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## On and On and On

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On and On and On

Rachel Hansen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

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## ABSTRACT

On and On and On

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One defining root of the essay is its goal to articulate thoughts, simple and complex, into a piece that readers might deliberate and rest and even rely on. *On* this or that or the other—“on” being a word suggesting sturdiness and foundation. *On and On and On* is a collection of personal essays which intends to examine the theories of “truth” (another word associated with sturdiness,) within personal experiences, as they are delivered through creative means. When truths in life are examined and explored in essayistic ways, we discover more profound axioms of the soul that would otherwise remain hidden.

This collection first establishes the essay’s motivation and pursuit for truth, and then elaborates on the means by which an essay may most effectively achieve truth while navigating “creativity.” Following this analysis, the personal essays implement those theoretical strategies, encouraging an emphasis on truth throughout explorations of human experience and thought. The essays vary in subject and style, but are largely tied together through the theme of desire for control over what feels chaotic, or understanding of what feels unknown... that is, the desire for truths that give us peace.

Keywords: truth, personal essay

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## On My Honor

*“on one’s honor”*: an expression used to emphasize the truth of something which is said

-Cambridge Dictionary

There’s a scene in a movie I love in which the protagonist accuses his acquaintance Geoffrey Chaucer of lying. “Yes, yes, I lied,” Chaucer says, “I’m a writer, I give the truth scope!”

Well, I too am a writer—at least an aspiring one—and though I don’t share the gray ethics of this imagined version of Chaucer, I do believe that writing gives the truth *scope*, as in “the opportunity to do or deal with something” (Oxford Languages).

And, in fact, I believe that doing so does not equate to lying at all, particularly when you look at nonfiction, which is a word often used synonymously with “truth” (truth being those tangible and intangible realities that make up our world and existence); and, even more particularly, when you look at the essay, which is a word meaning “to try, attempt, or undertake”—thus the nonfiction essay tries truth, attempts truth, undertakes truth. It does not lie for the sake of wonder or to gain power over a reader’s opinion. Rather, it articulates truths so that readers might read them and think *oh, I see now*, or *that’s it, what I’ve been trying to say all along*. It is a chance for truth to be condensed into digestible fragments, delivered for consumption, and then used to nourish.

I think we’re programmed for truth. I think we crave it because we’re made of it: real cells knitted together, functioning in immutable ways, moving through a space dictated by natural

laws, crafted in the image of the God who lives and breathes and maintains truth. And when a variable society and soul throws us for a loop, truth lets us feel some semblance of control over what otherwise feels chaotic, or some understanding over what otherwise feels unknown.

The personal essay is a tool for discovering truth. It may not be the kind of capital T truth we expect from science, but it is truth, nonetheless. It is a truth that comes from examining subjective experience in search of objective truth about humanity. And just like scientists who rely on specific objective methods to discover truth, the personal essayist employs several subjective methods to uncover truths hidden in the experiences of our everyday lives:

First, adhering to the ‘facts’ of an event or memory, to the best of the writer’s ability, while acknowledging the limitations of perception and memory. Second, meditation on the implications of known facts. Third, “perhapsing” when we don’t know the objective truth. And fourth, finding new ways of seeing “facts” by using extended metaphors, comparisons, and even unexpected forms or structures.

I’ve found that when truths in life are examined and explored in these essayistic ways, we discover profound truths of the soul that would otherwise remain hidden. And when combined with charm of character and creativity of craft, the best essays are especially resonant, rich, and inspiring. These are skills I sought to identify in various essays and implement in my own.

*Adherence to Facts Within Memory (and Acknowledgment of Memory’s Fallibility)*

If, when writing about personal experience, essayists were constantly fretting over making their essay “apodictic” (or “clearly established or beyond dispute” as Oxford English Dictionary defines), if they always worried over the precision of their memory, writing essays would be like walking on eggshells, constantly addressing tangents and contexts that would only complicate their message and detract from its influence (Klaus 38). And nothing would ever be written, (or nothing would ever get read).

Essays *should* make confident claims. It is their confidence that gives them strength. They should also, however, provide some sort of acknowledgment that memory is fleeting, and flawed.

The first thing Nora Ephron writes in her collection *I Remember Nothing* is a disclaimer: that “I have been forgetting things for years—at least since I was in my thirties. I know this because I wrote something about it at the time. . . . Of course, I can’t remember exactly where I wrote about it, or when, but I could probably hunt it up if I had to” (1). Something Ephron excels at is her humility, her ability to admit “I HAVE NO IDEA” (19). And that is the first key to claiming truth in an essay—report what you can with the accuracy you are capable of, and admit your limitations where you are incapable of accuracy. A humble admission of imperfection can instill a level of trust that can’t be accessed otherwise... acknowledging that truth is difficult to grasp is an act of humility that gives authority to the writer, a level of trustworthiness that readers can relate to and rest on.

Jose Ortega y Gasset grants essayists some slack when he says that essays are not a science, “they are simply essays,” which is science “minus the explicit proof” of anything (Klaus 38). But this also points to writers’ responsibilities. A writer implements practices similar to the scientist—they theorize, analyze, and draw conclusions, though they do so broadly, on abstract

subjects unable to be pinned under a microscope. Still, like scientists they must then uphold the obligation to adhere to the most accurate portrayals of their subjective observations, including in their memories, if they are to suggest truth with any authority. Ortega further comments on the roles within the relationship of writer and reader, that “although for the author the doctrines are scientific convictions, he does not expect the reader to accept them as truths” (Klaus 39). Under this ideology, the writer may claim truth without *imposing* it on the reader. They ask for collaboration, not conformation.

For such a collaboration to be most effective the writer should, like Nora Ephron, acknowledge their fallibility. Confession like this is not usually as blatant as Ephron makes it, but it may still be found in subtle nods (via tone or text) to holes in memory, or language that admits unknowing. For example, Leslie Jamison’s *Empathy Exams* is centered on the concept of how we might achieve empathy when our minds are incapable of total synchronization with another, which in itself concedes the reality of imperfect brains and understanding. What Jamison says of empathy could be said of the humility with which we should wield our memories: “Empathy requires knowing you know nothing,” she says, “Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see.” For this reason, I (as a reader) trust Jamison (as a writer) more implicitly, knowing that she is self-aware and therefore carefully responsible with her words, as she is careful with portraying memories beyond her vision.

If there is one thing I am confident of, it is the amount of things I do not know or remember. This makes me extremely self-aware, bordering on the eggshell-caution of self-consciousness, as I attempt to narrate the experiences I’ve gleaned truth from. I check myself constantly, evaluating the things I’ve written by looking in journals, emails, and old daily



planners in hopes that my memories will be triggered by and grounded in the things I have recorded. When those do not provide full-picture clarity, I admit my lack thereof. This admission was especially present in “On Fire” and “Onomatopoeia”, where the memories were fully my own and dealt with sensitive subjects which impacted other people even more forcefully than they did me. Out of respect for those people and for readers, I want to deliver these narratives with as much reality as I can manage.

For example, I acknowledge “haziness” of memory in “On Fire”, providing only brief and fairly scattered details to create the scene:

“The week that followed is hazy in my memory. I remember those first two days so vividly, but after that I mostly get just flashes of gray—gray clouds melting into gray earth on either side of the gray Highway 101. Bare, gray shelves lining the aisles at FoodMaxx. Gray news speaking bleakly of families whose lives were now gray too, having lost family members and homes and other things precious to them.”

By highlighting my lack of surety I hope to first, reflect of the instability we feel in the face of shocking circumstances, and (more importantly,) second, allow readers to fill in gaps according to their *own* experience, encouraging an understanding of truth on an individual, personal level.

### *Meditation on Known Facts*

Established facts are powerful resources for helping writers uncover truths as they write an essay. But on the topic of fact, Katharine Gerould points out that they in themselves are not “truth”—the truth comes after a meditation on facts (Klaus 62). She states that the creative

nonfiction essay sits in the overlap between creative and critical, its method of creation being meditation.

The essay, then, having persuasion for its object, states a proposition; its method is meditation; it is subjective rather than objective, critical rather than creative. It can never be a mere marshalling of facts; for it struggles, in one way or another, for truth; and truth is something one arrives at by the help of facts, not the facts themselves. Meditating on facts may bring one to truth; facts alone will not. (Klaus 63)

The essay is indeed persuaded to achieve some end, and therefore states (directly or subliminally) a proposition. It's then the author's commentary, train of thought, elaboration and expansion on facts that develops truth around that proposition; fact upon fact, line upon line.

As writers expound on the what, why, where, how and when of the factual elements they employ, truth materializes. This is what I appreciate about research-heavy essays, or essays with any kind of exploration of a physical or historical entity. Brian Doyle's *Leaping*, Elena Passarello's *Animals Strike Curious Poses*, John Green's *The Anthropocene Review*, each lean on thorough research of certain objects or moments, work through that "what, why, how, when, where," and thereby illustrate their respective propositions. In one of Green's essays he recounts "Jerzy Dudek's performance on May 25, 2005," wherein under exorbitant stress, Dudek (FC Liverpool's goalie) executed a jaw-dropping save from a penalty kick in the Championships League final match. Green recounts this historical moment in beautiful detail, incorporating quotes from Dudek himself as well as friends and family present for the match. He references footage, provides statistics, each of which root the story in truth. And all throughout he meditates on his own connections to the what's, how's, why's, where's... and comes to the end that "I often feel like I'm Jerzy Dudek ... feeling as hopeless as I do helpless." But, "seeing Jerzy

Dudek sprint away from that final penalty save to be mobbed by his teammates reminds me that someday—and maybe someday soon—I will also be embraced by people I love” (106). While the facts of this event do not in themselves have much deep meaning, Green’s work of examining and reflecting on those facts creates a space in which he finds truth about the value of being surrounded by the people we love. Meditation is the channel through which fact is added upon, and mingled with belief, then becoming truth—including truths that instill hope, or confidence, or solidarity, as they did for John Green.

I find a lot of power in the truth that comes from fact. Fact is grounding, reliable, steady. It lets me trust what I read and what I write. I try to take advantage of that steady power by incorporating research into my own essaying—I’ve learned about how wildfires burn, what race-walking entails, the statistics on juice sales in America, none of which would normally have any significance to me were I not to meditate on how I can connect with each of them. Every story and description has been enriching, revealing truth as only meditation can allow.

*“Perhapsing” When Objective Truth is Lacking: The Value of Speculation*

Even when a writer has committed to an effort for truth, and has utilized research to provide factual details, there will still be moments (frequently, even,) where the objective truth we have access to is lacking. That is, when even the things that are grounded cannot fully provide the insight the writer wants to draw upon.

When this is the case, Lisa Knopp recommends “perhapsing”: choosing to speculate on the objective facts available, introducing that speculation with signal words such as “perhaps.” “The word ‘perhaps’ cues the reader that the information [imparted] is not factual speculative,”

she says. By perhapsing we might suggest motives, complexities, justifications, validations, and general contextual details that help us pull truth out of closed concepts and experiences. This allows the writer to develop an idea by drifting into an imagined depiction of events, while maintaining the goals of nonfiction.

Brian Doyle masters perhapsing; his essays are sometimes entirely perhaps'd—hypothetical conversations, imagined things, still rooted in reality because Doyle has made it clear the words are his thoughts alone. “The Way We Do Not Say What We Mean When We Say What We Say” in *One Long River of Song* concludes, “Perhaps languages use us in ways that we are not especially aware of; perhaps languages are aware that they need us to speak them... Perhaps languages invent themselves and then have to hunt for speakers. Perhaps ...” and so on (100). Doyle’s “objects” of interest are often abstracts like this, like language, which cannot (ironically in this case) speak for themselves. And yet his perhapsing allows readers to fill in gaps, suppose things that provide the meaning-making we need, to identify truth.

Of all the techniques for uncovering truth, I think this one is unavoidable. I could identify moments in every essay I’ve written, I’d bet, that relies on supposition to highlight the points I’m aiming for. A couple essays in this thesis are particularly dense with perhapses, as I picture individuals “On a Walk” and wonder what they think as they do so—(such as supposing that “Toddlers... [are] innocently confident in their own ability to toddle again and again and again. To them it just makes sense. *My steps got me across the room once before, they must be able to do so again.*”)—or point out the words that stay “On Our Minds” and ruminate on why *those* words (“We hope that we are those things. We want those statements to be true. Because if they are, that means we are doing at least one thing right.”) Perhapsing allowed me to ponder and

glean inspiring truths about the faith and determination people are capable of, and the hope for good that guides our decisions.

This concerted imagination is part of writing that exemplifies Jamison’s definition of empathy, “acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see”—we navigate that context blindly, but sincerely, and hopefully do justice to the objective truth as we articulate it with subjective brains. When successful, we then have access to statements of truth that make us feel like we can understand and be understood, truth that proves we are not alone.

### *Finding New Ways of Seeing Facts*

Maybe my favorite thing about the personal essay is the confusion with which people may look at piece like “Solving My Way to Grandma” by Laurie Easter, which is crafted entirely as a crossword puzzle, and say “*how* is that an essay?” My joy is not in others’ confusion, but in the intrigue that follows as people realize the power and meaning that form and metaphor can provide when trying to illustrate (quite literally, sometimes,) an idea. It’s exhilarating, that moment of realization.

When the truth of something is hard to decipher, unusual patterns in the world can become means of revelation as connections are made. As Emily Dickinson says, “tell all the truth but tell it slant.” Essays embrace this challenge and opportunity wholly; extended metaphors, comparisons, and experimentation with form can each “perhaps”, but through analogy rather than conjecture. (We call these experimentations with form “hermit crab essays”, as words adopt a different “shell” than is the standard, offering observations and reflections and juxtapositions

that deepen the meaning-making of the essay and its subject.) Through these comparisons the reader is invited to draw conclusions of truth based on their prior knowledge or experience with more familiar, relatable concepts or objects. We see truth on the other side of a new lens.

I am excited by my encounters with essays like this, which embed perhaps into their form. Doyle writes an entire essay as a list of individuals he prays for, pulling in the seriousness and emotion of genuine care through a written supplication to deity. *The Anthropocene Reviewed* uses the form of the 5-star review to frame each essay, the frankness and simplicity of that genre speaking to society's inclination to calibrate thought. Green balances or counters that inclination with his own personal experiences and subsequent explanations for his reviews, reminding the reader that at the end of the day, each person will have a different (and valid) experience with the elements of the world he highlights and can therein find similar revelations. "OK, Cupid" by Sarah McColl is a dating profile, profiling her own grievances over a life she's dissatisfied with, via a form that many people associate with feelings of disappointment.

I attempt experimentation with form in "On the Up and Up", defining scripture within my own context and understanding, braiding quotes and dictionary-like definitions with my own commentary on the meaning of those verses. The word "certain" in the phrase "a certain woman" does not just denote a character, it "suggests individuality." It means to be "known for sure," in this case "by God." Suffering means more than just hurt, it can be defined as the turmoil of culminating "affliction, temptation, sickness, infirmities," and even "sin," and the exhaustion of having "tried everything to overcome" such turmoil independently, to no avail. Familiarity with dictionary definitions and their structural language can be a tool to point readers to particular meanings I want to make clear.

My hope with this and any other essay I write with form or metaphor so prominently prioritized is that the unexpectedness of such form might capture attention, while the familiarity of it may draw out further meaning. This is what Brenda Miller suggests as well, that “when you set about to write creative nonfiction about any subject, you bring to this endeavor a strong voice and singular vision. This voice must be loud and interesting enough to be heard among the noise coming at us in everyday life” (ix). A deviation from standard writing is one way to maybe be loud and certainly be interesting, enough to be heard or seen among the noise of other writing in the world. Emphasized creativity concurrently emphasizes the message, helping both writer and reader see truths in a new way.

### *This Is an Honest Essay*

Marya Hornbacher says that “Nonfiction implicitly argues that truth matters, that true stories matter, and that the individual author’s perception of what is true carries some kind of weight; that the story she tells can and should be heard, its reverberations felt, beyond the echo chamber of her mind.”

As a body that craves truth and the security I feel in it, I’m passionate about what the nonfiction essay does—this genre that tries, like I do, to capture truth. I’m encouraged, too, by the thought that *my* true stories matter. The truths that I am sure of, I want others to feel as well. Articulating these is a battle, especially when the only inherent tools or talents I’m capable of exist in subjectivity, but I am essaying consistently to do what Doyle does, what Green, Jamison, Passarello, Foster Wallace, Didion, Sedaris, Biss, and more have demonstrated so beautifully in their own portrayal of truth. They have given it scope, and done so honestly. These are stories,

thoughts, insights, opinions, exhortations, that can and should be heard. Better yet, they should be felt, from the eyes that take them in to the brain that computes them to the soul that is nourished by them.

Essay pioneer Michel de Montaigne begins “To the Reader” with the bold declaration “Reader, thou hast here an honest book.” I love this. I love that it declares truth so proudly—though “truth” is perhaps not the best word; “honesty” is what it promises. And after all is said, that’s what I find the core of nonfiction to be... not the perfection that Truth denotes, but the honesty and sincerity of truth’s portrayal, analysis, and conclusion. Not every word will be objectively flawless, but everything should be subjectively true.

In each of my essays as I wax on and on and on about truths that I’ve accumulated in my life, I can promise that each is an honest essay. The truth is important to me—and though I deliver truths with all the imperfections a subjective body and brain must, know that, on my honor, I strive for the kind of grounded truth that will, as Ortega puts it, “awaken in kindred minds kindred thoughts,” so that both of us might be enlightened.



## On a Walk

Centuries ago, somewhere on the plains of Moab in the Middle East, the prophet Moses reminded his people of all the commandments he'd collected. We call this the book of "Deuteronomy", which means "repetition of the Law," which is significant, I think, since Moses was a man who was self-conscious about the way he spoke, who described himself as "not eloquent," "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue," which tells me that whatever was reiterated must have been extra important for him to make the effort to say it again.

Here's what he repeats: the Ten Commandments, his code of law, and a summary of the covenants expected and available between God and the people of Israel. The thing I like most about Moses's re-exhortation is the metaphor he uses to describe obedience: "ye shall *walk* in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you," states the end of chapter five, "that ye may live, and that it may be well with you, and that ye may prolong your days in the land which ye shall possess."

Of all the words he could have used to represent the action of commandment-keeping, law-abiding, covenant-holding, Moses chose the word "walk." Perhaps that was because walking is a movement that suggests progression, travel from one point to a destination, a journey in which the walker travels somewhere intentionally and in doing so becomes different. Changed.

"That ye may *live*," he then promises, "and that it may be well with you." I trust those words. Moses was an excellent walker, I imagine, having wandered the wilderness for forty years. And he certainly changed by the time he reached Horeb.

Henry David Thoreau—prophet in his own sphere of transcendental observation—was (I believe) of a similar opinion. He admired those who truly “understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*.” The “saunter” was Thoreau’s preferred mode of walking, of that forward motion towards some important end. “...*Sauntering*, which word is beautifully derived ‘from idle people who roved about the country in the Middle Ages ... under pretense of going *a la Sainte Terre*,’ to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, ‘there goes a *Sainte-Terrer*,’ a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander.” In this sense, both Moses and Thoreau held that walking was the way to a transcended self. Somewhere close to God.

There are many ways to walk. When I think of certain “types” of walking, faces come to mind—people who I cannot separate from the way they go about the ground. Like Moses who was privy to wandering and Thoreau who enjoyed the saunter, these other exceptional walkers seem to have found both the mastery of their walk and a greater grasp of themselves. And, I suppose, that God that set them walking. Is this correlational, or causational? I picture each as they walk.

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*the moseyer*

My grandma always used to describe her husband as a “moseyer.” This is fitting for the aspiring cowboy he seems to be. My grandpa’s nickname amongst his ranching friends is Cactus Pete, and he attends the Cowboy Poetry Gathering and the ranch’s sheep shearing week every year, amongst other things only a cowboy could truly appreciate. He gets tan in the summers, the top of his bald head collecting dark freckles. He wears collared shirts and jeans and often a baseball

cap. He loves his riding lawnmower, peanut-butter-and-potato-chip sandwiches, long jokes, the ranch, and his family. And he takes his time with all of them.

Which is what I believe moseying is. My mom says that growing up their family took road trips as often as they could, but the itinerary was flexible, to put it lightly. They'd stop in a small town for gas and end up staying in that small town for hours to mosey about its museum or park. "Grandpa never rushes," mom tells me, "He's never in a hurry. But not in a lazy way... he's just taking his time to check things out."

My grandpa does a lot of things—he's worked in banks, in law, in business, on the ranch, he has a large family, he actively participates in his church congregation, he loves to travel—and any one or two of these things could justifiably require rushing from one location or task to another. Instead, he moseys. His walk is slow but purposeful. He has one hand in a jean pocket and the other holding a Diet Coke. He reads plaques, listens intently to people. He asks good questions and tells good stories, readily sharing his own life's lessons. My grandpa's thoughtful steps are what have given him the time to listen and learn. It's a slow move from place to place, but I know he'd call it time well spent. He's patient with others and with himself. Moseying is a patient man's walk.

### *the racer*

I believe the only time I (and maybe you can relate) have watched race walking is during the Olympics, and I also believe it usually gets flipped on as a joke. My laughs have turned from comedy to incredulity, however, when I realize that the awkward quick-waddle these athletes are

doing have them clocking in average mile times of 7 minutes and 42 seconds for 31 miles straight.

Absolutely unreal, the way these people race.

Strict rules and regulations dictate race walking: the competitor must maintain contact with the ground at all times, the forward leg must be straightened when its foot touches the ground, and then must stay straight until it has passed under the body. The sport is nearly as mental as it is technical; racers must practice strict movement until this very abnormal way of moving becomes natural, instinctive.

The 2021 Summer Olympics in Tokyo hosted the last 50k men's race walk event the Olympics will ever offer. The gold medalist time was a jaw-dropping 3 hours and 50 minutes—faster than the worldwide average time for a marathon, plus seven miles longer and without any running. Of the 59 competitors, only 49 finished, and two were disqualified.

Twenty-nine minutes after the 46<sup>th</sup> athlete, Ecuador's Claudio Villanueva Flores crossed the finish line, coming in dead last. Most of the spectators and many of the athletes had already exited the venue, but the remaining supporters roared for Flores, as loudly as a small crowd can, as he heaved himself over the race's end. In the footage of his finish he is sobbing, doubled over in exhaustion and emotion. His coach embraces him, and Flores cries harder. When Flores collapses to his knees and race organizers quickly rush to him with a wheelchair and offer to take him away, he refuses. He'll walk it off.

“No one could have begrudged Flores if he decided to bow out,” said one journalist, “but he persevered and produced one of the lasting images of the Olympic Games.”

Flores powered through thirty-one miles of mechanical movement, over four *hours* of foot over foot, arms pumping. I believe there is some catharsis and clarity that comes when muscle memory kicks in and the brain clears, its subconscious firing on all cylinders telling the body to move in patterns, leaving the consciousness of your brain free to focus wherever you want or need it to. I believe that's what allowed Flores to complete his race, despite his body's sure protests. He could have stopped—he would not have been alone in that—but he didn't. He channeled a mastery of his own mind and body simultaneously, funneling focus and canceling out unhelpful stimuli, which is what surrounds and attacks and abuses so many of us non-racers just trying to move. Racers maintain a control over themselves that we may desperately need. Flores is inspiring not because he started something, but because maintained the control to finish.

### *the toddler*

At her one-year checkup my baby sister measured in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile for height, the 50th percentile for weight, and the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile for head circumference. She was like a walking bobble head, the very embodiment of toddling. Her head would tilt this way or that and her body would follow, tumbling about in uneven steps that varied in gait and speed and surety. It was hilarious, and moderately concerning.

I don't know what came first, the "toddle" or the "toddler". To toddle is to step unevenly, as if an unbalanced, uncoordinated child. To be a toddler suggests then an existence of uneven, failed stepping, and yet we treat toddlers as some of the most successful people in the world. They learn faster, their victories are more exciting. They shock and awe us in ways grown adults can't.

A toddler is constantly vulnerable to injury with any fall—their skin is soft and thin, their bones are small, their immune system is developing. Yet they are resilient. They cry from the shock more than the pain, and after some ritz crackers and a cheese stick, they're toddling once again. The salt from their tears hasn't even had time to dry on their faces before they're up to toddle around, hurtling towards another wall, curb, or coffee table.

Toddlers cannot be confident in their world—they have not had time to learn it yet. They don't even know what “confidence” means. But they're nonetheless innocently confident in their own ability to toddle again and again and again. To them it just makes sense. *My steps got me across the room once before, they must be able to do so again.* I'd call that faith.

### *the shuffler*

For the few months I lived in England, Mary drove me to church each Sunday. Her timing was impeccable—she arrived at the doors of my building every week at 9:20 am, on the dot. Her consistency was a comforting reassurance for me, living in a foreign country where nothing else felt familiar.

Mary drove like a maniac, especially for an 80-year-old woman. I'd never experienced that kind of speed or road rage from such an unassuming figure... had our windows been rolled down I am sure her wispy white hair would have slicked back cartoonishly. Mary did not like “that Meghan Markle,” but she did love the color purple and wore it faithfully from head to toe every time I saw her—another consistent pillar of comfort I loved dearly. She loved being English, loved her family's history, she didn't draw attention to herself other than with her lovely purple-ness, which was still somehow sweet and never overbearing.

When we'd get out of the car at the chapel I would run around to the driver's side of the car, and hold her hand as she maneuvered her pointed purple shoes onto the pavement. And then she would shuffle inside.

Mary was a dream at the shuffle. Her steps were small, close to the ground, and soft. She made it look graceful and gentle, so contrasted from her pedal-to-the-metal driving. She would shuffle around to each member of the congregation (it was a small group) and ask them about every quiet and important thing she knew they were experiencing. Mary had an incredible memory, which made me wonder if maybe the shuffling came from her dragging every fact she'd ever acquired around with her. Unlike the unexperienced toddler, her decades of life had taught her how to prevent falls. Shuffling is a sign of wisdom, I think. Mary scattered those tidbits of information back around in the form of genuine interest and investment. Wisdom personified, she shuffled with both kinds of grace— an elegance of movement, and a consideration of others.

### *the strider*

Luke, my brother, was four when he was diagnosed with epilepsy. He went through eleven different medications and six months of keto dieting, waiting for something to kick his brain back into gear. By age nine his doctors re-diagnosed him with “refractory” absence epilepsy, meaning they did not anticipate him growing out of it like most kids do. I didn't appreciate how different his upbringing was from my own, when I was younger: I knew school was hard, explaining his “spacing out” to peers was awkward, sports were difficult. One of the first things that made me realize just how much this condition limited him was when he turned 15 and was not allowed behind the wheel of a car, while the rest of his friends were getting their licenses.

So while his friends drove, he strode.

When I say he strode, I mean his long-legged steps were confident and determined but also comfortable. Like Luke was—confident, positive, sure of himself, sure of the ground beneath him and the air around him. Luke was too busy dreaming up plans to worry about how he would travel there. He strode *everywhere*. For anyone, with anyone, to anyone. To the store for a snack, to the park down the road, to his friend’s place in the neighborhood over. He worked at a restaurant over a mile away from our home and would commute on foot every day. We’d ask if he wanted a ride, and Luke would say he did not. He preferred to walk.

He still does. He eventually (by a medical miracle that shocked his doctors) grew out of his epilepsy at the age of 20. He got his license, he’s a responsible driver. Still, he regularly spends hours traversing the sidewalks of wherever he lives, ear buds in his ears, hood of his sweatshirt pulled over his big curls. This is his time to “separate from the chaos,” he tells me. His time to ponder, simplify, and regain his footing through things that so many trip over. To stride is to step with surety, and Luke is sure of so much.

*the trekker*

I do not know Tom Turcich, but I’ve seen how he walks.

In 2007 Tom’s friend died tragically at only 17 years old. This was a catalyst for Tom, who felt a sudden push to really *live*. He decided he’d join nine others in history who have travelled on foot around the entire world. He started just days before his 26<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2015, heading down his driveway in New Jersey pushing a baby stroller loaded with camping and hiking gear, a camera, computer, and crate full of food. The man trekked.



When he reached Austin, Texas four months in he adopted a dog named Savannah, who would trek with him to the very end. Tom got a bacterial infection, was held up at knifepoint, was sequestered in Azerbaijan for over six months during the coronavirus pandemic, suffered through every element and every terrain, and trekked through all 29,876 miles of it. It took Tom seven years to make this journey. He returned home to New Jersey in May of 2022, becoming the 10<sup>th</sup> person on earth to have completed that circumnavigation.

If you have trekked before you have likely felt its value—it stretches your lungs and your body, pulls places you’ve never pulled before, it makes you grateful for oxygen and chairs—but it takes someone like Tom to trek well.

Tom has told interviewers and fans and followers that there were plenty of times on his trek that he was “not in a good place,” mentally (though I imagine there were plenty of places that did not feel good physically, either). “But I don’t think I ever would have stopped,” he says. Not even if it had gotten worse than the mugging and sickness and solitude.

Part of trekking is endurance—pushing through hard things that try your strength, that have you questioning your purpose and reevaluating your destination. Tom’s steps were enduring ones. Committed, motivated, determined. Those are the kinds of steps that teach you about motivation; where you go for strength, what you look to for hope. I think the best way to practice those steps and learn that lesson may be how Tom did it: trekking mostly alone, intending to meet new people, spending the greatest amount of time meeting himself.

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My parents tell me I was walking at nine months old. Not unheard of, societally, but still early enough to be a “spectacle,” my mom says. My grandma joked “what is she in such a hurry for?”

Twenty-five years later I am proud to say that I walk all the time. Daily, even. And I've walked enough walks to be well-versed in many different types: the amble, the parade, the trudge, the march, the tread, the traipse. The lumber. The hike. I've strolled streets, promenaded paths, roamed rooms.

I don't know what kind of walk I might call mine. Maybe all of them, at one time or another. I think, though, that it might be less important how we walk and more important *that* we walk.

I mean this:

Luke (the strider) told me that when he walks he usually thinks about what he's "going to do next"—in his day, his job, his life. He thinks about who he *wants* to be. His thoughts are in as much a forward motion as his feet. I don't always find walks to be so revelatory, so I asked him what he gets out of that time walking and thinking. He said "It just gives me time to figure out myself, I guess."

Which makes me think of this quote I saw the other day from Laurette Mortimer, a "zen walker," that said "Walking brings me back to myself." I like how that sounds, the idea that there may be some physiological phenomenon where through walking we can reattach what has drifted within us—the mind from its motive, or the soul from its Maker. And maybe that through walking we might be brought back to ourselves *improved*. More grounded, centered, enlightened, developed. I believe Moses or Thoreau might add more alive, more well, more godly. Transcendent.

I think God likes all walks. I know He loves all walkers—the wanderer, saunterer, trekker, toddler, and more. I also think that, whether conscious of it or not, each way of walking

allows its walker to be brought back to themselves: allowing them to feel a sense of self more fully with each soul-supporting step. Each walk may amplify something different, something that speaks well to the walker's mind or personality, that connects them to themselves in the way they need it most. The time it takes to mosey is time spent pondering existence and creation and miracles in context of that one individual. The self-mastery it takes to race strengthens one's spirit over their body. The gentle, purposeful movement of shuffled steps reflect the kind of gentle, genuine attention that everyone needs to feel valued.

I need that self-reconnection, because I've felt adrift plenty. And I believe that (ironically,) I'm not alone in that. But I think a master walker—Claudio Villanueva Flores, Laurette Mortimer, Moses, my grandpa, Luke, Mary, even Henry David Thoreau— would say that once adrift, maybe the shortest path back to yourself is simply the one you start walking on.

## On My Tab

*“When I read about the evils of drinking, I gave up reading.” -Henny Youngman*

In the slapstick comedy film *Airplane!* the protagonist spends about ten minutes recounting his tragic romantic past and then says, “That’s when my drinking problem began” and brings a glass of water to his mouth before missing completely, splashing the drink all over his face.

I laugh every time I watch that part. Honestly, I laugh (on the inside, at least,) every time I *think* about that scene, which tends to be often because it comes to mind every time I buy diet Dr Pepper, which is frequent. I have taken to fondly calling my love of beverages a “drinking problem,” because it feels like a humorous way to acknowledge what could, perhaps, be called a “problem,” but that confession demonstrates a consciousness of the issue, which means I am a thoughtful and mature individual, fully aware of my actions, and therefore respectably responsible. And I can sleep soundly at night knowing it is not a fault but a fancy.

“Fancy” also being a word that I think coincides with “drinks” in a number of ways, particularly in regard to aesthetics. You’ve seen it, I’m sure: the smooth, sanctimonious indifference with which glamorous people in the movies say “put it on my tab” as they order a scotch or martini or whatever neat-dry-dirty-on-the-rocks concoction they please. It makes the phrase seem less like a request and more like an expression of nonchalant disregard for a situation others would sweat over. *I* would sweat over, because my bank account balance is about three digits short of “nonchalance.” The ‘tab’ refers to a record of what you’ve ordered but not yet paid for. Those suave men and women in their dress shirts with the top two buttons

undone and their gilded cocktail dresses, respectively, are unafraid of that moment of recompense, and order drink after drink.

I feel obligated to insert a disclaimer that when *I* speak of drinking I exclude alcohol due to personal and religious reasons; I understand the downsides of liquor and prefer to keep it far, far away. I know the term “drinking problem” originated from the addiction associated with alcohol, which is interesting to me as I see even casual or sporadic drinking of alcohol to be a “problem”... regardless, for the intents and purposes of my thoughts on drinking, consider this essay a *prohibitive* one in the most historically-popular sense of the word. You may have found anyway, as I have, that plenty of people snub plenty of other drinks sans-booze, which is where I find myself indignant.

For example, even at this moment I am halfway through my first can of diet DP for the day and it is 11:00am (but it’s always five o’clock somewhere, *amiright?*) There are two flattened Caprisun pouches in my trashcan that I just barely emptied, and a smashed plastic water bottle near it, because I am not good at “trash”ketball. I have a mini fridge in my bedroom stocked with nine more cans of soda (not “pop.” “Pop” is onomatopoeia, or the nickname of my grandfather), a box of Caprisuns, a Gatorade (for when I’m feeling ‘sporty’), six water bottles and some cheese sticks, for protein.

I’m too poor and too unestablished to really merit a well-stocked personal fridge in my room. I justify this nonetheless by calling it my preparation to entertain guests. This falls apart

immediately upon any questioning because I rarely entertain, and if I do it's likely not in my bedroom. So yes, fine, those are all for me.

I down a lot of liquid. I love it. I love that drinks are easy, that they refresh me, that flavors can create or support different moods... that when it snows, logic says the best course of action is hot chocolate. And when the thermometer finally hits 72° for the first time following a winter, neighborhood kids pull out their cardboard boxes and plastic pitchers and crystal light packets and turn into veritable businesspeople. I love that everyone has a favorite drink. I love that that gives me something to ask people. I love that any drink can wash down food and frustration. I love that even nonalcoholic drinks drown out the things I'm stressing over, feel like a justifiable reason for a break. I love that it gives me a reason to not talk when I don't know what to say or don't feel like saying anything at all. I love that drinking something is measurable progress, because even if I haven't finished my essay or sent the email or graded the assignments or planned the lessons or checked off anything other than "make bed" on my to-do list, at least I've successfully emptied this container.

I love that it gives me something to love, when loving other things in my day feels hard. When I've said yes to too many things, and I'm paralyzed looking at said to-do list, and the most I feel capable of is a sip of something good.

The people I consider my closest friends have accepted that drinks are a love language of mine. Actually, it may be the reverse: that the people who have accepted this, I consider my closest friends. And, actually, they may or may *not* have accepted it, but at the very least they keep their observations and opinions to themselves, which I appreciate.

Sometimes, before they've accepted that my habits aren't likely to change any time soon, friends and acquaintances comment on my drinking habits with humor and masked wariness. I always have something in hand, and if I am caught without something to sip I am antsy; I can see why that might furrow the brows of those who care about my well-being; they've read the studies on artificial sweeteners and worry for my cardiovascular health. But to them and anyone else who insists that water be the only appropriate, productive, beneficial drink I say "There are so many things in life to be sad about and cautious with—let me have this one thing, please." In the grand scheme of things, this is fine. Right? I'm trying to juggle all the things that impressive people can juggle—a difficult job, an interesting degree, a stimulating social life, a list of hobbies to make me look fun, a fitness routine, travel plans, book club— despite knowing I have horrible hand-eye coordination, and you're concerned that I drink too much aspartame? *Let me have this.*

The more tasks I say yes to, the more drinks I want to consume; both things pile on my tab steadily. This ties to the freedom I feel in the phrase "drinking problem," because don't we drink to *solve* problems? Guzzle by the gallon to satiate our parchedness? Consume our caffeine to wake up, or to ease the pounding of a headache or the throbbing of a menstrual cramp? (That is proven science and I stand by it.) Don't we sip our teas counting on the fact that our nausea will subside and our congestion dissipate? Were I not staunchly sober, (and I readily admit that if that were not a religious conviction I fear I would be severely alcoholic) I would add that don't some turn to drinking alcohol to "cleanse" the inner injury?

This makes me wonder if we ought to call it a drinking *solution*, but we would quickly run into the issue of "solution" also meaning "a liquid combination" which is both normal and

delicious and not at all something with a negative connotation, unless to you “solution” first conjures to mind a chemical solution for, say, cleaning, which then has a *very* negative connotation because cleaning is annoying and cleaning solutions will melt your organs and therefore neither should be considered potable.

So we stick with *drinking problem*.

(I have just popped the tab to my second can of DP.)

I will continue to both ironically and admittedly call my habit a drinking “problem,” even though it seems to *solve* a lot of my problems.

Even though I find it charming that drinks can turn a bland experience into an especially enjoyable one just by adding flavor, and that seems unproblematic entirely. Or even though I have a veritable *collection* of punch cards to Utah-mocktail-drinkeries, but those are physical evidence of my pouring money back into my local economy, which feels like a good thing. Or even though I find my car floors littered with straw wrappers and 32 oz cups or plastic bottles or aluminum cans, all of these are recyclable and I do put them in such receptacles when available, bringing harmony to the environment, which Mother Nature cheers me to as we *clink* glasses of lemonade. Even though getting drinks has become my favorite thing to do with people—people I don’t know at all but would like to, or people I know better than myself—and I find the act a representation of my desire to spend quality, hydrating time with another person, which I think shows them that I both care for their physical well-being and appreciate the opportunity to talk with them, which benefits all parties. Even though my friend says I’m becoming too reliant on Diet Dr Pepper to soothe my cramps, but caffeine is technically naturally occurring and



acetaminophen is not, so actually you could say I'm homeopathic, or a naturalist, which a lot of people respect.

Even though drinks are, by many cultures, considered a vehicle of festivity, which makes every drink feel like a celebration, and isn't life to be celebrated? Don't we spend too much time choking down bite by bite of our obligations hoping to clear our plates by the end of the day, without taking a moment to wash down those tasks with a celebratory refresher?

And even though, often, when I openly admit that I *started* my day with a Diet Dr Pepper, someone comes to me and whispers "me too, I'm so glad I'm not the only one" which gives *both* of us a validation-induced-boost of serotonin, and I need all the happy-hormone I can get.

I can't really fathom being able to ever say with *confidence* "put it on my tab" or, rather, "go ahead, add the charge to my impending destitution." At least without my voice cracking, betraying the truth, which is that I am terrified of everything I've piled onto my tab and am dreading my moment of propitiation when the bartender says "time to close" and it becomes painfully obvious that I don't have enough to cover the bill. That I have failed, or am a failure, or that I'm alone and unattached, or that I'm not actually as remarkably resumé'd as you thought I was.

I add to the tab with abandon— yes I will work another job, yes I will go on that trip, yes I will devote more time to health and wellness, yes I will stack my schedule to include no breaks, yes and yes and yes— feigning confidence but feeling dread, using those drinks after drinks as

glorious glasses of coping while I erratically juggle those things with my poor coordination, and shock even myself that none have fallen and shattered.

But really, of all the means of coping and comfort I *could* be turning to, gulping down artificially flavored carbonated drinks or juice pouches or chocolatized-milk seems pretty tame. I've had to rely on drinks to keep me going more than once... I've drained a juice to boost a blood sugar, drank and refilled and drank again Hydroflask after Hydroflask; there was even a period where my stomach was unable to digest *anything* and I survived on two cans of ginger ale every day for nine weeks. Emotionally, too—I've trudged through mental turmoil for days and found brief reprieve when a friend dropped off a large diet Dr Pepper, lite ice, with lime, to my doorstep because they knew it is my go-to. It's a simple pleasure, but an effective one.

If that isn't validation enough, I think Jesus liked a good drink too: His first miracle of His ministry was to turn water into wine (and “good wine” at that, which I think shows He knew a quality drink and how it could impress a crowd.)

So I champion the drinking problem. I feel less guilty about the evils of carbonation or the number of travel mugs I own when I think about what an easy solution it is to so many taxing problems that have too little respite. When that is the case, we cope, and hopefully cope well. And so I say “cheers. Pick your poison. Knock one back. Drinks on me. Put it on my tab.” Because what an easy way to reenergize and revitalize, relax and refocus. And support your local dentist.

## Onomatopoeia

Mondays often start with a garbled *mmrrrgghh*. November 7<sup>th</sup> did, I'm fairly certain. That's how I woke up (wake up?) most mornings, but especially Mondays.

I was out the door for work by 5:30am; the light snow from a few days prior had frozen into brittle ice that *shhchk, shhchk, shhchked* under my feet with every step towards my car. The door was iced-shut and took me a few pulls to yank open, which made me grumpy because it was very cold out, and I was very tired and very much not looking forward to my commute. But the door did open, *djauw*, I climbed inside, and shut it with a firm *phwoogh*.

The first thing I looked at as I turned the car on was the crack in my windshield. I know it was born the previous March but I don't know how . . . one night I parked my car with a whole, unblemished windshield, and the next morning there was a crack, bold and proud and horrible. It was about seven inches long that first day, making its way down from the top edge of the pane, about a foot from the right corner. Every once in a while I'd notice that it had suddenly grown an inch or two or four; I never saw it happen but it moved like lightning when it moved at all, spreading down and to the left in jagged spurts. I'd forget it was there after looking through it for weeks and weeks, until it would demand my attention again with an emphatic *PLAT* that stabbed my ears and jolted me out of driving's monotonous, humming *vrriiiiii*. And then I'd see the progression, the added length. It seemed that the crack, left alone and unfixed, would every so often become angry and lash out, reminding me it was very much present and very much irritated at my neglect. I, meanwhile, felt I had a hundred other things I needed to spend my time and money on first. I'd fix it eventually.

Now eight months later, the crack was starting to encroach on my line of sight directly over the steering wheel. It looked like a tree branch. Every morning before my defrosters (*shmmm*) and windshield wipers (*gadomb gadomb*) killed what cold temperatures had painted onto the glass, I'd look at how the ice decorated the break in symmetric, intricate, spiky patterns, like the spiked coat of ice covering the actual tree branches hanging over my parked car. I imagine as it grows like a fungus it sounds a muted *thhhhh*.

The cold somehow adds another means of attention—"look at me. I'm spreading, the cold is expanding the atoms around me, I'm just getting bigger. Soon I'll have split your pane in two."

So it's Monday. Work is fine. I'm finished by 10:30, turn the lights of my classroom with a *fdip*. I cruise the freeway north to make a return to Gap for my mom—the door there opens and chimes *dleng* by way of welcome—before I'm headed back south. I play music. I make it back through my front door and trudge *bmb, bmb, bmb, bmb* up carpeted stairs. I type at my computer for a few hours, homework and work and menial curiosities creating a chorus of interminable *tuhtuhtuhtuh's*.

Later I get back in my car, headed to the airport to pick up a friend.

*Shhchk shhchk shhchk. Djauw. Phwoogh. Vrrrrrrr.*

A soundtrack of noises I can identify if I take only a moment to sound them out. These are not noises we pay attention to, but we hear them... enough that we can sound them out, spell them out, categorize and define them. Even these trivial, peripheral parts of our lives get a name, something rational to pin them down. Many are widely accepted, the *crashes* and *thwacks* and *buzzing* and *creaking*. Some, still, are personal. Perhaps I'm the only one that hears certain

sounds a particular way– would call their typing more of a quiet “*tuhtuhtuh*” where others may call it a “*clackclackclack*”, or hears a “*fdip*” when they flip their lightswitch instead of a “*click*,”– but it makes sense to me; makes me feel like I have some understanding of what’s around me.

Some sense of control.

I drive, and hardly notice the crack.

I park. *Fppttg*.

My phone vibrates in two short bursts, *tsz-sz*, the “tone” for a text.

**Did you hear about Zach?**

**No, is everything ok?**

**He took his life this weekend.**

I look at my windshield and can’t see past the crack. And there is no understanding, no control, no word to capture, sound out, spell out, categorize, define. Nothing to give this second a rational name.

My heart breaks, and it sounds like this:

## On the Up and Up

**“a certain woman”** /sértən/ *noun* 1. Suggesting individuality. 2. “Known for sure”<sup>1</sup> by God.

Some researchers estimate that more than 107 billion people have lived on the earth. Over *107 billion* lives, souls, personalities, characters, faces. I try to make an extra effort to remember people because I know how good it feels to be remembered, but to be recognized individually, out of over 107 billion faces? That is more than good. That is to feel loved. To feel special.

I crave that feeling.

To have been a woman with an issue that alienated her from the world, the society which should have made an effort to care for her, mourn with her, comfort her... what would that feel like? My stomach hurts as I picture that suffocating sort of seclusion.

But then to be thought of as “certain.” A word that establishes surety of place, and suggests *merit* of place. Known, for sure.

**“had suffered many things ... and had spent all she had and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse”** /séfæt/ *verb* 1. As in, was the object of pain, affliction, temptation, sickness,

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “certain”

infirmities, and sin<sup>2</sup>; and had tried everything to overcome on her own, but could not. 2. Tired, frustrated, hurting.

Part of the human condition is that we are dealt a plethora of trials. Life will take, and take plenty. The frustration for me comes in tandem with the lack of sure *resolution* for those trials... to invest so much energy and emotion and conviction into overcoming something that is just as firmly determined to not be overcome. And then furthermore, to be a natural being with limitations, running against an abstract like “trials” with none: that feels like a stacked race, and I’m not a great runner to begin with.

I realize this sounds cynical and bitter (and maybe it is a little) but I’m not *angry* so much as *exhausted*. I’m so... tired. Life struggles have me tired—the big ones like wars in Ukraine and 7.8 magnitude earthquakes in Turkey and chemical spills in Ohio, things that have me worrying about people I don’t know; plus relationships that hurt and lack of relationships that hurt and people I do know, people I care about, who are hurting. And the little struggles too, the stomach aches and depleting bank accounts and frozen, slippery sidewalks on the way to my car, the hangnails and stains on my favorite crewneck and cracked windshields of everyday life...they've all got me worn out.

When my “issues” started I may have had the tenacity to declare “full steam ahead” and jump back to my feet after a tumble. But right now, I sputter and gasp at the fumes I’m running on.

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<sup>2</sup> Alma 7:11-13

I think exhaustion exacerbates the problems, too. One frigid day in December I shuffled out of a university class into the courtyard between buildings. My backpack and anxiety were heavy in the crowds of well-bundled students; I began to trudge towards the humanities building when suddenly my poorly-tractioned shoes slipped on insidious ice, sending me to my knees... which also slipped, tipping me onto my outstretched hands... and then my hands slipped, hurtling my face towards the slush-covered concrete. By then there was nothing more to slip, and I lay there prostrate while thousands of (entertained) students carefully tread around me. Had I more energy that day, I may have been strong or sure enough to take more deliberate steps in the first place and avoid such precarious ice, or have been able to catch myself more securely. But I was tired. And one tiny slip turned into a more drastic stumble, which led to a downright cartoon-esque faceplant.

Exhaustion exacerbates the problems. And at some point, if one's suffering of issues has persisted and time has not proven any improvement, hope turns into desperation, desperation turns into skepticism, and skepticism turns into fear. And then, mangled and gray, fear turns to despondency.

Can you imagine? Spending all, gaining nothing. Investing hope, time, patience, making every effort, expending every energy of finance and body and soul, and making no headway. Suffocating seclusion feels inadequate to describe that scene. I'd have reached despondency after a year or so. She'd been suffering for twelve.



**“when she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind and touched his garment. For she said, If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be made whole”** / ˈjɪzəs/ *noun* 1. The son of God<sup>3</sup>; a man widely known [to heal]; the only perfectly empathetic man. 2. A motivator and strength through difficulties. 3. A sure bet. 4. Wonderful, Councilor, Savior, Redeemer.

The name “Jesus” is one that I doubt many remember hearing for the first time. It, for me, has simply always been there. The meaning of that name, however, has grown as I have. As a toddler I think I saw Him as a nice man who wanted to hear me sing songs in church. By middle school I think I imagined Him as an all-seeing-eye. In high school I began to see Him as the grand sacrifice He performed out of love, which was intimidating but amazing; a grand enough idea that I could not really wrap my head around it and (like many concepts we encounter in high school,) I held it at arm’s length. I started college, became more independent, and then Jesus became someone I begged for guidance. I left on a proselyting mission, and He became my reason for living. I returned home, and He became my space for venting. I had my heart broken, and my body weaken, and my will power drain, and my mind darken, and He became my medicine. I continued to grow, and He became my friend.

Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World. Saver of Me.

No reputation can match that. What I wouldn’t do to be in a hundred-foot radius of Him. What this certain woman would do, to just touch the hem of what He wore.

His reputation had preceded Him, and she believed every word. Perhaps her solitude was a good place for God to tell her help was coming, quiet enough to hear promises that a man with

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<sup>3</sup> MacMillan Dictionary, “Jesus Christ”

a reputation like this would exist for her gain. She knew it was He, and she knew what He could do. And she made the effort to reach Him.

**“and straightway ... she felt ... that she was healed”** /híld/ *adjective* 1. Made to feel better; requiring only a moment of contact from the Savior for improvement. 2. Relief. 3. Not to be confused with “cure,” which is a passive moment of submission to a practitioner, but *healing* which is active, requiring you to *be* there, fully awake and aware and participatory<sup>4</sup>.

Once when I was nine, I let my toddler brother sit on my shoulders in our neighbor’s pool while I walked around. Somehow I got to a spot where my head was submerged, but my legs weren’t strong enough to kick and push toward the elevated pool floor... I was terrified of letting my brother off my shoulders, panicked as my lungs started to burn and pressure built in my throat, and then my foot found ground and I pushed up as hard as I could, throwing my brother off while keeping him in my hands and shooting my head above the water. Black dots filled my vision and I felt like throwing up, and I have never loved a breath of air more.

That’s kind of what it feels like, to me. The breath of air. When He heals.

I wonder if she felt the same way.

**“and Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned ... and said, Who touched my clothes? ... and he looked round about to see her that had done this**

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<sup>4</sup> Elaine S. Marshall, “Learning the Healer’s Art”

**thing.”** /vărču/ *noun* 1. “Power”<sup>5</sup> automatically felt by the Giver; Jesus being perfectly aware, taking time to search out and acknowledge, recognize, converse with the ones in need of Him.

A friend once pointed out to me that Jesus—miracle performer, conduit to God—likely already knew exactly who had touched his clothes. And as someone who often healed and would heal another in need willingly, he wasn’t upset about that individual’s act of faith. So why ask?

Maybe, he told me, it was so that the woman had a chance to fully acknowledge her faith. Provide her the opportunity to admit for herself and for everyone else present that she *needed Him*. That she believed in who He was. Believed He would make her better.

**“but the woman fearing and trembling, knowing what was done in her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth”** /trúθ/ *verb* 1. An overwhelming amazement, incredulousness, wonder, or awe over a miracle; accompanied by a spilling over of words of one’s circumstances, hopelessness, need, willingness, and healing. 2. An anxiety over worthiness for having power spent on one’s behalf. 3. An admission of weakness or inadequacy, *and/or* a statement setting out essential religious doctrine<sup>6</sup>. 4. A gratitude for the reality of a Savior.

My “lowest” love languages are gifts and acts of service. I don’t mean to say that I don’t appreciate those things, because I do—immensely so. I hold onto gifts like a hoarder, and am prone to burst into tears when anyone sacrifices time and thought and energy for me. Yesterday my mom sent my cousin (traveling from my hometown in Idaho to my current residence in Utah)

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<sup>5</sup> KJV Bible, footnotes by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Languages, “confession”

with some daffodils to deliver to me, and when I saw them I cried, both at the thoughtfulness of the gift and the willingness of my cousin to play courier.

Still, these “languages” are my lowest because I fear being looked at as an obligation. I feel undeserving and also fear undeserving, and by extent, I fear that if those who give to me realize my undeserving and inadequacy, they may regret having given to me at all. So, is it my ethical duty to inform my givers of my shortcomings? Shouldn’t they know who they’re sacrificing for?

Such a confession would surely be fair to the giver.

This woman’s confession, though, was not for Jesus’ benefit—it was for hers. Telling the “truth” of her imperfection and search for a miracle would not disappoint the other party, make Him regret His gift, change His mind, take the healing back. It would not distance the healed from the healer. I think it would do the opposite: it would secure their relationship. It would allow her to feel the overwhelming, all-consuming love mutually shared by her and Him. It would let her articulate her shift from feeling that lack of deservedness to understanding, that *He* was as desperate for her to accept the gift as *she* was desperately in need of it. It would allow her to express her humility and awe.

It would let her say “thank you.”

**“and he said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace”** /fěθ/ ; /hól/ ; /pís/ *adjective* 1. To be okay. 2. To be reminded of one’s birthright, and extended a promise (i.e. commitment) of eternal care<sup>7</sup>. 3. To have been made more complete, undisturbed, unimpeded, unharmed,

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:20

through God and a belief (i.e. conviction) in a Redeemer greater than oneself. 4. A directive to move forward with uniquely divine serenity; to know with a surety of one's significance to their Heavenly Father.

I know I am young and my claims to struggle may seem naïve, but I will earnestly claim struggle nonetheless— I've felt physical and mental and emotional and spiritual suffering more than I thought I could. It's hurt a lot, and has given me plenty of real and metaphorical scar tissue. I've traveled the range of faith to despondency and taken souvenir memories from each step. They're heavy memories. They pull me down but push me forward at the same time, humility-turned-determination.

Every so often when I've gotten so tired that I've just chosen to sit against the wall while the throng bustles around me, I find myself in reach of that healer. My brushes with Him feel brief, but the relief I get from them is reliable. Those are moments of wholeness, where I feel I'm a certain woman with an issue (or two, or twelve. Hundred.) who believes what she's heard, while she's felt alone, about a Savior. And is allowed a miracle for it; and feels healed, overwhelmed, thankful, loved, loving. And at peace.



## Honorable Mentions

Here are some things that, in my opinion, do not get the accolades they deserve, being overlooked in favor of the louder, trendier, grander, prettier, easier, the more obvious, awesome, hot-topic things they coincide with. These are they that never seem to podium; these are the consistent runner-ups, the patted-on-the-back, the “how are you not married?!”s. These are they who are never considered quite the best option, but are certainly never the worst.

These are the honorable mentions.

### *Slide-On Shoes*

The slide-on shoes are perhaps not the “cutest” shoe available. But I dare anyone to say they’d rather spend full minutes lacing up their high-top Converse or using a crowbar to get their feet into their Air Force 1’s without creasing them, just to go get the mail or pick up their Rx from a drive-thru pharmacy.

No—when it comes to user-friendly footwear, the slide-on shoe is the unspoken hero.

I got mine *not* from a popular storefront or brand outlet, not from a DSW or Famous Footwear, but from Zurchers, the party store with the clown from your nightmares on its *Welcome* sign. They’re mostly plastic and foam, I think—nothing impressive, probably not “recycled”, they’re brown, they were \$9.00. And they’ve lasted me almost *ten* years. The left one makes a wheezing noise every time I step, like it’s begging me to retire it to a landfill, but I will not. The right one has a tear in it right where the base meets the strap, so when I bend the shoe at all it gapes open and threatens to bisect the shoe entirely, but I will not let it. These are tried-and-true shoes. I

once wore them hiking four miles through a river (because someone told me it was a short stretch and I wanted to keep my tennis shoes dry for the remainder of the hike; turned out, the river *was* the hike.) and they served me valiantly.

These are resilient shoes, shoes you can rely on to get the job done but not make a fuss about it. These are the shoes that are always there for you, especially when you're at your fashion-lowest. They are the late night phone call to the only person you're sure you won't be bothering. They're the quality-time shoe. I believe there is good reason many people call these the "Jesus sandal": slide on shoes suffereth long, and are kind. Slide on shoes envieth not; vaunteth not themselves, are not puffed up. They beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Slide on shoes *never* faileth.

### *A Heated Seat in a Car*

Leather or fake leather (faux leather? Pleather? I-can't-believe-it's-not leather?) upholstery is a clean and classic look for your car's seating, and is particularly appreciated for not absorbing spills. However, come the winter months this material feels less "comfy" and more "arctic torture-y." (Dante's ninth circle of hell is a frozen lake. Mine is a frozen car.)

One Honda dealership tries to spin that for the better by saying "leather provides a great barrier against heat because it contains a large amount of air, making it a very poor conductor. Whereas cloth quickly absorbs heat from your body, leather [...] will resist the warmth." At this, I can only blink in bewilderment, especially since "resist the warmth" sounds like an adage from the devil. Maybe in the dead of summer that resistance to warmth is appealing, but from October to March those of us without garages or modern remote-turn-on vehicles sit in miserable

iceboxes, praying to our Maker that the car's hot air will quickly thaw the car and our frozen bodies.

Unless the *car's* Maker has endowed it with the divine gift of heated seats.

A heated seat in a car is the answer to those many prayers from many commuters—like a stovetop burner for your butt, it is a means of relief in a time of distress. I feel I can use “distress” because I don't know of another word that can describe the anger and discomfort and longing for deliverance one feels in a frozen car, quite so succinctly. The heated seat relaxes rigid muscles, says, “there, there,” while your shivers diminish, and reassures you that the cold never lasts forever, the misery will end, you'll be just fine, and you'll get where you need to go. The heated seat makes an otherwise dreaded or boring drive not only bearable, but enjoyable. It's a safe space, a comfortable space. It's a solace.

### *Free Pens*

I know some individuals who insist on writing with a specific pen. Some just prefer a brand or type of ink. A few are adamant about the make and model. (In my experience, these are usually the same people who carry leatherbound journals and have lengthy opinions on why vinyls are music's purest form.)

I personally like a good ballpoint that writes thick. BIC does that well, delivering striking lines of ink eager to smear. For some reason though, nothing quite tops the efficacy and writing experience of a *free* pen.

You find these pens on the ground, or snag one from an overflowing container on a secretary's desk, or are given one in a promotional goody-bag. The ones that tell you “Payne



Orthodontics | Orthodontics at Bridgetower" with a phone number and address. I have never been to Payne Orthodontics and cannot speak for the quality of their root canals, but gosh do I love their pens.

These pens make you want to write. If you're not a writer, they make you want to doodle. They turn the self-conscious man into the man who scribbles his name 47 times on the margins of his handout in different fonts. They're a conduit of self-expression, of brains with bright light bulbs illuminating usually dim corners. Black and blue do not suggest beatings and bruises, with a free pen—they promise bold images and articulations that cannot and *need* not be erased or replaced, a firmness of ideas that don't require healing but *nurturing*. The free pen is a tool of confidence, something that makes you sure of yourself. It empowers the holder and emboldens their individuality, personality, originality. It's the friend that tells you to shoot your shot, submit the application, make the move, *try*.

If the pen is mightier than the sword, the free pen could take down a battalion.

### *Grape Juice*

According to various food and beverage statistics sites, year after year apple and orange juice stand as reigning "favorites" over their freshly squeezed competitors. I get it; they are delicious. Both have that delightful sweetness-to-tartness ratio that people look for in their juice, plus a popularity at breakfasts that makes them an easy pick. Minute Maid and Motts chose a good fruit to market. Toddlers and diabetics everywhere are constantly carrying tiny cardboard boxes of the stuff, to boost low moods and low blood sugars. (I would know, I'm one of them. A diabetic, not a toddler.)

But why is everyone so drawn to the apple and orange juice? Why not the grape?! Nature's candy turned liquid! Sweet and sharp and rich in a way neither apples nor oranges can compete with. When I peruse the juice shelves in Walmart my question is not "apple, orange, or grape?" but rather "grape or grape?" for there are *multiple options!* Light yellowy-green or dark blackish-purple, each pairing well with different foods and moods. It's versatile, a complementary drink. It is everyone's companion, willing to meet and nourish anyone who will have them. A spirited, classic beverage. It refreshes, without overwhelming or intoxicating. The unfermented wine; a virtue before its being left ignored for very long makes it a bitter, potent vice.

I've been told that the wine back in Jesus's time was more like grape juice. I bet He liked it. I bet it was His favorite.

### *The Human Ear*

A few years ago I had a brilliant roommate studying Communication Disorders. She once had to give a presentation on the human ear to her classmates and asked me to be her practice audience. I played the part dutifully, nodding through the introduction full of science-y words I neither knew nor was particularly interested in.

But then she started describing how humans hear: how sound waves travel through the small canal in our ear to the eardrum, which vibrates according to the frequency of the wave. Then how the eardrum sends those vibrations on through to three microscopic bones shaped like Tinker Toys in the middle ear. And then these three tiny bones somehow translate or transmit or transmogrify those vibrations into mechanical energy, and amplify it, and send that energy

swimming through the inner-ear-fluid, through a chamber that looks like an actual snail, where there are even tinier little hair-like sensors that feel the energy, and collect the data, and then send that data through the auditory nerve right to the gooey gray mass of your brain. Which then is somehow able to interpret the data as not only sounds, but sounds with meaning. And the brain attaches that meaning to those sound waves that hit your ear. And this whole process happens instantaneously.

I blame hormones and lack of sleep and the stress from my Critical Theories of Classical Literature class for my reaction to this information, but by the time Kenzie had reached the “gooey gray mass of your brain” part of her speech I was crying. Actually crying, with real tears tumbling over the real bags under my eyes. She froze and said “oh no, what happened,” and I took a shuddering breath in and let out a sob before asking “can you please tell me how cochlear implants work?”

My other question that I didn't voice was “*why aren't we talking about this all the time? This miracle! This wonder!*” This deserves to be talked about! The ultimate meta-experience: creating soundwaves that will travel to the brain and be interpreted as words about how soundwaves travel to the brain. We should worship our ears and the God that made them, just for existing as they do! How admirably it completes such miniscule tasks, how useful and helpful to our day-to-day lives. The ear is not only (definitionally) the best listener we have, but it is also the means by which our attention might be called to other beautiful things that enrich our lives. They introduce us to people, places, things, they make sure we hear words of affirmation; these small appendages, doing what they can to make living more wonderful.

### *The Perforated Tear*

Until the perforated tear, people relied on scissors, excessive folding, or luck to rip anything in a straight line. Scissors were a pretty sure bet, but anyone carrying around scissors with them day-to-day would be assumed a barber or serial killer. Excessive folding takes time, warps and frays the edges into soft, feeble fringe, and is still not a guarantee of misdirection when tearing. Luck is a crapshoot.

But the perforated tear... that strong, beautiful line, the discreet *zzziipp* as you rip, the confidence and pleasure at clean-cut success, *that* is something to applaud. This is a quiet thing; part of its purpose is to be unassuming, to require little sound and little evidence for an act as aggressive as splitting something into separate pieces. But even with its humility, it provides such sweet satisfaction. It softens the blow of handing over your money when you've just torn the check smoothly from your checkbook. The annoyance of February 14<sup>th</sup> is overshadowed by the clean dividing of cardstock valentines prepared the day before. The most exhausting homework is turned in with greater confidence after it's been gently tugged off its ream into a perfect 8.5x11 sheet.

You cannot mess it up unless you're trying to. Everyone's a winner!—the tear, the tearer, and the torn. Everything left fulfilled. The perforated tear is easy to please, leaving you with the feeling you get after a sharp high five. It is encouraging: you *can* do good things. You can do them right. You will make it proud, I promise.

### *The Rocking Chair*

The chair is a staple commodity. Bless their inventor for creating an easy object that allows rest to weary bodies, and bless them for making it easily balanced and sturdily-backed. But chairs are impersonal; though they perform a needed function, they do so rather insipidly.

Where a chair may firmly direct and support like an army general, a rocking chair *cares* for its sitters. It rocks them like a parent might—the gentle sway that mimics the sensation of being carried. And oh, don't we want to be carried. We want that assurance that someone is close and aware of us; we would love nothing more than the tender swing of being carried to stop our tears and tantrums. I turn elsewhere for the more obvious forms of validation and serotonin, like crappy reality TV and rants to my coworkers. And 32 oz soft drinks from Maverick. But had I a rocking chair...

Rocking chairs make me nostalgic for small hands and feet and board books. The rocking chair in my family's nursery room had a thin wooden back full of tiny octagons I would try to push my little toddler fingers through. I can vaguely remember being rocked, my dad singing to me in Portuguese, whispering the parts of my face while brushing them quietly. *Eye, eye, nose, cheeks, chin*. I more vividly remember rocking my sister who was born when I was 13. I could recite “Goodnight Moon” to her by heart but followed along with the pictures anyway, though her baby eyes couldn't see much, especially in the dark. And I'd whisper the parts of her face while brushing them quietly—*eye, eye, nose, cheeks, chin*. These are memories of comfort and security, gentle swaying lulling me into slower heartbeats.

What other chair can do the same? Can pull you into a secure sense of calm, care for you when you need care, be a place of consolatory rest? What other chair gives as good a hug? I submit: none.

A few more:

Peeling protective plastic sheets off new glass or screens— a physical depiction of the term “voila.”

When a song ends right as you park your car—*kismet*.

Wheat bread—wholesome, full of flavor, and better for all sandwiches except my mom’s peanut butter and honey.

The Costco return policy—merciful, a wink and a nudge out the door, forgiving, accepting.

Etc. – for being an abbreviation everyone uses without really getting to know its purpose.

etc.

To these honorable mentions and the so very many more, I give my applause and gold medals and blue ribbons. Though you feel overlooked, there are those who do notice what you offer: your consistency, aid, loyalty, encouragement, energy, compassion, pleasantness. You may not ever receive the awards you would like, but I hope the jobs you do will be reward in themselves.

You are good. I see it. Carry on.

## **On Fire**

When a cluster of snowflakes lands gently on your forehead and you wipe it away, it melts quickly, dissipating or disappearing almost instantaneously, as if it was never there. Even the memory of the cold from that intricate cluster of ice crystals is hard to hold onto.

When ash lands gently on your forehead and you wipe it away, it leaves a streak of gray. Stains the skin dark. Memories connected to that flake of dusty residue are difficult to forget.

It seemed like something out of a disaster movie, minus the screaming. That was what felt the most surreal, I think—a dirty orange sky, ash drifting in clumps like snowflakes, neighbors congregated on the sidewalks with their chins pointed skyward, and no running or shouting. Not even raised voices or doors slammed in panic. Just quick and quiet shuffling in and out of townhomes as residents loaded their Subarus with family heirlooms and important documents and pillows. Those of us standing on the concrete glanced at each other every few minutes or so, waiting for someone to suggest what to do.

An audience unsure of what they were watching, or if we would become a part of it.

I lived on Martina Avenue in the southwestern corner of Santa Rosa in October of 2017. The mandatory evacuation zone ended just 1.5 miles northeast of my apartment, though many of my neighbors chose to vacate preemptively, just in case. Unknown to me yet, tens of thousands of cars choked the roads heading south towards San Francisco while mine remained parked on Martina Ave as my roommates and I waited to hear . . . anything. Any word from city officials

that our residence was at risk, any instruction as to whether we were to stay put or join the throngs of evacuees. We stayed, at limbo on the sidewalk. Orange and gray sky, nervous energy, little sound. Ash kissing my forehead.

My friend Kyler had called me that morning at about 2 am. His response to my groggy “hello?” was a militant “are you awake?”

I said “no.”

He said “get awake.”

I said “what happened?”

By now one of my roommates had woken up and flipped on the bedroom light with her eyes still closed, body still mostly asleep. I heard, “Santa Rosa is on fire.” *Click.*

Confused, I checked the phone screen to confirm that Kyler had, indeed, hung up on me. Thinking back to that call and knowing his flair for the dramatics, I’m sure some part of him got a rush at the opportunity to bear shocking news. Concerned about the implications of shocking news, certainly, but the man loved a mic drop.

I looked at my roommates who were standing by my bed waiting for me to relay the 2 am wake-up call—“Something about a fire?” I said.

Tubbs Road connects California State Routes 128 and 29, right above the small town of Calistoga. Only 1.3 miles long, it divides the land on either side into residential properties worth



bajillions on the north, and vineyard fields and undeveloped lots covered in tall, yellowing grasses on the south.

At 9:43 on Sunday, October 8, 2017, somewhere along that brief 1.3 mile stretch, a “private electrical system adjacent to a residential structure” malfunctioned. It overheated, tripped, sputtered, coughed, crashed—whatever happened to that electrical system that night when no one was around to see, newscasts and articles would simply summarize as “failure.”

The electrical circuitry and wiring sparked, and the surrounding miles of autumn-dried vineyard became perfect kindling. Infamous and aptly named “diablo winds” swept flames across fields with abandon, some gusts reaching 70 mph. By midnight the fire had crawled almost 14 miles southwest towards Santa Rosa.

Another couple of hours later it had consumed entire neighborhoods. By 2 am Monday morning: 500 homes and buildings in Larkfield Wikiup. 3 am: 1,400 homes and buildings in Fountaingrove. By 4 am: 1,300 homes and buildings in Coffey Park, where the fire had launched over Highway 101.

The “Tubbs Fire” incinerated 36,800 acres of wine country, and leveled 5,600 structures (including 5,300 homes). To that date it was the largest wildfire in California history.

It also took 22 lives. Donna Halbur died in her garage; her husband Leroy died on the driveway. Both were 80 years old. 75-year-old Valerie Evans died trying to save her dogs. In fact, most of those who were taken by the Tubbs fire were elderly individuals living at home, mostly alone, who could not move quickly enough to escape the smoke and then flames. All but Christina Hanson, who used a wheelchair. She was 27.

I think of the fear that would go through your mind, watching flames boldly spill towards you. Willing your body to move faster than it's able. Praying it's only a nightmare, and the heat that you feel is all in your mind, and that the home that you have built that contains so much of your memory and legacy and represents everything that you care about and have dedicated your life to is not about to be disintegrated into chemical dust. I think of what might go through your head, the images of your plans for next week and the last conversation you had with your child. I think of whether you would beg God or curse Him; if you'd reconsider your beliefs of His existence or lack thereof. How many thoughts might go through your mind about how long death might take, or how painful it might be, while you're watching a blinding orange and yellow mass of carbon atoms swallow your neighbor's house.

When heat produces light, it's called "incandescence." *Incandescent* is also the word for "passion" or "strong emotion." The word that describes what fire does also describes what it is: it is riled, raging, wrath. Furious, fuming, foaming at the mouth. Unforgiving anger.

I think of the fear that would enter me, facing that behemoth. I don't know if it would numb me or make me acutely aware of every singed hair. That's visceral fear, the kind of terror that would make you shiver uncontrollably in front of 2000°F.

By sunrise the fire was still burning but had halted its spread. Coffey Park, where the fire was finally controlled by first responders, was five miles from my home on Martina Ave. I didn't know the fire was under control until late in the day—the only information we could find on its status was through Facebook, and our internet connection was so bad that the updates came slowly. Kyler called again at around 8 am and said our local church had been turned into a refuge for hundreds. We met him there.

Some people stayed huddled in the pews, bundled in their blankets, not speaking a word, staring at points on the wall for hours on end. Trying to recover from that terror of fleeing flames, or imagining their loved ones doing so. Some were working through the fact that they had no home to return to. Others fidgeted and scuttled around the basketball court to the hallways to the chapel and back to the basketball court, speaking anxiously to anyone who would hear them, asking the same questions knowing no one had the answers. And still others, like me, sat in the pews hoping to stay out of the way of administrators, until the stress of doing nothing to help pulled us to our feet and we begged anyone for some task to make us feel useful. The answer was always no, or not yet. “We’ll let you know when the trucks come in with more food to divvy up. Just help keep the peace here, that’s a huge help.” And we’d again sit nervously in the pews.

My apartment was still in a “safe” zone, so my roommates and I stayed there that evening, though we didn’t feel quite safe enough for sleep. October 9<sup>th</sup> bled into October 10<sup>th</sup>, and we went back to the church where they finally put us to work picking up deliveries, sorting relief supplies out for the evacuees, helping the older individuals call their children and finding ways to entertain young kids in the antiquated, bare halls of the church building.

The week that followed is hazy in my memory. I remember those first two days so vividly, but after that I mostly get just flashes of gray—gray clouds melting into gray earth on either side of the gray Highway 101. Bare, gray shelves lining the aisles at FoodMaxx. Gray news speaking bleakly of families whose lives were now gray too, having lost family members and homes and other things precious to them. The landscape was gray, the air gray, and a lot of Sonoma County’s people looked a little gray, too. No one could really do anything but wait inside

friends' homes or churches like ours until their streets were opened again, and so monotony and lack of stimulation turned resting expressions gray.

I think if I were to associate a color with the word "tired," it would be gray.

I think "silence" might be gray too. Silence is the sound "empty" makes. Silence reminds you of what you're missing. The hum of your air conditioner, the drone of your TV, the clanking of your dishes in your sink in your kitchen. Silence can drive a person crazy.

Or, at least, provide the ideal environment for anxious thoughts to materialize. When "what if's" echo in silence they expand, bloom. They multiply like weeds until you have a toxic terrarium of dandelions and crabgrass and morning glory, which all seem harmless until they debilitate any healthy growth. (Ironically, my mom says she often looks at the morning glory that has engulfed the side of our house and thinks "I wish I could just set it on fire.")

Anxious thoughts engulf the brain. *Where do I live now? Is there anything left of my home? How long until I can see it? Did I save the family videos to the Cloud? What had I moved to the storage unit? How can I afford to start over? What next what next what next?* Adrenaline rises and so, consequentially, does your heart rate. There's an uptick of energy and nowhere to put it; sometimes even the brain that is secreting the adrenaline is also saying "don't. move." And you become paralytic. And then that overabundance of adrenaline is also raising your blood pressure, and your body desperately tries to pump thick blood through buzzing veins while your body is struck still. And you're frozen in a church pew, bundled in blankets, staring at a spot on

the wall where the paint is chipped in the shape of the lamp that you can't remember if you turned off before you fled your home that no longer stands.

Anxious thoughts take up so much room—draining nutrients like dandelions and crabgrass and morning glory do—that you forget to do things that normally are subconscious, like breathing. When you have so many things to worry about as your brain fills empty silence, sucking air in and expelling air out can feel like a chore. When you are trying to recover from trauma, the fear that you are trying to forget sneaks off to the side, changes costumes to something mottled and gray and blurred, and appears suddenly in front of you. Subconscious inhales and exhales are replaced with fearful, bated breaths. Lungs constrict, refusing to stretch like they did before because before you had space, your own space, and you were free to go wherever you wanted and feel safe, and return when you needed familiarity again, but now you have only the unfamiliar walls of a church or a community center or a local yoga studio that has converted into a camp. Every sip of oxygen in is restrained, because oxygen feels heavy now. Fear knocks the wind out of you and keeps it out.

Silence, anxious thoughts, and fear, turn the world gray.

The first colorful moment I remember in the middle of the monochrome was brown cardboard boxes with bold, black sharpie lettering, overflowing with red and blue and neon pink and yellow and green shirts, dresses, pants, socks, jackets, sweaters, skirts. Dozens of these boxes. And at least three dozen people lined up, each with a mountain of colorful clothing in front of them to sort by size.

We sorted an 18-wheeler's worth of donated clothing that day. I wrote in my journal, "cars waited in line for an hour to add donations to the mountain of clothes." At one point, one of the volunteer coordinators used a megaphone to announce that we had more donations coming in than we had room or use for and encouraged donors to consider holding onto their donations until more were ready to be processed in coming weeks.

More colors: yellow pineapples on the counters of the church's kitchen and the red Campbell's labels on pallets of canned soup, stacked on the kitchen floor, all brought by the foodbank volunteers. White knuckles on hands gripping hands in comfort. Green foam pads rolled out from blue Walmart trucks, unloaded by workers in neon orange vests. And people in every color embracing friends and family and even complete strangers, refusing to let go for minutes on end.

I don't remember where I first saw the signs pop up but it seemed like suddenly they were everywhere: on street lamps and bulletin boards and bus shelters and community hubs and stop light poles, 8.5x11 inch sheets of paper, crudely taped for drivers and passersby: "THE LOVE IN THE AIR IS THICKER THAN THE SMOKE" they read. "#SONOMASTRONG."

And the smoke was thick—plumes of it still saturating the air even days after the flames were tamed. Its acrid taste stung your nose and irritated the back of your throat so you felt like you were choking. Suffocating and heavy and unavoidable. Impossible to ignore.

But then there was "the love," and it felt thick too. It choked people with tears of relief and gratitude. It hung ever-present, substantial, determined. Easy to see in every cardboard box of donations and extra car parked in driveways, every long embrace and hand squeezing hand.

Fire can be good for the earth. It removes damaging underbrush and gets rid of clutter, allowing more sunlight to pass through. It also nourishes the soil with the base elements left behind when fire breaks things down to their atoms. Controlled fires are used all the time by farmers and foresters, to rejuvenate areas for greater growth.

I don't believe the Tubbs Fire was good *to* the people in Santa Rosa. The damage—physical and mental—is lasting. It's been six years and construction is still going on to replace what was lost. But I watched that community nourish each other. Neighbors that had kept largely to themselves were standing shoulder to shoulder with people they'd only ever waved at over the roar of a lawnmower. There's a strength to the community that wasn't visible before this crucible made it evident.

Since then, there have been more fires in Northern California. Bigger ones, even, that have likewise shocked hundreds of thousands of people into a state of quiet processing.

And they too find that anxious thoughts are thicker than silence. And that fearfully restricted breaths are thicker than anxious thoughts. And that smoke is thicker than fearful, bated breaths. And that the love in the air is thicker than the smoke.

## On Our Minds

Right before my senior year of college I was randomly selected to receive a privately sponsored scholarship from a generous donor family. Part of the process was an interview with a representative of the family, along with an administrator from the university's English department. The family representative (an older man with a gruff presence) got straight to the point: "now, we usually give these scholarships to students with more financial need than you." I nodded—I was aware that, because I was still listed as "dependent" on tax forms, I lived in the not-so-sweet spot of the tax bracket spectrum. (That is, not low enough to qualify for financial aid, but not high enough to be able to actually afford anything.) He continued, "and looking at your transcripts... you've done well in your classes, but you're no star."

The faculty member seated next to him blushed hard and his eyes grew massive. He looked like he was stifling a laugh of incredulity and discomfort as his gaze bore into the table between them and me. I channeled my own stunned laughter into a wide grin as I said "well, you're not wrong."

I couldn't even be offended—the man paid for half of my last semester of college, and for that I was grateful. I was more taken aback by the candor, which again, I couldn't argue with. I had worked hard, performed decently (I thought), averaging a B+ across the board . . . but he was right: I was no star. Nothing to merit any spotlight.

A comment as comically offhand as that was easy to laugh about but, admittedly, the truth poked holes in my confidence, prodding deep-seated insecurities to the surface—that I am profoundly



average, that my contributions may be negligible. That I don't make enough of an impact to be remembered, or considered valuable. That I may not be worth noticing.

I told that story to friends and family because, of course, I thought it was hilarious in a kind of "can you believe this? How amazing?!" way, but also because I figured the more I joked about the comment, the lighter it would become. The laughter of my audience confirmed that they agreed, *how amazing, I can't believe he would say that*, but each made sure to adamantly reassure me "you are *totally* a star." Some would then contribute their own stories of shocking, moderately abrasive comments they'd received, or backhanded compliments they too couldn't help but laugh at. "That's my new favorite compliment," I'd say. *We laugh so we don't cry*, I'd think.

And maybe that's what planted the idea in me, to ask people what their favorite compliments actually were. Maybe hearing people's worst compliments had me thinking about their best. I don't know what inspiration or insight I thought I would hear in those answers, but curiosity and the need for some buoyancy urged me to ask anyway. I texted family, posted on an Instagram story, brought it up with friends in person: *What words do you hold onto? What stands out? What means the most to you?* "What is one of your favorite compliments you've ever received?"

I got dozens of responses, some delivered with quiet emotion and others with beaming smiles. Answers varied, from

"You radiate happy."

"You're like a walking hug."

"You're refreshing to be  
around."

to compliments like

“No one does empathy like you do. You’re so good at it and everyone should have a friend like that.”

“‘I love your smile.’ (whenever someone says this, I’d like to feel like it’s a time when I was being kind).”

“You’re genuine, and that is hard to find in people.”

Moms answered

“I love that every time I see one of your kids they have a big smile on their face.”

“You are exactly like your mom.”

“My daughter told me ‘You are the most interesting person I know.’”

and siblings answered

“I was telling someone how wonderful my brother was and they said ‘you’re describing yourself!’”

“My twin sister tells me ‘You’re a force to be reckoned with!’”

and individuals with careers in teaching, therapy and social work added

“You’re the teacher I’d pick for my kids if I could.”

“I believe the good things you say to me.”

“You insist on seeing good in people.”

Etc., etc., etc.

I added each to a list on the note app in my phone. And then school and work and life got in the way of my contemplating, and my project was shelved before I could really look at what the words we hold onto might say.

That list sat on my phone for a couple years. And then recently I read a tweet, that was quoted in a book, which was recommended by a new friend, who was introduced to me by a good friend, which is how I think revelation often arrives—through a chain of average things. The tweet said “PAY ATTENTION TO THE THINGS YOU PAY ATTENTION TO.” This is one of those statements that immediately feels big, even if you aren’t entirely sure what it means yet; maybe it feels that way because of its brevity and simplicity, combined with its parallel

structure of wording. Or because the word “ATTENTION” calls our attention innately.

Regardless, it made me think of that list I had stored away on my phone, of words that people had paid extra attention to. And it was the lens I needed to ask “why?”

Why would that feel good, to be told your smile is genuine? Or you are just like a parent or sibling? Or you embody grace or elegance or sunshine? Why is that what they paid attention to, and hold onto now?

Why do those things matter?

When I asked “what is a favorite compliment you’ve gotten?” the words sounded easy, like asking “Where was your favorite vacation?” or “Tell me about the best dinner you’ve ever had.” I figured it was a simple question with simple answers. But when I considered the “attention” behind each of their answers I realized that my question wasn’t really about compliments at all... the question wasn’t “who are you?” or even “what is something people say about you?”, which could have invited those generalized, one-dimensional responses.

What I was really asking was “who do you *hope* you are?”

At the root of every favorite compliment is some quality that the receiver finds valuable, something they want to be because of the impact it has. I’m reminded of Charlie Mackesy’s *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse*, in which the Mole asks the Boy, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” and the Boy responds, “Kind.” Mackesy’s Boy voices what we (perhaps unconsciously) hope for— to be, of all the things we could achieve, good.

A compliment holds a microcosm of our valued “good,” which is, I believe, why we pay attention to them. When one person is told “you insist on seeing the good in people” what they hear is “you are someone people can trust to be compassionate, to forgive, to love despite flaws.” When another is told “you make people happier just by being around you” they hear “you provide the kind of positive energy and uplifting impact that people want, that people need.” And when another is told “I can tell you care” they hear “I can feel that you’re a safe place, that you won’t judge me, I can feel that you want what is best for me, I can feel you want me to be well.”

We hope that we are those things. We want those statements to be true. Because if they are, that means we are doing at least one thing right.

Here is one of my favorite compliments I’ve ever received: I have a sweet, wonderful, perfect little sister named Lucy who, despite our thirteen-year age gap, is my best friend. When she was five years old (and I nineteen), she went running into my parents’ bathroom one Sunday morning all dressed for church and exclaimed “Mom! I look pretty like Rachel!” I was already moved out of the house by this point, so I was not around to feed ideas like this into her little mind, which tells me the thought was all her own. No obligation to boost an ego, no expectation of reward or return; to her the statement was just the truth.

It’s been seven years since she said that, and I still think of it when I’m feeling particularly unattractive, un-star-like, or generally mediocre; when I am extra self-conscious about being single, or extra unimpressed with what I’ve accomplished so far as an adult. Any number of intrusive thoughts, really. I hold onto that thing Lucy believed was true, not because I want to be “pretty” in the traditional sense of the word, but because at the root of that

compliment is the idea that I might be someone she thinks of when she is feeling confident and beautiful. At the root of that compliment, I'm told I may be someone worth thinking of as bright, or encouraging, someone that makes people feel their best. That is valuable to me. I hope I am that.

There's a line in a book that I love where the protagonist notices something that would normally be insignificant and says "it's not a big thing, but I guess it's true—big things are often just small things that are noticed."

And I think that's what makes the difference, the noticing. Each favorite compliment was of a small thing—an unassuming behavior, a quiet kind of good—that when noticed, paid attention to, became big enough to provide the needed reassurance that they are not average, or negligible, they do make an impact, they do matter, they are doing something right.

A better writer may be able to give the perfect metaphor here, make a more profound statement to send the reader weeping in joy to the rest of their day, invigorated by the thoughts of good words doing good things for people just wanting to be good; a smarter person would know just what to say about the implications of paying attention to these things we pay attention to, of recognizing what we hope we are and why. But I'm no star... and that's fine with me. My sister says I may be someone worth thinking of as bright, and that is enough.

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