking for someone to take pictures at the soccer game on campus because I had to leave for work. And there he was on the steps outside the office, smoking a cigarette.

"Hey, do you know how to work a camera?" I asked, almost walking right by him in my rush to get down the steps. "And are you around this afternoon?" I smiled, hoping to be charming enough to win him over. I had seen him in the newspaper office, so I knew that he at least worked there.

"I do," he said. "And I am. Why?" I can imagine his smirk as he smugly blew smoke out of his mouth. He knew he was attractive and I'm sure he was pleased that I had stopped on those steps to talk to him.

"I need someone to take pictures of a soccer game today at four. I would, but I have to go pick up a three year-old at daycare."

"I can do it, but you'll have to show me where the soccer field is. I don't know," he lied. I'd later realize that he knew very well where the field was. He had taken pictures for the paper before.

I imagine my mother feeling the same way about my father as I did about Justin. We were only together for six months, but it felt longer than all of my other relationships. I was there, not absent like people become with each other, doing other things when they're together instead of listening to each other or wanting to be with anyone else instead of the other person. The relationship swallowed me whole and there wasn't much I could do without thinking about him. He was the love of my life, or so I thought.

“So where do you hail from?” he asked me. We walked along, side-by-side, and I laughed. I told him where I was from and how I had transferred from a school in Pennsylvania. He told me where he was from. Although I don't remember much about the exchange, I knew we were flirting. He made a witty comments, I made them back. I felt like a character in a movie, the conversation flowing smoothly instead of being made of awkward pauses and statements about the weather.

Not surprisingly, we located the soccer field on the fairly small campus and I announced that I must take my leave.

“I'll walk with you to your car.”

Justin was smart. That's what I found most attractive about him. He wasn't smart to impress me and he wasn't willing to put aside his intelligence in order to make anyone feel comfortable or correct. He was unapologetically smart. Often, I found him out on the steps with another student, bumming a cigarette off of them and arguing about the origins of the universe or the possibility of life outside of our planet. He loved talking about politics, religion, and science,

things I didn't particularly like to talk about because I didn't have much of an opinion about them. Looking back, I realize how confrontational he was. If the other person didn't agree with him, they were a moron. He seemed to know everything about astronomy, evolution, and ancient belief systems. And when it came to politics, he always knew where he stood.

I, on the other hand, did not. All of the weight of adulthood that came along with college--voting and changing and soon-to-be drinking--overwhelmed me. My answers about everything seemed to disappear in order to make room for new things. I was changing drastically in my beliefs and Justin epitomized that. He was the opposite of everything I had been and, looking back, he was a form of what I would be like in the future. He pushed me, constantly questioning everything I had been so sure of.

“How can you believe that the complex universe with evidence of billions of years of evolution could have just been created?” he'd ask, after telling me about how stars and planets form and die.

“I don't know. I'm not really sure what I believe.” I could feel that he thought I was stupid, one of the brainwashed people who refuse to acknowledge scientific evidence. But I had grown up with that. It wasn't that I refused reality, but that up until that point my reality had been warped. I was embarrassed and uncomfortable. I had always been the smart girl who knew what she believed. Now, here was someone who, at times, seemed to think me unintelligent. Other times, I think he felt triumphant over grabbing me out of the grips of religion with scientific fact.

I had never bought into the concept of one person being the love of your life. It seemed reductive and ignorant of how people could change their feelings about each other. When I met

Justin, I had been in a relationship for three years. I had found myself at nineteen, talking about getting married and having babies. Since I was sixteen, I had been wanting sex, having sex, and feeling guilty about sex, my teachers and parents teaching me that it was imperative to save myself for marriage. After three years of that, I was tired of feeling ashamed. Now, I found myself at a crossroads: be with my boyfriend who was everything I had planned on having, get married, and continue on my usual path that I had been planning for quite a while, or turn away into the unknown and be with Justin. Even if we didn't work out, I knew that Justin represented so much more: a different future, an unknown future in which I could change anything I wanted to.

So I turned off the path I'd been on and began a new adventure. It wasn't easy. Justin wasn't the kind of guy I had ever been with before. He smoked pot and cigarettes, neither of which I had partaken in or had any desire to. He was a staunch atheist who talked about economics and politics and loved to debate. He had had sex with other people. And he certainly wasn't going to dote on me and keep in constant communication like my now ex-boyfriend had been. Being with him wasn't warm, fuzzy, and comfortable. It was energizing, challenging, sensual, exciting.

Besides being intelligent, Justin was attractive. He had gorgeous blue eyes. During my first newspaper meeting, he stared at me the entire time. And that's not an exaggeration. I found it extremely uncomfortable, being the shy new girl and feeling as though he was burning holes through me with his eyes. Despite his staring, I wasn't uninterested in him. He was intriguing and he made me feel special. A guy like him noticing a girl like me? I was still stuck in the

mindset of an awkward, overweight teenage girl. But now I was almost twenty and had lost thirty pounds over the summer. I was a different person. I was learning to spend more time styling my hair less time caking makeup onto my face and, according to beauty standards, I had a body. Guys like Justin noticed girls like me. To me, it seemed unbelievable.

We didn't start dating immediately, but we did start having sex. Gone were my days of sexual shame and trying to make myself feel better by saying that at least I was having sex with my future husband. Besides being a bed partner, I had no idea what Justin would be. When I took off his shirt, I realized how thin he was. Later I would learn that it was because he didn't eat often, his depression stealing away his appetite. His pale white skin was interrupted by a trail of dark hair, making its way to the top of his boxers. I had never seen any other man besides my ex naked and I was mesmerized by his body--his sculpted shoulder blades with a Darwin tattoo, his hip bones jutting out, asking me to run my hands over them, every muscle poised to do whatever we were going to do.

I must have been terrified to be naked in front of him. I must have thought that once I took my clothes off, he would realize that I had been hiding bumps and curves in the wrong places. I must have been worried about a whole mess of things, but I don't remember fear or anxiety at all. I remember straddling him on the couch that he slept on, topless, his hands running over my body. I felt like nothing less than a goddess. I felt free.

My parents were together for nine years. In that time, my father left my mother, dated someone else, and then returned, asking her to take him back. Being totally in love with him, she did. He also pressured her to have an abortion when she found out she was pregnant with me,

after she had already had one. Any time my mother talks about her relationship with my father, she illustrates to me the kind of relationship I don't want to have--and that she never wanted me to have. I never wanted to be at the mercy of someone else.

I did not want to be desperate for someone the way my mother was for my father. She even bought herself an engagement ring so that he would marry her. He still wouldn't. She had a baby, and he still couldn't commit, straighten out, be a father.

I had never been desperately in love before. Yes, I had made stupid decisions for boys: sneaking around, lying to parents--teenager things. But Justin was different. After a year or so into my previous relationships, I had found someone else. I'd lost interest. With Justin, I couldn't find anyone else attractive. There was no one else for me. I was hooked. And I finally sympathized with my mother who had so desperately wanted--needed--my father for such a long time. I had found the love of my life and it was not the way it had been advertised. I was not happy all of the time and we did not get along. The small windows of complete happiness felt sharper and more intense as anything I had felt, but so did the hurt.

The way I felt a need to be around Justin no matter how much we fought or how much he disregarded me also reminded me of my own relationship with my father. I would get angry at Justin for not wanting to spend time with me or go to any of his classes, but as much as I wanted to get in my car and leave school or his house, I didn't want to give up the opportunity to simply be with him. In a similar way, I would get angry with my father for not calling me or being involved in my life. Yet I was only angry because I was hurt. And I was hurt because I loved my father deeply, even when he did nothing to earn it.

When I turned sixteen, my father and stepmother got divorced and his phone calls to me dwindled. But it didn't matter to me. It didn't matter that he couldn't seem to emotionally connect and express himself to me even though I knew he must have been feeling hurt and alone. It didn't matter that he didn't call me or talk to me often and that I felt like an outsider trying to find her way in when I was with him. I still wanted to be around him, to make him laugh and feel like I made him proud in some way. He was my dad, no matter how he acted or what he failed to do.

I knew my relationship with Justin was bad while I was still in it. I knew that I was desperate for him and that he didn't appreciate me. I could see it. I also knew that I had never been one to fawn over someone who didn't have time for me, but I stayed. I couldn't explain why I felt the way I did. It was like an addiction. I was addicted to him, and he was addicted to marijuana. Justin had anxiety and depression and he smoked three or four times a day. When he smoked, he felt clearer, was able to get out of bed, ate, was nicer. When his dealer couldn't make the drive to his house, he would sleep all day and slink around the house, angry at anyone who crossed him.

I couldn't live without him, but he never made me believe he reciprocated that feeling. I always looked at girls like me with contempt, wondering how they could be so pretty or smart or funny and allow someone to treat them so poorly. Those kinds of girls let people take advantage of them. Guys walk all over them because they don't think they are good enough for them. Those girls are a cliché. And I was one of them now. I drove Justin around and paid for dates so I could be with him.

We never stayed at my house because my parents would have never let a boy sleep in my bed with me. Instead, we tried to fit ourselves on his couch in the sitting room that was sectioned off in order to serve as his bedroom. He lived with his mother, sister, aunt, and cousin, so it wasn't exactly a bachelor pad. Most nights, we would pull the mattress out of the couch and he would quickly fall asleep while I rested my head on his chest. I never slept well at other people's houses, so I'd lay awake and think, listening to everyone getting up to go to the bathroom or have a midnight snack. His snoring would aggravate me so much that I would sometimes roll him over onto his side. When we didn't pull out the mattress in the couch, Justin would often end up pushing me off onto the floor in the middle of the night. Sometimes, I would get back up and make space for myself. Other times, I slept on the hardwood floor.

"Sometimes I think about having sex with other people" he mentioned one day in passing, as though it meant nothing. I felt as though my insides had shattered. I couldn't even think about having sex or even a relationship with anyone else. And I had tried. I had wanted to want to be with someone else, anyone but him, but I couldn't. I felt like I had dug a hole in the ground, climbed in, turned around to help Justin down into it with me, and found myself utterly alone with no way out.

He said he didn't feel like having sex with me sometimes because of anxiety and, in my mind, that meant that I had to be understanding. I didn't know what it was like to have crippling depression and anxiety, so I felt guilty when I got angry with him for not wanting to do anything in bed with me besides sleeping. Yet I found myself furious again and again.

I wondered what was wrong with me almost every day. He had wanted to have sex with me when we first started dating, but four months into our relationship I was worshipping his body like a god and he was uninterested in what I had to offer. *How could a guy like him want to be with a girl like me?*

I wonder how my mother felt when my father married another woman when I was ten. I don't think it bothered her much, since she had gotten married years before, creating a family for me and buying a little blue house in a quiet neighborhood. But perhaps when the wound was fresher, when they had just split up, she felt a deep pain in her gut when she heard about him seeing other people.

It's not as though they broke up on hateful terms. She made the best decision for her future and mine, but she still loved him. Until her mid-twenties, she had given him everything. She tried to keep him and change him to fit into the new life they would have to have with a child, but no matter how hard you try, you can't fit a circle peg into a square hole.

Then came this other woman and he found marital bliss with her. He bought a ring, got down on one knee, and popped the question that my mother never had the chance to answer. It must have caused at least a little twinge of pain when I came home from seeing him over the weekend and told her the news. She must have, if even for a second, compared herself to this new woman. *What does she have that I didn't? Is it the job? The hair? The hobbies? The figure? The non-committal attitude that attracted him to her? Did I need him too much?*

“I just don’t think I really love you,” he said to me. Tears weren’t trickling down his cheeks, they were pouring, running down his scrunched up, red face. He was distraught by yet another fight we’d had. I had told him that I loved him enough to also love his depression which was a part of him, just like his Darwin tattoo and crystal blue eyes. He responded by saying that he wanted me to bring him home from my house that he was supposed to stay over at while my parents were away.

He left me that day. I felt like the world was falling apart on me and the weight would crush me out of existence. I think I longed for that actually, to be pressed down until there was nothing left and I wouldn’t have to deal with life--school, friends, family, finding myself--without him.

I loved him too much. I had never believed in soul mates before or in two people being the loves of each other’s lives. But after I met him, I completely believed that Justin was the love of my life. I truly thought that no other being could fulfill me like he did.

I still feel guilty when I talk about my father and our non-existent relationship. When he didn’t call or reach out to make plans with me throughout my years in high school, my mother would tell me that he was the adult and that I was not to blame for how our relationship dwindled. Despite this, I have always felt as though it was somehow my own fault. If only I had called more or made him feel like I wanted to go fishing with him or get dinner together, maybe we’d have a better relationship, better than seeing each other a couple of times a year for holidays, always claiming that we will call each other and get together.

I called him for his last birthday after not having spoken to him in months. He picked up the phone drunk. I could tell he was, because along with telling me he had been drinking, he actually talked to me about how he was feeling.

“I haven’t called you because I thought you were mad at me,” he said in the spirit of sharing that a dozen beers can inspire. I said nothing. In my mind, he was right. I was guilty. It was all my fault. And then I got angry. We hung up the phone and never spoke of the conversation afterwards, but in that moment I realized that the entire time I was forcing guilt upon myself, he was trying to make excuses in order to force it off of him.

Justin returned a few months later, saying I was the person he wanted to be with and that he really did love me. I didn't know what to say when I saw what he had typed on the screen of my phone. I had waited around our entire relationship, longing for him to say that. I would have given anything to hear that he had dreamt about me the way he did after he left. Now that I had moved on, he wanted to be with me. It was as though he could sense that I was beginning to feel better, to be all right, so he dropped back in, thinking I would want to try everything all over again.

But I had met someone. I had found someone who fantasized about me the way Justin fantasized about other women when we were together. So, I was left to decide between dropping back into my past relationship, or moving forward. Looking at the situation now, it seems like an easy decision: be with the person who appreciates you. But it was a difficult one for me to make at the time.

My mother married my stepfather when I was four years old. I wonder if there were times when she thought of going back to my father, of falling into the comfortable routine they must have created in all of the years they spent together. When she talks about my dad, I always get a sense that my stepfather was a person she always needed, the person she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with, but my father was that once-in-a-lifetime love, the kind that leaves you feeling empty and lost if you leave. And that's how I felt when I told Justin I wasn't going to drop everything to go back to him.

Every once in a while my mother calls me up and tells me about a dream she had about my father. Sometimes, they get married, other times, she just yells at him until she wakes up. He cannot be erased from her memory and I'm not convinced that it is only because she has me around to remind her of him. At one point, he was her everything, the love of her life. There was no one else. It's as though he stained every fiber of her being and nothing can wash him out.

Three years later, I still think about Justin often. Time may have stopped the overwhelming sadness and desire to lay in bed, cry, and eat cookies, but it hasn't erased anything or even made me forget. I imagined, I told myself so that I would feel better, that one day I wouldn't think about Justin, I would be happy not being with him. Part of that is true. Like my mother, I moved on and I found a person to spend life with, someone who is gentle and loving. But Justin never goes away. Perhaps that really does make him the love of my life.

In a picture I took of him, he is in a tree looking down at me and my Nikon and smirking. Justin is laughing in the picture, after saying something funny, and he is looking at me, not just to take the picture but because he is interested in the person behind the camera. I can see something

in his eyes. Even though he was probably saying something sarcastic, he is present, interested, and gentle in the way he is looking at me.

And I hate him for this. I hate that I never experienced a relationship as deeply as I experienced the one with him and that I can still feel the effects of that. I long for what used to be and I don't want to. I don't want to still feel anxiety when I talk about my father or plan who I'm visiting for the holidays and when I should call him. I also don't want to think about Justin and feel lost love instead of disgust or dismissal of the memories I have with him. I want to just get rid of them, wash them away so that I have a clean slate and I don't have to talk about them, think about, or dream about them. But they're stained into the fiber of my being. Nothing can wash them out.

Needed

When I was nine years old, my stepfather brought my mother and me camping. It was my first time hiking and camping out in a tent in the woods. I remember climbing up the mountain in New Hampshire and seeing little frogs hopping along the sides of the trail. The ground was wet and the rocks slippery as I carried my pack which seemed so heavy, but probably only contained some clothes and a sleeping bag. My stepfather led the way since he had planned where we would be climbing and sleeping on our trip.

Our camp site was a little outcropping next to a cold stream that flowed down to a large waterfall. I put my navy blue one piece bathing suit on, and played knee deep in the stream, throwing pieces of wood in and watching them travel down like boats heading toward the waterfall. I was amazed by how clear the water was. I could see down to the bottom through the slowly moving water and see each pebble and sunken stick. My mother tells me I played there for hours by myself, like I was the only person on the planet.

I wonder if I tried to help my mother and stepfather set up the tent and unpack, handing them poles they didn't need yet or taking things out of our packs that should have stayed packed. I know I would have wanted to help. I always have, especially with my stepfather. But I know that I would have been worried about getting in the way, making him angry, making things more difficult instead of helping. I had a tendency to do that, too. I wanted to learn how to do things like he did. I wanted to know the answers, to know where to go, what to pack, or how to fix things.

Something inside of me wants to say that the trip was my mother's first time camping too. On it, she learned how much she disliked the wilderness. She hated camping, being in the woods away from a bathroom, electricity, and her bed. They yelled at each other about this, like they would often do when arguing in our basement at home, thinking that I couldn't hear them. The only other thing I remember from this trip, besides the tiny frogs and wooden boats on the river is my mother and stepfather fighting. I don't remember the specifics of their argument or what brought it on, just that my mother never went camping with us again.

In our piles of photographs that have never been put into albums is a picture of me eating dinner at our campsite. Pasta sauce is easy to carry up the mountain and spaghetti is simple to cook, so my stepfather would prepare and freeze sauce in a bag for dinner. It is a staple camping food for him and it was what we were having for dinner the night that my mother snapped the picture. In it I am sitting in the navy blue bathing suit holding my bowl of pasta, my eyes bugging out as I smile ecstatically, spaghetti sauce forming a ring around my mouth. I am unrestrainedly happy.

In another photograph of me eating spaghetti, my eyes are bulging and my fists are clamped shut. I am not smiling, but clenching my teeth and showing them to the camera. I am probably a year old, sitting in my high chair in the apartment my mother and I lived in before she met and married my stepfather and bought a house. All around my mouth and fists is spaghetti sauce. It covers the Louisiana Saints bib that I wear, picked out by my biological father who loved the team. He and my mother separated when I was a baby, before she married my stepfather.

My mother's lack of interest in camping didn't dissuade me from loving the outdoors. She says that I had the time of my life on that first camping trip and I grew to love being outside, smelling like a campfire, and being tucked into a sleeping bag in a tent in the dark silence of the woods. I loved being away from civilization, even if only for a day. Camping, hiking, and adventuring became things my stepfather and I did together without my mother. I think he cherished this because my mother and I were always very close. First it was she and I, then he came into the picture. Having something between the two of us created a space in that picture for him to be a dad.

We would often go for hikes at an Audubon Society property near our house. As a child, it seemed gigantic, that we could get lost in there and never be found. We would hike for hours in the fall on paths covered by orange, red, yellow, and brown leaves, spotting birds and small rodents. We would venture down to the small streams. Along the bank, I would flip over rocks to discover salamanders running for cover to escape me. So many times, my stepfather would stop to show me a stick snake on the side of the path. I, of course, fell for this time and again in hopes that we would see an actual snake, not a broken piece of a tree branch. I would become exasperated and storm off down the path away from him, but not for long. He was the one who knew where we were going.

Years later, when I was about 13 years old, my stepfather and I went to Mount Washington. I thought I would die climbing up the steep trail with a pack filled with clothes, a

sleeping bag, and some pots. The blood rushed to my face. I felt like a tea kettle about to whistle, all of the heat in my body building up.

"We can't keep stopping or we'll never get up to the ravine," he said. He was carrying most of our supplies, yet didn't seem to struggle as much as I did. So I tried to push myself harder. I didn't want to not make it, to disappoint him.

We made it to the ravine and I stopped, put my pack down, and rested. Tuckerman's Ravine is about halfway up the side of Mount Washington. It was like being in a bowl with steep, rocky sides. Waterfalls poured down the sides of the ravine and near the campsite was a pond where all the water collected and the trees reflected in the still surface. Clouds and fog sometimes descend into the ravine, making it seem like an unknown valley, like you and the handful of people passing through are venturing into a new world.

We stayed in a lean-to that night with another man and his daughter. As it got darker, we made hot chocolate and my stepfather took me to the caretaker's building. It had a deck with benches for hikers to rest on, and we sat out on those benches and looked up at the night sky filled with stars. I had never understood how ancient people developed stories around the constellations. Once, my stepfather and I had woken up at three o'clock in the morning to watch a meteor shower, but the lights from a car repair shop behind our backyard polluted the night sky. We struggled to see the shooting stars, huddled in our winter jackets with hot chocolate in our hands. I couldn't comprehend that there were other places in the world where people could see hundreds of those stars that were missing from our view.

Up on that mountain, away from the lights of the city, there was more glowing white from the stars than empty black from space. It felt like I could see the whole universe from

where I was sitting on the deck of the caretaker's building. We were so tiny. The entire mountain was tiny compared to the stretching sky that seemed to fit over us like the dome I had at home that fit over a flashlight to project stars onto my bedroom walls. I had never seen so many stars in my life, and I still haven't seen that many again.

When I was 20, I returned to Mount Washington with a friend. It was the first time I had camped without my stepfather who always knew where he was, where he was going, and how to get there. But I wasn't worried because I had been here before. I knew where we would stay, what the campsite would look like, and approximately how long it would take for us to get there. I had even made my own spaghetti sauce for our dinner, and frozen it the night before.

I used my stepfather's hiking pack and filled it with his camping stove, pots, and crash pad since I didn't have my own. We climbed the trail up to the ravine and I found it much easier than I had the first time I climbed the steep trails. This time, I was the one telling my friend that we couldn't keep stopping if we wanted to keep our climbing time down.

We made it up to the ravine and even climbed out of it, set in a thick cloud that descended over everything. When we reached our shelter that night, my stepfather's stove wouldn't work for me. I followed all of the instructions he had given me and had shown me the day before at home, but it still wouldn't light. So we ate bagels and a jar of peanut butter by the light of my flashlight instead.

I had looked forward to seeing the stars again up there on the mountain that night. But a fierce wind had brought a blanket of clouds over us. I walked around the camping area, looking

for even the smallest patch of stars, but nothing could be seen. Instead, we huddled away in our shelter which was different than the one I had stayed in previously.

Although nothing had turned out the way I had hoped, I was still happy that we had hiked the mountain. My stepfather could tell his hiking friends that I had climbed one of the highest peaks in our area. During the years between my visits to Mt. Washington, our relationship had diminished. We fought often about rules and around sixteen, I knew that he was not proud of me as a daughter. He thought we had nothing in common and that I was a silly girl that had no respect for him.

Now I had done something he loved to do. I had taken after him. I had used everything he had taught me and at least tried to do it myself, even if it didn't quite work.

A year after that trip, my uncle passed away. He was my stepfather's younger brother, the youngest out of five yet the first, and only, so far, to die. He was also the only one of my stepfather's siblings who went hiking or camping with him. In his will, my uncle appointed my stepfather and mother as guardians for his seven-year-old son in the event of his death, since his wife had died a year earlier from cancer. So, along with losing his brother and best friend, my stepfather gained a seven year-old little boy, one that looked much like my uncle.

I was at a friend's house the morning my parents found out my uncle had died. My mother called me, telling how they had received a call from my grandparents who lived in Florida near my uncle. By the time I got back to our house, my parents had already bought plane tickets to Florida. They were packing. As I walked up the stairs, I came upon my stepfather

trying to button a silver dress shirt. He was looking down, fumbling with the buttons, tears leaving spots down the front of the shirt.

“I just want to look good for my brother,” he said. I had never seen him cry like that before. He was like a child, thinking it mattered what he wore, thinking that his brother would care if he showed up in a long-sleeve dress shirt, or a torn muscle shirt like the two of them wore to work when they did construction together. In that moment, he was fragile. This man who had always known where he was, where he was going, and how to get there, couldn't even get his shirt buttoned.

My biological father's side of the family has a party on Christmas Eve every year. One year, my aunt hosted the gathering. We went to her beautiful new house with large glass front doors and a catered buffet. When I was leaving the party, the headlights of my car lit up a sign across the street. It was for the Audubon Society property that my stepfather and I had often visited. Since I had never driven there, I didn't know where it was. We hadn't been hiking there in years, so I was surprised to see the sign.

In my mind, it had disappeared and become overgrown. If we weren't going there, it was still hidden away, like the secret garden, awaiting our return. But there it was, on an accessible road not far from a main intersection. Many people could find it easily, and my aunt could walk out her front door and across the street if she wanted to hike there, although I had a feeling that she probably didn't. After stopping to read the sign and confirm it was our hiking place, I drove away, excited to return home and watch *It's a Wonderful Life* on television with my mother and stepfather.

The summer after my uncle passed away, my stepfather wanted to go up to New Hampshire again. I mentioned climbing Mt. Washington like we had before, but he wanted to do something easier, something his aging body, with a bad shoulder and weakening knees, could handle. Instead we decided on taking a lift up Wildcat Mountain, hiking down into a valley, and staying in a hut there, where he had stayed years before. So, we packed up pasta sauce, pots, sleeping bags, and the new camp stove he had bought for the trip.

I had my own pack this time, one my mother and stepfather had gotten for my birthday. He had taken me up to a camping warehouse in Boston and helped me pick out the blue and grey pack with adjustable straps. I had tried on different packs, only looking at the earthy blues, greens, and grays that they store had to offer instead of the oranges and hot pinks in the women's section of the store. I didn't see a need in spending more money for something fashionable. Packs were for transporting goods, not completing an outfit. This made me feel sensible, and I felt as though that would make him proud.

This trip, my stepfather took his brother's pack. On the ride up, he said he wanted to dedicate the trip to my uncle. We didn't talk much on the way there, just listened to some Bob Dylan on a mix CD I had made. I was used to not speaking much, to long car rides spent thinking of something I could talk about that would be intelligent and wouldn't cause a disagreement.

When we reached the hut, it was much different than my stepfather had remembered. It was larger, with pillows and blankets provided, a kitchen where the people working there prepared a dinner for guests, and a 150 dollar charge to stay the night.

“The last time I was here, it was just a building with cots,” he said in disbelief. We weren’t looking for luxury, just shelter. Of course it had been almost fifteen years since his last visit. Things were different.

We decided to hike out to the road and walk back to the car, but ended up much farther from where we had parked than anticipated. So, we dropped our packs and walked the mountain road back to the truck. When we had almost made it, my stepfather gave me the keys to go ahead and get the truck while he sat and waited. His knees couldn’t handle the walking anymore. And in that moment he seemed fragile again. I realized that one day he would become an old man with a cane or a walker who couldn’t climb mountains or build things anymore. And I would be the one with the keys, the one in charge, the one who would have to know where we were going.

"What a strange trip," I said, once we were in the car on our way home.

"You'd think someone would have picked us up. They used to all the time," he said.

"People don't trust hitchhikers. There are so many movies about that kind of stuff now. You know, serial killers pretending to be hitchhikers so that they can get picked up by their next victim."

He chuckled and agreed. "When my buddies and I went canoeing once, some guy picked us up, got us food, and drove us back to our campsite," he recalled, reminiscing about the days when huts were just one room shelters with cots, when his little brother was still around and they would all go hiking together with packs filled with nothing but clothing and beer.

We didn’t get back to my parents’ house until late that night, after stopping at Dairy Queen for burgers and shakes. I didn't feel like driving home to my apartment, so I slept in my cousin’s room. He was sound asleep, fairly well-adjusted to his new home far away from Florida,

where he had lived with his father. It was easy for me to fall asleep comfortably; besides being exhausted, I was back in my old bedroom, the walls still painted grayish blue.

We went back to the Audubon Society property with my niece, nephews, and cousin as I got older. Not was is surprisingly close to our home, it was small. I couldn't imagine anyone getting lost in this place, and realized that most paths led to the main field in ten or twenty minutes. Now, I could see some houses through the trees that were losing their leaves. It was still as beautiful as I had remembered it, but the paths were smaller and the streams flowed more slowly than I pictured when I reminisced about our big secret hiking area.

It was strange to see the children running along the paths that I had hiked with my stepfather when I was their age. He pointed out stick snakes to them in an excited voice and watched as they fell for his tricks and corrected him that it was only a fallen branch and not a snake. Like my mother had, I told them to ignore him when he teased like this, but wasn't surprised when they didn't listen to me. They became exasperated like I had too, running ahead on the path to distance themselves from his games.

A year after my stepfather and I went on our trip dedicated to his brother, we headed back up to New Hampshire but with my cousin this time. This was his very first camping trip. At first, I was surprised, but then I realized that for most of his life his mother was sick and not long after, so was his father. Even if my uncle had wanted to bring him camping, there wasn't much time for trips into the mountains like we were taking.

My stepfather had a picture of my uncle on the dashboard of his truck and as we drove, he told us stories about him

"The first time I took your dad hiking, he hated it," my stepfather said to my cousin.

"Really? Why?"

"It rained a lot of the way up and he didn't like hiking. Everything was "F" this! I hate this! This sucks! I looked at him and said, I'm never ever bringing you up here ever again," he said, speeding up and down the hills of the mountain roads.

"But when we reached the top, he thought it was amazing. He kept saying 'wow look at it!' when the clouds cleared.

"No one likes the hard part," he said. "But everyone loves the view from the top."

We picked a fairly easy hike for our first. My cousin and I carried water bottles in our bags and he complained the entire way up that he was tired and his pack was too heavy, so my stepfather took it from him. I walked along quietly, hoping the trip wouldn't be ruined if my cousin didn't enjoy himself and hurt my stepfather's feelings. I could imagine his disappointment if my cousin complained the entire trip. That would mean that his potential hiking and camping partner was gone. I still liked it, but I didn't live at home anymore and would eventually go away for school or work, or have a family of my own. But for this window of time, he had another child to bring along on these trips--if my cousin wanted to go.

When we reached an overlook and climbed onto an outcropping in the rock, my cousin was amazed, just like his father had been. All of the complaining about being hot and tired disappeared while we took pictures and ate trail mix while overlooking a valley. We could hear a

river running through it and my cousin asked my stepfather to point out which mountain was which. He decided he liked hiking after all.

My cousin eagerly jumped out of my stepfather's pickup truck and helped take things to the clearing where we would set up our tent when we arrived at the campsite. He ran back and forth to the bed of the truck, using his unending source of child-energy to transport everything we needed. When it came time to set up the tent, we took all of the poles out of the bag and began to slide them into the right cloth holes. All three of us assembled the tent and my cousin grabbed a heavy rock to beat the stakes into the ground with. I thought maybe he wouldn't know where to put things or that he would get in the way of my stepfather, but I could see how happy my stepfather was because of his excitement.

That had been me, eagerly trying to be a part of the process of setting things up and cooking. Part of me was jealous because I saw how things had changed over time. My stepfather wasn't as easily frustrated with my cousin as I remembered him being with me when I wanted to fool around or ask questions. He also longed for some sort of connection to the living part of my uncle and bent the rules for him sometimes. I wondered if he was as pleased as he was then as he clearly was when my cousin wanted to help build the tent and the campfire and constantly asked questions about the mountains my stepfather had climbed. I wondered if he was as proud of me, grown up and graduating college, living on my own and making my own spaghetti sauce for the trip, as he was of my cousin's ability to put up a tent and carry all of our gear from the truck.

I drove the truck down to some natural waterfalls down the street from our campsite because my stepfather had gotten sick of driving. I had never been in charge of driving the truck

on any other trip, and I wove my way up and down the curvy mountain rode, trying not to drive too slowly to look scared, but to also be cautious because I was afraid of the oncoming traffic and ledges. When we reached the part of the river where people were sliding down the smooth boulders, I sat on a rock with a book, bundled in a sweatshirt and too cold to go swimming in the ice cold water. My stepfather and cousin took off their shirts and socks, gave me their belongings, and ventured down to the waterfalls.

Thirty minutes later, I got up to walk around and met up with my stepfather.

“I almost died!” he said to be in disbelief. My cousin trailed behind him, looking shocked. He had floated with the current over the smooth rocks like the other people in the area, but had been sucked into a current and pushed down a larger rock that was not meant to be slid down. I laughed along with him as he told me the story, but felt weak inside. He was still the one who knew where he was going, how to get there, which mountain was which, and how to fix things. I could not drive us home or start the fire at our campsite. I couldn’t figure out how to build a deck or fix things around the house.

While we were driving around in the mountains, I sat back and watched the two of them interact. There I realized that I needed to write about everything that was happening. I wanted to write things down because I would never remember all of the stories that were told or things that were said on the trip we took. But it felt strange to watch them and take notes as though they were my subjects. I didn’t want to spoil the moments, using them for content in a piece. Yet what was happening meant enough for me to write about it.

I saw that I still wanted to prove myself to my stepfather, but my position had changed. The entire situation had changed. My cousin didn't seem to have the same need to make my stepfather proud, probably because he was the only son of my stepfather's brother. My stepfather was happy to simply have a piece of his brother to bring with him while he drove by all of the places he had hiked and camped with my uncle. I, on the other hand, wasn't his child. I wasn't related to him at all. As a child, I think I may have felt like I needed to earn the place by being good at camping or whatever else my stepfather wanted to do. Now, even though I wanted to help set up the tent, I wasn't a child who didn't know which poles to use anymore. I knew which layers to pack and how to hang the trash in a tree so bears weren't attracted to the campsite. I had cooked our meals and driven the truck. I had hugged him and helped him button his shirt the morning that he found out that his brother was gone. Now more than ever, my stepfather needed me.