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-Childhood Stories-

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I am the small house tucked away behind the two confusing apartment complexes. The one with the six large Italian Cypresses in the back. The family that occupied me in the fleeting years of 1997 to 2017 had installed an above-ground jacuzzi in my backyard, and before that, in its place they had a small, green, turtle-shaped sand pit for the kids to play in. With the family there was once a white dog, then there was a brown, old, skin-condition afflicted, deaf, dog. I will never forget the time when a light fixture once fell out of my ceiling above the family's kitchen table. The little girl that was setting the placemats for dinner was mortified, convinced it was her fault.

I always enjoyed the colder months. The people had a skewed, Southern-Californian understanding of what the cold is; nonetheless, I provided them with my roaring fireplace during the cold winter months of October through February. Especially on those days in late December, my flames emanated off of the inhabitants' warm smiles as they exchanged gifts and welcomed more family members inside. They stayed inside the house for the entirety of those days, not once leaving for any reason, not in any rush, just enjoying one another's company, and hopefully enjoying my presence along with it. Oftentimes, during that slow period of time when the year was about to turn over, the family would flee my normalcy, my safety, for the shelter of their vacation home in Arizona.

I could tell that the summer months were my inhabitants' favorites. Around the time that the family of two became three, then four, I would frequently come to life, filled to the brim with their loved ones, their family members, hosting gatherings and birthday parties in the expansive backyard with the lush grass that the dad maintained and mowed almost every weekend. Only when bouncy houses were inflated and came to life, or when croquet stakes were implanted into the ground during a summer barbeque was the yard neglected.

Geographically speaking, I sit right in between where the city of Orange becomes Santa Ana. I am located close to the Seven Eleven and what was once the Gold Video DVD rental. Although presently the days of DVD rental are long past, one of my favorite memories of this family is when the mom would take the two little girls on a walk to Gold Video every Thursday, to pick something out to watch that night. On those Thursday nights where the girls sat inside my living room eating Jiffy Pop and watching movies, the dad sat in my garage, surrounded by his friends, playing games of poker often late into the night.

As the girls grew up, my backyard got dug up while the youngest daughter showed an aptitude for becoming a softball pitcher. After careful observation, I came to notice how this same girl often seemed to want to sit inside and play with her Barbie dollhouse instead. On the weekends when she didn't have any practices or games, she hid away, almost ritualistically, into the area that was considered her room, sitting on the bed with a book in hand. She would sit still,

tranquil, with the quiet comfort of my four walls providing a safe space for her—her own space—not leaving the peace of my room. She was accompanied by the fictitious world of her books and her solitude for hours.

On those weekends where she did have to practice, or had to play games, the dad coached her softball teams. This often led to the father and his youngest butting heads, causing the little girl to cry. She took everything too personally, especially when Dad became Coach. Maybe she was too young to see her talents, but they were evident in her father's eyes, and they made him proud. I think that's why he pushed her so much. On the occasions they were practicing in the backyard and she couldn't quite get a pitch right, she would flee, to her father's dismay, to her quiet four walls with tears plummeting from her eyes.

Eventually, especially after the girls got older and the tears got more infrequent, this family outgrew me. The oldest daughter went off to Las Vegas for college to study English, and the remaining three inhabitants moved into the nearby house that they would visit for Thanksgiving celebrations.

In their nearly 20 years living here, the one thing that always stood out to me was that this family knew how to have fun. They enjoyed every season, even the "bitter" Southern California cold, and most importantly, they enjoyed each other's company. They were present for each other, as they knew that that was truly all they had, but, I think, that each other was all they really needed.

I hope they know that even though they outgrew me, I won't outgrow them. I want the oldest sister to once again come back and raise a family of her own here. I want the green sand pit again, I want more dogs rescued from the pound, I want the croquet stakes messing up my backyard lawn, and I want the memories of this family to live on again.

I housed this family through their very beginnings, to the extended period of their children's lifetimes. Currently, I house another family; I welcome them in, providing them with a place to grow up and make memories much like I have in the past. Despite the present occupants, the other family stays in my heart; in my foundations, in the firepit, in the green grass that still grows in the backyard. Back then, I felt like I was all they had. I was the conduit to the memories, and the happiness, along with the badness. Now, I sit mute—and reflect, and I realize that the role I played in their lives was probably insignificant— they may not feel any different now than they did when they lived here. Perhaps, instead of me, it was the present moment they were taking advantage of. I hope that is still the present moment they live in and make memories in, regardless of where they are, how old they are, or what they are doing. As the daughters finish school, begin their lives, and lose the vividness of their memories, there is still some hope left

that they once again play in my backyard, but this time, with their kids, but still remember, that all they really have is now.

3097 Thistle Drive, Lake Havasu City, AZ

I remember the first time there was a bikini-clad little girl, ready for a day on the lake, that sat inside my small rectangular window panes that faced the front yard full of cacti. It was a valiant effort to hide away from her older cousins; being the youngest of the cousins, she was overly sensitive and always the one to be picked on.

It was during this time, with the four, then five, little kids running around the house, that inside my garage sat a red boat. For most of the time, the red boat was dormant, for the kids were in school and the adults were at work, about a four hour's drive away, so the red boat patiently sat, waiting to jump onto the water during the blaze of summertime.

During these days, I remember the small children playing the Spongebob DVD so many times that the disc got scratched, yet they would still watch it. I also recall all the toys that would come to life, all the board games, and the music that constantly played throughout the house, the same music I can recall from decades ago when I was visited more frequently by those adults who now take their kids out here.

Before the time of the kids, I remember the times that there would be so many adults in the house that people slept on the floor, on the couch, and even outside. It was hot enough to do so, sometimes so hot in the summer that temperatures would get to over 120 degrees, becoming uncomfortable to touch a steering wheel or sit down on a metal chair. I remember those nights that cooled down to a modest 80 degrees, with my visitors sitting outside, talking and drinking beer, enjoying the heat and the escape I offered them. Listening to the same variety of alternative music over and over again, considering it the best few albums they've ever heard, they got older but their music never aged with them.

My timeline is tricky. I housed many people throughout the years I belonged to this clan. I watched people grow up, and turn from strangers into family. I quite frequently housed the two older women who sat around watching Food Network all day. I housed that group of college students for that one weekend who definitely weren't supposed to be here, and definitely were not supposed to take the red boat out onto the water. I also housed people who did not realize at the time that they would expect to become a regular on my premises. Once they did become regulars, and not those who just ran through the house as a joke, they eventually brought children there, who eventually became the college students who weren't supposed to be there that one weekend.

During the wintertime though, I was not always left alone. Sadly, the red boat remained silent inside the garage, only getting to say "hello" when somebody would throw a load of laundry in the adjacent washer. But I would still be here, waiting to shelter the families trying to

escape-vacation, relax, and get away-to celebrate the New Year with the same people that they lived not even five minutes away from back home.

Despite my weather conditions being dry and hot during the summer, I often converted myself into a shelter for my visitors during the inevitable monsoon season. While I took my role during these times seriously, it was an auspicious event that one time the father took his seventeen year old daughter onto my roof with him to watch the lightning and drink her first beer with her dad, uncle, and cousin. I proudly shifted from feeling like a shelter to feeling like I was a lookout, a conductor for something more. Something that was bigger than my four walls, and something that I could never again capture.

After that last moment, when the family left and the girl went to resume the boredom of high school, I could feel myself getting older. My doors were unlocked less frequently, my garage was rarely opened, and my beds were almost never slept in. I remember that I began to flood one time, and the family that came to greet me had to deal with a huge mess. The food in my pantry began to expire as the contents of my closets were emptied out. I no longer felt the joy of being occupied, I began to feel like their burden of existence.

Sure, my outer foundations had visible cracks, and I had a broken roof, and I had old, scratchy carpet, but I felt as if I was still a nice home, a getaway. This feeling of being unwanted consumed my interior and exterior, and the ultimate feeling of loneliness was when the red boat was removed from inside my garage. The one friend I had to sit with inside my solitude had fled, hopefully to escape this feeling of abandonment, and once again, return to the lake.

I longed for the two young girls to still run around in their bikinis, waiting for another day on the river. I wanted the older adults to cook in the kitchen, play games on my wooden table, watch movies on my TV, and just hang out, enjoying one another's company. I enjoyed their company, even if they didn't know it. I wanted them to feel it. Even though I knew how much I was becoming a problem, I wanted them to realize that I wanted to give them a space to relax, not to worry or feel any pressure.

Memories, secrets, and stories are what I am built of. On the exterior, I may present a little shabby, but my walls hold a lifetime full of inside jokes, memories, stories, and moments shared that intertwine and connect a family's legacy. As I was slowly pulled apart, gutted of my interior possessions, I realized that these memories are now no longer mine to keep, nor foster. I see the people leaving, gutting me of my final memories of them, leaving me with an uncomfortable sense of emptiness. Up until the last time they visited me to remove the final parts of what made this house theirs, I got a glimpse of the emptiness in them as they finally realize I no longer house the red boat, and that makes me no longer the same house.

The Cousinhood, told by Grandma

They call themselves the cousinhood, and I'm just Grandma. In sequence from youngest to oldest, I watch from the kitchen the littlest girl with the temper, the other little girl that acts more like a boy, the boy with the curly hair, and the oldest boy sit on the couch and watch the *Lion King*. I anticipate them synchronously bursting into tears as soon as it is over, which I take as my queue to start the movie over again.

As they watch the movie, and as they spend the weekend hanging out in my house, I reflect on how rewarding it is to have become a grandma to this little clan. I see that there is no career choice nor life choice that I could have made differently that would've made me happier or more fulfilled with my life as it currently is; putting on a big pot of water to boil some pasta, making them their favorite sauce. They think that I put magic in it. But I'll tell you the truth, much like I did when they were older and all independently asked me for the recipe: that all it is is butter, tomato sauce, and a little garlic.

Another silly inside joke between us is that I have convinced them I'm Mother Nature. I'll tell you the truth about that too— I'm not. Anytime we go out for what we call a "nature walk," I talk to them about the trees, the flowers, the grass; the beautiful scenery that is the backdrop of our lives. One time, as the kids were picking up pinecones and leaves, I offhandedly told them that I was Mother Nature. They took my comment so seriously that every time they are graced with my presence, all they want to do is go outside. They get to feel like V.I.P.s, graced with the presence of Mother Nature herself. (But I really am just Grandma). Sometimes I forget how serious little kids can take certain things— they want to make a good impression on Mother Nature.

When we're not strolling about the neighborhood, it is normal to see them in the house fighting over who gets to sit on "the moon," the small piece of furniture in the kids room that was a deep indigo color with patterns of moons and stars printed all over. I see the toy box full of dress up costumes and jewelry that the littlest girl will inevitably want to play with, shamefully hiding it from her cousins but excitedly engaging with them when they cave in and all dress in princess outfits alongside her.

I see the countless toys, the RC Cars without remotes that their grandpa still gave them for Christmas, and I know just how much love these kids are surrounded by. I also see how much love they have for another, spending time with each other over the weekends to the point where it seems as if they are brothers and sisters rather than cousins. Even though they will bicker, argue, sometimes hide in a room and cry, and pick on each other, I still hope that one day they will look back on these memories with nothing but fondness. I know that in between these bad

moments, when they fight or get upset, they will think back to these times and remember how all they had was each other.

From where I stand now, with the littlest one of the original four grandkids (the one with the temper), about to graduate college, and the actual littlest one (the fifth, later addition to the grandkids) having just turned thirteen years old, I still find it hard to see them as anything but the little group of kids splashing around in the pool. In the present, it seems that the cousinhood that was once inseparable has grown up. Now, maybe, all they have is their memories with one another, but I still hope that they can once again see the present moment as an opportunity to seize and make more memories. The only sentiment I hold for them now is love, and the dream that one day, they will reunite again. I hope that they will once again celebrate Thanksgiving together, with their families, and hang out together by the pool during summers, and live close together, so close that they are once again more like siblings than they are cousins.

Patches, the Thanksgiving Turkey Pinata

Every single year around the end of November, right before strings of red and green-colored lights are about to come up, before drones of way too chipper music blare from every department store, I come to life. Much like the lights, this is my time to shine; however—unlike the light—my death is imminent. But I'm not afraid; I always seem to come back for the next year, but just a little differently. The family must like me, or admire me for my graceful, provocative presence.

My name is Patches – I don't remember where I came from, or how many times I've been beaten to death – thanks to this family who mistreats me every single year. For some reason though, I keep coming back just to die again. From what I can recall, each year, I fly in the sky, much higher than my actual species could ever dream of, then get promptly beaten out of my flight, and plummet to my death by this unnecessarily vengeful gathering of people. I think that they adore me though. I think they gather on this very day just to celebrate my being, although it has concerning undertones to it. For instance, they always cook a fellow member of my species in the oven all day and feast on it, before congregating in the front yard to perform my yearly ritual. Although this feels like some sort of celebration, they still swing on me and beat me down to the ground, making a mockery of my existence. When I fall and my inner contents scatter across the ground, the humans swarm around me, invading my privacy during this difficult time, laughing at my deceased carcass and collecting my entrails.

I don't know why my tragic death occurs each year at this same time, why these people do this to me, but I know that I usually regenerate, which I am grateful for. This celebration is always really fun—until the end.

Each year my construction varies; I am assembled with different parts and materials, but I think I am still the same. However, I couldn't tell you if I truly am. The yearly beatings have taken a toll on my memory. I'll tell you what I think happens though.

Every single year, a week before my special day, the dad gathers the kids around the white kitchen table and supplies them with newspapers, glue, and water—the foundations of my being. Each year as I'm beaten to death, I have parts of me reassembled, or remade completely, replaced and worked on with my underlying intention to survive this year's ceremonial sacrifice.

I certainly can tell you that it is the same process each year as I undergo my reconstruction. The two little girls intently work on cutting up the newspapers into long strips while the dad supervises and begins constructing my body. Each year, I seem to take on a new design, and they seem to find new goodies and jokes to share with the family for the holiday.

Maybe all I am to them is a vessel for a strange family tradition, but I personally consider myself to be more than that.

Initial preparations conclude for me about two days before my big day, and then I am stuffed with old Halloween candy, Del Taco sauce packets, other random goodies and pictures the two little girls drew, and I am transported to make my final descent. Every year I feel a little different and the gathering of people seems a little different too. One year, there was a yellow puppy in need of a home that arrived on the doorstep. Soon, that dog was there every single year I was, locked outside the sliding glass doors as the family sat down to eat their ridiculously fancy meal at an absurdly early time of day. Even though there would be slight variances in attendance, it was pretty much the same: the group of people, the same house, and most importantly, my same presence in the front yard. Everyone, especially the children, wanting to rush through the unnecessary preparations and the gaudy dinner, anticipated when it would finally be time to celebrate me.

Throughout the day, as I patiently waited and peered inside the house, I would notice the tiny grandma in the kitchen, running around, offering to do everything for everyone. She was the one who put in all the work behind the scenes, making the frivolous dinner a success. You could tell she ran the house, and that everybody absolutely cherished her. She was a caring, loving grandma, a busybody that was always consoling a child or running to the store. Although the set of characters changed a bit throughout the years, the four cousins welcoming a fifth, the family remained close and happy, the tiny grandma with the bright blue eyes always constant. Most importantly, on my special day, she was the one who cared most about my wellbeing. She was the only one to refrain from hitting me when the time came, pleading with the two young girls to not beat me up as the two young boys egged the other adults on to swing on me violently with a baseball bat. However, she was the one who always seemed to deliver my final blow, the entire family getting a kick out of watching their grandma— also known to some as their mom, their mother-in-law, or their aunt— absolutely knock me out of the sky, my yearly fall from grace at the hands of a woman who did not want to harm me. She seemed to change though, because once I had fallen, when I was beat down and miserable, a smile would slowly spread onto her face and quickly erupt into laughter that was shared with the entire family.

The year of my final descent, when I ceased to exist, was when the four little cousins had all grown up, with the fifth one, who was now bigger, and with long, curly, stringy blond hair in tow. The now high school and college-age girls invited their small cousin over to their white kitchen table one night and began my initial planning and designing. Paper mache commenced, and as the week led up to my honorable celebration, the high school-aged girl worked at creating my lavish feathers and elaborate design as the smaller one created some art and wacky prizes for my interior.

This year was like the other ones, I think: same people, same place, but you could tell that this was a distinct period of change for these people, and for this house. Everyone looked a little older, down to the yellow puppy who now, in his old age, has a little white speckled around his muzzle. The only constant serving my memory right is the tiny grandma, still lively and attentive as ever. As she worked to make an absurd amount of mashed potatoes, yams, green beans, even a fruit salad, and way too many desserts, the rest of the family just sat around. The oldest of her sons tended to my dead counterpart, cooking him in an oven for almost four hours, while squeezing in a few minutes of watching the people on the TV toss around a ridiculously shaped ball. The four little cousins who once spent every weekend together were reunited as older cousins with a lot less in common and a little less camaraderie. They talked about what these days of my celebration were like when they were kids. I still felt their excitement, though, as they exited out of the house to the front yard for my ceremony when their dinner concluded. I don't think anybody decided that this would be my last celebration, but as the kids were, for the most part, grown up, and parts of the family were moving away, I suddenly ceased to come to life every late November. I do get this feeling, however, that the tiny grandma still puts on her apron to prepare this same meal for the family she loves, much like how I was lovingly beaten and reassembled year after year.

Grandpa Bill's Rolex

Tick tock, tick tock. Sometimes I question whether or not I serve any purpose other than to pass the time away. I used to reside in a jewelry box, but one day I was suddenly moved to a bedside table, where I currently lay, tick tocking the time away. There must be a significance to me, a reason why this girl keeps me next to her bed.

In value, I guess I am special. I am a Rolex, dating back to the 1980s. I guess you could say I've seen a lot, but I still want to see more. I want to be worn, to journey outside the four walls I sit in every day, journey outside of the jewelry box I was entombed in for years. The only change in scenery has been being moved from one room in a house to another. I want to fulfill my duties as a watch. I want to be proudly adorned on a wrist, but nobody ever wears me, and I can't tell them to. I'm a watch—all I can do is keep the time.

I think I belonged to somebody in her family. I don't know why I ended up on this girl's bedside table though, but I like it here. It is comfortable, and she will occasionally look over at me, even put me on, laughing to herself as I sag off her wrist. I would love it if she wore me out. She just needs to take out a few links, then I'll be her perfect size, good to go. She keeps me in pristine condition because I'm a prestigious watch, and I know that I deserve the opportunity to leave this room. I hate sitting and collecting dust, becoming infuriated as each morning the girl chooses from her variety of other, much less cooler watches. Those other watches may seem more practical, and I tell myself that's why she chooses them everyday. I tell myself that I am here for a greater purpose than keeping time and accessorizing, and I am just waiting for the day she decides to wear me out....

As I sit here, navigating these obsessive thoughts, questioning every little part of my existence, I am suddenly shaken out of my rumination once I hear hurried footsteps headed my way, then, wait—is this it? Is she coming for me?

She clumsily opens the door and snatches me up from the same place I've been patient, waiting, keeping the time. This is not how I envisioned my first time going out with this girl. I had hoped she would've taken out some links so I was a perfect fit, cleaned me up, made sure I was exactly on the right time, but instead, she seems to be in a hurry. I feel fear as I can hear an uncharacteristically loud noise, blasting through the hallway as we make our descent. I can hear feet stomping about the house, voices raising, and the front door opening and closing. The house has suddenly become a zoo, and, unbeknownst to me, I have suddenly become the main attraction. As we venture outside the quiet of our room, I make my first public appearance in a while, anticipating a flood of happiness and pride, but instead, I get the feeling that something is a little off. No time to overthink now, though, perhaps it's just I'm a few minutes off of the right time.

I relax a little bit more as she goes around to show me off, with me proudly on display on her wrist, but once she approaches these two older boys, camped out in the corner of the house, one of them takes no time to yank me off the girl's wrist and jam me onto his. It's a tight fit. The weird feeling I had before was not because I was a few minutes off. How ridiculous for me to have thought that- of course I'm perfectly on time. As I currently sit in shock and fear on a foreign wrist, it becomes blatantly obvious to why I had this ominous feeling. I try to get comfortable, but he and the other older boy are standing there, inspecting my every inch. He even takes me off his wrist to further examine me, as if I am not already perfect. After a thorough inspection that feels like interrogation, the words escape their lips that any inanimate object of such high prestige would recognize:

“Fake.”

That's right. They called me a fake. I can't believe it. The girl stands there too, listening to their drawn-out, bullshit explanation of my “fakeness.” To my delight, after their spiel is exhausted, she simply shrugs and puts her hand out to take me back. I know how attached she is to me; I have no doubt that she is going to save me from these strangers.

As she waits with her hand out, the boy's grip around me gets a little tighter. He puts me back on his wrist. It is such a bad fit that if he were to wear me daily, he would have to add some links. I don't want that though—I want my links removed, to be on the girl's wrist. I would even settle for being placed back on the bedside table, or even back in the jewelry box. I really don't like this wrist. I know my worth, and I don't want to be on the wrist of some phony who thinks I'm a phony. I would rather be on the smaller wrist of a girl who can appreciate a good watch.

In a state of utter shock and disappointment, I am being walked towards the door atop the too-big wrist, leaving my home. Next thing after those catastrophic events, I am taken far away from anywhere I've known before. It's kind of nice, a different change of pace, as I'm finally receiving the treatment I had dreamed of: the new battery, being cleaned, making sure my timing is indeed perfect. In this new home, if I would even dare to call it that, I get to go out occasionally.

I should have savored this feeling of stardom I had so badly longed for because all of a sudden, I am being taken into this indescribable large storefront. There are tons of prototypes similar to me adorned in glass cases, and more expensive, luxury items displayed on the walls, and everything feels a little off once again, and this time I won't blame it on me being a few minutes off. I now know that it's not that. Similar to how this guy had originally looked me over, inspected me, more people hover over me, checking my condition. I glance upwards to see the boy hand the guy behind the counter some cash, and that's the last I see of that guy ever again.

Where I sit now, I am entombed in a glass case. This feels like a real zoo. I am taken out and sneered upon, a constant reminder of when I was stolen from the girl. My current residence gives me a lot of time to reflect on the strangeness of my journey: being taken from a jewelry box, to a bedside table, to a new jewelry box, to the present; this glass case where I sit; once again, tick-tocking the time away. It feels full circle to be sitting around again, feeling slightly useless, but admired. I do miss the familiarity of the girl. I know I probably wouldn't be doing anything other than what I am doing now, but I feel like I wouldn't be here if I were never taken from that girl's bedside table. I cannot seem to decide which fate would be better. I like to hold out hope that she eventually was going to wear me out. As I sit here, given what seems like an infinite time to reflect and once again overthink things, I wonder where that girl is. I even wonder where the boy is. I know now that time is limited. The only thing that I had was a glimpse of what life with that girl would be like. I don't know if she misses me, but I hope that she savored that moment and remembered to enjoy it while it was happening, even though things didn't turn out the way anybody really expected.

Wherever she is now, I hope she thinks of me and remembers how important it is to focus on what you have in the present, because now I have had so much time to reflect and realize that all I had with her was that moment. All she had was that exact moment with me. I don't know if she thinks of me often, though, if she misses me. If she even acknowledges the empty spot on her bedside table, or if she's even still there. I hope she is, and I hope that she maybe still has a spot left for me.

If only she knew the true story of where I am now. I'm sure big-wrist isn't much of a truth teller, but I know this girl. I know she's smart and thoughtful with a wit that would not let her fall so carelessly for the character-defining caliber of lies that her older family members feed her. The type of lies to mar family relationships. But I just sit here now, and I don't know what happened to either of them, so I suppose it all goes unspoken, just like my truth.

Dad

“All we really have is now,” I remarked, looking at my two daughters, settled by the fireplace in our house, too big for our dwindling family of four, the house that has been shared by multiple members of my family since my father bought it in 2001. Although this is not the house where my family began, it is now the house we reside in, approximately a five minute’s drive from the house we lived in for almost twenty years.

My two daughters sit with us. They are now in their early twenties, reunited while the youngest one is home from school for the holidays. It’s kind of funny how I have witnessed their entire lives thus far, much like my mother and father witnessed me grow up and begin my own life. I will always get to know the beginning and the start of theirs, how exciting it all has been, and how much more exciting it is getting. As they get older, so do I, and I look forward to seeing them grow up more. I feel these moments are beginning to be less and less, where it’s just all four of us. I don’t like to think much about the endings- the inevitability of endings—as I prefer to focus on what we have now.

As we sit by the fire and they chat away—I remain silent, reflecting on their lives, swaying in the wooden rocking chair that was once my grandfather’s. Amidst the chatter, I am miles away, isolated in my own thoughts of how I got to see the days of softball, musical theater, trips to Lake Havasu, living at our old house on Park Lane when we would go out for pizza every consecutive Sunday night. I am proud to have raised two smart and independent people. Even though they sometimes have a skewed version of how miniscule certain things in life are, and how important others are, I hope that they are starting to see things from a more mature perspective. My perspective has shown me moments with both of them on the softball field, to watching my oldest graduate with a Master’s degree, and my youngest transfer from Community College to UCSB— the first kid in our family to attend a UC for college. I know that I push them to be the best, do their best, to be successful and make smart decisions. This is sometimes where they don’t understand where I am coming from, and also why I don’t always understand their priorities. Thinking about this conflict, perhaps generational difference, I realize that the importance of their lives, my life, circulates in and around the present.

Despite accomplishments, prestigious accolades and awards, future hopes, dreams, and aspirations— even regrets from the past, even the differences in our perspectives of these things— the only thing that matters as I sit here in this rocking chair, is now.

-The Community College Years-

Rocking Chair

I remember the times that the place was packed full of four individuals and a cat, all (except the cat) diligently tasking away their days at the large dining table in the middle of the central room of the house. Every day they logged onto their laptops, headphones in, keyboards clacking, until around the time of day they usually came home from wherever they went when they usually left. It was somewhat of a disturbance to me, as I enjoyed my sunny afternoons by myself just fine, the unproductive gray cat perched atop me, snoozing, as I slowly rocked the time away. Although having the people here all the time was different from what I had become accustomed to, I enjoyed having them here to occupy the space. To actually live in the house. Sit in the chairs, maybe even sit in me from time to time. It felt nice to see them together, but the house still felt a little stuffy, crowded, and under a little bit more stress at this time.

I think that I would trade anything to go back to those times, though. Because ever since three of the people started leaving again for the day, there was still one that stuck around. Even though things seemed to be back to routine—spending most of my days empty, waiting for this family to reunite once again around when the sun goes down, I noticed a peculiar change that this one girl—the youngest, I think—never really seemed to leave. I don't have many complaints, as she kept me company, but it was different from when all four of them were there. It is different from when it was only me, though. She was an effortless companion to my quiet mornings and afternoons, studious and diligently working on the large dining table next to me, unbeknownst that I was so intent on spending this time with her. She was aloof and miles away during these days while I was basking in the joy of having company.

I always thought it was a little funny to watch this girl sit at a dining table so large, skewing her to look like a singular, small fish engulfed in an ocean. She didn't seem to notice the emptiness of her surroundings, though—or maybe my presence was enough companionship for her. I know that hers was enough for me. I was never entirely sure whatever goes on in this girl's mind, or on her laptop, but I wish that somehow I could communicate with her. So every now and then, I rocked, a little friendly

“Hello! How are you today?”

Only for her to perk her head up for the slightest pause, then resume whatever she was working on behind the screen.

One time, I mustered up the courage to ask all the questions that had been percolating in my mind, rather than go about my usual formal greeting.

“Can you hear me? I want to know what you're doing over there. Are you studying? Working? What are you spending all this time on?”

No acknowledgement, nothing. So I silenced myself. Maybe she's too busy to spend her time talking to a chair all day.

All hunched over, never leaving the laptop- long, reddish but streaked with gray hair tossed up into a pile atop her head, she looked tiny behind her computer screen. Drowning in an oversized, baggy t-shirt, I only saw her rise from her post at the head of the large, empty table, to go make another cup of coffee.

"Can you make me one?" I want to ask. But I know it's no use.

My loneliest days were the ones where she did have to leave. I would actually see her get ready for the day, get dressed, do her hair, makeup, prepare some snacks, and place the hot pink spiral key holder on her wrist like a fashionable bracelet. On those days, once she left me, she was usually gone for quite some time. Then I really had nobody to talk to, even though I know my new companion gave me little attention as it is.

Usually, when she would get ready and leave, it was around the time that everybody else returned. Sometimes, though, I had everyone together. They would act like a family, reminiscent of the days they all spent inside together, but I could always tell that the girl wanted to be alone once again, so she would go off to the room down the hall from me, and shut it. Why would she shut me out? What did I do?

"Hey! What are you doing now?" I whisper-scream to this girl.

But no response means I can only fill my time speculating. Maybe she was reading a book, or doing more work? Does she ever take breaks? Maybe she's writing something, or plotting some grand bank robbery or a riot or practicing her upcoming circus act. Those are all exaggerations that I like to imagine, but I truly don't know. This girl, even though I have spent so much time with her, I barely know her.

My favorite days are when I sit and rock, and she chooses to accompany me by sitting and working. I still talk to her, asking what she's up to. A pathetic attempt to solidify our friendship even, or just try to get her name. As I talk and rock away, she gives me the most quizzical look, expressive nature peeking out behind her subdued appearance, with a wry smile that I take as the closest thing to acknowledgement that I'll get from her. Even though I wish for more, I know that these interactions are still precious, because one day she could move on. She could find a different rocking chair, or she could find a different home. So I dismiss these fears by enjoying her company while it's in front of me. I wish that I could read her mind. Since she won't talk back to me, I want to see what's going on up there. Her mannerisms, her actions, don't seem as if she lets many people venture up with her into her thoughts. If only she knew, then

maybe she could trust me. If I could read her mind, get a response from her, anything– maybe I could fill my days with knowledge, like she does.

An Old Friend

As she held the bottle of box-dye bleach to my scalp, and tears dripped from my face down into the bathtub, I had a feeling that my hair was ruined. Not only my hair though. My entire life. Earlier that day, it felt like I had a rug pulled out from under me, and I was engaged in a free fall straight to hell.

My first, real, non-highschool boyfriend broke up with me.

But I knew who would be there to wipe away my tears. I have known Scarlett since I was eight years old. We lived down the street from one another, and she was pretty much the only person I ever hung out with, except for my family, and of course, David. Until now. No more David for now. I knew that she would have my back in this situation, and she did. But what also made me uneasy, was that she predicted it, in a bitter joke, almost six months ago. I'll never forget the sting of when what was intended to be a joke, turned out to be exactly how events panned out. It was six months later, he broke up with me, and she was the one that was there for me. It was her ominous, sarcastic way of her telling me that she didn't like him at the time, but I don't think either of us truly expected it to become reality. It hurt my feelings that she would even say something like that—she knows how much I like him.

Even before that uncanny and unsolicited comment, I knew from the start she never liked him very much, that she thought he came between us, and our years-long friendship, but maybe she was just jealous that I was the first one to get in a “serious,” after high school relationship. She stuck by me though, playing the supporting role throughout the trials and tribulations of my first relationship and most importantly, she was there for the finale. But it wasn't without the condescending feeling of “I told you so.”

As I sat in her car, crying and heartbroken, she was patient, subdued, and listened to what I had to say. After my tears were temporarily exhausted and slowed to sniffles, she took action immediately.

“You're staying with me tonight. Let's get you something to eat. Let's go do something unpredictable and crazy, let's get your mind off of everything.”

That's where the box dye came from.

Week by week, I slowly came back to life, freshly blonde after three treatments of box dye (and no toner because I like the brassy look). As I went through the breakup and the heartbreak, she was there every step of the way, like I expected, and honestly, needed. Something still makes me a little uneasy about how she had essentially manifested my fate.

Unfortunately, she was also there four weeks later when he came back. As the influx of emotions- panic, confusion, happiness, relief, flooded me and I felt frozen with anxiety, her words jolted me out of my panic.

“Remember what he did.”

Yes, I remember what he did.

“He couldn’t make up his mind, he’s immature.”

Yes, he told me we couldn’t be together because he doesn’t understand what it means to be in a relationship. He told me that he didn’t want to *be* in a relationship. That hurt.

“Think of how he’s treated you in the past. Are you really ready to forgive him?”

He would call me ungrateful.

“He broke up with you over the phone. He even pulled the cliché ‘it’s not you it’s me.’ That’s the cheesiest breakup line *ever*.”

He definitely did say that line.

However, her unwavering voice of reason in this moment sounded like a foreign language. I knew her disapproval of us getting back together was coming from a good-hearted place, but it was time for me to make a decision for myself, outside of our friendship, as an individual.

I did start seeing him again, but I didn’t tell her. Sometimes, you have to set boundaries with people and I, unbeknownst to her, no longer wanted her input on my relationship. After David and I began dating again, I didn’t think anything between me and Scar would be different. I thought we could let time pass, and things would cool down, and soon everything in my life would be perfect again– my family, my boyfriend, my best friend– I was going to have it all, once again.

I would have never expected that this decision would lead to losing my best friend in the next three months.

We sat inside a jam-packed restaurant when I decided to break the news. It was never going to be the right time, I was always going to feel uneasy about this.

“So Scar, I’m having my birthday party this Saturday, and I really want you to come. It’s country-themed, my entire family will be there, it’s going to be a lot of fun. But I also wanted to let you know that David will be there as well.”

Her face remained stonelike, as she calmly informed me that she didn't care to attend if he was going to be there. Even when we got to the car, I couldn't get any words of substance out of her. I wanted her forgiveness, or even her understanding, but I knew she was not going to budge on this one. Her feelings of betrayal were evident as she spoke in bitter, sharp staccato sentences.

It became obvious that since I had made a choice, she also had to make a choice. She became distant, no longer texting me, only speaking to me about work, and work-related topics. It was unfortunate timing that in the midst of the breakup and reunion, she just so happened to have gotten me a new job, and that she just so happened to be my supervisor.

As time went on, things did not go back to my predicted and ideal normal. Even though I got the fresh start in my relationship and the fresh start at my job, leftover negative feelings between my best friend and I lingered, and festered. It soon got to the point where the only time we spoke was at work, and she spoke to me as if she were the supervisor, I was the employee, and we had no external relationship outside of that. It sucked. We tried to talk it out, but nothing ever came of it. She constantly reiterated that I lied to her and withheld information from her, making it seem as if that was the ultimate betrayal.

“If you really consider me your best friend, you would’ve told me about this. It’s evidently important to you, and it sucks you didn’t even consider telling me, the person you claim is your best friend.”

She was hurt, but I wasn’t willing to apologize for making my decision. I got the sense that things were never going to be the same between us.

So I quit the job and I didn’t return her phone calls. I was over accepting her apologies, listening to her complaints and insecurities. She didn't deserve an apology from me. It was no longer worth it, I knew how upset she was and how our friendship would never be the same. Maintaining this friendship quickly turned into a chore, and now, with David back, I once again have everything I need. Even though we were great friends– with great memories, hopes and plans for the future once we were able to move out– it all kind of changed once David was in the picture, or back in the picture. I guess all that matters now is that I made a choice, and she made hers.

Unfortunate bathroom experience for all parties involved

Why did this man do this to me?????

But also, why did the girls let him????

I am in so much pain, my insides are killing me. I feel stuck, clogged, I cannot get anything to go down. I am about to erupt, spill water onto the floor, and make a huge mess for the two young salesgirls to clean up on this lazy Sunday afternoon at 6:00 pm, after they close the store to the public. It will be their obligation, after closing, to clean and take care of me, but they deserve it. They did this to me.

I am the toilet in the hallway to the back stockroom, and according to the two girls working and literally every other employee, I am only meant for “children and pregnant women.” But they lied and betrayed me—they let a man use me.

I had gotten no use all day, however, right before closing, they let this entire family use me. The back door was closed and I felt safe until all of a sudden this mom went in with the baby girl, then brought in the two identical twin toddlers. After they were finished, the Dad shyly entered, knowing what he was about to do. Nearly 20 minutes later, he left, knowing that the secrets only he and I knew now would soon become common knowledge to the two girls working together to close this store tonight. I gurgle and laugh at the horror and disgust that I can picture on the girls’ faces when the obnoxious pop music is silenced from the store, the front door is locked, and the cash is being counted. I predict a big argument over who gets to count the cash tonight— and who gets to do the cleaning.

This family has been loyal customers to this specific store; the girls recognized them as regulars, and it was just their luck today that they decided to open the Carter’s Credit Card. The two girls probably thought they were safe from disaster, or that it was the polite thing to do to open my facilities up to them whilst they shop.

Getting a credit card application is a lucrative thing here— it helps to ease the impossibly high quota and appease the impossibly demanding boss. So, as a courtesy and display of excellent customer service, the salesgirl with the long hair and glasses obliged the family by opening the door to my entrance for them.

As the other salesgirl, with long hair, but without glasses, swept the floor in preparation for closing time, she noticed the wide open door, but realized it had been open for quite some time. Sweetly, even innocently, she asked the mom,

“Are your kids still in there?”

“Oh, no, it’s my husband.”

The girl went along sweeping the floor, and once she had gone over the entirety of the store and realized that the man still occupied the restroom, her imminent and suddenly daunting fate flashed before her eyes—cleaning the bathroom.

Every night, the girls clean me, but I don’t think they knew how different this night would be. This night was going to be a test of willpower, strength, and resilience. This is the hardest work that these two girls will have to ever do here.

The girl with the swiffer had pretty much confirmed that I contained a mess for her to take care of that night. In a hurry and panic to avoid her fate, she scurried to the register, where the man of the hour waited patiently to check out with his haul, and haul ass out of there before the two sweet, young girls discovered what he did.

As she goes through routine questions, helps guide him through the process of getting his discount from his freshly opened credit account, something in his brain short-circuits. Perhaps he is frozen from the shame and embarrassment, his eyes cast down away from her attempted eye contact. He stumbles over his words, and then stumbles out the door, multiple large bags in hand, stroller being pushed, and the twins trailing behind. You might ask yourself, *how is it fair that this man gets to leave his mess here?* But there is no logical answer. He just simply does.

The weariness from the girls’ eyes makes me feel a slight regret that my digestion— I mean, plumbing— is so terrible. But, both these girls know the extent of my issues, and still made their decision to let the family in. I don’t think either of them knew what would occur though. Sometimes, things like this just happen, and two unassuming girls in their early twenties will be cleaning up the mess you made in the public bathroom of a children’s and baby retail location. To them, this was the worst thing that could have happened, after an eight-hour shift spent inside a chilly retail location on a beautiful Sunday in May.

They might not think much of me, as I am just a toilet, but in this situation, I am the real victim. They know I am sensitive and cannot handle much abuse without making a mess for them to clean up. They have always seen me as a problem, some mess to be cleaned up- but now, they see a door to be withheld from the public from this moment on. (Except maybe the occasional child or pregnant woman, but they are even skeptical of that now.)

A \$500 Cash Return's Lament, dated June 3, 2022

"Con-grad-ulations, kiddo!"

I looked up at her from the countertop, my massiveness leering up at her as she stared blankly at the man who came to return me in my entirety. Nobody here at this retail establishment at 10 A.M. knew that she had her community college graduation ceremony this very same day. But I knew, because as a \$500 worth pile of children's clothes that someone is currently attempting to return, I know everything about this store.

This girl also seems to know everything about this store. As she examines my accompanying receipt, long enough that it could be a replacement for a window blind, she begins to speak straight retail jargon with the guy who's here to return me. I know that's the wrong approach. This dude frankly just doesn't care, and doesn't even understand. I kind of think she's doing it for my sake, as huge of a purchase as I was is always a bummer to have to return. The store loses money, and the employees get flooded with all the go-backs.

But what is really bothering me, besides the rejection from this random guy, is why this girl is working right now?! She should be celebrating! I know she's been focused on getting out of community college for a while, been at Carter's way too long, keeping her head down, working hard, and she has finally found her way out. She's headed to UCSB— she's making it out. This is why she's been here for the past three years. She deserves to live it up—have some fun. I hear Isla Vista is a great city— no Carter's within a 50 mile radius.

Her voice shakes me from my angered internal monologue. I silence myself and glare up at her placid face.

"So it looks like you paid \$500 all in cash for these items, is that correct?" she asks the man.

"Yeah, and of course my baby mama decided she didn't want any of it. I even took her to the store and everything, ya know. She picked out all of this and now she don't want it."

This girl, obviously uninterested in my origin story and the extra, unnecessary details of this man's pathetic life, continues on, saying,

"So just so you know, we only carry \$200 cash in each register at the beginning of our day. Since you came in at opening time, I wanted to give you a couple options of how we can go about the return. For example, I can return \$100 worth on this register, then go to the next one..."

Her voice trails off as I am filled with rage. I am a huge pile of clothes, waiting to be returned! She is a 20 year old community college grad, and I know she's getting out of this place soon. She should be out of here already! What's a 20 year old doing working in a baby store? Go live your life, retail girl! Go! Get out while you still can— before you end up having to do my go-backs for the next five hours.

I shout words of encouragement as she explains policy and procedure to the guy.

“Get out of here! Go get ready for your ceremony!” I yell.

“So do you have any form of ID on you?” she inquires.

“It's okay! Just leave me here. We can wait for someone else.” I assure her. She doesn't appear to be listening.

“Just so you know, all the rewards you've earned from this purchase will be taken from your account,” she informs the guy.

“Oh, you'd prefer to do the entire return all in one transaction? I'm sorry, but we're unable to do that. My only suggestion is to come back later in the day when we will have more cash in the tills, or I can load the refund onto a store credit for you to use on a future purchase.”

“This is your big day! Why are you even here?” I keep shouting at her as the man scoops me up, placing me back in the bag and heads out of the store. I can't believe I'm getting out of here sooner than she is.

As the dude takes me back, I leave the girl, only hoping that she gets out of here soon, and that she has a good graduation ceremony later that day. She needs some fun, some excitement. No more baby retail for her.

A Teammate

After having played community college softball for two years here, you would think I deserve some respect. Especially after this hotshot first-year effortlessly stole the starting position from me. As I watch her from the mound, I see a sly smile spread on her face as she casually cracks jokes while raking the field after our first home game of the season. This wasn't just any game though. It was the start of the season, and we got our asses beat on our home field. How can this new girl be so disrespectful?

Especially, how could she possibly find something so funny to be audibly laughing so loud that I could hear her all the way from the dugout *and* be disrespectful to the field, team, and our coaches to be so lighthearted and unaffected after such a huge loss? Especially one that she pitched...

So I had to do something. After my ACL tear, I haven't been of much use to the team, so I figured I'd better set a good leadership example for the rest of my teammates, especially the incoming first year players.

"Hey! What's so funny?" I yell out as I walk closer towards her.

"Oh, nothing..." she responds with a smirk that makes my blood boil.

Her nonchalance and blatant lack of respect and care for the team are a slap to the face, and a painful reminder of my recovering knee. I wish I could be the starter instead of this awkward, left-handed, messy-haired, freak...

"Ok, well you should be focusing on raking the mound. The game's over, we lost. Coach will be mad if she sees anyone goofing around. Just focus on raking the field and try to keep quiet."

I'm just trying to set a good example, I'm trying to be a team leader— I swear. I'm trying to do what I can because Coach won't let me play. I want to play so bad, I want to pitch, but my knee still hurts. I know I could push through the pain, but I am three months post-op, my doctor hasn't cleared me to play in games and I know Coach won't push me like that.

Sure, she lets me practice, but all that does is just puts me closer to spending more quality time with my new favorite teammate. *Oh joy.*

Maybe I can try to be nicer to this girl in spite of her terrible attitude. Maybe I am being a little harsh toward her, but in all honesty, she has not made the best impression. And I will also

always get pissed at someone making a mockery on the field after we just lost a game. Badly. Since she started practicing and playing with us, she hasn't taken a single thing seriously and it *bugs* me.

Just as I'm trying to be rational, and help her out by giving her a warning that Coach might see her behavior as disrespectful and get us all in trouble, her response enrages me enough to no longer even try to be nice.

"Okay, well it's really not that big of a deal," she shrugs me off.

You've got to be kidding me. I barely know this girl—hardly anyone on the team does—she never talks to anyone during practice. She just stands around, laughing to herself, never focusing on anything, just staring off into space... seemingly consumed by something other than softball. Does she even want to be here?

So, that was it. I told her I was going to go tell Coach on her ass, and it *was* going to be a big deal.

To which she shrugged again, with a blank stare on her face, nodded, rake still in hand, and told me to go do it.

So I did.

After all, I have seniority over her, and her antics are getting tiring.

As I talked to Coach, I realized that there is an obvious disconnect between this girl and her conceptualization of what it means to be a team player. Even though she is a pitcher, our starter at that, she has to realize that can't be the center of attention, that even if she's some hotshot pitcher this is still a team sport. She constantly, and unknowingly, sucks all the attention and energy towards her. She wears her attitude across her chest in lieu of our team name. It's within her presence, the way she talks to others, the way she never conforms to what the rest of the team is doing. It's in the miles-away stares while we are warming up, and in the distant way she stands in the back of the dugout, talking to herself during games rather than cheering on her teammates. I'm guessing that she doesn't care simply because she thinks it's cool not to care. But it's not cool to me, as I sit from the bench while she's in the spot that I should be, and as I care about what she should be caring about.

As Monday afternoon arrives, Coach begins practice by gathering us into the dugout, and addressing everyone:

“So, I know we took a hard loss this weekend. I know there is some tension between teammates, and I want us to squash it now so we can move forward and be cohesive as a team together. We need to focus on our mental states, and our relationships as teammates, and it will show positively in our performance as a team. I know that Scarlett and Kaitlin haven’t had the best start so far, and I want everyone to hear their sides of the story, so we can move forward together and have a good practice to get over the loss we took this weekend. Who wants to start?”

I sheepishly stare at all my teammates; my friends. I thought this conversation would be in private, and I was trying to conjure the words I so desperately wanted to share when I heard the very last thing I would have ever expected to hear:

“Okay, I’ll start.”

She gets straight into it. It’s like she’s been saving these words for a long time. This is the most I’ve ever heard this girl talk, and this look inside her mind is dismal, and delusional.

“I’ve always struggled to feel like I fit in on any team I’ve played on. The vibe here was pretty similar to my high school team, in which I constantly felt ridiculed and unwelcomed. I’m not going to sit around and do nothing, I’m going to stand up for myself.”

This girl really had the audacity to confront me in this way, in front of everybody? Accuse me of being unwelcoming? I would’ve never thought her unsolicited attitude was actually meant to be a defense mechanism. I thought that this rant of hers was bold, and uncharacteristic, considering she has been so reserved and timid with everyone thus far. It seems a little unfair that now she has all this confidence to accuse me, when she was the one that has been the problem since she joined our team.

When it seems to be my turn to talk, I compose myself and speak my piece.

“I thought it was disrespectful that you were being so lighthearted after we lost so badly. It makes it look like you don’t care.”

“You never appear to be focused or ready at practice. You act like everything we do here is a joke. And you leave early, like all the time.”

I want to yell: “YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL FOR BEING THE STARTING PITCHER!!!!”

But I hold that one back.

As we go back and forth, delivering different jabs and accusations, the rest of the team is silent- we truly make no progress in this conversation, and it's cutting severely into practice time. So, Coach pulls us two aside, to continue, as everybody else charges the field, eager to begin practice. What I wouldn't give to be running out with them.

After we discuss further, Coach does her best to mediate, but the conversation is exhausted and it seems that we can only come to a mutual agreement that we just won't get along. That we will just stay out of each other's ways. Be courteous and polite—but we understood there was no need or desire for any conversation or interactions beyond that. It is going to be nearly impossible as we play the same position, meaning that we spend most of practice and games together. Especially at games, we always seem to be on the bench together.

As the season progresses, I watch from our agreed distance as she slowly becomes more comfortable with the team. I think that people were starting to realize her wacky personality goes so easily misunderstood, and so was I. The only thing was that she still didn't seem to really care. That's what got to me.

But as my knee worsened, and I was thinking I would have to go back in for another follow-up surgery, the apathy and nonchalance wore off onto me too. After all, sitting on the bench for an entire season can wear you out.

As we sit together, watching our team get lit up by Fullerton College, and scorekeep side by side in silence, her pitching arm sore and my knee hurting, she cracks the slightest joke. A joke that was only audible enough for me to hear.

So I joke back.

This banter continues for the remainder of the inning, as we chuckle back and forth, silently commiserating over how terrible our team truly is, how disappointing the season has been, and how I am finally seeing why she approaches this game with her detached mindset. It really is a defense mechanism.

Her words, when I listen between the lines and the bitter, disconnected monotone she speaks in, show me that she does care. But she doesn't want to address it, or else it will feel too real to her. So instead, she jokes, she talks strategy with me, points out every single flaw in the pitch calling and wonders why the hell we would try to throw out the runner at second when we have a first and third situation.

"It's idiotic," she says.

“It’s not knowing how to work a count,” she says. “This is not high quality pitch calling. I could call a game better than this.”

I may never feel this silent anger that she has, I may not even comprehend the every little last nuanced bit of the game like she does, and I know for sure that we’re never going to truly consider one another “friends”—but at least we can scorekeep together, and at least we can finish the season together as teammates.

My Favorite Professor

As she walks off the stage, she excitedly skips down the long line of professors waiting to celebrate the first in-person graduation ceremony we've had since before Covid. She's dressed in the graduation attire—but still with her personal trademarks of red chucks and long hair, and I think back to the first time she was a student in my virtual public speaking class over a year ago.

After having been student director (and the Forensics coach) at Santiago Canyon College for years, there is just something missing from the Zoom classroom that can only be encapsulated in the actual classroom. Virtuality sucks—especially when it comes to teaching public speaking to a ton of community college students. How am I supposed to get them engaged when we are only present virtually? This is a public speaking class, done in a somewhat private, isolated format. Regardless of these unideal conditions, I'm no stranger to figuring out a workaround. Much like how I run my in-person class, I'm still demanding attendance and undivided attention. I'm going to transform this class of chumps into world-class orators.

I remember starting the Spring semester, greeting them with my usual screenshare of piglets living at the OC Fairgrounds. I always addressed my class enthusiastically, but was always met with silence. It was a class policy of mine to always have your camera on. That was how I recorded attendance, which I made a big part of the grade. After all, it is a public speaking course. *Everybody* must participate. I remember watching all the blank faces staring back at me, the class starting promptly at 8 A.M. every Tuesday and Thursday, realizing this will be a semester-long challenge to engage these tired faces.

I don't blame them though—I personally felt unengaged, but I wasn't going to let that show. I am passionate about what I teach, even if I think Zoom school is the least enriching way to learn, and a joke of a way to teach students how to speak publicly.

I remember glancing over all the tiles, all the tiny virtual faces, seeing people from all walks of life, all backgrounds, all ages. I remember the girl with bad bangs (which later became a problem for us) that kept staring off into the distance. She couldn't keep her eyes on the screen. She was one of the most unengaged, and I began sensing that we were going to have a problem with her troublesome attention span as I had to repeatedly ask her to keep her eyes on the screen.

Despite always seeming way more interested in her surroundings rather than the class, she somehow got the work done, somehow managed to write a pretty solid speech and deliver it the way I had taught my students to. Maybe she did listen during class after all—except the one problem was that her hair covered her entire face. Even though the writing wasn't terrible, and she could project her voice, I took issue with the amount of hair she had on her head, and how it engulfed her entire body as she recoiled in her own blanket of self-consciousness. Even though

what she had to say was of value, she hid in her hair, too afraid to speak confidently, even though she knew everything she was saying was valid, interesting, and of purpose.

After struggling to understand that my criticism was constructive, I remember meeting this same student, in person, one summer later, with the bangs pushed to the side now. Her hair was still uncomfortably yet impressively long and even though she was without the awful full bangs it somehow still managed to hide her face, making her look small and timid, even weak. The first thing I jauntily greeted her with when I saw her name on the attendance sheet was “The Hair.”

That was the first of many times her scowl and sharp, sarcastic laugh met my teasing remarks. This student has some grit, but also has a lot to learn about life, and more importantly, herself. She can pretend to have a thick skin all she wants, that nothing really matters to her, but I immediately see right through that and know that’s not how she operates. I know there’s something going on in her mind much deeper than the academic work she clings on to, projecting that as her personality in a desperate attempt to push aside her personal feelings and embody the personality of an academic, emotionless robot. Even if this is her way of helping her get through community college and on to the next steps, I want her to see that there is still something valuable she can take away from her experience here. I have to find a way to get the true energy out of her.

Watching her in a physical classroom, that sense of timidity (even though she came off as anything but timid in interpersonal interactions) was palpable. She just seemed to always be a little uncomfortable, a little on edge, but when she started to speak, she was unintentionally funny and dare I say— confident.

After watching her first attempt to publicly speak in a physical space, she got so in her head she bursted into laughter, fleeing the classroom entirely. As she entered back in the classroom, bright red as a cherry tomato, she casually assumed her seat, trying to pretend as if nothing happened. There was no way I was going to let her live this down. Such a silly reaction for attempting to do something so basic— speak.

She has the words, she always does, but before they come out, she has a moment of doubt that causes her to stumble. She was chronically in her own way, and I could tell from her embarrassment it was impeding more than just her community college Communications courses.

Looking up at me for approval, with a defeated face after another failed attempt to present in front of the class, I could only tell her one thing.

“Whoever pissed in your cheerios, I don't know who it was, but it was a long time ago. It's time to move on. You can't let that hold you back.”

Her look of discomfort pulled at something inside me.

“You're a comm major. You can't let this get to you.”

“I'm not a comm major. I haven't declared anything. Trust me, I really don't know what I'm doing. Like at all.”

“Kid, you've taken all my comm classes, and all the comm classes that are offered here. Yes, you are a comm major. You have this in you.”

The wit, the intelligence, and the work ethic are only getting her so far. She's got to get over the impossible, insurmountable obstacle of herself. Even though her writing spoke for itself, and in the low-stakes interactions with me that weren't being graded or with her classmates, she was charismatic and confident without even trying. She was indeed a comm major.

For two years she took my classes, even signing up for an extra one she didn't even need. (It was one we both knew she'd hate, but I have a feeling that she wanted to take it just so she could be in my class one last time before her days in community college were over.)

After having known her and taught her for multiple semesters, I was elated to watch her on the day of graduation. I wasn't sure if she would be there, but as soon as I saw her walk past me in the sea of students surrounded by excited professors, I called out her name, pulling her into my embrace to give her my parting words of wisdom.

She's got a long way to go but I hope the tough love I gave her prepared her for the rest of the journey. She needed someone to push her out of her comfort zone, and to give her the time to develop that confidence. I have high hopes for this kid-she's got some potential, and a determined spirit. She can go far—as long as she remembers her self-worth and keeps her hair out of her face.

-UCSB-

Evolution of the Evil Eye Necklace

As I was thrown into the bushes of the apartment complex I had come to know as a home, I had a bittersweet feeling that this would be where I laid forever, or at least until some bird, animal, or human picks me up, as the girl I once belonged to was in a desperate attempt to flee this place for good. The magic I hold within myself, the magic to protect, has been exhausted by this girl who never once wore me around her neck. Instead, she would place me on display on her desk. I lived in two different apartments in the same complex, with identical looking desks. The one thing that differed amongst the apartments was the energy. As an Evil Eye, it is my duty to protect the wearer, or, in this instance, the possessor. These apartments are not where I originated, but they are where my story gets good, though— and where my story with this particular owner ends.

I come from Seattle, Washington. One of the vendors in the bustling Pike Place Market sold gems, stones, jewelry, all the popular items that humans might buy to feel a sense of security, or balanced energy about them. The girl that picked me up though, on that muggy, sticky day in late August, was anything but balanced. She was a teeter-totter of emotions that I had to do my best to protect. That's what my job was. I can't say I did my best, but to be fair, I was quite unprepared for the emotional turmoil of a person I was assigned to. My job is to shield the possessor from any negative energies surrounding them, which was another task I was wholly unprepared for when we made our first move together.

My first residence with this girl, after flying home to Orange County from Seattle, then a drive two and a half hours north was an apartment in a town called Isla Vista where she hung me around the little desk that was attached to her bunk bed. She draped me around the side, where she displayed some photos of her and her family from when they were younger, the figurine of Anakin Skywalker that her sister had just gifted her, the blue bandana she had earned at summer camp when she was 12, and the arrangement of different metaphysical crystals. I'll never forget the few tears she shed before walking out after putting her final personal touches on the desk near her new bed, and I'll never forget the many silent tears she shed in the coming weeks to follow. It was soon after the first few emotional episodes that she rarely came back to the room she left me in. I only ever saw her entering the house early in the morning to grab a few things, then quickly fleeing. Soon enough, a suitcase was gone, her makeup box was gone, and so was she. The trinkets and mementos I was surrounded by collected dust, and during these weeks, I knew that the best way to fulfill my duty to protect this girl was to sit and wait.

Eventually, weeks later, she came back for me, for everything. The still of the room that I had been left in was swiftly gutted, thrown into boxes, and transported about a five minute's walk away. As swiftly as I was packed, I was unpacked, and once again draped around an identical desk.

As we settled into our new home, I noticed her tears seemed to lessen a little, and she seemed to spend a little more time around me, in her personal space. Since she was gone so often, I previously had a lot of time to think, reflect, and wonder if I was doing something wrong. It seems as though a chain of neverending bad events has been haunting this girl since our arrival. I need to do a better job. I see her weary, tired eyes glare upon me, willing a strength larger than the both of us, every single night as I watch her try to keep her composure.

I wanted to provide her with a new fire or a new inspiration. Any time she started to pick up the pieces though, I noticed how easily she crumbled again. Having stepped up my game for her, I knew she had to do the same. This is her time to get through this, so she can visualize and actualize what she really wants out of this life.

As I watch her come home every day, a little tired, a little beat and worn down, I see her rise the next day, going forward with everything she committed to doing. She's got grit. She's not going to drown, even though she's barely dog-paddling through the eye of a hurricane. Because every day I watched her struggle.

I watched her do this for a half of a year, and did my best to protect her, but a long time ago, I realized that this just isn't her year. I think she realized that a long time ago too.

After she had once again packed everything up into boxes and loaded up the small car with way too many possessions, I watched her carefully pluck me from my perch next to the same blue bandana, but she hesitated for a moment upon picking me up. She sighed, maybe letting out a little laugh, then placed me on the desk amongst a pile of other things. I felt a slight tinge of a bittersweet emotion too far beyond my capacities to capture; but I ultimately knew she was making the right decision for her. She was ready to move on from this place, but she wasn't going to give up. She was ready to leave this apartment complex behind, and move on to something much better.

As she began making trips to and from her car, packing up nearly every single piece that she had of her and taking it home with her, she made the decision to leave me behind. I had done my best to get her through this, so I think she decided to leave me here with the memories of everything she's trying to move on from. As she carefully tossed me into the bushes, upon first impression, I questioned what she was doing. I stood by her, I protected her with all I had, and I'm not ready to let her go.

However, in the silence and solitude where I currently lay, instead of feeling like I failed, I realize I have done my job this time. I realize that she was ready to let me go. I am content as I settle into the ground, ready for whatever may come next. I was never meant to be something permanent in her life, and I am proud that she knew when to let go.

Sister

I wanted to get my sister's college experience, just like she had gotten mine. I remember when she visited me in Las Vegas, about two years ago when I was in college for my undergrad. Now it was like we had flipped roles, with her away, and me holding down the fort with Mom and Dad. It was funny how I was still living at home and she had lived at home even though we're both "adults." It gets lonely at the house without her there, and I was curious about the life she lived outside of our family.

I'm curious to see what her life is like outside of the familial constraints we inevitably, as siblings, find ourselves within. The whole concept of your sibling being a side character in your life only ever resonated with me until she left to continue college at UCSB. I realize now that she is a main character in her own right, just like how I see myself as a main character in my life. I wanted to see her world, the one she was living in while everybody else was wrapped up in our own individual worlds. I hope her world is okay. I get this feeling that it's not always okay, and that she misses home. I want to see her world, while providing the comfort of the one she left, even if it's just for a weekend.

Since she had been gone for a long time and I have barely had the chance to catch up with her, I thought a getaway to Santa Barbara would be nice. It would be nice to see my little sister. The little sister, two years younger than me, that I feel like has already had so much more life experience than me. Even though I worry from afar, I know it is her time to be away, and I hope she enjoys it, or gets something out of it while she can.

After I got off the train on that Cinco de Mayo day, proudly sporting the UCSB Sister shirt she got me for Christmas, I was picked up and immediately swept away by my overzealous and meticulous sister into the cute downtown that was Santa Barbara proper. She wanted to show me the pier, the beach, and the best places to get ice cream.

What she didn't mention—nor necessarily want me to see—was Isla Vista. The place she impassionately, oftentimes angrily, spoke about, but never really went into specifics. Usually, when she came home for a weekend to visit, she spent a lot of time alone in her room. I think a part of her misses the quiet that she got when she lived at home. Even though I know she's been hurting, she hides it under a grandiose bravado. She should feel as if she has nothing to hide, but I decided to give into the schemes she has planned for this weekend. I think it's a little bit of a getaway for her too.

"It 's Cinco de Mayo. I'm taking you to Sandbar."

Too many drinks later, for a person who doesn't drink, doesn't always go well. The bar scene in Santa Barbara was nothing near what I showed her when she came to visit me in Las

Vegas. Even though it was not what I was expecting, it was fun while it lasted. I must say that when I told her that I wanted to see what her life was like out here, I was surprised to see this aspect first. I went along with it though, I wanted to buy into the masquerade she was most definitely putting up with how her time here has been. She didn't want me to see the pain, or struggle, she wanted me to see the fun, carefree, time that she was pretending her college experience was like.

As we were waiting outside the bar after it closed, I cradled her face and told her, with honest sincerity, that I felt like in a way, she was the big sister, and not me.

A Good Friend

“Hey! My name’s Scarlett. It’s so nice to meet you,” the girl grinned excitedly as she stumbled up to me, evidently overwhelmed to get to meet me, and I think a little overwhelmed in general.

Strangely enough, this girl who was introduced to me as Scarlett was being called Elizabeth by everybody around her. I immediately was a little curious (with some undertones of concern) to learn more about this girl. She had long hair down past her waist, and was wearing Red high-top Converse, what she would refer to as her Chucks. I was quickly able to figure that her name was indeed Scarlett, that some random guy had just started calling her Elizabeth, and it seemed to stick; it was the first week of the Fall quarter at UCSB, we were all transfer students, and we were all visiting Del Playa Drive for the first time.

She was funny, loud, and excitable. I learned that we lived in the same apartment complex. I was able to give her my phone number to call me, so I would know that she got home safe, as she seemed to almost be alone despite being in a large crowd. As she wandered off into the night, I didn’t know when the next time I would see her would be.

I later found out that it would be four weeks later. Then, suddenly, after briefly saying hello to her after seeing her for the first time since we initially met, she wound up sleeping on my couch for the last three weeks for the first quarter. She always apologized for taking up so much space in the living room but nobody cared. We liked having her here.

It was a sad trend that I picked up on that she would return home from school and work every day, crying.

“Are you crying?” I would always inquire.

Her shameful gaze targeted towards the floor would always let me know that something else had happened, complicating her already complicated situation. She was someone who was a little complicated herself. But she needed some time to figure things out, and she was good company, so the couch was the right place for her to be.

However, she was able to resolve her situation at a rapid pace. She was off my couch by the end of fall quarter, having found a better living situation during our first finals week. I was happy that we remained friends after she moved off my couch. I can tell that she’s on this interesting timeline which I think is a journey to find herself.

As seasons changed and we went on breaks from school, we grew to learn more about one another. I saw her go through additional struggles, but also some triumphs, and still consistently battle with her worst enemy: herself.

I lost her, physically, as in I don't know where she went on countless nights, where she would sometimes once again show up at my door, crying. Or that one night, early in March, when things seemed to be turning around, she was yanked back, drowned in a situation that she still cries about to this day.

As the crying slowly weaned, and she seemed to be a little happier, a little more confident, I was happy to move in with her over the summer. To start a new chapter of this time in our lives, being in college navigating life, the future, and a stressful course load. The realization that we were entering our last year of college before we were facing that future we had been constantly stressing about. I was proud of her though. Like I said, she comes home crying a lot less frequently than she used to.

Books of Stories

FIRST JOURNAL

Usually, when she opens me up, she is inclined to write poetically, and softly. I am the small notebook with shades of pink and green on the cover, inscribed with “Inside us there is everything.”

On one of my inside pages are the unforgettable words of, “when I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.” I remember how special it was once she found that page. She scribbled that quote obsessively over a few of my pages.

Maybe because of how beautiful and poetic I am, she begins to feel empowered with hope when she opens me up. I also think that I may be her most secret journal though. I usually reside in a drawer only to be brought out during an emotional outburst, revelation, or manic-like episode in which her words become incohesive blobs on a page that only she can decipher afterwards.

Sometimes, when she is extra embarrassed about what she’s written, she rips pages out of me, and it hurts, but I know the words hurt her more as she reads them back. I wish she wouldn’t be so embarrassed for feeling her emotions. I realized that she keeps all her emotions tucked away though, translating and coding them into me and all my derivatives. Sometimes, I think she gets so overwhelmed by them she doesn’t even want to share them with me.

NEXT JOURNAL

But, when she opens me up, instead of fluid poetry or painstaking emotion, the pen pressed to paper is fierce and I am filled with sharp, jabbing words that I keep as a secret to the grave. I am the small purple notebook on which she wrote in Sharpie “long, strange trip” on the cover. She likes to carry me around because I am pocket-sized– tucked away in her backpack or purse– and I give her the capacity to jot down quick thoughts, quotes she likes, songs she wants to listen to later, or write in all caps when she’s angry. I’m her on-the-go companion, for when she has a fleeting moment of revelation that she has to capture quickly. I also go with her on trips– road trips, trips home, trips to see her family. I’m surprised nobody ever found me in one of her bags. I would jump at any chance to read me if I were an outsider, but I’m glad nobody does, because I know the secrets, observations, and stories she probably doesn’t want anyone else to know. Oftentimes, she’ll take me out of her bag in a public place, and begin writing, laughing to herself because nobody knows what’s going on inside her mind– and atop my paper.

OTHER JOURNAL

I keep the most practical lists of things, as I am the most accessible. I am spiral-bound, which is hell to a lefty, but I am black with a pretty cover of flowers. I sit displayed on her desk, the word “Write” scrawled on my cover. I think she keeps me on display to remind her that she can always

write. Even when she feels like she has nobody to talk to, nobody that would understand what she had to say, she still has me.

In me, she writes down a lot of lists, but also a lot of reflections or ideas she has. I think it's funny she leaves me in such an inconspicuous situation. Sometimes the things she writes are inane, like a grocery list, or a new workout routine she wants to try, but in between the normalcy she also writes truth and pain in me.

Sometimes it's a random napkin that is filled with her innermost thoughts, that ends up blowing away in the wind.

Or a note typed out on her phone that eventually gets forgotten about, only to be found a few months, or a few years later, and laughed about.

Especially the journals from childhood— the fuzzy, sparkly one that had her first initial on it contains some of her best content. Her most authentic, true commentary. They made her the writer she is today.

She's a little disorganized in where she puts what, but it can open up an interesting dialogue, almost mirror-like exposition and introduction into her mind.

We capture the full experience, what she has established to be her truth, her books of stories. But we think that the truth is constantly changing. We know her's is. We reflect that and circulate that around her. We also remind her that there is always room to grow, to change your mind, to reflect and process. There's always a new page.

We are her creative works, her secrets, her intrusive thoughts, her silly inside jokes she shares with herself, and even sometimes her grocery lists. We are her spot for her personal dialogue— the conversations she has with herself are contained and scribbled and ripped out and scratched out but also loved and cried over and make up for her recollection of how she has lived her life and how she continues to live her life.

Throughout the process, she wondered how other people saw her stories. How their journals kept their thoughts, what insights and secrets they held. I think now she laughs at how limited perspective can be when a story can unfold in countless ways.