

[estuaries]

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designed in Detroit, Michigan

When my brother, sister, or I say, “I love you, Mom”

She always responds,

“I love you more”

At any second a phantom stenographer threatened to read back her testimony and prove that her love was less than perfect. Her hugs always last an excruciating full minute after your hug has ended. It’s possible that’s her performance for the demon camera crew. Or that she is hiding from them for as long as possible in my arms. Either way I am always more aware of the demons’ unblinking red eyes than I am of the embrace.

She never knew when the court was in recess or the cameramen were taking a break. It’s miracle of stamina her testimony has matured into a vigorous filibuster.

She is bent over the kitchen sink, washing the dishes before they go into the dishwasher. “That’s really just a sanitizer”. She’s wearing one of the many colorful sweatshirts she got such a “kick” out of puffy painting with candy canes at Christmas. But it isn’t Christmas or even winter. “The world would be a better place if we treated everyday like Christmas Day.” Sweatshirts also minimize the visual impact of her breasts which she constantly reminds us are huge. “With my eyesight and these, had I been alive during medieval times there would have been only one job available for me- wet nurse”. My mother has really bad eyesight too. She’s in the kitchen

stewing about being in the kitchen because she hates men and men are the reason that women are in the kitchen but she does love to cook it's just the cleaning she hates she's writing a cookbook they say the best chefs are men but that's not true and the world will find that out when they try her spaghetti sauce.

I fucking hate her spaghetti sauce. It has carrots in it.

Anyway, there she is in the kitchen. I am coming in from another exciting day of sophomore year of high school. I didn't learn to drive until I was twenty-two, and lived in the farthest part of Lilburn from Brookwood High School. Getting rides home after theater rehearsal or football practice or student council was always a bit of an undertaking. The least I can do is offer Neil, or Leslie, or Byron, or whoever it was that day a little snack.

Refrigerator. Three different kinds of mustard. Four different tubs of sour cream, none which contained sour cream. One empty jar of pickles. Just in case we could use the juice. Meat. Cooked to perfection at which point it can no longer be differentiated from any other kind beast that had been cooked that long as well. Yogurt. Dannon fruit on the bottom of course. Real food. Not like that candy YoPlait sells. Assorted deli meats and cheeses.

Sandwich time. My foraging gives my mother adequate time for an epic hug. Now delightedly, she notes the meats on the

counter, and turns to Neil...

"Neil, what type of deli meats does your family eat"

"Ummm. I'm not really sure. I guess like the regular kind"

"Well, I really care about my kids that's why I spend the extra money to buy Boar's Head brand meats."

The Oscar Meyer in his fridge empirically proved to all of us that she loved her kids more than his parents loved him. At sixteen years old he and I are both conscious enough to understand that's a diss. Tense silence follows.

My mother smiles smugly to the stenographer.

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Every time my Dad's 1993 red Ford Aerostar appears in the driveway, the defense has an opportunity to cross-examine.

"The sperm-donor is here. Call me if you feel uncomfortable in anyway".

"Your father has been emotionally abusing you kids for years; you can refuse anything he asks you to do"

"Try be OK this weekend. I'm going to Al-Anon, because of your father."

My friends are alcoholics. That's how I know my Dad isn't.

“I love you more than anything.”

Starting sometime in my seventh grade, my mother had twelve unbroken days to show us how much she loved us, by proving how much he didn't. Then for two days my brother and sister would struggle to synthesize her twelve day Phillipic with an obviously different reality.

I didn't go to Dad's. Mom cried everyday. Dad didn't. Mom told me that Dad cheated on her. Dad didn't say anything like that. Mom told me what a bad man Dad was. Dad never said anything bad about Mom. Mom always told me that I was the smartest person she'd ever met. It was pretty obvious to my twelve year old genius, that everything was Dad's fault.

A judicial appointment before puberty. Lucky kid.

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The longest senatorial filibuster by one person lasted just over twenty-four hours. My Mother persists. Moments become days. Days make years make miles. Like walking too long in high heels. Every step hurts more every hurt closes off more of life outside the foot. The tunnel of pain casts shadows beneath her eyes. Every day there is less recess and more session. The echoed clatter of the stenographers is deafening. She breaks down more and more on the stand.

Breaks down again and again at dinner. A joke between siblings at the dinner table, can send her screaming and crying up to her room, if she doesn't like it. If she doesn't feel

included. “You're ugly. Ugly people”. Sobs. Slams door. The stand off will continue as she refuses to emerge from her room until we apologize and tell her how much we love her.

It can go for days.

But it doesn't because we apologize. The only thing worse than the crying, the threats, even the paddle, is the silence.

The car. The car is like judges chambers. No cameras there apparently. No stenographer. She herds us into the car before church. To wait. In silence. Sometimes for forty five minutes. Comes screaming into the car telling us she's late because of us. We're the reason they hate her at the church. And how phony they are.

She always told us. Shut up. Was a terrible thing to say. An ugly thing. Even cried a few times thinking about someone telling her to shut up. I had to have the bar of hand soap from her bathroom in my mouth for an hour once. It was old. And cracked. And the cracks were filled with a blackness.

On the way to see the Wiz. The Wonderful Wiz. At the Atlanta Civic Center starring none other than Peabo Bryson and the incomparable Grace Jones. She gets lost on the way.

“If you stop, I'll go ask for directions, Mom”

“Shut the fuck up. Shut up. Shut up. You shut the fuck up. If

I wasn't taking you to this fucking play this never would have happened. You fucking assholes. Shut up." This is not spoken. It is screamed. She screams and screams.

Not one of us cries. She is upset- we are not allowed to be upset when she is. It is our fault she is upset. We don't get to feel bad when we have been bad. Emotions are a reward for accomplishment or a right when you have been abused. Abusers like us get to feel nothing. The car is silent.

Ten minutes later in the parking lot. The southern summer sun reflects off the bumpers and windshields like camera lens. We're a happy family. And lucky to have a good mother take us to such a wonderful event. You can tell how educated she is, by how not racist she is. We count the other white people in the audience. There are only six others.

Not even the flapping of the cameramen's tiny wings can detract from her satisfied smile.

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I go away to college. I spend less time at the hearings. She insists that the highlights are misleading.

The reported suicide threats. Because my sister wanted to go to a prestigious prep school in Boston. She had always told us that she would die if we left her. She'd be so lonely. She loves us so much. But according to the stenographer the real reason

she didn't want my sister to leave was the child support. She'd lose the money. The money.

Could it be a typo? My sister's tears don't corroborate.

I tell her I'm going to invite my Dad to my college graduation. She calls me a traitor.

And so on. And so on. But she never stops insisting that she "loves me more".

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I don't talk to her much these days. She doesn't know where I work or what part of town that I live in. She seems to be as disinterested in asking as I am in telling. Our mutual ignorance encourages robust imagination in both of us. She can imagine I've grown into the man she dreamed I'd be. A history teacher with a crazy tie and a penchant for standing on desks. A secret avenger of wounded children torturing molesters in the garage of the home I share with a wife for whom I do all of the dishes and laundry. A wife that thinks my mother is the mother to model herself after.

I am free to imagine that she is not inside me. That every time someone tells me that they love me I don't hear her say, "I love you more". Free to pretend that I'm not afraid of having someone love me, because her love hurts me so much. That every girl I've kissed isn't another step in high-heeled shoes.

Recently, I got an email from my sister. My mom is going to a church retreat. At the end of weekend the retreaters get a bag of letters. A bag of letters from their families and friends.

I am supposed to write a letter. It is supposed to be magical and special.

I'll stick it to her.

Use the advantage of surprise, the expectation of context to double the impact of my punch. Three words: Fuck. You. Mom.

Then there is an impulse to create something beautiful. To write something that that re-imagines where we've been. To write something that ignores the past to make blueprints for a better future. A future where we love each other for real.

But I can't do that. Hatred blossoms red in me every time I think of writing this letter.

She loves sentimentality. She listens only to Luciano Pavarotti and Aaron Neville. Reads only romance novels. She always maintains that she reads only great literature a striking contrast to my Dad who "doesn't read at all". The prosecution calls her nightstand to testify.

"All evidence by the defense regarding reading was submitted prior to 1980. I have witnessed only paperbacks that can be

purchased by the pound for the past decade".

Should I just lie, write some cheesy bullshit to make her happy, and let myself have an opportunity to be the son she always wanted for her sake and mine?

My hatred settles into disgust.

The idea of not-writing is unsettling. I realize I am still afraid of her. Afraid to hurt her the way she told me all men have. Afraid that I am become one of them.

All I know now is that I don't know anymore. What she wants to hear. Who she thinks I am. How to talk to her at all.

I start to wonder how I would talk to her if she was my age. If I met her in a bar. If I would even have ever seen her in a bar...

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10/18/2011

Mom,

Life in Detroit is interesting.

I wonder if it would feel familiar to you or not. When you were my age, Ben (my brother) was almost a year old. You had

two kids and a husband, lived in a place far away from your family, from your “comfort zone”.

My mother was raised on Long Island, went to college in Boston and wound up living in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. In 1981, cities of Lilburn and Snellville, GA were still as much “Deep South” as they were “New South”.

Was it a lonely time?

I often imagine what it would be like to meet you as a peer...

I think I know everyone in town. I go out all the time. But really I live in a tiny bubble. A delicate polychrome globe populated by attractive mostly white middle class childless twenty something aesthetes. Who also like to go out. Who also think they know everyone. Would your bubble and my bubble touch in the larger world if we were the same age in the same place and time?

I spend most of my time with people a few years younger than me. I don't drink or take as many drugs as they do but way more than you ever did. I work sporadically so that lifestyle is kind of sustainable, as I can sleep in when I need to. I play music a lot. Talk a lot about what I'm going to write about. Dream up ideas that I lack the technical ability to see through into reality let alone monetization. I don't have a TV, and try to resist feeling superior about that. I spend at least four to five hours a day talking on the phone with friends and driving

around with them and having coffee with them trying to help figure out their emotional problems. And crying about my emotional problems. And gossiping. And telling jokes. And getting off on ideas. Ecstatic to change the world but in reality letting it continue unharried on its trajectory of needless consumption and rancorous apathy.

I have almost no direct responsibilities like kids or a house, which I suppose, has led me to take my indirect responsibilities more seriously. My existential responsibilities. My semantic responsibilities. Most people would have a hard time determining whether we were engaging in creation or

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a way that seems loving enough for you. But so much of the love that is in me is your love. The ferocity of your love. The warmth of your love. So many people in my life now have tasted the intense insistency of your love.

They all know something of you because I love them so deeply.

I wonder if the rain recognizes itself in the sea as it falls. If it remembers the place from whence it rose. What the sea and the rain feel, one salty, one sweet, about each other as they reconnect. The differences are obvious, yet they are inexorably linked through common origin- common substance even. Slowly discovering that they are separated only by what they have picked up along the way, not by what is in them.

You and I don't always communicate the way we'd like to with each other. But I hope even if you can't feel it, even if it tastes too different, even if you can't live in it, you will enjoy knowing that far from your shores your love is falling like rain on empty streets, on forests and green fields, on friends of mine with silly hair-dos and filthy skirts. And though I sometimes fear the waves, I will always look for myself and all that is good in me beyond my terrestrial frontiers.

Phred

## epilogue

My mother took a month to reply.

Via text message.

“Thanks for the letter. I don’t really understand it but what I got out of it was that you know how much I love you.”

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I discovered something in writing the letter. Something that was important for me to understand about myself. I hoped my mother could read that in the letter, I doubted she would.

I felt compelled to send it to someone who could read that. Who had also braved the undertow of her love. Who had stood strong in the thunderstorm.

██████████

Beautifully crafted. You packed a lot in there.

Your letter brings to mind ██████████. here is a young man slight above intellegence. ██████████ also has slightly above basketball skills. He wants to use his basketball skills to get a college scholarship so that he’d can go to med school. you have gifts that sometimes you use and other times not. Sometimes you use them for re retain and other times for procrastination and even other time for contribution. Penny calls it mental masterbation. She is right it is orgasmic. Like you I prefer to spend most of my day talking, exploring, investigating and inventing. I don’t need a purpose. I worry that in just a few years I will have no prupose, only another mouth to feed. i would like to believe that i can bring value simply by talking and that your mom can bring value just by loving.

Sent from my iPad.

