

*You Are Not an
Inconvenience: A Memoir of
Queer Adolescence*
By Zach Benak

To Joe and Nancy Benak,

All my love, I love you!

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Spring Break

“So, I have a confession to make,” my mom said. She held a hand on her hip, her auburn hair sitting on her shoulders. It had gotten progressively longer over the past two years after I encouraged her to grow it out. Despite a brief and frightening stint with breast cancer six months prior, every strand of her hair was still intact.

We were standing in our kitchen, talking over the laminate countertop strewn with bills, car keys, and sections of that week’s *Omaha World Herald*. We had just gotten home from a fish fry. It was spring break of 2018, and I was back in Papillion, Nebraska for a week and a half. Because my spring break always fell over Lent, the forty-day period of prayer and penance that precedes Easter in the Catholic church, my mom always scheduled a Friday night fish fry for our family, including my grandpa, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Every year, we’d venture to a new parish in the Omaha archdiocese, and we’d compare each fry based on drink selection, the dessert bar, and of course, the beer-battered cod and walleye.

“What is it?” I asked. For me, spring break was never a time to get fucked up on a beach in Texas or go on a cruise with all my fraternity brothers. I was not in a fraternity, and flights from Chicago to Omaha were about \$200 cheaper than a flight from Chicago to anywhere else. Instead, spring break was a time for me to lounge around at home with my Brittany Spaniel and Black Lab, eat lunch with my parents on their breaks from work, and drive around my hometown with my high schooler sister, Paige. Omaha’s rainy spring weather wasn’t much of a trade-off from Chicago’s rainy *and* windy spring weather, but the main incentive was time with my family.

“When I was remodeling your room last month, I found something that you wrote,” my mom said, furrowing the two lines of skin between her eyebrows. The lines had existed there for years, which she blamed on “a loss of elasticity” and “an inability to afford Botox.”

“Fuuuuck,” I said, never one to shy away from cussing in front of my parents, who in return, were never ones to really care about curse words. “It was that thing I wrote when we were in Florida, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” my mom said.

Ten months before this moment, my family had gone to Florida over Memorial Day Weekend with the Parrs and the McNeils, my parents’ best friends from high school. John McNeil’s brother was a millionaire real estate developer in Omaha, and owned a mansion right outside of Tampa. He was insistent that family and friends and family of friends and friends of family all use the house to their liking, and this was the third time in ten years that my family had gotten to stay at the house, completed with marble floors and double-headed showers, five bedrooms that could lodge at least twenty people, a screened-in infinity pool and hot tub. It was one of my happiest places, because I loved our loud and argumentative but ultimately loving community of friends, soaking our sunburns in the pool after a long day of drinking, wading our feet in the hot tub, or intensely debating during heated games of Mafia.

But this trip was different. It was 2017, and I was about to finish my sophomore year of college. And to my immediately family, I was freshly-identifying as gay.

This did not, however, stop the gay jokes from running amongst the rest of the group.

There’s a scene in Judd Apatow’s *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* where Seth Rogen’s and Paul Rudd’s characters are playing a video game, talking shit with anaphoric insults:

You know how I know that you’re gay? You like the movie Maid in Manhattan.

You know how I know that you're gay? You listen to Coldplay.

You know how I know that you're gay? You have a rainbow bumper sticker on your car that says, "I love it when balls are in my face."

Adjacent to the pool was a screened-in porch where we ate dinners of barbecue ribs and grilled chicken beneath warm light and a billowing ceiling fan. From the porch, we could watch boats come in to the marina and porpoises splash around in Manatee Bay, feeling Florida's 90 degree weather drop to a modest 82 as the sun set. After a group effort of cleaning dishes and foiling leftovers, our congregation would crack open Bud Light Limes or my mom would make a pitcher of lemonade cocktail, and we'd play card games at the wooden table. Games like 31 or Shit on Your Neighbor, where players drop every round until one remains standing, are vehicles for card table smack talk. So the *40-Year-Old-Virgin* gay jokes came a-spewing.

I was raised on this movie and other movies like it, and the homophobic jokes were something I had come to ignore, even as my dad and brother laughed until tears came. But now, sitting at the card table and playing Shit on Your Neighbor, recently but limitedly out, I could not ignore the movie lines being quoted and repeated by dad's best friends, and I could not help but internally flinch as my dad joined in. I looked at my mom, who looked back and sighed helplessly. My sister and I then made eye contact, and she mouthed, *I'm sorry*. For the rest of the night, I pouted, swimming to the edge of the infinity pool and staring out at the moonlit marina. I flicked water at the geckos that clang complacently to the porch screen.

Later that night, after a long talk with my guilt-ridden and apologetic father, I stayed up by the pool and wrote. I had forgotten to bring my journal with me on the trip, so I swiped a notepad and blue-inked pen from the kitchen. The notepad had a bright pink border and was

advertising Asmanex Twisthaler, an asthma treatment device. And it was on this Asmanex Twisthaler notepad that I journaled out my feelings with no filter and no hesitation.

My father says he loves me, but can't shed his homophobic jokes.

My mother says she wants me to be happy, but her facial expressions tell me that I'm inconveniencing her by liking men, and by getting offended by jokes about men liking men.

I had my catharsis with paper and pen and stuffed the stickied notes into my suitcase. Though I eventually lost track of them, I did not suspect that they would show up in my mom's possession about a year later.

"I'm sorry if I said anything that hurt you," I told my mom, leaning on the kitchen counter and fiddling with a red Bic pen. "But that's how I felt at the time. I was just getting it out."

"I know that, and I respect that," she said. "But you said that you felt like you were inconveniencing me by being gay. And I don't ever want you to feel that way."

I nodded, looking down at my fingers on the laminate countertop. It had been a year since my last spring break, when I sat in my mom's bedroom and told her that I liked men. So much had happened in between. I had traveled out of the country for the first time. I started to call Chicago home with a little more confidence. I told my older brother that I was gay; my mom told the McNeils that I was gay. My mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. My mom beat breast cancer. One year passed, so much learned.

"Zachary," she said. My green and her blue irises focused on each other. The line between her eyebrows moved once more, the wrinkled crevice being her most expressive feature. "You are not an inconvenience."

I believed her, because I knew she meant it.

Memories of a Catholic Boyhood

“You *need* to watch *Killing Eve*,” I said, walking down Fullerton Avenue in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood, a residential area for affluent families and university students. “If you loved Sandra Oh in *Grey’s Anatomy*, you’ll worship her in this series.”

It had become a tradition to call home every Sunday, but calling home always meant calling Mom, and the phone would either get passed around to anyone else available, or she and I would chat by ourselves for an hour. I had just finished a shift at my on-campus job, and was walking to pick up chicken pad Thai from a restaurant I hadn’t tried before. My mom was sitting out on our backyard patio back home in Papillion, and I could hear the late-July summer breeze blowing, sometimes whipping her neck-length auburn hair into her mouth. Our conversations were prone to jump all across the webs that entangled our lives, but tonight, I was poised to talk about television.

“Oh, Z. You know I hate committing to hour-long shows,” my mom said, and I could imagine her struggling through different streaming services and remote controls, trying to find BBC America, but upon discovery, being so fed up and tired by the entire process, that she’d rather go to sleep than watch the show.

“It’s just eight episodes! So low-commitment! And I’m watching another documentary series on Netflix called *The Keepers*. Only seven episodes and it’s so good. It’s all about a Baltimore nun’s murder in 1969, and it really exposes corruption and abuse in the Catholic Church. You’d *love* it,” I said. Punctuating my story with snark wasn’t necessarily the best approach to convincing my mom to watch the show, but rarely am I able to contain my contempt toward Catholicism and the institution that is the Church.

“Yes, because I’m sure Catholics are the *only* corrupt people of faith in this world,” my mom retorted. Back and forth passive aggressive sarcasm is what most closely links us together as mother and son.

“You’re obviously missing the point.”

“What’s it called again?”

Released in 2017 at a high time for true crime docuseries on Netflix, *The Keepers* told the story of Sister Cathy Cesnik, a nun and high school English teacher whose murder coincided with revelations and allegations of sexual abuse and cover-up within the Church in Baltimore. Suspicion loomed over Father Joseph Maskell, a priest working at Archbishop Keough High School at the same time as Cesnik. The docuseries follows Gemma and Abbie, two former students of Sister Cathy, now working in their sixties to solve the murder and bring justice to the teacher that impacted their lives for a short but meaningful moment of time. It follows Jean, a victim of Fr. Maskell that came forward in the 1990s with her story and its connection to Sister Cathy’s murder. And it follows the corrupt, powerful, intimidating, and proactive Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore, desperate to maintain its reputation and financially capable of doing just that in the midst of sex crimes and evil.

It’s difficult to watch a harrowing series like this and not think about my own upbringing within the Church and my nine years of experience in a Catholic grade school, where injustice existed in ways expected and unexpected, where memories of love and hate exist in concert, and where my queerness was revealed to me by others before I could discover or accept it myself. This collage of memories and moments formed me whether I wanted them to or not, and carrying them alone is no longer option, as I grapple with gayness in a church and environment

where it's never been accepted, and seek to understand the belief system that has defined the movement of my life. This is some high-stakes shit.

One would encounter St. Gerald Elementary School when driving through a century-old neighborhood in Ralston, Nebraska, consisting of single-family homes that vary in size and exterior décor. There's a rustic house that's built like a log cabin with a wooden bridge leading from the sidewalk to the front door. There's a modest split-entry house made spectacular by intricate, hilly landscaping and wide windows that enthusiastically consent to the sunlight. There's a rectory across from the school, discreet with grey siding and closed blinds. St. Gerald sits off Lakeview Drive, an ironic and meaningless name, as there is no lake to view. Heading east downhill, a right turn brings the driver around a bend, past the parish office, and into the vicinity of the school. The oldest wing of the building is plain and brick, housing the gymnasium and elementary school classrooms. A chapel is directly attached, where upwards of 350 students, teachers, and parishioners gather every Wednesday for all-school Mass. Finished in 2005, the newer addition of the schools sits on the north end, housing the middle school, main office, library, and an elevator installed to perpetuate the illusion that a small private school in suburban Nebraska can meet the needs of students with disabilities. This terrain was my life for nine years, the first of which was loaded with blissful ignorance. I learned how to spell conjunctions before I knew what conjunctions are. I learned about September 11th and the attacks on America's homeland before I knew the difference between a Muslim and a Catholic. I sat on a rainbow rug for story time before I knew that rainbows were used as an outrageous symbol for acting out. Kindergarten was so simple.

However, Kindergarteners at St. Gerald were positioned under the oppressive eye of Mrs. Morrison. Kim Morrison was not a nice woman, but she was good at what she did. Her job

meant everything to her. She lived down the street from the school with her husband, but could often be found in the school until seven or eight in the evening, working and planning in her classroom. She had long, curly hair that was blonde and silver and light brown all at once, and was prone to wear those classic teacher sweaters and blouses with outdated floral patterns and bulky buttons, the outfits that my mom would describe as “so bad!” I vaguely remember moments when Mrs. Morrison wasn’t harsh or intimidating, like when she was honored with a quilt and flowers for her 25th anniversary at St. Gerald and cried tears of gratitude. But more distinctly, I remember her smacking the shit out of me.

Though it seems odd for Kindergarteners to be taking an exam, we were on that day. I’m sure it was a standardized test of some sort, as our work tables had white wooden dividers set up to act as cubicle-like cheating preventers. I don’t remember if it was addition or subtraction or spelling or reading, but I remember at one point, leaning out of my private space to look at my neighbor’s answers. Maybe I thought, *Hope he has the same answers as me, since I know I’m right!* Or maybe I was cheating with the intention of cheating. But regardless, the outcome was a swift slap to the back of my head.

“Don’t look at his test!” Mrs. Morrison whispered through gritted teeth. The fire of embarrassment engulfed me and I slinked back to my cubicle, negotiating the sting on my scalp as the consequence for my action.

I’ve heard old wives’ tales from my elders about the ruler slapping and spanking at the hands of Catholic nuns, and this singular swat was nothing compared to what they endured back in a day when many considered various forms of abuse to be crucial to child rearing and character building. And perhaps Mrs. Morrison’s discipline worked: I certainly wouldn’t cheat on another test if it meant physical and emotional humiliation. But it also made me resentful and

permanently intimidated, like my rescued Black Lab, Lyla, who had one bad incident with an ironing board, and is now perpetually frightened of it. Once is enough. Still, I didn't tell anyone what happened. I was six-years-old. I cheated on a test, and I didn't need a Catholic education to know that cheating is wrong. A revelation of physical abuse could only occur with an admission of guilt. So perhaps I deserved it.

Mrs. Morrison was asked to resign nine years after her incident with me, when she yanked the ponytail of a student who actually had the courage to inform her parents about the incident. It's hard for a school administration to advocate for one of their longest-tenured teachers when Child Protective Services gets involved. Even after her departure, Mrs. Morrison stuck around, volunteering in the school garden and serving lunch in the cafeteria. St. Gerald was her lifeblood, and completely parting with it wasn't an option. Still, I can't help but wonder how she felt, being exposed for an inappropriate act that she had deemed acceptable, and losing the thing that meant the most to her because of it. Despite my resentment, I have to wonder, did *she* deserve it?

But there is no debate on my end that Father Perry got what he deserved.

Eight years after Mrs. Morrison hit me, Father Perry left the St. Gerald parish unceremoniously. For over a decade, he had been the associate pastor at our church, delivering mass multiple times a week and performing sacraments on parishioners. He had thick 70s-style glasses and combed over gray hair, and the fatness between his neck and chin would always jut out above his vestments. In his soft, womanly voice, he'd frequently read from *Chicken Soup for the Soul* submissions for his sermons, lacking his own originality and instead tying back others' stories to the Gospel. About once a week, he'd visit our classrooms unannounced, and our teachers would be expected to stop their lessons for him to talk to us about whatever he wanted,

usually riffing on something related to Jesus and the New Testament. *Well, when Jesus was your age...*

I instinctually disliked Father Perry. I didn't like the way his lips and tongue smacked each other when he'd eat the Bread of Christ. I didn't like how he chided the school congregation for not singing loud enough at all-school masses, even though he didn't sing at all. I didn't like the light-up wand that he carried to classroom visits and tapped on male students' heads, or the laser pointers that'd he shine on unsuspecting boys in the hallways. I didn't like the time that I was helping him clean up after altar serving a mass, and he asked me to put the wine chalice back in its cabinet.

"Zach, since you're so tall, could you reach up and put this away?" he said, handing the chalice to me. In seventh grade and no taller than 5'0", he stood above me and called me *tall*. I obeyed, my arm stretching past the sleeve of my white altar boy robe as I reached up and launched myself onto my tiptoes.

"Thank you," he said, with a thin-lipped smile.

Father Perry left St. Gerald in the spring of 2011, eighth grade for me. A letter from Head Pastor Owen Korte in the parish newsletter said that Father Perry was on sabbatical, and we were instructed to pray for him.

"I bet it's cancer," my mom speculated at our dinner table. "'Sabbatical' in the priesthood usually means that someone's sick." Just weeks later, Nancy's theory was disproven by an *Omaha World Herald* article revealing the real reason behind Father Perry's departure.

In the 1980s, Father Perry had been removed from his position at a Catholic high school in Milwaukee for inappropriately massaging a student, and being found with child pornography. He was "treated" at a center that specialized in sexual misconduct, and because charges were

never pressed, Father Perry was transferred with a clean record. The allegations resurfaced after a man in California claimed to be the victim of Father Perry's inappropriate touching, and the Archbishop of Omaha immediately took action. But instead of being honest with the St. Gerald parish, the reasons behind Father Perry's exit were kept secret, lest the allegations were false. Parishioners heard about the allegations from the newspapers, not the institution.

So on Good Friday of 2011, I furiously texted the news to at least a dozen of my classmates. Our flip phones were abuzz that day.

Father Perry got fired for being a PEDOPHILE IN THE 80s!!! It's all over the newspaper!

Omg. Are you serious?

WTH!!

We came back to school after the long Easter break, and each class was separately taken into the chapel and given an explanation by Father Korte and our principal, Mr. Garland. Neither of them explicitly stated Father Perry's misdeeds during our talk, and instead worked under the assumption that we, as gossipy fourteen-year-olds, already knew what happened (and most of the class did, thanks to me).

"We are explaining to the younger students that Father Perry violated someone's circle of grace a long time ago, so he had to leave," Father Korte said. Neither he nor Mr. Garland had lost any hair over this situation, as they were both already bald, but both seemed exhausted, opting for a matter-of-fact approach instead of an inspired lecture. The talk ended without an opening for questions, so we were dismissed before any of us could pry.

I was too young to realize then that they'd kept the allegations a secret because the institution was holding out hope that they were untrue, or could be undermined. The men behind

the scenes of St. Gerald were primarily focused on preserving Father Perry's dignity. But looking back as an adult, I know exactly what they were doing, and I know what they continue to do. In June of 2018, a priest at St. Wenceslaus parish in West Omaha was dismissed for sexually assaulting a 21-year-old man. The priest had previously been accused of sexual misconduct in O'Neill, Nebraska five years prior, but parishioners of St. Wenceslaus were, once again, never informed of past allegations until the *Omaha World Herald* investigated the case. Rev. Tom Bauwens, pastor of St. Wenceslaus, told the *Herald*, "We own the sin. We embrace the mistake of allowing Fr. Francis to ministry in the belief, based on all the information we had, that he could do ministry again. We shouldn't have done it, absolutely." Father Bauwens clarified that the ousted priest was "not a pedophile," because his victims were eighteen or older, but Bauwens also felt a sense of betrayal.

"I feel so burned by the guy... We gave the guy a break. It turned out to be a bad decision."

No one can make a martyr of himself better than a Catholic priest.

But in all of these cases, what I've never seen or heard addressed is the *gay factor*. Perhaps Father Bauwens feels burned because he was working with a flaming homosexual. By eighth grade, I knew where my sexual attractions lay. I was aware of my body and the bodies of others, but made a point to avert my eyes from classmates as we changed our clothes for gym class, when shirts were thrown off and boxers would occasionally slip down past the hips. I was also aware of the Catholic stance on homosexuality, one that still persists today as the same Archdiocese of Omaha that hides sexual abuse has recently recommended a sexual education curriculum that deems gay sex as sinful, and addresses gender as a "given reality." It was addressed that Father Perry was a pedophile, but no one ever highlighted the hypocrisy of a

Catholic priest taking part in a homosexual act. It was something that lingered with me, because I knew there existed the possibility that Father Perry and I were more alike than different. What did this mean for me, that the first and only gay-acting man I knew was also a pedophile? I had seen Mischa Barton and Olivia Wilde kiss on the beach during an episode of *The OC*, but at that point, I had no real-life encounters or experiences with any openly queer people. No role models, no mentors, no inspirations, no one to tell me that there was nothing wrong with being gay. As a young closet case, I wish had the queer representation I deserved, that I could have seen myself reflected positively in the space around me. But no, all I got was a pedophilic priest who didn't know how to chew with his mouth closed.

So I locked myself in the closet and burrowed the key inside the pocket of my altar boy robe. But what ran even deeper than my secret sexuality was a vow to never be the coward that Father Perry was.

Don't Rain on My Parade

As a longtime Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Morrison was adept at observing and handling nuanced, problematic behaviors in children, then disciplining them as she saw fit. In 2002, I was the child being brought to a heel, as she highlighted my playground habits as a cause for parental concern.

“Zach only plays with girls,” she told my mom at my first parent-teacher conference. And in that moment, the first and only teacher to ever hit me was also the first and only teacher to ever out me, exposing one of my first signs of queerness and calling me out on what was considered abnormal behavior.

Of course, Mrs. Morrison was telling the truth. I spent every recess in Kindergarten with Claire Horner, where we would pretend to be spies and peel paint off the red basketball pole. I had play dates with Katie Pohlman, where I was allowed to try on cheap lace dresses and chiffon scarves under the guise of playing Dress Up. I had no interest in flag football, and the only reason I played soccer was for the fun costume: neon shin guards and maroon knee-high socks. Perpetually short for my age and never not scrawny, I always lacked the hard edge and physicality needed for sports and roughhousing. I much preferred to think or talk, especially when it came to all things related to celebrities or pop culture.

Somewhere between Kindergarten and second grade, around the same age that I was giggling with girls on the swing sets, I got in the habit of checking the mail every day, looking forward to the biweekly arrival of my mom's *People Magazine* subscription. When I was at home during the summer, my trips across the street to the mailbox came multiple times a day, my anxiousness running high as I waited for the next magazine copy to show up. I marched across the street barefoot, sticking my toes in the warm, squishy tar that filled the road's cracks

and became gooey under the sun, and ambitiously opened the mailbox, hoping to find Julia Roberts' glossy face wedged between our cable bills. When the magazine did come, I would pore over its contents, reading up on Brangelina's latest adoptions, or the death of Anna Nicole Smith. I loved glimpsing into the lives of these beautiful people, and learning about life's most dramatic occurrences, like affairs and suicides and drug overdoses.

"What is crystal meth?" I asked my mom after reading about Jodie Sweetin's battle with addiction. It was my first time seeing the *Full House* child star as an adult, but I couldn't solve what that puzzle of words, *crystal meth*, meant when put together, or understand what Sweetin meant when she said she'd spent every day rearranging her sock drawer while using it.

"It's a drug. It's very dangerous and can kill people," my mom said, filled with regret. She knew it was problematic for her child to have his hands on this issue of the magazine, but at least it offered a teachable moment. Because my school participated in Red Ribbon Week, and we annually vowed to stay drug-free, I figured that crystal meth had to be pretty awful, and was shocked that the Stephanie Tanner I loved watching on TV was participating in such startling behavior as an adult. Pop culture wasn't just Halle Berry being the most beautiful woman alive, or Drew Barrymore promoting a new romantic comedy. Celebrities had real struggles, and staying informed on their lives made me feel well rounded, like I was paying attention to the news that mattered the most. These were, after all, the names and faces that filled screens worldwide, made people laugh and told important stories. My persisting interest and watchful eye over their behaviors fueled my love for pretending, picturing myself in a different life as a famous child actor on Disney Channel, or esteemed guest judge on *American Idol*. I was content with my life and family and school in second grade, but not exempt from an overly ambitious imagination.

My love for celebrities like Sandra Bullock and Jennifer Aniston reflected my fascination with all things femme. Oscar Red Carpets and glamorous photo shoots hinted at the many secrets lurking behind femininity, sparking my boyhood interest in girlhood. What was the difference between a skirt and a skort? What intricate processes were required for braiding hair? And what *did* girls do at sleepovers? These questions didn't stem from boyish curiosity regarding the opposite sex—they came from jealousy. I felt excluded from the feminine narrative that I wanted to be a part of, and my revolutionary, groundbreaking, and entirely unconscious efforts to break down these barriers typically resulted in negative criticism, and not just from Mrs. Morrison.

“I don't remember how I felt, so I must not have cared,” my mom texted me recently, after I asked her about Mrs. Morrison's remark. “But I do remember you being the only boy invited to some girl's birthday party, and listening to Katie Pohlman's mom go on and on about you playing only with girls, and I did not like her implications.” Because I was at school in Chicago and my mom was at home in Nebraska, I could only imagine her on the other side of this exchange. I'm sure she typed slowly, pondering the past, furrowing her eyebrow behind her thin black bifocals.

Michelle Pohlman, the mother in question, had four other children and drove a mini-van with a vanity plate that read “5GR8KIDS.” They were a model Catholic family, attending 10:30 mass and sitting in the fourth row pew every Sunday morning. Michelle volunteered as a Eucharistic Minister, and all five children altar served on a near-weekly basis. Matthew Pohlman, the middle child, is now enrolled at the St. John Vianney Seminary in Minnesota, with the intention of becoming a Catholic priest. I can't know what exactly Michelle said to my mom about me playing with girls, or why it seemed so wrong, why *I* seemed so wrong, but I'm sure her implications were no better or worse than ones that her own son carries now, striving to

become a priest in an institution infamous for sexual abuse. Meanwhile, I am secular and gay and still predominantly friends with women, and I'm doing just fine!

“I never liked Michelle, anyway,” my mom concluded.

Amidst my detractors, Mrs. Ackerman accepted me with affectionate arms.

It all started with my spellbinding theatrical debut at my second grade First Reconciliation. The first sacrament received after Baptism, Reconciliation requires seven and eight-year-olds to confess their sins to a priest and seek absolution. The tradition requires memorization of prayers like the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Act of Contrition, learning about Adam and Eve's fumble in the jungle that caused original sin, and encourages young Catholic minds to think about the power of God's forgiveness. This preparation occurred every day in our religion classes, between practicing our times tables in math, and memorizing words for our spelling tests. First Reconciliation was an exciting first step in the trajectory of Catholic identity. And the event was made all the more special for me because Mrs. Ackerman, my young, gorgeous teacher with dark brown hair and blonde highlights and a thin, fresh face, cast me as the titular character of Zacchaeus for a play we'd perform at the ceremony. In a refreshing Biblical critique of capitalism, Zacchaeus is a tax collector in Jericho known for being a corrupt and greedy asshole. Understandably despised by his neighbors, the townsfolk are shocked when Jesus comes to visit and specifically chooses to dine with Zacchaeus. Awed by the power of the Messiah, Zacchaeus decides to pay for his sins and donate his money back to the lowly in the name of redemption and forgiveness—a moral appropriate to learn in preparation for Reconciliation. Being selected for the role was flattering, though I know now that it was because

I was the only boy flamboyant and poised enough to recite memorized lines with enthusiasm. I was capable of what my athletic male classmates weren't: performing in front of an audience.

The performance of the highly anticipated play took place at St. Gerald Church, a five-minute drive away from our school and built 35 years after the original chapel attached to the school. The church was a grey brick building arched and angled with slants, giving the building a modern look that other churches in the archdiocese lacked. Inside the church, a row of stained-glass windows sat just beneath the ceiling, each plate designed with fuchsias, navies, emeralds, and golds. The beige ceiling appeared to be reinforced by thick slabs of wood that stretched across the entire building, adorned with bulky nails lodged in their corners. The image of these structures seemed to invoke the story of Noah's Ark, and I loved staring up at the caramel-colored ceiling during homilies, imagining that Noah himself had built this church under God's command, and that, should any storm or flood come barreling through Nebraska, the church would act as a sanctuary. We the sheeple would be safely shepherded to the same place where we prayed and praised and lauded the same God who punished those who failed to recognize His glory.

I loved church as a kid. By paying attention to every Gospel reading, listening to Mary Clare Mendick rhythmically slam on the piano keys during hymns like "Lord of the Dance" or "Go Tell It on the Mountain," and by responding and reacting to each call and response the pastor recited, my eight-year-old self viewed every ritual as a new chance to perform, and I was eager to participate at every opportunity. I loved reading as a greeter or petitioner during masses. I enjoyed the drama of Stations of the Cross, the Catholic passion play that is reenacted every week during Lent. In first grade, I was assigned to narrate Station Six, "Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus." I was immediately enamored by Veronica's bravery, independently pushing her way

through a crowd of heckling men to clean the blood, dirt, and sweat off Jesus's cheeks and forehead, and wipe the tears running down his eyes. Veronica was an outsider, forcing herself to be seen and sacrificing her name and her status to do the right thing. Like Zacchaeus, I viewed her as another revolutionary character whose story it was my duty to tell.

"Jesus is in town! I hope I get to meet him!" I exclaimed as Zacchaeus, standing just before the burgundy altar of the church. It was early November and Daylight Savings had just struck, the darkness of night arriving earlier and earlier. The crowd of parents and siblings gathered cozily in the church, the warm lighting making the space perfect for a mid-evening nap. But as the star of the show, I felt energized and poised to recite my lines clearly, making sure I could hear my high-pitched voice echo back to me after each word. Joey Weber, a polite boy whose hair was neither brown or blonde, and instead a lighter gray color, played the role of Jesus, and as he shuffled across the dark salmon-colored carpet, I pantomimed a climbing motion, moving onto the steps of the altar to portray Zacchaeus's shortness and need to mount a Sycamore Tree to see Jesus over the crowd. Joey-as-Jesus then beckoned me to come down.

"Zacchaeus, may I dine with you today?" he asked. A few more classmates selected to portray Jerichoans dropped their jaws at Jesus's request.

"JESUS HAS CHOSEN TO STAY IN THE HOUSE OF A SINNER?" they chimed in unison. Looking back, I have no idea who adapted this script from the Bible, but this petty dialogue from the townspeople of Jericho is surprisingly true to the King James Bible version of this story. It's like a dating show: Zacchaeus is the token villain of Jericho, talking shit and stealing everyone else's money. For a certified heartthrob like Jesus to stumble into town on his publicity tour and only have eyes for That Bitch Zacchaeus, it's no wonder every other contestant vying for Jesus's attention is pissed! I loved the story as a young performer, but as a

gay adult with an affinity for reality TV, I still find myself invested in the dramatics of this parable.

The play ended with Zacchaeus learning his lesson, vowing to atone for his sins. After a standing ovation from the audience of parents, and a curtain call with a dozen eight-year-olds entangling our chubby fingers together and bowing out of rhythm, we transitioned to performing and receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation. I don't remember the details of that event, though I'm sure they did not matter. I probably sat down with a priest and confessed poor excuses for sins ("I took the Lord's name in vain; I disobeyed my Mom when she asked me to clean my room"), but receiving my second sacrament in the Catholic Church wasn't what actually mattered. What I reveled in was the attention that I received, the pats on my back from classmates, and the "Congratulations!" from my parents and others. My performance didn't involve a ball or running or making a goal, but it required skills of memorization and articulation, and the confidence to show off these things in front of a one-hundred person audience. My abilities were not the same as the boys who could score homeruns during kickball, but on that night, *my* talents were recognized. They were important, entertaining, and contributed to a greater goal of telling a story and teaching a lesson. I was proud of myself. Others were proud of me. And I was happy.

After the second graders received Reconciliation, Mrs. Ackerman, approached my mom and me. She had straightened her usually wavy hair, and her cheeks were brushed up with pink shades of blush. She looked like she belonged on her own cover of *People*. Mrs. Ackerman leaned down to my level and put her arm around me. She wore a stylish purple sweater appropriate for the late autumn weather, and I made contact with her auburn eyes and long lashes.

“Zach, your mom told me she wants you to take acting classes at the Rose Theatre. I really think you should. You’re so talented,” she said.

I felt my face blushing in a way that undoubtedly matched hers, but it wasn’t from embarrassment. It was the warmth of flattery, the heat that your heart reflects onto your face when you feel encouraged and special. It was true that my mom had offered to enroll me in a weeklong camp at the Rose Theatre the summer before, but I had refused the idea, not yet confident enough to put myself into such a sensational activity. My mom was also encouraging, recognizing how much I loved to pretend with my favorite Pink Power Ranger action figure, or make lists of imaginary characters with different magical powers. But Mrs. Ackerman’s approval was the final push I needed. I gave her a hug and said thank you. On the drive home, I told my parents that I wanted to do the acting camp.

To me, Mrs. Ackerman’s affectionate belief in my abilities resembled something more: a friendship. As an eight-year-old, I was simultaneously confident and naïve enough to believe that my teachers could view me as a peer, and thus began my fascination with Mrs. Ackerman and her friends at St. Gerald. I observed their behavior, how they stuck together at morning assembly, how Mrs. Fraser would come into our classroom during silent reading and whisper gossip to Mrs. Ackerman, her mouth shielded by a warm, freshly printed stack of arithmetic assignments. Once more, I felt a longing to be included in what wasn’t meant for me. Still, I don’t think my desires were unwarranted. These were the women actively making space for me, giving me the lead role in a play, cheering me on in the school Spelling Bees, and laughing through my recaps of *One Life to Live*, my favorite soap opera, during lunch and recess. Given the political demographics of suburban Nebraska and harsh attitudes harbored toward homosexuality in the Catholic Church, I don’t think Mrs. Ackerman and her peers had any

intention of fostering an environment for a queer child to be exuberant and chatty and undeniably himself. But perhaps they never read me “queer,” they just read me as “Zach,” knowing I was different, but just thinking of me as special. I don’t know how they’d view me now as a gay, highly political, creative adult, and I don’t know what intentions they had, if any, as they indulged me in grade school. But it doesn’t matter. They made a lasting impact on me just by letting me live out loud, with no need to reckon with or explain my flamboyance, no need to find fault in chatting with the girls at recess, and no need to apologize for finding joy in being myself.

Mrs. Ackerman and teachers like her afforded me a privilege that so many queer children miss out on: attitudes of acceptance and encouragement of behavior that stands outside of the norm. It was that moment, post-performance, Mrs. Ackerman leveling with me and telling me that I was good at doing what I loved. *I really think you should do it. You’re so talented.* Encouragement and pride, embracing her seven-year-old male student’s vivaciousness, high-pitched voice, the hands he put on his hips when he felt like being sassy. It was a saving grace, not provided directly by Catholicism, but by those affiliated with it, and by the queer performance of it all.

The Flash

“The cat claws are coming out today!” I said, watching from the sidelines. Two girls were going head-to-head in a game of Knockout during gym class, pulling out dirty tricks like ball bumping and screaming *Shot!* at every attempt to sink a basket.

“Benak, when you say things like that, it makes me think you’re a faggot,” TJ Martin said. He was shorter and rounder than me, with short light brown hair, pale skin, and barely existent eyebrows. The stuffy gymnasium wasn’t good for my body, which was suddenly overheating from embarrassment. Tears needed to be blinked away immediately because crying in response could never happen. I was less upset with TJ for making the remark, and more upset with myself for fucking up. I knew better than to make a joke about “claws coming out.” My delivery was exuberant, my words queer and sassy, adjectives I had spent the last few years trying to avoid.

“I’m not gay,” I said, aware now that gay no longer meant being only attracted to the same-sex. By the sixth grade, I knew that I was, but I also knew that my attractions and curiosities about my male classmates were not the norm. The associations of homosexuality were not acceptable to anyone in my world. Denial was necessary.

“Then why do you hang out with so many girls?” TJ asked.

“What’s wrong with hanging out girls?” For my female friends and me, nothing. I loved hanging out with my best friend, Claire, and playing Four Square or watching *The Bridge to Terabithia* at her house. There were no expectations to talk about sports or think or act romantically. We could just talk about our teachers and eat her mom’s chewy chocolate chip cookies and be ourselves, and nothing seemed wrong with it until TJ pointed it out. But on the basketball court, a realization dawned upon TJ’s round face.

“Oh, I get it. So you act *happy-happy* to get with the ladies.”

It seemed like every accusation of homosexuality was an opportunity for words to be weaponized against me in a way that was fresh to my ears. Gay. Homo. Girl’s Gay Best Friend. Queer. Fag. Faggot. Pussy. Fruitcake. *Happy-happy*. During those middle school days, I bore witness to every word and descriptor and action and behavior that was synonymous with feminine or homosexual or antonymous with masculine or heterosexual, and every time it felt like I’d had my dignity ripped out from the spot in my chest where I carried it, my soul stabbed and depleted a little more. I wish I’d known that everything about me was not just okay, but special and important. But perspectives get morphed when life experience and representation of what can be “normal” is limited, and as a young person, I was more inclined to believe what others said than what I wanted to know as true.

But reliving these experiences of words hurting worse than sticks and stones also means remembering and reflecting upon the moments when I was just as guilty of hate and verbal indecency as the perpetrators I seek to blame. There was Kevin, a friendless and emotional classmate prone to temperamental outbursts. I know I was guilty of the exclusion that perpetuated his anger, and I’m sure using words like “psycho” and “freak” to describe him made his life worse. There was Claire, that first best friend of mine and still a best friend today, whom I called a cunt after nine years of friendship. As a 13-year-old, I had no idea what the word meant, and I don’t remember what Claire and I were fighting about when I said it, the harsh consonants echoing off my teeth recklessly and impulsively. I was aware of the effect slurs had when used toward me, but uncaring about the effect my words had on others. And there was Craig, a brilliant Georgetown student of today, but formerly a victim of bullying after one incident in seventh grade.

It was a snowy Valentine's Day in 2010, and Craig invited our group of friends over for a sleepover to celebrate the four-day weekend that President's Day had granted us. Middle school sleepovers typically consisted of three to four boys, playing basketball or *Call of Duty* on the Xbox, or watching a horror movie destined to haunt our heads at three in the morning when it was time to fall asleep. This one was different. Catastrophe occurred with eight pubescent boys in one finished basement, especially with a group as vicious and willfully hurtful as ours. Mean girls were in short supply at St. Gerald, while mean boys were far more likely to ruin a life. And no part of Catholicism made us better people. Our parents' tuition dollars spent at a private institution with a mission to shape disciples had little impact on our words and treatment of each other. At this sleepover alone, our despicable senses of humor and thrashing comments were displayed more proudly than Jesus on his cross. Liam called Will an "erection pill baby" because Will's dad was nearly 60 years old, and our recent discovery of Viagra was now in use as tool of insult. Words were exchanged about respective middle school girlfriends, with David bragging that he had kissed Claire while Jacob had kissed nobody. But the most evil and manipulative bully at St. Gerald was Joe Cassidy.

Joe was in our friend group because we knew the repercussions of him being out of it. He had tan skin, a chubbyish, not-yet-developed figure, and a brown buzzcut. He was the best basketball player on the court, the most feared dodgeball player in gym class. Each of us were desperate to keep Joe happy, to ensure our place on his good side, to play into his ego and pay him the attention he needed. Joe was the fascist leader of a weak society eager to follow him, despite the last day of sixth grade when he threw a girl down onto the gravel sidewalk of a baseball field, or his propensity to call all of us the most hurtful names if we dared to cross him. Once, when I made the mistake of excluding him from a movie outing to see *Iron Man*, I got an

AOL Instant Message from Joe calling me a “pussy.” A cliché in the culture of bullying is that it occurs as a manifestation of the bully’s own insecurities. I believe this cliché to be true in many cases. But I also think that Joe might have just been born mean.

Because Joe’s loud mouth crowned him the unofficial moderator of lunch table discussion and scheduler of weekend plans, he held his power to rally troops over the heads of us as individuals. Acting against Joe meant exclusion and, in some instances, all out war, and the threat of being out of the group (or “clique” as we’d be called if we weren’t young boys intent on achieving masculinity) intimidated all of us into following Joe’s commands. We watched lesbian porn together and said we liked it because Joe had it playing on his iPod Touch. We played tag football with Joe as the all time quarterback so that Joe could be on the winning team every time. And after Craig’s action at the sleepover, we mass-criticized him at Joe’s behest.

We piled onto the soft beige La-Z-Boy couches in Craig’s basement, taking turns playing video games on his flat screen TV. Craig’s parents were both retired from the military, and like many families, retired in the Papillion, Nebraska area, not too far from Omaha’s Offutt Air Force base. At around one in the morning, Joe made an announcement.

“Let’s go into the hot tub,” he said, getting nods of agreement from the other boys.

“We can’t, my parents are asleep,” Craig said.

“Exactly,” Joe said, pushing back.

“My mom is going to get pissed if she hears you.”

“We’ll be quiet, don’t worry,” Joe said, and his decision was final.

The hot tub sat beneath Craig’s deck, and was accessible through a sliding glass door in the basement. Joe, Logan, Liam and I changed into our suits and enjoyed the close-to-scalding water and bubbles in February’s eighteen-degree weather. It started to snow, and we speculated

whether or not Nebraska schools would cancel if it kept coming down. We laughed at the brush of frost accumulating on the top of our heads, with me once more looking like the Ebenezer Scrooge character I'd portrayed for the winter play earlier that academic year.

"Do you guys want to know a secret?" Joe asked.

"Lay it on us," I said, overeager to hear what Joe was about to reveal.

"I smoked pot with my cousins and brothers last Thanksgiving. I got sooo high," he said, shaking his head to indicate that he impressed even himself.

"Aw, man. That's awesome," Liam said, as Logan and I stared in disbelief.

Giggling discreetly so as to avoid waking up Craig's parents, we soon saw Craig appear at the sliding glass window, a tall, dark, and lurking Michael Myers-type figure looming in the dimness. We sat confused as he stared at us, and we noticed a gesturing motion from his biceps to his forearms.

"What the hell is he doing?" Joe asked, squinting. Obscured by the lack of light, the revelation of Craig's actions came when Will sneaked behind him from inside and flipped the light switch: Craig's penis was exposed, and he was flopping it around in our direction. We howled at the sight, Craig continuing despite our horror. Upon realizing what Craig was doing, Will turned the light back off and ran back to the couches inside. Craig pulled up his pants and closed the shades on sliding glass door.

"What the fuck?!" Logan squeaked, his voice still a year off from dropping.

"It was so big, and he had so much hair down there. Is that what a choad is?" I asked.

"No...that was an adult-sized penis. He must be finished with puberty already," Joe said, equal parts stunned and envious.

While the other boys seemed horrified to have seen another guy's genitals in such an unceremonious manner, I was immediately searching for a way inside's Craig head. Having already made my own private discoveries, I was aware of my sexual attraction to males. So I sat in the water, compelled and replaying the image of Craig's exposure. Craig had made a conscious decision to flash us, nothing accidental or incidental, but what was his intention? Did this come from an impulsive thought of wanting to prank and incite, or was there something more to this? Did Craig, encouraged by ups in testosterone and eagerness for exploration, expose himself in a moment of vulnerability, wanting to be seen in a way he never had before? Certainly he did not expect the reaction he received that night, or for the following year, where us boys relentlessly ridiculed him for his unveiling, and Craig remained embarrassed and ashamed for showing us what he did. Maybe we were all wrong for it—the group, for our mean-spirited mockery; Craig, for the lewd act that no one consented to—but I think my wrong was the worst.

Weeks later at the lunch table, in the same gymnasium where TJ Martin called me a faggot, between spoonfuls of chocolate pudding and bites of pears, Joe begged a question.

“Who here do we think is most likely to be gay?” he asked.

“Craig,” I said, before anyone could say my name. “Right, Flash?”

I conceived the nickname for Craig right in front of him, just when everyone was started to forget about the incident. He laughed along with everyone else and shook his head, not showing any sign that I had broken him with my insult. But I think I might have. Craig never invited any of us over to his house again.

It's difficult to pinpoint where my meanness came from. Maybe I was complicit, seeking the approval of Joe Cassidy and thinking it was better for him to target Craig than target me.

Maybe being the victim of hate through language inspired me to perpetuate it onto others, while a more resilient person would have taken an empathetic route.

Or maybe I was desperate to cover up my secret obsession with the incident, criticizing Craig to keep my own homosexuality closeted. The reality in my head was a constant pondering of why Craig did it, and what he meant by it, and what youthful queer longing might have been shared between Craig's action and my witness to it. I privately wondered what would have happened had it just been Craig and me, alone with his penis out of his pants. Were any of my desires and wonders about boys shared by Craig? What hypocrisy did I gain and credibility did I lose by vilifying him, vilifying his action that I secretly reveled in?

Turn this Town into a Home

In 2015, *Money* magazine named Papillion, Nebraska, the second best place to live in America. Citing 10.2% job growth, a median income of over \$75,000, and “a downtown teeming with fresh energy,” the folks at *Money* magazine did a fine job of highlighting why Papillion is a utopic small town to raise your family in.

But has anyone from *Money* actually been to Papillion? Like, actually seen it? Or smelled it?

Papillion is named after a creek that runs through the city, discovered by French explorers who noticed countless butterflies inhabiting the area. French for “butterfly,” *Papillion* was an obvious title for the creek, though “Papio” is the nickname that sticks with most residents. Officially becoming a city in the 1870s, when the Union Pacific Railroad was extended to run through the town, Papio has since tried to establish itself amongst the other suburbs of Omaha. It doesn’t have the million-dollar-making pumpkin patch that Gretna has, it can’t compete with the cuisine of La Vista (which hosts a McDonald’s, Taco Bell, *and* Burger King), and the houses in West Omaha are much bigger and higher in property value. A brief ten-minute drive outside of Papillion will lead travelers to the vast, plain farmlands of Springfield, where trailers are adorned with confederate flags and where the portions of the Omaha Metropolitan area’s meth supply is cooked in abandoned barns. My father, a former undercover narcotics officer, was responsible for imprisoning most of these residents throughout the early-2000s, though he keeps the stories from his narcing days close to his chest. Once he hit his 40s, he was unwillingly transferred to road patrol, and later transportations, where he was unsatisfied with the boring routine of a police officer in the suburban Midwest. He is currently riding out the rest of his working days with the Sarpy County Police in the Investigations Unit, and I get wide-eyed

reactions when I mention to friends and acquaintances that my dad is a detective. I imagine that their brains flash images of sunglasses studs from *CSI: Miami* and *Hawaii Five-O*, while I mentally recall the incidents where my dad had to act as a coroner for a baby that had fallen victim to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or the times he's had to leave our family dinners of roasted ham or enchiladas to remove children from their abusive homes. Aware of these ugly parts of the job, I take pride in my father's career as a police officer, especially knowing that his values align with my own, and oppose the Blue Lives Matter attitudes that permeate throughout his squad. Started as a response to Black Lives Matter, members of the Blue Lives Matter countermovement wave black and white American flags with a blue stripe horizontally running through the center to show support for police officers. This propaganda can be found at the local Dairy Queen in downtown Papillion, or as a bumper stick on any Chevy Silverado. But Joe Benak think differently.

"That guy belongs in jail," my dad said about Darren Wilson, the police officer who went uncharged for the 2014 murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. I was watching CNN coverage of the protests ensuing after the prosecuting attorney announced far too eagerly that Wilson would not be indicted. My dad had walked into the living room, wearing his standard gym shorts and navy Boston Red Sox t-shirt, running his hand through his full head of wispy, brunette hair. "He completely ignored procedure, and that kid should not be dead."

As a 17-year-old with a burgeoning, albeit naïve passion for social change, I was relieved to hear my dad express sentiments on what I believed and still do believe to be the right side of history, the side of justice. In a town as non-diverse and self-unaware as Papillion, my dad's comments revealed to me that he was able to see beyond the tip of his own nose, past the deceitful iridescence of his own bubble. I was proud of him then, and I'm still proud of him now,

as he informs me about his \$25 donations to local Democratic Socialists running for election in our district.

Despite my inclinations to dismiss Papillion as a deplorable, hick town, with me and my dad as the only political progressives, I can't deny the luster that keeps so many coming in, and deters so many from getting out. On a Wednesday summer drive, around 6pm, one could drive downtown and pass Stave's Wine and Cheese Parlour, where a live band will be playing for couples drinking glasses of Malbec under stringed lights. Further down the hill of N. Washington Street, past Nebraska's famous Runza fast food restaurant (known for their Runza Sandwiches—beef, cheese, and cabbage baked into a golden bun), across the bridge hanging over Papio Creek and alongside the chic farmer's market in the 1st Street Plaza, one could take a left on Lincoln to enjoy the breezy green atmosphere of Halleck Park. A fountain flows in the middle of a duck pond, and kids push each other on the tire swings that hang adjacent to the rentable shelters. After a long day of riding slides and penciling off the high dive, families trickle out of Papio Bay Aquatic Center (or trickle *in* to swim at Twilight Hours' discounted rates), and the cheers of baseball parents and siblings echo as they watch their sons and brothers play under the white lights of Fricke Field. Cutting through S. Monroe Street would lead one past husbands and wives sitting in red Nebraska Cornhusker lawn chairs on their driveway, and straight ahead to Papio Bowl, where Lady Gaga held her wrap party after shooting her "You and I" music video. Because the song was dedicated to her *Cool Nebraska Guy*, it would have been blasphemous for Gaga to not film the video gallivanting through the cornfields and strutting across the gravel roads of Springfield in a metallic black, bionic-themed costume.

Circling back around Halleck Park and driving south through the neighborhood, one will eventually wind up on Cedardale Road, home to Don Bellino's house. If Warren Buffett is the

Oracle of Omaha, then Don Bellino is the Potentate of Papio, owning and managing property all over the city and making big bucks every summer with his profitable firework distributing company. He's a wrinkly old white man, with gray hair receding a mile back on his head, though his Paul Newman-blue eyes provide him with a few ounces of physical charm. The Bellino House is a white, three story building that stands behind a line of skinny loblolly pine trees and a cast iron fountain surrounded by perfectly trimmed shrubs. I once finessed my way past the front lawn because a friend from high school utilized her dad's friendship with Mr. Bellino to host her grad party at his proud abode. Their backyard consists of a beautiful wooden patio and gazebo, stained a beautiful rust color and separated by an in-ground pool surrounded by tiki torches. I joked that it'd be the perfect place for my high school classmates and I to play *Survivor*, competing in water challenges and voting each other off the rich man's property, one by one. We could build a shelter near the volleyball nets past the gazebo (where Tribal Council would always be held), and the eliminated castaways could stay in the guesthouse-turned-game room, complete with an arcade of Galaga and Mr. and Mrs. Pac Man. It was the perfect landscape for a reality TV show, and why wouldn't Mr. Bellino give up his modest mansion for a few weeks? He'd easily be able to negotiate a handsome rent to charge the shitty cable network airing our show.

"He's an asshole," a waitress at Applebee's once told me. She had been sweeping the carpet as my friend Elle and I were polishing off our half-priced mozzarella sticks and cheeseburger sliders and trying to list aloud all of the properties that Bellino owned. The waitress had several ear piercings, suntanned skin, and hair that was a pretty, albeit unnatural brown color, almost maroon. "I used to work for his brother Rich at La Vista Keno."

“Yeah, I’ve heard bad things,” I said. “But my dad has always told me that Rich was the nicer brother.”

“Nope, he was an asshole, too.”

“Didn’t Rich just die last year?”

“Yup.”

And in this exchange, an obvious hierarchy was established: Mr. Bellino and his allies, those distant and privileged enough to gossip about him, and those who’d been misfortunate enough to have worked for him.

But what Bellino did not own was the restaurant that the waitress found herself sweeping and serving in now, the neighborhood bar and grill with at least two neon lights always darkened on the front sign, a parking lot that’s a nightmare for claustrophobic drivers, and a glass jar consistently empty of the post-meal peppermints that everyone needs on their way out: Crapplebee’s.

How much money have I irresponsibly spent at this trashhole of a dining establishment? How many bags of stale tortilla chips and bowls of pre-made queso blanco have the kitchen employees prepared solely for me and my friends, desperate for our fill of greasy, fried whatever-sounds-good? How many times have I been recorded on iPhone cameras, singing atrocious Wednesday night karaoke and refusing to tip the DJ, who turned off my microphone when I belted “Bring Him Home” from *Les Miserables*, and accused me of ruining “Africa” by Toto for the rest of his life? And how many times have the hunter green leather booths kissed my sweat-stained bumblebee yellow Papio Bay work t-shirts, the restaurant’s icy air-conditioner cooling me down in ways my dilapidated, fuel-leaking, AC-less 2001 Ford Taurus never could? Crapplebee’s remained an asylum for me all throughout high school, the perfect place to catch up

with old friends over Thanksgiving break, or congregate and gab with pals with whom there isn't even anything to catch up on. The half-priced appetizers and free Mountain Dews never made for gourmet dining, but they were always reliable for a belly that needed nourishment, or comfort.

This is where I grew up. These are the sights and places I drove through at the end of every shift I worked at Papio Bay, after selling season passes to families, getting cussed out by patrons who were angry about the lack of toilet paper in the women's bathhouse, and scrubbing off crusted nacho cheese from the folding white lounge chairs on the pool deck. These are streets I still roam when I visit Papio, having no intention but to play "Dancing Queen" by ABBA as loudly as possible and pass time by driving the 2003 Mitsubishi Lancer that has replaced my now-deceased Ford Taurus. These roads are undeniably home, with home, to me, being defined as what is most familiar, the easiest place to fall back to. Home widely differs from Chicago, my college town and place of political, sexual, and academic awakenings, but still too distant from the familiar for it to feel like home. It's difficult for me to not know every block and neighborhood in Chicago like I know every sign and reused street lamp Christmas decoration in Papio, and to feel like every designer-brand-clad young professional or literary hipster or *Streetwise* corner vendor is a stranger I can't know, even if I tried. I can't combat the depression that strikes beneath the fluorescent lights of the CTA Red Line, which comes regardless of whether or not I'm traveling alone, as I feel my skin and clothes become uglier on the train car, my body too distant from fresh air and my anxious mind wondering what my family is currently doing without me. This, to me, is one of the most unforgiving characteristics that Papillion embodies, and instills within the residents it rears: complacency, undying satisfaction with a home they've never left, and vow to never leave, or for those who do manage to escape, a lingering homesickness and fear of missing out.

Still, I deplore so much about Podunk Papio, including the emphasis that my alma mater and town place on sports. I was only present at basketball games when I was selling Tubos Locos candies for Spanish Club at the concession stand. I was only spotted at football games if it was Homecoming Week, when gossip was most prevalent throughout the stands, and cheers during the Field Walk helped predict who would be crowned King and Queen at the dance. It disgusted me being a part of Monarch Nation, the title of our mascot a pun of monarchs like sovereign rulers, and Monarchs like the butterflies that Papillion was named after. Refusing to cheer for Monarch Athletics meant I lacked school spirit, but who got blamed for the record-low ticket sales of the theatre department's production of *The Crucible*? My baby face spent autumn of junior year condemning John Proctor to the gallows in a colonial wig, and only forty-five people could drag their asses to the school auditorium to witness it? Forget about the Salem Witch Trials, my high school's lack of appreciation for 16-year-olds shittily performing Arthur Miller's masterpiece was the real injustice.

What remains most difficult for me is continuing to call Papillion home when a future there seems unimaginable, unattainable. Career options for a liberal arts major are limited, yes, but the queer identity I've cultivated in Chicago is still anomalous in suburban Nebraska. A scroll through dating/hook-up/messaging/nightmare app Grindr reveals a host of photo-less profiles, with names like "Discreet" or "Str8/married" or "MASC ONLY!" One chubby and bald 40-year-old wrote *this is retarded* next to the "Pronouns" portion of his profile, a jarring reminder that bigotry and hate and ignorance are just as likely to exist amongst white gay men as white straight men, and a painful mnemonic that I, Dorothy, was no longer in the Kansas that was Chicago's queer community. Despite persisting issues like racism and classism, Chicago is where I feel my safest and gayest. It's where I attended my first Pride parade, getting sunburnt

while cheering on dancing drag queens and clapping for the queer families who marched between Boystown's squatty brick residences, nightclubs, and ice cream shops. It's where I toured the slick and windowed Center on Halsted, the largest LGBTQ community center in the Midwest, and listened to a panel of queer senior citizens share their lived experiences. It's where I can take a quick bus ride to the Andersonville neighborhood, bustling with independent bookstores and Middle Eastern restaurant and pay \$12 to see thirty experimental, social justice-oriented in sixty minutes at *The Neo-Futurists*. It's where I can belt "I Can Hear the Bells" from *Hairspray* at a karaoke bar full of queers who know the lyrics, and the bald, beefcake DJ won't turn off my microphone.

Coming out in Chicago meant a giddy hype session with my roommate before my first Starbucks date with a boy. Coming out in Papillion meant fielding questions from lifelong friends like, "Is it okay for me to call you my 'gay best friend'?" and "So why did you fake it with those girls in high school?" When I told my parents the "news" over spring break during my sophomore year of college, I was promised worlds of love and acceptance. Still, when the dad I've always been so proud of laughs aloud or repeats the gay jokes in Judd Apatow movies, in the comfort of our living room or at the house in Florida, I'm disappointed in him, and disappointed in myself for causing this shift in our relationship.

These juxtapositions have encouraged me to view Chicago as the wokest, queerest, end-all, be-all for my gay identity, casting downward glances at Papillion and other suburban environments for not *getting it*, creating further dilemmas in my quest for establishing permanent space. Can I only be gay in Chicago, the city whose unfamiliarity still prevents me, four years later, from considering it "home"? Must I abandon Papillion and its landscapes and bodies that are responsible for forming me, but where my grandparents live completely unaware of my

sexual orientation? Un-assigning Papillion as home means purposefully distancing myself from the comfort of familiarity and sameness that I may roll my eyes at, but still find myself clinging to. Establishing Chicago as home means considering this city secure and easy, despite being aware that my footing has never felt fully steady on this ground.

A song I've loved for years and still often listen to is "A House Is Not a Home" by Dionne Warwick. Her voice exudes gentleness and pain and power all at once, in concert with the roll of the cymbals and croon of the saxophone and shake of the strings. Whether I'm listening on the train rails of Chicago or the freshly paved roads of Papillion, there's one lyric I always find myself especially moved by:

"A room is not a house / And a house is not a home / When the two of us are far apart / And one of us has a broken heart."

I know this ballad is about lovers, and I would never say that my heart feels *broken* in Papillion or Chicago. But when I think about my heart never quite feeling *whole* in either place, I know exactly what Dionne means.

Stumbling Out

Transitioning from elementary and middle school to high school scared the shit out of me. Because of my history and experiences with homophobic language and queer accusations, I was hyperaware of my behavior, my voice, and how every mannerism I made was susceptible to scrutiny, especially now that I'd be out of the "politeness" of Catholic school and thrust into a public one. A past of being called a "faggot" and "tomgirl" meant a necessary future without limp wrists or hands on hips. My go-to outfit was a pair of gray Nike sweatpants and my royal blue Creighton University sweatshirt. I used these discreet pieces of clothing to keep me closeted, ensuring that if my high-pitched voice or a slip of my girlish interests in pop culture worked to out me, then at least my garb could classify me as a straight-passing boy, who was also a fan of college basketball. It didn't hurt that the sweatpants were comfortable as hell, and I could always cozily burrow myself into my sweatshirts when classrooms felt like ice boxes during Nebraska's winter months.

It was obvious that I had changed in high school. The 9-year-old boy who got marks off on his report card for being too chatty and social in third grade was now a 15-year-old boy who several teachers confessed to "not really knowing very well." And being new to a public school district facilitated this. But the students at my new school were not brutal verbal terrorists like they were at St. Gerald. I had zero encounters with bullies or F words. Any cliché I'd read about or watched in movies were debunked; my Catholic elementary school teachers who lamented about the lack of prayer in public schools would have been shocked to learn how much nicer people were at my high school, and how much more inclined people were to leave each other alone. And there was more freedom: students could speak up in class Socratically without raising their hand, and if a note had to be delivered, office aids didn't have to knock on the door before

entering. I morphed into a mouse with braces, rarely raising my hand, sitting in the corner of the classroom, and cautiously observing my new environment.

Needing to get involved and meet people, I joined the cross-country team within the first days of freshman year. I had an older cousin who was a runner at his high school, and because I had a similar body type as him (5'7" and 115 pounds), my mom and Aunt Kathy were encouraging that I follow his path.

Disaster was immediate.

Who the fuck does this for fun? I thought, panting through my second mile and running uphill on 72nd. I just had to reach the top of the hill, then the road would slope downward, past the Wal-Mart, Kohl's, and Chick-Fil-A that had popped up in Papillion over the last decade. The neighborhood adjacent to the busy street temptingly boasted houses with in-ground pools. I couldn't muster the energy to keep running, but thought I could easily hop a fence and collapse into the chlorinated teal water, if only it were an acceptable escape.

Nebraska's August heat pumped onto me, the only breeze coming from the Ford SUVs zooming past. I trailed behind everyone else, gazing ahead at my teammates' lean torsos, naked from the waist up, while also refusing to take off my own shirt out of fear that the toneless shape of my body would further repel the people around me. Being around this team of fit jocks reminded me that they were what I would never be, and didn't really want to be, but I still felt a desire to be paid attention to, to be liked. I believed that the physicality of my body would play a role in how people viewed me as a friend or teammate, and refusing to take my shirt off while admiring the others from afar (literally, about a quarter mile behind them) was another way to erase myself.

Fortunately, this desire was far from intense, and didn't dissuade me from quitting the cross-country team after three practices. I emailed the coach with my decision, telling him that the sport wasn't for me.

Sure, Zach, he replied, within minutes. *Good luck with everything.*

So much pressure was alleviated after I sent the email. I had spent the last three days agonizing over how deplorable I was at running, how my breath became irregular after going for only a quarter mile, and the dilemma of eating lunch and throwing it up later, or skipping the meal altogether. My brain was still a tossed salad of anxiety-inducing ingredients, but at least I'd removed the rotten hard-boiled egg that was stinking up the entire bowl.

"Well, if you're quitting, then you need something else," my mom said. "You can't not do anything with your time."

My mom wasn't often the "tough love" type, but it did come out at times like this, when her disappointment was mixed with an understated worry, a fear that her child wouldn't have any communal outlets or friends to lean on.

But she didn't need to worry. I found the Drama department. And I found Nick.

Quitting cross-country coincided with my audition for the fall play, *Charlotte's Web*. After successfully auditioning with the monologue from *A Christmas Carol* where Ebenezer Scrooge vows to honor Christmas in his Grinchy, corrupt heart, I nabbed the role of the County Fair Announcer. While essentially a chorus role, the part required me to recite a monologue celebrating the unique, award-winning pig that was Wilbur. I pinned the first place blue ribbon on Wilbur's chest, ensuring that his greedy farmer family would not slaughter him. *There is no*

such thing as a small part was advice that I took to heart and wore on my Creighton University sweatshirt sleeve.

From that first play, my commitment to the Papillion La Vista Fine Arts department never wavered. For the next four years, I was a part of every single production that our high school put on as an actor, singer, dancer, run crew chief, props master, and stage manager. I joined the Free Spirit varsity show choir, necessary for optics, as there was a shortage of boys and my maleness was needed on the stage whether I could sing or not (I couldn't). Everything about me changed once I was in that department. I grew confident and comfortable, dancing in tight suede shoes and singing Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" for our show choir ballad, alongside forty of my best friends. I served time as the president of my high school's International Thespian Society chapter, I wore a sparkling red cocktail dress and full body suit of fake fur as the Big Bad Wolf in *Shrek the Musical*, and I led the Improv Team to a second-place finish at the state competition. I'm certain that I didn't peak socially or artistically, because I still felt the yen to leave the town that I experienced all of this in, but I will always be grateful for having that space to blossom, and having people to blossom with.

The Fine Arts kids really defined our own world. Our lockers were on the opposite ends of the school, near the band and choir rooms and auditorium but segregated from the rest of the student body. In that zone, we'd congregate every morning after show choir rehearsal, eating blueberry muffins and working on homework before class. For those of us involved in both drama and show choir, our days were often fifteen hours long: getting to school at 7:15am for the Drama Club Meeting, taking AP classes on top of our fine arts elective during the day, rehearsing lines or music for theatre from 3:30pm to 5pm, sneaking a Burger King or Jimmy John's dinner before show choir rehearsal from 6 to 9pm, and then carpooling home or driving

through Sonic for post-rehearsal mozzarella sticks and cherry slushies, reflecting (i.e., talking shit) on the day's events.

"Tyler is absolutely abysmal as John Proctor," I said, with one hand on my car's steering wheel and the other elbow-deep in a bag of McDonald's French fries. "I can't believe the lead of our Fall play has braces and can't remember any of his fucking lines."

"I saw him looking at his script in study hall," Ambi said from the backseat, chomping on a meatball marinara sub and licking sauce from her fake nails. "But he made no progress at rehearsal. Tragic."

"You can't memorize lines through osmosis," I said before blasting the soundtrack from *Shrek the Musical* from my stereo.

Typical Fridays and Saturdays were also spent at the school, as each student broke apart across the auditorium, the stage, the props, the wood shop, the catwalk, the costume closet, and the green room to work in our respective departments and pull together whatever show we were working on. Daniel Erickson and Kasey Trouba would splatter the stage with broken chairs and tables and couches from past sets, trying to find the right piece to use, or deciding how many two-by-fours they could hack with the buzz saw. Ally Sargus and I would flail plastic wine glasses and pairs of stilettos from the props closet, searching for rotary phone. Alaina DeLeo would adorn her hair with a scarlet chiffon scarf that she swiped from the costume closet while taking measurements for the chorus boys' outfits. We were a village, collecting and gathering and harvesting toward a common goal. And even the most cynical tech theatre kid could admit: we were a family.

I never looked back on my three days of cross-country, except to cackle empathetically at my stumble in trying to find a place for myself, and I'm retrospectively impressed with myself

for feeling so uncomfortable in my small, identifiably queer body, yet still saying *Fuck it* and doing the performances and dances and plays that provided me with rushes of endorphins and adrenaline and bliss that running four miles never could. But no performance of *The Crucible* or concert choir award was as essential as Nick Falewitch was to who I wanted to be, and who I became.

I don't remember when I first met Nick, if or when there was formal introduction, but I do remember seeing him for the first time at auditions for *Charlotte's Web*. He, too, was wearing a tacky outfit, a tie-dye *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* t-shirt paired with gym shorts and tennis shoes. He had sapphire eyes and blonde hair that can only be described as luscious, despite my desperation to think of any other word besides luscious. But it was luscious, truly luscious! He had a rounder figure back then, not plus-sized, but a slight tubbiness that filled out his clothes. Fuzzy blonde curls of hair wrapped around his legs, and he stood center stage, auditioning with a harrowing monologue that dealt with bullying and suicide. It was a completely inappropriate piece to use for the feel-good comedy that was *Charlotte's Web*, but nonetheless, Nick secured the flamboyant and sassy role of the Gander. His costume consisted of a white button-down shirt, pants, suspenders, and a bow tie, with orange blush on his cheeks and yellow feathers strewn in his hair. To convey the waddle of a gander, Nick stuck out his butt every time he walked across the stage.

Nick was two grades above me, and I spent most of freshman year outside of his world. He was best friends with all the seniors and Mrs. Grasso, our director. Grasso was a hardworking, ambitious director, but she was not above gossiping with and about students, or even faculty. Nick was quick to indulge her in this habit, and she'd flip her blonde hair back and

forth while they whispered secrets about our show choir director or accompanist, her sitting in her desk in the drama room, him sitting in the polyester blue chair next to it.

Nick was really important during my freshman year, as he was in charge of hair and makeup, and played Raoul in *The Phantom of the Opera*. While the confidence I gained in the Drama department certainly encouraged me to befriend the upperclassmen, Nick was someone I always avoided. His talent preceded him, which was extremely intimidating. He was a bossy show choir dance captain and consistent vocal soloist, but also widely respected at our school and across Nebraska's high school theatre scene. He was also someone that everyone read as gay. Even when Nick wasn't out, he was. He earned the nickname "Diva-Fale" for an attitude and stage presence that would make Patti LuPone flinch. He was exclusively friends with women, and his gait and stance were anti-masculine. He leaned on one curvy hip when he stood, letting it jut out with his hand resting on his side. When he walked, his hands swayed back and forth in swift, elongated motions, different from what'd you expect to see from a man like Leonardo DiCaprio or Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. And he had the voice.

One may ask, *Why do all gay men talk like that?* I might reply, *Because God hates fags and wants everyone to know it!* My voice outed me at a young age, because it was so high-pitched and often mistaken as my sister's or mother's when I answered the phone. But Nick's was different. It was deep and nasally, but his tone and drawn-out ending vowels on words like *Total-yyy* or *Sopran-ohhhwe* put him against the norm, against the voices of straight basketball players or boyish musicians in band. Not all gay men have the voice, and it's also possible that men of other sexualities have the voice. The voice takes form in many ways, versatile in its sound. In my case, the voice sounded identical to a girl's, at least until puberty hit. In other cases, the voice comes with a lisp, or is Lady Gaga-like in its resonance. But no matter the oral shape in

which the voice manifests, it is almost always damning, immediately making its owner susceptible to mockery. Because I had the voice, it was easier for me to recognize it in others, like a more niche, nuanced form of gaydar. And I recognized it in Nick, and I know he recognized it in me.

While I observed Nick all throughout my freshman year, it wasn't until the very end of the year that I took notice of him in a different way. The upperclassmen were performing a two-show run of *Laugh In*, the stage version of Rowan and Martin's sketch comedy series. Complete with a groovy set, painted all sorts of pinks, oranges, yellows, and purples, the show was self-aware of its 70s-style camp, and Nick performed as a Charles Nelson Reilly-type. He wore a flowery printed shirt, partially unbuttoned so that his tan, bare chest was exposed, and donned brown corduroy slacks that accentuated his butt. I was helping out backstage, getting ready to move props and pull the curtain at the stage manager's command, but I was enamored by the round and perky presence of Nick's backside, having never taken notice until that moment. I knew Nick was gay, and I knew I was gay, both unspoken truths that needed to remain that way, but I was no longer committed to ignoring the possibility of him and me. His big beautiful butt changed everything.

My sophomore year was Nick's senior year, granting us an entire academic calendar to actually connect. It started with the fall play of 2012, where I played the Gorgo to his Victor Frankenstein. They were challenging roles for both of us, as Nick was required to perform as a spiraling, obsessive doctor trying to play God, and I had to limp across the stage with a hunch on my back, projecting a scraggly voice across an 800-seat auditorium. Though Gorgo was a physically ugly character, my real-life appearances were going through a positive transformation: I had just gotten my braces off and was receiving compliments from everyone in the department

for my naked, shiny teeth. That in addition to the praise I was receiving for my performance as Gorgo was giving me more life and personal strength than Dr. Frankenstein was giving to the Monster.

Working onstage as Nick's personal assistant created a playful dynamic between the two of us. He would playfully push me around or yank me by my hair, and I'd excitedly go along with his bits. *Yes, Master*, was Gorgo's response to every single one of Frankenstein's demands, fetching him scalpels and scissors and various organs that our props crew had molded and painted. It's extremely abusive and inconsiderate of Frankenstein to take advantage of Gorgo the way he does, latching on to Gorgo's desperation to have a friend in life who will accept him, hunchback and all. Instead of promising Gorgo his own friendship, Frankenstein seizes his labor, makes him false promises, and doesn't even shed a tear when the Monster strangles Gorgo to death in his laboratory.

Thankfully, Nick and my relationship was nothing like this, aside from my own desire to make Nick happy and capture his attention in any capacity. I would text him frequently, congratulating him every time he won the Best Male Soloist awards at a show choir competition. *Thank you, Zachy!!* he'd reply. No one else ever called me "Zachy."

But Nick could also be really mean. In addition to his propensity to gossip, he was not above yelling at underclassmen who fucked up on costume crew or continually biffed a dance move during show choir practice. Once, I even bore the brute of his petulance, when I requested help with my stage makeup.

"No," he said, "the point is for *you* to learn how to do it *yourself*." I can be a bit combative and strong-headed myself, but this snap nearly sent me into tears. It was almost parental, like my mother had snippily denied me the help of a night light to fall asleep. Just ten

minutes later, as I was trying and failing to nail the ugliness and filth of Gorgo with streaks of brown and red foundation, he approached me with a makeup sponge to repair the damage. Neither of us said word, as I refused to cry and he refused to apologize, but he didn't need to say sorry for me to forgive him. He spread out my uneven foundation and powdered my neck before saying, "Break a leg tonight, Zachy."

Our spring production was *Grease*, and Nick was a shoo-in to play Danny Zuko, one of the douche baggiest roles in all of musical theatre history. During auditions, I got a callback for Danny's right-hand man and *Grease Lightning* crooner, Kenickie. I knew I wouldn't get the role, as there were older, more qualified performers also called back, but it still smarted when I got onstage for the callback and flubbed the lyrics and tempo of the song. After callbacks ended, I walked through the upholstery maroon chairs of our auditorium with my book bag hanging off my back and my head hanging toward the ground.

"Zachy!" Nick said. He approached me from behind with a posse of girls. "That was so good!"

"No, it wasn't. I fucked up," I said, smiling sadly to ease my own self-deprecation.

"Isn't this your first year *ever* singing? And you got a callback for a lead as a *sophomore*? That is so impressive, Zachy!" he said, his eyes genuine.

In that moment, I knew I didn't care that he was a diva. I would never care that he only scored an 18 on his ACT while I was aiming for a 30. He was beautiful and talented and paid attention to me. And those were the only things that really mattered.

At the end of the school year, Nick's acceptance to Roosevelt University's Chicago College of the Performing Arts meant that I only had a few more months with him before he moved two states away. I knew I might not be a priority for Nick, because he had friends in his

grade and who had graduated before him that he'd want to spend time with, but this did not deter me from making an effort throughout a summer that seemed reliably endless. My best friend Tyler Cox was the younger brother of Nick's best friend, Jessica, and hanging out at their house always meant that Nick and I would get to hang out, too. There was one night that we collectively stayed up late in the Cox family room, watching *Ghost Hunters* in the dark. Nick and I were both lying on the floor amidst a pile of blankets and pillows, our eyes drooping with drowsiness. He shut his eyes and let out a sighing hum from his nose, rolling over and putting his arm around me. I lay there with Zak Baggins on TV, obnoxiously beckoning a spirit that I didn't think was real, with Nick resting his strong, furry forearm across my chest. Like a dummy (both the motionless replica of a human and the nickname for an idiot), I didn't move. I lay still, waiting for him drag his body across the carpet and closer to mine, or debating whether or not I should snuggle up to his upper arm, his shoulder, his neck, even with all the other teenaged bodies strewn across the couch above us. Within a minute, Nick unlatched himself, rolling onto his other side. An hour or so later, as Nick and I walked out of the Cox house toward our cars, we saw a shooting star.

“Oh my god. Did that really just happen?” Nick said, blinking up at the galaxies above us, so clearly visible from the suburbs of Nebraska. We said good-bye, and I opened the door to my white 2001 Ford Taurus. The engine squeaked as I ignited the car, chirping like a bird panicking in a cage. Before I drove off, I closed my eyes and made a belated wish upon the star.

It was the gayest thing that I've ever been a part of.

Can I ask you a question? I texted him. My generation is one of risky text senders. I can hear the moans of Gen Xers and Baby Boomers in my head, slapping me and people like me on our Apple Watch-clad wrists, shaming us for handling important matters over text message. I understand that young people frequently resort to handling confrontation and high-stake issues without face-to-face interaction, and I understand that I contribute to this problem. But unfortunately, I have other shit to deal with, and can only improve so much at a time.

Of course! he replied.

Do you think I'd be able to drink with you guys sometime? I think it'd be fun and I want to try it!

Omgggg yesss Zachy!!!

I did it. I successfully invited myself to Nick's basement, a space that otherwise seemed like a suburban legend.

Nick's basement was furnished like most basements in Papillion are: there was a pool table, a seventy-inch flat screen TV mounted on the wall, and a fully stocked bar completed with granite countertops. For friends in Nick's grade and above, his basement was the place to experiment with alcohol, and occasionally marijuana. I had no interest in the latter, but I recognized drinking with Nick and his friends as a way in for me, with the possibility of a more fun and looser version of myself leaping out. Further, it meant inclusion. I heard stories about drunken shenanigans and post-prom escapades in his basement, and I knew Nick's mom pretended to blissfully ignore what was occurring, adapting the *I'd Rather You Do It Here Than Somewhere Else* mantra. But otherwise, what happened in that basement was like Narnia. Stories could be told, but everything remained a fable until you walked through the door and experienced it for yourself.

Emily and Jessi were in attendance, both Papillion graduates that I had met my freshman year during *Charlotte's Web*. Emily was a cynical girl, always showing up to functions in a rush of cranky energy with her black hair in a greasy bun, but boisterous laughs and burps often gilded her negative attitude. Jessi, a thin red-headed girl studying Elementary Education, was more of a supervisor than participant in the drinking. She was sweet and tame, traits that the rest of us lacked.

Our group, about eight of us, decided to share a bottle of SKYY Vodka that Nick swiped from his mom's liquor cabinet. After a few hours of loitering around the basement, watching TV and waiting for Nick's mom to go to bed, we lined up our shot glasses and clutched our chasers (i.e., the Red Solo Cups of Sundrop soda) as Nick played bartender. I felt my heart thumping in anticipation of my first swig of alcohol, but with "Swing Swing" by the All American Rejects playing in the background, we performed a cheers and I downed my first shot with my older friends.

Vodka claims to be fermented from grains, but I think distillers are actually just collecting Satan's urine samples and putting them in bottles. No amount of soda could combat the toxic taste I had in my mouth. Of the seven other people in that room, not a single one of them informed me that our beverage of choice would taste like a wretched hybrid of nail polish remover and hand sanitizer. I did not react well to my first shot of alcohol, but because I was determined to get drunk, the violent assault on my tongue did not deter from taking three more shots within a half hour.

After this rapid intake, I remember toppling to the ground and acquiring severe rug burn on both of my knees. Music was still playing, and different bodies were moving to and from

different corners and nooks of the basement. In the midst of my pain and begging for Neosporin, I found myself in the basement guest bedroom with Emily.

“Emily!” I said, propping myself up with my elbows. “You are *such* a good time. Do you know where Nick keeps his Band-Aids?”

“Are you gay?” Emily asked me.

I did not anticipate this question.

“No,” I lied, looking down to avoid eye contact and feeling unsure in my gray baseball t-shirt. “Do I seem gay?”

“I ask every guy that question,” Emily claimed. “Most of my guy friends are gay. Like Kevin, like Trevor...and Nick, obviously.”

Emily was nearly twenty-years-old, asking a sixteen-year-old boy to decide on his identity, and then announce it to her. I was not ready to speak my gayness into existence, though I knew it was there, and the alcohol in my bloodstream made me even more cognizant of it. But Emily had just confirmed what I always suspected, that Nick, too, was gay, and out to her. Maybe Emily could be an ally to me.

“Well, I kind of have a crush on Nick,” I said. My ears were burning from my admission, my stomach was burning from the alcohol, and my knees were still burning from the rug burn.

“Oh, don’t worry! Everyone likes Nick! So you *are* gay?” Emily said. Her attempts at consoling me were horrid. Everyone likes Nick? Jealous rage was going to set in really quick if I thought about *everyone* who liked Nick. I also flinched every time she said I was gay, cruelly thrusting a label onto me without my permission.

“No! I definitely like girls. Nick is the only boy I’ve ever liked,” I said, again lying.

“Well, I’ve never really believed in bisexuality,” Emily said. “I don’t understand how you can be both.” The Zach I am now would have taken time to educate Emily on the dangers that socially constructed binaries like this impose on our society, and why her line of thinking was detrimental to communities everywhere. But the Zach I was then just felt like throwing up.

Nick walked in at an ideal moment, as if his gay telepathy sensed I needed rescue from this conversation. But I wasn’t quite ready to talk to him, either. He had a knowing smirk on his face that my alcohol-fueled brain couldn’t resist telling the truth to.

“I think you guys should talk!” Emily said. “I need to get another Mike’s Hard, anyway. They literally taste like Sprite.” She dismissed herself, and I was left alone with the boy I had desperately wanted to be alone with for months.

“Zachy, is there something you need to tell me?” Nick asked, as I gazed at his blue eyes and full lips. I wasn’t sure how many shots he’d had by that point, but he was obviously handling himself with more composure. I, on the other hand, was a manic animal, trying to keep all my secrets from falling out while desperate to cleanse the skin that was hanging off of my knees.

“Do you already know?” I asked, surprised to find out that “already” was not an easy word to say while intoxicated.

“I’ve always known! Since I met you,” Nick said, reassuring me that there was no secret being revealed here. I adopted a flirtatious tone as my hopes increased.

“Well, don’t flatter yourself! I haven’t liked you for that long!”

“What?” Nick said.

Fuck, I thought

“Didn’t you mean that you’ve always known I have feelings for you?” I said.

“No...I’ve just known that you’re gay,” Nick said, the smile that had been on his face seconds before now dripping into a confused, jutted bottom lip. “But it’s okay if you like me! That is so sweet of you!”

“Jesus Christ, I’m not gay!” I said, pissed at the patronizing rejection and peeling myself off the bed. “Not everyone has to know exactly who and what they are when they’re sixteen years old.”

I was so pissed off, and so sad, because Nick’s nuanced response was all I needed to know that he didn’t like me the way I liked him. Coming out and experiencing rejection in a matter of minutes sent me into a whirlwind of histrionics. Ever the performer, I decided to cause some drama to soften my own blows.

“I’m leaving,” I announced as I stumbled toward the card table and snatched my car keys. Of course, I had no intention of drunkenly driving home, and I knew my friends were capable of physically restraining me from doing so, but the possibility of a dramatic exit steered the attention away from my sexual revelations. My keys were immediately taken away from me, and after scouring the blurry bar for more alcohol, I eventually staggered toward the pool table, collapsing beneath it. I lay on my back, jamming my fists into my eyes to diminish my dizziness. Nick crawled under, too, and sat quietly with me for a few moments. What could I have asked of him to change his mind?

“Zachy, I am leaving in two months. I’m going to another school in a different state,” he said. Nothing was going to work. No consolation he gifted me would be accepted with open hands, or an open mind. Nick didn’t like me. Nick was leaving. And I wanted to sober up and forget everything we shared over the past two years, because none of it mattered anymore if he

and I weren't going to be together. But before I doused our friendship with alcohol and set it on fire, I did ask one question.

"Have you ever been with another guy?" I asked him. The image of Nick physically or emotionally connected to someone else was painful for me to think about, but I needed to know.

"Just once," Nick said. "I was at a party down in Lincoln, and I met a boy there. He was in an A cappella group. I spent the night in his bed, and we just cuddled."

I gazed up at the bottom of the pool table, processing Nick and an a Cappella boy in a bed, sharing something that he and I never would.

"What was it like?" I asked.

"It was amazing," Nick said.

His happiness shattered me. Not for the petty, envious reasons I thought it would, but because I felt like my own ascension into a queer identity was unattainable. Nick cuddled with a boy! He felt the embrace of another person, who was of the same biological sex and gender. But I was suffocating in heartbreak, and I didn't want my queerness to breathe again. I was gay, a truth partially revealed with my infatuation with Nick, but a truth I had no interest in uncovering any further. If I couldn't be gay with Nick, I didn't want to be gay with anyone. I'd rather keep it away and pursue women, committing to heterosexuality for the foreseeable future and stowing away the pain that I felt in my first queer rejection.

The next morning, I felt physically deplorable and emotionally spent. Between suppressing my vomit and negotiating how many Advil Liquigels could defeat my migraine but also not kill me, I decided to go back into hiding. The night before contained too many difficult conversations and realizations for me to commit to queerness. I had spent my first sixteen years

concealing myself in plain sight, remaining visible without actually being seen. Did it really matter if I spent the rest of my life that way?

To answer that question is to come from a privileged place of retrospect, having grown up a little and survived a few more moments of heartbreak. Ultimately, Nick was just a boy. He saw me, he heard me, and there was a good year in my life where he made me feel like my queer, closeted, insecure self was someone that was special, and deserved attention, deserved to be seen. But an important lesson I took away in my exit from adolescence is that I am capable of reaping that satisfaction independently. *Peace comes from within*, says Buddha. *Do not seek it without*. Buddha, an undeniable gay icon with his artistic representations as both a bear and a twink, is right. I couldn't use Nick to validate my queer existence, and I couldn't rely on him to assure me that my life and my identity mattered. I had to come to that on my own. We all do. And maybe it's more difficult for queer people to do. Or maybe it's difficult for everyone.

Nick and I are still acquainted. He is living in Los Angeles, trying to figure out his life as an artist, and I'm still in Chicago, doing the same thing. He's had a boyfriend or two, while I still haven't allowed myself to get that close to anyone. But I don't think that means that this story has a sad ending. It's like *Titanic*, when Old Rose is reliving Jack's tragic death, but confirming that he saved her, "in every way a person can be saved." Rose and Jack don't end up together, and Nick certainly didn't save me. But between the time shared and the lessons learned, it was enough.

Dim the Lights

Today is September 13, 2018, and Marin Mazzie is dead.

It was ovarian cancer, which media and fans believed to be in remission, that took the beloved blonde Broadway star's life at 57, an age that becomes younger as I get older.

My best friend Ambi introduced me to Marin in the summer of 2016, when Ambi discovered her on YouTube. She was wearing a sleeveless red dress, singing "Losing My Mind" at Stephen Sondheim's 80th birthday party. Ambi, a senior in high school preparing for college auditions, was searching for musical theatre songs to add to her repertoire when she stumbled upon Marin, and instinctually shared the video clip with me, knowing I'd immediately be taken. This song came to me at the brink of my sexual acceptance, as the summer of 2016 was the last summer I ever identified as heterosexual, before working up the courage a few months later to start expressing myself in a more honest manner.

"Losing My Mind" from *Follies* is a heart-wrenching ballad sung by Sally, a character infatuated—obsessed, perhaps—with a man that is not her husband. It is a love forbidden by circumstances of bad timing and fear of pain, not unlike some of the loves I've encountered in my own life. I've heard many versions of this song, by some of the most powerful women to have ever walked through the world of musical theatre. Dorothy Collins did it first in 1971. Barbara Cook made it famous in 1985. But the rendition from that birthday concert in 2010 at the Avery Fisher Hall at the Lincoln Center in New York City, where Marin Mazzie stood up and took her turn, was the song's premiere to my ears. You never forget your first.

Surrounded by Broadway legends like Patti LuPone, Audra McDonald, Bernadette Peters, and Elaine Stritch, whose names and voices are more recognizable than her own, Marin gets up from her chair and saunters her way to the microphone, which she lowers ceremoniously.

The full orchestra welcomes Marin's mezzo-soprano, which smoothly enters into the music with the bluntest lyric:

The sun comes up;
I think about you.

Marin's expressive eyes and soft smile both hint at a sadness not yet ready to reveal itself, though its unleashing seems inevitable. She sings on about the progress of her day, each coffee cup, chore, and moment in bed marked by the pervasive thought of the person she loves, launching her into a dreamy, near-catatonic state of indecision:

Sometimes I stand in the middle of the floor
Not going left,
Not going right.

After an introduction that is thoughtful and relatively calm, the orchestra chimes, interrupted twice by bursting moments of desperation within the soliloquy:

I want you so, it's like I'm losing my mind...
Does no one know it's like I'm losing my mind?!

All composure is gone, and the tame velvet of Marin's singing has been heightened to a harrowing roar that seeks to swallow the room. Her versatility stuns me, watching at my kitchen table with Ambi and hearing Marin echo on my glossy wood floors. I am latched on to Marin's character through this transition from honest divulging to raw, gutting vulnerability, but it also fully encompasses two different aspects one is subjected to when on the losing end of unrequited love: the emotion of sadness and the physicality of anguish, evoking an empathy so strong that one might yearn for a broken heart to fully understand and feel what Marin is feeling.

From here on out, everything about the song is upped: the tempo, the volume, and Marin. The simplicity of the song is revealed in that the lyrics of the latter half are repeated from the former, but the intensity has been quadrupled. Having watched the video clip upwards of two

dozen times, I notice something different each time: the intensity of Bernadette's face beneath the iconic pop of orange curls on her head, the glittery sparkle of the ring on Marin's right index finger, the ebb and flow of violinists and violists strumming their instruments in the background. It's not just the voice and the song that allures me: it's the glamour of the red dresses, the staging of the queens, the fact that Sondheim, a gay man, only invited women to perform at his big night.

In the song's eleventh hour, Marin's mezzo-soprano has morphed into a power alto, filling the concert hall with a resounding fortissimo dynamic, her wide-opened mouth capable of so much power. Something I fixate on every time I watch the performance are the two rolls of skin that appear between her neck and chin when she belts the word "left." This feature is something most people, myself included, are self-conscious about, the appearance of a "double chin" being frowned upon. But when I see Marin's neck and chin form like such, I revere the feature as a deeply dignifying sign of age and life experience that authorizes her to interpret this heartbreaking ballad, the lines and wrinkles on her face not dating her in an age-conscious industry, but giving her credibility to tell this story.

Marin's performance climaxes with the cathartic belt of a statement: "You said you loved me," her volume at its loudest, the orchestra breaking on the extended "me" note, then, "Or were you just being..." sang a Cappella until the orchestra returns as she riffs on "kind," and finally, ultimate pondering, sung flawlessly through well-placed gasps, "Or am I losing my mind?" This is the ending of the singing, but Marin is not finished performing. Like a true professional, she acts in concert with the music playing her out, panting into the microphone as the camera zooms out to reveal the portrait of Marin center stage, with legends of voice and instruments behind her, off-center-left and off-center-right. With the final squeak of the violin, she lets out a sigh with her entire chest, gazing out not to the audience (though each member is convinced that their

personal love story has been revealed onstage), but to someone or something else, an abstract figure or gap of space only known to the performer staring at it. A rousing applause guides Marin back to her seat, where she acknowledges both her peers and the audience with mouthed thank yous and a humble smile.

There's something inherently queer about women in musical theatre, I think, because of the fanbase that undyingly supports them. Explicit gay male representation in what has arguably always been the gayest genre of music has fluctuated since the last decades of the twentieth century, starting with the premiere of *The Boys in the Band* in 1968, continuing with Harvey Fierstein unapologetically flamboyant, Tony-winning performances in the 1980s, and through the 1990s when *Angels in America* and *RENT* took center stage to depict HIV/AIDS in artistic and meaningful lights. The last decade of the twentieth century also saw rises in prominence of queer leading men like Nathan Lane and Alan Cummings, coinciding with Ellen DeGeneres coming out, *Will & Grace* premiering, and the release of RuPaul's "Supermodel (You Better Work)," each affecting change in other outlets of entertainment. But was there gay male representation beyond these token performances? Was it just Fierstein blazing queer trails, while general visibility remained low for the men who played a key role in the industry's prosperity? Perhaps this is how and why gay men latched on to their queens. Instead of reaching for far-fetched resonances with the hypermasculine Jets and Sharks of *West Side Story*, or siding with Christine Daae's toxic and abusive love interests in *The Phantom of the Opera*, gay men worshipped the fabulous women of musical theatre, both on stage and on screen. They died hard for Judy Garland's cabaret shows in the late 1960s, and even harder when her daughter Liza put on the ultimate *Cabaret* show as Sally Bowles only a few years later, and perhaps hardest when Diana Ross took on the coveted role of Dorothy in a timely reimagining of *The Wizard of Oz* in

1978. Bette Midler got her start singing at a gay bathhouse in 1970; during a production dominated by patriarchal pressure, Patti LuPone befriended and cherished the male background dancers of *Evita*, all of whom were later taken by AIDS. By wearing ruby slippers and green nail polish and sequined dresses, and reaching out publicly and privately to the men on the margins, these women spoke louder and clearer to the gays than Mandy Patinkin or Kevin Kline ever could. Gay representation came through the women that the community established as its heroes, as their femininity afforded them privileges that heteronormative culture denied to homosexual men. These women were iconized not just for their talents, but for their generosity in allowing their queer fans to live through them vicariously, something that extends beyond gaudy eye shadow and flashy dance routines and feathers and tights. Ultimately, they provided an expression of identity that was denied to so many for so long, found in imagined worlds created by campy choreography, enduring glamour, and the perfect voice.

On dating apps and social media, many gay men seek meaning in their identity, offering themselves up to titles like Twink, Bear, Otter, Jock, or Geek, defining their queerness by their body hair, or lack thereof, or size or interests. While I'm apt to resist these titles, because I find them restrictive and narrow, I am guilty of using one label that I can't not affectionately claim for myself: a Musical Theatre Gay. It's the orchestras and the lyrics and the costumes and the choreography, yes, but ultimately, it's the performers that are and have been responsible for this key aspect of my identity, defined by music that soars and lyrics that reflect matters of the heart, hardship, and emotional turbulence.

Generations later, I'm embracing this cultural history while watching present-time establish its own. Musical theatre continues to take steps towards LGBTQ inclusivity, succeeding at some turns, but failing at others. Alison Bechdel's queer graphic memoir *Fun*

Home was produced into a Broadway musical in 2015, starring Beth Malone as Bechdel. Meanwhile, the titular genderqueer character in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* has never been portrayed by a non-cisgendered actor in a professional production. *The Color Purple* and *Falsettos* have ran successful, award-winning Broadway revivals in the last three years, but these prominent queer stories are being told by predominantly hetero casts. Is there a limit to how much inclusivity we can and should ask for? Why should we have to settle for progress that's not enough?

But then, how is this different from my own fandom and admiration for straight, cis women like Marin? There is ultimately nothing innately queer about her songs or performances, but perhaps the queerness manifests with me, the queer, listening, feeling, and inserting myself into the narrative she is producing.

Still, I feel fortunate to be living in a time where I can admire and iconize performers of my own, some queer and some not, but who like the Lizas and Dianas before them, reflect queerness in their storytelling and performing. It's Judy Kuhn in *Fun Home*, cathartically aching out loud after years of silence, trying to keep her queer family together. It's a 19-year-old Lea Salonga conveying the ultimate sacrifices brought on by the oppressive culture of war in *Miss Saigon*. It's Renee Elise Goldsberry, raising her Tony Award high into the air after being recognized for versatile skill in singing both classical music and rapid hip-hop lyrics in *Hamilton*. And it's Marin Mazzie, capturing my attention and empathy every single time I circumstantially or actively come upon the three-and-a-half minute video in which she allows the viewer to witness her losing her mind over a man, the same way I lost my mind over Nick Falewitch, the same way I'll lose my mind over many men to come.

In the past, I have preached that musical theatre can be for everyone. But in these performances and in these moments, I so often feel that musical theatre is just for me, and the other queer bodies that have found space in an Eden of song, dance, flash, and imagination, made visible by watching and listening viscerally, ethereally.

Today is September 13, 2018, and Marin Mazzie is dead. But in the world she helped create simply by walking through it, her footsteps have left a permanent mark.

Fears, Queers, and Cherry Beers

In February of 2017, I downloaded Tinder and started swiping left and right on boys throughout Chicago.

In March of 2017, I announced to my parents that I am gay, that I've always been gay, and that I was ready to live my life as a young gay man.

In June of 2017, I fell in love with a woman.

My sophomore year of college, I applied and was accepted to a study abroad opportunity through the Religious Studies department at my university. The program offered a fully funded scholarship to travel Germany for two weeks of the summer, studying Christian reformation, Jewish history, and the present-day Syrian refugees. The cast of characters along for the ride were:

Me (20 y/o): Brown hair and black glasses, posture needs work.

Nick (21 y/o): Curly brown hair with sprinkles of dandruff, stout, glasses. Future pastor.

Ellen (21 y/o): Long, wavy black hair and brown glasses. Aspiring librarian.

Gabby (21 y/o): Blonde hair, blue eyes, tan skin. Raspy voice.

Bradley (21 y/o): Buzzed head, lanky, devoted follower of Christ, voted for Trump. But Dad funded the scholarship so therefore we love him.

Professor Jim (68 y/o): Bald with white hair on the sides. Catholic priest with comedic timing that Don Rickles would envy.

Professor Alexei (44 y/o): Brown hair, Eddie Bauer t-shirts and jeans. Russian accent.

Justin (35 y/o): Fearless travel guide, skinny legs and enormous hiking backpack. Thick eyebrows, sits with his legs crossed, cute in a sophisticated kind of way (Was his last name Trudeau?)

Prior to our trip, the five of us students and our two professors spent every Friday of the spring academically preparing for Germany. We read up on Jewish diaspora in the Middle Ages, during the Enlightenment, and through the Holocaust. We watched a documentary on Martin Luther's defiant opposition toward Catholic corruption, and discussed American Supreme Court cases regarding the religious liberty of Jehovah's Witnesses. These meetings took place in the Religious Studies department's cozy student lounge, and food was occasionally provided. All of the students were enthralled with Father Jim, who'd kick up his feet on the couch during lecture and parody the conservative religious right. But aside from our classroom interactions, we remained strangers for the majority of the academic term. I was especially quiet in class, staying true to my wariness when meeting new people. It's been a part of my demeanor since my proud flamboyance deflated in middle school: I observe before I speak, get a wholesome read of the room before I slit myself open and slowly begin to reveal myself.

Before our last class session, Bradley suggested a student get-together at a local deep-dish pizza restaurant. He held the conversation, talking about his vacations to Disneyland and past abroad trips to the Czech Republic and France. At one point, he emotionally detailed an awful news story about Catholic nuns who ran a home for unmarried mothers in Ireland, and buried dead children and babies in mass graves. "And the worst part is," he said with tears forming, "they weren't even baptized!" I cringed while picking apart pepperonis stringed with cheese.

At another point, Bradley turned to me and said, “I don’t even know anything about you.” I smiled and went on about my recent visit to Omaha for a cousin’s wedding, but in my head, I thought, *Let’s keep it that way.*

So I was somewhat aware that my travel companions were a bit of a motley crew, but the biggest mystery was Gabby. She had skipped out on the group dinner because of a prior commitment to a White Sox game, but I loved hearing her talk in class.

“Nationalism kind of makes my skin crawl,” she once said. “I think it’s rooted in racism and xenophobia.” Originally from Minnesota, Gabby was passionate about refugee and migration studies, in addition to her German major, and International Politics, Religious Studies, and Peace, Justice, and Conflict Studies minors. I’d soon find out that in addition to being brilliant liberal arts scholar, she also loved Trevor Noah and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The most important person in her life was her Nana. She wrote long, detailed entries in her journal every day. And she was the girl of any hetero dreams I had left in me.

When we arrived at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport in the middle of June, I decided that Gabby was beautiful. She had the most concisely packed purple suitcase and Vera Wang carry-on bag. She wore ripped jeans and a dainty black jacket, prepared for the unpredictable airplane temperature despite the Chicago heat. I had flown into O’Hare from Omaha, but the rest of the group was coming in from across the city. The Blue Line train that led to O’Hare had suffered major delays, and upon arrival, Bradley announced that he’d done “the smart thing” by exiting the train and hailing a cab.

“Well, you and I still arrived at the same time, didn’t we?” said Gabby, who chose to stick it out on the Blue Line. Bradley didn’t reply. In addition to her pretty face, I liked Gabby’s ability shut Bradley up.

We spent a lot of time walking once we’d made it to Germany, and I was usually eager to walk alongside Gabby. She’d regale me with funny stories about her very social Midwestern mom, and her grandmother’s pet peacock. She loved to take pictures of fuchsia flowers and German stickers that read messages of anti-fascism. I realized how strong my appreciation was for Gabby in Weimar, after a day of eating crepes and learning about Goethe. As we walked on cobblestone streets, her blonde hair blended in with the yellow, sunny houses of Weimar, and she pointed out to me a portrait of Toni Morrison in a local bookstore. Later that night, once we’d made it back to Erfurt and its medieval cityscape, she took a picture of me with next to St. Mary’s Cathedral with a pointy ice cream cone sticking out of my mouth.

I used an international messaging app to text my friend Joanna about the feelings I felt developing.

HALP! I have fallen in love and it’s only Day 3! I said, throwing around the word “love” as if it were “like,” being appropriately dramatic.

Zach! Who’s the German dreamboat? Is he hot? Joanna said. I could almost hear her thick Chicago accent exclaiming through my phone.

Her name is Gabby...

WTF. I thought you were gay!

So did I!

Omg. So are you two going to hook-up?

With this text, Joanna pointed out my cognitive dissonance. Despite realizing that I was emotionally drawn to and physically admiring of Gabby, sexual feelings were completely absent. While I had romantically desired women in high school, I always held myself back from relationships. I'd go on dates and cuddle during movies in my basement, but once a "next step" was anticipated, I'd cut myself off and announce my emotional unavailability. With this pattern of behavior, I disappointed theatre girls more than a high school musical cast list that featured their name next to *Chorus*. If I pursued Gabby, would anything be different? And what would I tell my parents and best friends, who'd surely react the same as Joanna? Coming out was my decision, and I had said gay. Not bisexual, or pansexual, or demisexual. Gay. How could backtracking or reimagining be an option after the spectacle of FaceTime calls, voicemails, and kitchen table confessions?

This internal debacle didn't hinder how I felt. I wanted to hold Gabby's hand as we licked ice cream cones and admired post-WWII replica architecture in Munich. I wanted to share Kirschbier (cherry beers) at the medieval restaurant we ate at in Erfurt, before feeding ducks from the bridge of a neighborhood pond. But perhaps the most alarming surprise was my jealousy. I found myself feeling invalid when Gabby would talk to other men, specifically Professor Alexei. The two developed a rapport that was normal between any teacher and student. He was a moley man with neatly combed hair, and Gabby had an affinity for his academic insight on German and Jewish history. They talked about Bernie Sanders. They joked about Gabby practicing witchcraft in a past life. Gabby was tickled by Alexei's admission that he'd watched and enjoyed *Shrek*. Meanwhile, I was greener than the fat ogre himself with envy. As he and Gabby shared intellectual thoughts, I was considering the repercussions of starting rumors

that Alexei was a Russian spy who hacked the 2016 election. Alexei was a harmless academic who enjoyed learning from a smart girl like Gabby. Had I really become this unhinged?

But these irrational moments of jealousy were often countered by the best moments Gabby and I shared. Walking beneath the Brandenburg Gate, grandiose and topped with a horse-drawn chariot sculpture, and taking pictures outside of the regal, sandstone Berlin Cathedral, I told her about the death of my grandma and confided in her my uncertainties about God and religion. She was empathetic and felt things on an intense emotional field, and shared with me the depression she suffered from within the past year. I wasn't used to telling people my feelings and inner conflicts, but I felt comfortable enough to share these with her. And it was fulfilling for that to be reciprocated.

Traveling facilitated this emotional unearthing. As history and knowledge revealed themselves to us, the tourists, it was easier to reveal ourselves. So much was learned from site to site, and between tour guides divulging information, we took time to do the same thing. We weren't quite experts on the Wartburg Castle where Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, but we were historians of our own bodies and experiences. We exposed our own struggles and histories alongside the German landscape, across a country that was historically problematic, but burgeoning with repentance and beauty.

And yet, what remained unsaid was the secret I was most inclined to share in the recent months. I was still fresh off my Coming Out Tour, having told every close family member and friend in my community. But my romantic interest in Gabby set me back in my desire to proclaim my truth. Telling her that I was gay would give her another wide-open view of my world, but it'd also annihilate any chance of Gabby and me being more than friends. It was better

to keep quiet and cling to the absurd notion that I would actively pursue a relationship with a woman.

Our last two days in Germany consisted of a three-hour boat ride down the Rhine River and a bright visit to Rudesheim. We toured a monastery of Benedictine nuns and attended a wine tasting. The summer sun shone on Gabby and I as we drank and wandered through the vineyards. Wisps of clouds complemented the blue sky and we had a view of the German countryside and the quaint villages it hosted. I wanted to get back on the Rhine, shallow, serene, and teal, and float down it with Gabby. America didn't need us. Germany was an oasis the two of us could share for as long as we wanted. We could fight for social justice and Fascism together. We could pick bright pink roses and travel cathedrals that smelled of incense and musty wood. I could tell her that I was gay and hope she would still love me and somehow it'd be okay.

Or maybe that was the sparkling white wine talking.

In the summer of 2018, exactly a year after our two-week excursion to Germany, Gabby and I went to Lincoln Square. First inhabited by German immigrants and now populated by a Berlin Wall monument and annual German music festival, Lincoln Square is the best alternative to Germany that Chicago can offer. Gabby was eager to eat at a new Thai restaurant, while I was adamant that we try the gelato at a few blocks south. So we did both. Visiting Lincoln Square was new and exciting as we were quickly immersed in its community of families, friends, and dogs, but the occasion was bittersweet: Gabby and I were preparing to say good-bye. Having just graduated, Gabby was selected for a prestigious Fulbright scholarship, and would be returning to Germany to teach English and American culture.

We ate our amaretto and vanilla gelato cones, once again indulging the best way we knew how. Gabby paid for my cone as a gift, while I smiled at the cute scooper, admiring his white teeth and the brunette scruff on his chin. It was an ironic reminder that Gabby and I were never meant to work. Following Germany, we'd spent much of the academic year back at college together, seeing live theatre in Chicago and cooking meals with our other travel companions. Gabby now knew that I was gay now, a firm stance that separated us from non-platonic possibilities.

As we sat on the bench in Lincoln Square, she told me about saying good-bye to Pedro, a boy in her life. Wincingly listening to her talk about her romance with him and sadness to leave it behind, I told her that love should never be shied away from because of fear of a broken heart. It made me sound philosophical and full of wisdom, but really, it was a line that I appropriated from comedian Sarah Silverman, who wrote it in a Twitter tribute to her dead mother. I was overcompensating in my comfort of her, sure that my rambling was obnoxious and unwarranted. And I felt invalid, having no stories of my own to share, other than unrequited attraction toward a co-worker and advances from men twice my age on dating apps, and in the midst of our conversation, I spiraled into a dark place of anxiety and insecurity, still not quite comfortable in my gay identity when I've had more romantic experiences with women than men, and still feeling a little hurt hearing about Gabby's relationship with a boy that was not me, and then I transferred myself into a head space of self-loathing for being so selfish and reluctant to be happy that Gabby was happy, and then I stepped back into a calmer, more rational mindset and thought, *Zach, what the fuck is wrong with you?*

I never told Gabby how I felt, and I don't think I ever will. It'd be too complicated now, as she teaches English to students in Germany, and I download and delete and re-download and

re-delete my dating apps in Chicago. She remains in my life as a friend, a best friend, who knows me in the deepest way a platonic partner can.

Now, I pursue and am attracted to men, exclusively, and have had many a cyber chat and shared many a flirtatious glance with men in public, sitting on the Brown Line or walking across the quad on my campus. But I've never connected with a man the way I did with Gabby. Not even Nick Falewitch. No man whom I wanted to show off my intellect to, no man whose emotional depth fulfilled me the way Gabby's did. What I want from men is what I can never get from Gabby. What I got from Gabby is something I have yet to get from any man. What kind of gay person am I?

But this story does not have a sad ending; this story is not finished. I know that my queerness is mine, shaped by me and for me, to fit me and only me. I can accept the joys and possibilities of fluidity, and embrace the actions that define me as a queer man, beyond sexual preference. I'm gay when I sing a Tracy Turnblad song in one of Chicago's queerest karaoke bars, beneath pink and green disco lamps. I'm gay when I sit on my computer and research the soap opera actors I loved as a kid, learning what became of their careers. And I'm still gay when I, in a moment of vulnerability or self-pity, think I'll never love a man the way I thought I loved Gabby.

I am gay. And even in the pollution of insecurity and confusion, it is not an inconvenience.

“Maybe You’re Braver Than I Am”: An Analysis of Queer Counteraction in Literary Memoir

In 2017, Australian literary and feminist scholar Faye Chisholm Guenther published an article called “Archives, Creative Memoirs, and Queer Counterpublic Histories: The Case for the Text-as-Record,” in which she analyzed three American literary memoirs, “each offer[ing] different perspectives on queer quotidian life in New York City,” and each examining the “queer counterpublic experience during the last quarter of the twentieth century” (Guenther 75).

Guenther approached these texts from an archival lens, reading them as not just literary memoirs, but as archival records and pieces of historical insight on queer counterpublics in the 1980s and 1990s. Reading *Inferno (A Poet’s Novel)* by Eileen Myles, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* by Samuel R. Delany, and *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* by David Wojnarowicz, Guenther is specifically analyzing queer sexuality and culture in a time when and place where the AIDS epidemic and political contexts surrounding it nearly erased the existence and knowledge of these counterpublic spaces and cultural histories. Further, Guenther emphasizes the specific abilities of literary memoir to capture historical counterpublic spaces and operate as archives with larger impact than other forms of visual or audio media. Guenther argues,

in their approach and aesthetics, creative memoirs provide readers with ways of engaging in and thinking about counterpublic histories that combine intellectual frameworks of knowledge with other ways of knowing and understanding...I argue that the different forms of critical consciousness expressed in the creative memoirs, generated by the personal and subjective perspectives, are relevant for contemporary queer culture on multiple levels. The kinds of thinking, perceiving, and feeling conveyed in the texts offer contemporary queer readers different approaches for negotiating survival outside of heteronormative institutions and engaging in greater social justice and liberation (78-79).

Thus, Guenther's research argues the essentiality of literary memoir as archive and textual record of queer counterpublic space, while citing three texts focused on a specific time, place, and political moment in queer culture to frame her argument.

Now, in the process of writing my own queer literary memoir, I find it necessary to examine the contents of my own essays, discovering meaning in them in a greater context of place, time, and political moments in present-day culture. I cannot do this, however, without first analyzing the mentor texts that have influenced and inspired the crafting of my queer literary memoir. In this research-intensive essay, I will utilize the same methodology that Faye Chisholm Guenther crafted and implemented in her article, using her research on queer literary memoirs as historical and cultural archives and applying it to three new texts: *Truth Serum* by Bernard Cooper, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now* by Ryan Van Meter, before briefly explaining how they influenced my own collection of queer literary essays. Like Guenther, I will examine the author's queer identity and personal navigation of space. But unlike Guenther, I will specifically focus on readings and meanings of queer action. While Guenther analyzes queer counterpublic space in the last quarter of the twentieth century in New York City, I will center my analysis on actions, behaviors, and moments within these queer literary memoirs that specifically counteract heteronormativity, spanning across American region, through the 1960s to the present-day. Further, my essays and accompanying mentor texts focus on a sub-genre of queer literary memoir: childhood and adolescence. Therefore, my application of Guenther's methodology will further contrast from her own analysis of queer counterpublic space, as mine will instead focus on queer counteraction of heteronormativity, specifically occurring in adolescence.

If You Knew Then What I Know Now by Ryan Van Meter is a collection of essays that ruminates on queer moments in adolescence—the secrets, the awkwardness, the insecurity—as well as the aftereffects of queer adolescence upon emergence into adulthood. Van Meter’s essays hone in on private moments, their real-time encompassing five days, to five hours, to five minutes, in cars, homes, and backyards. By grounding his essays in intimate moments, Van Meter takes his time in detailing the nuanced, otherwise passing moments that actually operate against gender and social norms, and therefore act as queer adolescent counteraction of heteronormativity. In the collection’s opening essay, “First,” Van Meter details a moment as a kindergartener in which he tells a friend he loves him during a car ride, and proposes marriage. “What did you just say?” Van Meter’s mother asks, having overheard the conversation between the two five-year-olds (Van Meter 4). “I asked Ben to marry me” Van Meter replies, only to face an immediate reprimand from his mother (4). “‘You shouldn’t have said that,’ she says. ‘Boys don’t marry other boys. Only boys and girls get married to each other...Okay?’ she asks,” with Van Meter replying, “‘Yes’...but by accident [his] throat whispers the words” (5). His mother persists, asking, “Okay? Did you hear me?” and Van Meter confirms, “‘Yes!’ this time nearly shouting,” the testy interaction conveying frustration on both ends (5). Having been corrected for an action deemed inappropriate by his mother, Van Meter’s inclusion of this back-and-forth dialogue conveys explicit tension between a heteronormative mother and a queer-behaving son. Van Meter further reflects on the rest of the car ride, writing, “We all just sit and wait and watch our own views of the road—the parents see what is ahead of us while the only thing I can look at is what we have just left behind” (5). This interaction depicts Van Meter as a five-year-old boy, asking another to marry him in the name of love, a first moment of queer behavior immediately and forcefully shut down by a parental figure. Additionally, Van Meter’s reflection on the scene

further reveals the repercussions of the anti-queer discipline he received, dwelling on what his mother told him, factually, could not be. This essay documents early emergence of queer thinking, with a young Van Meter professing same-sex love and seeking to establish the only institution of love that a five-year-old knows: marriage. While counteraction of heteronormative behavior is evident here, the moment is rife with tension due to a mother who reinforces heteronormative values immediately after the counteraction. Therefore, Van Meter's "First" archives pre-adolescent queer thought, while also documenting its conflict and repercussions.

Van Meter's "Discovery" also documents a counteractive moment of queerness, though as opposed to "First," Van Meter's younger self is provided space to act out. Spending a day on his grandparents' farm in rural Missouri, an eight-year-old Van Meter discovers a satin blue dress while rummaging through a closet. He tries it on and finds that it fits perfectly as his grandmother walks in. "Suddenly my arms feel cold and the trim encircling the collar scratches my neck," Van Meter writes upon exposure (44). After a moment of non-reaction, his grandma says, "'I was coming in here to see if you would set the table for Grandma.' She knows I love setting the table because she taught me how" (45). As he sets the table for dinner, Van Meter narrates,

I can't get enough of watching myself, gazing at how I move and perform these tiny actions, which are somehow glamorous now instead of just chores. Because I'm wearing the blues dress. And I love the feeling of the skirt on my legs, the cool slickness sliding over my skin, how the hem rustles over the carpet when I stop suddenly to fix a spoon...I love touching my face when I'm wearing the dress because beautiful women touch their faces when they wanted to be noticed (45-46).

After thanking Van Meter for helping, his grandmother "fidgets with her apron, [and] her thumb rubs a stain near an embroidered leaf. 'I expect you should change for dinner before your Grandpa gets here,' she says" (47). It is here that Van Meter acknowledges the importance of the moment, the space that he was granted, writing, "We look at each other, a woman in her dress, a

boy in his...Here is a secret we both helped make...I'm too young to know exactly why we're keeping the secret, but I know we're not going to tell anybody what she's just let me do" (47). Van Meter recognizes his grandmother's complicity in his queer actions. Upon finding him dressed and happy in a girl's dress, she allows him to wear it as he sets the table, feeling like "a beautiful woman" and embracing the comfort he feels in breaking a gender norm. But Van Meter also notes the secret that is kept, what must remain unseen and unknown by Grandpa. By archiving this moment in his literary memoir, Van Meter is again demonstrating the queer, gender-bending behavior he participated in at a young age, but as opposed to the reprimanding he receives in "First," he is now allowed a discreet, secretive space to act out and immerse himself in feminine, queer behavior. He is also documenting his grandmother's role as an ally in his counteractions against heteronormativity, recording not just the queer behavior and space he created, but also the role of woman who helped him maintain it.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is a graphic novel that moves back and forth between Bechdel's adolescence and adulthood, orbiting around her relationship with her father. Utilizing both cartoons and an honest, eloquent narrative voice, Bechdel interweaves her father's tragic coming out story with her own, reflexively examining a defining queer relationship in her life and the actions that fueled it.

One moment of counteraction that Bechdel hones in on is the juxtaposition of physical expression between her and her father. When comparing their respective gender expressions, Bechdel writes about being called "butch" by her cousins while playing basketball and embracing of the title, writing, "No one needed to explain what it meant. It was self-descriptive, cropped, curt, percussive. Practically onomatopoeic. At any rate, the opposite of sissy" (96-97). She then goes on to compare her own expression to her father, adding, "And despite the

tyrannical power with which he held sway, it was clear to me my father was a big sissy,” then drawing a scene in which her father reprimands her for not wearing a barrette (97). Here, Bechdel shows herself acting out and endearingly identifying with a nickname associated with lesbianism, as her father works to repress this embrace of queerness by forcing a barrette upon her. Bechdel is highlighting her own “butchness” and her father’s “sissiness,” juxtaposing their gender expressions, but noting how both are expressed on her own body. Later, when Bechdel details her first encounter with a “truck-driving bulldyke,” she again compares her and her father’s reactions: “I recognized her with a surge of joy,” Bechdel narrates, while her father says, “Is *that* what you want to look like?” (118). Once more, physical gender expression is a point of contention between Bechdel and her father. She reacts with the happiness of feeling seen, while he admonishes the lesbian’s appearance as wrong, an example to which Bechdel should not aspire. In these vignettes, Bechdel is interweaving two opposing, queer counteractive stances: an adolescent girl discovering and opening herself to queer gender expression, and a closeted adult in the midst of resisting queer action and encouraging his daughter to do the same.

Bechdel also describes the queer manner in which she made her sexual discovery: through literature. She writes, “My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing. A revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind” (74). What follows this declaration is a montage of Bechdel researching homosexuality and lesbianism in books, dictionaries, and other resources at her local library and bookstore. After this academic discovery, Bechdel depicts herself masturbating while reading a copy of Anaïs Nin’s *Delta of Venus* and later attending an on-campus Gay Union meeting, narrating, “It became clear I was going to have to leave this academic plane and enter the human fray” (76). Bechdel’s trajectory toward sexual self-discovery is inherently queer and inherently

counteractive, occurring through an academic lens before a physical one. Here, Bechdel recognizes the duality of her queer behavior, both the queerness of her sexuality and the queerness of her exploration, once more demonstrating how her actions counteract what is expected.

Bernard Cooper's *Truth Serum* is a collection of memoirs that range from adolescence to adulthood, each poetically zooming in on queer moments and expressions in his 20th-century California landscape. Primary examples of counteractive queer behavior emerge from Cooper's high school social experiences. When a classmate invites him to a make-out party, Cooper reluctantly participates, but describes the longing he instead feels for a classmate and friend, Grady: "It didn't matter whom I held—Margaret Sims, Betty Vernon, Elizabeth Lee—my experiment was a failure; I continued to picture Grady's wet chest" (9). Later, when Cooper describes spending time in the pool with Grady, he shares, "Despite shame and confusion, my longing for him hadn't diminished... In the name of play, I swam up behind him, encircled his shoulders, astonished by his taut flesh. The two of us flailed, pretended to drown. Beneath the heavy press of water, Grady's orange hair wavered, a flame that couldn't be doused" (14). Here, Cooper is detailing the queer longing he felt despite surrounding pressures and "experiments" in heterosexuality, his behaviors inspired and encouraged by the secret of his homosexuality.

Cooper also details a close friendship with another high school classmate, Greg, and the scene in which he explicitly acted on his homosexual desire. During a sleepover in bunk beds, Cooper writes, "The need to touch him rushed through my fingers, heedless as blood. I thought of the times I'd hugged my pillow. Or grazed other boys in the name of play and committed their skin to memory. Or kissed my own arm, then tried to divide myself and feel the force of another's ardor," initially describing the persistent longing (92-93). He then details the moment

in which he reaches out and touches a naked Greg, who is coming down from the top bunk: “His hipbones were blunt, his pubic hair coarse, his navel inches away from my face...I could smell his body’s privacy, a distillation of sweat and sex, and it me like whiff of ether” before Greg breaks away and tells Cooper, “I can’t...I don’t feel those things...Maybe you’re braver than I am,” effectively ending the possibility of a sexual relationship between the two (93-94).

Nuanced, poetic, and thoroughly detailed, Cooper’s counteraction is fueled by physical attraction, sexually performing his forbidden desire. Though met with rejection, Greg’s acknowledgment of Cooper’s “bravery” further addresses the moment as counteractive, as an action that requires a courage not reciprocated by Greg. While Van Meter and Bechdel share moments of behavior that define them as queer-acting in personality and expression, Cooper’s explicitly sexual behavior expands queer counteraction to include moments of desire that are against the grain, unacceptable, and unrequited.

Using these mentor texts as examples and inspiration in examining queer counteraction in adolescence has enhanced my own writing and addressing of moments in queer literary memoir. Throughout my collection of essays, specific moments echo, reflect, and respond to the queer counteractions I’ve detailed in this critical response. In “Don’t Rain on My Parade,” I write about experiences and affinities for dressing up and reading about the glamour of Hollywood, with my interests in feminine subjects being inherently queer in the same manner of Van Meter’s desire to wear a dress and set the dinner table. In “The Flash” and “Stumbling Out,” I write about subverting myself in behavior because of homophobic language, and hiding beneath athletic clothing to avoid taking up queer space, opposing Bechdel’s embrace of the “butch” nickname and counteraction in refusing to wear her barrette. In the same essays, I detail desire and sexual longing toward male friends, just as Cooper experienced at the same formative age. Queer

counteractions, similar and different, expressive and subversive, are present in each of these texts, tying together queer literary memoirs through action in response to identity. By utilizing these texts to both read as a writer and understand the working relationship between action and identity, my own essays and academic understanding of queer literary memoirs have been enhanced.

With these critical analyses of queer literary memoirs and counteraction, I hope to have expanded upon Faye Chisholm Guenther's research on queer texts as archival records and queer counterpublic histories. Our analyses differ in approach of counterpublic versus counteraction, and Guenther focuses more on historical and archival functions of queer texts. But at the root of both analyses is a clearer understanding of queer literary memoirs, and how they can be used to examine the intersections between identity, space, action, and historical record.

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