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Essays on Unknowing

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a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

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The following collection grapples with themes of growing into memory, generational experience, and coming of age.

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For the village.

And I learned every detail of the story just as fast as I discovered its falsehood.

—*Eula Biss, Notes From No Man's Land*

Firsts

I sat on the living room floor, yanking on strands of the loopy white carpet as if ripping up grass. The TV was on, as it normally was. I sat there with my back to the couch, where my Aunt Alissa was sitting. She was crying. I was confused. I had never seen a grownup cry. Mamaw came up from the kitchen, scaling the first few stairs of the trilevel in which she has lived most of her life. She sat next to her daughter-in-law on the couch and rested a hand on her back. I asked when we were leaving for my preschool class. The afternoon kids weren't going today, Mamaw said. I asked when my mom would get to the house to pick me up. She was on her way, they said. But there would be lots of traffic. My mom always complained about traffic.

I am told now that it was more likely my great grandmother, G.G. Betts, sitting on the couch, and that Aunt Alissa wasn't there. But in my recollection, my aunt is still sitting there, weeping into the cushions.

This is my first memory, September 11, 2001. I was four years old.

I never knew a world without terrorism. But I never knew terrorism personally either. I was young enough not to understand the threat it posed in the early 2000s and white enough not to feel marginalized by America's response to it. In elementary school, there was always a moment of silence after the Pledge of Allegiance so that people could pray if they wanted. The polite thing to do was keep your head down and eyes closed, not to peek at little lips whispering to God. On each anniversary of the attacks, the moment wasn't silent. It was filled with a prayer the principal read over the announcements. Everyone bowed their heads and some people cried. Even then we could tell we had all lost something.

In my fourth-grade choir class, a few years later, we were still talking about the crash. Miss Smith passed around loose-leaf copies of the lyrics to Alan Jackson's *Where Were You*

When the World Stopped Turning, the song we were practicing for the Veteran's Day program at Abraham Lincoln Elementary School. It was the fall of 2006, deep in the heart of Bible Belt Indiana, where public schools could teach you to sing about God and most parents signed the waiver allowing you to be paddled if you were naughty. We took our seats on the music room risers and perked up at the opportunity to sing the song we'd heard on the radio. Miss Smith told us to "sing it sad," so we did.

"Where were you when the world stopped turning, that September day? Were you out in the yard with your wife and children...or drivin' down some cold interstate..." Jackson separated these lines by several stanzas, but they still run together in my head. I always pictured my parents driving when they found out the world had stopped. I imagine they stopped too, that all the cars stopped honking and spewing out fumes to pause for a moment of silence before the shock set in and everyone drove like mad, only to be stopped short again in the traffic. My mom was heading back from class at IUPUI, the commuter college in Indianapolis where she was finishing her bachelor's degree part time. My dad was at work, on a job site downtown, erecting the frame of some building, not a skyscraper that day, with his union, Ironworkers Local 22.

Fast forward through my self-involved adolescence, and it wasn't until I entered college that I really started searching for my role in the attacks. By that point, even my memory of the day had been corrected by the grownups who were old enough to understand.

My first trip on a plane was in October of my freshman year at Emory University. I was flying home for fall break, and I tried to go through TSA with an aerosol can of sunscreen in my backpack. I was stopped and reprimanded. They confiscated my sunscreen, and the incident became nothing more than a funny precursor to my first experience above the clouds. As far as I was concerned, this was standard procedure, being checked and scanned and patted, my bag

rifled through, its contents unfolded. I was learning the ropes. For some reason, I didn't get a *Delta First Flyer* pin. I wondered if it was because I seemed like a natural.

Some flights later, I began wrestling with this idea of remembering that which I never really experienced. I was there for 9/11, but I was never able to do anything with that presence. I didn't cry. I hadn't lost anyone I loved. Is it morbid to say I felt left out? I desperately wanted it to matter. I wanted something poetic to justify my first memory being the most extreme event in America's recent history.

The event loomed over my upbringing, but I still didn't know what to do with the memory of it. Fear doesn't feel like fear if it's all you've ever known. Neither does grief. I never knew a flight without TSA, a country without fear, without xenophobia, without a ruptured sense of exceptionalism, without a war in the Middle East, without privacy infringement. The political grumblings of my parents and grandparents and those boys who became fascinated with history at a young age always seemed to trace back to that September, but I knew little about what happened, let alone the chain of events that snowballed after it. I didn't want to be the kind of girl who flits through life without understanding how it came to be. So I set out to learn what I didn't, most of which seemed painfully obvious. The planes and Al Qaeda and the PATRIOT Act and the rest of what I found on Wikipedia (supported by other, more scholarly accounts and rabbit holes, I assure you). Even then, I could not conceptualize the weight of the day. The lives that were lost, the markets that collapsed, the American dream as it was punctured and collapsed inward. I couldn't feel it, not really. That world was one of the past; the effects of it in my life just seemed normal.

I wanted to write my memory of 9/11 into a greater generational discourse. I wanted to find a way to conceptualize the memory which has been rewritten for those of us who were just becoming relevant, thinking, feeling beings at the time. I wanted to redefine the history to

consider the way I lived it, to validate the experience of coming of age alongside this social and political change. This experience, as I had experienced it, was wholly discredited because we were too young to “get it.”

Initially, I failed. I did not write some great generational anthem. I wrote what amounted to little more than a half-baked summary of the day and its proceedings. It read like a high school research report. I was having trouble, more than anything, connecting to the material. After reading my dull account of how I’d come to know 9/11, I met with my Senior Seminar professor, who told me I ought to go to New York. I laughed at the thought of paying my way to The Big Apple for a *paper*. Something I couldn’t even afford for a vacation. Professor Grimsley did not seem to find it a laughing matter. If I wanted to write the piece, I had to experience the place.

“You’re going,” he said. “I’ll take care of it.”

I set out writing the most modest budget I could muster. It was denied, deemed unrealistic, and within a few hours, Emory’s writing department coordinator booked me a safer-looking hotel in Manhattan and a roundtrip ticket for the next week. I was off on my first trip to New York to chase a story 17 years in the making, in my making, and they were going to make sure I felt it.

The day before I left for New York, Mamaw called from Indianapolis. I was still at school when I answered.

“Hey there, Poopsie,” she cooed. “I heard you’ve got a trip to the big city tomorrow.”

The Newhouses are not well-traveled.

“So, I got my hair done yesterday, and I was talking to the gal there, telling her about your trip, and she was telling me about the last time she was in New York, in 2003 for somebody’s wedding,” she began. “And I was telling her about your project, and she said you have to check out this little Irish place by the memorial.”

“Oh cool, what’s it called?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t know. She couldn’t remember, but I just thought, ‘Oh, I have to tell Ana because this would be perfect.’ Maybe you can find it when you’re there. It’s a little Irish pub. Apparently the firefighters hang out there all the time, or at least they used to.”

I promised I would look for it and let her know what I found.

“Well, are you all packed?”

The car I called to take me into the city the next day smelled like cigarettes. It was expensive, and had I known that part of the trip would not be reimbursed, I might’ve taken the bus from the airport. But the view, a soft grey sky into early morning Manhattan, felt like quintessential New York magic. I was entering the world of song lyrics and romcom settings, and I was doing it alone. In the back seat of that sedan, maneuvering beneath the skyscrapers, I realized just how little of the world I knew.

There is wonder in feeling small. When I return to the places I only knew as a child, I am always surprised by their size, the normalcy of them. The water fountains now at the appropriate height, the ceilings lower, the halls narrower. In New York, you can never grow enough to fill up the space. The city will always be grander than you, larger than all of us. And when that magic was ruptured, it kept quaking into the heart of anyone who toyed with the words *American Dream*, rolled them over with their tongue and checked their pulse.

I dropped my bags off at the hotel lobby and mapped my way to the memorial. A real New York bagel and a coffee to go. The trees on Broadway were lit up like Christmas. Someone told me they’re like that all year round. It was not yet 8AM when I reached the memorial pools. The sky created a haze that made the place feel like the only thing in focus. I walked slowly around the South Pool, letting my fingers trace the names of those who were lost. There weren’t many people out, the tourists surely still tucked into bed, the nine-to-fivers just starting on their

first cup of coffee. I circled the pool and walked over to the North one. Retracing the foundation of what once was. There is an absence there that feels sacred, that the erection of any new structure would have stolen. Inside the pools, water cascades into the center. Lights run the length of each square. Behind the falling water, in the early, almost-darkness, the lights seem to extend far beyond the confines of the pools, like a room of mirrors, you can see the reflection of the light extend somewhat infinitely, as if retracing the towers that once stood.

I check my watch and realize I have an hour before my 10 o'clock reservation for the 9/11 Memorial Museum. It is just after 9AM, nearly the time the second tower was struck, minutes after the buildings began evacuating. The air here would have been thick with more than a haze. The morning absent of this quiet.

There, against the back wall of the museum, are two NYPD officers. I pull out a notebook and pen from my bag and walk over to them.

“Hi,” I say, unsure of where to begin.

“Hello, can we help you with something?” one of them asks.

“Um, yes, hopefully, I’m looking for an Irish pub around here? I’m told law enforcement and firefighters frequent it.”

“Oh, you mean O’Hara’s?” the other one asks. His is the first New York accent I’ve heard. Thick and booming.

“I guess that could be it. Could you tell me where it is?”

“That’s gotta be it,” he says. “Just cross the street over behind the pool, and it’s on the corner across from Ten-Ten.”

“Great, thank you. I’m writing a story about 9/11 and I was told it would be a good place to start.”

“Oh yeah, that’s the place,” he said.

“How old were you on 9/11 anyway?” the other one asks.

We each share our recollection of the day. Mine at Mamaw’s. One’s in college. The other one’s in middle school. Before I go around to get in line for the museum, the other one says to me, “By the way, you’ve got something in your teeth.”

I blush.

“Oh, thanks, and thanks again for your help.” It’s a sesame seed from that New York bagel.

I am mistaken for a high school student upon entering the museum and debate going along with them so I can listen in on their guided tour. They are all snickering and rolling their eyes, and I remember how removed they are from the contents of this museum. They weren’t alive in 2001. I drop my keys in a bowl before walking through the metal detector. I cry before I make it to the main corridor, passing first through a dimly lit hall filled with footage and sound bites from the day. I stop in front of a clip showing a woman running from the scene, her bag over her head to cover from the falling debris, her shoes in her hand. A woman behind me whispers to her friend. “I knew her.” I turn and catch a glimpse at her haunted expression. She looks down, and her friend slides an arm in hers. I put my head down as well. We all walk on.

Two halls, and a separate exhibit dedicated to baseball and George Bush’s hope-restoring first pitch, extend from the main floor. It is crowded, and I feel a twinge of animosity toward the people cramming into the sports exhibit while the halls of twisted metal and photographs of the lost are left sparse. I decide they would rather not relive their grief, and I forgive them, but I still skip the baseball exhibit.

I come upon a firetruck, mangled and melted on one end, like a toy deserted in a housefire. It is hard to imagine a force strong enough to inflict so much damage outside a superhero movie. I hang back and listen in on a tour. The young guide is describing the nature of

the first responders. He tells a story of men and women, of heroism and victimhood, not just body count. Near the front of the truck, a woman bursts into tears. Her husband pulls her into his chest. “It was 10:26 when I heard. 10:26.” She sobs. The tour moves on.

I emerge from the museum in time for lunch but not quite hungry and set out in search of O’Hara’s. I find it catty-corner to the memorial on Cedar and Greenwich. A pub on the ground floor of what appears to be an apartment building with the kind of fire escape you see in movies. The rickety looking staircase serves as a backdrop for the vertical sign, yellow with green font, that boasts the bar’s name. I swing open the door, and a man, Dave, catches it behind me. The place is packed. A long bar with tables and chairs squished along the narrow walls. There are only two seats open, together in the center of the bar. I take one, and Dave takes the other. We are introduced. Ryan, the bartender, comes around and brings Dave his regular, a Blue Moon in a glass. I order a water. Dave asks if I’m a recovering alcoholic or underage. I answer neither, and his eyes widen a bit. He likes me already.

The place is buzzing with lunch rush, the local kind. The bellowing of the patrons suggests that most of them are native New Yorkers, their accents a bassline. From floor to ceiling there are fire and police department patches hanging on every inch of the walls. Dave tells me law enforcement and firefighters come from all over the country to hang their patches here. The whole place pays homage to these public servants. I tell Dave I am writing a story on 9/11 and that I happened upon this place on a loose recommendation from a friend of my grandmother’s.

“You’re in the right place, kid,” Dave says. He tells me to order the burger. I do. “Ryan here, is studying for his fireman test right now actually.”

“Studying?” Ryan calls from the end of the bar, wiping out a glass. The gruff men at the counter nod at Dave and look inquisitively at me. “I passed my physical last week.”

“You did? No shit!” Dave says. “One of these days you’re gonna have to come around to our side and let me buy you a drink.” They discuss the politics of New York City bartending, how Ryan isn’t allowed to get merry in the bar he works for.

Ryan makes a joke about Dave’s mother I don’t quite catch and Dave shouts “Fuck you!” Ryan brings him another beer.

“Kid, you oughta go over to Ten-Ten after lunch,” Ryan says to me.

“What’s Ten-Ten?” I ask.

“It’s the fire station across the street,” he says. “That station had the most first responders. They lost a lot of men that day.” He doesn’t think anyone who was there for the attacks would be there today. He hasn’t talked with them about it in a while. Dave offers to walk me over there after we eat.

“Just tell em Ryan sent ya. They’re good boys, those guys.”

I finish my fries, and Dave gulps down the rest of his beer. He works in the New World Trade Center. He pays my tab. As we get up to leave, Ryan shakes my hand and wishes me luck. Before we get to the door, a firetruck screams past the windows with cinematic timing, sirens blaring.

The station is empty when we knock. I thank Dave and we part ways. On my way back to the hotel, I stop and study the bronze mural dedicated to the first responders that lines the wall outside O’Hara’s. Two decades ago, the little pub would’ve sat in the shadow of the massive towers. Today the mural is draped in a light uncharacteristic of the city. Sunlight peeks through the break in the New York City skyline, a hue of hope that colors the metal engraving. As the afternoon light melts off the haze, I realize how much I’ve been asking of the morning.

I never sat in the shadows of the original World Trade Center, and I never will. I am moved only by the history that lives here: the patches that line the walls of the pub, the cascading

pools, the break in the skyline, but the event itself will never be mine to feel. That absence is not meant to be filled. I set out to recreate something that was only relevant to me in its destruction.

It was a dramatic preface, if nothing else.

I call Mamaw and tell her I found it.

Blue-Collar Baby

My guinea pig died in 2008. I was in seventh grade. Named Benjy, after the son my parents never had, the little guy starved himself. We never took him to be a suicidal pet; we cared for him the best we could, but when his time came, he went gruesomely. The process was arduous, beginning with his sudden distaste for the wooden blocks on which he was supposed to teethe. It escalated into veterinary visits and mealtimes imposed with a syringe. The bottom and top rows of his front teeth grew together in a painful tongue and groove. Eventually, they grew to the point where he could no longer open his mouth. The vet could, for a sizable sum, grind them down every few weeks or so. We begged and pleaded my parents for the procedure. Whether grief stricken for the suffering of our first family pet or scared of the mourning that would ensue among their children after he passed, my parents took him to the vet, and they ground the things down, and everyone, for the most part, was happy about it.

When it came time for Benjy's second appointment, my dad, who never handled much of the scheduling, called to get the appointment pushed back.

"We'll save money this way," he said. "Better to wait until he absolutely needs it, right?" And so we waited a week, and then another, until finally my sisters and I begged and pleaded some more and got an appointment for a Thursday morning. The night before, we cleaned his cage and scooped his poop and laid down fresh sawdust.

When I woke up the next morning, the room I shared with my sister was eerily quiet. Usually Benjy was awake and scrambling around in his cage well before we got up for school. He had been less active since the teeth debacle, but this silence was heavier. I slunk out of bed and knelt next to his cage. There, in a small heap, he lay motionless. Gingerly, I unlatched the door and reached inside. My sister's footsteps padded against the floor behind me until she

peered over my shoulder. My eyes welled with tears as I willed myself to prod his small body. Nothing.

I slid my fingers into the sawdust, scooping him into my palm. He had never been still enough for me to feel his body beneath his thick fur. A skeleton covered in hair. Despite the syringe, he had starved. Dad called to cancel the appointment, and even as he laid his hand on my shoulder, a part of me was sure he had done it on purpose.

My father, our family's sole breadwinner at the time, was laid off for three months during the Great Recession. Had I understood the weight of my father's burden, I doubt I would've been so hard on him. The truth was we didn't have the money for the first veterinary visit. Even then, through that syringe, Benjy was beginning to eat us out of house and home. That home is the ranch where my nuclear sect of the Newhouses still reside, the six of us in our modest three-bedroom, one bath. My father grew up in a working-class family. His father was an ironworker, his mother a woodworker, sometimes a tutor, always a wife and caregiver. I don't think my dad ever imagined he'd be laying steel beams as his father had, but as I was ushered into the world, so was the ironworking legacy.

We took pride in the blue-collar. The Newhouses are a hardworking, smartass people. I was nine when my mother got her bachelor's degree. I wasn't when my dad got his. Simply because he didn't finish. A semester into his freshman year at Indiana University, as the story goes, he was called into the Deans office. The Dean's complaint was my father's utter lack of attendance. Since the beginning of the year, he had not attended a single class, except, my dad is always sure to add at this juncture, *History of Folk Music*, of which he attended most. In whatever circle my dad was running in at the time, apparently that was "cool." Or at least cooler than *Algebra I*. Regardless, you have to give the man credit. Or at least I do. He might not have been productive academically, but luckily for me, he was productive enough to conceive a child,

no matter how accidental. My mother, always one step ahead of him, was in her third semester when she got knocked up, much to the displeasure of her friends and family. The budding pre-med embarked on a journey of the human body her anatomy class left her wholly unprepared for. Nine months later, I came into the world, and her dreams of becoming a doctor left it.

My mom was forced to wait exactly two months after having me before she took her first legal drink. I can't imagine her waiting long after I came out screaming. Motherhood became the forefront. With the help of grandparents, friends, family, the whole village really, she made it work. My father quit his gig as semi-pro-hockey-stud-slash-party-boy and enrolled in apprenticeship school. Two years later, he graduated and began working full time as an ironworker, and my parents moved into a new (to us) apartment. Although it came a little early, it was the good ol' American dream: stay-at-home Momma with a working-class Daddy and the beautiful baby girl to match. The reality was that my mom still looked much like a baby girl herself, and it took my father awhile to kick the wild streak and come to grips with what exactly 40 hours a week looked like. Even after skipping so many of those algebra courses, he was sure this didn't add up.

Mom and Dad spent their twenties doing things out of order. Somehow, they got marriage right; my mom at 26 and my dad 28, they were right around the average, on par with their peers. My cameo as a flower girl along with my younger sister set things askew, but to my grandparents' relief, they were finally hitched. As if the second child wasn't evidence enough they were in it for the long haul. My dad settled into his union job, still playing hockey with his buddies on Sunday nights. My mother studied long into the night, chipping away at her degree one class at a time. My parents, the proud bearers of four baby girls, worked hard to make sure we never wanted for much. My sisters and I were provided for in ways well above our means. Our parents settled in somewhere well below. My mother came from little, and while my father

came from a comfortable situation, they were both more modest than materialistic. It wasn't until around the time of the recession that I began to realize which rung of the socioeconomic ladder we were perched on.

In elementary school, my sisters and I went through a phase in which we desperately *needed* American Girl Dolls. The toys retailed in the ballpark of \$100, and were, for a family like ours, out of the question. There was one character in particular we took to. Kit Kittredge was the American Girl whose well-to-do family fell to poverty in the Great Depression. We liked her because she had a blonde bob and blue eyes like my sister Gabby and a movie on the big screen. Now I think we liked her because she had less.

We also liked her because our great grandma, whom we affectionately called GG Betts, grew up during the Great Depression. Kit's story felt like a time machine back to GG's childhood. GG was a helluva bowler and a wise-cracking storyteller. I still use bumpers at the bowling alley, but I am told I inherited some of her smartass charm. I was too young to appreciate most of her stories while she was alive to tell them, but I remember one in particular. When she was a girl, in the thick of the Great Depression, she and her siblings (Tootie, Junie, and Janie) would pick tar off the streets when it melted in the summer sun and chew it like gum. In the winter, her father would bet her a nickel she wouldn't run across the snowy street and back in her bathing suit. After she succeeded, she would bundle up and run to the corner to spend it on sweets. Despite occasionally being suckered into infomercial merchandise in her old age, she was frugal all her life. It's weird how money becomes hereditary.

The Recession for me was not some great equalizer in which the whole country suffered and millions lost their investments and homes. It was a marker of socioeconomic disparity. It was the first time I was confronted with my family having less. At its worst, our financial situation manifested itself in cigarette butts and beer cans strewn around the front porch, our

parents' raised voices not muffled enough through the screen door. The neighbors never seemed to mind. In a neighborhood like ours, I figure they probably understood.

While I was fighting middle school acne and learning to correctly apply eyeliner, my parents were fighting the economy. They lost stocks or bonds or some convoluted form of money sitting in a virtual account that we never regained. This still comes up sometimes in that invariable conversation about how better off we would be if only...

In high school, friends from my honors classes would come to pick me up to grab a movie or go to a party. Invariably, the first time one of those middle-class, high-achieving kids pulled up to my little house, they would ask in a shock, "*this* is where you live?" I would look at them blankly as if I didn't understand. Let them sit in that presumption for a moment. They would grumble something about thinking it would be bigger, you know because your family is so big. You know because aren't the smart kids from wealthy families? I would nod quietly as we drove off. Once a peer of mine's mother called my family white trash. My mother laughed. It's a funny thing, blue-collar pride. It's an underdog story in itself: the-look-what-I-can-make-out-of-less. There is something about surprising people I never get tired of, even when their responses are a privileged shade of impolite.

Years later, in college, I was talking with a friend on the track team about this game my parents love to play when waiting to hear if they've won the lottery. They conjure up imaginary versions of all the things they would buy with the winnings, how long it would take for them to renovate our house to sell and then how long it would take to build the new one in the woods on a big plot of land and how nice it would feel to be debt-free and to have working cars and to stop worrying and to maybe buy a boat or a yacht if we hit the Powerball. This sort of thing, I told the boy, happens all the time. My parents buy a lot of lottery tickets. It's funny really, how this fantasy has become such a big part of their lives. After listening and laughing along, the boy

replied, “My parents call the lottery the idiot tax.” And that was all. He took a bite of his pizza and the conversation rolled on. I sat there inside myself feeling as small as the dollar sign he had just reduced me to. He had no idea.

My mother says I have a complex surrounding the wealthy. It’s not so much of a complex as I am painfully aware of my disdain for the rich. Attempting to unlearn that contempt has proved especially difficult at an affluent institution like Emory.

In my first Emory writing workshops, a common narrative emerged in my classmates’ stories. It went something like: blue collar man despises himself and his life, destroys relationships, and hits rock bottom, before realizing he is unhappy because he is a plumber or a construction worker or electrician. Then he ascends from rags to riches by the writer’s Adderall-inspired *deus ex machina* and lives happily ever after in his newfound wealth. To this I have to ask if I am the one with the complex. Me, the self-actualized low-income girl who has worked her ass off to earn enough scholarships to sit in this classroom or the daddy-funded students who have been raised to pity me and my barriers to success? Who is lacking the perspective? Here I am in this space where I am being groomed to leave this institution and climb the ranks, to leave behind my own working-class roots to make “a better life.” How am I supposed to reconcile with that?

It's hard to recognize the girl who grew up on powdered orange juice and her parents’ sacrifice when her blue-collar is bleached.

Adjacent

I figure the world doesn't need another white girl writing about race. I figure I can't *not* write about race when trying to capture the generational zeitgeist of the past couple decades. I know there are voices more fit than mine to tell this story. In the broadest strokes, I can reduce my dealings with race to a few paltry pages. I struggle with recognizing this privilege and often finding myself racist-adjacent.

The summer after my freshmen year of college, I went out to Wyoming to work on my friend's ranch. His family's property sits on the outskirts of Kaycee, a 211-person town. I did not see a single person of color during my time there. I did, however, hear the N-word used on many occasions. I heard it at the dinner table, as a descriptor for Obama fans. I ate my shepherds' pie without expressing my support for the Obama administration. *I could not bear to be impolite.* I heard it again when one of the ranch hands asked to listen to my music. N-word music, he said. How do you listen to that rap crap? I said I had pretty broad taste. I heard it again to describe the sort of people who live in Cheyenne, Wyoming's nearest big city. I think I changed the subject. I don't remember. I came back from that trip and wrote a wonderstruck account of The Great American West, leaving out the vernacular altogether.

The semester prior, I was enrolled in a social and political philosophy class. It was the first time I thought critically about the contemporary construct of race. We read Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*, and I had the opportunity to hear him speak. At its most basic level, the text argues that the world is sick, and in living in it, we are all racist. Most of the students in attendance were white. When he opened the floor for questions, I left to make sure I made it to track practice on time.

My sophomore year of high school Trayvon Martin was shot and killed. That same year, we read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in my AP Literature class. Students were encouraged to read the N-word out loud. There was no reason, our teacher told us, to shy away from the language of the time.

The following summer, while I was being recruited for the high school newspaper, George Zimmerman was acquitted, found not guilty on all counts, for the murder of the 17-year-old. My first piece for the paper, one I would refer to on numerous occasions as “hard-hitting,” detailed the ruling. The headline read, “All-woman jury finds Zimmerman innocent in Martin case.” The tagline beneath read in bold, “**But many think him guilty of SOMETHING!**” My depiction of the crime as race-related reads as a suggestion, something to mull over.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement emerged on social media in the weeks after the trial, gaining international traction and attention. Even then, I did not understand how this racial violence was not some archaic resurgence but an ongoing societal issue. I did not have the grasp on my privilege to understand what that **SOMETHING!** was.

There were three students of color in my class throughout most of primary and secondary schooling. My township was relatively diverse, sitting on the edge of the city, just outside the border for Indianapolis Public Schools. The honors classes were overwhelmingly white. I was in seventh grade when Obama was elected as the first black President of the United States.

I learned the bystander effect in regard to people who need to be administered CPR. It was only later I began to understand the weapon of complacency in the context of Civil Rights. At 16, I felt progressive writing an article about race even as I was too scared to dig into its racial implications. My high school friend group felt evolved because we featured an interracial couple.

In college, my best friend’s name is Dilys. She is Ghanaian, and I feel woke because I know how pissed she is going to be after I see a white girl touch her hair. I clam up when Dilys

talks about a whitewashed Instagram as I scroll past post after post of white bodies. I mistakenly discredit womanism in a Gender Studies class.

“But isn’t it weakening the feminist movement?” I ask. “Wouldn’t it be more effective to all speak with one voice? To be unified instead of split?”

A girl with 4C hair responds to me venomously. “We have never been one voice,” she says. “Some of us have been left out since the beginning of the movement.”

I apologize.

I just didn’t know. I am paying attention now, but paying attention is not enough. There will always be more I do not know. I will be learning the effect of my whiteness for as long as I live in it. I am afraid of all I have done and am doing in my unknowing. I am afraid of what I might do in the name of being polite.

Racist-adjacent is just another way of saying racist.

Suffolk Street

When it comes to my safety, it is hard for me to tell what is irrational.

This morning in Cambridge, MA, was sunny and warm, a September precursor to fall, teetering on the verge of 70. I left my boyfriend's apartment on Suffolk Street in search of Whole Foods. I'd been there with him once, maybe twice before, but navigating there myself was a different story altogether. In fact, I would hardly call it "navigating myself" with Apple Maps pulled up on my phone. The program was glitching, projecting my whereabouts as a glowing blue dot about half a block left of wherever I was. Left on the screen, maybe south on the map. I don't remember. This caused relatively little trouble except when I first set out. I could not tell which way I was meant to turn because according to my misguided blue dot, I was already there. I feigned a soft smile in the direction of a young father pushing his daughter in a stroller down the street. The stroller continued straight as I turned right, walked a few paces, backtracked, turned left, walked a few paces, and then ultimately decided that right was the best route after all. After this minor embarrassment, I walked to Whole Foods on a breeze, as leaves rustled in the adolescent trees. Young adults walked briskly to work, funneling into tech companies across the square. Dog walkers and new families alike meandered about, enjoying the hiatus from summer heat.

In the year after graduating high school, my mom worked at Steak n' Shake waiting tables. One evening, after her shift, she climbed into her white Pontiac and drove from the south side of Indianapolis to Bloomington, where my (soon-to-be) father and his friends were hosting a house party. Sometime along the way, she noticed a semi-truck had been following her a little too closely. She turned off the highway into a residential neighborhood. The semi-truck followed.

Her pulse quickening, she maneuvered the suburb as erratically as possible. She was only a few blocks from the house, where my dad and his Indiana University hockey buds were rolling in kegs. After a few sharp turns, the semi had vanished from her rearview. She thought she had lost him. She pulled in the driveway and took a breath. It had been nothing, some delivery truck probably, only a coincidence. She walked around the car and popped her trunk. Wheels screeched down the street. The semi-truck driver must have struggled to make a tight turn in the neighborhood. Now he was hauling ass straight toward where my mom stood in the driveway. In a world pre-cell phone, she hadn't had a chance to beep over the fearful news to my dad or his buddies. She sprinted up to the house and threw open the door. The young men stormed the yard with baseball bats and hockey sticks, and there it was. The semi-truck, sitting outside the house on this dead-end street. My mom watched in horror as my dad and his friends beat the side of the cab, demanding the man leave, cursing and causing a scene. They watched as he tore up the neighbors' yards, making the 27-point turn to leave the street. The party recommenced.

Scanning the aisles in Whole Foods can be a dangerous pastime, not to mention a devastating cliché, but I ended up with a single French baguette, exactly what I came for and nothing more. A small miracle, and reason enough to celebrate with breakfast at Starbucks, for if I managed to save money one place, I might as well waste it in another. A tall iced caramel macchiato and a bagel. Out of cream cheese? Avocado spread then, thank you, no receipt, and smile. Looking to reduce the amount of time I spent scanning the small cafe, I chose a corner chair of the long table stretching across the room. A man's backpack sat next to me, its corresponding back in the chair next to it. His headphones protruded from his bald head, their wire snaking down to the phone in his hand. I watched in my periphery as he mouthed the words to something but made no sound. His hands danced around dramatically, performing what

looked like a drug-fueled Tai Chi practice in fast forward. I smirked and retrieved my bagel from the counter. When I returned, the man rose from his seat and plopped his backpack on a stool facing the window.

“I’m sorry,” I said to him. “Am I bothering you here?”

With an incredulous look he replied, or rather shouted, “NO, NOT AT ALL.”

A dozen or so people filed in, regarding and disregarding the line with equal fervor.

My mom drove a maroon minivan for the majority of my childhood. She upgraded from the white Pontiac after the birth of my sister, or maybe it finally crapped out and they had to replace it. One of the first times I remember riding in the minivan, I was seated behind my mom in the driver’s seat. It was sunny and warm. I imagine now she had her long chestnut hair splayed across bare shoulders as we drove to the grocery or the zoo or wherever it was that we were headed. We pulled up to a stop light. A pickup truck came to a stop next to us with three men sitting across the bench in the cab. They were calling out to my mom, telling her how beautiful she was, how much they liked the sight of her, how lucky she was to be so pretty. And I waved to them, the nice men. So they turned their attention to me and waved back. Seeing this in her periphery, my mom wheeled her head around to see me smiling and waving to the men.

“Ariana, stop that. Don’t wave at them,” she said.

“Why? They’re just being nice. They think you’re pretty!” I countered.

“No, honey. They’re not being nice.”

The light turned green. They turned left. We drove straight.

I watched as people debated their orders and squeezed past one another. It was slightly past 10:30 AM, an odd time for such a rush. As the herd was caffeinated, several customers

tossed smiles in my direction, the girl with an entire French baguette in the middle of the store. An older gentleman walked in and said to me, “Why you’ve got green stuff all over your bagel!” as he tried to decipher whether or not he should recognize me. I think my voice is what did it. “They were out of cream cheese,” I said. The man smiled and walked around my table, ignoring the line altogether. He found another girl around my age, with similar brown hair sitting at a table in the corner. She stood to greet him, and the man said, “Mind if I squeeze you?” The girl laughed. They hugged. She thanked him. When I realized my attention had been turned to them for a beat longer than palatable, I turned back to my bagel and surveyed the line of worker bees and tech engineers. A middle-aged woman received her coffee and sat in the chair two down from mine. Within seconds, my headphoned friend stood from his place at the window and said, or rather shouted, “CAN I HAVE MY SEAT BACK PLEASE?” to the woman who had likely been somewhere out on Massachusetts Avenue, far out of earshot, the first time he relinquished his seat.

“Oh, of course. I didn’t realize,” she replied, perfectly polite. She raised and lowered herself around me to the adjacent table with a sort of seasoned elegance I doubt I will ever achieve. A woman so well-versed in getting out of a man’s way, she does it with grace.

The first time I used an ATM, I was on my way to a concert with my high school boyfriend. We stopped at the gas station, and he waited in the car while I went inside. I don’t remember if I was confused by the function of the machine itself or if I was flummoxed by the \$3.75 service fee it was trying to charge me for taking my own money out of my own account, but for whatever reason I was stalled there for a moment before I dialed up any sort of transaction. In that moment, a man came up behind me and with one large hand, groped my teenage ass. I spun around, ripping my bank card out with me and saw a scraggly looking man in an unusually

large coat for an autumn night skulk out the door. He walked right past the car where my boyfriend sat on his phone waiting for me. I fought back tears as I ran out the door after him, averting my eyes from the woman at the cash register and the couple standing in line. I slammed the passenger side door and began to cry.

Headphones reclaimed his seat, and his backpack brushed my arm as it too returned next to me. A man walked in and crossed in front of my table, catching my eye as he passed. I smiled softly and added more avocado spread to my bagel. I lost track of the man as he traveled through the line, not paying him much attention, focused more on the sesame seeds I seemed to have gotten stuck everywhere. A particularly tough one in my hair. As I cleaned up the remnants of my bagel, I felt eyes on me. I raised my own and again met those of the man. He stood staring at me with his back against the wall at the end of the counter. I did not smile this time. I softened my face in an attempt to seem polite. No one appeared to notice him looking.

A man once said "...when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything ... Grab them by the pussy." Someone caught it on camera. Some people saw the footage. Sometime later, on January 20, 2017, that man was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. The next day an estimated five million people marched in protest throughout the United States. Five million more marched internationally. I was at home studying when I first heard of the march. It was already over. I pounded my ear with the heel of my palm to knock the sand out.

I fumbled with my purse, zipping it as if I were going to be robbed in the middle of a crowded Starbucks and the zipper would be my last defense to prevent the crime. After a moment of trying to look busy, I unzipped my purse and removed my phone, plugged in the

address for my boyfriend's apartment and read the details of the walk back. As I stalled, the man left his spot at the counter and walked around the corner. I waited what seemed like enough time to put some distance between us before tossing my trash and heading out into Central Square.

I told myself I must be paranoid. You're being stupid. It was nothing. Hadn't you just sat in the same Starbucks people watching for the better half of an hour? Perhaps this man was doing the same. I had been seated in the most centrally located spot in the room. Who was to say he was looking at me at all? He could have just been looking. I forced the thought of him from my mind as the sun warmed my jeans down Massachusetts Avenue. The day was growing brighter, and the coffee I sipped muted my ever-present headache. I navigated with my phone and baguette in one hand, coffee in the other, my purse still unzipped at my side.

I turned left onto a stretch of Essex Street filled with the construction of one of its flanking buildings. I peered up at the wooden beams and met the eyes of a boy way up in the building. Beneath his hardhat, his face looked kind and shy of its twentieth birthday. He smiled at me. I waved, unafraid.

In October of 2017, an actress made space for a flood of women to speak out about their sexual assault. Half a million people posted #metoo in the first 24 hours. I was never raped. It wasn't that bad for me. I did not tweet.

As I approached the intersection at the end of the block, the boy shouted "Hey!" from above. It was a call looking for a response. I did not have a response to give. I kept walking.

At the stop sign, I was instructed by Apple to turn right onto a street I no longer remember the name of. When I looked back to check for cars before crossing the road, I noticed someone behind me. I crossed the street and my shadow did too. I picked up my pace and looked

down at my phone. Soon I would need to turn down Suffolk Street. I felt this was something I must not do. Instead, I turned at the first stop sign I came to. My shadow turned too. I spun around and saw him. The man whose back had been against the counter. The man who no one appeared to have seen watching me. His head was down. He was no more than two strides behind me. Tall, white, middle aged, with Doc's *Back to the Future* grey hair, light blue jeans, and readers folded over the front of his white t-shirt.

A few days before Christmas, my friends and I drove downtown to meet my cousin and her friends at a bar in Indianapolis. The cover band played dancy 90's hits, and the dress code for the night was ugly Christmas sweaters. We got there, and some people drank. Some of us didn't. All of us danced. After a while, I found myself directly in front of the stage ironically headbanging to a song that was more of a slow shuffle groove. A few young, bearded men were dancing in front of us, obviously trashed and friends with the band. One of them turned to me and raised his voice over the crowd.

"Whaddyu think of the lead singer?" he jammed a thumb up behind him to the blond at the mic with pupils like saucers. Sauced.

"Eh," I shrugged, uninterested.

"He looks like he's 14, right?" the guy prodded.

Again, I shrugged.

"I, on the other hand, look like an old man compared to this kid," he said looking deflated.

"You don't look old," I shouted over the music. "It's just the beard." He seemed pleased with my response. Not wanting to interact with him any more than that, I turned my attention back to my friends so we could air-guitar the rest of the night away.

Not five minutes later, I felt a large hand fully cup and squeeze my right butt cheek. I spun around, face to face with the beard.

“NO.” I shouted in his face.

He threw his hands up.

“It was an accident, I swear.”

“Whatever,” I turned back to my friends and dragged them towards the door. We left.

I swiveled my head back around and quickened my pace. The man quickened too. It felt like no time had passed before I could hear his breathing stuck like a bee in my hair. He let out something of a chuff. My head spun again to face him, and in what I can only remember now as a blur, he smiled in my face. The sight of his teeth dropped my stomach through my pants. I raced down the sidewalk, still speed walking, refusing to break out into a run, still maintaining my composure. I can only describe what followed as a feeling of immediate danger, of threat I had long anticipated and guarded myself from but never truly experienced.

I read the comments on a Washington Post article about the professor who came forward to accuse the President’s Supreme Court nomination of sexual assault and attempted rape. I felt sick. I remembered he was appointed. I closed the tab.

I looked down the street in a panic. A man in dark clothes turned the corner ahead and started walking towards us. Without thinking, I called out to him in the most chipper tone my shaking voice could muster.

“Hey! It’s so nice to see you!” I ran to him. “How are you?” I smiled, as he removed an earbud.

“I don’t—”

“How are you doing!” I interrupted, desperately enthusiastic. The man in dark clothes stared at me, saying nothing. I stared back, hoping my facial expression exuded the pleading my voice wouldn’t carry. In that moment of silence, my shadow, the man whose back had been up against the counter, who no one had seen following me, who had lurked somewhere near Starbucks waiting for me, who tried to follow me home, brushed between us. Between us. Me and the man in dark clothes who had no idea why this crazy bitch was stopping him in the middle of residential Cambridge.

“Hi, I’m so sorry. Are you in a hurry? I can walk with you this way,” I said, gesturing behind me.

The man in dark clothes looked at me, as if I was stupid. He shook his head no. I took this as a *‘no, I don’t want this strange person walking with me’* more than a *‘no, I’m not in a hurry. I’m happy to help.’* Regardless, my shadow was waiting ahead at the stop sign on the corner. Without traffic to speak of, just waiting there, minding his own business, which apparently had an awful lot to do with mine.

I glanced down to where he stood and said to the dark-clothed man, “That man followed me from Starbucks.” I pointed directly at my shadow on the corner despite the nagging voice in my head that said pointing was rude. I wish I was kidding about that voice. The voice that under normal circumstances probably would’ve said flagging down strange men on the street was also rude. And dangerous.

A few weeks ago, I drove from Indianapolis to Atlanta after spending winter break at home. I stopped at Cracker Barrel for a solo dinner, not an uncommon practice, apparently, for the elderly of this nowhere Tennessee town. Being so young, so female, I drew a little more

attention. Two men commented on the book I brought and on my being alone. Another came up to me in the middle of my meal. I had lost my voice in the days before, when I was suffering from the first case of the flu I'd had in nearly a decade. He was hard of hearing, it turned out, so the interaction was strained, if not stupidly repetitive.

"What are you doing out here all alone?"

"I am driving back to school," I croaked. I repeated this line several times before we came to the mutual understanding that he couldn't hear and I couldn't speak and I was driving from far away to Atlanta which he thought was "a dangerous town."

"So where are you coming from?" he asked.

"I'm from Indiana," I struggled. I lifted up the image of the state on my sweatshirt and again breathed "Indiana."

His face perked up. "Indiana! Where in Indiana?"

"Indianapolis," I managed.

"Well I used to live there, on the south side."

"No way, I also grew up on the south side, near Southport."

"Well isn't that something," the old man replied. "I used to live there when I was driving semi-trucks."

I smiled. "Well it was very nice to meet you." I extended my hand. "What was your name?"

"Mr. T," he said shaking my hand.

"Ariana," I replied on the shake.

When the man in dark clothes said nothing, I considered that I had flagged down the only mute person walking around Cambridge that morning. Maybe he spoke another language. Maybe

this was hopeless and there was nothing I could do but walk right up to my shadow and give him my boyfriend's apartment number to save us both some time.

"I'm Ariana," I said.

"Jean," the man said.

"Your name is Jean?" I asked.

This apparently was a rude question despite, or perhaps in accordance with, all the other very rude things I was doing. He furrowed his eyebrows at me.

"Yes?"

"Oh, that's great!" I exclaimed. "I love that name, Jean. Listen, thank you so much for stopping, that man was staring at me and then he started following me and..." Jean cut me off. I glanced down toward the stop sign to find my shadow out of sight.

"You're not from around here, are you?" Jean asked.

"No, I'm from Indiana. I'm here visiting my boyfriend."

Jean looked skeptical. "This is the nicest area you'll ever see. Nothing bad happens here. Don't worry. This is the safest place in the world. I don't think he was following you."

"No, Jean. Trust me. I've been paranoid before. I know the difference. He was following me."

"Well if you're really worried, there are police all around. You can call 911 if you need to. Cambridge? It's the safest on the planet."

I looked down the street. Still no shadow.

"Alright," I said, trying not to piss Jean off any further. "Thank you."

I shook Jean's hand, and he walked off surprisingly unfazed. I walked briskly back to my route, checking behind me every few steps. The coast was clear of pursuers. There was no shadow. I seemed to have lost him. Or rather he had lost me.

I turned and sprinted down Suffolk Street and up the stairs into my boyfriend's apartment, where I locked the door, checked it, locked it again, took a breath, and cried.

As I waited in the old-timey storefront to pay for my Country Breakfast Platter, it occurred to me that Mr. T was about the right age to have been the driver from my mom's story on the southside, years ago. It occurred to me that it was probably unwise to identify myself as the only Indiana plate in the parking lot. That I shouldn't have confirmed just how alone and far from home I was. That I really should have parked under a street light.

I walked outside and there, right in front of my car, straddling six or more parking spots, was an emerald green semi-truck.