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HOW TO EAT

By

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BA English and Creative Writing, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 2020

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In Creative Nonfiction Writing

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May 2023

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Food is connection. It is love, it is nostalgia, but, for me, it is also the anchor that brings down an already sinking ship, the thing that tips the boat into rocky waters. It is late nights of six-packs and gobbled frozen pizzas. It is days with no sustenance at all. It is comfort followed by shame followed by comfort followed, again, by shame. It's the good, the bad, the ugly, but it's also home. Food is nothing if not marks on one's body, tiny photographs in one's mind. It follows me like a hurt, lost do



## How to Eat

As the screen settled, the application prompted me. I connected the sound to my wifi and turned on my camera. A woman appeared on screen. Distantly, I thought she looked like a young Jane Goodall. She introduced herself and we began.

“Walk me through a normal day of eating. Let’s start with yesterday.”

I paused, thinking of how honest I wanted to be. I wanted to tell her I started with a full breakfast, a spinach omelet and half a grapefruit with some seed-filled toast with grass-fed, ethically-sourced butter. I wanted to tell her I grew my own zucchini and made dinner every night. I wanted to tell her that I knew how to eat.

“I don’t usually eat in the mornings. I’ll have some coffee, but that’s about it.”

“When do you first eat during the day?”

“Sometime in the afternoon. 1pm on a good day, closer to 4 on a bad one.”

“Do you have a meal at that time?”

“Not usually. I’ll generally have a snack.”

“How do you know when it’s time to eat? Do you get any hunger cues?”

“I know when my hands start to shake, or I feel like crying, or I get weak.”

Her eyebrows went up and she nodded her head, slowly.

“What about later?”

“When I get home from school or work I feel pretty depleted. If I’m up to it, I’ll make dinner, something savory. If not, I’ll eat chips and drink wine or I’ll order a pizza.”

“How often would you say you binge?”

“Three or four days a week.”

I was speaking to the lead dietician at the Eating Disorder Center of Montana. This was my intake interview, an hour-long meeting with the RD, followed by an hour-and-a-half long meeting with the head of therapy. I knew I had had an eating disorder when I was younger, but as I began putting the puzzle pieces together, I recognized that this wasn't a matter of past and present. It wasn't that I once *had* an eating disorder, it was that I *have* one. It had morphed into something that felt normal, but maybe it wasn't.

^

I remember when food became a secret. When I was five or six, the Halloween candy in my room was a beacon. I got out of bed and went to the basket. Every night from there on, I chose a small piece of candy, one that no one would notice was missing. I buried the wrapper behind books or in the back of my closet.

Everything was about hiding, about having something for myself.

^

The head of therapy laid out her recommendations as our time came to a close. I had mapped out my current and past eating habits, how I felt about my body, where I thought this all stemmed from.

“Basically, the options are partial hospitalization, an intensive outpatient program, and weekly care, where you would meet with a counselor and a registered dietician.”

“What do you think I need?”

“If you lived in Bozeman and you had different insurance, I'd have you start our partial hospitalization inpatient program as soon as possible. I think you would benefit from uninterrupted time in a structured environment. Given that that is not an option, the intensive

outpatient program would be the next choice. Our physical office hasn't opened in Missoula yet. Even when the IOP is up and running, your insurance wouldn't cover it."

"What should I do?"

I was in Missoula and on Medicaid. The insurance wouldn't cover the dietician portion of the program and none of the therapists in the Missoula satellite office were covered under Medicaid yet. I opted to pay out of pocket for the RD and try to find a therapist myself.

At the end of our conversation, I reflected on the timeline I'd laid out. I thought of all the forms food had taken in my mind. Comfort, love, terror, badness. It was everything, all at once.

^

When I had my first meeting with my dietician, Abby, I was nervous. She seemed so young. I shut down a reflexive sigh. I had no idea how old she was, or if she, like me, looked much younger than she was. I figured we were about the same age, which meant she probably remembered the terror of low-rise jeans. She could stay.

I tried to be honest about my concerns with her.

"I'd like you to use this app to track your eating patterns. How does that make you feel?"

"Like I'm taking a step backwards. I tracked for over a decade before quitting last year. Even when I eat something as simple as almonds, I see a number floating above them, like a talk bubble in a cartoon."

"How does the idea of a meal plan make you feel?"

"It triggers my issues with authority. I don't love being told what to do."

She ran with my attempts at humor and asked if I was willing to give this a shot. I said I was. I was ready to ask for help, but wasn't sure if I could receive it yet. Despite my initial hesitation, I liked her and I knew she was trying to help me.

^

During a deep clean of our apartment, my parents found dozens of containers, bags and boxes of packaged foods I had hidden. I was twelve or thirteen and prone to lying. Bags came from between the couch cushions, flattened containers of ice cream lined the garbage can outside of the bag, under my bed were cardboard boxes from crackers and cookies, bottles from sweet drinks rolled behind the TV.

Every day I would walk home from school, go to the apartment and fish shiny quarters from a large pretzel jar sitting on my parent's dresser. I'd then go to the bodega on the corner and pay for my goods in change. It was between me and young women who worked at the store—no one else had to know.

^

The next time we met, Abby asked me how tracking was going.

I was scared about how easy it was to go back to my old ways. The app was different from others I'd used, it focused on when I was eating and how I felt, if my food had been an adequate quantity, while the ones I'd used previously were about calories and deficits.

^

My grandfather had taught me a trick. He showed me how to add a swipe of peanut butter to an Oreo and create the perfect sandwich.

I would twist the cookie open like he'd taught me, drag a butter knife through a jar of Jif and spread it over one of the sides. I sandwiched it back together and shoved it in my mouth.

I'd done this a few times on a day I was visiting my grandparents. I sat on the screened porch and munched happily on my concoctions. My cousin came up behind me and reached over my shoulder. He grabbed the fist that was holding my cookie and squeezed until it crumbled into



a mess in my palm. He took that and the ingredients of my sandwich makings and took them back to the kitchen, throwing a “you kind of overdid it” over his shoulder. I was left with peanut butter on my hands and tears in my eyes.

^

At our second meeting, Abby told me she had drawn up a meal plan for me.

“Some people have a big reaction to seeing it for the first time. It might seem like a lot of food.”

Internally, I rolled my eyes and called bullshit. I wanted to tell her that I was here for a binge eating disorder, I was eating too much, that was the problem.

She shared her screen and I took in the sheet before me. It was broken down into three meals and three snacks. There were no amounts, no specific foods, just a basic outline of the kinds of things I should try to eat at each meal.

Abby was right: it was a lot of food. I struggled to remember the last time I had eaten two meals in a row. I felt emotional. The back of my throat tightened and I finally saw what she meant. It had clicked. *Binge* was a misnomer. The bingeing was a result of the restriction. The occasions where I over ate were limited in comparison to all the meals I’d skipped, all the things I didn’t eat.

It was a lot of food.

^

I considered colonics, fat freezing, liposuction, removing ribs, gastric bypass, breast lifts, tummy tucks, diet pills, diuretics, weight loss surgery, simply not eating. I tried keto, intermittent fasting, paleo, veganism, high protein, low carb, high carb, high fat, low fat, low cal, no cal. Had I had the money, I would have sliced off parts of my body, wrapped them up with rocks and

dropped them in the ocean. I'd have set follicles on fire and cracked open my skull to pour out the bad stuff inside.

^

At one meeting, Abby pulled up a chart about hunger. Zero to ten: zero being painfully hungry and ten being painfully full.

She had me map out where I sat on the scale throughout the day. I oscillated between a zero or a one and a nine or a ten. I was never neutral, never satisfied.

^

I starved myself until I couldn't function. Sometimes it took hours, sometimes days. The bare lining of my stomach reckoned with the meals I didn't eat, that I forced out of my mind like a bad dream. I avoided eating at work or at school, never taking more than a bite when others around me were not eating.

When your body is the subject of conversation, you learn to distract, to cover, to shrink. Regardless of what I did, someone would say something. Gain or lose, it didn't matter.

^

As I continued to work with Abby, I started to unpack why I thought I had developed this illness. I decided it wasn't about being smaller, it was about being less *there*. I wanted to be seen for something other than my body, I wanted to hide, I wanted control. In trying to find those things, I gave up on knowing how to eat.

## Weight

The newspaper was light between my fingertips. It left hieroglyphic imprints on my sweaty skin. The article had come in an envelope in the mail, painstakingly cut out from a local newspaper, along with a note that said something along the lines of *thought this might interest you*. The report was based on a study that said drinking 8 ounces of milk daily could lead to weight loss.

My paternal grandparents had sent it to me, the latest offense in their battle to get me to drink milk. I would later learn that my aversion to the substance was due to lactose intolerance, not the insolence they perceived in me. They touted how much milk my cousin drank, how tall and healthy and fit he was. It didn't seem to matter that he was 7 years older than I was, that he was male, that we had different genetics and different circumstances. I was doing something wrong, while he was doing something right.

I looked between my parents and the article, clutching the flimsy, sooty newspaper, my eyes welling with tears, the words lose and weight blurring together. I couldn't understand why they had sent it. It wasn't as if I didn't already know that my 8-year-old body weighed too much.

~

I had a lot of reasons for weaning off my medication. Elevated liver enzymes. Withdrawals after just one missed dose. Orgasms hidden in a lockbox somewhere, on a high enough shelf that I couldn't reach them. Weight gain. It was September of 2020, a good time to make potentially life-altering decisions.

I started with the medication that gave me the most trouble, pills that I used for anxiety but were meant for another purpose. The first few weeks were terrible. I couldn't control my body temperature and I had to practice breathing techniques in order not to snap at my bosses.

Coming off of medication is like stripping away the epidermis, you can still survive without it, but when the sun hits your skin, it hurts like hell. I was under doctor supervision at this time. I went about weaning in the safest way possible, little by little until I had reached 0mg.

Eventually things evened out. I made it through the withdrawals. I lost 10 pounds. Things were okay.

~

I came out of the dressing room in a lavender dress with a kerchief hem and glitter flowers, much the style of 2004. I liked the dress. I liked how I felt in it. It swooshed around my calves as I opened the flimsy department store door. Lynn, my grandfather's wife, leaned from her chair and patted my stomach, and said, "It makes you look kind of fat."

~

I felt settled enough to wean off of the two other medications. These were easier with fewer withdrawals and more benefits. I lost more weight and gained a libido. I bought a tight turtleneck and a vibrator in celebration.

For the first time in a long while, when I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn't see a distended tummy or thighs that touched. I saw what my body was then and there, but I could also see the hologram of my future frame. I saw how it floated in the spaces of my sweaters and jeans. I knew I would lose the weight, that it was just a matter of time. All this time thinking there was something wrong with me, that my size was a testament to a lack of willpower, to a laziness under my skin. I could see future-me and it felt fucking good.

~

My maternal grandmother put a lot of stock into aesthetics. That and intelligence were the things she valued most. She was never seen without earrings and lipstick. To this day, when I

pull out something of hers from my closet, I can still smell her perfume. She died in 2010. No room went untouched when she was around.

Once, when she was a teenager, my mother came down the stairs at a family member's house in Cape Cod to her mother saying, "Erica sure is pretty, but she's not very bright."

Once, when I was about nine, I walked into the kitchen of my grandparents ranch-style home in Tucson to my grandmother, who put a hand on my stomach and pressed firmly, telling me "If you suck in your stomach, you'll look more attractive."

~

After months off of medication, anxiety began to creep back in. My hours were cut at work, leaving me eating rice and pasta. Neither of my parents were working, having been furloughed due to the pandemic. I couldn't ask them for money. I didn't want to. I carefully watched my bank account, hoping that a forgotten expense wouldn't show up like an uninvited guest.

~

My mom's friend, Shoshana, was beautiful. I liked that she was tall, that I had to bend my head back to look at her. She was impossibly chic. Long and thin and smelling of sweet flowers, I liked her immediately and went out of my way to impress her.

My mother owned a women's gym in Seattle in the early 2000s. She often used the space to host women vendors. That day, it was a trunk show for her friend, who was a jewelry designer.

I helped Shoshana unpack the small cardboard boxes, carefully laying out necklaces and bracelets over velvet stands. I met every task with a bounce in my step, wanting her to like me. She had me set up the snacks, placing crackers and cheese on boards. During the party, I

munched happily on crackers that looked like tiny pieces of toast, spread with the creamy, savory French cheese. I loved each decadent bite. I felt like a grown up at a party full of grown ups. As I ate my latest tiny sandwich, Shoshana approached, took it out of my hands, and steered me away from the food. She said, “That’s quite enough for you.”

A few weeks later, my mom came home with a small cardboard box. Inside was a necklace with a blown glass heart and a note from Shoshana, thanking me for all my hard work.

~

January 6, 2021 was a shitty day. For the country, for the world, for me. It was my 26th birthday. I was broke. I made my own birthday dinner, squash and mushroom risotto, made with Pinot Grigio and good Parmesan, a luxury in my time of dire straits. Only some of my roommates decided to attend, every phone call I got was about the riots, understandably. An anxiety settled on my skin like a caustic film.

~

My first kisses were with boys who were made to put their mouths on mine. I was a theater kid with some talent. My director would cast me in major roles where I would have to kiss boys who were more popular and better looking than I was. It felt cruel in a way I couldn’t put into words. After a couple summers of playing Spin the Bottle with those same boys in Prospect Park, I knew where I stood in the middle school hierarchy. When the bottle would land on me, everyone would laugh and groan, the spinner either saying ‘no way, I’m not doing that’, or, if I was lucky, quickly brush their chapped lips over my cheek.

I had to kiss one of those boys on the mouth in a school production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. He was not my usual scene partner, but he was filling in while mine was out

sick. He was Oberon and I was Titania. We kissed in front of 200 of our schoolmates and when he pulled away, he wrinkled his nose and stuck out his tongue. The kids exploded with laughter.

Backstage, he told me he did it “because he forgot his line”. I nodded, accepting his excuse, pressing my lips together tightly in order not to cry and ruin my stage makeup.

~

I lost my housing and the dam broke at the end of January 2021. Missoula had a 0.1% vacancy rate in rentals that winter. There was nothing affordable available. I couldn't stop crying, the stress was so palpable. It felt as if someone had installed a small door at the front of my throat and was stuffing it full of objects, so many that adding anything into my body felt impossible. So I stopped eating, only partaking enough to stave off fainting. I got used to the tremors running through my body. With stillness came sadness, depression; anxiety was easier to live in. It was active and I needed activity to function. I took on a second, full time job. I found an apartment 4 days before ensuing homelessness due to the kindness of someone who loved me. My mom flew out to help me resettle. She moved my boxes, helping me when something as simple as taking out the garbage felt monumental. And then she left.

~

In the mid-2000s, my mother was a personal trainer, mostly working on the Upper West Side. One of the unseen benefits of her employment was that many of the members of the gym she worked at were on Broadway. Tiny social butterfly that she was, my mother would inevitably befriend them. Sometimes we would get tickets to a show. On one such occasion, when I was about 13, we attended an evening viewing of a musical I have forgotten the name of.

We got to go backstage after the show. I got to stand center stage and meet some of the cast. The female lead of the show greeted me with enthusiasm. She looked into my eyes with something like awe and said, “You are so beautiful”.

No one had ever said that to me without a caveat. It was always, “You have such a pretty face” or “Think of how pretty you would be if you lost some weight.” I didn’t know what to do with her compliment, the genuineness of it. I felt like crying.

~

I was working 6 day, 60-hour weeks that winter. Things had worked out on paper. I had a place to live and somewhat livable wages, and I made it to workshop on Monday nights.

I could still barely eat and sleep came filled with boogeymen living under my bed. It felt like I was choking on everything in orbit.

~

I got hot the summer before I started high school. Forty pounds slipped off of me like water from a leaky faucet. I received attention I was unused to, made more friends than I ever had before. When school began in the fall of 2009, I attempted to bolster my newfound hotness with a bubbly personality. I made eye contact with the seniors in the hallways, hugged my friends, and slowly, over the next 18 months, failed all my classes, one by one. In the winter of 2010, I was told by my advisor that I should find a new place of education because I clearly wasn’t up to the challenge of their rigorous, lauded academic institution.

I officially flunked out of high school, age 15, a few weeks later.

~

During my attempts to re-center and regulate, my father informed me he was coming to visit. He showed up on a cold winter’s night, taking in my nearly empty apartment, my eyes that



never stopped flickering, and the boot on my right leg. I had fallen while chasing after a dog I could barely take care of up a mountain in socks.

Every morning for the next week and a half, my dad would pick me up, bearing coffee, and take me to work. We would sit in the warmth of the rental car in the parking lot until I had to go inside. I would cry or have a panic attack for several minutes before wiping the tears from my cheeks and taking my coffee into the office with me, hobbling on the space-boot attached to me.

~

I started at an alternative high school a few days after my 16th birthday. Technically, I was too young to attend, but an exception had been made. My new high school allowed students up to age 21 to attend. I was a kid surrounded by actual grown-ass people. Our circumstances had led us here, as different as they were. The young men found me endlessly entertaining. Be that my youth, my quietness, or the novelty of my pale skin in a sea of varying shades of Brown and Black, I don't know. They teased me relentlessly, always trying to get me to blush, complimenting my body, dipping their heads to my neck to smell my perfume. The young women went about adopting me. They played with my hair in classrooms and asked about my nonexistent boyfriends.

I struggled with school, even in this new, relaxed environment. The academics weren't difficult, but I barely made it to my classes. My parents left before I did, so they were none the wiser to my increasingly truant ways. For 2 years, I tried every SSRI on the market, received a new diagnosis with every new provider. By the time I graduated, I was on four different medications and had agoraphobia so severe that I could barely leave the apartment. It was the only time in my life that I remember never really thinking about my body.

Over the next few years, I steadily came out from under the covers of anxiety and depression and steadily began to gain weight.

~

About a week into his stay, my dad called me a few hours into my work day.

He said, “You’re going to put in your resignation at both jobs today.”

“What?”

“You’re coming back to New York for a while. I think you need your mom and I around.”

I thought about it for several moments, thinking of the implications, before I sighed, and said, “Okay.”

I made the arrangements with varying reactions from the higher ups at each of my jobs. I packed my things and a few days later I got into the passenger seat of a car the size of a small island nation.

My dad drove us from Missoula to New York City over 3 days in the rental, in the dead of winter, with a scared dog on the console between us. I wasn’t sure if I was coming back.

~

I dated a guy who loved my body. He was polyamorous with a primary partner, a woman who was not me. He showed me a photo of another woman he was seeing. She was fat, fatter than I was, short and round. I said something inconsequential, all the while feeling an inextricable hurt pulse through my chest. I hated that he fucked other fat women. I wanted to be a token, to be the exception to the rule, like he could overlook my body and I could truly defy odds with my supposed pretty face.

He tried to show me what I looked like in his eyes. Laying in bed, naked and drunk off of 2 buck chuck, he asked, “Can I take a picture of you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I’ll take it and you can be in charge of deleting it. You look so gorgeous right now. I want you to see it.”

I let him take the photo and deleted it myself, as promised.

In the picture, I was lying on my side, my breasts scooped into one arm, my thigh with my bad tattoo blocking my vulva, my face turned into the dark blue fabric of the pillow case.

He stared at it, saying, “Look how sexy you are, look at your curves. Don’t you see it? Don’t you see how fucking gorgeous you are?”

I didn’t see it. Where he saw curves, I saw mounds of fat on a landscape of fish belly-white skin, a stark contrast to his warm, cafe au lait tone, seen where his calf was caught in the picture.

I deleted the photo and buried my head in his chest, hoping we would let it go. He held me until the Chardonnay-induced haze made me boneless.

~

New York is where it all exploded. Where all of my carefully maintained facades came crumbling down. Without a job to go to, friends to see, or an apartment to clean, I was forced to come face to face with all that had been simmering underneath the viscera of my flaky skin. I couldn’t stand to be alone. I cried every time my parents left, like a toddler being dropped off at preschool. They tried to coax out of me the reasons for the pain. I couldn’t say much more than “I’m so scared” and “It just hurts so much” and “I’m sorry”.

~

My breasts had been twin resentments in my life since puberty. They made it impossible for me to hide in my most vulnerable moments. The way I dressed had nothing to do with the treatment I received because of them. An oversized sweatshirt or a barely-there tank top had the same effect. It was like overnight everyone had developed X-ray vision. Women would look at me, shake their heads and sigh, as if I had asked for 20 pounds of tissue to make a home on my sternum. Men would stare.

The sheer weight of my biggest enemies created physical problems. Permanent discoloration under each mound from years of underwires, one shoulder that sits higher than the other, back pain, stretch marks, numbness in 4 of my fingertips, grooves in the tops of my shoulders, difficulty breathing in certain positions, neck pain, stunted athletic ability, rashes that occur in the summer, and complete numbness in a third of the tissue on each breast.

In my early 20's, while I was still on my parents insurance, I contacted some plastic surgeons. I assumed there was no way I would not medically qualify for a breast reduction. Every office I called said the same thing. When I gave them my height and weight, they calculated my BMI and informed me that my insurance company would not cover the surgery for someone my size. They explained that when, not if, I lost the 40 or so pounds needed, they would happily set me up for a consultation.

~

I had been talking my way around what I really meant when I came back to New York. I didn't want to admit it to myself, I didn't say the words. During the never-ending crying fits, I would utter endless streams of "I can't do it", "it's too much", "it hurts so bad", "I can't, I can't, I can't", until finally, between hiccuping breaths and lips bitten bloody, I looked at my mother

through drenched eyes and said “I want to go to sleep and not wake up. I just want to fucking die.”

~

My aunt, Andrea, my mother’s sister, used to tell me that when my mom walked into a room people would stop talking. They would momentarily forget how to speak in the gravity of her beauty. Her mass of barely contained dark curls, her caramel skin, her lithe, athletic frame.

I don’t look like her. People would often look at us in puzzlement when she introduced me as her daughter. Where she is short, I am tall. Where she is narrow, I am wide.

When she was heavily pregnant with me, she and my dad were walking through a mall when she spotted a very pale, very blonde baby. She turned to my father and said, “Nothing that white will ever pop out of me.”

Weeks later, after 36 hours of labor followed by a C-section, I was taken from my safe space where I had stayed 3 weeks past my to-be birthday. I did not cry. There was fluid in my lungs and my skin was a bluish-purple. My mother did not hold me. I was whisked away in order to have the fluid extracted. When I was returned, cleaned of blood and other substances, I was pressed into my mother’s arms. I had a full head of white-blonde hair and translucent, pale skin.

I told my dad, once, that no matter what I did, no matter how much weight I lost, I would never be as beautiful as she was.

~

The next months were a practice in unraveling. Trying to untangle the wires of my psyche, learning where I had gone wrong, figuring out how it had gotten to such a point.

During this time, I helped my parents move from New York to Austin. I surrendered my dog to a shelter in Atlantic City before playing my first slot machines, where I lost the money I

started with. I returned to Montana. I slowly pieced my life back together, wanting to let the past months be eaten by the thousands of miles I had traveled.

I came to understand that after a decade on pills, no matter how safely I had come off of them, I had put the systems of my brain into a perpetual fight-or-flight instinct. I came to understand that while the events of that winter had triggered my ensuing emotional collapse, I was harboring years of unresolved wounds.

With all of this being true, I still struggled to understand why I had stopped the medication in the first place. When I really thought about it, when I was honest with myself, I knew that I had stopped taking the meds because I wanted to see if they were responsible for my size. Because being thin seemed more important than keeping the railways of my brain running smoothly. Because being thin was more important than anything.

## Be Safe

The dogs killed the crow on an overcast day. Clouds hung heavy as they often do in the Pacific Northwest, the threat of rain just shy of the roof of our peach-colored house.

The dogs looked at my mom, as if to say, *We're sorry. Don't be mad. He was just so loud.* They plead with their eyes, still asking to be loved.

Onyx feathers glowed under the red guise of blood. The crow, its chest cracked open.

^

On the day nineteen school children died in Uvalde, I made a pot pie. It had a puff pastry crust, a cross section of flaky-crunch and pillowy lamination. The pie was filled with herbs. Tarragon and parsley and chives filled the kitchen with their scents. I seared the chicken in a cast iron skillet. It took a long time to cook through. I let the onions and garlic sweat in the schmaltz, taking on the flavor. I made a pot pie because I didn't know what else to do.

^

My parents raised me to be safe. I looked both ways at crosswalks. I knew what to do if a stranger touched me. I always wore a seatbelt.

The chorus of my childhood went something like this:

*StaysafeTextmewhenyougethomeDon'tlistentomusicwhileyouwalkBeawareofyoursurroundingsLo  
okbothways*

The undercurrent being: don't get killed. If you die, it will kill your parents. Your safety is somehow both entirely your responsibility and entirely left in the hands of others.

^

The crow sat on top of the kennel in the backyard. It had squawked a ceaseless tune for several weeks, its mate occasionally joining in.

^

On that hot day, I thought of Doireann Ní Ghríofa and her book *A Ghost in the Throat*. I had not read the book at that point, but had listened to a couple of my classmates present on it a couple weeks prior. The term, “a ghost in the throat”, swirled in my mind. It felt like the only apt way to describe how I was feeling.

The book is about the silencing of female stories and Ní Ghríofa’s search for one of them. She is especially interested in stories of mothers. Ní Ghríofa talks about the ‘literariness’ of the ‘To-Do’ list. I imagined that many of the mothers of the nineteen dead children had their own To-Do lists that morning. I wondered how many things got crossed out.

Thousands of kids were afraid to go to school the following day. I imagine many of them begged their parents to stay home, or that their parents kept them there anyway, held closely in their arms, just to make sure they would still be there in the evening, safe.

^

My parents didn’t teach me that the call could come from inside the house, that fear could permeate walls and floors, that the outside world was only responsible for some of the scary things.

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After the dogs killed the crow, the crow’s mate sat on the ledge of the kennel, squawking for what was lost, what was taken.

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I am a child of the school shooting generation. Columbine happened just 18 months before I began kindergarten, Sandy Hook during my senior year of high school. We learned how to hide under our desks in elementary school, hiding our only option as small packages of flesh



and blood. There were active shooter demonstrations in college. I never went to one because I felt that this was an impossible thing to prepare for. The fear instilled in myself and others of my generation isn't a palpable panic, it is a slow burning flame, the occasional spike of *will this be the day?*

Many would argue that my thoughts on the matter come from an anxious place, and they would be right. Because that is what these catastrophes do, they create and harbor and harvest anxiety. They make us live carefully.

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The places that were meant to be safe, weren't. The sources were inside and out.

^

The dogs whined over the squawking of the crow. *We're sorry. Please stop. Please.*

^

I made the pot pie in my parents' kitchen in Texas. Austin, not Uvalde. My dad helped me put the puff-pastry covered skillet on a sheet pan, ready to catch all the drippings.

I am not a parent, but I wonder about those who choose to become them, when this is a known possibility. I think about my friends with children and I suppose they'll hold their babies just a little closer for a while.

I thought of what I'd make the next night, what to do with my hands that felt so helpless. I listened to the sweet sounds of kids laughing in my parent's apartment complex. I thought of those who won't hear that sound again.

## Eggshells

I came into this world silently, when I should have spoken up. I was born on January 6, 1995 at UCSF hospital. My parents had been waiting for me to come out of my womb-cocoon for over ten months. My birth was like a *Sopranos* storyline, sans the murder plots, complete with my hysterical maternal grandmother's shrill demand she be near my heavily-in-labor mother, which led to her being escorted out of the room by a nurse, half a dozen med students watching my high-risk mother dilate, and ending with a verifiable slapstick moment.

The conception of my human form was complicated by some weird physiology and sheer bad luck. When my mother was twenty years old she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. In the mid-seventies the normal course of action for this condition was to perform a complete hysterectomy, regardless of the patient's age, the severity of the cancer, or the potential surgical complications. My mom managed to see the one doctor in all of New York City who thought that was a bit extreme. The doctor froze the tumor off of my mothers cervix and she went on her way. Then, in her late twenties and again in her early thirties, my mom suffered two ectopic pregnancies, a phenomenon where a fertilized egg implants outside of the uterus, which nearly killed her. She was told, though not in so many words, that having children was unlikely.

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My parents met in a country western bar in Orlando in the winter of 1992. My mother was the bartender, my father the patron. As she rounded the corner to my dad's table, he was struck by her caramel skin and enormous head of hair. Their first official meeting took place when my mom poured a shot into my dad's mouth. When he tilted his head back up, he looked my mother dead in the eye and said, "I'm going to marry you."

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They married September 11, 1993, less than ten months after their first meeting. I became a pea-pod of cells occupying my mom's uterus sometime in early 1994. Some months later they relocated to San Francisco. My mom has informed me that she was "pregnant from head to toe" and resembled a "cherry tomato." My folks were convinced they were having a boy, spending hours arguing over names. My dad wanted to name me 'Jett', convinced they were having an athlete.

And so, well past my due date, I sat snugly in my meaty vacuum pack of a home and refused to join the party. After thirty-six hours of labor, my mother's doctor, followed closely by a group of flesh-horny med students, decided to perform a cesarean. They kicked my father out of the way, putting up cotton curtains attached to metal beams, forgetting that they were in the presence of a giant who could see directly over them. He watched as my mom's organs were moved to a sterilized table and I was wrestled out of my much-loved home. The doctor exclaimed, "It's a girl!" To which both parents replied, in unison, "Are you sure?" The doctor, the nurses and both parents stopped what they were doing before bursting into laughter. The doctor then realized that blue was not the color of skin and that a newborn should probably be breathing.

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Things were pretty good at the beginning, as good as they could be with four giant dogs and an equally giant newborn. My parents were in love with me despite my resembling a very pale tadpole and everyone wondering how my mom could have given birth to a baby so white. I walked and talked early and loved my dad with all my little heart could handle. He would put my small body on an oversized towel and drag me down the long hallway in the row house in which we lived, me screaming with laughter and all four dogs following like a pack of wolves, making

sure the baby was unharmed. They followed me everywhere in my toe-headed glory. Once, caught on video tape. My father snoring on the couch and me under the kitchen table with crackers in both hands and shoved in my mouth, with the babysitting dogs waiting for one of them to drop. There were times when I continued to make my dad laugh, like when I stood in my godmother's kitchen before I had the faculties to control my facial expressions, my dad looking at me and asking what was wrong while I scrunched my nose up and wiggled before he realized I was pooping and promptly laughed until he wheezed.

^

Things were fine except for sometimes. Like the time where my tear-streamed face and my lemur-sized eyes looked at my father and told him that the graphic MMA fight on TV was “too scary for me.” I screamed it over and over until my mom got home to break up the fight and its spectators. Or the time my dad drove drunk and got a DUI. I wasn't in the car but I was at home waiting for my daddy as he spent the night in a jail cell.

The three of us and our enormous dogs moved to Seattle at the beginning of 1998. My father was on the heels of the DUI, for which he was allowed to complete treatment in the state of Washington under some strict guidelines. I imagine it really pays to be a handsome white guy in the criminal justice system. I did not know about his indiscretion until I was in my twenties, though he did tell me that he had spent the night in jail due to ‘unpaid parking tickets’, which I bought hook, line and sinker. I went through much of my childhood thinking that my parents would end up in jail if they got so much as a speeding ticket. My dad did not have a drink for the eight years we lived in Washington, but that didn't seem to matter. A veritable dark cloud leaked

out into the empty spaces of our lives, creating an unsavory aftertaste that none of us could escape from.

My dad did not receive help for his depression until he met my mom. He'd spent his life muscling through darkness, as if feelings needed to be wrestled. Early on, he subsisted on a diet of drugs and alcohol followed by periods of highly restrictive exercise and eating regimens. He binged in every aspect of life. Nothing was moderate. There was no gray area.

^

Seattle was bad for all of us. The odd social norms of the Pacific Northwest made it hard for all of us to make lasting friendships. I watched from corners of rooms as my dad expanded physically, as heaviness seeped into his bones. I watched as he sunk into wet sand.

There were good moments. My dad built me a playground in our backyard out of wooden beams and steel pipes, which I fell off often. When a sex offender moved into the neighborhood of my elementary school, my dad taught me to defend myself. In the backyard, he taught me my first lesson.

“Keep your nails a little long, stick your middle finger right in his eye.”

“Wouldn't that hurt him?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

He took me to my first day of kindergarten, smiling and holding my bright pink Backstreet Boys backpack, which made him laugh. There's a picture of the two of us at that moment, him in a suit and tie, me in his arms.

The two of us went to a nature preserve. I wore a bright red shirt in the passenger seat of the car and I thought an overzealous llama was trying to eat me. Later, I squealed when a moose slobbered on the window, thick spit rolled over the spot where the window was left open.

He tried to connect with me as my interests expanded outside of the things with which he was familiar, but he struggled to understand my artistic interests. We bonded over chess, played in chain coffee shops. On the weekends we would have breakfast at Cafe Luna, befriending the staff to the point of attending a few of their weddings over the years.

There was a point where I assumed the taste buds on my tongue were hair and decided to weed-whack them with a rusty razor. It was not a smooth glide and I left a step-ladder of cuts on the length of my tongue.

When I ran out to the living room, screaming, “Dabby, dabby, it huwts stho much,” while bleeding profusely from the mouth, my dad shoved paper towels in my mouth, looking perplexed. He paused before saying, “Don’t tell your mother.”

Few of my memories from this time are presented in Technicolor. My own demons reared their heads for the first time. My feelings were just so much, so big. Much of Seattle is couched in a haze of pleading to go back to San Francisco. Mom and Dad grieved unfulfilled pregnancies. They forwent the big family they wanted, slowly relinquishing the idea of my would-be siblings.

When I was five, my mom had a second cancer diagnosis, breast cancer this time. It was caught early but became another thing we held our breath about. She went on tamoxifen and we hoped for the best.

There were financial issues too. My parents filed for bankruptcy in 2003. I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew enough to be scared.

I could feel my father's anger at tactless things. He snapped at me when I spilled some cloying perfume onto my skin, making me shower several times until the smell dissipated. But mostly, he ignored me. The times where he tried to get closer to me felt miniscule in comparison to the rest of the time. I played by myself, read by myself and only ventured into our cold basement out of necessity, not wanting to interrupt his action movie binges. I spent my time walking on eggshells around him. He never hit me, never called me names, but I was perpetually waiting for the other shoe to drop. Sometimes I felt like I was the kid he got, but not the one he wanted. I didn't know what depression was then. I just knew that I was a little girl who needed her dad. He was withering across plains where I could not reach him.

^

We moved to Park Slope, Brooklyn in 2005. My dad went ahead three months before my mom and I joined him, leaving my mom to pack up our house. During this time, he started drinking again. The first thing I noticed in our new home was the six-pack of PBR sitting on some boxes, it seemed so out of place as I had not seen him drink since before I could hold onto memories.

At six feet and six inches tall, with a body mass ranging from two-hundred and seventy-five to four-hundred pounds, my father is a veritable giant. On the good days, I would lovingly refer to him as the BFG. I would tell my classmates, later, that "my dad could beat up your dad." On the bad days, I would stiffly say he was imposing. His sheer size was all at once comforting and terrifying. It was the lap I'd crawl into after a bad day, lanky girl-legs flopped across tree trunk thighs. It was also the shadow I closed my bedroom door to, unwilling to hear him tumble into lamps and nightstands after a bender.

Our apartment was a pressure cooker. The heat of the summer slowly gripped us in its fist. I was home all day because I had yet to make friends. My dad struggled with his new job, a Director of Security position at a high-end hotel. It was a job run by people that put him up against impossible tasks with impossible expectations.

After the cross-country move and my mom working for little pay, my dad lost his job around the six month mark. We would later find out that the hotel went through five Directors in eighteen months. While I tried to lighten the mood, I found that no one was laughing.

The days went like this: the imprint of my father's body in our cushy leather armchair, his hand wrapped around beer bottles, empty gallon-sized cartons of ice cream littered our lives like rectangular prisons. We were broke and my father's shame led to a sour smell that permeated through the wood floors. At the edge of my mind, I couldn't help but think, *are we going to have to move again?*

We were going to take the train upstate to visit my paternal grandparents when the pressure cooker burst. My dad had borrowed some essentials from them when he first arrived in the city, which were shoved in large plastic bins in the back of a taxi. The traffic was heavy between Brooklyn and Grand Central Station and I could feel a growing tension between my parents. Initially I tried to make some jokes. ("Why did the skeleton burp? Cause he didn't have the guts to fart.") I was met with silence from my dad and a weak smile from my mom. We were running late for the train departure when we finally made it to the station. My dad snatched the bins from the back of the car as my mom and I tried to keep up with his long legs. My mom asked him a question, I forget what, and my father dropped the bins with a bang that echoed through the marbled walls of the station. He whirled around and yelled, "I'm fucking done. I'm not going and I'm taking this shit with me."



People stared as tears ran down my mother's face and I stood frozen, ghost-white. My dad looked every bit like the giant he was, face contorted in an ogre-like frame. He left the station without looking back at us. With a deep breath, my mom grabbed my hand and led me, gently, to the train.

My mom and my grandmother had always had a contentious relationship, but in this instance, they could agree on my father's poor behavior.

My dad joined us a few days later at the lake. He managed to get a speeding ticket in the car he had rented. I wondered if he would spend another night in jail. I thought that I wouldn't mind that, after seeing how scary he'd become.

^

About a year later, after I was in middle school and both parents had steady jobs, after another cruel outburst from my dad, my mom folded me into her arms while tears left salty residue and said, "We could leave right now, if you wanted to. Say the word and it's done." I just shook my head and continued sobbing.

^

During my freshman year of high school, we moved to a different apartment. If the last place was a pressure cooker, this one was a hand around my throat. I spent more time at friend's homes than my own, their parents taking me in, sensing a disturbance in my adolescence.

My father and I spent little time together in person, but we connected in our near daily morning phone calls when I was in high school, me hyperventilating and him sighing while trying to be up-lifting. It was a constant push-pull. I needed him but he could only try to be there, he could meet me some of the way, but it felt like we were on different paths. I noticed something growing inside of me, filling my belly with a shadow that looked a lot like his.

Within eighteen months of our moving, I had flunked out of my high school and virtually stopped sleeping. The anxiety and depression went from something I could push aside to something unavoidable. My father had been the one pushing my attendance to the school, an institution with impossible standards. He dealt with his guilt by shutting me out and getting angry. My parents would find me in the middle of the night knee-deep in a baking project, hoping that leavening agents would pull me out of my stupor. I hopped from uppers to downers to ADHD medication, a condition I have never had. Doctors pumped me full of drugs and my dad would lessen his distance when I would inevitably have a bad reaction to a medication, only to deepen the distance when I was off of it.

When I started my transfer school, I attended my classes and my required internships, but I never finished the assignments that went along with them. My parents did not know that. They also didn't know when I began to cut classes and eventually entire days of school. When the gig was up, when I could no longer lie, my father told me if I lied again I would no longer have a place to live. I didn't know how seriously to take the threat, but I promised I wouldn't lie.

After a tense meeting with my advisor, a kind man called Carl, I could see that other people were afraid of my dad too. Not so much of him, but of his affect on me and my mom. Carl often checked in with me, asking how things were at home. I think he thought things might be violent, he seemed nervous to let me go home after school.

We relocated to upper Manhattan at the beginning of 2013. I was in my senior year of high school, only leaving the house by necessity. My feelings were all encompassing and I was highly agoraphobic, seeking my own small corner of the world, but my bedroom had long since felt like a safe space.

When I finally graduated, after a prolonged stint at summer school, I did not go off to college like so many my age, instead I started intensive therapy and got a job. For the next two years, all of my energy was put into relearning all of the things my brain had learned wrong. Gradually, my dad and I got to some more even ground, but his own problems always seemed to win out. His sadness and anger permeated every square inch of my life. His adopted ideologies ranged from thousands of dollars spent on the phone with a healer to dozens of abandoned diets to a whiplashed turn to staunch Republicanism. My dad sent me links to Jordan Peterson videos, not understanding that a doctorate credential did not make his rhetoric appropriate. Books on leadership were left collecting dead skin cells on window sills. He made me speak with the healer on the phone, her shrill voice cutting into the tiny bones in my ear. She tried to make explicit recommendations and was shocked when I told her that she was wrong.

He told me that he had accidentally given me bleakness and he wanted it back, that he hated watching me crumble under its weight. As if he could single-handedly resuscitate me long after I'd been dead. That he could relieve the pain from the soles of my feet where the eggshells had cut them open.

^

One night, the three of us had come home from somewhere, where I don't recall. My dad had been in a mood for days. Snapping his jaws at everything. It came to a head when he went into the tiny third bedroom in our apartment, picked up a PVC pipe he used for perfecting his weight lifting techniques, and smashed it on the floor until it was nothing but powdery pieces of polyvinyl chloride, dust. I walked out the front door and into the night.

Later he told me he had to, that otherwise, *he would have found someone instead of something to break.*

^

I left home in the summer of 2016. I started college after so long stringing along in dead-end jobs. I went as far away from New York as I could get in the continental US.

My dad took my leaving badly. While he did not say that to me, his retreat from my life spoke volumes. I thought he had been distant before, but I didn't yet know distance. I realized that I was, perhaps, his only friend.

## Monsters

Between rants about how *Romeo and Juliet* should really just be called *Juliet* because ‘Romeo is a fukboi’ and longwinded descriptions of missing his ex-wife (who was also a professor of mine, dear lord), my Shakespeare professor would, on occasion, randomly say, “There weren’t Nazis when I was growing up!” While that isn’t completely accurate—there were certainly acts of white supremacy in the 1990s, such as the killing of Rodney King—the point still stands. Nazis once hid in shadows, or behind gleaming badges and cheap polyester uniforms, and now they don’t.

I didn’t worry about Nazis as a kid. I was aware of them in a nebulous way. I understood that parts of my family likely died at the hands of them in the 1940s, but that seemed like another world to me, considering all of my great-grandparents had emigrated here by that time. I knew the KKK existed, but that was in the deep South, central Pennsylvucky, and parts of Oregon, all places I wasn’t likely to visit because fuck humidity and nature.

I spent my formative years in New York City, where being Jewish was about as unusual as liking pizza. If anything, I was always accused of being not Jewish enough. Some of this being due to my mixed religious upbringing (Jewish on my mom’s side, Episcopalian on my dad’s). My family really wasn’t religious in any way. I still can’t really explain what Purim is and I have no idea what Episcopalians believe in (though my mother does call them ‘catholic-lite’). I had no interest in being Bat-mitzvahed and my parents, unlike those of my classmates, did not have 20 grand lying around in order to throw me a party where 13-year-olds would awkwardly grind on each other to the seminal classic, “Get Low”.

And so, Judaism was just a thing that I could technically call my own, but probably wasn’t going to. That started to change somewhat when I became an adult. I, like many people in

their early 20s, started to identify my 'roots'. I started to learn more about my descendants and participated in a handful of holidays (when I remembered them and wasn't, like, busy). I fasted on Yom Kippur while somewhat thinking of things I should atone for, but mostly thinking about how hungry I was. The biggest way I have gotten in touch with my Jewishness is through food. I try to learn about things through multiple senses and food has always been a way that I could explore things I needed help understanding. I mustered up a Hanukkah feast for my roommates. I made challah and matzo ball soup from scratch, as well as whipping up some latkes. Side note: the more Jewish foods I cook, the more I realize that I might actually be the physical embodiment of these foods. Squishy, salty, and irresistible to the point that it makes your body hurt (please date me).

Food is a wonderful way for me to connect, but it doesn't replace having a working knowledge of Judaism. I definitely don't have that. Part of the confusing nature of my relationship to being Jewish comes from the fact that Judaism is both a religion and a culture. I don't feel I can lay claim to the religious part of it, I simply don't know enough, but I do feel culturally Jewish, I feel my ancestors living inside of me, enough that I feel a personal stake in watching the alt-right work its (dark) magic. It feels as if they are making their way through every marginalized group.

If you had asked me 10 years ago if anybody gave a fuck that I was Jewish, I would have said no. But now, I often find that I tuck that part of myself away, wary of the reactions it might garner.

Queerness is another part of myself that causes me to feel caught in between. As a child, I knew only one person who openly expressed attraction to multiple genders. Due to her bohemian lifestyle and inability to make and stick with decisions, she was often labeled as confused or

attention seeking. Portrayals in media taught me that bisexuality was essentially the devil's work. I was told long before my own acceptance, that monosexuality was really my only option. I was being made to 'choose'.

I still fear relationships of any makeup. Being mistaken for straight makes me feel as if I am withholding something, while the idea of public affection with a woman makes my stomach swell with swarms of buzzards (granted, my stomach reacts similarly when I so much as see a cute girl).

When marriage equality came around, I had been out (to some people) less than two years. It should have objectively been a joyous occasion. My community was finally being granted a right they should have always had in the first place. But I couldn't help but think of the dozens of other ways that community was affected day to day. There was relentless teasing, inaccurate media portrayals, violence, hate speech. What the fuck did marriage mean if you couldn't get through a Tuesday?

Even the ability to marry doesn't cancel out the microaggressions. They exist in every Tinder bio beginning with 3 pictures of a beautiful woman and ending with pictures of a couple, the assumption that you only exist to spice up the sex life of a hot girl and her tiny-dicked boyfriend. It is being treated as a party trick, as the funny friend. It is pretending not to see your roommate stiffen when you mention women. It's pretending not to hear when he expresses how 'hard' it is to be attracted to queer women.

Generally, people don't know that I am both Jewish and queer unless I tell them. I come off as a nice, if intimidating, straight Christian. The exception to this is other queer people. Recently I told this theory to a queer friend, to which she replied, with a confused look on her face, "I *never* thought you were straight" which I took as 'you gay as hell bb'.

Hatred against LGBTQ+ people hasn't gone anywhere. Instead, it has been sanitized. There is a very big difference between tolerance and acceptance. Collectively, we often tolerate the people who express differences from us. Celebration of those differences is still a long way away.

The alt-right hasn't targeted queer people in quite the same way as they have other marginalized groups. There are a surprising number of gay men belonging to white supremacy groups. They are generally attracted to extremist groups due to racism and misogyny. This doesn't negate the anti-LGBTQ+ history (and present) of those groups. Most of the alt-right isn't going to get on board with gay men, unless their rhetoric is abhorrent enough for them to flout them. There are alt-right video games where you can murder queer people.

I try to recognize my own fear as a fear of something that could happen, not something that is likely to happen. I question if I am even allowed to be scared. The only thing I can compare it to is the fear of being raped or sexually assaulted, a fear I've had most of my life due to truly abhorrent number of people I know who had been subjected to. Expressing this fear has always led to patronizing, placating behavior from others. My fear of white supremacy feels similarly. Most people would take this as my anxiety getting the best of me, or being a little too in tune with the news. It has gotten to a point where I don't feel the need to hide, necessarily, but I am exceedingly cautious in disclosing things about myself to others. This could easily be an overreaction to scary things happening in the outside world, or a catastrophization of what would likely be some very unpleasant, uncomfortable conversations.

In addition to the fear of the extreme, comes the fear of the tells of people you know. The assumption you were born into money, the conversation between your neighbor and her husband about the dense population of Jews in Skokie, Illinois, about how they run everything. That you



have an underground social tunnel that builds bridges for you. That you're cheap and cynical. That you don't actually love women, you just say you do for the attention of men.

It makes me question whether or not I could be a target. On the one hand, I am white, which grants me leniency in the eyes of white supremacists. On the other hand, I'm a woman, a Jew, and a queer.

What I do know is that most of the people I love would be targets. From my Black, Thai, Chinese, Taiwanese, Guatemalan and Jewish cousins to my Latinx friends to the dozens of Muslim people I know, I'm scared of losing a single one of them, whether that be a physical loss or so much as seeing their brightness dim.

While white supremacy isn't a uniquely American problem (just look at Hungary, Germany, and the U.K.), the rate at which their behaviors have been normalized is astounding. So much so that we elected a firm believer in 2016. So much so that my father voted for him.

Many people may consider their parent voting for someone you dislike as a small grievance, an irritation. For me, it wasn't. It felt personal, like all of the talk about me being myself, celebrating who I am was just a box to tick. That my heritage and that of my mother is nothing more than a footnote.

I couldn't talk to him about it. Any verge in conversation in that direction would create a vice around my throat and have me panting for reprieve. I made a choice to love him regardless, a choice denigrated by my extended family and by my friends. My mother challenged him on it, asking him how he could vote for someone with countless allegations of sexual assault, someone who lacked respect for those that differed from him. My father replied, "that's just a distraction".

When I finally could make my concerns known, after years of holding my tongue, I exploded in grief in a motel in the middle South Dakota, in the middle of the pandemic, in the middle of a marriage. My mother held me as I cried so hard I vomited in my mouth, as I told my father I simply couldn't understand what he had become. I told him I was scared to bring home a woman or a person of color. That the people he identified with would rather I not exist, that with the exception of the color of my skin, I was everything they hated about America. I told him that I simply couldn't understand how he could support a predator when his wife was a victim of one.

I'm afraid of a lot of things, some reasonable, others not. I am extremely competent at hiding my feelings. People often tell me they find me intimidating, whether that be from my quick wit or my stature or my tendency not handle bullshit well. But that is the mask I wear (under my actual mask these days). My fears about myself may err on unrealistic, but the ones of the people around me are entirely possible.

I'm scared that the stacking of the supreme court will lead to the dissolution of marriage equality and Roe v. Wade. I'm afraid of rollbacks of policies designed to protect the employment of queer people, the freedoms of queer and trans kids, and employers being unable to tell me what to do with my body. I fear more police violence against Black and brown people. I fear that the small steps taken towards fixing systemic racism will go out of style. I'm afraid that the Tree of Life synagogue shooting will become a regular occurrence. I'm afraid of Nazi symbolism being painted on my front door. I fear the violence that I may face at the vocalization of these concerns. I worry about bringing children into this world. I worry about raising the children who are already here. I am afraid that my father will continue to support people who would rather see me dead. But mostly, I am scared of being unequipped to deal with these fears. I fear my fears getting the best of me.

I know that this is a time for hope, but I don't think I can hope unless I truly understand what I'm afraid of. Maybe then, I can take a breath and trust that others feel the same, trust that the simple fact of my Shakespeare professor reminding students of the rise of Nazism is enough. Or maybe we just live in an America where monsters are no longer hiding under our beds. Maybe they live here now.

## **Touch**

Kindred Skin + Sole is the millennial white woman's dream come true. Everything is pink and beige with gold accents and smells like the inside of a candle. Its entrance and subsequent floor plan is dedicated to the sole (and hand) part of its title.

Behind a painted door, in a decidedly drearier hallway, and down some stairs the skin portion takes place. On a glorious November day with the sky spitting rain like an overzealous geometry teacher, I ventured into the world of capitalistic self care with little regard for my bank account and only one thing of my mind: heal me of the hell that is grad school. Take away the frozenness of my fingers and the hump in my back from spending unholy amounts of time in front of a computer and cowering in self pity. Zap me with your crystal magic and make me shine like a glazed donut.

My practitioner (or alchemist as they are known at Kindred), Alivia, led me to a similarly feminine room in the converted basement of the E. Front St building. I was surprised to see that the room was not private and that a woman was receiving what I assumed was lash extensions or a lobotomy. I changed into an elasticated strapless towel thing that miraculously fit over my bosom. Alivia led me to a table and had me lie down. She swept my hair back and wrapped a headband around my head to keep my hair out of my face.

The facial began traditionally, a double cleanse to rid my face, neck and décolletage of their numerous sins. After that, she applied a clearing mask to further rid me of my indiscretions and then put a collagen rosehip jelly mask over my face (including my eyes, though not my mouth because Liv and I concluded I was far too allergy-ridden to breathe exclusively through my nose). The crystal magic began then. She used what I can only assume was a crystal facial roller to further push the collagen mask into my skin. While the mask dried, she massaged my

scalp, shoulders, arms and hands. I learned that heaven is a scalp massage and that I have weirdly tender forearms.

She peeled off the mask, exposing my new life as a virginal, baby-skinned nymph. She removed whatever residue was left on my skin and then plied me with serums, moisturizers and creams. She used a rose quartz gua sha tool to define my jawline and cheekbones. Throughout the whole treatment, Alivia informed me of the things she was putting on my skin and what she was going to do next, like a real-life ASMRtist. The treatment came to a close as she applied some lip balm and took the headband off of my head. I was told to rise slowly, which was good, because I felt strangely dizzy.

What I had not expected from the treatment sank in later. I realized it was the first time in nearly two years that someone had touched me with reverence. While we, collectively, are at a point where we can touch the people we love, I, individually, am far removed from those that I hold dear. I recognize that I didn't go for a facial for gleaming skin, or even for stress relief. I went because I needed someone to show me care, if even for a little while.

I have a distinct memory of the last time someone really touched me before we went into lockdown. My friend Kit gave me a hug in our favorite coffee shop in Iowa City. It was March 9th and we were on the precipice of something unknown. We held each other in the same way we might otherwise, but this felt different. Kit was always the first person to know that something was going on with me. We would greet each other with a hug or a squeeze on the shoulder, and without fail, she would pinpoint when something was wrong. She would remark that the hug felt heavy, or respond with a simple 'what did you do to your body, Franklin?'

There was a time where I would have considered myself someone who didn't really need touch, who didn't like it. I've grown since then. The pandemic taught me that I do need human contact because, yes, I am human.

I am now at a point where I can hug my friends when I see them, but I don't think it is fair for me to ask for the intimacy I so evidently need. I don't have a partner and am not around the type of friends who pile across couches like puppies. Somehow, paying someone for 45 minutes of attention seems like the next best thing. That said, I would mostly return for another look in the mirror at my cheekbones, pronounced like golden accents against my pink cheeks.

## Youth

When I was with her, I was beautiful. Objectively. Comparatively. Oddly. I was the only girl at the punk shows we frequented in Bushwick wearing a dress. She could talk to the band guys about chord progressions while they sent appreciative glances my way, though generally not more than that. These men. Whom we had countless crushes on. Who were twice our age. It was like they could see the forcefield that surrounded us, like they knew I was hers before I did.

\*

We met when we were fourteen, as newly admitted high schoolers. At that point, her hair was cut to the nape of her neck, the freckled length visible when she bent her head to stare down at her iPod. My first glimpse: ginger and skinny, tucked impossibly into a chair, massive headphones covered her tiny ears. She was the quintessential picture of teen angst.

I had decided that I would cover my own angst in brightly colored clothing and a pseudo-bubbly personality. In middle school, I had earned myself a reputation of a talented, artsy kid with a penchant for the dramatic. I played up my own darkness, hoping it would serve me well, but it hadn't.

When I got to high school, I hoped my sunny new outlook would cover my fatness, my self-loathing, and that it would make me seem cooler than I was. I realized, later, that it only made me seem more childish. Over the summer, I had lost nearly 40 pounds, mostly by accident. In the fall, I donned a new body and a new personality.

\*

We became friends despite our outward opposite polarity. She introduced me to new music and funny internet videos. She took me to my first concert that wasn't Huey Lewis and the

News, a coffee-house show with some internet-famous British men, who would later go to prison for the grooming and child molesting of young women our age.

She lent me books I barely understood, books I would later consider life-changing. She gave me half her sandwich at lunch, knowing I hadn't gotten up early enough to make my own. She dragged me to local bakeries for lemon cupcakes and banana pudding.

My afternoons were spent in her Brooklyn bedroom, sat close on her mattress, listening to Elliot Smith. She didn't really like to be touched, shying away from hugs from our peers and kisses from her parents. I tried to respect that, but at that point, it was easier to express myself through touch than through words. I learned what kind of touch she could tolerate; firm hugs and strong-gripped touches, never something light and fleeting. I like to think she let me, that my touch was different. But maybe it was prolonged exposure.

\*

"I'm not, like, classically beautiful. I'm kind of—" I explained.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Huh?"

"You look like a '40s film star."

I snorted.

\*

"I think everyone thinks we're girlfriends," I said as we sat outside the third floor women's room.

"Probably," she said and went back to her sandwich.

\*



She sang me a million songs. Spindly fingers picking at guitar strings. Voice soft and rough at the same time. I would sit for hours listening, feeling the tightness in my chest that came from her voice carving its way under my ribs. It would stay there for days, playing notes on my ribs like an internal xylophone.

\*

There had been a time where I thought my own voice beautiful. When I sang with her, to her, around her, any squeak in my cords made her nose crinkle. I would fall over myself, explaining I hadn't sung in a long time, that I was just rusty. In my awkwardly situated apartment, that lacked the warmth that hers did, I promised myself I wouldn't sing again.

\*

I flunked out of our shared high school. I felt steeped in embarrassment. My classmates were kind, explaining that they were sad to see me go, that they wished the school knew what to do with people like me. My teachers looked on with squinted eyes that indiscreetly said 'I told you so.'

Subsequently, I found a school that would take me and I transferred halfway through our sophomore year. As a newly minted sixteen year old, I entered a new world virtually silent. I spent lunch at my advisors' desk, not eating and trying to answer the gentle questions he asked.

\*

We shared things. Mix cds, snacks, and crippling mental health issues.

I suggested she go to therapy. She did.

She came home with a Bipolar II diagnosis and a prescription for lithium. I was there as her blood levels were checked, when she was mean and dismissive, when she was silent. I was there. My panic attacks and lack of REM sleep were nothing compared to her pain.

It was always about her pain.

\*

“I don’t understand why anyone with depression would ever have a kid.”

“Oh.”

“It’s just so fucking selfish.”

She knew that I wanted kids. That I imagined a house full of tiny people and a handsome partner to boot.

\*

She transferred to the same school the following semester, albeit for entirely different reasons.

She graduated early. I did not, though I could have. She got her head above water while I continued to sink. I skipped school more than I went. I stayed up all night and napped, occasionally, during the day.

I kept getting sick. Endless bouts of bronchitis, laryngitis, sinus infections. A stomach bug that caused a fifteen pound weight loss. When I met her for tea weeks later, she said she barely recognized me.

\*

She got into a great school in Virginia and left a few months later. A few days into orientation, I got a call from her. She was being entered into a psychiatric hospital after dissociating on the floor of the dorm shower. I spent my days panicking until she came home.

\*

The following year she worked a couple of jobs and reapplied to schools in the city. I spent my free time with her.

I finally graduated, a bit late. I gave myself two weeks before starting to work. I worked an admin job that by all rights I should have been fired from, but my bosses seemed to know that I needed somewhere to go every day. They thought I had potential. They told me it was clear I was “figuring some things out.”

\*

I told her that I was bisexual on a bitterly cold day in January, just days after my nineteenth birthday. We were in the West Village, walking down the street after a diner dinner.

She laughed and said, “No shit” grinning ridiculously.

\*

After that, we inched closer to each other. No longer were we pressed shoulder to shoulder in her bed. We lounged with my leg slung across hers and the tip of my nose pressed against her neck. Every time we saw each other our faces would get closer, until we rubbed noses and touched foreheads. Sometimes, I could feel her eyelashes brush against mine when her glasses were off.

“I feel like we’re getting closer to kissing every time we get together,” I told her, softly.

“Do you want to?”

“What if it ruins us?”

“We won’t let it.”

We leaned in.

\*

We were bad at kissing. Clumsy and teeth-ridden. Breath smelling of tea with milk and the vegetables we had with dinner. She thrust her tongue into my mouth too aggressively and I

bit her bottom lip too hard. We were probably too old for this kind of fumbling. High school hadn't afforded us experimentation.

It escalated, though we never actually had sex. Instead, we spent hours creating bruised lips, wrapped up in each other. We shaped our bodies like koi fish, making ourselves cyclical, all without moving much. We swam around each other in some kind of nuance-laden dance. I found out about her sensitive nipples at some point and made it my job to indent them with my teeth. Later, she would text me, telling me the marks were still there.

\*

We got better. We kissed like we had no other options, like our lungs would stop inflating if our lips detached. We kissed until my underwear was so wet I thought it would disintegrate. I would wiggle out of our tangle of limbs to go to the restroom, breathing condensation onto the mirror as I took in my dilated pupils, my burnt rose lips. With color high on my cheeks I would clean up my mess and get back into bed, only to get messy again.

\*

She pointed at her lips, demandingly, as I packed up to leave. I cast a worried look towards the open door. I could hear her mother's fingers clacking over the keyboard of the family desktop.

“What about...”

“It's fine,” she said, pointing again.

I kissed her and slipped out the door with a quick, “thanks for dinner” to her mom.

\*

My first foray to Harrisonburg, VA had been a few summers earlier. Her paternal grandmother, Babu, was still living in a beautiful home on a plot of land outside of the city. She

was a scary Ukraine-born woman, who was referred to by my friend's maternal grandfather as 'the ice queen.'

In response to an allergic reaction I had that first summer, Babu glared at me while roughly rubbing calamine lotion into my skin and said, "You should wear long things when you go outside."

That summer, Babu was in the hospital, leaving the house less frigid. Though, despite her rough exterior, I found myself missing her.

Instead of the usual lively, perpetually silly air of the family, tension seemed to run everywhere. She fought with her sister for hours each day and snapped at me when I asked if they 'were done yet', her unflappable mother seemed to retreat from everyone and her father told far fewer jokes.

One afternoon, I snuck into our shared bedroom and kissed her, rubbing her breasts in a way that would generally get me a whimper and hands tightening in my hair. Instead, she said, "Please don't touch my chest."

I stopped and asked, "What's wrong?"

She shrugged and didn't answer.

I got up from the bed and left the room, knowing I was not wanted but not knowing that this would be the last time our lips touched.

\*

After the odd vacation to her summer home, she began to answer my calls less and less. Shortly thereafter, she started college. I sent her silly videos and asked how her classes were going. I would get vague, one-worded answers, if any at all.

She invited me to meet her new friends. A dinner party at the home I had once thought of as my second one. She was jovial and seemingly happy to see me. I hoped that this was the beginning of a new phase for us. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so quick to.

Her friends were snide and judgmental. Everything I said was met with an air of disdain. It was clear I was a piece that didn't fit into the puzzle. I wasn't smart enough, accomplished enough. I was just a hangers-on from high school, a clinging nitwit who would never amount to anything. I felt uncultured and uncouth. I didn't know what I'd done wrong, apart from existing.

She would lead the conversation back to safer territory, but she didn't actually defend me. Eventually, I left, citing the long trip to upper Manhattan.

The part of me I hated most wondered if she had planned things this way.

\*

The calls and texts stopped all together not long after that. I took on a second job and buried myself in entertainment visas and the lives of children under five. The following fall I went on a month-long trip under the guise of finding a new home, but really, I think I was running away from my own loneliness. When she stopped being in my life so much, there was no one to fill her place. Girl meets girl, girl loses girl, girl remembers she has no other friends, girl is alone.

When I got back to the city, I made an OkCupid profile and started finding people who actually wanted me. I didn't tell the first guy I almost fucked that I was a virgin. I told him I had 'experience with women.' It was only kind of a lie.

We rented some office space for a couple hours, like the yuppie version of a pay-by-the-hour motel. When he tried to push inside me, he was met with resistance.

"I don't want to hurt you."

“I guess we should stop?”

We left it at that. He kissed me gently on a Lower Manhattan street corner, like we were lovers, not like people who had failed to fuck in a glorified cubicle.

I didn't tell the first guy I actually fucked that I was a virgin either. He was nearly twice my age, living in a lightless box of a room in Crown Heights. I justified this by telling myself that virginity was a social construct and that I was taking back the power by not disclosing. I didn't want him to know that he could take something from me.

\*

She and I got together in the spring, our first effortless hang out in a long time. We talked about our sexual escapades and our risky internet behavior. I told her about the guy I almost fucked, the one with the enormous penis. She had a similar story about some kid from Long Island.

She told me she had met someone on Twitter in some sort of hockey fanfic group thread. I laughed and told her I toyed with people on dating apps and ignored my feelings.

\*

I met the Twitter woman not long after that. A beautiful Texan with a megawatt smile. She was electric. Tall and gorgeous and funny.

Later on, during a rare meeting, she gushed about this new beauty.

“She asked me if she asked me to marry her, would I say yes.”

“Would you?”

“Yeah, totally.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, I love her. It's hilarious, she cries every time she sees a baby.”

“She cries?”

“Yep, imagine what it’ll be like when she sees our kids.”

“You want kids?”

“Yeah.”

“You always said you didn’t want them.”

“Now I, like, really want kids.”

“Oh.”

\*

They left together for a summer in Texas, I left in the fall forever.

\*

I went back to school and began a new life in California. I made new friends and got drunk at a shitty Irish pub with my housemates. For the first time in a long while, I excelled in school. I felt like I was doing something with my life, comparing myself less to her.

\*

In October, I got a message.

“I just wanted you to know we’re getting married.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I just sent, “Wow, congrats!”

\*

The next month I got a series of photos of the wedding. Both of them in white, wearing the rings she made herself.



## Streets

You exit your Brooklyn apartment to find four young men on your stoop. You say ‘excuse me’ to the one closest to the door. He moves, but not before saying, ‘My friend likes you. He thinks you’re sexy.’ You don’t know how to respond, so you walk faster towards the corner store. You purchase what you need, all the while hoping the men will be gone when you return home. They’re not.

You say ‘excuse me’ again because you figure it can’t hurt to be polite. One of the other men straightens from his place on the railing, allowing a small place for you to pass through. You shift sideways, trying to keep your body from touching his. Your breasts touch his chest anyway.

Your 10-year-old breasts.

---

You don’t understand why other girls don’t have to deal with this. You learn to hide under extra large t-shirts. You cut your hair. It doesn’t seem to matter much. It still happens.

---

You’re a city kid. You take the subway alone. You are intimately acquainted with your local bodega. Your footprints are all over this city. Over the last year and a half you have gained a little toughness, but not nearly enough.

It’s a nice day on the subway platform. It smells like piss, but you’re used to that. The breeze of the train coming into the station feels good. You are wearing a t-shirt and holding your jacket in your arms. The train is fairly empty. You sit in a corner seat with your right side against the partition.

You see a man out of the corner of your eye, about six feet away from you. Your skin begins to crawl as soon as the doors close. You know what's about to happen. The deep, even breaths you take do nothing to calm you.

You realize there are no other women in the car. The man gets up and situates himself in the two-seater catty corner from you. He's only three feet away now.

The train pulls into the next station and you hope new people come into the car. You need someone to renew the distance between you and this man. Instead, someone else exits the train.

The man is staring at you. His legs are spread wide. You try to make yourself smaller. It doesn't work.

---

You've gotten good at identifying who will be a problem. You've learned there are no defining characteristics in these people. Gender, race, size, economics. None of them tell you who is going to scare you. All you have is the grime that floats onto your skin. You're covered in it.

---

You are not afraid of touch yet. You communicate through hugs and cuddles with your friends. It's how you take care of people and how they take care of you. But you are starting to understand that others are communicating things you don't want to know through their touch.

Boys demand hugs. You feel like you can't say no. You don't want to be difficult. You know that good girls don't make a scene, don't talk out of turn. Their hands placed low on your back. Sometimes their faces tucked into your neck. Their hips pressed tightly against yours. It is an intimacy you did not ask for.

---

You don't recognize this behavior for a long time. You assume that boys don't like you. You're taller than them. Your weight is the subject of conversation. No one seems to think you are pretty. And yet. Their fingerprints rest on the hems of your shirts and the waistbands of your pants when the only fingertips that should be there are your own.

---

He says, 'what if I told you I liked your ass?'.  
'That would make me feel awkward'.

He smirks.

---

You've heard it all at this point. Every name, every 'compliment', every slur. You've heard it from men old enough to be your grandfather and young enough to be your peer. You've even heard it from a couple of women. They approach it in different ways, but the intent seems to be the same.

---

Fight or flight is bullshit.

You freeze.

---

You are afraid of touch now. The fear has slowly made its way to your extremities. Your fingertips spark with each meaningless brush.

The train is crowded. This city is far too populated to allow you any room to breathe. The touches are accidental. Everyone is in their winter coats and there simply isn't enough room.

You stand, holding onto the railing, talking to your father.

At first, you assume the touch is another accident. You shift, trying to make room for the person behind you. The touch fades and you continue on as if it hadn't happened. After a few minutes the touch returns. You curl further in on yourself. There is a weight in your stomach.

You know not to say anything because this is an express train and it won't stop for several more minutes. You wiggle, trying to get the touch to retreat. Instead, the hand that was curled around the back of one of your thighs is now sliding between them. The train pulls into the station and the body attached to the hand quickly exits.

---

No one likes Greyhound buses. They're uncomfortable. There is too little space between you and the person next to you. There is usually an unpleasant smell. The bus driver always seems to hit every pothole in the county.

The man next to you falls asleep early on. His hand flops over and rests against your thigh. You shift. The hand finds you again. You shift. The hand is under your skirt now. You shift. The man is awake now and he is looking right at you. You finally get up the courage to shove his hand away. You look at him and very specifically shake your head. You tell him 'no'. He leaves you alone after that. But you are stuck on the bus next to him for the next two hours.

---

You try to explain your fear to your roommate, once. He really doesn't get it. But every woman you know has stories like yours. Stories that make yours pale in comparison. Stories of waking up without their underwear. Stories of strange apartments. Of strangers in their beds. Of weapons held to their bodies. Of photos and videos they don't remember being taken. Of people who were meant to keep them safe. It really doesn't matter that he doesn't understand.

---

‘You are so fucking hot’.

‘My gf likes to play with other girls’.

‘I wanna to be your daddy and I want you to be my lg’.

‘Do you do anal?’

‘I wanna cum on yer tits’.

‘I really want to suck on your toes’.

‘I’m treating my boyfriend to a threesome for his birthday’.

‘I wanna feed you. Stuff you like a pig you fuckin whore’.

‘Have you been a bad girl?’

‘Im gunna brake u in 2’.

‘I’ll smack the brat out of you’.

‘We’re looking for a unicorn. We are discreet’.

---

Your friend leaves to go grab the food you ordered. You stay at the counter of the brewery, pointedly ignoring the men behind you who keep shooting you looks and ‘accidentally’ bumping into you. They’ve been slowly moving closer to you and your friend for the last thirty minutes. It is like they’re vultures and you are the rotting carcass they get to feed from.

They think they’re being subtle. It’s appalling.

Your friend returns with a massive plate filled with a burger and fries. You both dig in right away.

One of the men behind you says, ‘Fuck, that smells so good’, his chest brushing against your arm. His friend adds, looking directly at you, ‘yeah, it makes me, like, wanna bite your shoulder,’ and he curls his hand around your shoulder, squeezing.

You are halfway into a bite of your burger. You and your friend share a look of bafflement. It's more ridiculous than offensive, but still, you drop your burger on the plate and turn towards the man. You shake his hand off and say, 'That would be a big problem.' You turn around before he can respond.

---

You are so, so tired.

## Feed

*Make pasta according to package instructions, stopping a few minutes before fully cooked. Meanwhile, heat oil in a heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add onions and season with salt and freshly ground pepper. Cook until translucent. Add chopped garlic and red pepper flakes. Cook for 1 more minute. Add chopped fresh tomatoes. Cook until saucy. Add in desired fresh herbs. Add cooked pasta to sauce and cook until thickened, stirring frequently. Add flaky salt, freshly ground pepper, and lots of parmesan cheese.*

^

2020 was biblically, almost comically awful. We all looked for comfort where we could get it, as if small things could save us from a world collapsing around us.

My savior was food. I cooked like my life depended on it. I made *everything*. I learned where the best olive oil came from, how salt was taken from the sea, how to sear a perfect steak. I also ate an inordinate amount of frozen pizza and the clink of my recycling bin was borderline concerning.

Food and drink were my saviors, but the thing about saviors is that they are not always welcome.

^

*Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Remove ends of brussels sprouts and cut in half. Put on a baking sheet and coat with olive oil. Season well with salt and freshly ground pepper. Scrub Japanese sweet potatoes and cut into half inch thick rounds. Place in a glass or enamel baking vessel. Coat thinly with olive oil and season well with salt and freshly ground pepper. Gently drizzle honey over potatoes and sprinkle with black sesame seeds.*

*Add chopped garlic to the rest of the pan. Bake brussels sprouts and potatoes for 30-45 minutes, checking them every 15 minutes until brussels sprouts are crispy and potatoes are crisp on the outside but still soft all the way through. Meanwhile, cook rice in a rice cooker, using chicken or vegetable stock if preferred. To make spicy mayo: add 1 teaspoon of sriracha for every tablespoon of mayo, or to taste. Mix well. To plate: add equal parts rice, brussels sprouts and sweet potatoes. Add arugula and top with spicy mayo. Add sliced scallions. Drizzle sesame oil and soy sauce.*

^

My relationship with food is a long and storied one. It ranges from being a toddler who would eat anything to being a kid with strange dislikes to being a tween who wouldn't eat for days only to find sanctum in an entire bag of Goldfish crackers and a pint of Ben & Jerry's. I became a teenager who would only eat when fed by the kindness of others and the convenience of free delivery in Brooklyn. My later teens lent themselves to baking my anxieties while not actually eating anything myself. My post-high school self ate only about five kinds of foods out of a fear I still can't explain. It was only when I went to college and met someone whose own love of food sparked something in me, that food became connection.

^

*Preheat oven to 400. With care, split the peel of the plantains with a sharp knife. Avoid cutting into the fruit. Peel the plantain and slice on the bias into 1/2 inch pieces. Put on a baking sheet and toss with olive oil, salt and pepper. Bake for 30 minutes or until brown and crisp on the outside. Serve with spanish rice, avocado, hot sauce, salsa, sour cream, or black beans in any combination.*

^



I moved to Santa Barbara in 2016. After about 6 months, Aidan became my roommate. To say I was spoiled is an immense understatement. As a trained electro microscopist, Aidan made considerably more money than I did, a large portion of which was spent at the farmer's market. This cycling-obsessed, two-time cancer surviving, English oddball became the most unexpected best friend I've ever had. But he really was the best. He taught me things about ratios of heat to sweetness and how to properly care for a knife. Aidan introduced me to foods I'd never heard of. I now would happily eat a cherimoya every day if I could. He fed my broke ass multiple times a week. He made me rabbit mole, swordfish steaks, curries that made my saliva pool down the sides of my mouth, and endless amounts of huevos rancheros. All along, he answered every question I had and tasted everything I made. At that point, I wasn't the best of cooks, but I absorbed all the information I could from Aidan. Our other roommate Num (who was born in Thailand) was another resource. The beautiful foodpeople at the farmers market and our local Mexican grocery store became my weekly stomping grounds.

When I left Santa Barbara, I knew that I would no longer have the luxury of incredible produce and the kindness of my friends. I spent the summer of 2018 in New York making my parents apartment into an actual oven while I burned through two years of creative energy.

^

*Heat a cast iron pan over medium heat. Add corn tortillas to a dry pan and heat through. Set aside. In a small pot, heat refried beans until warm. Spread beans over tortillas. Add oil to cast iron pan, heat slightly. Fry two eggs until crisp on the edges but still runny in the middle. Top tortilla with an egg. Add salsa of your choosing and avocado. Drizzle with green hot sauce if desired.*

^

Arriving in Iowa, I was disappointed in the food that was available to me. Despite being considered one of the foremost states for agriculture, very little actually grows in Iowa's odd climate. I had to rely on exported foods and many dry goods. I assumed it would inhibit my cooking abilities, but in actuality, it enhanced them. I became hugely creative in my cooking. I developed a love for beans and legumes. I began cooking the foods of my heritage for the first time. The first time I made challah was a revelation. I baked my way to gaining 20 pounds and cooked exclusively vegan in order to lose it. It was also the year I quit drinking. I watched as my father buried himself deeper into bottles and decided I never wanted to be like him.

^

*Whisk 3 eggs in a bowl. Add a bit of water to add volume. Season heavily with freshly ground black pepper. Add a pinch of salt. Run one piece of matzo under warm water for 30 seconds. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a frying pan. Break wet matzo into pieces and add to butter. Saute until thoroughly coated. Add egg mixture and continue to saute. When egg mixture is incorporated and no longer wet looking, the matzo brei is done. Do not overcook.*

^

That first year living alone, I often had no one to share my spoils with. I would look at glass containers filled with new recipes and realize that I had no one to give them to. The following year, my friend Maddie and I got an apartment together. I felt an instant need to feed her, to which I think she both appreciated and rolled her eyes at. I made spiced chickpea stew, butter seared salmon and a lot of cocktails (almost exclusively for me).

The Fall of 2019 was one of the best periods of my life. I finally had created a life that made me happy. I had a job full of some really wonderful weirdos and classes that sparked

writing I never thought I could put to paper. I started dating for the first time in years (mixed results...mostly bad ones, but still). I actually went out (note: do not try to keep up with 21 year olds, good god). My social life started to match my academic life in a way I had only experienced briefly in the previous decade.

^

*Heat oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add shallots and saute until soft. Add mushrooms and allow to sweat. Add herbs de provence. Mushrooms are done when they are about half their original size and tender. Remove to a bowl. Slice pieces of thick-cut sourdough or other rustic bread. Heat olive oil in mushroom pan and add bread. Fry for 1-2 minutes and then flip. Top with mushrooms. Sprinkle goat cheese and fresh parsley.*

^

2019 turned into 2020. I finished my grad school applications. I managed to develop emotional connections with not one but two baristas who worked at the same coffee shop. I pretended to understand more Portuguese than I actually did. I had my last hug a few days before we went into lockdown. For four months, I was not touched by another person. Emotions I thought I had dealt with sprung up like tulips in Spring.

Some things I did during lockdown: binged every English crime television show on Netflix, walked my roommate's emotional support bunny, Milo, on a leash, made hash browns, watched protests erupt across the nation, made kugel, heard my name in media for several months, considered if the police raided Brianna Taylor Franklin's home in the middle of night, and not Breonna Taylor's, Brianna would have survived, ate a lot of 'charcuterie' (by which I mean cheese, matzo, and fruit), bickered with Maddie over grocery stores, learned to drive, cooked a perfect steak, cried all the fucking time, missed New York for the first time in years,

made chopped cheese because I missed New York, talked to my mom several times a day, watched from afar as my city got demolished, killed a lot of bottles of wine, made chocolate chip cookies, did Chloe Ting workouts, tried to get Maddie to do Chloe Ting workouts and got reamed, ate so much avocado toast, drank shitty cocktails, admired tomatoes, and cried and screamed at my dad over FaceTime in a motel room in South Dakota for making me feel like he was one step away from white supremacy.

And then I moved to Montana.

^

*Slice cucumbers very finely. In a bowl, add cucumbers, yogurt, chopped fresh dill and salt. Mix to combine. Adjust ingredients to taste.*

^

Montana brought on stressors I had never experienced. My world began to collapse in stages. I dealt with a landlord who hated me, who weeks after I had moved out, watched as I scrubbed baseboards on sprained tendons. Who held up my roommate's rental application to get out of doing work that was her responsibility. Because of her greed, I lost my housing and faced homelessness. It made every meal I had made on her property taste like dust.

I worked a job that would build me up in hours and confidence only to take both things away. I started a different job I thought I would love, but became unusually challenged by. It took me 8 months to find a full time position, only to have my personal life crash into my professional one.

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*Fry bacon over medium-low heat until very crisp. Meanwhile, cut heirloom tomatoes into ¼ inch slices. Toast buttermilk bread until golden. To make the garlic mayo: add*

*mayonnaise to a bowl and grate one clove of fresh garlic into it using a microplane. Season with cumin, cayenne and salt. Add lemon juice. Adjust seasonings until desired taste is achieved. Spread mayo over two pieces of toast. On both pieces, add arugula and then tomatoes. Top with bacon. Close sandwich and cut in half.*

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I watched friends crumble around me in a way that no amount of hard cider and homemade bread could fix.

I had to ask for help. Financial help, professional help, emotional help. It felt as if I had been rendered incapable. My independence shot down from the sky, withering uselessly in the corner.

At the end of January I stopped eating. By March, I could stomach food but flavor became lost. My tastebuds felt joyless.

Food could no longer be my savior. It was just a thing I needed to survive. Even alcohol began to rest like dirt on my tongue. On the rare occasion I did cook, it felt fruitless. I began to question if my relationship with food was becoming like my relationship with Missoula: necessary but excruciating.

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*Put contents on appropriate vessel. Use appropriate utensils. Shovel into mouth. Chew to swallow.*

## **‘What I Eat in a Day’**

The videos start one of two ways: an immaculate celebrity in a studio with a white background, or some white woman's equally immaculate home, decorated to the brim with green plants and varying neutrals. Oatmeal, ecru, ivory. A Moroccan-style rug with faded black diamond shapes laid across wide-plank white oak floors. Slightly abstract line art covering the walls.

The studio-set clips are recorded with a producer clearly asking questions behind the camera. The Harper's Bazaar Food Diaries series is among the most popular of its kind. With ninety-nine videos and guests ranging from T-Pain to Kylie Jenner to Wolfgang Puck. Each video gets up to ten million views. Most of them are light-hearted, a bit silly. Famous folks who look confused as to why anyone would want to know what they eat. One might learn things like: Kelly Ripa does not eat solid food for most of the day and the first thing that Tiffany Haddish does in the morning is ‘stretch and pass gas.’

The videos for Harper's Bazaar and other platforms started in a more analog format. Fashion magazines like Cosmopolitan and Elle have long had their own versions of Food Diaries. The outcome isn't new, but the pervasiveness of it in digital format is. There are videos across all social media platforms documenting the eating habits of famous people, and not-so-famous-people. It seems almost as popular as WikiFeet.

The YouTube sect is more immersive in their set-ups. The audience becomes privy to the stark white kitchens and organic produce of these people, women more often than not. Sometimes they're famous-famous, an actor or a model, sometimes famous in a very specific, very internet way. The YouTuber will generally start with an introductory clip and then vlog parts of their day (the productive parts).

When it's time for them to make a meal, they film some aesthetically pleasing footage of them cooking something healthy, usually small in portion. There might be a voiceover explaining the healing properties of an herb indigenous to a country they've never been to, or how a certain vegetable can detox one's liver. The video can also be a conduit for ads for Hello Fresh or Daily Harvest, meal delivery services.

Some of the videos have titles like 'What I Eat in a Day to Stay Skinny' and 'What I Eat for Weight Loss.' Some are less stark. The YouTuber will use buzzwords like wellness, holistic, and healing to describe their intake. These words are just sanitized versions of skinny and weight loss. The undercurrent of each of them is wellness is equal to thinness.

I have a restrictive eating disorder. I have never once looked like these women. Regardless of how much I restrict, I am still fat. When I don't eat, I'm not fasting. It's deprivation. I'm not giving my body the nutrients it needs. My hands shake, my hair thins, and my mood is all over the place. When I choose what I can or cannot eat, I hide behind excuses like 'sugar makes my joints hurt' and 'gluten is inflammatory.' Things that might be true, but function as justifications not to eat cake at a birthday party or to skip a lunch. These videos and articles don't help. They are not the sole issue, but they are a contributor. I can't tell you how many of them I have watched and read. Dozens if not hundreds. It is hard to be critical when you're part of the problem.

I feel body envy and abhor the one I live in. I try to eat meals, multiple meals, multiple times a day, but every time I look at the sustenance in front of me, a tingling wave of guilt rushes over my skin.

It's not just the food videos. It's thirty-day workout challenges and Pinterest boards titled 'What I'll Wear When I'm Skinny.' It's the reinvigoration of the Master Cleanse. It's Gwyneth Paltrow. It's always Gwyneth Paltrow. When did the concept of wellness turn so aggressive? Things like eating more vegetables, finding movement that feels good, and meditating now seem like the edicts of bootcamp. Dieting got a rebrand, instead of showing militant quick-fixes of bygone eras, the industry covers its tracks by steeping everything in betterment.

On top of the influx of wellness content, the old ways of diet culture seem to be creeping back to the surface. When I look at the flat bellies over low-rise jeans, I feel all of eight years old. The past has come back to haunt us through more than just questionable fashion choices. Bodies, certain bodies, are trendy, while others are not. Certain ways of eating, or not eating, have claimed the spotlight. It's a byproduct of the early 2000s 'thinspiration', a pro-ana (pro anorexia) trend. It's about amplifying thinness under the guise of health, as if it were a golden trophy full of carrots and microgreens.

I don't know how to fix any of this. For myself or for others. I don't even know what responsibility actually falls on video creators, or writers for that matter. I will probably still watch these videos. They will get added to the list of things I know are bad for me but I do anyway. I've done a decent job at catering my feed to more body-neutral content, but I still find myself pulling at the edges of this corner of the internet. Perhaps it's to feel normal, to either see my own habits reflected back to me, or to pretend I can restrict my way into being someone else.



## **Kitchen**

When I walked into the kitchen on my first day of work, I was met with the love of my life. Eva's first words to me were: "I licked a condom with some arousal gel on it last night and my tongue went numb." I was hooked. This small Filipina bombshell was the friend I needed. This was the place.

The kitchen at the University of Iowa was a place where things happened, conversations were had, and food was made. We were the catering team in charge of events large and small, from box seat carving stations during football games to tiny hors d'oeuvres for big shot alums to entrees for entire weddings. A mixture of grown-ups and students and grown-up students, the kitchen was rife with inappropriate stories and probably some labor violations. Headed by the small, brutally funny Ann and seconded by Gunner, the crass but lovable cold foods head and John, the curmudgeonly—whatever. I'm still not sure what his job was.

We would often start shifts with a question posed by our sous chef, Lin. Questions such as: would you sell feet pics on the internet? (Yes.) Eva, are you sure you want to date Dwayne? (Yes?) What's your favorite anime? (Does Spirited Away count?)

In the kitchen, we learned many things about each other. We learned that Brian, a sophomore, thought that the perineum, the space between one's anus and genitals, was referred to as a 'taint' because it "tainted your balls." We also learned that he was unaware that women had one.

I told the kitchen staff about my stint as a child model, which was probably a mistake. Their laughter was brutal.

We learned that Ann never wore underwear, even with jeans and that Kacee didn't eat fruit or vegetables or drink water. I witnessed her eat a grape for the first time, holding onto

Eva's hand like a war bride waiting for her husband to come home after a long stint away. She said it was "okay."

We learned that Jack had a blow-up doll girlfriend...and then we learned how to tune Jack out when he went into detail.

After many years working together, the grown-ups were surprised to learn that Lin was not only gay, but had a live-in partner called Hector.

Gunner told us that the reason that he had a child was because he "slipped one past the goalie."

Eva regularly spanked whatever cut of meat was on the counter. Pork shoulder? Smack. Chicken breast? Slap. Prime rib? Swat.

The kitchen was also where Eva and Dwayne met. Dwayne was an affable, good-looking guy who everyone endlessly teased about his even-keel demeanor and nonchalance. We watched Eva and Dwayne's love blossom from a weird hookup into something soft and sweet.

These days Eva attends nursing school, works in an assisted living facility, and also still works in the kitchen. She now lives with Dwayne and their cat, Jeriya. She enjoys making soup because it makes her feel like "a little witch in a little cottage." Their food rotation includes risotto, baked goods from the kitchen, and a healthy supply of SPAM because "Filipinos love SPAM."

We haven't seen each other since I moved to Montana nearly three years ago. It's hard. I miss her like a limb. I miss chopping onions with her and holding her while she cried on her 21st birthday and all the love we put into the food we made, when we didn't have the words for each other quite yet. But now, at the end of our weekly FaceTime calls, she holds her phone close to her face and says "I love you" and I say it back.

## Hot?

When I moved to Missoula, Montana, during the summer of 2020, I searched for spice. I looked under couch cushions, scavenged in grocery stores, and along the river, hoping I could find heat that didn't stem from a wildfire. I followed my nose, but it led me only to (admittedly good) fried potato offerings, but none that had even a hint of a tingle. I asked for recommendations only to be disappointed. This was, of course, my fault for trusting the opinions of people who attempt to walk their off-leash dog on a bike. I learned quickly that if I wanted something adequately flavorful, something spicy, I needed to make it myself. I kept some level of hope, praying that a restaurant or product would satiate my need for flavor.

Some months into exploring my new home, I found there was a local hot sauce manufacturer. I was intrigued. I went to Orange Street Food Farm. I touched the bottles and then stopped touching the bottles because there was still a pandemic happening and I felt guilty for touching things I didn't need to touch. I bought one.

According to their website, Arthur Wayne Hot Sauce "is a small batch hot sauce company focused on quality sauces. Our sauces are all hand crafted with years of taste testing before any final product is released. We layer flavors to give a unique dynamic that can be used in a wide variety of food types." Other than this riveting description there is little information on the brand. From what I could gather, Arthur Wayne is actually just one guy named Arthur.

The brand's varieties include Haba Haba 'Dime' Sauce, Mango Habanero, and Scorpion Pineapple. Landing on the webpage is not dissimilar from landing on the MySpace page of a Blink 182 fan. Much like many things in the early 2000s, it is hard to parse out if this was ironic or not.

A good hot sauce has two main elements: spice level and flavor. It should be spicy but not overwhelming. The spice is a cog in the machine, not the engine itself. The flavor needs to be complex. It should have hints of sweetness, sourness, acidity, or bitterness.

For the purposes of this review, I tried three of the spiced offerings of Arthur Wayne Hot Sauce, LLC. Haba Haba Spicy Tomatillo Sauce, Huckleberry Ghost, and Spicy Mama Tamarindo.

Haba Haba Spicy Tomatillo Sauce was the bottle I bought on that fateful day at the grocery store. The spice masters of Arthur Wayne categorize this as a 3 of 10 on their hotness scale. I disagree with this. It is more like a 1. That being said, it's still a good condiment. On the website they describe the sauce as "our signature green sauce. Mild heat with flavors that will stand out." The sauce relies on acid from white vinegar and lemon to flavor it, while using the mild alliums of garlic and onion to 'spice' it. I have now bought this sauce several times, but calling it a hot sauce feels like a misnomer. It's nice on eggs and tacos.

Huckleberry Ghost is exactly what it sounds like. Huckleberry and ghost pepper. The notes are the sweetness of the berry followed by white vinegar followed by the burn of the ghost pepper. Generally, fruit and spice are a perfect pairing, sweetness and heat. I found that this sauce was the same, in theory. In reality, it just didn't taste that good. The sweet heat melted in the feeling of razor burn on my tongue. I couldn't imagine what this combination of flavors could possibly go on.

Spicy Mama was by far my favorite. It had heat that didn't flog me, smokiness and an undercurrent of tamarind that brought it all together. I found I wanted to put it on a variety of foods. There was one problem: the label. It depicted a large-breasted brown woman in a chef's hat. When I bought the bottle, I felt weird about it, but I justified the purchase by noting that I

did not know the story behind the hot sauce. I vowed to look into it. According to the website, “Spicy Mama is a hot sauce created by Arthur Wayne and Spicy Mari. The inspiration derives from the Yaqui Tribe of Sonora, Mexico and the generations of mothers who used their humble hands to gather what was from the land. Our mission is to honor every woman who loves to gift family and friends with delicious meals as an expression of love. A Spicy Mama is a woman who can take simple ingredients and turn them into something flavorful and extraordinary.”

The addition of Arthur Wayne Hot Sauce to my kitchen is a nice one. I like supporting local culinary endeavors. I like hot sauce. But my enthusiasm ends there. It’s nice, but not much more than that. While the flavors sound exciting, they fall a bit short. I’ll sprinkle the tomatillo sauce when I need extra flavor. I will stare at Huckleberry Ghost and wonder what I should do with it. I’ll use Spicy Mama and continue being just that, a Spicy Mama. One without children.

## Sound

Music is the heartbeat of a New Yorker. In a city full of sound, music, books, and other media permeate through the cacophonies of the city. During my formative, post-9/11 teenage years, music was the blood, television the body and books the twinkling soul of my experience. Everything had a soundtrack, everything was a soundtrack. It was mix-CDs and screenings at Film Forum and visits to the dwindling number of used bookstores. It was songs and stories through heartbreak, joy and understanding. I experienced the city through my ears. I learned how to love it through sound.

It was always hot except for the times it was freezing. The spaces were basement apartments, abandoned warehouses, backyards, and, on occasion, actual venues. The mid-2000s were rife with emerging punk bands, a resurgence that hadn't been seen since the early 1990s. In the summer, the unventilated rooms made every pore feel like a swimming pool. In the winter, my fingers would turn purple and my knuckles would flake in places without heat.

My family and I moved to the city in 2005. We dropped into a post-9/11, post-Giuliani and current Stop-and-Frisk New York. I never knew the skyline with its double-tall twin towers, but the people around me did. In Brooklyn, it wasn't uncommon for the kid sitting next to you in math to have lost at least one parent to the attacks. Students and teachers talked about the ash that had been blown through the city, making it over the bridge to Brooklyn, how their fingertips were sooty and black for weeks. There was an undercurrent of disdain for anyone in a hijab, a calculating in the eyes of ten year olds, figuring out what the undertones in a students skin made them. Were they Puerto Rican? Mixed? Or were they like the men they saw on TV?

New York City is a strange place to live. All at once it is a fishbowl, with people constantly watching you, but it is also a place of anonymity. Life in the punk scene was similar. All at once your body, your clothes, your vibe were all on display, but the moment the drumsticks hit their target, all those things faded away and you were only the music.

There were rules, of course. Unspoken guidelines there to make sure you never embarrassed yourself. While the original ethos of punk may have been to stand out from the crowd, to make sure your body, your clothes, your vibe were jarring, punk in 2010 looked rather different.

A few rules:

- Don't wear the t-shirt of the band you are about to see. Also called: being the shirt-to-show guy.
- Always look disaffected except for when the band is actually playing.
- Being overly feminine is frowned upon.
- If you don't like the opener engage in what is called the 'fuck-you-horse-shoe', which is where you stand away from the center stage in a semicircle and you stand and stare without physically engaging in the band's songs

At this point in my life, I would have thought that I would never stop going to shows, that they would be wired into my DNA. To not attend would be like removing the atria of my heart, like looking out over the New York skyline and finding something missing.

Small punk bands and their shows defined my teen years. Nearly every weekend I would be at a show with my best friend at the time. The Menzingers, Chumped, Luther, Cayetana, Cheap Girls. In crowds of twenty-something white dudes, we would have this interaction that seems to only exist in these spaces. The flannel and Adidas Sambas clad guy next to you would

morph into the bassist of the band you loved. They would peel off from the crowd with a PBR and float in the liminal space of musician and fan. The line between artist and appreciator was blurry.

It was the music and the environment of the young and the angry. White men always seemed to be the youngest and the angriest, even when they actually weren't. They were just louder about it. They also hung on longer at these shows. Their anger and what could generously be called 'youthful spirit' allowed them to work within the bounds of the environment. The women aged out much more quickly. By their early twenties they were forced to become adults in all kinds of ways, while the men could hang on until their mid thirties.

I had a high school teacher who had grown up with the musicians in the bands I loved. She told me, "I stopped going to shows years ago".

At seventeen, I spluttered out, "Why?"

She laughed and said, "I'm an old lady now. I need my sleep. And the music hurts my ears."

She was less than a decade older than me.

Most of the concerts I went to had fewer than a hundred people in attendance, which I was profoundly grateful for considering my proclivity for agoraphobia. I often consider if I really loved punk music, or if it just provided spaces for me to experience live music without having a panic attack in a corner somewhere.

I did breathing exercises on the subway to calm myself as strangers knowingly or unknowingly touched me. I avoided street festivals, parades and anything at the Javitz Center. But for whatever reason, in tightly packed rooms in run down buildings, I could let go of the



fears that plagued me the rest of the time. Music allowed me to practice my own unusual behavior to exist in spaces that, for all rights, should have made my breath catch in my chest.

I lose time frequently, in tiny and large ways. Sometimes I step out of the shower and don't remember washing my hair. Sometimes, I lose whole conversations. I remember the starkness of the faces of people I've known in the past, but I can't remember their names and have few specific memories of them. My time in the NYC punk scene is kind of like that. I went to shows most weekends, but only clearly remember a handful. What's more, my teenage years seem to be covered with a gauzy curtain, it lets the light through but everything outside the window is blurry.

It's hard to consider what is a waste of time, when you don't know what will come next. I didn't know that I would never go to another show after I left New York in 2016. I didn't know that I would no longer collect records, that I would rely on Spotify for music. I didn't know that I would be unable to go to concerts due to an accident that left my brain scrambled, that the sounds coming through the amps would be a one way ticket to migraine city. I don't regret my years in sweaty crowds with sweaty men, but it pains me not to be able to revisit them. I didn't have a chance to age out, it just sort of happened.

Growing up, I wanted to be an actor. I went to an arts middle school, starred in plays, attended theater summer camp. It was a way for me to both be seen and unseen. I was physically seen without it actually being me. It was a release for the complicated feelings that I had growing inside me.

I quit acting at age fifteen. It was for a lot of reasons. Most of which I don't regret. But I had nothing to replace the release with. Punk shows provided temporary relief for the building feelings, but it was ultimately never enough.

Music is a conduit for desperation, in all of its many forms. It is a release and an escape. Another place to go when things are hard and everything is scary. It works for a while, until it doesn't.

In 2012, Thomas James Gabel became Laura Jane Grace. Her life before her transition was filled with an off-putting hyper masculinity that I now recognize as a coping mechanism for gender dysphoria. The band had always said that any violence enacted was due to fighting against inequality. On paper I could understand that, but I didn't feel like I would be safe at their shows. I didn't really like Against Me!, I found their music kind of okay, but the behaviors of their lead singer uncomfortable. This happened occasionally. A band would attract a certain type of male attendee. Stories about groping or assault would go on the internet, but the band would always play on.

Post-transition, Laura Jane Grace became someone to admire, rather than someone to fear. At the time, there were no transgender musicians in the scene. Just like there were no queer men, very few women, and even fewer people of color. Punk straddled a line between inclusivity and exclusivity, it was the perfect conduit for neo-liberal men. Men who abhorred the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but couldn't seem to grasp the plight of people at home.

I attended a show in the summer of 2012 at Terminal 5, one of the larger venues in New York, where Against Me! was opening for the Cult. It was one of Laura Jane Grace's first shows since coming out. We attended as a show of support for a trans woman who had done something brave, in a space that might not accept her.

The band played their set. I don't recall much of it, mostly that I wished I had earplugs and that it was a little too crowded for my tastes. As they finished their last song, the last strum of chords emptying out of the speakers, Laura Jane Grace announced they had one more song, but they would need a friend to help them out. A small woman walked on stage from the wings.

It was Joan Jett.

They played "Androgynous" by the Replacements.

My seventeen year old mind was blown.

It was like the previous years of seeing punk shows in small venues culminated in that moment. By that point, I had seen a few shows with bands who had women musicians, but something sparked that night. Two women, one cis, one trans, both queer, made something magical happen. They took a song, a beautiful song in its own right, to this day one of my favorites, written by straight men and made it into an anthem for queer women.

New York shone brightly that night. The sticky heat of June couldn't touch my skin because I was floating through the pretty wisps of New York buildings, as she sang to me in all her glory:

*And tomorrow Dick is wearing pants*

*Tomorrow Janie's wearing a dress*

*Future outcasts and they won't last*

*And, today, the people dress the way that they please*

*The way they tried to do for the last centuries*

*And they love each other so*

*Androgynous*

*Closer than we know, love each other so*

*Androgynous*

It was a moment I won't soon forget, but it was just that, a moment. A moment in time, a moment in music, a moment in New York. But it lives inside its own time-goon box in my brain, when everything comes together in a moment of joy and redemption.