

MIXED: A BRIEF MEMOIR OF POLITICAL IDENTITY
AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN
THE TRUMP ERA

By

Elle Meyers

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors
in the Department of English
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 7, 2018

MIXED: A BRIEF MEMOIR OF POLITICAL IDENTITY
AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN
THE TRUMP ERA

Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Alex Lemon, MFA

Department of English

Stacie McCormick, Ph.D.

Department of English

D. Lynn Jackson, Ph.D.

Department of Social Work

Abstract

Two years ago, in the fall of 2015, I wrote an assignment in Professor Lemon's Creative Nonfiction Writing class about the complications of growing up as a white-passing mixed-race child. I told stories of the ways in which I had benefitted from white privilege, but how that privilege had come at the cost of the erasure of my half-Vietnamese identity. I thought it was a pretty good paper, but to be honest, I think most of my papers are pretty good. Thus, I was somewhat surprised when Professor Lemon approached me and told me that he thought it was a very good paper. So good, in fact, that he thought I should expand on it and use it to write a thesis for the Honors College. Honored and humbled by the praise of a professor I admired, I agreed that when senior year rolled around, I would work with him on writing said thesis, and then put the paper away and largely forgot about it.

Then, 2016 came, and I watched in bewilderment and horror as the world as I knew it turned upside down over and over again. A faction of the Turkish military attempted a coup, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, and the U.S. elected Donald Trump, a failed businessman with no political experience who mocked his opponents at every term, to be the 45th President of these United States of America.

Journalists and political pundits dramatized the "deepening political divide" at every given opportunity, but the conversations I had with the communities around me exposed much more nuanced feelings about what had happened. Confusion along with conviction. Apathy along with anger. Hurt along with hate. Over and over again, I found that that ubiquitous feeling of being unable to check identity boxes that accompanies most biracial children pervaded into most of our lives, not just those of us who had always felt mixed. Whether it was

anti-abortion liberals, Iranian Jews, or feminist Texans, everyone I talked to was, in one way or another, mixed. The election changed us, as individuals, as Americans, and only time will tell what kinds of scars we will collectively bear from this presidency, but I wanted to take the time to write down our stories before I forget them.

As I wrote down the stories of the people in my life, I heard other ones that were already written down that shaped the way I saw the world and this project as well. *Ally: My Journey Across the American-Israeli Divide* by Michael B. Oren, previous ambassador of Israel to the United States helped me to understand split loyalties to two different nations and two different identities. *Dangerous Territory: My Misguided Quest to Save the World*, a memoir by Amy Peterson, a white Christian woman from Arkansas, recounts her time spent as an English teacher/ missionary in Vietnam. Peterson spends a lot of her book reflecting on the well-meaning but often toxic habit of white Americans going abroad to poorer countries and how she realized that the Christianity she grew up in usually glorifies America and American whiteness more than it glorified God. Finally, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot revealed to me the deep, historical racism that black Americans have felt in every area of life- even medicine- long after we considered ourselves an equal society.

My hope for this piece is that it will shed some light on the nuanced way that we all see our world and ourselves, and that we will remember our humanity, long after all of this has passed us.

MIXED

A Brief Memoir of Intersectionality and Political Identity in
the Trump Era

Elle Meyers

Texas Christian University | Addran College of Liberal Arts

Everyone's Family is at Least a Little Bit Dysfunctional

"Come on! Just tell us!"

"We all have stupid stories from our freshman year you don't have to be embarrassed."

"Okay, okay!" Nick lifted his hands in surrender. "I'll tell you!"

Cheers erupted from the Clark side of the famous round table. Dad grinned broadly from his seat at the unofficial head. Mom and Dad had always told us that they bought the round table because at a round table there is no head, there is only equals, but when you sit in the middle of an incomplete circle, a head is formed anyway. Next to him, Mom, his seventeen-year-junior Vietnamese second wife, sighed and put her head in her left hand, the right holding Dad's under the table, and pretended to disapprove. Nick sat next to Mom, and while he had the same Vietnamese coloring as her, it was when they smiled, lips and teeth mirror images of each other, that you knew, unquestionably, that he was her son. I sat next to Nick, firmly on the Meyers side of the family, but almost next to my stepsister Laura.

The table seated eight, so even when the entire family was present, there was still an empty seat in between Laura and me. Sometimes that seat was filled by our cousin Cori, a Clark but one who had taken me under her wing, or by a friend one of us had brought over, bridging the gap between the Meyerses- my mother, brother, and me- and the Clarks- my father and three stepsisters- and making less strange this conglomeration of strangers who shared a meal once a week and called itself a family.

But tonight, that seat was vacant, and I tried to ignore its gaping significance as I looked to Nick, who had just given in to Laura and Katie's goading to tell his best story now that his freshman year at the University of Wisconsin had finished.

“Okay, okay, I’ve got it. So I was going to this party with Marty-”

“Marty was his roommate,” Mom interrupted.

Nick rolled his eyes. “Mom, they know who Marty is.”

“I didn’t know who Marty was,” Dylan piped in. Dylan, sweet ray of sunshine that she is, was usually some combination of drunk and clueless that inhibited her from remembering the details of our lives.

“I mean, does it really matter who Marty is?” Laura, sitting next to Dylan, tried to move past the discrepancy.

Katie snorted in disgust from Dylan’s other side, next to Dad. “Of course it matters who Marty is. He’s his *roommate* that changes the whole dynamic of the story.” Katie sat next to Dad because she was the unquestionable Favorite; the only one with a Real Job, the one who liked to drink beer and cheer on the Lakers, and if her politics didn’t lean quite so far right, well, she kept her mouth shut about it.

“Anyways,” I interjected loudly as I saw Laura open her mouth to bite back, and I turned back to Nick, “you were at a party with Marty.”

“Right,” Nick gave me a relieved look. “So, I’m at this party and, as can be assumed, I drank way too much. I can feel the vom coming up, so, being the good Samaritan that I am,” he gestured broadly to himself, “I go outside so I can yak off the side of the porch.”

I rolled my eyes. Dad, Katie, and Laura laughed.

“What does yak mean?” Dylan whispered to Katie.

Mom put her face back in her hand, mortified.

“Oh, don’t worry Mom,” Nick assured her in response to her reaction, “I’m not even at the worst part yet.”

“Oh good, can’t wait,” Mom lamented loudly, dramatically pulling her face up enough to take a sip of her red wine. Sometimes Mom reminded me of an article from The Onion, titled “Woman Has No Business Being An Extrovert.”

“So anyways, I yak off the side of the porch, and one of the guys who owned the house that we were at sees me and asks if I’m okay. I’m clearly not okay, so he says, ‘Hey dude, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go home like this, so why don’t you go upstairs, and you can sleep in here. Bathroom’s on the left, my room is the first one on the right, okay?’”

“Wait,” Laura interrupted, “did you know this guy?”

“Nah,” Nick shook his head, “people from the Midwest are just nice.”

“Wow.”

Katie rolled her eyes at Laura’s surprise, but Nick jumped back into his story before Laura could notice.

“So I walk back into the house and I try to make it up the stairs to this guy’s room, but about halfway through I just lay down on the stairs ‘cause I just can’t make it any further. I think to myself ‘this is okay, I made it as far as I can, I’m sure that nice guy will understand.’ But then one of his roommates finds me on the stairs and comes up to me and is like, ‘dude you gotta go you can’t pass out on our stairs,’ and I’m like ‘yeah I know you right,’ and so I try to get up, but I just can’t.”

Dad, Laura, and Katie are laughing again. Dylan looks like she’s concerned about where this is going, or perhaps she just hasn’t already guessed the punchline and doesn’t know why

everyone is laughing already. Mom has her hands splayed out on her face like she doesn't want to watch a scary movie but just can't seem to tear her eyes away, and I'm sipping my Diet Coke awkwardly, hoping Katie and Laura don't expect me to tell this sort of story this time next year.

Nick grinned at his reactive audience and continued on, "So this guy keeps yelling at me 'Dude, come on you have to get up! You have to go!' and I keep saying, 'I know I know!' but I'm so drunk I just can't get up and this guy probably thinks I'm just being an asshole but I'm genuinely trying to leave. Eventually I manage to stand up, but I look down the stairs, and I know there's no way I'm going to be able to walk down them but this guy is still yelling at me to leave," my expression starts to match Mom's horrified one as Katie, Laura, and Dad's grins grow only wider, and Dylan looks expectant, innocently not assuming anything about where this story is about to go. "So, since I need to leave and I know I can't walk, I think to myself 'There's only one way I'm getting down these stairs, and luckily I'm just drunk enough to do it,' and I just lean over and tumble all the way down." Everyone but Mom, who was still putting on a show of horrified disapproval, erupted into laughter, Dad's booming guffaw reverberating into the hallway and the rest of the house.

Nick grinned at our reaction, eating up the attention. This comfort in the spotlight was so new for him, but it suited him.

"So, Nick," my mom asked when our laughter finally died down, "do most people in Wisconsin guess that you're half Asian?" Her awkward transition reminded me of the tagline from that Onion article, "I'm not sure if having an outgoing personality is really the best fit for her."

"No, 'cause I always just tell them I'm from Hawaii," he answered lightly, getting back to cutting his steak now that his story was over.

“You what?” Mom sounded too surprised to be angry, but I could already see it coming.

“Yeah,” Nick shrugged it off, “I mean, being from California is pretty cool, but almost everybody knows someone from California.” He shoved a piece of steak into his mouth and continued through a mouth full of food, “But nobody in Wisconsin knows someone from Hawaii, so it gives me a lot of street cred with girls at parties.”

“And they believe you?” Katie wanted to know.

“Oh, yeah.” He swallowed and then nodded. “I mean, most people don’t think I’m white, since I’ve got dark hair and skin, but nobody in Wisconsin has ever met someone who’s hapa, so it makes sense that I would be Hawaiian.”

My mom began to tear up.

“So, you’re comfortable with just denying your Vietnamese culture? Pretending I don’t exist?”

“Mom,” Nick rolled his eyes so hard I wondered if it was possible to strain an eye muscle, “come on. It’s not like I’m pretending you don’t exist, but even you admit that you’re super white-washed. I’m basically white. Besides, it’s just some stupid thing that I tell girls at parties to impress them. All my friends know I’m hapa,” he insisted.

An awkward silence followed, in which my mom, having given up, shook her head sadly. My sisters looked at each other uncomfortably, outsiders not eligible for comment in the Meyers family drama, while I sat there, debating between pettiness and a nice, comfortable dinner conversation.

Pettiness won.

“Yeah Mom,” I chimed in, “when have you ever cared about being Vietnamese anyway?”

“Excuse me?”

“You purposefully didn’t speak Vietnamese around Nick and me when we were younger so that we wouldn’t learn it, both of your husbands have been white, *and*,” I raised my voice as I saw her began to object, as she always did when this came up, with how much strife it has caused her family when she married a non-Vietnamese man, “you had Dad come with me instead of you to my scholarship interview at TCU because you didn’t want them to know I was Vietnamese!”

“I did that to help you!” hurt and anger and shame that I was right welled up in her eyes and in her voice, but I was long past caring.

“Well, jokes on you, because I told them anyway! I’ve told everyone my whole life, but maybe I shouldn’t have bothered!” My voice got louder and my hand gestures got wilder as revelation started to click together in my head. Laura and Katie were shifting uncomfortably, unsure if they should interject in support of one of us or just pretend they weren’t there, and Dylan, unable to handle conflict of any kind, got up and left with her plate, probably to go pet our dog. Dad and Nick were staring intently at the two of us, trying to find a place to insert their own opinions, but I was beyond caring about what any of them were doing. “I’ve spent my whole life trying to convince people that, yes, I am half-Vietnamese. ‘I know I don’t look it with my pale skin and green eyes, but please, believe me, my mom is Vietnamese!’ And why? What’s the point? Maybe I should take a page out of Nick’s book! Tell everyone that Dad is my real dad, and you’re just my stepmom who is grossly closer in age to my oldest sister than to my dad. I’m white- just white. Just like you wanted Mom.”

A terrible silence filled the room. I had gone too far, and the knowledge pounded in my ears like war drums, but Pride wasn’t about to let me take any of it back. *Why should you?* He

whispered Devilishly in my ear *You know you're right*. The silence stretched on, exponentially painful with each fraction of a second as Mom looked down at her plate, shame and pain and embarrassment forcing her head down. Nick was mad at me- they were all mad at me- and maybe I deserved their anger, but I deluded myself a vengeful goddess- wild hair blowing in the wind of the volcano that erupted behind me- and goddesses did not deign to consider the opinions of her subjects.

Eventually, Mom quietly pushed back from the table, the padded bottoms of the stuffed chair whispering against the hardwood floor. We could hear her putting her plate down in the kitchen, and then walked, head down, into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. The wind blowing my hair died out, the volcano shrunk back to our dining room, and I was nothing more than a girl who had made her mom cry.

After a moment, we all followed suit, the girls whispering to each other awkwardly, and I ignored Nick's condescendingly disappointed stare as I walked into my own room and lay down in my bed, hating- hating her, hating myself, hating all of it- as I waited for the inevitable trembling knock.

It will come from my Dad three times, sending tremors through the door and down my spine. I'll from beneath my covers, wondering if there was any point to not answering.

"Ellie," his firm voice only slightly muffled by the door, followed by another couple of knocks.

I'll begrudgingly sit up, gathering the blue and white covers around me. "Come in."

He'll push the door open too forcefully, and I'll nervously watch the tassel with the glass beads in the shape of the animals from the Chinese zodiac that hung from my doorknob bounce

against the door, barely cushioned by the One Direction magazine poster tear-outs I had scotch-taped to my door in high school. He'll leave the door ajar as he comes and sits on the edge of my bed, pausing dramatically for a second with his hands clasped.

"You know, you really hurt your mom's feelings," he'll begin finally.

I'll, trying to sound morose and repentant. "I know."

"I know that you and your mom disagree about a lot of her life choices," he'll continue as though I hadn't spoken, "but she has always been very fair about the life choices that *you* have decided to make, and so it only makes sense that you're fair about the life choices that she has made."

I'll bite back a comment about just how "fair" Mom had been about some of the life choices that I had made, knowing that at this point the best course of action was just swallowing my pride and pretending to go with the flow.

I'll cast my eyes down and nod. "Yeah, I know." I'll look back up at him, trying to make my green eyes wide and innocent. "I'm going to go apologize, I promise."

He'll nod, appeased. I'll think he was going to leave it at that, and for a second he'll seem to turn towards the door, but he'll surprise me by adding, "Crazy as it is, your mom and I do really love each other, you know."

"I know," I'll say again, startled into genuine sincerity.

He'll nod again, hesitate again, and then leaned in to kiss my forehead before walking out, shutting the door too forcefully again behind him. I'll sink back down into my covers, wondering how much time I have before I have to fulfill my promise to apologize.

Eventually, I will, of course. I'll swallow my pride and go to my mom and tell her that I'm sorry and that I'm tired or I'm on my period and I didn't mean it. She'll say something condescending about my youth and I'll look past it, and it'll all be over.

Of course, it won't really be over. Not even close.

The First Time I Heard the Name Trayvon Martin

Sighing, I shifted my weight impatiently and did my best to feign attention at Mom as I glanced around our local Vons, but the large piles of fruit were too familiar under the fluorescent light to catch my eye for long.

“And Suzanne Condon called again asking me to consider joining Las Madracitas. I told her I’d think about it again, and I have been, but I think I’m going to say no again. I know that it’s for a good cause- helping sick children- but I just can’t fathom spending an entire Saturday once a month with those ladies...”

The smells of greasy, aggressively Americanized “Chinese food,” wafted toward me from the other side of the identical bananas that Mom was scrutinizing. I wondered idly if I could convince her to buy me some artery-clogging, deep-fried orange chicken instead of whatever bland, kale-based salad she had planned for dinner.

“You should do it!” I encouraged, surprising her by actually engaging in her monologue. Usually I just stood there silently, acting not so much as a person in a conversation but an empty sounding board for her to talk at. But I really wanted to bypass her gross health food plan and hoped responding to her would put her in a good enough mood to let me. “You love working with kids.”

“I know,” she conceded, “but I just feel like if I’m actually going to devote my time to some charity work, I want to actually do work, you know?”

“No?” I put a question on the end so that she would think I was still interested in what she was saying and not just closing the conversation.

She turned to me. "It's just that if I'm going to commit to volunteering with or for sick children, I want to actually go to the hospital and do that. I don't just want to throw fancy fashion show fundraisers and awareness luncheons just so I can have an excuse to dress up."

I nodded. "You don't have to tell me twice. I hate hanging out with rich people."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, this 'rich' person is buying you dinner, so watch the lip."

"Speaking of which—"

"No." She saw my eyes glance over to the Chinese food court restaurant and cut me off before I could even ask. I pouted in response.

"That reminds me, I ran into Kathy Johnson while I was walking Otto the other day- so awkward. Did you know that Kyra hasn't gotten into any musical theater schools anywhere? So surprising- she's so talented," she continued to babble, but I went back to only half paying attention. "But anyways, she was telling me about how farrow is super healthy, and I can use it in place of quinoa whenever we get tired of quinoa- as if we could get tired of quinoa..."

Mom finally finished choosing which of the bananas were of acceptable yellowness, and we moved towards the checkout aisle, the rubber wheels of our shopping cart squeaking over the fake hardwood floor. Two small Korean girls ran past us, their harassed-looking mother calling after them in a tongue I couldn't understand but a tone anyone could. I skimmed my fingers over the brightly colored candy bar wrappers placed conveniently by the conveyor belt, thinking about what Selina had told me she'd learned in her Econ class, how grocery stores are designed to make you buy more stuff than you need.

A snort of genuine disgust pulled me out of my pointless reverie. Mom grabbed a magazine from the other side of the conveyor belt and shoved it in my face, her French manicured

nails contrasting with the dark color scheme of the glossy cover. I blinked, startled from the blur of colors that shook in front of me.

“Have you seen this?” Mom demanded. She stopped shaking the magazine, and the blur came into focus revealing the face of a black teenager and the headline, “TRAYVON MARTIN’S DEATH AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY: HEARTBREAKING NEW DETAILS” in large, bright yellow lettering, with the subheading, “An unarmed 17-year-old is killed in a Florida neighborhood: How a chance encounter turned deadly- leaving a family devastated and a country outraged,” in smaller, more respectful font underneath.

I hadn’t seen that specific magazine cover, but I had heard sound bytes of the news story from all sides.

“He was just going to buy skittles-”

“He punched first-”

“He was scared-”

“Zimmerman couldn’t have known he was unarmed-”

“No one would even care if he wasn’t black.” This came from Mom as she thrust it back onto the magazine rack. “Outrageous, liberal media. They have to make everything about race.”

I swirled her words around my mouth, testing out her combination of flavors on my tongue. Was she right? I sifted through my memories, different news headlines flashing vaguely through my consciousness, none of which told the story of an unarmed white person being killed by a police officer. I tried to piece together one that stuck out of a young blonde girl kidnapped in Utah, but that was something different, I supposed. The teenager in me wanted to disagree

with my mom, but I couldn't remember a time that a white person made the news for being a victim of a violent crime.

You don't hear of white people getting shot unfairly by police officers because it doesn't happen I heard the voice of my AP US History teacher and feminist guru Ms. Varela in my head.

That couldn't be true though, could it? That an unarmed white person has never been shot by the police?

The bittersweet candy continued to roll its conflicting flavors around my mouth, until I just shrugged and followed Mom out the store.

If You Want to Flip Tables Like Jesus Did, You Need to be Willing to Die For the People Sitting
There

Hey Ninterns! Read the cheery greeting from Melissa Ice, local Fort Worth philanthropist, entrepreneur, and boss of my summer internship. “Nintern” was the cute nickname the staff assigned those of us interning for The NET, a non-profit organization that served various marginalized communities in Fort Worth.

In case you haven't kept up with the news, there was a shooting in Dallas earlier this weekend at a Black Lives Matter protest, and eleven police officers were shot, five of whom died at the hospital continued the considerably less cheery content of the email.

I closed my eyes for a moment, pushing back the sinking feeling that had accompanied me all that Thursday evening. The frantic texts from my mother, asking if I was in Dallas; the red and white lights from the television that shone onto the black leather couch all night as my roommates and I stared unblinking at the news, occasionally bickering from the stress; the tears that had silently run over my tired cheeks as the death toll continued to mount. I shook my head and returned to the email.

As such, we've decided to change your homework assignment for this week. Instead of listening to Timothy Keller's "Hope for the Poor" sermon, please watch the video of a panel that The Village had this morning, link at the bottom of this email, and then fill out your usual homework assignment with your biggest take-aways.

I know that this is very last minute, but the rest of the staff and I felt that this was something we needed to talk about at our weekly meeting tomorrow. So, if you've already

listened to “Hope for the Poor,” you’ll just be ahead for next week! :) Please respond to this email as soon as you get it so that I know we’re all on the same page for tomorrow.

Melissa Ice

Executive Director || The NET

Co-owner of BREWED

TheIces.net

TheNetfw.com

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” - MLK Jr.

I smiled a little to myself as I realized that, for once, my procrastination had not hindered me this week. Now, I only had to listen to one sermon instead of two. I clicked the link, and the familiar logo of The Village Church in Flower Mound opened on to my screen. The Village was a massive, and very influential, church in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and because The NET internship had a discipleship component, this was not the first time we had been assigned to watch one of their sermons. As the hour-long video began to buffer, I pushed back my chair and decided to wash dishes while I waited, knowing that Holly, my summer roommate, would be home soon, and not wanting to give her another reason to complain about me. Turning from the kitchen table where I sat, I walked over to the sink and turned it on, patiently waiting for the water to warm.

The running water was the only sound in the small apartment as I soaped up the pan that I had used to cook my dinner. I stared ahead of me at the little corkboard, covered in brightly colored pink, yellow, and blue Post-It notes of encouragements and inside jokes between the

three girls who normally lived here, another reminder that I was only a sub-leaser in this apartment; a guest, a stranger almost. The girl who normally lived here was my friend and sorority sister Annaliese, who was currently spending her last summer of undergrad backpacking across Europe. When she heard that I was looking for a place to stay over the summer while I interned at The NET, she generously offered to sublease her room in this apartment to me for a discounted rate. I had hung out with her and her roommates a couple of times before I moved in, and they were nice enough, but still. This was not my home.

“Well, good morning,” the somewhat familiar voice of Matt Chandler, executive pastor of The Village, startled me out of my brooding. “If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab those. If you don't have a Bible with you, there should be a hardback black one somewhere around you. If you'll grab that, we're going to be in one verse today. In fact, we're going to look at one sentence today, Micah 6:8.”

I quickly ran back to my computer, awkwardly holding my hands up so as not to drip soapy water everywhere, and, after several failed attempts, pushed the pause button with my elbow. I then ran back to the sink, finished the dishes, and then settled as comfortably as I could onto the stiff leather of the couch, my computer in my lap. Once adjusted, I clicked open a new tab to google the verse Matt had mentioned.

Micah 6:8 English Standard Version (ESV)

⁸He has told you, O man, what is good;

and what does the LORD require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

I blinked in surprise as I recognized the three mottos of The NET interns, emblazoned on our t-shirts- do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly- but then went back to the video and again pressed play.

“What I want to do with our time together today is I just kind of want to step into the fray of this past week, knowing that there are a lot of land mines there, and there are a lot of things that could go wrong by doing this,” Matt continued as he paced the empty stage in miniature across my laptop screen, his black skinny jeans and red short-sleeved button up accentuating his pale, gangly limbs, “yet I think the people of God need to enter this dialogue with the type of conversation that I hope will ultimately bring healing to souls and really will allow us to operate as the people of God in the midst of continued tragedy on all sides of this festering wound in the American landscape.”

“Festering wound” was a gross image, but even that felt mild compared to the carnage that our country had witnessed that summer. The sinking dread and the heartbreak and then eventually the numbness that came with waking up every other morning to a new name, a new hashtag, that spoke of another black person who had been unjustly murdered by the police. And the even harder truth to face- that for black Americans, this had been their reality since day one.

“I just don't see how you can argue that this isn't our history,” Matt continued, seeming to take the words right out of my mind and into his face mic. “This is our history. This is true. Because this is true, this has created a very real fear and rage, a version of PTSD that haunts our African-American brothers and sisters. I think the only shot we have for progress is to develop a deep sense of empathy that is not paternalistic, an acceptance that history has broken some

things, that systems certainly are broken, and an empathy in our hearts toward that so that we might actually mourn with those who mourn.”

Several months earlier, the white ash trees outside my window had finally begun to turn color, their deep reds and vibrant oranges falling into the wind with tantalizing promises of the long-awaited sweater weather. The wide-eyed excitement I got from these trees was just the kind of change of pace I needed to knock me out of the infamous “sophomore slump.” It didn’t matter to me how much my friends teased me- growing up in Los Angeles, trees changing colors was a novelty, and I hoped to never grow bored of its sunset beauty.

My second year of college, I finally began to feel the homesickness that had managed to evade me the year before, and the calls to home I made every Sunday began to feel less obligatory, even if afterwards I wondered why I had even bothered.

I sat in my standard-issue, twin-sized dorm bed, one such Sunday, leaned against the cinderblock wall.

“Mom, Black Lives Matter is important because when you say, ‘all lives matter,’ you are assuming that all lives face the same level of risk in this country, and that’s just not true,” I tried to hold in my anger as I gesticulated wildly despite my lack of an audience. *When did our weekly calls get so political?*

I knew, of course, when our weekly calls got so political. They got political when I started paying attention to the news on my own instead of hearing it second-hand from my parents. They got political when I began to grow in my faith and read in the Bible as over and over again

God sides with the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. They got political when Mom and Dad's life-long insistence that my siblings and I have opinions turned against them.

The bed creaked beneath me as I moved, knocking gently into the wall behind me as I stared at the wall opposite to me, belonging to my roommate Lindsey. Even rows of purple polka dot ribbon hung on the stark white wall, photographs attached neatly with paperclips. One of these caught my attention now, the one with Lindsey's family- her mother, father, younger brother, and youngest sister- all dressed in matching Easter clothes, smiling widely. Aaron and Lindsey were close, so he featured frequently in her wall photos. But, his severe autism made him grumpy when people tried to take his picture, so this smiling Easter photograph was a rarity and thus especially sweet.

"Elle, the black lives matter movement is made up mostly of riots and violent protests, and I simply do not support it," Mom continued, pulling me out of my reverie. "And I'm surprised that you do, pacifist Christian that you are," she responded, condescending in her veiled attempt at understanding, but her jab at trying to appeal to my faith only made me angrier.

"I can put it in this arena, and maybe it's helpful," Matt continued to speak on the Black Lives Matter protest that had turned violent, less than a year after I had insisted otherwise to my mom. The man who brought a gun to the peaceful Dallas rally was not affiliated in any way with the organizers of the protest or the values of the organization, BLM maintained at every opportunity, but still. Eleven officers had been shot, and five of them were dead.

"It is not uncommon for me to have to go to the hospital because a member of our church has died suddenly and tragically. When I show up, and there's the wife, or there's the husband,

or there's the mom and dad sobbing their eyes out, I don't start digging around for the facts before I'm willing to enter into their mourning. I don't go, 'Listen. I see that you're really broken and really angry. Let me tell you theologically why you shouldn't be.' I don't show up and see them mourning and see them broken and crying out and angry, and I don't enter that space and go, 'Now where were you when that happened? Gosh, didn't you think to do...' How wicked of a son of a gun would I be if that's how I handled brokenness? The inability of primarily Anglos to enter the sorrow of our brothers and sisters stems from a lack of proximity, stems from a lack of empathy and a lack of understanding of some of the systemic issues of our nation's history that has brought us to this point.

"Will you just join me in welcoming our panel today? It will not be an easy thing for them to share their hearts with us. Come on out, guys."

As three well-dressed black men walked out on stage holding chairs, I thought about what Matt talked about, comforting those in the hospital who were grieving, and I tried not to think about the five families who were now suddenly grieving. All five of the policemen who had been killed had families, and I wondered if a pastor had met them at the hospital and comforted them and cried with them. I tried not to think about the five sets of children who were now going to grow up without a dad; the five little girls who would one day have to have someone else walk them down the aisle; the five little boys who I prayed would have other male role models to look up to. Focusing on the political is much easier than having to look into the ugly, grieving eyes of the personal.

“Mom, Jesus was a pacifist, but he was violent when he needed to be,” I raised my voice, the thousands of miles of distance between my mother and I giving me a confidence to fight that hadn’t existed when I lived under her roof. “Like when there were all those people selling stuff in the temple, and he got pissed off that they were turning His holy place of worship into a market place. He literally whipped them out of there!” I pointed out, righteous anger heating my tone, and probably pissing off my hallmates. Dorm room walls were notoriously thin, and even the dorm for students in the Honors College of my fancy private school was no exception. The warped and angry part of my soul, however, grinned with wicked glee. Mom was less Biblically literate than me, so using the Bible against her was an easy way to win.

She paused and nasty triumph surged for my veins as my argument seemed to have won. “I simply don’t believe that happened,” Mom replied after collecting her thoughts, her calm tone only serving to stoke my flames.

“You what?!”

The four panelists sat down, and Matt, sitting on the far left of the stage, gestured to the man on the opposite side of the circle from him. “Why don't we start with Anthony. Why don't you introduce yourself, say what you do, talk about how long you've been at The Village, and then we'll go from there.”

I watched the guests as they sat down, their movements slow, their posture heavy with grief. I couldn’t even imagine the weight on their shoulders, addressing centuries of racial injustice to a group of people who may have been complicit in that sin.

“Yeah, I’m Anthony Moore,” began the tall, handsome man with the close-shaved hair and slight stubble. “I’m the campus pastor in Fort Worth. I’ve been here about two years.” The sharp planes of his cheekbones and comedic lilt to his speech reminded me of an older Eddie Murphy.

The man to his left was shorter with a fuller beard and thicker hair, and he lifted the microphone, “Hey, guys. Rob Daniels. Connections minister. I’ve been on staff almost three years.” Even through my tinny laptop speakers, I could tell that his deep voice reverberated throughout the auditorium. He struck me as someone who could easily command a room.

“Mike Dsane,” introduced the final panelist, a broad-shouldered man with a thick South African accent. “I am the pastoral resident at the Dallas Campus, and I’ve been at The Village just a little over two years.”

My experience with The Village was pretty limited, but these faces were all brand new to me.

“Alright,” Matt said as soon as the leaders in his church had finished introducing themselves. “Let’s get started.”

“The Jesus I believe in wasn’t a violent man.” Mom explained, her condescending patience feeding the wicked, gleeful anger monster inside who convinced me that Mom was nothing but an ignorant, racist hypocrite.

The monster again warped my thoughts and my words, exploiting that hurt- the kind that only comes from feeling like you’ve been personally wronged by the person you love most.

“Oh, the Jesus *you* believe in?” I repeated caustically. “And what Jesus, exactly, is that, Mom? Because the only Jesus I believe in is the Jesus *in the Bible*, and if that’s not the Jesus that you’re worshipping, then you are not worshipping the real Jesus,” my Biblical argument quickly turned into a personal rant as any semblance of righteous anger disappeared, easily replaced by a private need to deeply wound. “You’re simply worshipping a figment of your own imagination that you use to justify your own sin. If you don’t believe in the Jesus of the Bible, then you are just as much of an atheist as Dad.”

Outside, the sun had slowly moved closer to the horizon, and the romanticized “golden hour” was illuminating the autumn leaves that I had so admired earlier, but I was lost to them now. I could see nothing but Mom’s flaws and all of the ways that they had wronged me.

Keys jangled loudly in the front door as it opened, startling me out of my deep concentration to the video panel. In entered Holly, her face blocked by the large grocery bags she held. “Hello?” she called, unable to see me from behind all the bags.

“Hey!” I called back, turning the volume down on my laptop. “Do you need help with those groceries?”

“Nah,” she replied as she waddled quickly down the hallway and into the kitchen. “I got it.” With an *oomph* she set all of the bags down onto the kitchen table and began to unload them into the refrigerator, making small talk as she did. I tried to respond as best as I could, but Mike Dsane was talking about his experiences as a black man living in South Africa compared to living in the United States and I was too engrossed to want to pause it and wait until Holly was done.

“What are you watching?” she asked finally, noticing that my attention that was divided.

“Another video assignment for The NET.” This was not the first Sunday afternoon that she had come home to find me watching something online for my internship homework.

“Oh, cool. What’s it on this week?” Her voice was slightly muffled as she spoke from inside the refrigerator where she had begun unpacking her food.

“Uh,” I hesitated, “it’s a panel that The Village had this morning about what- about what, uh, happened on Thursday night,” I finished awkwardly, not wanting to bring up the argument we had had as we sat, eyes glued to the television, watching the news unfold.

“Why are they arresting that guy? He wasn’t doing anything!”

“He was acting suspicious. They’re being cautious.”

“How exactly was he acting suspicious? By standing there, being black?”

“They haven’t caught the shooter yet. All they know is that he’s black. It’s their prerogative to arrest black people who are acting suspicious.”

“So much for innocent until proven guilty in this country.”

“Oh, cool!” she responded, surprising me with her genuine interest. “Can I come watch it with you?”

“Oh. Uh, yeah, sure.” I scooted over, making room for her as she joined me, plopping down on the stiff leather as if she actually found it comfortable, and set the laptop on the rectangular coffee table in front of us, turning the volume back up.

“Does anybody else want to weigh in on that? Just kind of feelings, thoughts from this past week?” Matt was saying in response to Rob’s comments on the anger that he had felt from the way that people on his Facebook News Feed had responded to the shooting, saying that he

saw much more outrage over the shooting of the police officers than he had seen for the black men who had been slain by police earlier in the summer.

“Yeah, I find myself processing a little different,” Anthony jumped in. “I think just to reiterate what you said, that not all black people are the same. We're not Borg, so we don't all respond the exact same way. I have not had a lot of those feelings. Although, I have the experiences. I can point to them. But the place where it really breaks down for me and becomes difficult is trying to explain to my three boys what the history of all of this is.”

Another moment of silence hung between us after my fierce accusation. *An atheist just like Dad* hung silent and terrible between us, and for a second or two, all I could hear was the construction outside my window. “You know, Ellie,” Mom said finally, her voice choked with her own barely contained anger, “you go on and on about the overly religious bigots of the South and how they judge people and push their righteousness down the throats of others. But tell me now, how exactly are you any different?”

She's right you know. I had bullied her all afternoon for not knowing as many Bible stories as I had and then for not interpreting those stories exactly the way that I had. I believed so strongly that a Christian who didn't believe exactly what I believed was not a Christian at all, and then I had belittled her for not fitting into my mold.

So what? She has no right to talk to me like that. I may have been meaner to her than I should have been, but at least my beliefs weren't racist and oppressive. I was rude and condescending when I should not have been, but she was still wrong *she was still wrong.*

So I hung up, tossing my phone down in frustration and defiance, the once-sweet Elliott family portrait now mocking me with their smiles. I crawled under my thick, purple comforter so that I could stare instead at the sterile white ceiling.

“No better than them,” I muttered to myself. “As if.” I sighed, knowing that soon my conviction would get the best of me, and I would call her back in a few hours, tomorrow at the latest, to humble myself, apologize, and forgive. But for now I was going to do what I did best, which was to roll over, forget about it, and take a nap.

Back in Holly and Annaliese’s apartment, Anthony was expanding on his earlier statement about his struggles to explain the history of violence against African-Americans in our country. “It’s just hard to pull them together and say, ‘This is what it is. This is why,’” he explained, frustrated, gesturing broadly with his hands. “I don’t have categories for that. I don’t know how to shepherd them through that. I think for me, there’s a plea, and there’s kind of a cry in my own heart. The thing I want to say to them is, ‘Listen. The way forward is to know that racism is not the unpardonable sin. It’s just not.’”

“There’s a good likelihood, a good potential that they could worship for eternity alongside someone who got the issue of ethnicity or race wrong here on this earth. We have that type of scandalous Christianity and grace that has been given to us. Grace in, grace out.”

I sat there, stunned, reeling from the kind of grace that this man exuded. The kind of grace that extended forgiveness and fellowship to someone who hated him for nothing more than the color of his skin. The kind of grace that saw racial hatred as a symptom of a broken world and not

a defining personality trait. The kind of grace that I could never extend to my mom for much lesser sins.

“Wow, that was so deep,” Holly said, and we looked at each other, an understanding passing between us about the argument we had had days before, and what this pastor’s call for grace meant.

“Yeah,” I responded, somewhat lamely, before scooching closer to Holly, settling comfortably back into the couch, and finishing the video panel together.

The Ugliest T-Shirt I've Ever Had to Look at with My Own Eyes

“Alright, ladies, if I could have your attention for just a minute,” I called, walking out to the front of the lecture hall full of new sorority members, spread out along the front and up the stairs with large swaths of colorful fleece in front of them. The harsh fluorescent lighting that illuminated the classroom, the drab, brown carpet that covered the floor, and the bare, TCU yellow brick walls made the colorful soon-to-be blankets look even brighter and happier by comparison.

As Vice President of Philanthropy for my sorority, I organized all of the different service events that our members participated in. Brooke, our New Member Educator, wanted our entire new pledge class to do an event together, so we had coordinated to create a service event for them that came in the form of them making blankets for the homeless. My plan was to donate the blankets to The NET. Since the summer, I had only become more passionate about the work that was being done there, and I wanted to tell our new sorority girls about it so that they could get involved as well.

“Y’all can keep cutting and tying those blankets together, but while you work I’m just going to explain a little bit about The NET so that you understand why we’re having you make these blankets as your service project.” I said now, clicking the slide remote at the PowerPoint presentation projected on to the front of the room, the familiar turquoise and white logo of The NET glowing on my face.

“So, The NET is a non-profit that I intern at, and we serve three different marginalized communities here in Fort Worth: the homeless, low-income kids, and women who have been exploited and trafficked by the sex industry. The NET is a unique organization in that the work

that we do is entirely relational,” I explained, the familiar words flowing out of me effortlessly. Normally, I got nervous and stumbled over my words when I had to speak in front of a crowd, but I had explained to people what The NET was so many times, I could do it almost without thinking now.

“Here at The NET, we believe that poverty is more than material. This belief,” I clicked the remote again, and a simple black and white slide with more familiar quotes filled the screen, “comes from a study done by the World Bank in 2002 that interviewed 60,000 people living in poverty around the world.”

At my mention of the study, a few of the girls looked up at the slide and at me. I looked into their unfamiliar faces, wishing I had my boss’ knack for learning people’s names. Alex, the homeless program manager at The NET, was incredible at learning people’s names; he could meet someone for the first time and remember their name when he saw them again even if it was weeks later. It was part of what made him an amazing leader and me a mediocre intern.

“Now,” I began to pace a little bit, the hard soles of my boots muffled by the carpet, “we as non-poor people would describe poverty in material terms, specifically a lack of those materials. Lack of money, lack of food, lack of shelter etc. But, as you can see,” I gestured toward the screen, “people living in poverty- no matter where in the world they’re from- describe it in much more psychological terms. ‘Poverty means feeling powerless,’ ‘Poverty means feeling ashamed that I can’t provide for my children,’ ‘Poverty means feeling like I have no voice, like I am less than human.’ Thus, at The NET, we seek to alleviate poverty by treating the psychological root of it instead of the material symptoms of it. Our mission is to empower the city to restore dignity to people in poverty through community and relationships, and our goal is to see the

people we serve walk in freedom and joy as whole individuals.” The last sentence I tried to put as much meaning into as possible, but I had recited it so many times, it was possible it came across as completely rote memorized- which it was. Most of the audience was paying most of their attention to the blankets in front of them, so it was hard for me to know if they were even paying attention at all. I paused for a moment before turning to walk back in the other direction, looking through the small window in the door at a couple of students who looked lost. Sid Richardson, the only building on Texas Christian University’s campus that housed lecture halls, was infamously confusing to get around. I wanted to go outside and ask if those poor, lost kids needed help, but besides the fact that I had a lecture of my own to give, I realistically would have just gotten them more lost.

“Now,” I paced back in the other direction, “you’re probably thinking to yourselves, ‘If The NET doesn’t provide material relief to the poor, then why the heck are we making these blankets?’” I got a couple of pity laughs from my little audience, which I appreciated. “Well,” I went on, “these blankets will be a part of an empowerment program that we’re starting for our friends who are experiencing homelessness. They will be able to earn points by coming to our weekly events like Bingo and Bagels, taking classes that we’ll be offering, helping out around the building, and whatnot. Then, they’ll be able to spend the points they earn in our store, which will sell things like these blankets, clothing, food, etc.” I concluded, making my way back to the podium in the corner of the room.

“So, you guys can keep working on those blankets, and if you have any questions, just let me know!” I turned to go set the clicker down and chat with Brooke, who had been nodding and

smiling encouragingly during my lecture, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a hand go up. “Uh, yeah,” I said, surprised, calling on the freshman whose name I hadn’t yet learned.

“So, you intern at The NET?” The young girl called out from the other side of the hall, her thick southern accent evident in even that short sentence.

“Yes,” I confirmed, wondering if as a freshman she would already be interested in applying for an internship.

“So, do you know Kelsey Ritchie?” she asked excitedly.

My smile fell a little bit as she asked about my coworker, student body Vice-President, and all-around campus celebrity. “Yeah,” I answered dully.

She grinned hugely. “She was my Frog Camp facilitator! I *love* her!” she gushed.

I forced a smile. “Yeah, she’s pretty great.” Kelsey *was* pretty great, but I tried to contain my frustration that after a brief but, in my opinion, eye-opening lecture on the nature of poverty, the most anyone had to say was how cool one of my coworkers was.

Everyone else had turned back to chatting with their group over their fleece blankets, so I turned at last to Brooke. She smiled widely at me. “That went really well!” she complimented me.

I smiled back, slightly less enthusiastic. “Thanks, I hope so.”

“It did,” she insisted, nothing but sincerity in her blue eyes. I smiled again in response, a little more genuinely this time. Brooke was a good friend.

About an hour and a half later, our chapter meeting had come and gone, and I was chatting with a couple of friends, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone approaching me hesitantly. I saw her trying to get my attention from my periphery, so I turned from my friends

toward her and realized it was the new freshman who had asked me about Kelsey. As soon as I diverted my attention fully to her, I startled, and tried not to allow my emotions to show on my face as I saw the t-shirt she was wearing, previously covered by a hoodie, that had the Trump-Pence 2016 logo emblazoned on it.

“You’re Elle, right?”

“Yeah,” I forced myself to look up at her face, making contact with her bright brown eyes, framed by thickly mascara’d lashes. “Sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Emily,” she answered.

“Right!” I said, faking epiphany. “I knew that. Sorry,” I apologized again. “Anyways, what’s up?”

“So,” she shifted her weight, drawing attention to her shiny, clean white Adidas sneakers. “If poverty is more than material, then does that mean that we shouldn’t just give homeless people money and food when they ask for it?”

I startled a little again, surprised at her sincere question. “Do you mean if they approach you on the street?” I asked in return.

“Yes,” she clarified.

I nodded. “Yeah, so something that I didn’t get into in my talk earlier is this idea that we as materially wealthy people have money, which is that we have something that the materially poor don’t have, and we need to give it to them in order to save them from their poverty.” I could hear myself shifting back into lecture mode, reciting more of The NET’s philosophy. “This is bad because it enforces the giver-receiver model of poverty alleviation, which is extremely harmful psychologically to both the giver and the receiver. So even though it feels mean and selfish to say

no when a person approaches you on the street asking for food or money, it is much better in the long run.”

“Because otherwise they won’t be motivated to not be homeless anymore,” she concluded.

I tried not to frown at her wording. “Motivated to not be homeless anymore,” made it sound like homelessness was a choice, and if only they decided to make another choice, people who lived on the streets could pursue another option. That simply wasn’t the case, but she was essentially right. Studies on poverty and homelessness showed that depending on hand outs for money or food only created a learned helplessness that prevented people in those situations from being able to find ways to support themselves.

“Right,” I confirmed slowly. “For example, have you seen that lady who sits outside those restaurants on University? She’s usually next to Pizza Snob, she’s got a ton of blankets and stuff?”

“Yeah,” Emily smiled, “Miss Q!”

I smiled back at knowing that Emily had already made acquaintance with the sweet woman who could usually be found, surrounded by blankets, hanging out outside the row of restaurants across the street from TCU’s campus. Miss Q loved to chat with me anytime I stopped on my way to class, and was adored by many of my classmates including, apparently, Emily. I willed my heart to soften towards this young girl in her shocking shirt who, I told myself, was probably still just blindly following her parents’ political beliefs. If she cared enough about Miss Q to be her friend, then surely she couldn’t be as awful and uncaring as I painted most Trump supporters to be. Then, I frowned a little thinking about Miss Q and her situation.

“Right, so Miss Q basically hit the jackpot when it comes to being homeless, because she sits right here by TCU. Do you know how many rich TCU kids give her money and food on a daily basis? She’s set, right where she is, and unfortunately, that means she’ll probably be homeless for the rest of her life.” I paused, wanting to make sure that I chose my next words carefully. “And as Christians, we believe that every human being is made in the image of God, and that gives them inherent value and worth. So, a lot of the work that we do at The NET is restoring that dignity to our street friends and making sure that they know that just because they are homeless doesn’t mean that they’re less than human or that they’re not valued and loved.” I paused again. “But, we also want them to walk in freedom as whole individuals, like I said earlier, and most of our street friends are capable of having a job and being financially independent. And we want that for them, not because that will make them any ‘better’ as people, but because it will allow them to feel less burdened by the social stigmas of homelessness. Does that make sense?” I asked, hoping that I had gotten through.

She nodded vigorously, understanding brightening her brown eyes. “Yeah. Like in Genesis, it says that God created us for work, and so they’re not fulfilling their divine purpose by just sitting around and collecting other people’s money.”

My heart hardened again at her harsh words. *So typical* I thought to myself *for a Trump supporter to just assume that people in poverty sit around surviving off of other people’s tax dollars.* I thought again of Miss Q, and Brian and James and Kathy and all of the other people whom I had befriended through my work at The NET. People who I loved and whose friendship to me was real and for whom I cared for deeply. It hurt to hear them described as lazy welfare collectors.

I wanted to disagree with her. I wanted to argue with her. Truthfully, I kind've wanted to smack her. Because she annoyed me with her question about Kelsey, because her rhetoric was mean and harsh, and because she apparently supported one of the most horrific presidential candidates I had ever known to exist.

But the truth was that she wasn't wrong. A lot of our friends were relying on government assistance when they were capable of financial stability and independence, but they just hadn't yet reached a point where they were able to shed years of learned helplessness to figure out how to do that. The nuance here felt very important to me, but I couldn't quite figure out how to articulate that to this strange freshman who asked off-putting questions and seemed to twist my words to what she wanted to hear.

But none of that changed the fact that she wasn't wrong, and her t-shirt wasn't a good enough reason to fight with her. So, instead I just said, "Yeah," and let her go on with her night as I, dejected, went on with mine.

The Other Time I Talked about Trayvon Martin with my Parents

“You see? The justice system always gets it right in the end,” my dad said, shoving some crumbled veggie burger into his mouth. My brother was out with friends, so it was just the three of us seated at the cool, marble kitchen counter. Mom and Dad were voraciously consuming their Green Temple veggie bowls, myself somewhat less so. I pushed the green beans and brown rice around my plate a little bit, wishing it was Panda Express, or KFC, or honestly anything that actually tasted good.

It was a Saturday, which meant that dinner had come after Dad got back from practice with his rowing team. It also meant that Mom got takeout for us because her weekly run to Costco to buy groceries in bulk made her too tired to actually cook any of those groceries. Earlier, as I sat in my room reading and Mom bustled around putting away the groceries, Dad lounged on the couch watching Fox News, like he always did. It was from that exact spot where a couple of days ago on July 13, 2013, Dad had first heard the announcement that George Zimmerman, the man who had shot and killed Trayvon Martin, the unarmed black teenager in Florida, had been declared not guilty and acquitted of all charges by a jury of his peers.

The outrage had been instant, fierce, and one-sided.

Protests in L.A. Over Zimmerman Verdict Take Violent Turn the Huffington Post reported.

“My son would still be alive if he was white,” the Los Angeles Times quoted Trayvon’s mother.

He was shot for being black!

How can it be a death sentence to wear a hoodie and buy skittles but not even a minimal offense to shoot an unarmed black teenager?

America: where if you are a contractor who builds a bad house and someone dies, you can be charged with manslaughter, but not if you shoot and kill a child.

The fury filled my Twitter feed, my Facebook feed, my everything feed. My heart broke for the Martin family, for the corrupt justice system, for every black American who felt this affirmed that their grievances would never be righted. But even though I sided with the fury, it exhausted me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't escape the hurt, the shock, the pain.

Well, there was one place I could escape.

I frowned at Dad's contented proclamation that the jury had made the right call, staring morosely at my green beans. "Dad, you complain about the justice system all the time," I pointed my fork vaguely in his direction. "You call a jury 'twelve idiots in a box.'"

He chewed over this for a second, then swallowed his food and shrugged. "You're right. But I guess they got it right this time."

I hesitated, not really wanting to start a fight, especially when Nick wasn't around to back me up. I glanced around instead at the artfully distressed black cabinets, scoffing internally as I always did. *Who pays someone to bang up their cabinets?*

"Shouldn't shooting and killing someone at least count as manslaughter?" I asked evenly, trying to keep the hordes of angry tweets out of my voice, pretending I was merely curious, I didn't care.

Dad shook his head. "Not if it's self-defense."

I bit my lip and focused on the amber and black marble pattern beneath my bowl, the dark splotches contrasting sharply and harmoniously against each other. *Is it really self-defense if you're a grown man fighting an unarmed teenager?*

“It was just a stupid race thing,” Mom echoed the statements she had made all those months ago, when the story of Trayvon’s death had first made headlines. “He was just a guy who shot someone out of self-defense. It’s sad that it was a kid, and it’s sad that he died, but there didn’t need to be this whole media circus over it. He was found not guilty, and it’s not because his jury was racist or because he was racist, but because he just wasn’t guilty.”

I looked over at my mom and really looked at her in a way that I hadn’t in a long time. The yellow undertones in her skin covered with expensive foundation, her black coffee-colored hair cut and styled the way that all of my friends’ moms had it done, the expensive jeans that covered the bullet scar on her upper thigh. I wondered how she got here.

Not here as in the literal sense, of course. I knew that story.

How Nana had woken her and her siblings up in the middle of the night and ran to the helicopter that would take them far away from the only home they had ever known to a country where they didn’t know a single soul or word of language. They had gone first to the Philippines, and then to an army base in Guam, and then to Camp Pendleton in Orange County, California, where they watched on television with the rest of the nation as Saigon fell to the Vietnamese People’s Army.

That story I could tell- and had proudly told- by heart.

What I didn’t understand is how she got *here*. How she went from being a young refugee, mocked in her kindergarten classroom for her accent and her lack of vocabulary, to complaining about how hard it is to communicate with our Mexican gardener. How exactly does one become the type of person who rolls her eyes at the goings on of rich white house wives and has

compassion for sick children but doesn't shed a tear at the shooting of an unarmed black teenager?

I watched her as she grabbed our empty bowls and took them to the sink as Dad meandered back to the couch. She had already forgotten about me by the time that she began washing our dishes as Dad turned on more Fox News or ESPN or just fell asleep, but I watched her. And I just felt sad.

The Last Time in the World as We Knew It

I rubbed my eyes and tried not to groan so as not to disturb the other late-night library students, cramming for midterms before leaving for TCU's Fall Break. I stared at my half-finished paper, trying not to let despair overwhelm me as I realized that I had about 200 words left to say about Chaucer's use of French-derivative words in his description of the monk in the prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* but about 500 words until I hit the word count minimum. The words on the page began to swim. I looked at the clock. 10PM.

You've been at this for a few hours now I told myself *give yourself a quick break and then come back to it with a clear mind*. I looked around at the other students, harshly lit by the fluorescent lights, sitting there quietly stressing, and wondered what sort of break I could get away with without being judged by my imaginary audience.

I knew that a productive quick break would be getting up, stretching my legs a little, maybe even walking outside for a bit to get some fresh air. But I told myself that I didn't want to distract the other students, so instead, I logged on to Facebook. The regret was immediate.

Sensational articles from every end of the political spectrum filled my news feed. Every other post contained a link to not-quite-reputable news outlets outlining why Hillary Clinton is The Anti-Christ or why Donald Trump is Literally Hitler, juxtaposed with fruitless pleas to please keep politics off social media. I scrolled mindlessly, becoming more and more desensitized to the outrageous the further I scrolled, until a link to an article whose headline was both unusual and unusually reasonable.

I'm Pro-Life. And I'm voting for Hillary. Here's Why.

The link was to a blog post written by someone named Shannon Dingle and had been shared by Faith Brown, a girl a couple years older than me who was on staff at my church.

Curious, I clicked the link.

“I’m pro-life.” Began the post.

“Because I’m pro-life, I won’t vote for Donald Trump. Instead, I’m planning to vote for Hillary.

“To many of my fellow pro-lifers, this seems confusing and inconsistent. I understand that. Hillary firmly believes women should have the right to abortion. In the earliest days of my blogging, I wrote that if I were to be a single-issue voter, abortion would be that issue for me.

“So what’s changed?” asked Dingle.

A fat drop of chocolate ice cream ran down my wrist, and I quickly stuck my tongue out to lick it up before it could travel down onto my forearm. As soon as my tongue made contact with my skin, I briefly wondered if I should be embarrassed to be seen licking my hand in public, but I knew that no one would be paying attention. All around me were the brightly colored vendors of the annual Fort Worth ArtsGoggle street fair, and crowds of people swirled like schools of fish, weaving in and out of booths set up by local artists. The fair ran the length of Magnolia Avenue, home to some of Fort Worth’s trendiest restaurants such as Melt Ice Creams, whose iconic yellow-brick wall I left behind as I wandered back onto the street, Kayla by my side.

“So, as I was saying,” I said, continuing to bemoan my roommate woes, “I knocked on Leah and Morgan’s doors to say goodbye because I knew they were leaving for home for fall break in the morning and I wouldn’t see them before they left, and they were both like ‘Oh, okay

yeah, goodbye,' whatever," I waved my hand noncommittally. "Then I went to bed, but I was still awake a few minutes later when Lindsey came back from wherever she was and I guess she was leaving for home right then," we passed a booth selling succulent terrariums and I paused, mesmerized by the beautifully arranged cacti and aloe vera.

Keep moving, Elle. I told myself sternly. *You don't have money for artsy house plants.*

"So, Lindsey came home," Kayla prompted.

"Um, right," we continued walking as I regathered my thoughts. "Yeah, so Lindsey comes back, and she goes and knocks on Leah and Morgan's doors to say goodbye, only when *she* does it, they're all, '*Oh my gosh bye Lindsey!!*'" I pitched my voice higher, mocking my roommates and their sorority-girl squeal. "*Have such a good fall break!! I'll miss you!!*" I sighed, the ridicule covering up the rejection that had twisted and yanked at my heart. My other roommates' clear preference for Lindsey's company over my own was more painful than I would ever let myself admit out loud, even to Kayla.

"Oh, man, that is the worst," Kayla lamented as she turned towards me, the warm streetlights glowing her auburn hair red.

I smiled in appreciation at her sentiment. Kayla and I had met through our church, and she didn't go to TCU- making her an excellent objective sounding board for when I whined about my friends.

We walked in silence for a bit, almost matching in our skinny jeans, brown boots, and long-sleeved cotton t-shirts. A cool October wind across my bare arms, and I pulled the sleeves back down from my elbows, grabbing them in my fists and enjoying- at long last- the fall weather and the comfortable quiet between Kayla and me. My mind wandered across the myriad of art

booths, this one selling personalized wooden signs, this one intricate glass work, this one a variety of wind chimes, and so on. Coming from Los Angeles, I was something of a city snob, and I was constantly amazed at the depth of culture and appreciation for art that existed in this small country-western Texas town.

“Do you think...” Kayla began, bringing me back out of the local art mecca and back into our conversation, “Do you think that there might be something you said or did that might have upset them? And that’s why they’re acting this way?”

I shook my head. “No, honestly I think that it’s just that my schedule is so weird that I never get to hang out with them, but they’re always hanging out with each other. And, you know,” I took on the ironically cheerful tone that we used when we made fun of our pain, “my mental illness just loves to take everything personally for no reason, so.”

Kayla laughed, her sweet giggle seeming to contradict the content of my joke, but it was another reason she was one of my most treasured friends; there are not a lot of people in this world who are comfortable making light of broken situations, but Kayla was one of them. I looked around briefly, again paranoid that someone I didn’t want would overhear me, but, again, there was no need to worry. Our intimately personal conversation surrounded by hundreds of strangers suddenly reminded me of that quote from *The Great Gatsby*.

And I like large parties. They're so intimate. At small parties there isn't any privacy. The noisy crowd of art appreciators surrounded us, creating a nice, private bubble to be as open and vulnerable as we wanted.

“Although,” I said after a moment, “things have been kinda tense lately, I guess, because of the election next month.”

Kayla turned to me again in surprise. “Really? Are your roommates Trump supporters?”

“Well,” I hedged, “I’m not completely sure. But, I’ve been pretty vocal about my support for Hillary, and they never say anything to agree with me- they usually just kind’ve change the subject. Plus, they’re all from conservative, Christian, Texas families.”

“Ah.” She nodded slowly, thinking, I assumed, of her own conservative, Christian, Texas family and what it had taken for her to publicly disagree with them.

“Yeah.”

“Nothing.” I raised my eyebrows a little at this anticlimactic answer to the question of what had changed in Dingle’s views towards abortion, but my skepticism was quickly answered.

“Well, nothing in my stance toward abortion. I’m still opposed to it. But since Roe v. Wade, most Republicans have talked a lot about abortion while doing little to make meaningful change in that area of policy. Furthermore, they’ve opposed or even stalled measures that could prevent abortions by targeting the underlying causes, like poverty, education, lack of access to healthcare, and supports for single parent and low-income families. In fact, I suspect these reasons contribute to why abortion rates rose under Reagan, rose under the first Bush, dropped under Clinton, held steady under the second Bush, and have been dropping under Obama. As such, I’m not sure we can hold that voting Republican is the best thing for abortion rates in this country.”

I paused, genuinely surprised at her statement, but a quick google search for statistics backed up her claim. I had not grown up in the church, but even so I had always heard that if you cared about abortion, you voted Republican, and if you didn’t care about abortion you voted

Democrat. The fact that voting Democrat could actually make you a *better* fighter of abortion, well, that was news indeed.

We continued steadily down Magnolia, the art fair booths gradually transitioning into taco trucks and sno cone vendors, and then to the regular businesses that permanently occupied Magnolia Avenue. Slowly we crept closer to the Texas White House Bed and Breakfast at the end of the street, where Kayla worked as an inn keeper, the warm fairy lights of the fair fading in the distance behind us. Back and forth we vented about Trump and the endless comments he had made that we found disgusting.

“He’s basically said that all Muslims are terrorists-”

“And he keeps referring to minorities as ‘the whatevers’ ‘the blacks’ ‘the Mexicans’ like dude you seriously can’t even refer to them as people-”

“And all that gross stuff he said about Ivanka- about her boobs when she was a baby-”

“Oh my God, yeah, how do you say stuff like that about your baby that’s so gross-”

“And then of course the ‘grab ‘em by the pussy’ comment.”

“God, there is still just nothing worse than that. How can there even be people still voting for him after that?” The bright and fun sights and sounds of the fair had all but entirely disappeared by now, ahead of us only the harsh white street lights of the Baylor Medical Center that separated us from the Bed and Breakfast.

“Because they don’t care about women. They’re too worried about babies getting killed and ‘the homosexuals’ getting married.” I rolled my eyes. The priorities of the evangelical right would never cease to baffle me.

“Right, and I mean, it’s not like abortion isn’t an issue that I care about, because it totally is,” Kayla started, slowing down the pace of our mindless ranting to a conversation pitch. It was quieter here, and the passionate ranting that had felt normal amongst the throng of art lovers on Magnolia now felt inappropriate on this quiet, suburban street.

“Right, no, me too,” I agreed quickly. Even with Kayla, there was little that was more taboo than a less-than-absolute condemnation of abortion when speaking amongst the church.

“But did you read that article?” She continued, “The one about how-”

“How abortion rates have been higher under Republican administrations than Democratic administrations?” I finished for her, knowing that our small circle of liberal Christians had all read the same article, the one that gave us a leg to stand on in our church when it came to abortion and our choice of presidential candidate.

“Yeah!” Kayla enthused her voice getting airy from exertion as we reached the end of the street and started the trek up the hill to her Bed & Breakfast, “Because I was already leaning toward Hillary for all the other stuff, but I felt weird still about the abortion thing. But that just sealed the deal for me.”

I nodded. “Yep, me too.” My answer short in part from the extra effort and air that it was taking me to walk up the hill and in part because as passionate as I was about getting Hillary into office, I was just as exhausted of talking about it. One way or the other I was ready for this election to be over.

We reached the Bed & Breakfast, and Kayla reached over to wrap me in a tight hug.

“We’re going to get through this,” she said into my hair. I wasn’t sure whether she was referring to the presidential election or my earlier discussed mental health struggles, but either way I nodded. “I’m praying for you. Don’t forget that.”

I squeezed her tighter. Kayla was such a good friend. Then after a moment, I pulled away so that she could see me smile at her. “I won’t. I promise. Thank you.”

We hugged again and then headed in our separate directions. *Yeah* I thought to myself as I got into my car to drive back to campus *one way or another, at least this will all be over soon.*

“That’s my nutshell answer, but I think this topic deserves a more detailed analysis. If you just want the summary, feel free to stop here. If you press on, please trust that I did my best to edit down my thoughts but you’ll still be wading through a few thousand words. I wanted to offer a comprehensive, thoughtful, and well-researched presentation of my stance, and I’ve never been one for brevity.

“So buckle up, y’all. We’re in for a ride...”

In for a ride indeed. The election season had felt like a crazy rollercoaster that was exciting at first, but now I just desperately wanted to get off, no matter what the cost. I had so naïvely longed for election day, on the one hand truly wanting the craziness and uncertainty to be over, on the other hand not truly believing that Hillary Clinton could actually lose the election. I had no idea of the despair I would feel on that November night, or the anger I would hear from all sides, and not even Shannon Dingle with her well-researched, well-articulated, and well-publicized article could have predicted just the wild ride that we were in for. I could never have guessed

that the intense drops and loops we as a nation would endure in 2017 would make 2016 look like a child's carousel.

But that night, reading that article as I put my midterm paper on pause, it felt good enough to just finally have justification for my vote. It felt like being informed and voting was going to be enough. Eventually I would put the article away, buckle down to finish that paper, and leave behind the plush purple cushions and harsh fluorescent lights of the library behind for the weekend. I had finished my paper, and for now, that was enough.

And the Award for Best Conservative Snowflake Goes To...

When we finally arrived home from dinner, Mom and Dad sat on the couch in the living room, finding some basketball game to watch. I walked past them, hoping they took my silence as judgement, back to the guest room to watch something else on the other television. I settled into the Lazy Boy, wrapped a blanket around me, and clicked around mindlessly until I finally saw Chris Rock walking on stage.

“I counted at least 15 black people on that montage!” Laughter from the audience. “Well I’m here at the Academy Awards,” I lowered the remote. I hadn’t really planned on watching the Oscars, but Mom and Dad’s comments at dinner made me curious. So, I lingered.

“Otherwise known as the White People’s Choice Awards,” the host continued. “You realize, if they nominated host, I wouldn’t even get this job! Y’all would be watching Neil Patrick Harris right now.” He began to pace, and I turned the volume up. I had been mildly interested to see how Chris Rock would handle this year’s Academy Awards scandal, and so far I was definitely enjoying it.

“But here’s the crazy thing. This is the wildest, craziest Oscars to ever host because we got all this controversy — no black nominees. And people are like. ‘Chris, you should boycott! Chris, you should quit! You should quit.’ How come it’s only unemployed people that tell you to quit something, you know? No one with a job ever tells you to quit. So, I thought about quitting. I thought about it real hard, but I realized, ‘They’re gonna have the Oscars anyway.’ They’re not gonna cancel the Oscars because I quit! And the last thing I need is to lose another job to Kevin Hart, OK? I don’t need that!” He pointed to Kevin Hart sitting in the audience, and I laughed, setting the remote down.

Earlier that night, I had looked around anxiously as the hostess at my parents' favorite sushi restaurant wound us through the small maze of tables, eventually gesturing with a smile to a booth next to the glass doors that led out onto the balcony. From there, we had a stunning panoramic view of the sun setting over the Pacific Ocean, but I could see Dad resisting the urge to ask for a different table so that he wouldn't be blinded by the sun during its last few minutes above the horizon.

I will never let anyone I know ask their host for a different table, my brother Nick had started working at a steak house a year before, and I'm sure his words were coming to both of us now. Do you know how much it messes everything up? For someone who is working minimum wage? No, you take the table they give you and you smile and you say thank you- that's it.

I let Mom do the smiling and thank you-ing though as we sat down and I continued to cast my eyes about, fluctuating between anxiety and relief as each unseen face remained unrecognized.

"What are you doing?" Mom finally asked, annoyed that my attention was still divided.

"Nothing," I was still distracted, there were a few corners I hadn't thoroughly swept yet.

"Are you worried about seeing someone you know?" She asked it ironically, as if it were a ridiculous proposition, but it got me to finally make eye contact with her.

"Yes," I replied emphatically. "That is *exactly* what I'm worried about."

Dad sighed and pulled out his reading glasses before propping up his menu and flipping idly through the pages, not wanting to be a part of our argument, the grooves worn off from repetition. I wondered briefly if he even needed to look at the menu anymore, they came here so frequently.

“Elle,” Mom’s patronizingly gentle tone brought my attention back to her. “People take semesters off of school all the time. It is not a big deal if you see someone you know.”

It didn’t matter how many times we had this argument, I could still feel my face heat at her defense of her decision to pull me out of school to “focus on my mental health.” *Yeah, great idea, Mom. Take me away from all of my friends, everyone I love, my school and my job, everything that gives me purpose, and make me live at home for six months. That’s what a depressed person needs, isolation and lack of structure.* I had screamed those words at her the night she told me I wouldn’t be returning to TCU in the spring and repeated them at every opportunity since.

“Really? People take semesters off all the time?” I folded my hands on the slick, black table between us. “Because, you know, I can’t happen to think of a single person I know who has taken a semester off.”

“Connor Johnson took a semester off,” she reminded me, naming the older brother of a girl I’d been friends with in elementary school.

I rolled my eyes in response. “Mom, Connor Johnson took a semester off to go do mission work in Uganda. It’s not exactly the same thing.”

“You’re choosing to see it that way,” patronizing again.

“Yeah, well, since you chose to take me out of school, I’m going to go ahead and choose to see it however I want,” I spat back, bitterness like a sour candy puckering every word.

“That’s right,” this time I could hear my petulance wearing on her patience, “*you’re* choosing to sulk through the next few months- no one is making you do that.”

A thousand angry retorts clamored for my attention, but this time I just sighed in response, wondering if the albacore sashimi I'd been craving was worth the anxiety of having to interact with my parents in public.

An awkward silence filled the space between us, Dad lifting up his menu to shield his eyes from the sun that had started to slant onto our booth, and Mom and I looking away from each other. I glanced around the restaurant again, this time observing the other families smiling at each other, wondering idly if I would ever again feel happy sitting at a restaurant with my parents, and then feeling mildly surprised at my lack of desire for such a future.

Back in my room, I stared motionless at the television, riveted by Chris Rock's speech. "Now the thing is, what are we protesting — the big question: Why this Oscars? Why this Oscars, you know?" He continued as he paced, the cameras capturing every angle of his perfectly tailored suit. "It's the 88th Academy Awards. Which means this whole 'no black nominees' thing has happened at least 71 other times, okay? You gotta figure that it happened in the '50s, in the '60s — you know like one of those years Sidney Poitier didn't put out a movie. I'm sure there were no black nominees some of those years. Say '65, '62 or '63 — and black people did not protest! Why? Because we had real things to protest at the time. We had real things to protest. We were too busy being raped and lynched to care about who won best cinematographer. When your grandmother's swinging from a tree, it's really hard to care about best documentary foreign short!"

I winced a little bit at his casual reference to family members being hung, and the laughter that came from the audience this time was a little bit more nervous. He was, of course, right. The

United States still had a long way to go when it came to racial inequality but, well, at least grandmas weren't being lynched on the regular anymore.

Back at the restaurant, a waitress came by to take our drink orders, and Dad finally sat his menu down.

"Well, Ellie," Dad folded his hands on the table, mimicking my own, signaling that I was in for *A Talk*. My heart raced.

We found out today that Nana has cancer.

I'm being sued for fraud, and we might lose all of our money.

We submitted a transfer application to UCLA on your behalf and you've been accepted so you won't be returning to TCU in the fall.

"Your mom and I just wanted to let you know that we will not be watching the Oscars tonight."

"Oh," I responded dumbly, surprised at the serious posture he had taken for such an inconsequential matter.

"Yep," he continued past my lame acknowledgement. "We've just decided that we are tired of Hollywood using their acceptance speeches to spout propaganda and we just aren't going to stand for it anymore."

I had been surprised at the fact that Mom and Dad took the time to tell me that they weren't watching the Oscars, but their explanation of their decision made a little bit more sense. I was long used to the sounds of Dad yelling at the TV, calling Democrats idiots and assholes, and I guess Dad had just gotten tired of having to be confronted with people who disagreed with him on every channel but Fox News.

Still, I raised my eyebrows sardonically. “Seriously? You guys are boycotting the Oscars because they’re too liberal?”

“It’s not about being liberal,” Mom cut in. “It’s about the fact that most of these actors aren’t really educated about their political opinions, and they’re using their popularity to influence innocent, uninformed viewers.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think you’re seriously overestimating the amount of influence Meryl Streep has on undecided voters, but whatever.”

“Well, you’re welcome to watch it if you want, of course,” if I thought Mom’s tone had been patronizing before, it was nothing on Dad now. “But your mom and I won’t be joining you.”

I shrugged. *It’s not like I really wanted to spend more time with you guys anyway.*

We lapsed back into uncomfortable silence, briefly interrupted by our waitress bringing us our drinks and taking our orders, and then on to an hour of jilted conversation, endless sighs, and sharp barbs from things left unsaid. Most of me thought that their decision to boycott the Oscars was petty and ridiculous and not worth another thought, but a small part of me couldn’t ignore the chafing of old wounds. How hard is it to just listen to people in pain and sympathize with them?

Chris Rock, at least, was doing his best to help the conservatives who were still watching the Oscars understand. “Well here’s the real question,” he continued, my awkward dinner with my parents long forgotten. “The real question everybody wants to know in the world is: Is Hollywood racist? You know. You gotta go at that at the right way. Is it burning-cross racist? No. Is it ‘Fetch me some lemonade’ racist? No! It’s a different type of racist. Hollywood is sorority racist. It’s like, ‘We like you Ronda, but you’re not a Kappa.’ That’s how Hollywood is.”

I winced again at his sorority reference, but I knew he was right. How many black girls were there in my own sorority? Four? Five? More than most sororities, but still not nearly enough. Chris continued on for a little bit about microaggressions, but I was lost in thought about how Greek life reflected the systems of privilege that existed in our country. How did we get here? Are we destined to continue to perpetuate these systems of white supremacy? As a country, we've gone from slavery, to segregation and Jim Crow, to Greek life and a white-washed Hollywood. The systems are getting smaller and less powerful, and that was something. But will they ever disappear entirely? Or will Black Americans continue to feel unwelcome in this country?

"What I'm trying to say is it's not about boycotting anything — it's just, we want opportunity. We want the black actors to get the same opportunities as white actors — that's it! You know. Not just once. Leo gets a great part every year. All you guys get great parts all the time. What about the black actors? Look at Jamie Foxx. Jamie Foxx is one of the best actors in the world, man. Jamie Foxx — he is! Jamie Foxx was so good in Ray that they went to hospital and unplugged the real Ray Charles. It's like 'We don't need two of these!'

"Hey, welcome to the 88th Academy Awards!"

The audience laughed and cheered as Chris Rock walked offstage to make room for the two glamorous presenters of the Best Original Screenplay award, and I wanted to clap right along with them. But my joy evaporated almost immediately when I remembered my parents sitting in the other room, purposefully ignorant of what I had just witnessed. Chris had handled this issue so well, but his efforts felt fruitless when they weren't received by the people whose minds needed to be changed. I sighed- my thousandth one of the night- and settled in to hope for awards for my favorite movies, wondering if things could truly ever change.

Roses are Red, Violets are Blue, Should I Tell my Roommate that Terrorists are People Too

After our lunch in the Holy/ Mystical City of Tsfat, we headed to this organization called Stand With Us, which was, as Amos put it, where we got our dose of Birthright Propaganda. My pen looped and stroked smoothly across the pages of the travel journal that my cousin Cori had bought for me years ago from her trip to India, the black ink stark against the creamy white hand-made pages. For years, the journal had left me with a sense of nagging guilt as it sat on a shelf in my closet, collecting dust, but I was glad now that I had neglected it for so long, as it was the perfect size for my summer travel adventures.

Stand With Us is an “apolitical” organization that exists to educate visitors to Israel about the history of the State of Israel, and why they believe that people should, well, stand with them. I wrote now, sitting cross-legged in my pajamas on top of the red floral comforter of my hotel bed. I say “apolitical” because I don’t really know how anything surrounding Israel and its existence as a country can be considered “apolitical.” I paused to look out the window of our 16th floor hotel room in downtown Jerusalem. Five days into my trip, and it was still hard for me to wrap my head around the fact that I was on the other side of the world, in Israel. It was even harder at night when I could squint and easily convince myself that the sparkling cityscape of Jerusalem was Los Angeles, or Fort Worth, or any other American city.

“Writing about today?” I looked away from my musings as my roommate Shanna walked in from the bathroom, toweling her dark, curly hair.

Shanna and I had been randomly assigned by our trip leaders to be roommates at our first hotel, in the city of Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee, and we became fast friends. She was funny, adventurous, and easy to talk to. But as much as I had already grown to love her, Shanna made

me a little nervous. She had grown up in an orthodox Persian-Jewish family, and I was always anxious that conversations with her would reveal that I didn't actually know that much about the Jewish faith. My dad had been Jewish, but he had died before I was old enough to remember him and with him went most of my potential exposure to Judaism. As I got older, my Jewish heritage had become more important to me and I wanted to learn more about it. Or at least, that's what I had told Birthright when they interviewed me to see if I qualified for the free trip to Israel given to Jewish youth around the world, and they seemed to find that an acceptable enough reason to send me abroad. Still, the trip so far had me living in a constant state of low-level anxiety at being exposed as "not Jewish enough."

I swallowed my worry, though, and smiled. "Yeah, but it's so hard to remember everything that happened. Every day is such a blur, I have to concentrate so hard to remember everything we did and all the important conversations I had." Rafting down the Jordan River, wine tasting in the Golan Heights, weeping at the military cemetery on Mount Herzl, bartering with vendors in the Jerusalem marketplace- those were just a few of the adventures we had had since landing in Tel Aviv just a short time ago. The first couple of days had been non-stop fun and light-hearted sightseeing, but I suspected that with our visit to Stand With Us that day, we were beginning to transition to perhaps a more political side of the trip.

Shanna nodded as she threw the towel back onto the bathroom floor and picked up her hairbrush. "Yeah, and I'm so tired at the end of each day. I can't believe you've kept that up every day."

I nodded back. "I'm surprised, too, honestly. I've never been this diligent about anything before, but I'm so glad because it's what? Day five? And I already barely remember what we did

on day one. There's no way I'd remember this trip at all by the time I got home if I didn't write it down as it happened."

"You barely remember what we did on day one?" she teased in mock outrage. "How could you forget rafting down the Jordan River and beating Elie and Amos in our water fight?" She waved her hairbrush, miming when we had shoved her boyfriend and his roommate into the water after their failed attempt to do the same to us, and I laughed at the memory.

"Okay fine, I remember day one," I conceded, still laughing.

Shanna grinned at her small victory and began to pull the brush through her long, dark curls, slowly padding barefoot across the questionable hotel carpet to her bed next to the window. "I know what you mean though. I'm so glad that Elie is recording everything to make into a video, or else there's a lot I would probably forget too." She nodded toward my journal. "What are you writing about right now?"

I sighed. "Stand With Us."

Shanna paused her brushing and frowned, her thick eyebrows furrowing. "Why do you say it like that?"

"Well," I hesitated. The low-level of anxiety that was always buzzing through my veins ratcheted up a couple of notches. I remembered the words of Victoria, the Birthright Amazing Israel Director, when we arrived at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, what already felt like ages ago:

Don't forget that this trip has been generously donated to you by our donors, the Jewish American Federation, and the State of Israel. This is not just a free vacation; it is a gift given to you by people who believe in our mission that every young Jewish person should get to come to

Israel. If you do anything to show us that you shouldn't have received this gift, you will be forced to purchase your return ticket home, at an average price of \$1,500.

On the other hand, the words of our staff leaders and tour guide also echoed through my mind. *Don't be afraid to ask questions! You are allowed to disagree with us, but give us an opportunity to explain our point of view.*

But how many questions were too many? What was considered "engaging in the process" and what was considered treason?

I weighed the risks for a moment, and decided that this conversation was unlikely to make Shanna suspicious of anything, and even less likely to motivate her to say something about it to a staff member.

"It's just that everything that guy told us, where he basically summed up all of Israel's history in 45 minutes-," Shanna interrupted by laughing a little, and I joined in, remembering how frazzled our brains had been after the dense lecture given to us by a charismatic University of Arizona graduate who now worked as an advocate at Stand With Us. He had energetically and effectively summed up hundreds of years of history in less than an hour, but even with his impressive lecture skills, two hundred years of history in forty-five minutes is still a lot of information to process. It was especially difficult when a lot of that information was about how the Jewish people, after centuries of persecution, had settled on to a small piece of land, and the Arab people had over time demanded that more and more of that land belonged to them.

"Anyways," I continued after our laughter over the absurd speed of the lecture had died down. "Yeah after hearing that lecture, it sounds a lot like Israel has the right to this land, but that guy admitted several times that he's biased, so his lecture was going to be biased." I saw

Shanna open her mouth to answer, so I quickly continued, “I mean, for me it’s really hard to understand where Palestine is coming from after today, but tons of people do side with Palestine, so I guess I’m just wondering what their side of the story is.”

In fact, I don’t think I knew of anyone who openly sided against Palestine. Considering most of my friends were on the same side of the political spectrum as me, I was worried about what supporting Israel would mean for my political identity.

Shanna nodded, less apprehensive now that I didn’t appear to be a total Palestine-sympathizer, and continued to brush her hair. “Yeah, it’s especially hard because on like every single political issue I’m a Democrat- like feminism, black lives matter, gun control, whatever- so it’s hard to have to agree with the Republican Party about Israel, but I definitely do.”

“Yeah!” I agreed enthusiastically, glad now that we had at least established that we were on the same page about our other political values and the party implications that came with supporting Israel. “I don’t really know anything about the Israel-slash-Palestine conflict, other than what we heard today, but I feel like I always see all my liberal friends supporting Palestine.”

Shanna dug around through her bag as I was talking, putting away her brush and pulling out a bottle of lotion which she began methodically rubbing into her legs. “I think that it’s hard because in America there’s so much Islamophobia that the Democrats have overcompensated by supporting the Muslims in everything, even when they shouldn’t- like with Palestine,” she speculated.

I capped my pen and set my journal aside, committing to the conversation and not wanting to get ink everywhere in the meantime. “Yeah, there’s this Muslim girl that I’m friends with on Facebook, and she’s super liberal. She was a huge Bernie supporter, and she’s always

posting a ton of feminist articles, and I know she posts a lot of stuff in support of Palestine.” I thought back to the months leading up to the primaries, where my news feed had been full of Juwariah Syed posting multiple times a day about how corrupt Hillary Clinton was, how racist and sexist Donald Trump was, how she wouldn’t see *Wonder Woman* because Gal Gadot was Israeli; on and on it went. Even now that Clinton had defeated Sanders and then lost to Trump, she constantly filled my news feed with articles bemoaning Trump’s endless list of offenses.

Shanna’s eyes got wider and wider as I spoke, and now she narrowed them in anger. “She says she’s a feminist, and she says that she supports Palestine?” I nodded. “Okay, well that girl clearly has no idea what she’s talking about because there’s no way that you can be a Muslim and support Palestine and be a feminist too.” I startled at the harsh tone she had suddenly taken. “I mean do you know how oppressive Islam is against women?”

“I mean- I don’t really-,” I stammered a little, trying to agree with her in a way that wasn’t Islamophobic. Alarm bells went off in my head that said defending Juwariah might be crossing into not-Jewish-enough territory, and I had my own reservations about some Muslim practices, but I wasn’t about to write off an entire religion as sexist. “I guess she’s never like explicitly called herself a feminist, but she was super pro-Bernie during the primaries, so I guess I just assumed-,”

Shanna rolled her eyes. “Fuck Bernie. He’s the reason Hillary lost to Trump, and everyone knows it. No offense, but this girl sounds like a total bitch.”

I swallowed nervously, thinking of Juwariah’s sweet smile and the way that her eyes lit up when she talked about the Down’s Syndrome kids that she volunteered with. I agreed with Shanna about Bernie’s contribution to Hillary losing the election, and I knew that it was easy to

call a girl you'd never met a harsh word. Still, her cruel words shocked me. Shanna, however, didn't notice my reaction to her words, and started gesticulating wildly as her speech turned into a full-on tirade.

“And, look, okay, it's not like I don't get it. I'm Persian, and it's obvious that I look Middle-Eastern. People assume that because I'm Middle-Eastern, I'm a Muslim, and people say really shitty things about me. A couple of months ago I was on the bus and this woman started literally screaming at me to take my terrorist family and 'go back to our country,'" she aggressively air-quoted, globs of lotion still stuck to her fingers, “and at first I tried to tell her that I'm not even Muslim- I'm Jewish- plus I was born in America, but she wouldn't listen, so I just sat there and took it and it was awful,” she paused for a moment, allowing both of us to feel the effects of her story, but then she shrugged. “But honestly, I can't really blame her. I mean, I know it's awful to say, but it's true what all those Republicans say- not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslim.”

I was shocked at her generalization. *What about the man who shot at that movie theater in Colorado? Or the man who shot all of those elementary school kids at Sandy Hook?* I wanted to ask. *They weren't Muslim and they were white. You wouldn't call them terrorists?*

But Shanna was lost to my reactions now, as she began getting agitated again. “And when it comes down to it, the whole Israel- Palestine debate is really just about Jews vs. Muslims, and I side completely with the Jews. I know that Muslims are oppressed in The U.S.- and Myanmar or whatever- but Jews have been oppressed for *literally our entire existence*,” she was truly heated now, her voice too big for our cramped hotel room.

“So, if I have to choose between my race and my religion, I choose my religion- 100%. Because I don’t even get to choose my race- I was born with it- so why would I choose it now? Although,” her tirade lost steam suddenly, as the weight of a revelation brought her down a couple of notches, “I guess I was born with my religion too. Still,” she shook her head out of her doubt, but she went on in a more even tone. “I could still choose to believe something else, but I don’t. I could choose to be Muslim or Christian or Buddhist or whatever, but I don’t. I’m Jewish, so I side with Israel.”

I nodded, understanding that this was a moment that she needed to feel validated, not a moment that was appropriate for my debate. I couldn’t agree with her on most of what she’d said. I didn’t think that all Muslims were terrorists- or even most of them, nor did I think that you could boil the Israel-Palestine conflict down to a Judaism-Islam conflict. I didn’t say any of that though. I’d come here to learn more about the Jewish identity, and what it could mean for me, and, well, that’s what Shanna gave me. For her, being Jewish was both the culture that she was born into and the religion that she chose. I thought about asking her if she would still consider herself Jewish if she had chosen another religion, as I had, but I knew this was not the time.

Shanna blew air out of her lips, the fight going out of her when she realized I wasn’t trying to give her one. “Sorry I ranted for so long.”

I shrugged. “You’re good. I’m glad I got to hear your perspective.”

She smiled at me and then looked at the clock. “Shoot. It’s late. We should probably go to bed, we have to be up early.”

I nodded. “Yeah, you can go ahead and turn out the lights. I’m going to finish journaling, but I can just use the light from my phone.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it.”

She waited until I pulled my phone out and turned on the flashlight before flipping off the light switch and crawling under her covers. “Good night, Elle.”

“Good night.”

That One Time I Almost Felt Like a Conservative

An ice-cold drop of water ran off the beer bottle in my hand, onto my chest, and down my shirt, mingling with the sweat that had beaded on my skin from the sweltering Texas heat. It was mid-September, and all of my friends from high school who had gone to school in the Midwest or on the East Coast were reveling in the crisp, fall air and yellowing leaves while I fanned myself enviously from afar. Tonight was particularly gross. It was one of those nights that nothing you could do could stop you from feeling hot or sweaty. The kind of night where you knew that you would probably still feel sticky even after you had taken a shower. I often complained about the Texas humidity, but tonight truly felt as though I was sitting inside someone's mouth.

I set the beer back down on the table in front of me and settled back into the cushions of the whicker patio furniture that I sat on, feeling- despite the weather- pretty content in my environment. The cold beer in my hand helped to abate the heat- if only a little bit- and I smiled at my surroundings. The gauzy, white curtains that hung around the backyard porch of our friend Andrew's house fluttered gently in the light evening breeze, and the string of small, bare bulbs hung above and around me cast a soft, warm glow on the strange assembly of friends I sat with. Inside the house, the bright flashing lights reflected on the colorful balloons Andrew and I had strung up earlier as decoration for his fiancé's birthday, but I was mostly oblivious to them now, preferring the light-hearted conversation of my friends to the thumping bass of the party.

Across from me, Camille and her boyfriend Jakub kept interrupting each other as they each fought over who could tell me their story. As Camille waves her arms animatedly, I could see flashes of the tattoos on her forearm: "Purchased" on her right and "Set Free" on her left in the flowing cursive that I teasingly referred to as the, "basic Christian white girl tattoo font." She

ran the “Purchased” arm through her artificially red hair now, sighing in defeat. “Okay, you just tell it.”

Beside me, Lindsey laughed politely at Jakub and Camille’s antics. My somewhat-estranged ex-roommate, her awkward distance from me two chairs over seemed to represent the months of silence between us, followed by the very recent attempt to patch things up. Even in the stifling heat, she was dressed modestly, in jeans and a loose, long-sleeved, off-shoulder shirt that she kept adjusting every time it dared slip far enough off her shoulder to reveal her bra strap. Legs crossed with one hand propping her up on the cushion and one hand holding her glass of water, I knew she felt ill at ease here, amongst drinking and tattoos and liberals, and part of me acknowledged that I should give her credit for sticking it out. But, man, it was uncomfortable, and I honestly wished she would just leave.

“Okay,” Jakub said, leaning forward, excitement lighting his eyes, oblivious to my discomfort, and I grinned back in response to his enthusiasm. I loved Camille, but I was glad she’d let Jakub tell the story because his musical theater background made him a much more compelling storyteller. “So, while you two were inside getting drinks just now, Camille comes over and sits back down after playing with Finn,” he began, referring to the six-week-old puppy brought to the party by another friend, “and she says to me, ‘Jake let’s get a dog.’ And I said, ‘Camille, we cannot afford a dog right now. Maybe when we move in together and we’re splitting rent and sharing our income.’ And Camille responds with, ‘Okay, let’s move in together then.’ And I said, ‘We can’t move in together until we’re married,’ and she just responds with, ‘Okay.’”

Jakub and Camille had only been dating for a little less than a year, so I knew they weren't planning on getting married anytime super soon. I laughed loudly, knowing now where this story was going, while Lindsey's eyes widened, and she choked out a nervous giggle beside me.

"So, then I said, 'Alright, marry me,' and again, she just says, 'Okay.'" He kept having to shake his curly red hair out of his face as he told his story, and the bottom of his colorful rooster tattoo peeked out from underneath his shirt sleeve. "And I keep going to try to call her bluff, so I say, 'Hey, Matt and Kaity!'" He paused, and briefly turned to Lindsey to politely explain. "Matt and Kaity are my older brother and his wife, and they're also our church city group leaders, and they were out here earlier too," Lindsey nodded in understanding, and then Jakub turned back to us and launched back into his story, "So, I said, 'Hey, Matt and Kaity! I've got something to tell you! *Camille and I are engaged,*' and *still* Camille just shrugs, so then finally at that point I gave up and said, 'Okay, we're done, let's stop before I vomit and/ or we get married just to keep this stupid joke going.'"

The three of us burst into uproarious laughter, drowning out Lindsey's somewhat less enthusiastic chuckle. Jakub's large belly shook as he laughed, and I grinned even wider looking at him sitting next to Camille, whose ever-present black skinny jeans and tank top clung to her thin frame. The two of them seemed so different in every way, but they were nearly always in sync, finishing each other's sentences and predicting which story the other was about to tell in response to something one of us said.

"You two *would* get married just because you're too stubborn to let the joke go," I said when I had finally caught my breath, and they laughed again in agreement. "But," I added, "you

would hate yourselves for being just like every other young, Christian couple who gets married after only like a year of dating.”

“True,” Camille agreed, shuddering in horror, “Like Kristen and Kercho.”

“I know,” I shook my head, “I still can’t believe them.” I turned to Lindsey, “Kristen and Kercho were two Paradox people-,”

“Yeah, that you met on your trip to Brazil, right?” she finished for me.

“Yeah,” I was surprised that she remembered. I talked about the friends in my church that I had made on our service trip to Brazil- friends like Camille- quite a bit, but I never really got the impression that Lindsey actually listened when I talked.

“They’re married now?” Lindsey asked, inferring from what Camille had said a moment before.

I nodded. “Yeah, both of them were single when I met them on the Brazil trip, and both of them were married within a year.”

Lindsey shuddered despite the heat. “That gives me anxiety just thinking about it.”

I nodded again. “I know, right?” After a moment, I sighed nostalgically, thinking of the children who had sung to us as we walked into their community center each day, and the bonds of complete trust and love that had formed so rapidly between our team members. “I miss Brazil.”

“Yeah,” Camille agreed hesitantly, “Sometimes I really don’t though.”

I nodded again, not quite agreeing with her, but knowing that I was probably seeing that trip through rose-tinted glasses. “Did I ever tell you about the super awkward conversation I had

with Dustin about politics?” I asked, thinking of the few moments on the trip that I did remember as being somewhat less-than-wonderful.

Camille shook her head.

“Yeah, so he and Shannon and I were all sitting in the lobby of the hotel one morning after breakfast, and Shannon was telling him about some news alert that she’d gotten about Paul Ryan—something about him maybe being a, uh, white horse or wild card or something like that in the Republican primaries. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

Camille nodded slowly, trying to piece together long-since irrelevant election news in her head. “Yeah, I think that sounds familiar.”

“Yeah, so anyway,” I continued, shifting in my seat to cross my legs underneath me. “They’re talking about how dumb it is, and I said something along the lines of, y’know, ‘well, anyone but Trump, right?’ and it gets kinda awkward and Shannon tells me that Dustin is a Trump supporter.”

“Ugh,” Camille snorted in disgust. “I forgot about that.” Jakub responded with a similar noise of disdain, while Lindsey remained politely impassive, probably unwilling to pass judgement on people she’d never met.

“Yeah,” I agreed, shaking my head. “So, I turn to him, and I’m all surprised, and I said, ‘Really?’ and he gets kinda embarrassed and he’s trying to explain himself and he says some bullshit along the lines of not liking any of his specific policies but thinking that Washington needed a shakeup blah, blah, blah. And I just didn’t really say anything because I didn’t want to argue with him, and I guess he’s trying to make it seem like we’re on the same page or something and assumed that I was pro-Bernie since I’m in college, because then he says, ‘I’m anyone but

Clinton, I mean I would take Sanders in a heartbeat.” I concluded, rolling my eyes. Senator Bernie Sanders had attracted a large following of young voters with his populist message and free college platform, and I was one of only a few people my age who were not charmed by his thick Brooklyn accent and did not prefer him to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as the Democratic nominee.

Jakub sighed wistfully, “Oh, Bernie. If only.”

I shook my head and snorted in disgust. “Fuck Bernie.”

All three heads turned to look at me in surprise.

“What?” Jakub finally managed.

“Fuck Bernie,” I repeated. “He lost us the election, and you know it.”

“Who do you mean by us?” Camille asked.

I looked at her like it should be obvious. “You know, us. Democrats. Liberals. Sane people.”

I looked out of the corner of my eye at Lindsey at that one. She’d voted for Hillary Clinton in the general election, but she probably didn’t appreciate me referring to people like her parents who had voted for Trump as not sane.

“Well, yeah,” Jakub shrugged. “I’m not gonna argue with you there. I hoped so bad that Hillary was going to win... but I still couldn’t vote for her.” Camille nodded in embarrassed agreement.

Now I was the dumbfounded one. “What?”

“She’s done so many awful things in her past, and I couldn’t bring myself to vote for someone who I thought was going to be a bad president.”

“But nowhere near as bad as-,”

“Nowhere near as bad as Trump, I know” Jakub interrupted, “Like I said, I wanted her to win so bad, but I just couldn’t vote for her.”

I bit my lip in order to avoid lashing out at that kind of logic- or lack thereof. *You can’t argue with crazy* I reminded myself. And, more importantly *it doesn’t matter anymore anyway. Trump won. You can’t go back and make them vote for Hillary.*

Camille jumped in to agree with her boyfriend, “Look, I wanted to vote for Hillary, because I’m so strongly pro-choice, but I can’t be a single-issue voter.”

I laughed awkwardly. “See, abortion was the only issue that I was kind’ve iffy on with her.”

I could see Lindsey nodding next to me, but I wasn’t sure if I appreciated her support. Politics wasn’t exactly her preferred topic of conversation- especially with people she had just met, but I tended to disagree with most of her life philosophies and ideologies. A strict Catholic, she cared more about whether or not people were drinking underage or having sex outside marriage than whether or not they were actively caring for the poor, an ideology I found personally repugnant. So, the fact that she was agreeing with me now wasn’t exactly comforting.

Camille gave me a surprised and confused look. She and I had had many passionate conversations about feminism- especially its role in Christianity- in the past, so she must have assumed that I agreed with her about abortion.

“Really?” She asked now, giving me room to explain myself.

“Yeah,” I said slowly, trying to put my words together. I set my beer down on the table in front of me and sat up straighter, folding my legs beneath me on the white wicker chair. “I mean, you know me, you know that I’m a feminist in every other way. And I definitely believe that a lot of the rhetoric around anti-abortion is extremely sexist and misogynistic, but that doesn’t

discount the fact that I still believe abortion is..." *Sinful*. I could hear my pastor's voice in my head, trying to fill in the blank. *Murder. Evil.* "...wrong," I finally settled on. I could see Camille open her mouth to argue, but I cut her off. "*But*, I'm not out here trying to make abortion illegal because I know that making abortion illegal doesn't stop abortions, it just stops safe abortions. And if I am truly pro-life, then I have to care about the life of the mother as well. Well," I amended after a moment, "not that I'm really 'pro-life' for obvious reasons, but anti-abortion I guess. But, either way, Hillary being so staunchly in favor of abortion just doesn't really sit well with me."

"I mean, I agree with you," Camille finally said, "but I still consider myself pro-choice because even though I would never get an abortion, I can't hold people who don't believe in God- and thus don't believe in souls or that life begins at conception- to that same standard."

"Right," I agreed hesitantly, "but if I knew someone who wasn't a Christian but who was thinking about getting an abortion, I would still try to talk her out of it."

Camille shrugged, and I could tell that she disagreed but didn't want to push the point. Perhaps she could tell that I had felt the same way about her and Jakub not voting for Hillary.

"Why can't you consider yourself pro-life?" Lindsey asked finally, surprising us all by actually participating in the conversation at hand. It had been a night of surprises, indeed.

"Well," I said, once again trying to collect myself so that I could articulate myself better, "I think that I am pro-life in the true meaning of the word- actually caring about life, but the pro-life movement is, for the most part, not pro-life. It's just anti-abortion. If they were really pro-life, they would be anti-death penalty, pro-refugee, and pro-government aid for single mothers, but they're not. They're not pro-life; they're just pro-birth."

Camille and Jakub nodded in agreement, and Lindsey just made a, “Hmm,” sound. Our group lapsed into silence, and I looked through the sliding glass doors at the rest of the party going on inside. The dinosaur- themed Happy Birthday banner that I had painstakingly taped up earlier had fallen down, probably due to one of the drunken revelers, who were at this moment jumping on the couch and singing loudly to The Killers’ 2004 anthem, “Mr. Brightside.” That was usually my comfort zone at gatherings like this- on the dance floor, the life of the party, everyone laughing at my ridiculous dancing. But, for once I was totally happy where I was. Even with the tension between Lindsey and me that I couldn’t quite ignore, and even with my almost-spat with Camille and Jakub, I loved this moment. Sitting and laughing and feeling buzzed but not drunk with just a couple of friends, I felt suddenly very in love with the life that I had.

Is this what it’s like to get older? I almost startled at the clarity of my thought, and for just a brief second, I felt the weight of it- getting older. Of a lifetime ahead of me of ex-roommates and awkward political debates and watching my friends fall in love at birthday parties. Of the way we would look at the 2016 election in retrospect and of all the horrors and wonders I had yet to even dream of. Of time doing what it always promised to do- pass.

I shook myself a little. *Lighten up Elle you’re at a birthday party for Christ’s sake.* I picked up my beer, took another sip, and then immediately almost spit it back out when Camille broke the silence with, “So, have I told you the story of when Jakub, Matt, and I took a three-hour road trip to a family reunion, and Matt tried to have the sex talk with us?”

“No!” I cried, wiping off the beer that had dribbled onto my chin. “Tell me *everything!*” Jakub buried his head in his hands in embarrassment as Camille launched into her story, and I

laughed along, once again enjoying the perfect glow of my friends and I, safe in our own little world.

There's Nothing Texans Love More Than Tacos and Jesus

Wind whipped through my hair as Camille pressed on the gas, accelerating down I-35, making my hair even wilder. Even with the wind blowing on me at 70 miles per hour, I didn't dare roll up my window in the passenger seat of Camille's beat-up Honda Civic. The heat- still making me sweat in my denim blouse despite the wind- would only be stifling with the window rolled up, and I didn't want to ask for the air conditioning to be turned on, assuming that Camille was trying to save money on gas by not using the air conditioner. Since the death of her mom a few months prior, I knew that the Cannariatos were struggling to make ends meet, and I was not about to be the bitch whose personal temperature comfort superseded the financial burdens of a grieving family.

"How cool was that brunch?" she yelled at me now, over the roar of the wind that whipped her artificially red hair around the tattoos on her shoulders- one of the rebel alliance symbol from Star Wars and one of a line from her mom's favorite song in her hand writing.

"So cool!" I yelled back enthusiastically. The past month had left our country slack-jawed in abject horror as first we watched Hurricane Harvey, then Irma, then Maria wreak immense havoc on North America. When a devastating earthquake racked Mexico City a week later, I had become mostly numb to the destruction and the death that came from these natural disasters, but our friend Nathanael leapt into action. That Sunday, he hosted a donation-based breakfast taco brunch to raise money for the victims of the Mexico City earthquake, and we had showed up to find his small house packed with people there to support his cause. "Did you see those t-shirts he was selling?" I asked as the familiar skyline of Downtown Fort Worth approached ahead of us.

“No!”

“Oh, man. I wanted one so bad but they were \$20, and I don’t have that kind of money to spend on t-shirts,” I lamented.

“Really? What did they look like?” Camille asked, no longer shouting as the Downtown traffic forced us to slow down enough to where we could speak to each other at a normal volume.

“They had that famous picture of the Virgin Mary praying with her hands together and her head to the side and underneath it said, ‘Make Tacos Not War.’”

“Oh my gosh, I need one,” she agreed, swerving suddenly to switch to a faster lane.

I tugged at my collar uncomfortably, wishing I had worn a tank top to church instead of being overly concerned about someone chastising me for dressing immodestly. The 70-mph wind had not been fun, but it was definitely preferable to the ninety-four-degree heat that beat down on us now without any wind or air conditioning to abate it.

“Oh!” I cried, the Virgin Mary shirt reminding me of something I had wanted to tell Camille. “Did you see my Instagram story the other day?”

“No,” she replied, intrigue apparent in her voice as she perceived my sudden excitement.

“What was it?”

“Oh, man. You’re going to love this.” I dug around in my purse for my phone so that I could read my series of posts to her verbatim but explained the backstory as I searched. “So, I was reading through the book of Matthew, and I got to the end where Mary and Mary Magdalene find the empty tomb,” I began, knowing that, as someone who had grown up in the church, Camille would know immediately that I was referring to the account of Jesus’ resurrection in the Biblical Gospel of Matthew, and would need no further explanation of context. “And the angel

approached them and said, 'Do not be afraid for the One you seek is not here. Go, find His disciples and tell them that He has risen,' or whatever. Aha!" I exclaimed triumphantly as I finally found my phone buried under piles of junk in my purse. I opened it and navigated over to my Instagram page as I continued. "So, I posted a little series on Instagram of that page in my Bible with that section highlighted and with three different captions. The first one said, 'Friendly reminder that it was two WOMEN who were first given the task of spreading the gospel of Jesus' resurrection,'" I could see Camille nodding vigorously in my peripheral vision. "The second one said, 'Because Jesus loved and respected women,' and then the third one said, 'What a concept am I right.'"

"Dude, yes."

A month or so after the election, Faith Brown, the girl who had shared that blog post that we had all read and shared about being pro-life and voting for Hillary Clinton wrote a blog post of her own, entitled "From the Christian woman who marched in the Women's March."

"I love to talk about politics and religion in person, because I don't quite fit anywhere," she began. "I am an anti-abortion democrat, a charismatic AND reformed passionate feminist Christian. WHAT. Feminism at its core, is so biblical, and most Christians I am in contact with do, in fact believe feminism, but just are not comfortable associating with the actual word because of the latest wave of 'man haters.'"

"Feminism is believing in equal rights. It means both men and women have the same worth and value, all of them in every color, shape, background. This does not mean we cannot celebrate the different strengths or gifts we might have, it simply means we have the same value."

I'm not sure what person, with any understanding of scripture could argue with that." Unfortunately, many Christians with at least some understanding of scripture did argue with that, as 81% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump, a man whose every campaign speech defied the idea that all people have the same worth and value. And while I had thought that people like Kayla, Faith, and myself- people who cared deeply about our Christian faiths and believed that those principles did not align with the political party we had been raised to believe they did- were in the majority, the numbers showed that we were, in fact, in the minority. By a lot.

"I went on this huge Twitter rant about this the other day," Camille told me, her volume picking up as Downtown Fort Worth disappeared off to my right and our speed picked back up.

"Yeah? About Jesus respecting women, unlike the 'evangelical conservatives' who think that they're following Jesus?" I scoffed thinking back to a previous conversation that I had had with Camille about Christians who voted for Trump.

There is no way that you can reconcile your faith in Jesus with voting for that man. She had said then, legs curled underneath her on her couch where we'd been sitting and listening to Kendrick Lamar's new album together. The Jesus who spoke to the woman at the well and defended a prostitute from stoning would never condone you voting for a man who advocated for grabbing women by the pussy.

"Yeah," Camille said now as we finally pulled off the interstate. "But also just, like, gender roles in general and how women aren't allowed in most ministry spaces. Here," we were stopped at a red light, so she pulled out her phone and quickly scrolled through her twitter feed to find

the beginning of the rant and read out loud to me. "I am gonna rant about a few things that have bothered me today. Apologies if it isn't coherent. I am heated."

"Yes, girl!" I was already excited about where this was headed. "Get heated!"

"Oh, yeah, here we go," Camille grinned hugely at my enthusiasm. "So let me get this straight- you believe in a God that is omnipotent and good. But you also believe that He draws the line at women having careers in what should be a 'male field.' Or He doesn't allow women to preach or teach in any capacity besides women's studies and children ministries."

I shuddered, remembering the stories that Camille had told me of her old church where women were only allowed to volunteer in the children's ministry.

"How is it you can possibly believe God created everyone equal then?" Camille continued, not noticing my grimace. "While also in the same breath teach women that they are 'important' but only in the context of serving-slash-marriage. Most people won't say that outright, but by the way you treat women that is what you are saying. If He is all-powerful then why can't He use women in ministry as he does men? Aren't you limiting God?"

"*Dude,*" I snapped my fingers enthusiastically. "'Aren't you limiting God by saying He can't use women in ministry as He uses men?' *Amazing.*"

"The same spirit who empowered a man to tear apart a lion, lives inside of me." Faith wrote. "That spirit empowers me, compels me to no longer be silent. The Father, creator of the universe, has made both men and women in His image, and He sent his son Jesus to die to give us worth and value that cannot be taken away. It is belittling to his death on the cross to devalue half the people he died for."

The light turned green and Camille put her phone down as she began driving again. “Yeah, and then I go on for like another ten tweets like that, referencing a bunch of women that God used in the Bible, but you get the picture.”

“Yep.” I stuck my arm out the window, trying in vain to use the wind to dry my arm pits. “It’s so stupid when rich, old, white men try to use the Bible to oppress women because there’s like 10,000 examples of God doing the opposite.”

We continued on like that for the next couple of minutes, talking about Phoebe and Lydia and the other amazing Biblical women whose stories we agreed needed to be shared on stage on Sunday mornings, until we eventually arrived back at my house.

“Well,” I said as I put all my junk back into my purse. “We know now that Pastor Jim follows you on Twitter, so whether or not he does anything about your feminist rant, at least he knows you feel that way.” Camille and her boyfriend had been over at our pastor’s house for dinner the week before, and Camille had nearly choked on her soup when Jim revealed that he was an avid follower of her Twitter.

Camille laughed. “Yeah, dude. At first I was so freaked out when I realized he’d been following me without me noticing, but now he has no excuse and can’t say that he didn’t know that women in our church wanted these issues addressed.”

“Yep,” I turned over to give her an awkward one-armed car hug, which surprised her. Normally, we would stay in the car and chat for a while, but as much as I loved hanging out with this girl, I was in desperate need of some air conditioning. “Thanks again for the ride to Nathanael’s!”

“No problem,” she replied warmly, “and, hey, if you ever want to rant more about Christian feminism, you know where to find me.”

I grinned in response before getting out of her car to finally rest inside the air-conditioned comfort of my apartment.

This is Why We Can't Go on Road Trips

The bleak New Mexico landscape rolled past us at an agonizingly slow rate. To my right, endless bare earth expanded all the way to the horizon in every direction. The monotonous brown-orange was only occasionally interrupted by a sage brush or saguaro cactus, and in the distance, the land was barely distinguishable from the grey blanket that wrapped around the sky, dark enough to make time feel meaningless, but not dark enough to tease at rain. I knew that parts of New Mexico were beautiful, with sharp plateaus of flaming rock, but this stretch of Interstate 10 was not one of those parts.

To my left, an eighteen-wheeler started to pass me.

"Ugh," I hung my arms over the steering wheel in despair.

"What?" my mom turned to me sharply, her alarm from my sudden outburst filling the car, overpowering the new One Republic album that had been quietly buffering the awkward silence for the past hour.

"We're driving so slowly a truck is passing us." I moaned the distress from way down deep in my soul.

As soon as she realized there wasn't a real emergency, Mom rolled her eyes at me and turned back to the window.

"Mom, I am the person who drives on the wrong side of the road to pass car- what? Don't give me that look!" I interrupted myself as her head turned back to me, eyebrows raised in deep disapproval. *"Dad's the one who taught me to drive like that on all of those family road trips up to Mammoth,"* I reminded her, my mind briefly travelling back to the mountainous landscape that had accompanied every winter break growing up. Legs cramped up in the back of a different

car, suitcases taking up as much space as possible in the back seat between Nick and I, lest we start fighting, my warm cheek fogging up the window as I leaned on its cool glass, staring out at the familiar white peaks.

“Anyways, as I was saying,” I pulled myself out of the bitter nostalgia that had almost sunk me again. “I pass trucks; trucks do not pass me.”

“They do when you’re towing a small apartment of furniture,” Mom reminded me, the warning in her voice to not speed and damage my car clear.

“I know, I know,” I sighed, rubbing the driver’s side armrest. “Hank’s a good car, and I need to take care of him.”

“That’s right,” Mom confirmed, “because when you take care of your car-”

“Your car takes care of you,” I finished with her in unison. “I know, I know.”

She nodded approvingly. “So, what’s the plan for this weekend again?”

I sat up straighter in my seat, the mere mention of my tantalizingly close return to Texas trouncing my previous boredom with the New Mexico landscape. “We should arrive at El Paso tonight at around eight. Then tomorrow we get on the road at around seven and get to Fort Worth around five, find a U-Haul place to rid ourselves of this stupid trailer, and then get dinner, probably with Annaliese and Holly.” On my left, another eighteen-wheeler began to pass me, and I fought back the stupid competitive urge to speed up.

“Thursday night,” I continued, “we unpack the bed and all the other essentials, and then we’ll unpack everything else Friday after Bingo & Bagels.” I smiled openly at the thought of my long-awaited return to the Friday morning breakfast shared with the Fort Worth homeless, hosted by The NET, the non-profit I’d been interning with since the summer before.

“So, what am I going to do while you’re at Bingo?”

Her words came through to me one syllable at a time, the sounds familiar but the words meaningless.

“What?”

“Well, I would just start unpacking your things for you, but I know how much you hate it when I touch your things or do anything for you.”

She smiled teasingly, but her lighthearted ribbing was completely lost on me. “You’re not going to come to Bingo with me?”

“Well,” her smile faded as she caught my tone, “I mean, do you really want me there?”

“Mom, yes!” I was beyond incredulous.

“Why? I’m just going to be really awkward.” She whined. “I don’t know how to talk to homeless people.”

“You just talk to them like normal people,” my tone turned harsh. I had spoken often about the real friendships I had formed with the people who ate breakfast every week with me with during my time at The NET. Her attitude that they were somehow “other” and unable to socialize did more than just rub me the wrong way.

She bit her lip, knowing that there was nowhere down that road that would give her any purchase with me. “And what time is it again?”

“8AM,” she groaned and I raised my voice over it, “and it’s fifteen minutes away so we need to leave at 7:45.”

She groaned again.

“Mom, this is really important to me.”

The trump card. No parent could justify saying no to “This is really important to me” and after the past six months of living under her rules and decisions, forced to take a semester away from school and live under her roof, I wasn’t afraid to guilt her into doing this.

“Okay, okay! I’ll go,” She huffed. Less than gracious, but still a commitment.

“Thank you.”

I focused my attention back to the road ahead, turning on the windshield cleaners when I noticed the number of bugs that had met their tragic end on the glass.

“You’ll need to give Hank a good bath when we get to Fort Worth too.” Mom advised, also noticing the multitude of insect carcasses on my windshield.

I nodded. “There’s a place I always go that’s directly on the way back to campus from Bingo. I get \$6 washes with my student ID.”

“\$6?” She asked skeptically, “How good of a wash is it if it’s only \$6?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s one of those ones where you drive through the thing and the machines wash it.”

“So, there’s no hand wash?”

“I mean,” Confusion and hesitancy filled my tone, not understanding why she was making such a big deal about this car wash, “at the end, a guy comes out and windexes my windows.” I offered.

“Isn’t there somewhere else that you can go that will hand-wash it? Why do we have to go to this place?”

I bit my lip to prevent myself from responding immediately, causing my eyes to tear and the dull landscape before me to blur into a totally featureless monotone. Bitterly angry responses

screamed for dominance inside my head. I had so much pent up hurt from her deciding to take me out of school and keep me a thousand miles away from all that my heart longed for, and it took everything in me to not give that pain a voice.

Because now that my sentence in your prison has been served, I just want to go back to my old life. I wanted to say.

Because after six months of being away from everyone and everything I care about, I just want to go back to the way things were before.

Because half of my friends graduated last month and since you robbed me of my last semester with them and now I have no idea when I'm going to see them again, I want to at least be able to return to my old car wash.

But I was tired of this old argument, and we still had fifteen hours left of this cramped car ride, and I was trying so hard to do the whole forgiveness thing. So instead I just shrugged, the casual gesture masking months of anger and bitterness that I wasn't sure now could ever go away.

"Well, it's important to get your tires hand-washed too. Isn't there some place nearby where you can get some Mexicans to wash your tires?"

"Mom."

"What?" She honestly sounded like she didn't know.

"That is incredibly racist." Disbelief and incredulity didn't even begin to cover the fact that I had to explain this out loud to her.

"No it's not!"

"Are you kidding me?"

"It's not racist if it's always true-"

"Good God." Was this conversation really happening?

"- just like it's not racist for me to say that you should get some Vietnamese ladies to do your nails."

"How can you even say that? This is why *Di Hai* and *Di Tu* say that you're white-washed," I invoked the names of her cousins who had come on the helicopter to Saigon with Mom and her siblings when they escaped Vietnam in 1975. Having married other Vietnamese men, they often criticized Mom for marrying a white man and not teaching Nick and me to speak Vietnamese. Mom always justified her decision by saying that she didn't want her and her children to be able to speak a language that her husband didn't speak, but to her cousins that only illustrated the problem.

"*Di Hai* and *Du Tu* would agree with me about getting some Mexicans to wash your car," she replied, unfazed by my criticism.

"Yeah, well, they're racists too," I muttered, remembering other times my aunts had criticized Mom- like when she told them she would let Nick and I marry whoever we wanted no matter their race.

"Either way," I lifted one of my hands from the steering wheel so I could emphasize my argument with hand gestures, "that's still a perfect example of how that stereotype is not always true."

"What? You're telling me you know of a nail place that isn't owned and operated by Vietnamese ladies?" She scoffed

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you."

“Yeah, right.” She rolled her eyes and turned back to look out the window, thinking she had won the argument.

“The place where I got my nails done last time I was here for the wedding has all white women.” I distracted myself briefly with the thought of the four days I had spent back in Fort Worth, interrupting the six months of isolation in Los Angeles. Brunch at my favorite pancake house with my sorority sisters. Squeals of surprised delight and lung-crushing hugs from my NET coworkers at Bingo. Wind gently blowing my curls in front of my face as I watched Annie float down the aisle with her stunning wedding bouquet to Josh, who was barely containing tears. *Thank you, Jesus I had prayed on my flight home Thank you for a perfect weekend.*

“Sure it does.” Mom’s snark brought me out of my sweet reminiscing. “Why don’t you take me there?”

“Alright, I will.” My voice hardening again at her attempt to call my bluff.

“Alright, I’m looking forward to it.” She turned back to the window again, and I looked at the clock, sighing. Fourteen and a half hours to go.

Jesus was Jewish Too

The bus careened around a tight curve of the narrow road winding up the mountain of the Israeli Golan Heights, and, in typical fashion, Moshe the bus driver continued at his breakneck speed, ignoring the protests of both the tires under his bus as well as the passengers on it. Instinctively, I reached out to stop Danny, who'd been standing in the aisle, from falling into my lap. When the bus leveled back onto all four tires, Danny and I both looked down at my hand splayed out on his ribs, my skin looking especially pale sitting on top of his neon pink Wonder Woman tank top. I quickly pulled my hand back into my lap, slightly embarrassed.

We were nearing the end of our Birthright Israel trip, and today our tour guide was going to take us up the Golan Heights to tell us the story of the Six Days War. The Golan Heights were a small mountain range that bordered Israel and Syria and were won for Israel when they shocked the world by defeating both Syria and Egypt in a war that lasted from only June 5- June 11 in 1967. It was a story that many Jewish people, Israeli's especially, told with immense pride.

"Come on, Elle," Danny joked with a wink back in the bus, "I know you're into me, but I'm your staff leader. You can't just touch me like that- it's not appropriate."

I rolled my eyes. "Please. I was only trying to prevent myself from having to touch more of you when you fell into my lap. The next time that I voluntarily touch you, it'll be when I'm pushing you off this mountain to your death." I didn't remember how or why exactly, but from the beginning this is what my friendship with Danny had been- nonstop, merciless teasing.

Danny feigned hurt, his thick eyebrows pushing together and up, making his big, brown eyes look innocent and doe-like. "How could you even say something like that?" He changed

tactics suddenly and grinned smugly. “Doesn’t matter- you’d never get away with it. These people love me too much; they would never let anything happen to me.”

“Oh, yeah?” I grinned hugely at the easy victory I saw coming and pushed myself up to kneel on my chair, facing the rest of our group behind me, and trying to ignore the motion sickness setting in as the sparse mountainside landscape whipped backwards in my peripheral vision.

“Hey guys!” my theater voice carried easily across the rows of my fellow Jewish Birthright travelers, and most stopped their conversations to look at me. “Real quick- raise your hand if you would help me push Danny off this mountain.”

Rows full of hands shot up into the air.

“Awesome, that’s what I thought. Thank you!” I turned back to Danny and sighed happily. “I love being right.” Even though I was the one who teased Danny most of the time, the rest of our group had gotten on board with it pretty quickly as well.

He shrugged and looked down, putting on the wounded puppy routine again. “Yeah, sounds about right. I’ve been bullied my whole life- guess I shouldn’t have expected that that would go away in adulthood.”

I rolled my eyes again, briefly wondering if I could strain a muscle doing that too frequently. My imagination ran for a second, envisioning myself in an Israeli hospital, trying to explain that I had hurt my eye from rolling it too much at my obnoxious staff leader, who was actually my friend. I shook myself out of my wild nightmare and responded to Danny’s desperate plea for sympathy. “Please, you think you can gain my sympathy with that? You’re sitting in a bus full of Jewish kids- how many of us do you think *weren’t* bullied growing up?”

“Yeah,” he agreed reluctantly, gripping on to the overhead compartment when Moshe swerved suddenly again, “but growing up in Dallas, Texas I bet none of y’all were bullied as bad as I was.”

“True,” I conceded. “Generally not a lot of anti-Semitism in Los Angeles.” The small suburb south of Los Angeles that I had grown up in had a very small Jewish population, but I couldn’t remember any instances of my Jewish classmates being bullied for being different. The kids at my middle school tended to bully people for much more consequential matters- like whether or not you wore too much Axe body spray or how colorful your braces were.

Danny nodded. “Have I told you about the time that two Evangelical Christians approached me in Downtown Dallas?”

My eyes widened. “No!”

“Yeah,” he shook his head and laughed as he launched into his story, “So, I’m walking down Downtown Dallas, minding my own business, when these two guys approach me and start talking to me.” His words painted familiar brushstrokes in my imagination, as I saw the skyscrapers that had surrounded me on many a weekend sojourn to the nearby “Big Brother” of my dear Fort Worth. In my mind, I placed him at Klyde Warren Park, the famous city park built right over a freeway. He’d be ambling down the sandy dirt path, enticed by the myriad of food trucks on his right, or amused by the croquet players on his left, their pastel outfits creating a comically stereotypical tableau of American wealth. “I don’t remember how we got there, but at one point they asked me if I was Jewish, and I told them yes,” Danny continued, bringing me out of my imaginative reverie. “So, they ask me if I can pray for them.”

“Oh boy,” I interjected, trying not to reveal the discomfort that was beginning to worm its way through my chest.

“Oh, I’m not even at the good part yet,” he replied, grinning wickedly. “So, I say ‘sure,’ why not, right? Just trying to be polite. So, they start praying saying some shit whatever, and then they start praying *for the redemption of my soul*,” the irony in his voice wrapped around each word as the worm in my heart grew to a snake and constricted even harder around my heart.

“Yikes,” I managed to eek out, trying to pretend that I hadn’t, on many occasions, prayed for the redemption of the souls of my unbelieving friends. Only in the privacy of my own heart, but still.

“Yeah, right?” Danny scoffed, “So, I say, ‘whoa, whoa- why are you praying for the redemption of my soul?’ and they said, ‘well, because you’re Jewish, and your people killed Jesus, so we need to pray that God has mercy on you for the sins of your people.’”

I gasped in real horror this time. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nope. And you know what I said in response?”

“Oh, no. What?”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure that if he comes back, we’ll kill him again.”

“Oh, my God,” I laughed, trying to will the snake to loosen its grip. “That’s so savage.”

“I know,” he shrugged, “but they kinda had it coming.”

“Oh, for sure,” I nodded, genuinely agreeing. “So, then...” I trailed off, trying to collect my thoughts, staring out the window as we climbed higher and higher up the mountain. More and more of the Israeli landscape came into view as we climbed, and below us I could see the rows and rows of grape vines at the winery we had visited the day before.

“What?” Danny prompted after a moment.

I turned back to him. “Do you think that growing up in Dallas, surrounded by so many Evangelical Christians- do you think that it made you care more about being Jewish? Because you were somewhat persecuted for it?”

“Hmm,” he took a moment, and I could tell that he was taking my question seriously and wanted to give me a good answer. “I mean, yes, in a way. I think that when people made fun of me for being Jewish, my Jewish faith is ironically what got me through. But I mean, it’s more than that, like I don’t only care about being Jewish because of the fact that I was bullied for it.

“Right,” I assured him, “I didn’t think so. But so, then, what does being Jewish mean to you?” I thought back to something Assaf, our Israeli tour guide had told us on the first day. “Because this idea of Judaism being a religious identity instead of a cultural one is a very new and very American idea, right? But then you’re not very religious, are you?”

He started to shake his head, but then paused. “Well, I guess it depends on what you mean by religious.”

“Okay,” I took a moment to think again, trying to pull myself out of the Christian theology that I had so deeply entrenched myself in- the one that believed that loving Jesus didn’t make you a religious person either, “Let’s start with do you believe in God?”

“Again, it depends on what you mean by that.”

I fumbled, trying to figure out how to phrase a question about God that didn’t sound like it came from a pulpit. From the corners of my eyes, I could see Shanna and Elie, sitting behind me and looking at Danny, suddenly a part of this conversation too. A few other people sitting nearby also had their heads turned towards us, interested in my answer.

I wanted to say something like, “do you believe that there is an all-powerful higher being?” but that sounded too vague- one could believe in a god without believing in God. On the other hand, I worried that saying something like, “do you believe in an almighty and all-loving spiritual father?” but that sounded way too Christian-y.

I eventually settled on asking if he believed in the God of the Hebrew Bible and opened my mouth to respond, but before I could, Danny seemed to have come up with an answer to my question even without my clarification. “Like, okay, do I believe that there’s a big dude with a beard up there who decides who wins the Super Bowl? No. But I do pray.”

“Right,” I recalled the morning after our first night here, when I had gone out onto the balcony of my hotel room to grab my clothes that I had laid out to dry, and I saw Danny meditating on his balcony next to mine. “So, why do you pray though if you don’t believe in God? Do you believe that your prayers are answered?”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t pray if I didn’t think that there was a point to it.”

I stared at him with my eyebrows furrowed, trying to understand how a belief in answered prayers reconciled with a disbelief in God. “How?”

“Well,” he still spoke slowly, carefully choosing his words to articulate his worldview correctly. In his pause, I saw Elie open his mouth to speak, but Shanna shushed him. “For me, when I pray, I don’t believe that there’s some sort of all-knowing, all-powerful God in the sky who hears my prayers and answers them because he’s in control.” Danny said at last. “I just believe that when you meditate on something, it allows you to subconsciously focus on those kinds of things happening.”

“Like the law of attraction,” Elie added, somewhat helpfully.

“Yeah, totally,” Danny replied, dropping his arm for a second so that he could acknowledge Elie.

I nodded. “That makes sense.” It coincided with everything I’d ever heard about meditation and mindfulness, which I guess he was into. “So, then, if for you being Jewish isn’t about being religious, then what is it about?”

He took another moment to answer, and I took advantage of his pause to look out the window again. Before this trip, I didn’t really know what to expect from Israel, but I basically expected it to look like a desert wasteland, like Luke Skywalker’s home planet of Tatooine- sand dunes, camels, shady dudes trying to sell you parts for your spaceship. I didn’t realize that there were mountains and wineries and that many parts of it were so *green*.

“Well, right now it’s my job.” Danny answered finally. “Since I work at the Jewish American Federation, I’ve basically made a career out of being Jewish-,”

“Right,” I interrupted, trying to get to the root of the matter, “but what does it *mean* to you to be Jewish? Like if an alien came down to planet earth and was like, ‘what’s this Jewish thing I keep hearing about?’ what would you tell him?”

“Him?” Danny teased, “Why do you assume that the alien is a guy? Or that aliens conform to the same kinds of gender binaries that we do? That’s very patriarchal of you.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes again, genuinely worried now about straining a muscle. “*Danny*,” I chastised instead. I thought about shoving him playfully, but didn’t want another comment about me touching him.

“Well, it’s different for everyone,” he said, getting back to my question, “so I don’t think that any answer that anyone gave to this alien would really satisfy it. But I think for me, primarily,

it just means belonging to a people that isn't bound by the same ways that other people are bound to each other." He mused, beginning to pick up steam now that he had latched onto this idea. "Christians belong to each other because they all believe in Jesus, and Spanish people belong to each other because they're all from Spain, but Jewish people all belong to this big umbrella of culture and religion and geography that allows you to belong no matter how tenuously you connect to any one of those factors."

"Okay," I began, ignoring the scraping of the snake's scales against my beating heart, "so then could someone be Jewish and something else at the same time? Like could you be a Spanish Jew or a Christian Jew?" Danny began to formulate an answer, but I interrupted him. "Like, if you were born into a Jewish family- both of your parents are Jewish- and you grow up Jewish and everything, but then later in life you convert to Christianity, can you still call yourself Jewish?" I tried to keep the desperation out of my voice. A desperation that came from wanting to have some connection- however tenuous- to my dad's family, but knowing that if I had to choose, I could never give up my faith in Jesus. "A Jewish Christian?" I asked as non-chalantly as possible. *This is a hypothetical question* I internally willed Danny to believe, like a silent Jedi mind trick. *Your answer will have no impact on how I personally construct my identity at all. So no pressure.*

Danny thought for a moment, and then shrugged, "Sure. If you still consider your Jewishness to be an important part of who you are, then I see no reason you can't be a Jewish Christian."

I nodded, trying to hide my relief that released the snake's grip on my heart. I sat in that for a moment, fighting back the tears that had sprung up suddenly at knowing that I could allow the Jewish part of me that loved my biological dad and loved the legacy he left for me to coexist

with the side of me that loved Jesus and knew that nothing could ever supersede Him in my heart. That while Jesus said that if we had to choose between our family and our faith, we must hate our family in comparison to our love of our faith, today that was not a choice that I had to make. Unlike Shanna, I didn't have to choose.

I thought about how so much of our identity was outside of our power to choose. I didn't choose to be born to an Ashkenazi Jewish father and a Vietnamese Catholic mother. I didn't choose for my father to die and for my mother to remarry an atheist who brought with him the older sisters I had always dreamed of.

Even the things about myself that I thought I had chosen were largely shaped by things I hadn't. I had chosen to care about feminist issues, but I hadn't chosen to be born a woman and to experience the feminist fight personally. I had chosen to follow Jesus, but I hadn't chosen to meet the friends that brought me to youth group and prayed for me to know the grace of God. I had chosen to come on this Birthright trip, but I hadn't chosen to have my heart wrecked by love for this beautiful country and its beautiful people that Danny said I got to be a part of.

Most of the time, it seemed to me, you don't get to choose your life- your life chooses you.

In my peripheral vision, I could tell that Danny had noticed that I was caught up in some personal musings and had turned around to talk to Shanna and Eli while I sorted out my feelings. I appreciated his tact, but before I could dwell on it for too long, we arrived at our destination, where Moshe dropped us off and we would hike the rest of the way up the mountain.

"Come on," I said as I stood, gathering my things, "it's time for me to push you off this cliff and finally get rid of you forever."

Danny laughed and clapped me on the shoulder as we hopped off, our banter following us into the bright sunlight.

F Is for Friends Who Do Stuff Together

Matthew 6:5 And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Soft, Sunday morning light glowed through the windows of TCU's Robert Carr chapel, an ethereal glow shining from the white pews onto its equally white congregation. Cursing the loud click-clomp of my heels against the marble floors as well as my inability to get anywhere on time, I quickly found an empty space in a pew in the back and sat down onto the plush scarlet cushions. Glancing around, I tried to catch the eye of a familiar face and then tried not to panic when there were none.

This is why you're here I reminded myself *You're a freshman- of course you don't know anybody. You're here to meet and befriend other Christians at TCU.*

I leaned back into the pew, trying to seem at ease, sitting all alone. *I came here alone on purpose* I wanted my posture to say. *I am a confident young person who likes to go to church alone so as not to be distracted by my friends. Sure, my heart is beating way faster than normal and I am beginning to sweat from the extreme discomfort of sitting alone among a hundred strangers, but you don't know that.*

I tuned in to what the pastor was saying, only to tune right back out when I realized she was doing little more than regurgitating old clichés about new beginnings. Instead of paying attention, I allowed my mind to wander. I thought about my last two years of high school and all that had led me to come to TCU. The hours I spent hunched over a toilet, throwing up cheap

vodka and off-brand orange juice, the violent action causing tears and eyeliner to run down my face. The nights when I could almost see the darkness encroaching, and the night I stood on the beach, unable to see anything but the darkness.

I need you God I had cried into the unfeeling waves but I don't know how to follow you anymore.

I shook my head out of the dark rabbit hole I had begun to spiral down and instead thought of the day nearly a year ago when I had first stepped foot on TCU's campus. I had dragged my feet the whole way, only letting my parents talk me into visiting because of the sizeable scholarship this small safety school in Texas had promised. But standing in the campus commons, watching the strange, February snow float gently down, the first snow I had seen in years, I felt a flicker of something I barely recognized. A flicker of a different kind of life. A flicker of God's mysterious works. A flicker of- could it be?- hope.

Despite my disdain for this sermon's well-worn message, I desperately needed this year to be a new beginning for me.

An hour later, the service had concluded, and I filed out with the rest of the congregation. Standing awkwardly under the shade of a large oak tree whose branches reached gracefully over the whole front lawn of the church, I finally noticed the curly-haired blonde who lived next door to me chatting idly to a couple of other friends. Intoxicated with the possibility of kinship, I made my way over to them, and they generously opened up space for me in their conversation circle. Polite hellos and introductions were exchanged before they resumed their intended topic of conversation.

"God, what I wouldn't give for like a gallon of water and some sunglasses right now."

A smirk. "Hungover in church- classic."

Oh.

"Were y'all at Delt or Sig Ep last night?"

"Delt."

"Sig Ep."

"Delt."

Are those fraternities? I stood in awkward silence, unable to participate.

"I heard Delt bought two strippers and had them put on a show before laying down and eating each other out on a towel in the kitchen."

"Yeah dude, it was so hot."

"Gross."

"Yeah- ew."

I grimaced uncomfortably in agreement with the other girls, my mind still reeling too much, my heart still too uncomfortable, to offer any other kind of response.

"Ugh, God, I really shouldn't have drunk that much if I knew I was going to get up for church this morning."

Murmurs of agreement.

"Anyways, I'm starving. Shall we head to the BLUU?"

"Ugh, I'm already tired of the dining hall. Can we go somewhere off campus?"

"I'm down. How about Pizza Snob?"

"No, Pizza Snob is gonna be so crowded. Let's go to Café Brazil I've heard it's good, and I wanna try it."

“Sounds good to me.”

“I’m down.”

“Yeah, same.”

“Elle, you coming with us?”

I looked up- startled to have been actively invited into the conversation for the first time- into the bright blue eyes of my neighbor- Sarah, I remembered- and grappled with the tumultuous washing machine of emotions inside me.

“Uh,” I stalled. Warm gratitude at her sincere invitation. Blossoming hope at the possibility of friendship. Screeching hesitancy at more time spent in this company.

Are these really the kinds of friends you want to make?

Am I really going to judge them based off of one conversation about their first weekend at college?

“No, sorry, I can’t,” I responded at last, half of me nearly sagging in relief, the other half nearly drowning in self-loathing. “I promised my roommate I’d get lunch with her.” I thought of Caroline, who was probably still asleep under her thick Anthropologie bedding, and wondered briefly if I shouldn’t have involved a specific person in my lie.

“Alright, next time then!” Sarah looked like she truly meant it, and guilt added itself to the mix.

A weak smile. “Yeah, for sure.”

I walked slowly and dejectedly back to my hall, absorbed in my discouragement and oblivious to the bright shining day on our beautiful campus. Once inside, I was still so lost in thought that I didn’t even notice the transition from warm sunshine and green grass to cold white

fluorescent light and checkered linoleum-or the red-headed girl standing by the front desk- until I heard my name.

“It is Elle, right?” She was looking at me hesitantly, her head cocked slightly to the side like a bird, unsure of my name.

“What? Oh, yeah- sorry,” I shook myself out of my self-centered wallowing. “What did you say?”

“I just asked how you are,” she said, smiling shyly. She was dressed nicely, in green corduroy’s, tan sandals, and a white blouse.

“Oh, I’m good,” I rattled my brain for a more specific response, shifting my purse strap on my shoulder. “I just got back from that First Sunday Service at the chapel.”

Her face fell. “You just got back?” I nodded. “I thought the service didn’t start until 12:30- I was on my way now.”

I shook my head. “No, it started at 10:30.”

“Shoot.” She bit her lip, and I wondered if I should take this chance to climp-clomp across the linoleum to the elevator and make my way to my bed, the host of the pity-party I was about to throw myself. Just as I had opened my mouth to say *well have a nice day* she interrupted my intentions with, “Well, are you hungry? I guess I’ll just get lunch at the BLUU now- do you want to come?”

I hesitated. I had spent the whole walk back looking forward to taking off my uncomfortable heels and changing into my fuzzy socks and pjs, and I could almost hear my bed literally calling my name. I had already been disappointed by one possible friend today, did I really want to face another rejection?

Suddenly, absurdly, an image popped into my head from my favorite sitcom: Steve Carrell in the role of Michael Scott from *The Office* sitting in front of a white board that said,

“You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take. -Wayne Gretzky”

- Michael Scott

I smiled, and then realizing I definitely couldn’t smile while rejecting her said, “Sure, that sounds great.”

She smiled back. “Great! My name is Lindsey, by the way,” she reminded me sweetly, realizing that I did not remember her name.

“Right. Shall we?” She nodded, and together we climp-clomped back out of our freshman dorm into the bright sunshine of September at TCU. Brightly colored flowers bloomed along perfectly manicured walkways, across the way water splashed happily from the campus’ central fountain, and all at once, I allowed myself to feel hopeful.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

A little over a year later, the endless flat Texas plains of tall grass and sparse trees slowly rolled past us as we finally neared civilization. Hours in a car that would have already felt long due to the drab, lifeless landscape were made even longer by Lindsey’s refusal to drive above the speed limit.

It’s called a speed limit for a reason she’d lectured when I begged her once again to please, please drive at the speed of traffic. It’s the limit for how fast you’re allowed to speed.

Rust brick buildings and the sharp, golden steeple of a chapel peeked out at us behind large, sweeping oak trees that sat on the lawn of the local Baptist university. The massive, white marble sign seemed a bit grandiose considering the size of the school, but looking around, it didn't look like the town had much else to brag about. I had wanted to stop at a gas station and stretch my legs, but I was beginning to wonder if this town even had one.

To my right a billboard rivaling the university lawn sign loomed past us with cheesy fire graphics and block lettering.

HEAVEN OR HELL? YOU CHOOSE

REPENT NOW TO SAVE YOUR SOUL

CALL 855-FOR-TRUTH

I glanced over at my roommate, strawberry blonde hair hiding the cross necklace that hung delicately from her neck. Dallas born and bred, her lips moved along to the words of the country song that she could no doubt sing in her sleep. I don't know what song it was. They all sound the same to me.

"Did you see that sign?" I scoffed as we rolled past it a moment later.

"What? The Baylor sign?" She rolled her eyes. "So obnoxious, right?" Baylor was the name of the university with the grandiose lawn sign, the only pride and glory of Waco, Texas.

"No," I said as already we were reaching the end of the town and heading back into the bare Texas wilderness. "I mean- yes, that sign was obnoxious, but no, I meant the billboard on my side of the road."

She shook her head. "What was it?"

“Oh, you know, one of those *Heaven or Hell- your soul your choice* billboards,” I intoned in my best doomsday predictor voice. “Call 1-800-FOR-TRUTH.” I rolled my eyes. “So stupid.”

Lindsey shrugged noncommittally, some of the hair on her shoulder shaking on to her back. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” I asked, trying to let my annoyance show as confusion. “What don’t you know?”

“I mean,” she paused as she checked her blind spot three times before changing lanes. “It’s true, isn’t it? There’s Heaven and there’s Hell, and, well, if you’re a Christian you go to Heaven and if not, then...” she drifted off, her discomfort contrasting oddly with her supposed conviction, but I didn’t call her out on it. Growing up in a Catholic family in Texas, Lindsey didn’t really question anything she had been taught, an attitude that often butt heads with me and my anti-establishmentarian ways. I knew that Lindsey loved Jesus as much as I did, but I wasn’t completely sold on the way that she chose to express that love.

“Well, yeah,” I still spoke slowly not wanting to start a fight when we still had several hours- ten at least at this rate- left until we reached her grandfather’s ranch in the Hill Country outside Austin, our destination for the weekend. “But is that really the best way to reach people? If I saw that sign five years ago before I knew Jesus, my instinct would not be ‘oh, wow, guess I better get my soul in order,’ it would be to go, ‘oh, wow, that’s a pretty dumb sign.’”

“Yeah,” Lindsey replied in that unnaturally high voice she used when she was trying to appease someone. Also trying, I realized, to keep things light. “I guess I’ve just never put much thought into it. I see those signs all the time, so I’m just used to it.”

But aren’t you thinking about it now? I bit my lip. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

A moment passed, and I tried- I really did- but I couldn't just let it go.

"It's just, in the church we talk so much about being Christ-like and we're always asking, 'what would Jesus do?' but this is not what Jesus did."

Lindsey turned to me, her wide, green eyes letting me know she was the surprised and confused one now.

For a second, those eyes grabbed me. My eyes were green too, but they were the dark, clear green of an evergreen tree. Hers were the pale jade of a Caribbean Sea, and for a moment, I couldn't think of anything else but the fact that our eyes were so different even though they were both ostensibly green.

"Didn't Jesus tell us to go make disciples of every nation?" Lindsey's question brought me back into the soft acoustics of black leather seats in her Volkswagen Tiguan, crawling its way through Waco's bare nothingness.

"Well, yeah-"

"And is that not what the sign is doing?"

"No!" For a second, I told myself I was being ridiculous for getting this heated over a sign, but it didn't feel ridiculous. It felt like she was missing something important. "Jesus- He made disciples. And he did that by meeting people, being in their lives. He ate dinner with prostitutes and gamblers and con men. He didn't stand outside anywhere holding a sign; he actually talked to people. Answered their doubts and looked them in the eye and told them they were loved." I realized that I had begun ranting, that my voice was too loud for a conversation between two people in one car, so I shut my mouth before I could turn this into a full-blown argument.

To my left, Lindsey just nodded and shrugged a little. “You’re right.” I was surprised by the amount of sincerity in her voice, although the cynic in me wondered how much of it was just out of a mutual desire to not let this escalate any further. Still, I appreciated that she wasn’t shrugging me off like she had before.

I tuned back in to the music Lindsey was playing and groaned. “Okay, look. If I’m going to have to endure your terrible driving, you can’t make me listen to your terrible music too. Let me DJ.”

“What?!” She turned to me again, fake anger replacing the previous tension. “You can insult my driving, but I will not sit here and allow you to slander the great George Strait.”

I shrugged nonchalantly. “I honestly don’t even know who that is.”

“You *what?*” We bantered and playfully bickered, our spat already forgotten, as around us the gray Texas landscape rolled on, fading slowly, slowly to black.

Matthew 12:34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

Do you want to go to a protest against White Supremacy in Dallas tonight? I texted my best friend Emily, and I hadn’t even managed to click my phone off yet when the response came.

Yes. I smiled and put my phone away, concentrating back on writing my paper, for now.

A few hours later, I drove the half block down to Emily’s house, still wearing the neon orange sorority tank top and high-waisted jean shorts I’d donned to run errands, and pulled up directly in front of her walkway. I’d planned on texting her when I arrived, but she was already

outside, smoking a cigarette on her front porch in a black crop top and tribal print shorts. I grinned and rolled down the passenger side window so that she could continue to smoke while we drove, and she nodded appreciatively as she walked down her lawn and hopped in.

“Need help?” I asked as she struggled to buckle her seatbelt with one hand, holding her cigarette in the other.

“Nah, I got it,” she answered, the satisfying *click* from the buckle affirming her statement.

“Sweet,” I said, shifting the gear back into drive. “Let’s go protest white supremacy!”

“YAS!” Emily shouted, punching the air with her first.

I laughed loudly at her antics, pulled out onto the street, and began the familiar route to the Interstate.

We chatted animatedly for a few minutes, catching up on what we’d been up to in the day or so that it had been since we’d last hung out, gossiping incredulously about Emily’s roommate who had flooded their living room with wedding planning preparations, and complaining, always complaining, about teachers who had the audacity to assign work before the first day of school.

“It’s just so crazy,” I said after a few moments, watching the sun set in my rearview mirror as we headed east from Fort Worth to Dallas, forty-five minutes away. “Last week, I was in Berlin, crying my eyes out at the Holocaust Memorial and Museum from 50 years ago, and now I’m back the U.S. going to an anti-Nazi rally.”

Emily nodded. “I know. When I was at the Fort Worth Women’s March in January, I saw a sign that said, ‘I can’t believe we’re still protesting this shit,’ and that’s exactly how I feel right now.”

I shook my head. “Who would have thought that in the U.S. in 2017 we’d be protesting literal Nazis?”

Emily sighed, and we spent the next few minutes of the drive in silence, both of us caught up in the events of the past week. I reminisced over the adventure I had just returned from: ten days on a group trip in Israel and then three and a half weeks solo backpacking through Europe. I thought of the tears of joy that had sprung to my eyes as thousands of tourists applauded at the sunset in Santorini and the cute Italian girls I’d befriended at my hostel in Budapest. How we drank wine in bars built out of WWII bomb shelters and how they laughed as I coughed my way through my first cigarette. But mostly, I thought of Berlin. I thought of the tears that had streamed endlessly as I walked through the memorial to the Jewish people killed in the Holocaust, and then dripped onto the floor of the museum, backlit by the exhibit of letters written in concentration camps. I thought of coming home to my hostel with the checkered linoleum and green vinyl mattresses, lying in bed and overwhelmed by the headlines I’d seen pop up on my phone, confusing and out-of-context as the poor hostel wifi and general travel exhaustion made it impossible to do more than glance at them right before I fell asleep each night.

Protest Rally at University of Virginia Turns Violent

White Supremacists Gather in Charlottesville, Virginia

One Dead, Many Injured at Charlottesville Counter-Protest

I had come back to the U.S. only a couple of days later, already missing Europe, but excited to be back with my college friends as we began our senior year at TCU. Once back in the land of good wifi and English-speaking newscasters, I finally heard the whole story of what happened while I was gone. How a group of white supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia had gathered in

the dead of night with tiki torches and a brand of racism many of us thought our country had left behind to protest the state's plan to remove Confederate statues. They were met with counter protesters who supported the plan, and the two clashed violently until a man from the original protest group got in his car and ran down several counter-protestors, killing one young woman. I felt sick to my stomach when I thought about the hate and the violence that I had so naïvely believed to have been eradicated from my country. How I had stood between the looming grey cement blocks of the Holocaust memorial and prayed that that would never happen in the U.S., only to come home and find that it was already there.

As was to be expected, the news shifted a couple of days later from what happened that night to what President Trump had to say about it. Everyone from Bernie Sanders to John McCain took to twitter to criticize President #45 for saying that violent members "on both side of the conflict" were to blame, instead of solely the neo-Nazi who got in his car to kill people. Outrage continued to spread until a little over a week later, jet-lagged and sunburned from my vacation, I accepted a Facebook event invitation to the Dallas Protest Against White Supremacy, condemning the actions of the neo-Nazis in Virginia, denouncing Trump's statement that both sides were to blame for the violence, and demanding that the remaining Confederate Statues in Dallas be taken down.

A half hour later, the Dallas skyline reared its ugly head into view, and I looked down at my phone again, double checking the navigation directions. The confusing highway exits and labyrinthine one-way streets had gotten me lost on many a weekend sojourn to my dear Fort Worth's "Big Brother," and I was determined to not let this night be another one of those. However, fate- or God or maybe Apple- was on my side that night as I easily wound my way

through the marbled brown and black and white skyscrapers and found the City Hall square and a nearby parking lot. I found it so easily, in fact, that-

“Elle, we are *an hour and a half early*,” Emily yelled incredulously as she got out of the car.

“I know, I know,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Why are we here so early?” she demanded, as we walked to the square and found it mostly deserted.

“Well, when I went to the Women’s March, we got there like a half hour early, and it was so crowded I never even made it to the square where it started,” I replied defensively.

Emily let out an exasperated breath. “Elle. The Women’s March was an internationally organized protest, and you went to the one in *Los Angeles*. This was planned like 2 days ago, and it’s in Dallas. There will probably be, like, a hundred people here.”

“I know, but I also thought there would be more traffic and I thought we would get lost and I thought it would be harder to find parking, and I don’t know I’m sorry!”

Emily just rolled her eyes. “It’s fine, I probably should have wondered why you were picking me up so early.”

I smiled winningly, and we ambled over to a bench and made ourselves comfortable as we waited for more protesters to gather.

Above us, the bruised sky faded gradually to a deep navy. It was a Saturday, and I fantasized that the night sky was just like any other young city girl on a Saturday night, getting ready by brushing moon dust over her eyelids, putting on her silky midnight blue dress, stars embedded into the fabric glistening and glimmering in every breath of lungs and swish of hips.

Below night's beautiful ball gown, the Dallas City Hall loomed towards us, an architecturally unusual concrete slab that angled at 45 degrees away from its foundation and towards the large, round fountain pond that dominated the center of the square. It was here, underneath the shadow of the institution, that other protesters began to gather, their large signs marking them distinct from any other Dallas-ites who might have stumbled past the City Center on their way to other, more tantalizing activities.

I tried not to think of Lindsey, who was probably at her parents' home not fifteen minutes from here. She wouldn't be here tonight, that much I didn't need to be worried about. *I don't know* she would have said if I'd asked her to come *protests aren't really my thing*. I sighed a little to myself. I didn't want my friendship with Lindsey to dissolve over politics in the wake of the Trump era as so many other relationships had, but even I couldn't ignore the writing on the wall forever. I cared about fighting for justice like Jesus had, going out into the world and battling alongside the broken and the oppressed, whereas Lindsey, well, Lindsey sent her thoughts and prayers.

Presently, a young man who looked to be about our age in skinny jeans and grey flannel approached Emily and I on our concrete bench where we had been swapping stories of our individual adventures in Prague.

"Excuse me," he said shyly, his light brown eyes striking against his dark skin. "My name is Carlton, and I'm a student at UT Arlington."

"Hi Carlton, I'm Elle." I stuck my hand out to shake his. I saw Emily rolling her eyes at my friendliness, but she did the same.

“Anyways,” Carlton continued after our introductions, “like I said, I go to UTA, and I’m a journalism major. I was wondering if I could interview you about why you came here tonight.”

I responded eagerly, and once he pulled out his tape recorder, I launched into a passionate chronicle of what I had seen in Berlin and the fear and pain that had struck my heart seeing the parallels of what was happening in my own country.

As I was going on and on about how the Nazis had slowly and legally gained power and how the U.S. could learn a thing or two from how Germany owned its history, I noticed that the street lights had come on and there were a lot more people gathered in the square than had been when Carlton first approached us. I realized that I had been talking for a while, but I needed to say one last thing.

“Also,” I said, catching my breath, trying to say what I needed to say as succinctly as possible as I had already gone on for so long, “I am a Christian, so I believe that every single human being is made in the image of God and is thus equal to one another. Jesus was passionate about speaking up for the oppressed, so I’m here to show my black brothers and sisters that I support them in their fight, because racism is the exact opposite of the gospel. And, uh, yeah,” I finished lamely, not knowing how to conclude after such a tirade.

Carlton thanked me and then moved the microphone over to Emily.

“Well, I didn’t go to Berlin this summer, and I’m not a Christian either,” Emily began, and we both laughed a little awkwardly, “but I agree with Elle that all human beings are equal and it’s the responsibility of those of us in power to lift up those who are oppressed in our country. What happened in Charlottesville was horrible, but I think that the people who believe in neo-Nazism

are more prevalent than we think, so I'm here to make sure if there are any in Dallas, they know that their message does not belong here."

I looked over at her in admiration, the bright white street light glowing on her artificially red hair. I knew that it took a lot of effort for her to overcome her social anxiety to both be here and talk to this reporter, and my heart swelled with pride that I got to call her my best friend, even if she wasn't on board with the whole Jesus thing.

After Emily finished speaking, Carlton thanked us and moved on to an older interracial couple sitting on a bench a few feet from us. A few minutes later, one of the protestors gathered in a crowd in front of us approached and offered us electric candles, which Emily and I both accepted. Figuring that this was a cue that the protest was about to start, we got up and walked over to the crowd that had gathered beneath the Hall, blending in with the others. I looked around and took in my other protestors. Black, white, and brown; male, female, and somewhere in between; young and old; obviously wealthy and obviously not so much; Emily and I easily fit in because there was no norm in which to fit. We were all other. None of us were other.

A well-dressed, dark-skinned man approached the previously empty podium, his mere presence quieting the somewhat unruly crowd. His cream-colored fedora created a stark contrast over his dark face, as his sharp eyes raked over the crowd, silencing those left who were still talking.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. His voice was as deep and clear as the ocean on an August afternoon, easily filling the courtyard and reverberating to the surrounding streets. "My name is Reverend Michael Walker, and I am angry." Cheers erupted from the crowd, my voice among the many.

“I am angry,” he continued, “because there are those in this country who honestly believe that they can claim the name of my God and in the same breath denounce my black brothers and sisters as less than them.” More cheers. “I say to these people- have you not read the Word of our God?” He held up a Bible. “Does this book not say that we are all made in the same image of the same God? Did not the Son of our God- an immigrant, a brown man, an impoverished man- die on the cross so that people of every tongue, tribe, and nation could come together and worship him in harmony as equals?”

He thundered, not even the cheers of hundreds of protestors able to drown out the words of his message as they galloped over us. “I say to these people- pray that the God of mercy and justice and grace does a miraculous work in your hearts, or you will go down in history with those who tried to twist the Bible to support the enslavement of my people in the not-too-distant past. Pray, you sinners, you brood of vipers!”

Reverend Walker leaned back and paused for a few moments, allowing the cheering of the crowd to speak for him as he caught his breath. I clapped and cheered as enthusiastically as Walker’s sermon rang clear and true in my heart. His heaving chest slowed gradually, and he stood to the podium once again. “My brothers and sisters. Dallas,” he began again, “I am here to say to you that Christianity and white supremacy cannot coexist. Just as light keeps no company with darkness, the unfathomable and radical love of Christ has nothing in common with any sort of philosophy that says that any race or ethnicity is less than any other.” He gripped the sides of the podium, and I realized, suddenly, how tired he must be. How many Sundays had this man stood in front of his white peers who automatically thought less of him because of his skin? How

many heartfelt pleas had he extended to love your neighbor, only to have racist slurs thrown back in his face?

“Racism is contrary to the gospel. There is no other way that you can look at it. What happened last weekend was an extreme example of that racism, but Dallas,” his voice became heavier, the bone-deep weariness I had noticed earlier much more evident in his voice now. “Dallas, racism is not just a group of young, white men with tiki torches who shout some terrible things once a month. Racism is a sin that is rooted in the hearts of each and every one of us.” He scanned the crowd again, feeling, as I did, the way that the crowd shifted minutely, uncomfortably. “Racism is the fear that strikes your heart when you see a black man walking toward you down the street. Racism is the surprise that jumps your lungs when the young black woman in your biology class performed better than you on that exam. This is a little bit less than Biblical,” he shook his head a little, “but when the late Michael Jackson told us to change the world by looking at the man in the mirror, that applies to the racism that we gather here to protest as well.”

I thought, suddenly, of the panel of black leaders from the Village Church that I had listened to the summer before and of pastor Anthony Moore’s message that racism is sin but the only response to sin was grace. *How much longer* I wondered to myself *will black church leaders in this country have to bear the burden of preaching the true gospel?*

Around me, I saw nodding and heard empathetic “mmhmm”s. Reverend Walker glanced at his watch. “We got a lot of speakers here tonight, so I don’t want to take up too much more of your time. I just want to conclude by encouraging you, all you beautiful people, if you love Jesus as I do- preach his gospel every day. Not just on Sundays, not just on protest days. Every day.

Every day that you allow a racist joke to slip by, you are telling a false truth about who Jesus is. Every day that you make a racist comment and don't repent of it in your heart, you are believing a false truth about who Jesus is. Don't let racism be the sin that you refuse to lay at the foot of the cross. Jesus paid for it all. Let that transform you before the Nazis in Charlottesville do."

Walker bowed his head before stepping off, followed by applause and cheers more thunderous than even the most passionate parts of his speech had been. I vowed to myself that I would do as Reverend Walker told I would lift up the voices of my black brothers and sisters and repent every day of any act of racism no matter how small that bore false witness against my neighbor and bore false witness against my Lord. My vision blurred, and looking around, I saw that I was not the only one who had been touched by the Reverend's words.

Emily, however, was not one of those people.

"Are you crying?" she laughed incredulously as she looked over and saw the wetness that pricked my eyes.

"Yes, okay?" I snapped half-heartedly. "I just get really emotional when Christians do the right thing, you know?"

Emily laughed and nodded a little. "True." She shoved my arm playfully and I smiled back at her, before we both turned back to the next speaker, chosen to lead the mid-matched group of humans into a better future.

I Thought of Myself as Mary Magdalene but It Turns Out I'm Mr. Scrooge

"... and okay, even if you want to make the argument that cops pull over black people more frequently than white people because they're statistically more likely to have drugs or guns on them- which is still discrimination and incorrect and super racist by the way- then how do you justify what happened to Philando Castile? He wasn't doing anything wrong, and then he got shot in front of his fiancée and their four-year-old son. *In front of his child.* I mean..."

I sighed quietly and tilted my head all the way back, trying in vain to convince the last couple of drops inside of my Diet Coke can to fall into my mouth. Looking past the silver lip of the can in my hand, I stared at the blood orange walls of my family's dining room, allowing its deep color to fill my vision, and smiled to myself. We used to joke that the walls of this room were once the same eggshell white as the rest of the house, but they turned red from all of the wine thrown angrily in one another's faces at various holidays and family meals.

Across the table, my older brother was arguing with our dad about the Black Lives Matter movement and what had happened earlier that year to Philando Castile. Well, arguing was a strong word for what was happening. The word "arguing" implies that there is more than one party involved in the fighting. This was more of a monologue shouted in Dad's general direction.

"I don't care what you say, there is never a reason to shoot a man in front of his kid. *Four years old...*"

I closed my eyes for a second, trying to block out the memory of hearing the news of Philando Castile's murder. How he had been pulled over on his way home from grocery shopping with his girlfriend and their four-year-old son, and forty seconds after their interaction began, Officer Yanez pulled out his gun and shot Castile seven times at point blank range. During the

summer of 2016, the most violent summer that I hope I ever have to live through, it felt like every other day was a new headline about a black man being shot by the police, and I had grown numb to most of the news. But the detail of his son being in the backseat and witnessing the murder of his father had broken even my hardened heart. Time passed, more names filled my news headlines, and I mostly forgot, until I came home for Christmas and those names were all brought back for cannon fodder in the Meyers-Clark family arguments.

Slumping back in my chair, I wondered idly how long Nick had been going on about this. Long enough that I wanted to get up and get a second helping of mashed potatoes, but not long enough that Dylan had finished her plate. Although, sometimes it took hours for the youngest of my older step-sisters to finish eating.

“And look, I know what you’re going to say about Ferguson, so forget Ferguson. What about the guy in New York? Shoot, I’m forgetting his name. The one who was choked to death for selling illegal CDs. Do you know how much music I’ve illegally downloaded in my life? And I’ve never been punished for it, let alone killed for it...”

Nick had moved on from Philando Castile to Eric Garner, killed in a chokehold by the NYPD after being approached on suspicion of illegally selling cigarettes, not CDs like Nick had said. He had been killed in 2014, but his name had come up again in the wake of the 2016 deaths, as more evidence of police violence against African-Americans. The Black Lives Matter movement used Garner and Castile’s stories to advocate for reform in the law enforcement system that would prevent any more black Americans from being killed unnecessarily, and while they hadn’t made much legal success, it looked like they had gained quite the supporter in Nick.

Realizing that Nick's "argument" with Dad was going to go on for a while longer without any need for me to participate, I softly pushed my chair back and stood up, my new boots transitioning from muffled squeaking to satisfying click-clacking as I walked from the hardwood floors of the dining room to the marble-tiled hallway on my way to the kitchen for more food. I was lumping lukewarm mashed potatoes onto my plate and trying to decide whether or not I wanted to microwave them, when I saw Cori walk in. She pointed to the direction of the dining room, where Nick's rant could still be plainly heard, and she shook her head in disbelief.

I laughed. "I know, right?"

"I think I've heard your brother talk more at that table today than he has in the last fifteen years combined," Cori said. Nick had been introverted and shy for most of his life, and it was shocking to almost everyone to hear him talk about anything at the dinner table, let alone rant angrily at Dad.

I laughed again. "Yeah, I grew up in this house with him, so I've probably heard him talk a little bit more than he has today... but not by a lot."

Cori walked over to me, and I handed her the spoon so that she could refill her own plate with my mom's mashed potatoes. I turned around and reached up to the microwave, deciding that I did want to reheat my food- partially because I hate room temperature food, and partially because it was nice to get a breather and talk to my cousin alone, away from the madness inside the dining room. Here, surrounded by the olive-green cabinets, Nick's impassioned ranting muffled by the teak swinging door, Cori and I could be in our own little oasis, temporarily separated from the turmoil and politically charged hellfire of the dining room.

“So, I guess college really changed him, huh?” Cori asked, again referring to my older brother.

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s gotten a lot more confident in the last couple of years. Honestly, I feel like him getting to move out and not constantly be compared to my academic achievements helped him realize that he’s better than me in, y’know, pretty much every other way, and that really helped him a lot.”

Cori smiled her warm smile at me, the one that always made me feel loved, the one that made her my favorite cousin. “Well, I don’t know about ‘better than you in pretty much every other way,’ but I am glad that your brother is finally coming into his own, although I am surprised that politics of all things is the way that his confidence has manifested itself.”

I frowned a little to myself as I pulled my food out of the microwave. “Yeah that surprised me too.” We were all happy for Nick that he had really found himself and that his confidence had soared in the last couple of years, but sometimes his new boldness caused more problems than it solved. “Although,” I continued after a moment, moving to the side so that Cori could put her food in the microwave now that I was done. “I’m glad that he’s finally formed an opinion outside of my parents’ Republican brainwashing, and now I’m not the only liberal black sheep.”

Cori nodded, sighing. “You know that your dad has always been a good uncle to me, which is why I don’t argue with him about politics- I just don’t want that to get in the way of our relationship.” She looked toward the dining room, where by the deep, reverberating voice that was now making its way to us, it sounded like my dad had finally begun to argue back. “I just hope that if it continues to go on like this, Nick can find a way to maintain his relationship with your dad, too.”

What relationship? I thought. Dad spent most of our childhood at work, at the gym, or on the couch watching Fox News, so neither Nick nor I had much of a relationship with him to begin with. But instead I just answered, “Yeah, me too.”

Cori’s food finished rotating, so with an internal steeling of nerves, we grabbed our plates and walked back into the dining room where, from the sounds of it, Nick and Dad had moved on from police brutality to affirmative action in the college admissions process. Dad was beginning to press his lips together and clench his hands on top of the table- signs that he was trying to contain his anger.

I sat back down at the round, black wooden table, scratches and grooves covering its slick surface from all the times my siblings and I had slid condiments across it at each other, no matter how many times Mom and Dad told us not to. I rubbed the edge of the table unconsciously, looking over at Dad, where he was seated at the center of the arc. When they first got married and bought this table fifteen years ago, they told us that they wanted a round table so that there would be no head and all of us would be equals. But most days, there weren’t enough people at the table to complete the circle, so Dad ended up sitting at a sort of head anyway.

“I just don’t understand how you could take some African-American kid from Compton who was lazy and smoked pot and got all B’s and C’s and give him a college acceptance over a white kid from PV who worked hard and studied hard and did tons of extra curriculums just because he’s black. Explain to me how that’s right.” He was saying now, sitting at his de-facto seat of authority. He spoke in short, clipped phrases that dripped with condescension, and I could see Mom sitting next to him, silently nodding along in agreement with him.

“Because, Dad, you have no idea the kind of impact on your life it has to live with racism, okay?” Nick fired back, strength in his broad shoulders being showcased as he gesticulated dramatically, arms flinging so wide I sometimes worried he might accidentally hit our oldest sister Katie sitting on his right. “When the whole world- the media, your teachers, everyone- is telling you that you’re not going to succeed, you’re not going to go to college, you’re just going to grow up and be a gangbanger and a drug dealer, do you have any idea how much of an accomplishment it is to even get B’s and C’s? No, you don’t, because our whole educational and economic system has been built so that you, the white man, can succeed.”

“Now look here-,”

“Yeah, well what about me?” Mom’s voice surprised everyone. Uncomfortable silence filled the room, as Nick and Dad’s politically theoretical argument all at once became tangible and personal. Even Dylan looked up briefly from her green beans, and Cori shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“What about you?” Nick asked warily.

“Where is my affirmative action? Where’s my racial justice?” Mom demanded. “You’re going to sit there and spout off about how we need to let all the black people get into college because we enslaved their ancestors, but you don’t say a word about how *my people* worked on the railroads for basically *nothing* and yet Asian-Americans are turned away in droves from Ivy League schools because we’re not ‘diverse enough’ for their liberal bullshit.” Mom didn’t always shout as loud as Dad- well, truthfully no one ever shouted as loud as Dad- but her anger was just as sharp.

Nick was not cowed by her anger. He sighed dramatically. "Because, Mom it's not the same thing-,"

"How can you say it's not the same thing? Because white people in hoods don't go around calling me a nigger?"

"Okay, Mom, calm down," Nick pleaded anxiously, dropping his nonchalance as the tension in the room ratcheted up another notch at my mom's casual use of such a taboo word.

"I got called a gook and a dirty Jap growing up- I'm not even Japanese for Christ's sake. We get stereotyped just as much as black people, but, oh, just because we're labeled as the 'model minority,' I don't get to go to college too?" In my periphery, I saw Cori widening her eyes a little, and I shook my head a little at her.

Nick rolled his eyes at that. "Mom, you *did* go to college."

"Not the college I deserved to get into."

When our mom was in high school, she got excellent grades and was on track to go to her dream school when she got caught cheating on a test. She had to settle for Cal State Northridge instead of UCLA, and she always used her story as a cautionary tale against cheating, so I was surprised that she brought it up now in this context.

"Mom," I said, finally interjecting, "you didn't get into UCLA because your academic record showed that you cheated on a test, not because you're Asian, and you know it."

"So, what?" she challenged, "I bet if I was black they would've looked past it."

"Oh my God, *Mom*," Nick let out an exasperated sigh, and looked down, shaking his head and putting his hands on his thighs with his elbows out, as if he had just finished a sprint. For a brief moment, I saw the Nick that I knew underneath the "New Nick" that Cori seemed to only

see. This valiant defense of the oppressed may reflect a newly confident and empowered brother of mine, but in arguing with my parents, he was having to forcefully shake off years of shyness and obedience to authority. My heart swelled a little; this was not easy for him. "Mom, look, the 'model minority' stuff sucks, okay, but being stereotyped as a good student and a law-abiding citizen is not the same thing as being stereotyped as a violent, drug-dealing high school dropout."

Mom switched tactics and looked down into her lap, putting on her best defeated victim voice, "You kids just don't care about me and my struggles."

Nick let out another exasperated sigh and finally leaned back in his chair, knowing that there was no point in continuing the argument once Mom put on the "poor me" attitude.

I wasn't so easily satisfied.

"Mom, why do you think that your struggles have to negate the struggles of the black community?" I asked, picking up the torch where Nick had laid it down. "Why can't you just say, 'hey, life as an Asian-American sucked for me growing up, and I know that life for you as a Black American sucked growing up, so let's band together and take down the white patriarchy together?'"

"Okay," Dad interjected, "can we cool it on the 'white patriarchy' talk?" He and Mom had switched roles and he had been silently sipping his wine and nodding in agreement with Mom, but now he tried to jump back into the conversation.

"Band together?" Mom continued on as if Dad hadn't spoken, "What do I have in common with a black person that we can band together?"

"Are you kidding me?" Incredulous. "I just said that you've both been put down by this society-,"

“A society that I never got to be a part of,” the dam finally broken, and Mom’s voice and her eyes were both thick with tears, “You want to know why I don’t give a single shit about what black people in this country have to go through? Because they get to be *American*. I was always on the outside,” I opened my mouth to respond, but she continued over me, her voice growing louder as she aired out years of anger and pain. “You want to talk about black people getting looked down on by their peers? How do you think the kids in my class reacted when I told them that I liked to eat dirt because I thought they were talking about the Vietnamese word for mango? You want to tell me I don’t know what it’s like to be black? You have no idea what it’s like to be an immigrant- always a foreigner. I had to work my ass off just to learn to speak the same language as everyone else, let alone master it and get good grades in school, all the while I was starving at home because my parents were too uneducated to get good jobs to support us and too proud to accept help from the government.”

I started a little at her proclamation that my *Nana* and *Baba* were “too proud” to accept welfare. The fact that her parents had “picked themselves up by the bootstraps” and paved a path to success for their children without any government assistance had always been a point of pride for her, so to hear any kind of negative reaction to that was new to me.

“So yeah, I’m pretty goddam tired of hearing about how hard black people have it when they’ve got nothing on me,” she finished, each word like a slap to anyone who thought they could disagree with her.

I don’t know how she expected us to react to that. Maybe awed silence. Maybe verbal acknowledgement of the struggles that she faced as a non-native growing up. Maybe a shrugging

of the shoulders and a decision to agree to disagree. And maybe she deserved those things. I could see both Cori and Dylan opening their mouths to give them to her.

But that's not what she got.

"See, you don't get to do that though," I said before anyone else could affirm her, condescension in my voice as thick as her tears.

"Do what?" she demanded. Her eyes were bloodshot with tears and anger, but I wasn't even close to caring about her pain.

"Pretend to care about being an immigrant in these kinds of arguments when it suits you and then turn your back on immigrants and refugees now that you're safe and sound in your big house with your rich, white husband."

"Excuse me-," Both she and Dad erupted in anger but I shouted over them.

"You turned your back on your people when you married an old, white man, and refused to teach your children about your culture or how to speak your language." Now I was the one letting out years of pain and insecurity from the way Mom had chosen to raise us.

You're half Vietnamese? You don't look Vietnamese.

Do you speak Vietnamese?

Do you eat a lot of Vietnamese food?

Do you celebrate any Vietnamese holidays?

Are you sure you weren't adopted?

Years of schoolkids denying my identity because my mom chose to deny hers came out in an anger I hadn't expressed in a long time. "You chose the comfort of privilege over the pride of your people, and then you continue to betray them when you vote for a party that has at every

step of the way done nothing but uphold the status quo that has supported people of privilege and put down those who are born without.”

“I have never-,”

“Oh, that’s right!” I cried in false epiphany, “You *haven’t* because you don’t vote! And, remind me, why again is it that you don’t vote?”

Across the table, I could see Nick pleading with his eyes for me to let It go, but it was too late for that now.

Her brown eyes defiantly met my green across the table, refusing to be cowed by my condemnation. Chin high, shoulders back, “Because I don’t think that I should have to serve jury duty.” Under the table, I could see that Dad had put his hand on her thigh in support.

“Right,” If the condescension was thick before, it was nothing compared to the sludge that came out of me now. “Nana risked her life and literally dodged bullets and bomb shrapnel to escape an oppressive government so that she could come here, to a country where her children could have the gift of freedom and a political voice. And you spit in her face and throw away that gift because *God forbid* you be inconvenienced enough to take a few days off work- where you are a secretary for your husband- and do your duty as an American citizen and serve as a juror. Way to go, Mom. You have really done a great job at teaching Nick and I to be proud of our roots. *Thank you.*” I spat the last words at her, the same way that I accused her of spitting on Nana, and all that she had sacrificed so that she could be here, so that I could be born here.

I don’t know what I expected. Maybe for her to shout back at me, telling me how ungrateful I am. Maybe for Dad to shout at me, telling me I can’t talk to my mother like that. Maybe for Nick to pick the torch back up and agree with me. And maybe I deserved those things.

But instead, Mom simply lifted her wine glass up at me, and choked out, “Merry Christmas,” before pushing her chair back, walking into her bedroom, wine glass still in hand, and slamming the door.

A few days later, I got in my car to drive up to Nana’s house for lunch. It was a Monday, so I plugged in my phone and turned on the newest episode of “Dear Hank and John,” a podcast produced by Hank and John Green, two of my favorite YouTubers. Each week, the two brothers uploaded a new episode where they answer questions, give advice self-proclaimed as dubious, and gave updates about random bits of news, like what was going on with Mars or the current ranking of a third-tier English soccer team.

As I wound my way through my familiar neighborhood streets, I laughed at Hank and John’s familial antics, trying to ignore the small wistful aches at such an easy relationship. *It must be nice* I thought, a little melancholic *to get along with your family*. Sashaying back and forth down the switchbacks that slithered across the large hill where my parents lived, I tried to ignore the envy pulling at my chest, and simply enjoy the mindless entertainment the Green brothers brought.

“Alright, Hank,” John said as they wrapped up their answer to a strange question about pet snakes in college dorm rooms, “since you came close to bringing up a political point, can I ask a political question?”

Hank laughed. “Sure.”

“This question comes from Samantha, who writes, ‘Dear John and Hank, I’ve been a Nerdfighter for six or seven years now, but I’ve recently become more politically conservative

and have greater understanding of politics and my beliefs, and I'm struggling with hearing people in my communities like my Tumblr friends and in my field of work and study- I work in graphic design- expressing views about evil Republicans in front of me and being afraid to offer my own thoughts on a topic, because I would be an evil Republican in their eyes."

My attention sharpened as John read the question aloud and I squirmed uncomfortably in my seat. Have I condensed my parents' opinions about race politics into an all-consuming identity of evil? I turned on to the freeway and clicked the volume up a couple of notches.

"This happens a lot around issues like welfare," John continued, "because I'm against government welfare because I don't believe it's the best way to help struggling and impoverished Americans- not because I don't believe in helping people. How do I talk about my political views without being labeled evil and racist and homophobic and Islamophobic because my views lump me in with a lot of other people that do fit those terms? Is it worth speaking up at all? Best, Samantha."

A short pause followed the end of the question as both brothers considered their answers, and I considered my own. I sympathized with Samantha. Any time I talked about abortion or government welfare, I had to make sure that I articulated myself in a way that made sure the people I spoke to knew that I cared very deeply about the people affected by these issues, but I just didn't agree that our current way of doing things was very effective.

"Hmm," Hank murmured at last. "I don't know John; you answer that question, because you're the one who wanted to ask it."

John laughed. "Well, here's the thing," he spoke slowly, formulating his thoughts as he said them aloud and then gaining speed as he was able to collect them into a cohesive point. "I

think that anytime people are talking to what they believe to be themselves or preaching to what they believe to be the choir, they talk differently than when they are talking to, like, trying to talk to a broader public. And I think that's, like, a failure of discourse right now, that we aren't doing a good job of doing anything other than preaching to the choir--"

"Yeah--" Hank began to talk over John.

"--and kind've converting the converted," John finished as he ceded time to Hank to answer.

Guilty I thought to myself. I thought about the intelligent nuanced conversations I could have with my friends like Kayla or Camille who agreed with me on nearly everything versus the all-or-nothing condemnation I had given my parents.

"Yeah, and we like it," Hank continued. "We like doing it. It's comfortable and it feels good, and it's like, y'know, it- it's easy." Unlike John, Hank spoke quickly, stuttering over himself as he rushed to reach a conclusion he hoped would be at the end of his sentence. "It's the easy thing to do. And then if you, uh, y'know, there's- there's that like concern that like, oh, is my opinion in this room making everyone have less of a good time?"

Is my opinion in this room making everyone have less of a good time? I snorted a little to myself. That certainly hadn't been something I'd considered as I screamed at my mother at the Christmas dinner table.

"Well--" John interrupted.

"Because, because you can--" Hank struggled to find where he was trying to take that point, so John took over.

“Well, there’s that, but I also think actually in Samantha’s question is a little bit, or one solution at least to Samantha’s problem, which is that she writes, ‘this happens around issues like welfare. I- because I don’t believe it’s the best way to help struggling and impoverished Americans.’ So, let’s have a conversation about policy, Samantha, instead of about ideas like welfare. So, when we talk about welfare, what are we talking about? If we talk specifically about programs that are a part of the current federal government and what we would like to see instead of, or what we think the world should look like instead of the way it looks like now, instead of vague, kind’ve ideologically-driven ideas like the word ‘welfare,’ I think we get a lot closer to being able to have a real conversation, rather than just kind’ve staking ideological ground and then throwing rocks at each other. And I just think that if we- Democrats and Republicans- talked in specifics instead of in ideologically charged language, we would find a lot more overlap.”

“Yeah, yeah, I agree. I agree.” I could almost hear Hank nodding in response to John’s well-thought out theory on political discourse. The two went on to answer some lighter questions, making jokes about Olympic diving and perhaps something else, but I was lost in thought, long past paying attention to what they were talking about now.

As I drove on auto-pilot down the well-worn lanes of Los Angeles’ I-405N, I considered John’s idea that political discourse could be a lot more productive if we talked about policy rather than ideology. I thought back to the fight I’d had with Mom on Christmas. We’d thrown around words like oppression, affirmative action, and racial justice, without really even defining what those terms meant. Would our conversation have gone differently- could our conversation have gone differently- if we tried to define those terms and then find compromise on policy surrounding them?

Most of me thought no. The overwhelming anger that Dad brought to any kind of conversation, political especially, made me think that any kind of calm, productive, rational conversation was impossible at the Meyers-Clark dinner table.

Maybe Nick could accomplish one. He'd ranted a lot that night at the table, but he'd always had more empathy for Mom and Dad's childhoods and their "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mentality. Me, I was too angry, too emotional, too stubborn and prideful to see someone else's perspective. Maybe I was more like my Dad than I liked to think, but either way, productive discourse looked impossible.

But you've never tried an unexpected thought came. *Your relationship is only going to get worse if you don't change something. Isn't this at least worth a shot?*

"Ellie?" A tapping came on my window and I nearly jumped out of my seat. I had pulled up to my grandma's house a few minutes ago but, lost in thought, had stayed sitting in my car. Nana must have seen me from her house, as she had come up to my car and tapped on the window.

I turned off the car and got out to embrace my favorite grandmother. A full head shorter than me with a thick Vietnamese accent, I often referred to her as the World's Cutest Little Old Asian Lady. She hugged me back but then pulled away, and I was surprised to see the scolding look on her face; normally Nana was nothing less than 100% ecstatic to see her only granddaughter.

"Ellie," she chided, her accent pulling the vowels in strange directions, "I hear you got into big fight with your mom on Christmas." She frowned, and I sighed. Nothing made Nana more

upset than squabbling amongst her family, and nothing made me more upset than seeing Nana upset.

“I did, Nana,” I shut my car door, locked it, and began walking across Nana’s well-manicured lawn with my arm around her shoulder, “but it’s going to be okay.”

“Yeah?” she looked up at me with her big, brown eyes, and I smiled reassuringly.

“Yeah.”

Maybe trying to repair my relationship with my mom so that Nana wouldn’t have to hear about us fighting was the wrong motivation, but at this point I was coming up short with other reasons to do it. On Christmas, I told Mom that she had thrown away everything that Nana sacrificed when she escaped Vietnam and brought her family to the U.S., so was it wrong to try to mend my relationship with Mom in order to show Nana the respect I felt she deserved?

I knew, of course, that there were many other reasons to want to mend the fence that Mom and I shared. Anyone with a basic understanding of Christianity knew that forgiveness was a pillar of Jesus’ teachings, and by not forgiving my mom I was living in active sin and disobedience towards God.

Love thy neighbor as thyself. It was so much easier said than done, but at the end of the day, isn’t that what this was all about? Feminism, racial reconciliation, caring for the homeless—all of these passions of mine were just different ways that I was trying to love my neighbor. And if I loved Jesus enough to care about these groups of people, surely I loved Him enough to care about my own parents.

It was going to be a long road, that much was certain. But walking with my arm around Nana that day, a million decisions ahead of me that I had yet to make, a million more political

disagreements I had yet to have, and a million more opportunities to forgive I had yet to take, I decided that it was worth a shot.

Works Cited

- Brown, Faith. "From the Christian Woman Who Marched in the Women's March." *Pieces of My Story*, Wordpress, 26 Jan. 2017, likeabedofrest.wordpress.com/2017/01/23/from-the-christian-woman-who-marched-in-the-womens-march/.
- Chandler, Matt, director. *Justice and Racial Reconciliation. The Village Church*, 10 July 2016, www.tvcresources.net/resource-library/sermons/justice-and-racial-reconciliation.
- Dingle, Shannon. "I'm pro-Life. And I'm Voting for Hillary. Here's Why." *Shannon Dingle*, 31 July 2016, www.shannondingle.com/blog//im-pro-life-and-im-voting-for-hillary-heres-why.
- Empowerment and Poverty Reduction*. The World Bank, 1 May 2002, siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/486312-1095094954594/draft.pdf.
- Green, Hank, and John Green. "055- A Proper Dumpster Fire." *Dear Hank and John*, Vlogbrothers, 27 Jan. 2017.
- Rock, Chris. "88th Annual Academy Awards." 88th Annual Academy Awards. 88th Annual Academy Awards, 28 Feb. 2016, Los Angeles, CA, Dolby Theater.