MAP PINS: A MEMOIR OF MAYWOOD, NJ

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ABSTRACT

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In this creative dissertation, I write about the connection between writer and place. Each story in *Map Pins* was included to build a single narrative. Its tone throughout is positive when describing the inclusive, welcoming atmosphere of a small suburban town but I do provide evidence of inhabitants who are excluded, or even some who chose not to belong. Through an interconnected series of stories, I explore relationships with other Maywoodians and the lessons I have learned from them throughout my life.

In my scholarly introduction, I explore a variety of narrative styles. Each of these authors was selected first for the theme of place in their work and then additional craft movies. I refer to Eudora Welty as an example of how characters intersect in between stories. Mary Karr is an example of partnering grief and humor. Philip Roth and William Faulkner both write about place with fine detail and apply novel approaches to their narrators. I reference Jennifer Egan as an example of narration in reverse; she tells a single story using multiple narrators. J.D. Salinger's narrator is an example of candor and lessons taught but never quite grasped. I include Sherwood Anderson in part for his single narrator and in part for his shadowy small-town Americana.

I extend the theme of the shadow side of belonging to a place into my creative piece, opening with references to Stephen King and Daphne du Maurier. Both of these authors, King, in particular, have had a profound effect on my adult writing life. Membership is not always inclusive, and it will be judged by its limitations. The primary focus remains, however, on the positives of small-town life, the lessons to be learned from your neighbors, and the desire to be the protagonist of your own story.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband for always believing in me and gifting me the time to write. And to my children, for loving Maywood as much as I do, making my writing true. And to my friends and neighbors in 07607, these are your stories, too, so thank you.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to thank my fellow students; we came together at Drew not realizing that we would all complete this journey alone, at home, through distance learning. If we are all alone, then in that isolation we find solidarity. It is a strong community that remains connected throughout a pandemic.

As with all that I do, I want to thank God, thank my family, and thank my country. This work is, even more, a product of where I am from as the title implies.

Critical Introduction

Maywood, New Jersey, is a mere two miles long and a half-mile wide, topping out at a respectable 1.29 miles square. It is a tight-knit community where more often than not a trip to the market means running into someone you know. Familiar faces wait ahead of you at the post office and, when crossing the street, quick waves are returned sometimes with smiles from the passing cars or in fine weather, a bellowed hello through an open window. Sometimes you are recognized by your first name, sometimes only by your last. This popular nomenclature (you must be *A Cicarelli* or *An Alberse*) is not unique to Maywood but is no less one of the many traits of small towns that are both fantastic and tiresome. My father was also raised in Maywood, making Peg's granddaughter a familiar personal epithet.

Being recognized and recognizable are for many a treat and a comfort but there are some who are jealous with their anonymity. For me, this recognition represents belonging and is a testament to the powerful bond shared by the small-town citizens. These people are my friends, my family, my companions on this earth as we journey around the sun. I draw from it strength, knowledge, companionship, hearty laughter, and an endless supply of spirit-wear relentlessly emblazoned with an M or Cicarelli or both.

While training a diverse team of players drawn from all over the country for the 1990 Winter Olympics, coach Herb Brooks questioned his players again and again: who do you play for? It was not until the replies shifted to a single answer, that they play for the United States of America, that the team truly solidified. Some of the players had been with Brooks for years and some were from rival schools, rival states, rival regions, but they had all come to that team to be part of something bigger than themselves. Brooks

responds to their final emphatic reply of *USA, USA, USA*, saying "When you pull on that jersey, you represent yourself and your teammates. And the name on the front is a hell of a lot more important than the one on the back" (Worral). And Maywood is the name that is important to me, the name on the front of the innumerable jerseys in my home, and it is part of my identity and part of my culture.

Maywood, a fine place

My children's friends are the children of my friends; people stay in Maywood. There are ten thousand citizens--each adding to the town's flavor, its history. Each vignette in this dissertation is an examination of someone in my life that also calls 07607 home. With my recollection of each small moment shared, I built a library of membership tales of my community and my psyche. These memories, told as best as I remember them, are moments of reflection in my life; moments that define a subject and have been instrumental in my own development. I am made of these stories.

The lessons to be learned here encourage membership in the community while also cautioning of its shortcomings. Belonging in a place, to a place envelops its citizens in the comforts of inclusion and acceptance based on a certain sameness. Writers recognize the power of place in their own writing, and in the writing of others. In her essay, "Place in Fiction," Eudora Welty defines place as, "the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress. . . Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else"

(Welty, “Place” 243). These stories are wholly Maywood and would be different if told in another locale.

There is a tiny danger in that sameness that some may perceive as the stifling pressure of conformity, a microcosm of the mirrored traits of inclusion and exclusion. For those of us from Maywood, those who truly can, do, want to belong, it is a wonder but for those along the perimeter, those not sitting on the bleachers at the game, those not marching in the parade, those not shopping at the Market, they may see the cracks. I recognize the cracks exist and will discuss membership as judged by its limitations. The primary focus remains, however, on the positives of small-town life, the lessons to be learned from your neighbors, and the desire to be the protagonist of your own story. *Map Pins* defines its short story cycle as autobiographical vignettes connected by place and recognizes the weight of small, happy moments designed as a light-hearted yet still cathartic partner to the commercially popular trauma-driven tropes in current memoir writing.

The serial memoir at home

This dissertation defines the significance of the relationship between author and place in memoir as well as the interconnectedness of these short stories. Through the exploration of a selective group of genre authors, the connection evolves thereby tethering the author to their native country, city, state, or town in a way that is both grounding and uplifting. The importance of Maywood as both my hometown and the setting for my writing is inseparable from the lessons learned. Formation of self is linked to understanding where we come from and respecting the consistency such a place offers

in a world of change. In “The Blue Zones of Happiness,” Dan Buettner discusses the importance of place regarding health, well-being, and even happiness. He claims, “Where a person lives determines their level of happiness more than any other factor” (Buettner). To identify as a Northern New Jersey, suburban housewife conjures a kaleidoscope of recognizable tropes ranging from SUV driving soccer mom to Terese Giudice on RHONJ.

A charismatic sense of belonging blankets the population and is evident in my character and the character of friends and neighbors. It is enough, the dissertation challenges, to define a town by its people and to tell its story block by block. There is no need for drama, for pain, for the ugliness often ascribed to memoir writing. Although André Gregory laments in his memoir, "Happiness never makes as good a story as distress,” this dissertation disputes that claim and in its stead puts forth a collection of stories about self and place and very little trauma (McAlpin). Even those memoirists most heavy-handed in childhood trauma exploration couple those moments with humor; the funny is what endears them to the reader. These authors gifted in the exploration of trauma often excel equally in their treatment of moments of levity; the shadows of life are most visible where they lie closest to the light. Attention to both the darkness endured and the joy tasted creates a narrative that is both available and relatable.

A close reading of the collected works of Mary Karr outlines the proximity of grief and laughter often applied in memoir. When Karr’s first memoir, *The Liars’ Club,* was published in 1995, readers were moved by her pain artfully rendered and peppered with humor. Karr describes her strong connection to the Liar’s Club, and by extension Groves, Texas, to her readers even after three hundred pages of her childhood memories

of raging alcoholism and heartbreaking parenting. When she hit seventeen, she couldn't wait to leave, yet, when she returned home from college the realization was immediate: "Then it hit me that my joy came purely from being in the Legion . . . But it was something more than that. Something about the Legion clarified who I was, made me solid inside . . ." (Karr, *Club* 280). It may be that everyone loves their hometown or it may be the comfort of the routine and the rules that some homecoming resurrects. At the Legion that day, Karr was overwhelmed by memories and decorum, and belonging. But that memory ends with her father winning a fistfight and somehow that encounter, that specific chain of events marks her final visit to the Legion.

Unwritten rules of membership are just that and after that day, Karr's membership was revoked. Such is the dichotomy of belonging; you are on the inside (warm and smug) or on the outside (cool and longing). In "648 Edel," James is an outsider, and he is both welcomed and chided for his being an outsider. Exclusion is itself a characteristic of community; whether the community claims to never exclude or it warns just how you will be excluded, much of what binds us together is the recognition of what we don't want. That is the true nature of a community. Rename it a faction and that dark side feels all the more real.

There is unity in these stories, however, and what unites is my voice, my unique but familiar, suburban voice. Other authors have used a narrator to unite their work. In the modern classic, *Winesburg Ohio* (1919), Anderson broke from the traditional form of the novel and instead wrote a collection of stories in which it is, ". . . George Willard's narrative voice — and his presence as either observer or protagonist — in the stories that ultimately unifies them" (Grant). The stories each have their own players, and as narrator,

I get so close to some, perhaps even sitting next to them throughout the story. Others are told as a character study of sorts. In Anderson's work, George Willard, the youthful boy portrayed in these stories is both the same and quite different from the narrator of the same stories. Young George is an observer and the narrator an older, reflective storyteller. The work itself is focused on this fictional place of Winesburg and a fictional protagonist of George but the parallels draw readers to surmise that Anderson has written a bildungsroman, a story of moral and spiritual growth. George learns from the residents of Winesburg and thereby his own character is revealed story by story. As he learns from these residents, his neighbors, and friends, he begins to consider himself apart.

If a town has a personality, a prescribed disposition, then that identity can be either alluring or reprehensible, joyful or right off of a page from "the book of grotesque" (21). Willard wonders why he is a part of this, or if he is a part,

> "There is something memorable in the experience to be had by going to a fair ground that stands at the edge of a Middle Western town on a night after the annual fair has been held. The sensation is one never to be forgotten. On all side are ghosts, not of the dead, but of living people…One shudders at the thought of the meaninglessness of life while at the same instant, and if the people of the town are his people, one loves life so intensely that tears come into the eyes." or such a lump of unfocused, unimportant smallness. (Sherwood 128)

The "tales and the persons" explore the dark side of small-town life by highlighting the loneliness felt by so many while painting a portrait of the closeness and familiarity of small-town life. George, as a model for many smalltown souls, yearns to leave and find adventure and happiness. Yet as he leaves Winesburg, he is not thinking about the

adventures ahead of him but instead he, “thought of little things--. . . a tall woman, . . . the lamp lighter, [and]. . . Helen White . . . putting a stamp on a letter” (247). These tiny moments of comfort and clarity are aligned with the small moments of *Map Pins*. Small moments can be of great influence in the journal from childhood to adulthood or the journal from smalltown to the world. In “49 Lenox,” I describe the many traits of belonging found in my small town, in any small town, as I outline the lessons learned from Brande, an independent force:

> “The powerful draw of small-town belonging and togetherness, the constant inclusion, the sharing of events, activities, and meals, all of these to me are quintessential positives of Maywood, of any small town but if you are not a joiner, you walk your twenty-five paces and put your chair down and smile and wave to the rest of us from a distance. I find it curious, worrisome, frustrating, and, on occasion, unforgivable. You cannot come to a small town and think we won’t make you belong”.

To further explore the small-town experience, in addition to reading Anderson’s work, I read several volumes penned by Maywood’s newspapermen. Although these texts are not explicitly narrative works, they offer a nearness of recollection I emulate in my own writing. One volume written by the editor of the town paper, organized his stories group by group, recalling stories about the Rotary and then the Town Council, the youth sports, then the fire department. Similarly in his work, Anderson cycles through a variety of substructures in his writing, sometimes focusing on a symbol, other stories define a universal truth. A single narrator unifies but the structural changes provide insight as to how the narrator sees the world; not every situation presents identically. For nonfiction,

there is the trouble of recollection and for fiction, even the most astute narrator waivers in the face of adversity or pain or even newness.

It is in the learning from these events, not specifically their structure, the bulk of the work is weighed. Perceiving a collection of short stories as a singular work precludes this understanding by the reader that there will be a variety of structure and of nearness just as one would find in exploring a terrestrial smalltown. In this manner, *Map Pins* also follows a cyclical structure with stories as lessons and others as simply character studies. Whereas Anderson may leave readers conflicted on what attracts us to small-town America, *Map Pins* leaves readers with the sense that small towns are unique clubs with only the highest of standards for membership. But unlike in Winesburg, there is no acute loneliness in my Maywood, except perhaps for the outside who does not belong. Community can be measured by its togetherness as well as its exclusivity.

Drawing the map of memoir

Map Pins shifts the focus of my life from the dark places of Karr's backroom pool tables and $2 beers to those bathed in light. Or whitewashed. My idyllic hometown is not in pain or suffering; we just prefer to bury it and wait out its half-life, not unlike our Superfund site of radioactive waste. Moments of humanity and humility are exposed for entertainment; why not invite readers in for a little more happiness and a little less sorrow? A memorable memoir tells a story, shares some meaning, makes a connection, mirrors life in a real and recognizable way, good or bad, happy or tearful. And a memoir is not an autobiography, nor is it without literary elements. The pursuit of truth is that of

our own truths or miraculous discovery of the power of a universal truth exemplified in our own story. But finding a truth and being truthful are not one and the same. Memoir is about story as much as it is about history.

Philip Roth, another New Jersey author, outlines the intersect between fiction and memoir in his own unconventional autobiography. Roth describes memoir as a manipulative genre and writes in a letter to his protagonist-cum-alter ego Nathan Zuckerman that, "he wrote 'the facts' of his life in order 'to transform myself into myself'. That is, the 'real Philip Roth like the 'real' Nathan Zuckerman, is a narrative supposition before he can be known as a historical entity" (Parrish 272). Roth parses out his self and his narrator yet in their connection he reaffirms his legacy of bildungsroman and the effects on both the reader and the author of the search for truth. The distance created by the alter ego allows Roth to forgo some of the ethical propriety assigned to memoirs; the constant question of is this fiction or is this reality engages readers in a pact less prescribed to veracity and detail.

The memoir is a hybrid, a pairing, a fusing. In his 2012 volume, *Memoir: An Introduction,* G. Thomas Couser calls the memoir and the novel a pair of siblings that grew up together, "often borrowing each others' clothes" (14). It is the author and the narrator, who are the same, that make this genre both intimate in its narration and universal in its intent. This dissertation narrates a series of small moments with great impact. Couser explores also the shape of memoir, and how the memories and ideas are cataloged and connected. Memoir is not mere bildungsroman. The arc of child to adult, simple to complex, misunderstood to understanding may intersect at right angles or run hopelessly parallel. It is not in its length epic but in its depth. He concedes that the

definition of memoir is often defined by its form, in that, “in fiction and nonfiction it is rare to find narrative that is exclusively scene or summary; the two modes are often used in alternation” (71). It is the cadence of up and down, of telling and showing that shapes memoir and connects the author to the reader. The showing and telling are enough of the shift to mobilize the pace and drive the narrative. Memoir does not always need the pitching between sorrow and laughter to provide a driving force to the narrative.

Eudora Welty also combines this trope of place with a short story cycle, when in “developing ‘The Children’' into ‘At The Landing,’ Welty links her fictional characters’ feelings to a place and removes a sense of resolution from the story” (Takeda 161). In her essay, “Place in Fiction” (1977), she opines the charm and loyalty of this connection: “Place can be transparent, or translucent: not people. In real life we have to express the things plainest and closest to our minds by the clumsy word and the half-finished gesture; the chances are our most usual behavior makes sense only in a kind of daily way, because it has become familiar to our nearest and dearest” (Welty, “Place” 243). The connection between self and place transcends the page as the movements of her characters reflect their heritage and their local. A gifted narrator of Southern life, Welty writes into her opaque protagonists a recognizable soul, defined by the nearest small town or plantation. The circles drawn on a fictitious map of Mississippi are recognizable to locals undoubtedly but are universally accepted by Yankees et al. She discounts the idea that place is merely defined by “regional” flavor but is defined by the writer’s roots: “. . . place is where he has roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view” (Welty, “Place” 232). The limitations of local beliefs elicit a sense of belonging; readers want to connect

with these off-hand references, quaint verbiage, landmarks, and customs. In fiction, the design of place either mirrors or extends the rootedness of the writer. Welty, in *Delta Wedding* (1946) names places that support the characters themselves.

In *Map Pins*, those living in The Knolls, accept *bourgeoisie* as a personal antecedent. Maywood is not wealthy enough of a town to have a true Bathtub Row, but The Knolls and The Lawn conjure a vastly different image than Maybrook Gardens or Summit Gardens or any neighborhood in south Maywood. Welty uses this recognition by ensuring the names themselves are "central, integral to the characters who inhabit them. Within the confines of these three places which take on different aspects of the Fairchild family, the theme of the novel, the search for self-knowledge within the mini-cosmos of the family, is amply developed. Shellmound is the place where things happen; The Grove is the place where they have happened; Marmion is the place where things must happen to ensure the future." (Crews 136). These places, even if fictional, are real to the story, and as Welty has explained, changing their location changes everything about the story.

Welty's belief that our behaviors, our beliefs, even our movements only make "sense only in a kind of daily way" contributes to the power of the setting to move the plot forward. And if the setting can move a fictional plot forward, then surely it plays a role in memoir. If it can drive the movement of a character, it can define by my writing my character. Welty believes that "Feelings are bound up in place" and by that measure, who a character is depends just as much on where he is from as what he believes ("Place" 232).

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . ."

Chronology and the traditional narrative arc are flexible components often blurred or even missing from a memoir. In *Memoir: An Introduction,* Couser defines Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* as a non-linear collection of stories about women from Kingston's life and argues that through this structure, she "addresses her childhood, her adolescence, and her adulthood, [but] long stretches of her life are omitted. And parts of her narrative are about others' lives" (64). Similarly, *Map Pins* includes stories in which I am both narrator and protagonist as well as those I only narrate, though still, it is the telling of the story itself that is close to me, linked to my own story by geographic sentimentality.

In its organization, *Map Pins* appears more reminiscent of a coming of age novel but it is an almost parsable short story cycle. Much like Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* (1938), stories can be interconnected but not collapse into a single story. This story has no one moment when I grow up, no discernable rising action, and only a hint of resolution. Rather than a trajectory of youth to adulthood, cataloging lessons and growth, and because of that structure is a representation the bildungsroman genre, like *The Unvanquished*, "has one plot, frequently engendered the critique that its chapters do not provide the narrative cohesion that leads up to the final chapter where the protagonist has reached maturity" (966). There are lapses in time and shifts in tone and distance. The main protagonist, Bayard Sartoris, is a constant but the stories themselves were written over the course of years. Faulkner uses these micro-events to bring readers close to a Southern family, a Southern community, during the Civil War and into the Reconstruction. There are aspects that make it inextricable from Southern culture, from

Jackson, Mississippi, and there are those that make it the story of anyone who has lived through war and come out the other side.

Identifying the characteristics that make this place real, intangible but visceral, stems from Faulkner's ability to replicate here and now before it is. Place becomes his medium, and like a painter working in oils, he renders Yoknapatawpha County with such fervent detail that it is both identical to and fully separate from its inspiration, Lafayette County. "Faulkner is, of course, the triumphant example in America today of the mastery of place in fiction. . . I am not sure, as a Mississippian myself, how widely it is realized and appreciated that these works of such marvelous imaginative power can also stand as works of the carefullest and purest representation" (Welty, "Place" 240).

A different take on the story cycle is the serial memoirist who writes several memoirs over a short amount of time or about closely related events. Both Mary Karr and Frank McCourt wrote several memoirs, each examining a different period of time in their lives. In a similar fashion, *Map Pins* is not a single unedited timeline but a collection of moments connected by authorship, place, and style. Whereas readers do not expect all of Karr's books to fit into a single story (they are not a trilogy) nor is the reading diminished by the skipping of years. My stories are not unlike these self-sufficient, stand-alone memoirs written in succession yet, if wanting, arranged into a meandering, cohesive thread.

Remember the happy

This dissertation may transgress the current trends in memoir writing. *Map Pins* lacks tragedy as a catalyst; while there may be the exposition of house fires and drunken

arguments and the death of loved ones, my tone is one of optimism as my stories are meant to stand as examples of how to persevere not in the face of tragedy but everyday life. Memoirists, brave in their cathartic sharing, have experiences that are dark and painful and through the exploration of these experiences, their life story unfolds. But my life has been relatively free from tragedy--I have no dark history, only the slightest of shadows.

Ben Yagoda, writing in an article for *Slate* about authors who have faked their memoirs, concedes that, "Memoir today is like one big game of misery poker: The more outlandish, outrageous, or just plain out-there the recounted life, the more likely the book is to attract the attention of reviewers, talk-show bookers, and, ultimately, the public" (1). The story of my life, my real life, is not one of particular misery--nor of particular grandeur. Whereas the historic autobiography is one telling of great deeds or of great thoughts, the modern memoir is one of great personal suffering and angst. There have been so many wonderfully horrible stories told already that memoirists, as Yagoda has explained, are beginning to lie for new content, believing that only a painful life is a life to remember.

It is either the literary world or the consumer, or possibly both, prescribing a diet of pain and suffering for the life-writer--your personal history is of no interest to anyone if you have not endured or have not been scarred. Now I posit that there is room for my work, a new memoir not about a painful childhood memory resurfaced or even that much about me at all; my memoir is a collection of people in a special place and the connection we share. Each one is either a character sketch or a brief encounter; however, the stories,

when read as a single collection, will fit together to reveal my life's arc as well as reflect the personality of my town throughout my lifetime.

Each character mentioned has its own voice and perspective, just like each neighborhood. What makes this work a collection or cycle is that, like with Welty in *The Golden Apples* (1949), although some characters do not converse face to face, "readers hear their voices resonate with one another beyond the boundaries of each story" (167). Welty continues to explore the relationship between the individual and place or setting; her space, like Faulkner, is decidedly Southern, and mine is Bergen County. Each neighborhood holds for me different memories and key inhabitants but is tied together with the common themes of hidden heroes, vicarious learning, and hometown pride. Exploring the map is exploring my own psyche and selecting which stories are included is an act of definition--defining my self. The stories unfold as does a map; with my overwhelming sense of belonging serving as the compass rose and a handful of life lessons as its key.

The idea of a collection of stories, whether fiction or memoir, is not new. Ernest Hemingway published a collection of short stories titled *In Our Time* and D.H. Lawrence wrote of the text that it, "calls itself a book of stories, but it isn't that. It is a series of successive sketches from a man's life, and makes a fragmentary novel" ("Celebrating Short Story Cycles"). These stories are when collected and presented en suite, a representation of my life. Drawing on the power of interconnected stories and characters from mentor texts ranging from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, each vignette is both its own story and a chapter in my book. Read individually they are lessons to engender belonging or pride or success but read as a

collection, or a novel, they present a portrait of Maywood and of me. Arranged by neighborhood, these stories confirm, "how the stories force our minds to create a map more complete than the one the book often gives" (J. Smith 42). One stylistic choice that mimics Anderson but not some of the others is that continued single protagonist as narrator. In *Map Pins*, my voice remains constant, even when distant. Some story cycles see a protagonist fade to the back after their introductory arc, only rising to the occasional supporting role in subsequent stories, and the stories are told, "from numerous perspectives in explicitly linked stories, a technique which renders suspect my treatment of individual stories as autonomous objects" (Trussler 601).

I am the voice in your head

The voice of Holden Caulfield echoes in our heads with his judgment, superiority, passion for candor, and schoolboy rigidity, ensuring that the reader sees only his narrow field of vision and understands nothing of the world but the misguided ponderings of a rebellious (i.e. in the throw of mental illness) teenager. Our ambivalence in following him down the rabbit hole is second only to Holden's own internal conflict. He describes encounter after encounter, never seeming to learn from what are clearly roadsides posted in increasingly narrow intervals. We see the walls closing in long before he does and yet we grasp his sweaty hand and lean in with him. The fate of the narrator, the conscience of the narrator, even the voice of the narrator can be grating, fruitful, lovely, dispassionate, heartless, or pained and if only given a few artful phrases or lovable character flaws, the reader will follow them anywhere.

There are some authors, however, who have skillfully designed a series of love affairs as they shift from narrator to narrator. Jennifer Egan employs thirteen narrators in the same number of chapters. While this baker's dozen is connected by the same characters floating in and out of the chapters, it is the theme of loss and the oft lampooning tropes of the entertainment industry that propel the narrative forward and engage the reader. The sheer number of narrator voices and perspectives makes for a tangled madness of cavalier lifestyle choices and broken hearts--and the community to which they all belong. In a chapter written in second person, the narrator tells Rob that "Something was funny a while ago but you can't remember what" and much of the book moves at that pace (Egan 199).

Although like so many memoirs, the book is full of sorrow, it is balanced with humor and at the onset of each new chapter, new voice readers are comfortably uncertain where they are and where they are going.

> That shouldn't make sense but it does: *Goon Squad* is a book about memory and kinship, time and narrative, continuity and disconnection, in which relationships shift and recombine kaleidoscopically. It is neither a novel nor a collection of short stories, but something in between: a series of chapters featuring interlocking characters at different points in their lives, whose individual voices combine to create a symphonic work that uses its interconnected form to explore ideas about human interconnectedness. (Churchwell)

Egan achieves what any serial writer aspires to achieve: separateness and communion. If you want to hear more about Sasha, you must wait until Bennie tells you. And if it is Bosco's journey that most intrigues you, it is from Jules that you will learn the most. *Map*

Pins revisits places and characters at different times offering readers a glimpse of other perspectives; through shifts in narrative distance, each chapter focuses on a unique experience tied to the larger Bildungsroman motif, not unlike Holden's. The narrator as self, however, culls the respectability and reliability of autobiography even when shaded as the more covenant casual genre of memoir. Memoir provides a promise of truth not availed upon by fiction. Even when the narrator completes their arc from childhood to adulthood, the maturity of their findings can remain suspect.

Unlike popular unreliable narrators, there can be declining self-delusion; as time and the narrative progress the clarity and truthfulness and therefore sometimes distastefulness emerges. In Faulker's *The Unvanquished*, the narrator Bayard Sartoris switches, "back and forth between what Bayard was experiencing then and what he knows now" giving some passages a youthful naivety and others the dispassionate frankness of reflection (Hinkle 227). At twelve in its opening chapter, his world views are narrow and his understanding of right and wrong is binary. His "detached autobiographical point of view allows Bayard to characterize what he saw at age twelve . . ." and then shift back to the older, wiser adult voice (Haynie 118). Which voice is the truth? Is older bitter? Or young naive?

Nobody likes phoneys

My work will fill a niche of the ever-expanding sub-genre of memoir. My narrator will be both distant and near, personal and universal. The connections I make to the people in my community are sharable examples of lessons--lessons that may be different

from the ones the narrator learns. In *Varieties of Narrative Analysis,* Holstein and Gubrium consider the "narrators-cum-protagonists" and their effect on the order and pacing of the autobiographical story (273). The idea of different temporal planes, linked yet existing separately, is part of the map. And thus, I will tell these stories the way they fit into my story. In *Memoir: An Introduction*, Couser claims that "As a result, memoirists assume two distinct kinds of obligations--one to the historical or biographical records and another to the people they depict (164). He questions if it is possible or even desirable to maintain truth, contrasting perhaps the reasoning Yagoda adopted when observing the proliferation of lying in memoir for either marketability or for the sake of the story.

In designing the overall structure of my collections I considered first my dual role as narrator and protagonist. Authors of literary biography often lapse into this dual role when they are too close, too enamored of their subject. It wasn't until my work began to look like a literary biography as well as memoir and then, "the narrator refuse[d] to vanish, and in effect [became] the protagonist of the whole [work]" (Holden 31). As I narrate my own memories of a much-beloved hometown, every story becomes a story about me. The power of place overwhelms and connects; thus, using a map of my town to plan the order and position of each story in the collection reinforces the narrator's omniscience as well as the importance of each story in connection to my life.

As a memoirist, my veracity will be challenged but only so much so; readers may accept a certain level of poetic license in exchange for engaging pacing--the reader wants to be entertained as much as it wants an honest contract with the author. The limits of the narrative world are stretched; and their weight can be felt as the author carries them

further and further along, distancing herself to achieve her goal of a single moment of an almost recursive narrative. Memoir is by nature recursive as writers reflect on their life's moments while writing reflections on those moments. John Barth's *Autobiography: A Self-recorded Fiction* is a recursive story in which the narrator is the story itself, writing about itself, "It ends, recursively, in its own end: 'Nonsense, I'll mutter to the end, one word after another, string the rascals out, mad or not, heard or not, my last words will be my last words.' " (Corballis 4). The narrator doesn't learn until the reader reads and the reader does not learn until after the narrator does, who learns by telling other people's stories. You (the real reader) and I (the real author) learn together. What defines *Map Pins* is not objective and my point of view, entrenched as it is, is my own, alluding to Benton's idea in *Literary Biography: An Introduction*: "Literary biography is . . . greatly enhanced by the intimacy between the biographer's and the subject's shared medium of words, their common interest in literary forms, and the particular closeness of fictional and historical narrative" (12). *Map Pins* is as much a memoir about the people and the time as it is about the place.

Knock, Knock

As I bring my reader inside the homes and businesses at each of the addresses mentioned in *Map Pins*, there is only a hint of a Stepford wife. The persons described are both quintessential North Jersey residents and highly unique individuals. The lessons I have learned are equally divergent, schismed by the fact that it is my journey to stay here and therefore I have no choice but to hope the lessons come to me. In "800 Maywood Ave", Dimelza is a young Colombian immigrant whose passion on the sidelines is

nothing short of poetic. She cheers on our sons' fourth-grade basketball team with enthusiasm most preserved for the final games of March Madness. There is a decorum at youth sports, a level of interest tempered by the number of errands remaining after the game ends. Dimelza reminds listless fans that they are our children, collectively our children, and that cheer reticence diminishes our role as parents; really, her loud, accented cries of encouragement bring us closer together. You don't have to sit next to Dimelza to hear her shouting--it just sounds like you are. This playful courtside banter reads as either endearing or obnoxious–from the home bench her voice echoes passion and playfulness. From the visitors' side, it may sound shrill or braggadocious. Once inside the gym, you can choose your seat.

Just a few blocks away, Brande avoids community in a million small ways and still finds herself immersed. Brande and her family do not sit with the crowd. She is not on the grade level group text, or the school dance committee group text, or the what-should-the-moms-do- while-the-dads-play-cornhole group text. Truman Capote, once a small-town boy himself, left the American South for New York. But when he writes "Lucy," a short story about a young black woman who moves North to work for her employer's son, she becomes a symbol of his own desire to belong to a community. There is "more than Lucy's race, there is her Southerness in a cold climate . . ." or a parallel to Capote's own feelings of disconnect. The feeling of community born in a small town is not always wanted nor welcomed but it is hard to ignore.

The final piece of this narrative puzzle fits together in a place that is not only my town but also an example of any suburban town. It represents an iconic, if not idyllic childhood home. Many of the shops and restaurants are ones I have known my whole

life--the schools and the church are the same. Many of these spaces will enter into the stories and will heighten the effectiveness of the individual vignette's synecdoche. There are spaces that "capture from the narrators' perspectives the space of all-inclusive simultaneities, perils as well as possibilities: the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle" (Zalis 22). Zalis contends that space can be both good and bad and I will in my writing reveal that my Maywood, though mostly good, is not without some sadness and that the feeling of community is sometimes exclusive in its dissemination.

How I choose which stories, how I build this map of my town, how I define this place that is so important to me will also define my own place in literature. Small events, daily chores, Tuesday mornings, and endless suburban socializing all have a chance at a moment of being; these tiny pieces of memory could be watching your kids swim in your neighbor's pool in "310 Concord" or reading dozens and dozens of texts messages on a single subject like in "675 Grant." As Virginia Woolf describes, it is not the nature of the action in a day that separates moments of being from moments of non-being. "One activity is not intrinsically more mundane or more extraordinary than the other. Instead, it is the intensity of feeling, one's consciousness of the experience, that separates the two moments" (Urquhart). This dissertation explores the dichotomy closeness of my community, the powerful being of these moments, and I will examine and define the moments of my life that have significance; they are for me pins on the map of my life.

MAP PINS: A MEMOIR

Compass Rose

"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again." A place so magnificent in memory, so perfect upon first glimpse, Manderley was as grand and welcoming as a place one could imagine. Enamored of its charming beauty, the just married Mrs. de Winter believes when she learns the rules and rituals, she will become the mistress of this place. Trying to belong, the young girl, so earnest in her endeavor to become Mrs. de Winter, mistress of Manderley, never even gives readers her name. This unnamed protagonist in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) learns that not every place is what it seems, that some communities are closed, and that even beautiful landscapes can have dark shadows. If ever there were a story so focused on place, it is that story: part coming of age, part romance, part gothic horror, part mystery, part redemption tale. But this is not *Rebecca*.

Sixty years later Stephen King opens a novel with the same line and there is wonder again about belonging. In *Bag of Bones* (1998), Mike Noonan arrives at "Sarah's Laugh," his vacation home in Maine, and King explores place and belonging and a bit of soul-searching with his poignant portraits of the unincorporated town of TR-90. The allure of small-town connection, of its naked intimacy, preserved by equal parts withholding and reproach, is by design and it is by its own population, its own people that the design is plotted. With their shared passion for place, these two authors, King and du Maurier have shaped my own writing. Manderley represents that place of tantalizing yet

elusive belonging; Daphne du Maurier relates the angst of the outsider and the longing we all have to feel part of something beautiful. King's sense of place, almost palpable in everything he writes, reveals more than a connection but an entanglement so that the Yankee colors and flavors of his home are awash even in a novel set in South Florida.

The audiobook for *Bag of Bones* is narrated by King himself in his gentle New England accent. It opens with Du Maurier's most beautiful quote from *Rebecca* but when I heard King first speak that phrase, the name of the place, Manderley, was replaced in my mind with the word Magnolia. Listening to the first disk of twenty in the CD player of Catherine's 1992 Explorer Sport, it barely registered that I misheard. We were far from home and far from our street, Magnolia, and as beautiful as California is-- anyone who has seen San Diego will tell you the same--I was missing home more than just a bit. There is a feeling of charade on the west coast for me; the same way Hitchcock used California for his English Manderley, for me the mix of desert and beaches are all part of some fictitious sound stage. Catherine, who had been living out there for a few months and undoubtedly succumbed to its certain charms, had asked if I would share the long drive East and so I flew out for a few days of vacation before hitting the road. We had only been in the car for two hours when she wanted to stop by some outlets at Barstow. The signs advertised 15% off, 20% off, even 30! I wanted to hear more of the audiobook. Catherine wanted good deals on famous brands. At twenty, I knew there was no arguing with her on trivial matters like our schedule; if our friendship was ever tested it only had to do with time. I may have argued at twelve and maybe even at sixteen but by twenty I understood what a trip with Catherine would mean. We spent so much time on this, never

knowing how little time we really had--time spent talking about time, arguing about time, and for me, a lot of time waiting . . .

Our friendship began in childhood. Our grandmothers lived across the street from one another, our fathers grew up together, our families intertwined. Her family moved in with her grandmother, Nana, just as my family moved into my father's childhood home. They live at 24 West Magnolia, a gray saltbox Colonial with black shutters and a row of snowball bushes that are still the envy of the neighborhood. She and I could name every family on our street, tell you their stories, their secrets. Many of the families were the same in our youth as when our fathers were young, older versions of the faces we instead now recognized. If I looked out my bedroom window, through the petals of my favorite dogwood tree, I could see Catherine's window. To the left of her house lived the Toriello sisters, never married. To the right, were the Turners, but I could never keep track of which of her boys were living at home. When a new family arrived the receptiveness of the neighborhood ran the gamut. The young were curious, excited, and wanting new playmates; the teens feigned nonchalance while casting sly glances because they too were wanting new playmates. Expectant mothers longed for other moms with infants and toddlers, someone to share the burden of being tied to the neighbor all day when others left for work and school. The working mothers and fathers hoped for someone to share the walk to the train or bus. But no matter who they were, we would welcome them. When they were unloading their boxes, hellos would be exchanged. A welcoming. Every time. As a little girl, I (perhaps selfishly) wanted every family who moved in to have a little girl; now, as an adult, I want the same. My reasons are no longer as selfish; I want my neighborhood to stay young. Maybe that's still selfish. After all of these years, I have

stayed on our street, buying my own home, raising my own family there. There are still O'Connells at 24 but Catherine is gone.

But then, in that green Ford, when that three thousand mile drive lay ahead of us and "Steal My Sunshine" played on the radio, I thought about that one line about Manderley, once just a few highlighted words from a paperback I'd read in high school, and it began to mean more. The wistful chorus of a gothic novel took on a new life as I heard King repeat it again in his thriller. The call to return home, the wayward traveler, the stranger in town, the outsider in town, so many tropes overlapping in my thoughts as the miles clicked by.

I have traversed the United States a handful of times, driving along both northern and southern routes. Different states, different cities, different cars, and companions but always the same starting point and the same ending point. If you open Google Maps on your phone, you can drop a pin at the beginning of your trip and at the end, as if you have a real corkboard and a long piece of string. You can drop pins all along the way, wherever you stop, and mark your path. The map is then covered with tiny colored dots, each a symbol of some special spot, a moment in time worth remembering. Like Odysseus to Ithaca, all of my travels lead me home, no matter how arduous the journey was. Every time I go back to Maywood, back to Magnolia, and it is at home that I have marked the most pins, where I have so many moments worth remembering.

When you are home everything is familiar and in that way accessible. Knowing your neighbors is a little like never running out of sugar; you can just send one of your kids across the street to borrow a cup. Driving along the interstate you rely on a quick flash of familiarity in the form of golden arches or a gasoline-selling tiger. Walking up

and down the aisles in a truck stop minimart you might find some comfort by running your fingers along the rows of gum and mints, potato chips and coconut cupcakes, antacid, and bandaids. But when you get to the register, it's not your neighbor's kid who is only working while home from college for the summer. You aren't Uptown at Coronet Variety next door to Miss Debbie's dance studio. And it isn't just the face you don't recognize. It's the voice, the accent, even the words. Belonging to a place is knowing the language, the vocabulary, and the rhetoric.

Every town has its own way of speaking in more ways than having its own language. My mid-Atlantic accent, so neutral in my ears, may have a few Jersey words that ring out to foreign listeners. Water. Knapsack. Sneakers. When reading *Bag of Bones*, King's voice affects a hearty Yankee accent for some of the characters, rich with up and down pitching that nearly startles the reader. Catherine and I try out some of the phrases from the book, forcing the accent with hilarity in our eras. "Hello whoremonger, where's your whore?" After more than twenty years I can hear his voice forcing out the line "You can't get there from here." This phrase, a New England staple, implies that the directions are so complicated that they can't be explained.

Well, it can't be explained to an outsider, at least.

When you step out of your car and reach for the gas pump with mild trepidation (Jersey Girls Don't Pump Gas), it's not your license plates that give you away as an outsider. Consider instead the multitude of secondary characteristics that mark you as other. Your ridiculous footwear. You are talking way too loud. Eye contact--way too much or too little and you are just shifty. No one needs that many snacks. And whichever sports team logo you are sporting, it's the wrong one. All of these missteps are what can

make travel so exhausting. Not being home for some is an escape. Escape from worries and problems. But if you love your home, why would you want to escape? What are you running from? Or to?

Catherine and I took turns driving or playing DJ and navigator on the trip, but it wasn't just the navigation of the truck. We reminisced and strategized; the comfortable closeness of a friend that is part of so many of the stories of your past makes it impossible to forecast them into stories in the future. But even in a space that small there was time alone it seemed. When we reached Joliet just after dark, the exit ramp was littered with cones and warning signs. It had started to rain, the small amount of drizzle that renders the wipers useless. Through the streaks on the windshield, I struggled to see the road. The blacktop ended abruptly and the smooth ride gave way to the jerky ride of unpaved road. Fully reclined in her seat, Catherine's breathing hitched for a moment and then resumed its slow, even pace. I was alone on an unfamiliar road at night in the rain and I felt just for a moment the steering wheel shudder. The rain was falling against the windshield with sporadic plops. I imagined the edge of the unfinished road would be soft and the too-heavy SUV would lose traction. Downshifting to slow our progress, I tried to take control of what I was feeling. The urgency of life was forever propelling us forward: get ahead, you're going places, upwardly mobile, on the move. But what if all of these things are simply distractions from the real goal? What if succumbing to the Siren's call is the end of the journey and not another adventure and all of these directions, every stop on the trip, each pin in the map is a lesson learned, a moment remembered, a chance at the future? If I could control the Explorer's descent on this seemingly endless curve of the exit ramp, then I was ready to return home, ready to start my life, and ready to be done

with that trip. The yellow of the yield sign glimmered when my headlights flashed across its surface and I realized I had come to the end of the ramp. The feel and sound of the tires hitting the once again smooth macadam sent a relaxing wave through my body. The sign for the Super 8, or maybe it was a Motel 6, shown like a beacon as I maneuvered across the four-lane road. I did not see another car in either direction. Once I had parked across the street, I rolled down the window and looked out at Route 80 and the exit ramp, not sure what I expected to see. Nothing. I could see nothing of the ramp save for a few cones near the top and the sign at the bottom reading Construction Ends.

"What are you looking at?" Catherine asked as she rubbed her eyes. She was tired and confused, awake now that the slumberous motion of the car had ceased.

"We were just there." Just, I thought, as in barely and not a moment ago. We just made it, I wanted to tell her. But I said nothing else. I had been afraid for nothing I now realized as we gathered a few things to bring into the room for the night. It was a time before we all had a million devices that needed to be charged but we still found ourselves amassing a small trousseau's worth of junk as we exited the Explorer. The truck had a manual transmission. That makes it seem longer ago than it was.

"Last night I dreamt of Magnolia again. . ." Starting from the same point every time does not always lead to the same ending. Catherine and I had so much time together and it was still not enough. Shortly after my girls were born, Catherine was admitted to the hospital. She was in the adjacent building, one floor down. Born at thirty-two weeks, my girls were still in the NICU, or Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and the nurse (a neighbor of both of ours from Maywood of course) cautioned me against visiting both sections of the hospital, cautioned against cross-infection long before I had given any

serious thought to word quarantine. Catherine had fought so hard against her cancer and then some virus, some illness, had knocked her down. When I spoke with Catherine, she was the strong one. “Go be with your girls,” she said. That was the last real conversation we had. All that time we spent, thirty years together and that was how we left it.

Catherine, my best friend, whom I had waited for so many times, barely gave us time to get ready before she left us; I, instead, left her waiting. We were promised to be friends for all of our lives--it was all of her life and just an unfairly small portion of mine.

The word again: just. Just can mean barely or recently or fairly. My town of Maywood is barely one square mile. And recently I have realized how much it has to offer. And unfairly, too many of my friends and family have left this small town with its little pink houses and charming main street. The people that I love that have left and have stayed are the map pins that mark the path of my life. Each shining plastic globe, so small and significant, marks lessons I have learned and some I still need to realize. When I am here I am home. Not only in my house, on the street I have lived time and time again but also when I am mailing a letter at the drive-up mailbox at the bottom of Uptown, just past the Padovano Christmas tree. When I am ordering a few slices for a quick lunch in between the morning soccer game and the afternoon baseball game. When I am paying for a quart of homemade soup at the Maywood Market (which I still at times think of as the IGA). Raft night at the pool, summer reading clubs at the library, and the 4th of July Parade. OLQP, MYAA, MRPGS, IGA, MAS, MEM, KofC, Peerless and Undine, the Santacade, the Fall Festival, the Hawks 5K, the eighth-grade car wash, the Bagel Bin, Billy Jerlinski’s holiday decorations, Martha de Young’s Girl Scout Sing-a-long, Fish n

chips during Lent, caroling at the senior center during the winter holidays, Trunk or Treat, and the Sidewalk Sale with its pickles, pony rides, politicians, and on center stage, school kids from Maywood dancing without a care.

Driving along the interstate you will find one reason to exit at 63 and that is not Maywood. It's the Garden State Plaza, the penultimate mall in northern New Jersey. But if you make a wrong turn and wind up in Maywood, we will give you directions to any of the three malls that surround my hometown. Giving directions is neighborly and we are quite neighborly here. But giving directions and having direction are not synonymous; knowing where you are is not the same as knowing where you are going. When that Yankee from Maine tells you,"You can't get there from here," he's telling you that you may be looking for more than a point on the map. Maybe you are looking for a home, for the familiar, for a place where you can find anything and everything you need without searching. But all of that belonging is not without challenge. There is a price to pay for belonging. You become entrenched and leaving can be painful--no matter who is doing the leaving. This place you are from gives you identity. The red and white hawks blanket in my trunk is a security blanket, oh yes. But it is also a symbol of belonging to something elite and for the few that have one, it's a reminder that they were limited edition and sold out quickly. Actually, I have two (I won the second blanket at the Memorial School Tricky Tray. It came with two t-shirts and a red bag.) Every small town is partly fodder for rom-com gothic romance and partly a charming backdrop for a horror flick.

Deciding on the ending is more important than writing down the beginning. When Maxim killed Rebecca, he may have killed Manderley. Or did put into motion the

process by which Manderley would always be the beautiful place of his dreams? Mike Noone leaves the TR, with more ghosts echoing in his ears than when he arrived; he will always be connected to Sarah's Laugh. As I place each pin on the map and I revisit my home, my Maywood, I may find ugliness among my treasured memories. But still, I return and relive each wondrous, beautiful moment--polishing a few of those which have tarnished. Conformity is the ugly lesson of belonging and the warmth of inclusion is best felt after the chill of a cold shoulder. Welcome to Maywood, NJ, 07607. Population 10,136. Home of the Hawks. It's time to belong.

800 Maywood Ave

The Maywood Invitational Tournament, or MIT, is an annual event for teams playing recreation basketball. Between the entrance fee and concessions, it's the biggest fundraiser for MYAA. Tons of people come out to watch the games and support the MYAA or the Maywood Youth Athletic League. There are parents and siblings and grandparents for most of the players and then there are parents and siblings and grandparents for most of the cheerleaders. It's pretty terrific. But the MIT should not be confused with the Hawks Tournament. That is the middle school basketball team tournament and the two typically run back to back. The Hawks Tournament, simply the Tourney, is attended by players' parents and siblings and grandparents but also friends and neighbors and alumni--a lot of alumni. The Tourney runs right after the BYBL tournament and before the BTYL. The Bs in these tourneys are for basketball or for Bergen County. Y is for youth. L is for League. There may even be another tourney I

haven't listed with the same letters in another order. So for your son or daughter that might mean games in all of the tournaments: recreations, travel, and school teams. But yeah, Maywood is a basketball town.

At a travel game in the big gym at Memorial school, I sat with Dimelza, watching our sons play. Orlando, named after his father, is tall and dark-haired. My son, Vincent, is short and fair-haired. Both look great in Maywood's red and white uniform. The gym is crowded, the home bleachers at least. The visitors' side never has quite the same showing.

After nearly forty years of Maywood basketball, my conversations in the bleachers were seldom about the game. Dimelza and I were talking about number 12.

> *The S on his chest isn't really an S. It's just a shape, a symbol for Hope on Krypton, his home. It's for the House of El. That's why their names are Kal-El and Jor-El. But this kid is Khalil. Kah-l'il. Kə'lĭl.*

This wasn't the first time I had tried to explain to Dimelza how to pronounce Khalil's name. We were seated in the second row of the bleachers, while the bench in front of us held our four daughters. It was Friday night or maybe Sunday afternoon or Tuesday evening. We spent a lot of time together in gyms for basketball between the rec team and travel team, girls and boys teams. I don't remember the exact game but I remember her wide smile opening, again and again, to cheer on our boys.

Dimelza would shout Hands Up with the s in hands sounding like a z and running into the word up. Then she would add a boy's name. Whichever boy was nearest to her when she shouted. Except when that boy was Khalil.

When Khalil came near she would drop her head to me and whisper khu-lul. Her mouth squished together like she was sucking a lemon as she forced out the second syllable.

Dimelza is an amazing fan. She leans over her long legs, her elbows balanced on her knees as she watches the boys run the length of the gymnasium. Other parents, some seated, some standing, watch the boys with their arms crossed, frowning at turnovers and mumbling after the referees make a call. One mother sits sideways on a higher bleacher, her head turned from the game as if distracted but her eyes tracking her son's movement every time he leaves the bench. A pair of mothers, sisters really, watch their sons on the court in between tending to younger siblings, plying their subdued behavior with snacks and trinkets. Dimelza watches every moment of the game and shouts encouragement to the boys in an endless stream of accented English.

Han zup!

Dee fenz!

Lez go!

Shoooot!

When she was just finishing college she met Orlando and fell in love. She left her life in Barranquilla, Colombia, behind and headed to New York. Three kids later she was fully entrenched as a suburban housewife in Northern New Jersey, a minivan driving member of the PTA replete with ombre highlights and jewelry from an MLM like Stella and Dot or some other stay at home mom multi-level marketing scheme.

Hey. She was leaning in again. *Koh-leel.*

No. I don't look at her so she doesn't see me trying not to laugh.

Maybe more like part of DNA. Alelle. Kal-eeel. She's trying again.

Dimelza is tall. And slender. Gorgeous. A ringer for Sofia Vergara. Once, when a dozen or so moms were out for dinner, another diner asked if she was the actress and without missing a beat Dimelza mimicked holding back a sigh as if being recognized was a mild inconvenience and she got up from her seat to pose for a selfie with the surprised older gentleman. He fumbled with his phone and she took it from his hands. Dimelza, (just barely) young enough to be a Millenial, is a selfie expert. She held the phone aloft in the dim light of the restaurant and tilted her head until it was almost touching his. Her red lips parted to reveal a line of straight white teeth and her big brown eyes framed by long, curled black lashes opened wide for the camera. Damn, we all thought, she did really look like Vergara.

Modesty for a celebrity doppelganger would be a disappointment. Dimelza seldom disappoints. If this man in this restaurant craved a selfie with Sofia Vergara she was there for him. Like she is always there for us. For me, when I need a little celebrity.

But at this particular game though, in the crowded, noisy middle school gymnasium, she looks less like a movie star and more like me, like a Maywood mom. And throughout the entire game, she is cheering on the players or commenting on the fallibility of the officials.

Wherz tha fow-ul, ref?

Don let him shoot!

At one point her son, named Orlando for his father, drives to the basket and draws a foul. The boys are tired now and take a moment to find their places for the foul shot, using the break in play for a chance to catch their breath. Orlando stands toes on the line

and Dimelza is for the first time silent. She has a half-smile on her lips. The pride is obvious. Her fingers are not quite raised in the air. They are rather just raised off of her lap and as Orlando lifts his own hands her fingers splay and wiggle in the silent movement reserved for foul shots and jazz hands. Orlando stretches his body and pushes the ball to his fingertips and then it is in the air and then--thunk. The ball hits the rim and bounces off into the air and then to the floor.

Dimelza cheers.

Good try!

Orlando takes a second shot and makes it in and she cheers again, louder. Then she wraps her arm around me, presses her cheek to mine, apologizing for being so loud. Laughing that no one wants to sit next to her at games. Is she too loud, she asks. She sighs and slides back to her seat.

Kha-lal.

She looks me in the eye, sideways. I shake my head.

It isn't just cheering on the sidelines at basketball. Or soccer. Or a swim meet. Dimelza is everyone's cheerleader. You have to be strong to be supportive. How else can you hold someone up? We might not be waiting to be thrown an actual life preserver, or be pulled from woodlicking flames, or transfused a rare blood type. Some of us just need advice--when to email to my son's teacher, what shirt to wear to the tricky tray, whether to cut bangs. It's not wanting to run in the Hawks 5K alone or needing someone to show up with a flan because nothing makes your day more special than a flan--except a flan with birthday candles.

There is a gleam in her eye, almost a reflection of what you need, that catches the light. When the night is nearly ending and coats and purses begin to appear out of nowhere, but you are not ready to go home because there is something else you need to talk about, Dimelza is always up for one more drink at the Inns. It's because she is the most perceptive of our group, the most in tune with your needs. She is one of the strongest mothers in our social group. And the youngest. She loves to tease about being the youngest.

Though hard to imagine, she was even younger when she met Orlando. Her friend Karen mentioned that she had an uncle who was visiting Colombia from the US. He was in town for a few weeks to escape winter in New York. And he had a friend. An older friend. When Dimelza told me this story I thought she was using a typical American euphemism. Right, I had said. Like in *Pretty Woman*. An uncle.

Yes, she replied. She paused in her story and looked at me. She seemed unsure as to why I had repeated the word uncle. Earlier in the night, before the coats and purses, we were all sharing the stories of how we met our husbands. Undeterred by my comment, she continued to tell the story and each time she said niece or uncle we all started to smile a little more. Orlando is fifteen years older than Dimelza.

I tried to imagine Orlando picking her up at the airport when she arrived in the US for the first time. Waiting by the luggage carousel, craning his neck against the crowd in search of his bride-to-be, and he's telling people he was there to get his niece. I felt the gurgle of a laugh in my mouth before I could stop it.

Dimelza looked me in the eye, sideways. I love that look. I laughed out loud.

We were not laughing at Dimelza. Or maybe we were. The look on her face told us she did not understand what had all of us pressing our lips together and turning our smiles into our hands. Dimelza described the date with Karen and her uncle and the uncle's friend.

I waz expecting to meet, you know, like an uncle. But instead, I meet Orlando.

Her face was lit with the memory of meeting the man she married. All of our laughter dissolved into tender appreciation. It wasn't just that she suddenly made us forget Karen and her uncle, it was that she made us remember Orlando and Dimelza.

And then a twenty-two-year-old Dimelza moved to the United States. She and Orlando were married on St. Valentine's Day. Alone in a new city, a new country, speaking a new language, she started over. First in New York and then again in New Jersey. Before she turned thirty she had started over twice.

I have never been far from home. I have never started over. If I walk to the end of my driveway and stand on my toes I can just make out the trees in the yard of my childhood home. I met my husband in third grade. I can see his childhood home from my kitchen window. We order pizza from the same pizzeria as our parents. Our life is filled with same. The same school. The same basketball tournaments. Same church, same scout troop, same Uptown, soccer team, Knights of Columbus hall parties, 4th of July Parade, Sidewalk Sale, not very good bagel store, town pool, neighborhood nicknames, and families. My kids play with the kids of kids with which my husband and I went to school.

Sitting above me on the bleachers at the basketball game is Terri from my Girl Scout troop. Her husband was a grade below me. Sitting next to Dimelza is Lisa. She was

two, no three years behind me in school. Her husband was a year older and a bully. Ask him and he'll laugh and agree. Brande and her parents and daughter sit off to the side, the elder mother and daughter engrossed in not watching the game. And there's Dave standing at the end of the bleachers. With his gap-tooth grin and tall, lanky frame I've crushed on him since I was nine years old. I say I crushed on him like it's past but if he asked me right now Uptown for pizza I would. My husband knows. Dave knows. I think everyone in town knows. Because, it seems, I know almost everyone in town. Just like I know every street. And many of the houses and most of the families. They are known to me; they are a comfort. They are in many ways a source of strength.

The score of the basketball game is close. Our boys have pulled ahead by two baskets but there is enough time on the clock that we are all still nervous. Dimelza is watching intently. Both of our husbands sit across the gym, mine with the team and hers at the scorers' table keeping the book. Dimelza has not stopped yelling for a full two minutes and is running out of things to say. The boys are exhausted. We just need to keep the other team from scoring and we will win.

De fenz.

Han zup!

A turnover and a few weak passes and we are tied. Dimelza leans into me with excitement. We watch the boys jostle for control of the ball. The clock's countdown makes it feel like a John Hughes movie. With the call of a jump ball we take possession and Khalil goes in for a layup. We lose sight of him in the thick of the boys but then the whistle blows--the foul is on the offense. Khalil stands on the line and Dimelza is silent.

Totally silent. The entire gym nearly echoes when the ball hits the backboard, spins along the rim, and then drops to the floor.

You gat thiz!

The other boys step up to high five Khalil, encouraging him.

Khalil dribbles once, looks up at the basket, and dribbles two more times. I close my eyes. Just to blink, I tell myself.

When I open them the ball is falling through the net and Dimelza's arms fly up! As she grabs my hand she calls out his name; confident this time:

Kah l'il! Yah! Home wins!

310 Concord Drive

There is a signpost on the corner of Concord and East Magnolia where they meet at a T. On the well-manicured lawn of my neighbor Tom, there is a fairly average street sign hanging from a die-cut wrought iron wagon jauntily drawn by high stepping horses. The entire montage is mounted on this rather auspicious wooden post nestled in a bed of well-tended mulch. The extended bed is landscaped with seasonal flowers often photographed by passersby eager to add to their Instagram feed; the current layout includes twin clump birch, Persian blue allium, old Dutch tulips, early stardrift. And just behind the blooms and Tom's well-maintained fence, there is a lemon tree. It was the lemon tree that caught Stephanie's attention.

Looking at the manicured lawns and brightly painted doors in the Knolls section of Maywood, it is a picture of the American Dream. But for some people, the picture of the dream may be just slightly out of focus. No matter what life gives them, the perfect family, the perfect home, the perfect life, they want more, they want something sweeter. Stephanie's house, with its four bedrooms, granite countertops, brand new siding, and state-of-the-art alarm system, is across from Tom's on Concord, not on the corner but one house in. And so, Stephanie saw those lemons and wanted to make a pitcher of lemonade.

"Any time, Stephanie, just come on over," Tom had said. There was a gate in the fence that ran along with his property, his house facing Magnolia. Tom offered her an invitation to pick as many lemons as she wanted. Real neighborly, that Tom. Standing with a Wiffle ball bat in his hand, he smiled at her.

"They make great baseballs," he joked. Noah, her youngest, threw a wild pitch just as Tom turned to check that she was listening. The plastic ball hit his ear with a thwack. For a moment Stephanie thought she saw something besides a smile on his face but maybe not. "Quite an arm there, Anthony." Tom had said, not looking to see which son had thrown the ball.

"I'm Noah." replied the six-year-old.

"Quite an arm there, Noah." And then Tom picked up the ball from the grass, tossed it into the air, and with the plastic bat hit the ball up, up and over Noah's head.

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If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Stephanie grinned at me and for a moment she looked like she did when we were in high school: conspirators quietly gossiping. As she continued to tell me the story, she leaned back in her chair and fanned her face with a paper plate. Even though we were sitting by my pool, neither of us had gone in and it was as hot as always for the 4th of July. That day, however, after Tom left, she had gathered a basket full of the small, bright yellow lemons and brought them home to show her husband, Rick. He'd never seen lemons so round, so yellow, "So you got these from Tom?" he had asked. "I'm gonna check what kind these are. These aren't your regular Trader Joe's lemons." He found a foreign fruit forum and posted an image of the lemons. And then waited for someone to comment on those lemons. Stephanie paused again to look for her husband.

Stephanie is the mom that makes t-shirts. Every suburban neighborhood has one or two of these moms. She's a crafty mom, always has a few different projects going at once, often waiting for one last step to be finished. Steph is willing to try almost

anything. Over the years we have had some successes and some failures. We have a lot of ugly tye-dye. We made magnets out of tiny rocks and our kids' photos. After we glued them together, we wanted to add a clear coat of epoxy. But her husband, Rick, wouldn't let us. He didn't want Steph to use the epoxy. He said he would do it himself. Later. And he did. When Steph has an idea, he may tell her it's crazy, but he will figure out how to get it done.

The Fourth of July is one of the best days in Maywood. This morning's parade was fantastic and the grand marshall, Joey Diaz, definitely had one of the best days of his life. The half dozen families we've invited over to celebrate this nation's birthday are scattered around the yard, near the bar, or seeking out shade elsewhere but most of the kids are in the pool. Noah and Anthony are swimming with the rest of the boys but Ariel, Stephanie's oldest, older than her years, hovers nearby as we chat.

"Anthony!" Ariel waves her arms as she calls. "Where's your ear?" She points to her own as he looks at her. He throws his head back toward the pile of towels and shoes on the side of the pool in a sloppy over there gesture.

Ariel sighs a mini-maternal sigh and says, glancing at me to make sure I see her and explains "I'll look for it. He's always just doing that." She crosses the patio in a determined stride and begins to sort the towels and t-shirts.

Ariel and Anthony are deaf. Their Cochlear implants give them access to the hearing world, but they are deaf. Ariel has taught me that it is part of who she is. And that she is proud of it. When we first looked at our house, we noticed the signposted across the street, cautioning drivers, Deaf Child Area. We didn't know that Stephanie lived there

or that the sign was for her children. Or that Anthony, her firstborn son, and Vincent, my firstborn son, were born just a few months apart.

Ariel finds the implant. She gestures toward Stephanie, then begins signing to her brother. He ignores her as any brother would. Ariel huffs, her glasses appearing to fog momentarily with the air of hot-headed indignance. Anthony may have answered her smartly or may have ignored her completely; both would have angered her. She takes her role of junior mom very seriously, often reporting what most would consider trivial concerns. She seems particularly intent on delivering these updates when Stephanie and I are trying to gossip.

"Anthony! Noah!" Ariel is now somewhat wet, her brothers having either deliberately splashed her or, by sheer coincidence, been extraordinarily close to her while splashing each other. Stephanie lingers for an extra moment in the in-between-place where Ariel's getting wet is still a little funny before she yells to Noah to get Anthony's attention.

There are guidelines for yelling at your kids in the suburbs while attending a neighborhood barbecue. The magic of suburbia is a little like Disney--no one wants to see how it works, they just want finished products. No one wants to see you weeding your lawn or digging for weevils or scraping old paint from your garage or hefting bags of salt. We only want to see your green, green lawn, fresh coat of paint, and swim in your god-damn pool. Same with the kids. We don't want to see you discipline your kids; we just want them to all behave. I am considering with a smidgen of jealousy how Stephanie, using ASL, can silently chastise Anthony in front of all of these people when I realize Bridget, one of my daughters, is asking if she and the girls can go inside.

“Absolutely.” And just like that my girls and Ariel go in the house and do whatever preteens do and now the boys can splash as much as they want.

Of course, they no longer want to splash.

“Tom is back from Florida but I don’t think he’s around today,” I say to Stephanie to remind her that we were in the middle of a Tom story. There are many Tom stories. Tom is a snowbird. He is generally fussing in his yard all spring and then only emerges at dawn and dusk during the summer months. But his driveway faces my house and I tell Stephanie that his car was in the driveway a few days ago--even if he wasn’t in Maywood now.

“Doesn’t he usually watch the parade?” she asked. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Everyone but his wife.” Jokes about missing wives are always funny, especially when we didn't know her.

“That is a horrible piece of gossip. And I don’t believe any of it.” A smile played at her lips in spite of her tone.

“Well, they certainly had a pool.”

“Hmmm.” Stephanie smiles a bit, looking at me over the top of her sunglasses.

“And she definitely is not here now,” I say.

A nod from Steph.

“And he filled in the pool,” I add.

“Lots of people fill in their pools.” She wasn’t giving me an inch.

“Lots of people?” I ask, leaning in and raising a single brow. This is a discussion we have had before. I try a different direction. “When a baseball goes over the fence, do your kids go and get it themselves?”

"Sure," she says, now leaning forward, too. "Tom said they could just open the gate whenever and grab the baseballs or frisbees or whatever." She's wondering what I'm getting at when she seems to remember something, but not about those lemons. "But then--then he came over and said that they broke the gate. That he had to fix it. And could they stop coming over." Stephanie didn't shy away from a fight. If she thought that Tom was accusing her children of something they had not done, she was about to go all momma bear on him. She fought for her kids to get everything they needed; not that every mom doesn't but when your children have extra needs, you fight extra hard. And, we all had to live in this neighborhood.

Plus there was just something strange about Tom.

"He told you to fix the gate?" I asked.

Steph was looking out at the pool, at her boys. "He said that he had already fixed the gate. Then he said that it wasn't the first time they broke it. It was so strange. One minute we are welcome and then-done. I mean, you never really know what someone is thinking. He seemed so nice, playing in the front yard with the boys. And then a few days later he was angry about the gate and I told him to talk to Rick."

Rick. I looked around at the party. I see him slip through the slider into the garden room, maybe to check on Ariel. The garden room and family room are an addition at the back of my house and from them, you cannot see the street at all and you definitely cannot see Stephanie's house. So in the summer of 2012, while watching a movie with my husband Peter and our kids, I had no idea that Rick and Stephanie's house was burning. When I walked to the kitchen at the front of my house, maybe to fill sippy cups

with milk, I noticed that the sky was dark. Why is the sky dark, I had wondered, though perhaps at that moment I knew. I could smell it as I asked Peter to come into the kitchen.

Most people have a favorite color, a favorite song, maybe even a favorite breed of dog. I have a favorite fire engine and Peerless was already parked outside when I opened the door. Smoke seemed almost solid in the air. Ladder Truck 17 had pulled up as well and its engine was rumbling out there in the smoky dark. The men and women of the Maywood Fire Department, all volunteers, swarmed the narrow T-shaped intersection of Magnolia and Concord. We could see it wasn't Tom's, Lorraine's, or Dorothy's. We didn't know Rick and Stephanie as neighbors yet but the auxiliary police, as they placed cones to keep cars from turning, yelled over the diesel hum, "It's 310." I don't know how we learned that their family was at the beach when the fire started. Or that they were on their way home when they got the call and drove to grandma's instead, sparing her children from seeing the blaze or even the ruin. That night we only knew that the family was safe and not at home and that was enough for Peter and me to turn and go inside, and kept our little ones away from the front of the house, hugging them a little tighter--not even telling them about the fire until the next day.

One afternoon I stopped by my high school classmate's house for some reunion chit-chat. It had been too many years since we graduated and a big reunion was in the works. Christina mentioned that there was tension between some planning committee members. High drama. Just like high school. She rattled off who was hating on whom and who had decided they might not even attend. She mentioned Stephanie. And then added, "But you probably see her anyway." She lives at 310 Concord. Stephanie and I had attended Paramus Catholic Girls High School together and now lived across the

street from one another and had sons that would be in the same grade. High school reunions bring about a whole slew of emotions for people but I was so excited. I had lost Catherine, my best friend, to cancer days after my daughters were born and another close friend had moved away shortly after; Catherine had lived on Magnolia and Julie had lived on the end of Concord. I had gone from two friends so near, and so close, to being caught in that too often isolating young mother of four solitude.

Christina shared a little more about Stephanie I didn't quite catch. But she was doing great, Christina had said. I was distracted at the time. I had four kids at home and the clock was running with the sitter. I don't know if I wasn't listening or if I didn't want to hear. I gathered the cleats and some leotards that still had the tags on them--Christina only has one daughter and admittedly overshopped from time to time. I don't quite remember the air kisses but I'm sure we exchanged them.

By the time I saw that now familiar address, 310 Concord Drive, printed in my high school directory, the house had been rebuilt. Living in Maywood as both a child and an adult, I have been reintroduced to many people. I have reintroduced myself. I was excited to meet adult Stephanie and hoped she liked me. Our kids were almost the same ages--how perfect. Why we hadn't met at the pool or the park I wasn't sure. Now I know that her life had been so different from mine; she had already worked so much harder. My experience with deaf children before Stephanie's children was only as an educator. I had for a short time worked in a school that provided services for the hearing impaired. I had an inkling of what having two deaf children entailed, especially since she and her husband are both hearing. I have spoken to so many parents of children with special needs that struggled with letting go of what they thought their child's life was going to be

like. Some have made it to acceptance but might be caught up anywhere on these steps. First, is the loss you feel. Then maybe some shame or guilt for feeling that loss. Maybe embarrassment. Then overwhelmed by the work--the work for you and for your kid. Stephanie had had to learn a new language to communicate with Ariel, who wasn't implanted until later than most children and first learned ASL. For Anthony, she fought even harder and he was implanted earlier and, much to Ariel's disappointment, he is less than fluent in ASL. When I think about how much they have gone through already with these kids. And then they lose their home. When I got home from Christina's that day, I looked out my kitchen window but Lorraine's tree was full and leafy. Stephanie's house (as it had just become) was mostly hidden from my view.

The reunion newsletter did not mention any of that part of Stephanie's life and I wouldn't learn about it until that later spring. Instead, it looked like one of our classmates was using the event as an opportunity to throw herself a wedding; the Paramus Catholic Paladins proudly announced the Reunion of Sandra Bazzarelli and her Clipboard. High school reunions dredge up old fears, rekindle old flames, fuel forgotten grudges, and are as awesome or awful as you want them to be. Bogged down by internal squabbling, the reunion committee eventually returned to their prescribed 1990s roles. Sandra found her old clipboard and had to be in charge and did not want any nor need any input from anyone; two icy blondes, still shapely, their names for me as interchangeable as they were then, waited for someone to explain everything to them; another woman, the years not showing on her face or her temperament, just wanted a lovely evening for everyone; the venue, the DeeJay, the napkins, the menu, the centerpieces, the speeches, the dedication and recognition for all Sandra's hard work--everyone's hard work--so much hard

work--the arguments, the blaming, the sighing, the ignoring, the backstabbing (that escalated quickly), then somehow everything was ready.

Stephanie didn't go to the reunion. Making friends as an adult often depends on the truisms of idioms not so far from when life gives you lemons. What I had hoped would be a fun and natural way for us to reconnect was instead not just more lemons for Stephanie but bitter, sour pits. When she said she wasn't going, I thought it was about the fighting. Or that she was just tired of the drama--which sounded like her. I chided her, even, I think. Christina had said she was doing great. There are guidelines for new friendships in suburban neighborhoods. Keep it light. Talk about other people's problems, not your own. We talked about all of this when Anthony was on our rec baseball team and I realized while feeling the fool, that he attended a school for the deaf. But talking about it in a camp chair next to a bunch of dads coaching a bunch of kids while they tried to play baseball lowered my exposure. Sitting around with Stephanie and chatting was great. Is great. Great that day by the pool in July.

Because it's so hot while we chat by my pool, we both have a bottle of water alongside our real drinks. I sip the rum punch and say, "Did you know Tom is having curbs put in? So that people stop driving on his grass when they cut the corner?"

"He's putting them in, like paying for it?" Stephanie asks. Our neighborhood does not have sidewalks nor barrier curbs.

I glanced over her shoulder into my carport, trying to see down the driveway, imagining that I could see the nearly curbless corner across the street that held Tom's photogenic garden. "It's important to him that the DPW stops driving on his grass when they turn the corner."

"Well, then I don't feel so bad that he had to pay to fix his gate. Not if he's paying for curbs." She is straining her neck to see down the driveway, her chair facing in the wrong direction.

"They say good fences make good neighbors." Another idiom. "Maybe the curbs will make Tom happy."

We both turned this time, looking in the direction of Tom's blue allium, just blooming.

"He really has a knack for gardening. Those lemons look like they should be delicious. I'll let Rick tell you what he heard back from the internet." I had almost forgotten about the lemon tree. But not Stephanie. And she always saw the good. Always.

Stephanie was going to make lemonade from those lemons. She would spend all this time finding out what kind of lemons they are, looking for a great recipe, washing them, slicing, squeezing, picking out a few errant seeds, adding some organic agave and maybe blueberries or watermelon to cut the tartness, just to make a single pitcher of lemonade. A lot of work for a few sips and you don't even know if it's going to be good. She always took the time, though. Any lemon she got, she'd try to make lemonade. And she wouldn't just make it for herself. She would make some for me as well.

The shelves of Trader Joe's are packed with organic, gluten-free, nut-free, seed-free, renewable resources, in glass and paper containers promising no BPA products. Making fresh lemonade is just another way to ensure you fulfill for your kids those Trader Joe's promises. She stays away from preservatives in foods, especially some of the dyes. And from chemicals like epoxy. But having breast cancer will make you cautious

in that way. And who wouldn't miss their high school reunion days after their mastectomy? And Christina had told me, I'm pretty sure now. But since losing Catherine, maybe I just don't hear the word cancer--I block it out.

None of it stops Stephanie from wanting to make lemonade, though. As if sensing her need, Rick emerges from the garden room and walks out into the sun.

"Rick," Stephanie calls him over. After beating cancer and rebuilding their fire-ravaged home, Stephanie wants to make some lemonade from scratch. And Rick wants to indulge her. "Rick, tell Danyel what the email about Tom's lemons said."

"When they emailed back," he says. "The lemon lady." He is smiling as he squints his eyes, from the sun and the memory. "They're poisonous. It was some kind of Chinese lemon. The email said they cause heart attacks." He shakes his head a little, slowly.

Stephanie and I now stand with Rick at the edge of the patio, nearly under the carport, and all three of us turn to look down my driveway and across the street, half expecting, I think, to see Tom at this point.

Tom's lemon tree. Stephanie and I had spent the afternoon chatting by the pool about everything and nothing. That easy conversation of friendship that had taken some years for us to find. Sickness, catastrophe, barriers, challenges, everything life can throw at you but Steph sees a lemon tree and starts to fill her basket.

"Rick," Stephanie rests a hand on her cheek, thoughtful. "I was going to make lemonade."

This life gives us lemons time and time again. The sweetness, though, is in the gathering of ingredients. Because it seems that maybe not all lemons are for lemonade.

"The best part is," Rick glanced across the street one last time, "is that this lady wants to know if she can have some. Of the lemons. For her husband. For lemonade."

648 Edel Ave

The clock was running out for the contestants on *Top Chef* but because we were watching the show On Demand we couldn't fast forward the commercials. It was during the pause in the action that Bridget noticed the blue and red lights flashing in the kitchen. There was a police car in the street outside of our house.

Parked in the wrong direction was Tut's car, head to head with the fire chief's car, then an MFP, or Maywood Fire Police, car. My husband and I stood on our front porch, uncertain and unspeaking. A memory gnawed at me, a memory of when we had stood on this porch before and looked across to the house on Concord. The windows of Stephanie's house were dark but we could see cars in the driveway. Large arborvitaes blocked our view of the porch. I couldn't think of what to text if she was home. I really wasn't sure what to text if she wasn't.

Tut had only recently stepped down as chief but was still on call--he would probably always be on call because this was his town as much as it was mine. He knew every fire during his lifetime and had been on scene for most. He had been in my neighbor's house six years ago when we saw blue and red lights. When we smelled smoke and told our children to stay in the back of the house. Then it wasn't arborvitaes blocking our view but first the Peerless truck and then Engine 17.

I walked across the street until I could see both Tut and the chief standing on the porch. Rick was there, too. Steph, I guessed, was inside with the kids. All three men stood with their arms relaxed at their sides and when I saw this, I ignored the officers posted at the edge of the lawn and walked up the driveway.

"CO_2 alarm won't go off," Rick called out to me as I approached. How fabulously mundane I thought as I offered for Steph and the kids to head over to my house. "All good," Rick said, "the house is safe. They are watching TV already." His alarm company would be coming the next day to replace the sensors. The MFD had already cleared the furnace, the fireplace, and whatever else in a house might make CO_2. The kids were ready for bed and at this point so was he.

Since we were all now relaxed, I joked with Tut about his travel plans. I was genuinely surprised to see him in town and not surprised by his tired eyes; he said he was barely home for the night. Tut works for Homeland Security and has spent more time in Puerto Rico than in New Jersey since Hurricane Maria. Tut is my unofficial second husband. Or I am his second wife. We are both unclear as to the specific arrangements even if we were practicing pretend polygamy.

It was James that arranged our marriage and it wasn't even the strangest thing he said.

James and I had been sitting together having a beer at the Blazina's Luau when he asked who I'd marry if Pete were out of the picture.

"Pardon me, what?" I asked, not sure I had heard correctly.

"You know, if Pete were gone, or if Pete wasn't here and you had to be married to one of these guys, which one would it be?"

My husband Peter was, at the moment, nowhere to be found. But Tut, sitting across from me, was listening and slowly shook his head in confusion.

"This is a strange question, James," I said.

James grinned and tilted his beer between two fingers, contemplating my suggestion. “Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Yeah, Danyel, who would it be?” Tut, grinning like an ass, echoed the question.

“Tut.” I answered, nodding. “He’s the perfect husband. He’s never home.”

Tut’s grin for just a moment faded and then exploded into a laugh.

Whatever pageantry of the whispered secret or extramarital innuendo James had hoped his question would elicit was forgotten as Tut called for his wife to tell her the news. Jen loved the idea just as much and we all laughed about not having to cook when your husband was out of town.

“Or any of the other wifely duties.” More laughter.

When you have known someone most of your life, longer than their spouse has known them even, there are liberties. Intimacies. Tut had a crush on my friend Jennifer when we were young. Not the Jen that he married. But that Jennifer didn’t marry someone from town. She left. Tut didn’t marry someone from town either. But he stayed. James, who has engaged me in numerous strange and often inappropriate conversations at parties, is neither from town nor married to a townie. Sometimes it clicks and sometimes it doesn’t. It hasn’t yet clicked for James. I don’t think he even owns any town spirit wear.

The Blazina Luau is actually the Blazina/Torini Luau at the Blazina home. When my children’s children are listening to their parents talk about their childhood, mentions of the luau will need no explanation. Having this shared history, using a vocabulary

distinct to your location, all of this makes us closer. Not having to explain why something is funny or scary or wrong is part of belonging. When James asked which man I would choose and I chose Tut, it formed another bond of many. There is just another layer of connection that we don't explain to outsiders--we may appear smug or exclusive but it's a bond we have earned and not just some elitist trappings. Almost every car parked along the street that night belongs to a family I think of as family. People that I look to for help, for fun, for everything. Civic duty and responsibility, caring for and about your fellow man is part of what ties all of this together. Community and a sense of belonging are the small towns, hokey ideals mixed with friendship, and joie de vivre. I am at an age where I want to be both the parents and the kids from *Footloose*.

James doesn't really understand why we are all laughing or why it's okay that Tut and I are still making plans for our second marriage or why now my husband has joined in on the joke. James is still not a townie and will never be. You can move here and not be from town.

**

When I walk back to my house from Rick and Stephanie's, Peter is laughing at his phone. Tut has already texted and the walk is not that far. Everyone is safe for the night. This is our home and not just this house we live in. Our street, our neighborhood, our town. I told James that Tut was the perfect husband because he's never home but that's not true. It doesn't matter how far he travels, he never really leaves because this is his home. There is something about small towns, or about this one, that makes you want to stay.

8 West Magnolia Ave

From the moment our new neighbors moved in on East Magnolia, they began clearing their front yard. They yanked out overgrown bushes, turned over old flower beds, and had Almighty Tree Removal in twice to take out an Oak and an Evergreen. They turned the garage into a three-season room and widened their driveway. They seeded the lawn and out there with the hose before the sun every morning. And then I noticed them. The aluminum lawn chairs. These were city people planning to spend time in their front yard. But in the suburbs, the backyard is king. They would no doubt be disappointed when they realized it was just them sitting in the front yard. Kids might play out in front or even in the street, but when you entertain, you entertain out back. Some backyards are little more than a patch of grass and a rusty patio table and others are a hidden oasis.

Across from 341 Maywood Ave, my childhood home, lived the Schiemers. Their house loomed larger than the rest of the homes on the block. So mysterious because it was turned sideways; its front door faced the Jordans' house. A macadam driveway ran smooth and spotless from two white garage doors, always closed, straight down to the curb. The driveway was free from hopscotch drawings and overturned bicycles and the garage doors practically gleamed, free from sticky fingerprints and kickball twacks. I was always curious about those garages. We didn't have one because my father had burned ours down when he was eight. The Toriello sisters had a narrow pea gravel driveway even though I don't remember either of them driving. The Turners and the O'Connells had adjoining, crumbling driveways, and their garages seemed to almost be conjoined. Both structures were filled with anything but cars and were only still standing due to a

careful blend of God's good Grace and well-placed yard furniture. Stolen glimpses of the Schiemers' garage revealed neatly lined shelves with rows of important things, useful boxes, and items of a certain value. And both Mr. and Mrs. Schiemer parked their cars in their garage.

One summer afternoon when I was six and Catherine nearly seven (Catherine would have wanted you to know she was six months older), we spotted a car in the Schiemers' driveway. Because they didn't park in the driveway that meant they had company. A nephew. A kid. He was older some but still, he was a kid. He came out and played with the kids on the block. Only we didn't want to play. We wanted to see the house. So he took us inside the yard. The grass was so green and every flowerbed looked like a magazine cover. There weren't any plastic bats in the grass or overturned bicycles on the sidewalk. No chalk drawings or piles of sticks or leaves. No tire swing. For a moment we stood together, taking it in. A cloud moved away from the sun and the breeze whispered in the branches above us. The quiet was everywhere. White wrought iron furniture with plump rose-covered cushions sat near us in a semi-circle. An ashtray held the butt of a cigar.

"What is there to do?" asked Cormac. He wasn't the oldest but speaking first was now in charge.

"We could play hide 'n seek," said the boy, not looking at us.

"Hide and seek?" repeated Cormac. At eleven, hide and seek seemed a bit beneath him. "Not that many places to hide in this yard. Are you allowed out?"

The boy shrugged, still looking at nothing. The eight of us stared at him.

Brendan reached for the arm of one of the chairs, meaning to pull it out and sit down while we decided. The metal leg screeched against the slate patio and as we turned, eyes wide, Brendan sheepishly muttered his apologies. The boy took that momentary reprieve from our attention to walk toward the front porch.

"You hiding or counting?" one of us asked. We followed him to the porch and then down a step toward a tiny door closed with a broken lock and hasp. He swung it open and revealed a crowded nook under the front porch. I followed Catherine who followed Brendan who followed whoever was in front of him.

After barely a moment to take in the sheer volume of stuff hidden under the porch, Mrs. Schiemer emerged from the door, looking cool and crisp in what I immediately thought of as an ensemble, not even realizing I knew that word. She called out to her nephew and we all stumbled out of the crowded space and turned up our heads, the collective sucking of breath audible.

"Look at her outfit," I whispered to Catherine.

Mrs. Schiemer held aloft in her hands a wicker tray that held lemonade, ice, and lemons filling the sweaty glass pitcher. Tiny cups with delicate handles surrounded the hand-squeezed beverage. Mrs. Schiemer, quite unaccustomed to children and surely not expecting so many in her yard, turned around gracefully, pivoting on her kitten-heeled sandal, and retreated indoors.

That was the first and the last time we visited the Schiemers.

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Reader, I hesitate to tell you how this adventure played out. I have built it up into something magical over the years and now cannot parse truth from fantasy. We followed

older kids into those days like the Pied Piper and that boy led us around the property showing off the outdoor fireplace and fancy yard furniture. But it was the storm cellar that hovers in my memory. We all piled into that tiny space and pawed all over his aunt and uncle's stuff. When we had run out of the storm cellar, he had been holding a cigar box. His uncle had dozens of them. Each one was filled with different treasures. Baseball cards. Bazooka comics. Prayer cards. Train tickets. Some were sealed with rubber bands like the one the kid was holding. He had handed it to Cormac and told him to stow it.

"What is this?" asked Cormac.

"Just hide it," he had said. "We can open it next time I visit."

Cormac, not known for patience, had waited exactly three days for him to return as if keeping an Easter vigil. Then he had opened the box. Inside was five hundred dollars and no baseball cards. Gathering the other kids, the older ones tried to decide how to share the newfound wealth. Like any secret, the more it's shared the less it's kept and soon everyone in the neighborhood knew.

Mr. O'Connell, Cormac's father, knocked on the Schiemers' door with all those kids trailing behind and returned the money. At this point in the story, the amount of funds found (and therefore returned) varies in my memory as well as the memory of others. My aunt claims that the money was part of a wedding dowry set aside for whichever Schiemer was close to her age and was close to five thousand dollars. My father said it was probably money won in a card game and remembers it as five hundred dollars. Either way, we did not get a reward for returning the money, not that we deserved one. Doing what's right brings its own reward in your feeling of self-worth. But when I was six years old, a dollar would have made me feel pretty good about myself.

What I got from the Schiemers, and from a few other families on my block, was a glimpse at my future. I have been for many years working on the utopia in my own backyard and only now realize how idyllic a venture it is. Our yard has far surpassed the now grainy memory of 8 West Magnolia Ave but it is the feeling that I have been chasing. When new neighbors moved into my husband's childhood home, just a block from mine, they moved from Staten Island. We met them after they had settled in and asked how they were finding suburban life. They told us that their first evening, tired from unpacking, they came out onto their front porch, unfolded two aluminum lawn chairs, and sat down to watch their new neighborhood. And then, nobody came out.

We are all in our backyards, not our front yards. Calling out to your neighbor or strolling over unannounced is not so commonplace when we are all behind pool-safety, child-lock gates. We see only the smallest glimpse of each family, each life, when they are gathering their Amazon packages or planting a few Mother's Day flowers, or handing out candy on Halloween. Still, as I plan each fashion-forward backyard barbeque ensemble, I have my reward. I have a yard filled with Wiffle ball bats, chalk drawings, and wrought iron furniture with plump navy cushions. I may serve my guests lemonade in a pitcher but I also bring out a tabletop cooler filled with shiny juice pouches. Sometimes we leave the gate ajar to encourage guests to *come on in*. But not usually.

As warm and welcoming as my small town is, maybe to really be a part of it you have to be invited. It's not a secret society or anything like that. Everyone wants to belong to something larger than themselves. Maybe it's an elite sports team, or a political machine, or an adventure role-playing game on Discord, or Wall Street or Broadway or Hollywood or Bollywood or you just want the other moms at baby yoga to offer you

some of their snacks. Well, you can't just sit there and wait for the snacks to be offered. Bring your own homemade gluten-free oat buddies. Invite them into your circle.

162 Romaine

". . . Originating from an area known as New Barbados," reads the dented metal sign posted on the side of the road as you exit Route 17 and enter the 1.29 square miles of boro sandwiched between Hackensack, the county seat, and Paramus, home of the Garden State Plaza; Maywood is a town many drive through without a slowing even for a yellow traffic light.

Peter grew up in Maywood, too. But not on Maywood Ave. Not on Magnolia at all but a street over. At 162. On Romaine. And his parents were not from Maywood. Not like my parents. And my grandparents. They are from Hudson County. His parents went to high school in Hudson County. My parents went to high school in Bogota. Maywood didn't have a high school and so Maywood kids were bussed to Bogota. Then Maywood kids went to Hackensack High School and kids weren't bussed anymore. My husband went to Hackensack. My husband's sister went to Hackensack. Her husband went to Hackensack. Coincidentally, they now live in Bogota and that's where their kid goes to school.

Our children go to Maywood Ave School or MAS and soon they will go to high school in East Rutherford. Maywood doesn't go to Hackensack anymore. Maywood still doesn't have a high school.

Peter and I both went to MAS. And if when I was in third grade at MAS, you had asked me who I was going to marry, I would have told you, Ricky Schroeder. If you've never seen *Silver Spoons*, you are missing out. In 1986, Tomoyo Toyoda and I were equally smitten and often traded several dog-eared copies of *Teenbeat* and *Bop* between us during class. Our classroom in MAS overlooked the courtyard and throughout the day

we could hear the bells of Our Lady Queen of Peace Church, so close its steeple cast a shadow across the courtyard blacktop. Slipping the magazines back and forth was difficult to do without being noticed by Mrs. Pallant because we didn't sit directly next to each other. Between us sat Peter Cicarelli. Looking back, I had to walk past Peter's block to get to Tomoyo's house, too. She was on Golf but closer to Hartwich.

Peter was awful. He liked sports, something I still don't understand or recommend. Even worse, he didn't really read during SSR. SSR, or Sustained Silent Reading, was the best time of the week. We would all select the next volume from the color-coded texts in the class library, grab a personal carpet square, and find a quiet nook in the classroom. If competition was as important as those sports enthusiasts made it out to be, then SSR was my sport. I was nearly finished with blue and after blue would be on to purple. Purple! After purple was silver, then gold, and after gold was fourth grade. Peter was still pretending to read orange. Seriously?

When Tomoyo, who was also on blue, and I spent time organizing the cavernous bottoms of our desks, arranging fruit-shaped erasers, hand-colored book covers, and plastic stars, Peter would slam his chair into his desk, rattling the tightly packed trio, their spindly legs wobbling in unison. Our books would tip and knock into a pencil case or cup filled with markers, tipping it over and spilling its contents. Peter wore sweatpants and sports jerseys. He never wore anything cool like acid-washed jeans or parachute pants. He never noticed when I got a new charm for my charm necklace or when Tomoyo brought in new matching folders for both of us--purple with unicorns. Mrs. Pallant would change other kids' seats throughout the year and before I knew it Tomoyo was gone--all

the way across the room by the door. On the other side of Peter was another boy. Maybe Mike Weyrauch. I'm not really sure.

But Peter and I stayed in those two seats all year. I don't think Mrs. Pallant liked me. She must not have, or why would she have made me sit there?

During a lesson on the Revolutionary War, she asked us a million questions about what life was like for the colonists. She fixated on certain details like she was remembering her own childhood. She started asking questions about the soldiers and asking *what we think it was like for them* and *what happened when they were injured* and *were there hospitals*. She asked about their camps, their horses, and their weapons. I must have raised my hand a million times but she never called on me. Did I mention that she didn't like me? Finally, she asked us, "Why was salt so valuable during this time period, especially to the soldiers?" My arm shot into the air. I waved my hand. I wiggled my fingers. I braced my elbow with my other arm as I strained to keep it in the air, higher than any other arm.

She called on Peter. "They put the salt on the soldiers' wounds," he said with no little or no inflection.

Mrs. Pallant and I had never before and have never since been, as they say, of the same mind, but that day we responded together by sucking in our breath.

A half moment later, she recovered and explained that rubbing salt on a wound was not the answer, never the answer. Rubbing salt on a wound is what people say when you are making a situation worse. It's just something people say but it's not something that you do, she continued lamely. No one seemed to follow what she was saying. She missed a teachable moment for figurative language and instead continued to blabber,

saying, “You shouldn’t rub salt on a wound, she continued, if someone is hurting, the salt just makes it hurt more, makes it worse.” She looked out at the rest of the class to see if there were any other hands up. But her reaction to the last answer was enough to cause every hand to drop.

Well, almost every hand.

“Yes, Danyel? Do you know why salt was so valuable to the soldiers in the field?” she asked with a voice controlled by years of teaching.

I wonder if Mrs. Pallant remembers my answer about their poor food supply and lack of refrigeration and how important it was for them to cure meat and have a good store for the winter. I remember. It was a great answer.

I don’t remember thinking it was ironic that Peter had mentioned rubbing salt in a wound right before I bested him in front of the class. Probably because he didn’t notice. At all. This was not his sport, it was mine. He didn’t even notice that Mrs. Pallant didn’t change our seats all year, although he thinks he remembers Tomoyo. She moved out of Maywood that summer. Whether he remembers it or not, it’s a metaphor worth extending. About twenty years later when we were choosing the readings for our wedding at Our Lady Queen of Peace Church, we chose: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?” I know I am still a little salty.

So much of who I am is tied to where I am from. Our laundry room is filled with spirit wear for Maywood. Growing up, this town helped make me who I am. Now that I'm grown, who I am will help shape this town. The cycle continues with how I raise my children, how I keep my home, volunteer my time, spend my money, cast my vote.

In my husband's office, we have a map of Maywood that shows all of the names of Maywood families. Families that have been here since New Barbados. All the old names of Maywood like Lydecker. Jager. Terhune. Cummings. Zuber. But no Cicarelli. Yet.

When our children raise their children here, they too will be Maywoodians.

"Wait, did you mean work Meg or home Meg?"

They have never met and if they did they would not realize immediately that they are very much alike. You can, perhaps, take any two women and find them alike in some ways. These two are smart and funny and they worry about climate change. Work Meg, or Megan, worries about it in the academic sense, as the supervisor of the science department should and Home Meg, or Maegan, a birth photographer, shows her concern with purchases of bruised fruits and vegetables and has carried reusable bags long before it was trendy. Similar too is that Megan grew up near Buffalo and Maegan in Montana; girls born running free in open lands with horses and flannels, places certainly not suburban New Jersey. These women both tell funny little stories about their children that make me laugh, good-naturedly ignore me when I talk too much, open-heartedly, even painfully, wish they lived closer to their aging parents, and share a language for sharing history that I know I've heard before but don't quite understand.

When I would tell Maegan about Megan, I first called her work Megan but then realized that it didn't make any sense. I could just say Megan. Megan, like me, has long, dirty blonde hair and light eyes, but her eyes are a Harlequin green and her smile is too often wan. It is only when she is caught with her guard down that she laughs until her eyes smile, too. A geologist by education, by craft a teacher, Megan views the world in the smallest, close-up measurements of pressure; anxiety weighs upon her, and even though she acknowledges the limits of its power and occasionally recognizes her own strength, to keep steady in her day she plans. She strategizes. She looks ahead to be ready

and with only a few feet between us, she sees that we are ready, too. Five desks in a single office. Her desk is adorned with charming miniature posters of the National Parks, tiny cacti, and a dozen snapshots of her children, Carys, Camryn, and Sean. She has books about the environment, cartoons about cats, and a hamburger eraser. She wipes everything down once a week with an antiseptic cloth and checks each night before she leaves that her desktop is clutter-free. Hers is the only one so tidy. But because of this, she always knows. She knows when things are due or who was meant to handle that or what the hell day it is on our rotating drop block schedule. Five desks in a single office mean more than a shared space. We share ideas, jokes, laughs, secrets, opinions, and moods. An office, any shared room, has a mood and there are days that our language, the ideas bandied about sound to me like we are laughing but then there is something mentioned, or unmentioned, I don't follow. Not her comments about the work, about content, about science--her comments about some worry. If she wanted to, she could get us worrying about potable water or sunspots or endangered tree frogs, but rather she asks questions about due dates and all eleven steps in the process and who's at fault for step number three. I am not by nature a worrier but I worry most about her when she worries on who's at fault for step number three. At work and at home, women are often weighed down by blame and fault.

Megan, because she understands about process and pressure, has her own process for dealing with pressure. Our children watch us, learn from us. Camryn is her middle child. Camryn is bright and spirited and as quick to laugh as she is to anger. Navigating the uncertainties of the fourth grade has proven for her a nearly insurmountable task. But Cameron's therapist has praised both mother and daughter for their hard work. Cameron's

teacher sees the progress she's made. But every time Camryn stumbles, Megan is at fault. She is the one to blame.

"Wait, what?" Maegan asked.

I turn my attention away from the soccer field for a moment, pivoting in my canvas chair to look instead at Maegan. Maegan's face was half-hidden by the camera as she snapped a photo, her chestnut hair flying in the warm breeze, her glasses slightly obscuring twinkly brown eyes. When she isn't chatting with me or just one or two other moms, she is more often standing alone, a few feet from the crowd, that camera obscuring half of her face as she collects memories for all of us. The camera allows her to move around the event, the party, the game, the school award ceremony, without talking to anyone. When someone calls to her, she can wave and then gesture to her camera instead of coming over to chat, her shrugging shoulders and sheepish grin meant to fool them. The distance she keeps from the other moms is as recognizable as her own personal style of journalistic photography. And yet her pictures are just as intimate from that distance as they are in diminutive dimensions of a birthing room. Maegan's photos would have you believe that she had an instant rapport with everyone she met. Instead, she talks to almost no one.

"Did you say it's Megan's fault?" she asked me, again perhaps. Of course, Camryn's behavior is Megan's fault. Mothers are often to blame for the heartfelt mistakes of their children, any weakness or emotion shown in offspring is seen as matriarchal in its lineage. And as women, we are no less to blame for the perpetuation of this belief. On the sideline, we judge the moms and how their children play in this game. Anyone watching knows that number 10 is a bit of a crier and half the whistles are

against 99. But 10 has learned to keep playing through the tears and 99 keeps the worst calls out of the eighteen; these lessons were learned to make them two of our best players. We judge the kids but are really judging ourselves and judging each other; I don't know if we tell them that or if we just give them these oddly specific instructions on how to be a better person. Too many times I have yelled from the sidelines criticisms meant for the parents seated next to me. When the whistle blows and a referee calls out for the boys to take a knee, my heart searches for my son, number 10, seeking him out to check that he isn't injured. Maegan looks to the field as well, looks for her 99, but at this moment she is still waiting for my answer.

Work Meg, Megan, is a good mom. So good that she blames herself. She feels like it's her fault. Like nothing, no matter the plan, it doesn't work out for her daughter. The worst is that it's like Meg's back in middle school with her. She got a phone call from a mom about a note that was passed around at school. Camryn and some girls were arguing and Cam felt hurt and wanted them to know and wrote it all out--it was meant to be a way for her to express how she felt, to admit her role in the drama, and to ask them to admit theirs. The note went home in a backpack. "And instead of that other mom talking to Meg about it or trying to give her a heads up, to let her know that maybe Cam was involved in something that wasn't so great, the mom called her on three-way with the third kid's mom and went all *mean girls*."

Another whistle blows and the game ends. Our boys have lost but played well. It's hot out so I ask Maegan if she and her boys want to come and swim.

She pauses, half-folded chair in her hands. "Yes. We'll just go home and change."

Maegan only lives three blocks from the field in the Lawn section of Maywood and even though my house is not on the park side of town, it can't be more than a mile door-to-door. When a half-hour later all four of my kids were in my pool along with another friend and the neighbors' kids I texted her. *Soon* is her response.

Everyone has met a mean girl. And everyone has probably been one, even if you didn't know it. The little girls that argued with Camryn may have been, I don't really know. But that mother that called Megan certainly is. She knew that Camryn had been in trouble before and that Megan was outside of the mom clique. Megan and her husband live in his hometown, not hers. She made friends with her first daughter's grade but the next set of moms was not as welcoming. Sometimes moms can be like that. And rather than think about three nine-year-olds and the folded-up scrap of paper, this mom thought about that little thrill we get when we validate our own emotions instead of considering someone else's.

Maegan never came to swim that day.

Megan asked why.

"Did she give you a reason?" Meg's face was half-hidden behind her computer's monitor. I thought of Maegan's camera. Half-hidden, half-revealed. Just like that, I was a mean girl.

"I texted her again. My neighbor Steph came by and so did Dimelza. I texted Maegan that we were all waiting. I texted *all*. I didn't even think about it."

Maegan didn't want to spend time, spend energy, on *all* that day. I invited Dimelza and Stephanie because of the afternoon I wanted, not the one I had described to Maegen. The same Maegan that left her career in working in the city for a life insurance

broker. The same Maegan that had known that negotiating for the best rates for her ultra-affluent clients wasn't how she wanted to spend her days had also known that she didn't want to come to my house if I had invited all those other moms. The Maegan who smiles and shrugs when you invite her to sit with everyone else and wears black pants and a plain tee and carries a drawstring bag with a few snacks from Aldi and a dented water bottle for her and one for Jasper is the same Maegan who doesn't wear this season's cut for denim or tees from the latest JCrew catalog or even mascara but has an open, reassuring smile.

When she photographed a family reunion we held in our home with seventy or so people she had never met, she seemed so at ease. She captured such amazing moments that day--moments that only someone who understands what it means to be so intimate, so emotional, so open would even know existed, or would even understand. Maegan's family, her mother grew up in town and I often think of her, refer to her as old Maywood but really she's not. These people are all new to her. Maywood is a place from her mother's childhood, not her own. And it's only when she keeps them at a distance that she really seems at ease. She wouldn't, maybe couldn't, come over that day by the pool. And I was the mean girl. I invited those other moms and then said come over, come on, it's so easy.

Maegan understood how closely you have to look at things to really see them, to study them. Just like Megan is always studying everything, every detail. There is a language in these details that I cannot fully understand but I now recognize some of the meaning. The effects of pressure and time are startling. They can be both destructive and stimulating and in between, we need to look for our own mistakes.

I have two friends I call Meg. One shops at Aldi, one on Amazon but both buy green. One I see every week at the field and one I see all week from seven to three but we never have enough time to really talk. I can see one brown eye twinkling behind the camera and one green eye peeking around the monitor. Two women so much a part of my life. They are so much alike; I finally learned to listen to one when I talked to the other so I might understand them both.

The nurse looked at me and narrowed her eyes. She watched as I cradled the phone between my ear and my shoulder. There were a lot of rules in the NICU.

"Love you, Cath. Text me when you know. Bye." I ended the call and met the nurse's gaze. She glanced at the baby I was holding as she walked to the isolette in the next alcove. I heard the scratch of her pen as she jotted down important information on a slip of paper on a clipboard. She then carefully handled a tiny pink infant who let out an almost imperceptible noise. With inspiring efficiency, she changed its diaper. I could hear her fingers smoothing the edges of the tiny rectangle, folding the fabric like functional origami. An IV ran from the spindly leg. No bottle for this baby and certainly no breast. The letters NPO were scrawled on the whiteboard. *Nil per os.* Nothing by mouth.

Babies don't get their own rooms in the NICU. They have their own isolette (please don't say incubator--they aren't chickens for Christ's sake) but they share a larger room with other babies. Because of this, you are never really alone with your baby. Which is sort of good because hospitals are not a place to be alone. A hospital should be a place of refuge, healing, of safety, but with its rules and regulations, and rituals, it can be intimidating. Part of me knew that I belonged in the NICU. I had just given birth prematurely. Another part was anxious, fearful that I would somehow be discovered for what I was not. When Christine looked at me on the phone, I worried I was too loud.

Christine was not a chatty nurse. She was efficient and attentive. Her hair was black and shiny and plaited loosely so that tendrils escaped by her ears. Her scrubs were a sad green, a dull and lifeless green but somehow hers looked clean and fresh. Her ID badge hung around her neck with a younger Christine's photographed smile peeking out

from time to time. I watched her working as I stood at the edge of the room, engaging in my favorite activity of breathing in the delicate scent of a baby as the antiseptic stench of hospital crept in. I almost didn't recognize her when I first came up to the NICU. Her family's house is also on Maywood Avenue; it's also cedar shake and it's also brown. I keep my thoughts about their house simple.

Near each isolette was a hospital-grade recliner crafted of the finest imitation leather. Looking at it, you knew it was a recliner and that its purpose was for sitting, even relaxing, as you held your newborn baby. But when your newborn baby had so many tubes and wires and rules and orders that stepping away from her isolette seemed an insurmountable task, that chair was just where you dropped your purse. I could see my purse there now. It had fallen to the side and a package of red licorice was poking out. During my pregnancy, I had developed gestational diabetes and hadn't had a piece in months. But it still didn't seem right to eat it.

Clouding over as she breathed in and out, a tiny tube with oxygen rested under my daughter's nose and wrapped around her ears. Our wrists bore matching barcodes proving we were mother and daughter because really at this point I haven't done much as a mother but hold her and wear this bar code. I looked down at Claire. She didn't seem to mind.

My back was aching as I laid her back into her isolette. She had a tiny gel mattress that allowed her to sleep on an incline. Although I hadn't yet received any bills, I could only imagine the cost of an infant-sized gel bed. But it looked delicious. I was envious of that mattress. Standing all day when your abdomen is bisecting is painful. I

hadn’t realized that you used your stomach muscles to stand until my doctor explained it to me and was then incredibly conscious of it--all of the time.

“How do you feel about cutting-edge technology?” he had asked, looking not at me but at the dimly lit screen of the ultrasound, and then had chuckled a bit at his own joke. “There is a glue that we are testing here in the hospital. I think we will have some before your delivery.” I hadn’t really thought about the incision until that moment and asked about stitches. “Not that incision. That one will have stitches.” He had gone on to explain but I didn't hear him or maybe I didn't listen. I’m not sure if I deliberately ignored the information or if I was just too overwhelmed. But then, standing for hours on end in the NICU, I understood about the inside incision.

With Claire back in her isolette, I moved to the next plastic tub. Christine had finished tending to my second-born baby and Gracie stared up blinking at me. She was heavier than Claire and looked longer. She had her legs crossed and arms stretched out. On her head was a tiny cap knitted by a hospital volunteer. It will seem impossibly small when I pull it from her box of memories years later to show her. The dry erase board above was updated several times a day by the nurses. Under her name, they added information that changed. The number I watched was her weight. Kilograms were even scarier because they are so small. 1.58 kg is not a baby's weight. It’s a deli meat order.

There are so many babies in the NICU yet somehow it was not crowded. There were dozens of isolettes. A baby patient gets an isolette which is a lot like a plastic bucket perched on a metal gurney. There are monitors on stands on either side, beeping at odd rhythms, and an IV pole, maybe two, adorned with bags of viscous liquids, some clear but some cloudy and dark. The mothers, who like me have done little or no mothering at

this point, stand permanently hunched over in delicate curves, touching their babies through a web of telemetry. Later, when I am at the park or the zoo, or even the play place at the mall, I will think about all of the mothers and babies around me and remember the NICU. The number will be the same but not volume.

It's as if these NICU babies were born in disguise, and as they convalesce, items are removed. Tubes are withdrawn. IVs discarded. The top half of the isolette is unhinged and the baby is afforded a permanent convertible as they begin to breathe what is poetically referred to as *room air*. Accessories are stripped away to reveal your baby's true form and after days for some and weeks or even months for others, you get to sit in that pristine pleather chair and rock your baby in your arms. The NICU policy is to move your baby's isolette closer to the door as they progress medically. The psychological ramifications of this policy are endless but what it ensures is that every visitor sees nothing more awful than they need to. There are many heart-breaking stories from the NICU and protecting these mothers from each other is part of what they do.

Christine was back at the nurses' station. I waited until she seemed settled to ask her for any updates. There was a rhythm to our interactions that she had set and I gladly followed. I was a guest in her house. We know each other outside the hospital in a vague sense. We are from the same town and have an overlap in our social circle. That gave us a bit to chat about--I wondered if she likes to chat on her shift or if she likes to sit quietly but is chatting with me. Chatting at work is a requirement for some professions, most notably hairdressers. But dental hygienist seems a close second and then perhaps manicurist. Babysitters and car mechanics need to chat enough to put you at ease and bartenders need to know when to stay and chat and when to walk away. Nurses are

different. She wasn't my nurse. She's my daughters'. But if she felt like chatting, I was her only option.

"Babies look good." Christine leaned back in her chair. I turned with Gracie in my arms. Christine was a nurse to both Claire and Grace. Only a few days into our stay in the NICU, I knew that nurses could only have two babies a shift.

"Tomorrow," I began, "tomorrow will they try again? Try to feed them?" I was asking if someone else was going to feed my baby as if I were incredibly rich and instructing a lowly servant instead of incredibly frightened and looking for reassurance. So many aspects of my children's lives were not in my control and remaining vaguely aloof made it all less terrible. Knowing that babies born at thirty-two weeks often had digestive issues normalized some of the conversations but didn't alleviate all of the tension. There were whispers of NEC or necrotizing enterocolitis. We had had only one night of sleepless pacing as we waited for test results that were in the end reported on in such a perfunctory manner at the standard 6:am rounding leaving us exhausted and relieved if not a tiny bit confused. I kissed Grace on her forehead and laid her back in her isolette. Then I walked over to Bridget. I walk over to my third baby, the last patient I will visit tonight.

My youngest, smallest baby had a different nurse that night, as she does every night. A blond woman in her late fifties with unstylish, cropped hair, peppered with gray, she wore reading glasses that were perched on her nose and adorned with a jeweled chain that caught the light when flitted about with rapid birdlike movements.

"Almost done." She twittered at me, not looking away from the baby. I was certain that a moment ago she had been headed for the nurse's station. But I was tired.

Maybe not. I am sensitive to the ownership these nurses possess over my children. Somehow in a matter of days, they have become more acutely aware of their needs than I was for six months. I carried three babies in my womb for thirty-two weeks and I know that this nurse has not accomplished such a feat. And I want to tell her that I am quite accomplished at motherhood, having done this and that I know my babies and I know their needs but really, at this moment, I close my eyes and I breathe in through my nose and I imagine my babies at home in their real nursery with the paper chicks I have hung on the walls.

"Okay," I say. And I mean it. I pivoted away and turned my attention to my purse. Maybe I would have a piece of candy. Christine was sitting in at the dimly lit nurse's station. The lighting in the hospital is enigmatic. With no acknowledgment of our circadian rhythm, lights are dimmed or brightened, procedures scheduled, and orders followed. A few areas of this expansive media campus have hours posted but many of those are mere suggestions. Was it late? I thought maybe the shift was ending. But Christine looked up and smiled.

"How's it going?" She raised her eyebrows and peered at the other nurse.

"Just waiting to say goodnight to Bridget."

"I haven't had Bridget. She's usually with Ann."

Ann. That was the other nurse's name. I had forgotten. I pulled a piece of licorice from the plastic bag and then held the bag out, toward Christine. She waved it off.

"Your girls look good. You will be home with them in no time." I wanted to believe her. No one should stay in the hospital.

“I hope so.” I looked back at Ann. She had moved away from Bridget without a word. I swallowed the candy, barely tasting it. Sometimes the NICU seemed huge but tonight it seemed small. Just a few beds and babies. I held Bridget close to me and inhaled the scent again. You can never get enough. I wondered if she would always smell like that. I wondered if each baby really smelled different but I hadn't been allowed to hold them together, to bring them close to each other. They hadn’t been together since before they were born.

Since before they were born.

One more nuzzle and I tucked her in. I air-kissed my fingers and tapped each isolette as I walked toward the door. I reached for my purse, an all too familiar conflict of glad to be done with the hospital for the night and never wanting to leave my babies.

My phone buzzed. Catherine had texted.

I’m being admitted.

Tears. Immediately tears sprang into my eyes.

And just like that, I wasn't done with the hospital for the night and there was the fourth patient.

My daughters moved closer and closer to the exit fo the NICU, growing stronger and stronger, until, one by one, they all came home; but Catherine, who was always so strong, never came home.

49 Lenox Ave

The Summer Slam is an annual event in Maywood, not quite as popular as the Hawks Basketball Tournament, but still very well attended. Using every field in town, more than two dozen teams from five age brackets compete in gameplay over a period of two weeks. Some of the fields are part of a larger complex named Memorial Park and one, Coaches Park, is a stand-alone field. Each field has a concession stand; the Summer Slam is a fundraiser to help send our boys to Cooperstown. In addition to the entrance fee which teams pay to compete in the tournament, they are encouraged to patronize our concessions (however, each year it seems there is at least one team that brings an entire picnic spread replete with their own tables and chairs, c'est la vie). The more Gatorade, sunflower seeds, and scooped Italian Ice you buy, the less I have to cough up when my son turns twelve and heads to upstate New York.

Every season since tee-ball, my husband volunteers his time as a coach, and I can still see him pacing near the dugout, clipboard in hand, leaning on the fence watching our team. I, on the other hand, support this nation's past time standing in the sun behind a folding table laden with single-serve bags of chips, ring pops, airheads, slightly melted snickers bars, and perpetually half-empty bottles of ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise available for those looking to dress their burgers, dogs, and fries. Crumply napkins, turtle-friendly straws, and a coffee station round out our vast offerings. The menus taped to the table and nearby fence are printed on 11 x 17 paper, and as items sell out, we cross them off the paper sheets. By the second week, have the look of a redacted FBI file. Snickers always go quick.

Behind the moms manning the counter is a dad manning the grill. In a historically gender-assigned division of labor, barbequing, no matter if in a city courtyard, a suburban backyard, or a country farmyard, is man territory. The concession stand at Coaches Park in Maywood is no different. Every few hours a new group of volunteers wanders into the area and assumes the postures of the exiting group. Sherry, who runs concessions, works the fryer which is both geographically and metaphorically midline between the Italian ice and the grill. Barbequing is for men. Italian ice scooping is for women. The fryer has the same element of heat therefore possible danger that the grill holds but it also requires the use of a pair of delicate tongs whose clicking is irresistible between tray shakes and fry reloading.

On this particular day, I am wearing my annual Summer Slam t-shirt, made by my neighbor Stephanie. I have seen at least nine other moms wearing the same t-shirt. My shirt is not exactly the same as theirs--I picked up my tee (organic cotton, pre-washed, sort of on-trend faded look) and had her press it with this year's graphic. I tell myself it's because I am just a little different. But I also know that just like most people, I also like fitting in. Wearing the shirt is about belonging, which I do. I belong. The different shirt shows that I don't follow the crowd blindly, I don't just give in to peer pressure. Stephanie plays along. She's a good friend.

At the top of the hour, the concession stand clears out as our boys take the field. I am mid-shift and Brande and I are now alone at the abandoned stand. Everyone has moved to the field; we two stay on the grassy slope in the dead space between the ball field and the town pool. From our vantage point, we can see the boys at-bat and most of the outfield but really, neither Brande nor myself has ever been particularly engrossed by

a baseball game. Brande's son, Emmitt, and my son Vincent are good friends, sharing many interests beyond baseball. Brande and I also have much in common but I don't know her as well as I would like. When you attend your kid's baseball game, or any sport really, there are two sections for parents and spectators: home and away. The home team sits wherever time and experience have dictated is the better location. This often means shade for warm-weather sports, dry ground for foul weather sports, and proximity to parking for both. For baseball, your team dugout is your fan epicenter with your knowledge of the local layout dictating how far and in what direction your territory spreads. At the edge of this territory, walk twenty-five paces past the edge of that territory and you will find Brande and her family. They are not what you might call joiners. The idea that they preferred sitting apart was confusing, disarming in a way.

Our concession table is parallel to a fence that marks the dead-end of Lenox Ave. Lenox Ave is the street that takes you to the town pool. Years ago, when I was a kid, you could also take Magnolia to the pool. You could drive around Duvier Park and into the same parking lot you access from Lenox. In 1998, they built the Senior Center (they say it's a Recreation Center but it's really for the seniors) and closed the end of the Magnolia. Duvier Place and Duvier Park disappeared. I wonder how the Duvier family feels about that. Brande and her husband and children live on Lenox Ave. It is unequivocally one of the best streets in town. Not because it leads to the pool but because of the charming homes. I am a sucker for a lemonade porch and nearly every home on Lenox has one. My home does not have a porch and therefore I suffer real and painful porch envy every time I drive to the pool. Brande, in line with her underwhelming need to join, does not belong to the town pool. The powerful draw of small-town belonging and togetherness, the

constant inclusion, the sharing of events, activities, and meals, all of these to me are quintessential positives of Maywood, of any small town but if you are not a joiner, you walk your twenty-five paces and put your chair down and smile and wave to the rest of us from a distance. I find it curious, worrisome, frustrating, and, on occasion, unforgivable. You cannot come to a small town and think we won't make you belong.

The Summer Slam is a misnomer. The tournament does not take place during the summer; since school isn't out yet the games are on weekends and evenings. The summer solstice is still a week away but Spring Slam just doesn't carry the same excitement and urgency as Summer Slam. There is an excitement in the use of the word summer, a promise that this event will be both an adventure and a reprieve. As teachers, Brande and I spend our shift swapping stories of how our respective schools collapsed at the end of eighteen months of hybrid learning. We compared notes on our local district, the boys' teachers, and how each was fairing during the final weeks of mask optional, Plexi-partitioned in-school learning. I had served on the Board of Education in Maywood for six years but had resigned the previous spring, giving the pressures of graduate school as a reason for my midterm departure. But when Brande mentioned the new principal at the elementary school, I flinched.

Brande pauses just the slightest in her speech, an acknowledgment of my reaction, and then continues. It's so great, she says that we hire from Maywood, right, that so many of our teachers are from town. I agree, of course (bigtime townie that I am) but only, I say, if they are the most qualified. We look at each other, saying a lot in a glance and an eye roll. What a great, exclusive club we have here in Maywood.

“Maywood is a club, a boys’ club," Brande agreed. A bit of a boys club at times but what isn’t really. We laugh because what we are saying is true but we aren’t about to sort out these issues while we work the concession stand. There are plenty of educators in town that we hold in high regard. And some that we do not. She talks about her school’s plans for the end of the year and I talk about mine. I have a new director and mention I am less than impressed. Education is a small world and we know many of the same people. The conversation is easy and although what we are discussing is really of heavyweight and importance, we are not weighed down by it. Maybe it's the laughter of the younger siblings playing tag down the hill or is it how aware I am that I am an English teacher and Brande a math teacher every time I take someone’s order and she makes change. We are discussing the problems of the pandemic that are so serious and far-reaching that we should be in tears but we are not. We are safe here, at Coaches Park, surrounded by 25¢ bags of chips and a grill we borrowed from the firehouse and donated Italian ice and kids and parents and baseball.

When another mom walks over to sell Summer Slam t-shirts. Of course, I buy one. The shirt is for my son, not for me. It has the name and date of the tournament and the names of all of the teams. It is even made of that terrific wicking material, this mom tells me. I don't know her or her son and for a moment I am confronted with the realization that I am one of the older moms. Not that I am old but that my kids are. I may only have two or three Summer Slams left. Best to get the shirt then, so we can remember this amazing time. I joke with Brande about the t-shirts, the one I am buying, the one I am wearing, the one I want to make for her for our baseball trip to Hershey Park. The whole team is going so, of course, we need shirts. Brande's obvious visceral reaction to

the mention of matching shirts is for me an invitation to continue the discussion. After much teasing (about not wanting to wear the shirt on her part and about an overt need to join on mine) we decided I should write a Haiku for the tee and if I did she would wear it. The themes contributing to the Haiku should be baseball, interstate travel, togetherness, Hershey Park.

"And Bernie Sanders," her husband Dave had chimed in. Literature, I often tell my students, is meant to carry its reader to another time and place and to bring to heart the emotions felt by those who first wrote and read the words. I wouldn't write the Haiku until much later, sitting by my pool with my own kids and remembering the spirited exchange. I am not at all a poet and Haikus are best left to the theme of nature but after some lesser attempts, I found these lines: Share love share the game|Balls bats mitts mittens jerseys Jersey|Sweet chocolate trip. Belatedly I realize I have nine syllables in the second line and am forced to cut Bernie from the poem. Maybe it's good, I think. Brande deserves a good effort for a poem.

Still manning the concession, she tells me about her youngest and we talk about how special education is handled in our district. Every small town has a way of doing things, an endearing local cadence to how things are done. But that charm, that heritage, that inbred procedure shouldn't usurp pesky little things like educational best practices or research-based decision making or even laws. Being such a small town and being so close to everyone can be a burden. As I tell her first about my own family's challenge with the school and I name the players and try to fairly show my hand, I know that I am still holding back. I do not want to tarnish the shine. But I am honest because to not do

enough for my child is wrong; to not do enough for any child is wrong. Brande nods often and when it is her turn to share she also pauses, a moment of reticence.

"I am not sure if you are close with this person. I know what a townie you are. And so is he. We ____ so I know him, too," she says as she dips her head and looks at me questioningly.

Of course, I know who she means. As I root around in my red tote back, our town's zip code proudly displayed in bold print as its only decoration, I remind her of an earlier topic: my new director. I share with her that during meetings, when I am bored, I like to find silly images and assign time to the contacts on my phone for the people at the meeting. People assume I am answering emails or conducting other important business but really I am swapping their faces with that delightfully awful picture Beyonce tried to remove from the internet. As I find my phone, I swipe casually through my contacts until I find my director.

"When I show you her profile, you'll know how I feel about _____." I feel a little giddy like I am revealing a secret at a middle school sleepover.

When I turn the phone to reveal its screen, Brande leans in and squints.

"What!? How did you do that?" It's ____'s picture, a screenshot from a particularly thrilling zoom that we both attended. He was pontificating and I took a screenshot, meaning to add it to his own profile on my phone. But when my new director arrived, the resemblance was uncanny. Just then the game ended and fans from both teams flocked to the concession stand for postgame sustenance. Brande and I served them with secret smiles still tugging at our mouths. A dad jogged over to man the grill and soon the air was fragrant with the summer scents of hot dogs and cheeseburgers and

sweaty baseball players and I pushed up my sleeves and started to scoop Italian ice, two rainbows, and a lemon.

Brande is just as close to this town as I am. She is just as in love with Maywood as I am. But loving your home doesn't always mean spirit wear. It doesn't mean you have to join everything. Or anything. Your sense of belonging is just that--yours. Being a Maywoodian isn't just calling the Bakin' Bagels by its original name, *the* Bagel Bin, it's about friendship and working together at Summer Slam, even without a matching t-shirt.

675 Grant Ave

There is nothing fancy about lice.

Kate's text reads like a six-word memoir. When the phones of a dozen or so moms chimed, their collectively bent heads nodded in unison. As we scrolled through a flurry of replies, that first text, liked, again and again, remains a precept for Kate's outlook on life. Scrolling through her dog's Instagram (#minidoodlelife), images of happy afternoons, smartly dressed children, and endless natural light, the reality of this charming, idyllic, beautiful life plays out frame by frame while somewhere in the recesses of your mind lingers the cloying scent of rosemary and tea tree oil.

Kate is so very Maywood. She's on the PTA, her daughters dance for Miss Debbie, her husband coaches soccer, and she runs the local talent show. And having grown up slightly too far East in 07601, Kate has cemented her belonging to 07607 by both having worked at the IGA in her teens and, perhaps of equal weight, marrying one of our own. But then, to know Kate is to know that she belongs wherever she goes. Belonging is a peculiar state. Belonging can feel like a birthright or something worth fighting for or working toward or easing your way into . . . belonging can be an olive branch or a secret branding. It is when you are both accepted and accepting that you understand belonging. In her post-White House memoir, Michelle Obama tells us that as women we cannot have it all. And that any woman claiming she does or can is faking it. Michelle writes that after living the life of the first day. Kinda hits you right in the gut. I'm not even sure that I have worked out what having it all means and now I have been told that I can't. Nobody tells Kate.

Looking at the list of friends' names on the group chat, I do not sort them into homemakers and career gals. I don't think *oh she's not from here* as long as it's not Rochelle Park. There are so many pieces to this: your family, your home, your career, your community, your church, your country, your outfit, your pet's Instagram page. It is something to consider: letting some of it go. This idea can be freeing. Rather than a smug belittling of people whose choices are different, just accept them. Or just accept that Kate can do it all. Or accept people whose lives have a wash and wear look to them instead of a fresh from the dry cleaners look. But Kate's box pleats could cut butter. And I'd wager she ironed that dress herself or it was delivered from Fit 'N Fashion Cleaners. So put together, so involved, you would think that Kate was faking if it weren't for the lice.

When a letter comes home from school informing you that a student in your son or daughter's class has lice, your mind instinctively scrolls through the roster. Maywood is so small that you can easily begin to text a third of the moms in a class of twenty, and while you are furiously typing those messages, another third will be texting you. Narrowing down *student zero* is not about pointing fingers or shaming a child but about sanity for moms. If the child in question is often seen whispering with their head bent alongside your child, if their cubby is adjacent to your kid's cubby, and if that kid ate dinner at your house last night are all indicators for how nutty you can get--the internal loudspeaker in your head intoning Defcon 1.

It was in the same chat that we RSVPd to Sherry's annual holiday party that the topic of discussion switched from ugly sweaters to infestations without a pause in the action. Kate texted first, about lice, and it all went to hell:

Kate: *Hey guys, I just want to let you know that __ had lice.*

It was professionally treated this morning.

I'm letting you know because I don't want your kids to get it

Or for you to spend $700 on treatments like I just did.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "The head louse, or Pediculus humanus capitis, is a parasitic insect that can be found on the head, eyebrows, and eyelashes of people." Another point made repeatedly on the CDC website is that "Head lice are not known to spread disease." Lice often prefer clean hair and suspect personal hygiene is not the cause of the infestation. Lice aren't from dirty homes or dirty kids and they are so easily transferred especially among younger children, that there is no shame in finding a few nits. The narrative that lice prefer clean hair does not help with the shame. I have read the inserts in the Nix boxes and they bring no comfort. These women have been to my home and I have been to theirs. We all know that we are good parents, keep clean and safe homes, love our children, whatever it takes to not ever get lice because no one cares what CDC says. You get lice and you are a bad parent and everyone knows. Kate was embarrassed and within the hour a few nits had grown into one big louse-y epidemic.

Kate: *I figure that if it can happen to me it can happen to anyone*

Kate said this without pretension. It wasn't that she was better than any of us as parenting or housekeeping or lice-checking. What she meant was that we are all the same. That we all belong to this community where we might be a little judge-y and gossipy sometimes but we are all in this together because this is where we belong. And as within any close-knit community, the lice-fearing frenzy spread at a rate three times over the rate of the lice transmission. The effect was a trying combination of FOMO (Fear of Missing

Out) and NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard). Once the confessions began, every mother in the chat detailed their struggles with combing through endless damp curls, heads doused in rosemary and tea tree. Each nit was cataloged, every nymph a chance to catch it early, and the few sly sesame seed adults, ready to leap from one head to another with carnival-like skill. No one wanted to miss out on having been victimized by the epidemic. We were unified in our embarrassment and that took away some of the sting.

Kate has three children: a son that is a year older than my daughters, a daughter the same age as my son, and then a second daughter a year or two younger. Although the ages and genders of our children have never completely aligned, there are still plenty of townie events we have in common. Girl Scout camp is one of those events. Like lice, Girl Scout camp is not fancy. Kate, however, always appears at the mess hall in a charming mix of Lululemon and Patagonia, possibly something with the camp logo that she just picked up at the canteen and was able to re-purpose in a cute and trendy way. Her daughters most often are just as put together and her son, as far as sons go, toes the line. Her husband often shows up for events untucked, his nod to independence perhaps but it really comes off as an almost perfect foil. It's a counterweight in some ways. Helps us trust the narrative that the rest of the fancy is organic.

Kate's job, of course, is PR. Her job is other people's image which may be why she is so concerned with her own. Except maybe she isn't. Kate isn't concerned with what people think of her; Kate really likes fancy things. She would rather take the extra five minutes to get a piping bag than to use a spatula. Why not wear the matching headband if you have the matching headband? Yes, post a picture of that gorgeous charcuterie board because everyone loves to look at beautiful things. If you have the drive, the know-how,

the ambition, the skill, and (God Bless her) can find the time, why wouldn't you be fancy? Live and let live, they say.

And according to the CDC, that's the new approach to lice.

Lauren: _____ *is pissed! He said they used to do routine checks years ago. But I just read the new CDC recommendations and policy and one of the titles was "Let Lice Live." The CDC says lice do not cause a real health risk, so kids who have it are no longer excluded from schools and HIPPA laws protect information from being disclosed. So it is up to the parents to spread the word and keep on top of it!*

Kate: *Economy sized lice spray, they should have a lice council*

Amela: *5 kids out today, including the teacher*

The hysterical waxes and wanes. It was funny reading through the texts. Sitting in the bathroom with every light blazing, I combed through all four of my children's heads. I looked at the pictures the other moms had posted. Was that a nit? Was that dandruff? Lint?

Jeanine: *Wine and lice check party, anyone?*

Our insatiable need to come together as a community overrides the communicability of the teensy vermin. Kate absolutely did have a wine party in the middle of the lice epidemic. And it absolutely was fancy. It was a reprieve. We gathered and sipped and laughed and nibbled and gossiped. Everyone who attended felt incredibly included and anyone who missed it felt mildly rebuffed. We talked about nothing of importance and sometimes those conversations are the most important of all because on Monday morning, Kate had to pull her daughters' hair back into those tight, slick-backed

buns, so smooth and shiny that Robert Palmer would be jealous. Sunday night the phones chimed again.

Beth: *Do you tip the lice people?*

Another six words that tell a whole story.

Kate: *My head is itching*

And i don't have it

I'm getting nuts

I need a bubble

ANd I want the girls' heads covered next week

Is that nuts?

Kate doesn't just like fancy. She likes control. We all do. And the more you take on in life, the more control you need; sometimes this also means the less in control you feel. The argument about having it all and whether or not it can be done may not even be addressing the right question. It's about tea tree oil and box pleats. It's about laughing at yourself before you laugh at someone else. It's about sometimes serving frozen vegetables. Or frozen dinners. Or take-out. It's about having amazing self-confidence at work, and then crumbling when someone mentions lice but then your friends rally around you. That's having it all. Because it does take a village. To do anything, even treat lice. So just when we thought we were done with those little buggers, Beth sent out her SOS and we went back into action.

Sherry: *maybe we should carpool to the lice place, not*

Sara: *whoever was Santa @ MEM should be checked ASAP!*

Kerry: *Lice-free zone at lunch, like the nut-free zone, they need a nit-free zone!*

And to prove our lasting solidarity in the fight against lice, we donated a gorgeous basket full of economy-size bottles of Fairy Tales Rosemary Repel Shampoo, and Daily Hair Spray, a Nix Lice Treatment Kit, and of course, a bottle of wine! Sometimes having it all is only possible when you accept a certain messiness, a touch of jealousy, and a case of lice are part of *the all*. And being part of that all is everything.

341 Maywood Ave

At the corner of Maywood and Magnolia, stands a three-story, cedar shake Georgian Colonial hand-painted for years by an Alberse with a 50/50 mix of Sears brand medium brown wood stain and linseed oil. Across the street is a tall, gray side-hall Colonial and, in it still, live the O'Connell family. To the left were the unmarried Toriello sisters Rose and Helen, and then the Schiemers, further down are the Turners and then the reform temple, then Tammy's house, then the Pavlicks, then Angela & Rosie, then the Donovans . . . Many of the families have left but just as many have stayed. When I walk up and down the block, if I listen hard enough, I can hear my father's voice.

"1983," my father called out as he flung a handful of change into the neighbor's above-ground pool. In the Turners' backyard, Catherine and I dove down into the chilly water, searching feverishly along the bottom of the wrinkled liner and then resurfacing to glimpse at the coin's date in the dim light of the permanently festive party lights from the garage's gutter, only to submerge again in search of a 1983 coin.

After begging him to call more years, eventually, we would lose interest or energy and the game would end. Catherine and I would float with our heads just barely above the surface, our toes hooked on the inner tube from a tracker trailer tire, our presence secreted from the murmurs and laughter of the adults in the yard. Inside the tire's loop was room for just our two heads and we would talk in hushed tones, echoed against the worn rubber and cooling water, discussing the issues most important to seven and eight-year-olds. Those nights were magical.

My father was the fun parent. His idea of quality father-daughter time ranged from repairing ancient electrical outlets in the basement of the house we both grew up into sneaking home-popped popcorn in a crinkled paper bag into *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Late-night swimming in that pool was just a perk for Catherine and me while he and Joe Turner and Catherine's brother Keil worked tirelessly to complete the pull-tab curtain that served at the rear wall of the Turners' garage. He taught me how to ride a bike, how to shuck clams, why as Catholics we confess our sins, that every good sauce begins with a roux, he made me memorize Red-Right-Ring-Return, and he promised me that no matter what happened, we would all somehow be alright.

My father was the sixth child of eight, his five sisters named Mary (Mary Jane, Mary Margaret, Mary Claire, Mary Pat, and Mary Ann) and three boys named James, Gerard, and Paul. Gerard, my father, woke us up on Saturday morning with Tchaikovsky and bacon. It was only after we were out of bed that he'd play the Beatles.

He and his brother Paul were Irish twins, born in October and then August. My grandmother, Mrs. Margaret Alberse, who was both a nurse and a Catholic explained to me once that breastfeeding was the most effective way to plan out your children. "Or not," she had said and taken a sip of gin. Peg, as her friends called her, had named my father Gerard after St. Gerard, the patron saint of pregnant women. St. Gerard is also the patron saint of prostitutes, a fact my father would always remind my grandmother of when she invoked the saint's name. The expression Irish twins, sometimes referred to as Catholic twins, is slang that some find quaint, some find offensive. The term originated in the late nineteenth century as a disparaging term associated with Irish immigration to the United States. The implication was that groups of close-in-age siblings were a negative

characteristic of large Irish Catholic families linked to their views on contraception. My grandmother did not live to see my children born but now that I have children of my own, the term Irish twins irks me in another way. Having two babies in a year is not just like having twins. It is not at all like having twins. I know this because I have triplets and when I had what some have called an Irish quadruplet (a fourth baby just a year later) it was not the same. Not. At. All.

My grandmother also warned against sleeping with wet hair. This advice may have had more to do with setting your hair in curlers than with physiological repercussions. My grandmother was dedicated to her family, to her home, to her faith. When her job at Holy Name Hospital took her out of the house, her youngest three were left in the care of a German nursemaid. These twin images of her being both the perfect 1950s housewife and a strong career woman remind me of many of my friends; women are often torn between these roles, thinking they have to choose. But even with her work and her endless volunteering, Peg still was home to have my grandfather's supper ready for the table every night at 6 o'clock sharp, regardless of which train he caught from the city. This hardline for dinner prep left my father's childhood meals bereft of crisp vegetables and juicy meats save for those rare weekend meals when Jim, my grandfather, was home to pull the steak from the oven while it was still cool in the center. My grandmother preferred to start early and leave things to simmer. My grandfather did not like to wait too long, rather sooner than later. His steak was black and blue, our what I was raised to call Alberse-purple.

My grandparents were like that in nearly everything they did. She went one way and he the other. Jim and Peg Alberse were as much alike as styrofoam and silk but they

were married nearly fifty years when he dies. On the porch at their beach house, on the small table between the pair of wicker chairs where they sat in the evenings for a drink, watching the sunset, there was always an ashtray full of peanuts. My grandmother would only buy peanut M&Ms, the kind her husband likes. She would savor the chocolate and then daintily spit the peanut into her handkerchief and then place it in the ashtray. My grandfather loved those peanut M&Ms. After he died, she still bought the peanut M&Ms. As she spat out the peanuts, one by one, as a reminder of how very different people can love each other very much. My own parents were also very different. No peanut M&Ms for them, though. They divorced when I was twelve.

When my father was twelve, he accidentally burned down the garage at 341. It was not until after my parents' divorce when they sold the house we had all had grown up in that the new people finally built another garage. My father also set a small fire in the music room but blamed his sister Claire for that one. She had been on the telephone with a girlfriend, my father remembered, and wouldn't hang up. Had she simply answered his question about candle wax the fire could have easily been avoided. His mother called him Gerard, her accent swallowing the second r; the rest called him Rod. He was clever and funny. He drank cheap beer but Beefeater gin. He loved good food and good friends. He always spoke his mind, even when it hurt him, even when it hurt you. Professionally he was a technological whiz but personally, he was a Luddite. He had a goldfish named Gil because he absolutely loved *What About Bob?* He never watched commercial television. He once was pulled over for riding his bicycle while intoxicated. He loved the color green. He wore nightgowns. He loved to play poker but only when camping.

His voice was low and rumbly. In high school, his lamb chops made up for the lack of hair on the top of his head. In 1967, after all of the fish in the principal's fish tank had died of unnatural causes, my father was asked to leave an elite all-boys Catholic school and complete his senior year at the regional public high school where he met my mother. Even though *All in the Family* wouldn't air for a few more years, my father's yearbook picture is a ringer for Michael "Meathead" Stivic. When Rob Reiner was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director for *A Few Good Men*, somebody sent over a round of drinks to our table offering congratulations. He played along because whoever sent the drinks was clearly excited to buy Reiner a drink so why would he take that away from some stranger? And now we both have a story to tell.

When my father died he donated his body to science. No shit. The Robert Wood Johnson Medical School Anatomical Association Body Program. That meant no funeral, really, because no body. They took it to "procure specimens for medical research, surgical training, and educational programs." They send you the cremated remains after the donation has served its purpose. That's what their website says, anyway. We had a memorial service with some flowers and photos and an empty casket that the funeral home supplied. I cannot imagine why they have such a thing. It was the same funeral home for Catherine's dad, all of those years ago, and the same one for Catherine, just a few years ago. There is only one funeral home for Catholics in my town.

Living in the town where you grew up, where your dad grew up, means lots of people come to pay their respects. It was overwhelming the number of people that came and told me stories about my father--many which I had never heard and that now I can't remember. We held the repast at my house, inviting anyone that wanted to join. The

Turners and the Donovans were there, and the O'Connells. Friends from each generation that had lived in town came to say goodbye. We served gin. And good food. And we reminded each other of my father's catchphrase, which he'd had printed on pens and business cards and scrawled under his name on hundreds of birthday and holiday cards, We'll Be Alright. And we will be. We will be alright.

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