

SONG OF MY(EIGHTEEN YEAR OLD)SELF

J. THOMAS MEADOR

During my senior year of high school there were a few things that I knew to be universal truths. The first – improprieties aside – Bill Clinton was the best president ever. Second, N*Sync was way better than the Backstreet Boys. Third, PAL's was a local fast food chain that needed to go national because their paprika-sugar fries were the greatest thing on Earth. And, finally, a little over a year ago, Matthew Shepard died for my sins.

To be honest, my sins weren't big, but I knew I was gay, and that was enough when you grew up in the South. I blamed Hollywood, because the only gay people I saw were effeminate, over the top, and usually lisping. Being gay wasn't an aspect of one's character, it was one's identity. Since I didn't act like that, it was confusion that kept me in the closet. When I came out to my mom at dinner one night she shrugged and said, "Okay. Pass the salt."

As accepted as I was at home, transferring from private school to the public school system that year magnified the feeling of being out of place. Like jumping from a hot tub into an ice bath. A lot of my credits outweighed public school requirements, so I filled the gaps by taking an internship at a nearby theatre. Jane, a former private school teacher, was the Artistic Director. She was also a family friend, though *friend* implies you answer the phone when the name pops up on caller ID. That's not how it was with Jane. A phone call inquiring about your day was a desperate need for you to inquire about *her* day. My mother pushed for the internship because Jane had been a math teacher and promised to tutor me for the year. I pushed for the internship because it meant that I got out of school two hours early.

One of the few classes I looked forward to was called Theatre Lab. I had acted in plays and musicals, but never had formal training. So, three days a week, Theatre Lab was my last class before leaving early. I was excited to be around other actors my age, and everyone was talented in their own way. One girl, Christina, was a master of accents, transforming herself into anyone a script required. She would've left school immediately for New York if she knew she had an audition. A guy named Chris was our silent comedian, performing intricate mime routines that made everyone question the necessity of language. Another boy, Robert, focused on debate, and had won multiple awards for our school. He was also a mediocre free-style rapper. And then there was Brandi, who was outspoken, nose-y, and blunt.

"I heard you're gay," she said in passing one day. "Figures. You got that keychain." She pointed at my backpack and the Teletubbies keychain attached to it. "That's Tinky Winky. He's the gay one, right? My boy, John, told me. He's gay, so he would know."

Shit. I thought I was being coy with the keychain. "Who's John?"

"Remember? He was at the Theatre Lab meeting. Blonde hair. Looks like Justin Timberlake's and Ryan Phillippe's love child. Anyway, you should lose the keychain – people will think you're a fag. Bye."

She walked away with a prideful trot, as if giving me life saving information. In a way she had. I did remember John. He was an underclassman, and also the cutest guy I'd ever seen. I didn't think I had a chance. Then, a few weeks later, after being paired for a theatre scene, John came over to my house to practice. After an hour of awkwardness, we kissed. Suddenly all doubt and uncertainty about being gay disappeared. There was nothing wrong with me. There was nothing wrong in the world. God gave his approval, and in that moment I knew nothing but miracles.

We didn't get much rehearsing done that day, because I was busy getting my first boyfriend.

Despite the Almighty's blessing, John wouldn't go farther than making out. He wanted to get tested for STD's before we did anything else. He had had a boyfriend before me, and they weren't exactly careful.

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John wanted to be responsible. That's the kind of guy he was. Always an overachiever, because it made him a better person. He took advanced placement classes when possible, and when he couldn't he borrowed textbooks from the library. We were both obsessed with bettering ourselves, so together we read Voltaire, Melville, Stevenson, Whitman. And together we waited for his test results to come back.

As I got to know John I got to know his sister, Sarah, who wasn't nearly as responsible. She was fourteen going on sixty-nine, if you catch my drift, and to her sex was as casual as a handshake. Without a stable parent figure, John took it upon himself to look out for her. In spite of his efforts, it came as an un-shocking surprise when, in mid-February, Sarah announced that she was five months pregnant. She had kept it hidden by wearing sweatshirts left by boyfriends who were old enough to get arrested for statutory rape.

When I asked why no one was pressing charges, John's response was so absurd it had to be true.

"She's a straight girl, having straight sex with a straight boy." He said this while I drove him home from the theatre. We had just opened *Man of La Mancha*. John was in the show so we could spend time together.

"Still," I said, "I can't believe she got so far along without somebody noticing."

John chuckled. "My family's good at hiding things it doesn't want people to see." His fingers tightened in mine.

He was right. His father was good at hiding from responsibility and forgetting to sign divorce papers. His mother was good at meeting guys at the bar and hiding them from Jesus on Sunday mornings. His granddad was good at hiding vodka in Sprite bottles while driving his ancient, farm-worthy pick-up truck. And I knew his grandma was good at hiding her life's disappointments behind rehearsed excuses and redirected conversations.

I also knew that I loved John. That's what I had been hiding. Telling him had been weeks in the making, but I stayed silent. I didn't want to be wrong and embarrass myself.

"By the way," I said as we pulled into his grandparents' neighborhood, "I think Jane wants the baby."

"Of course she does."

I had mentioned Sarah to Jane that afternoon, while we sat in the theatre box office doing algebra homework and eating greasy hamburgers. Jane's crossed eyes immediately lit up and a string of graying hair danced across her face. She'd always had shitty luck with pregnancies. After four or five miscarriages Jane was even more determined to have a family. At this point, if it wasn't her biological clock that was ticking, someone else's had to be.

"What's she doing with the baby?" Jane had asked.

Good question. What is a fourteen year-old going to do with a baby?

Jane noshed her burger, gears turning. She always had gears turning, if only to make sure she got the smoothest ride possible. Then she smiled. "Maybe I should talk to John. Make sure everything's okay."

The problem with Jane's subtlety was that it was never subtle. She had a habit of making the same suggestion to so many people that everyone saw through it. There's a fine line between desperation and deception. Sarah was five or six months pregnant. That gave Jane plenty of time to half-heartedly plan the attack, because her personality was more like a war of attrition.

That was the afternoon of my eighteenth birthday. It wasn't my intention to give Jane a present too, but as the cast of *Man of La Mancha* filtered into the theatre I noticed she had been on the phone all day. Probably talking to her husband, Eric. Probably hatching a plan.

While a group of us sang vocal warm ups around a piano, John arrived and motioned for me to the edge of the stage. He took a tri-folded piece of paper from his pocket and slapped it into my hand. His eyes told me everything. It was his test results.

He left for the dressing rooms before I could say anything.

I went to the lighting booth so I could be alone. Unfolded the paper.

A jumble of dot matrix. Words I didn't understand. Medical words. Diseases I'd only heard about.

Then, after each one, a word I did know.

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Negative.

Over and over again.

Negative.

Negative.

Negative.

And then John's handwriting at the bottom. *Happy Birthday.*

A few minutes later I found him in the dressing room and we exchanged a look, saying nothing. Miracles don't have to speak to be recognized.

After the show I drove John to his grandparents' house. We sat parked on the curb with the front seats leaned back. It was close to midnight and the trees rustled gently so as to not wake the neighbors. We hadn't discussed his good news. Instead we talked about anything else.

"Do you want kids?" His hand tightened in mine.

"I don't know. Maybe. Do you?"

"I guess," he said after a pause. "I think I have to. If I don't I'll be the last one with my family's name." He had no male cousins with male children. Assuming everybody took their future spouse's name, he was correct. He would be the last one.

"What about Sarah? If she has a boy there's a chance. If she keeps him then –"

"Oh shit," he interrupted, looking past me.

I turned to see the face of a broken man in my window. Waxy features. Red, distant eyes. Greasy hair pushed across his scalp. It was John's grandfather. Vodka (née Sprite) bottle in one hand. He opened the drivers' door with the other.

"Grandpa. Stop!"

But the old man didn't. He slapped me across the face.

"Grandpa! I said, stop!"

His drunk fingers worked against him as he grabbed at my shirt. I managed to push him away, but not before another smack to the cheek. He didn't say anything the whole time. There was no "faggot," "queer," or anything like that. Only hate voiced through action. John got out of the car and tackled his grandfather. The Sprite bottle flew across the yard. John grabbed the old man's arm as he took a swing at his

grandson.

I moved to get out of the car.

"Go on," John yelled to me. "Get out of here!"

Too young to protest, too shocked to be told a second time, I did what he said. Cranked the engine. Shifted gears and sped off. In the rear-view mirror I saw the old man being dragged across the lawn by the guy I was totally in love with.

I drove without direction, because fear and panic has no beginning or end. I needed to be around my own people. But where? It was Friday, so I guessed where they would be. Waffle House. Everything, good or bad, every win and every defeat in the South is celebrated at a Waffle House.

I pulled into a parking spot, crossing the lines, and stumbled inside. Friends who came to see the show erupted in cheers, applause, and quickly went silent when they saw my face. I'm sure it was red, contorted, like a Phantom of the Opera in the world of Romeo and Juliet. I slid into a booth and friends crowded around.

"The show wasn't *that* bad," Brandi said. Someone tapped her arm. Shut up. Brandi doubled back. "I mean ... what's wrong? Where's John?"

Somehow I formed sounds into words, into sentences, and into the story. Once finished, a friend with a head for numbers ran out to the payphone and made some calls.

A waitress appeared with a cigarette.

"Here," she said, "You look like you need this."

"I don't smoke."

"You want something else?"

Yes, through hurky-jerky emotions, I nodded. I wanted John. I wanted to make sure he was okay. I wanted to rescue him, liberate him from his family. For one moment I had had the chance, but I ran. That's what hurt even more. I could have been a hero. I had played heroes on stage – men who knew what they wanted, who risked their lives to get it – but I was only an actor pretending to be brave. John was the brave one, facing Goliath on his own.

"Hun?" The waitress said. "What do you want?"

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I wanted to be a method actor and use my sense memory catalogue to know how to rescue John. But I didn't have a memory catalogue. I had a laminated Waffle House menu.

"I want some grits," I said.

The waitress nodded. Scratched the order on her pad.

"Better make it a double," Brandi said.

For the next few minutes friends talked as I sat in silence. They talked about John's grandfather. *Call the cops. File a report. Hate crime. Hate crime!*

Brandi tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey. We found John. He's at his mom's house."

"I have to see him."

She raised an eyebrow. "You good to drive?"

"I'm fine."

"Suit yourself, but you look like shit."

I ran to my car, *Dukes of Hazzard* style, and cranked the engine. Glanced at the passenger seat. There, in place of John, was the piece of paper with his test results.

Tonight I was going to be a hero.

Somehow I drove across town without getting into a wreck and without getting pulled over. My mind conjured visions of John with a bloodied nose, a black eye, a story of pain and suffering. By the time I got to his mother's apartment I was sobbing again. John answered the door with the phone pressed to his ear and a cigarette in his mouth. His face was stolid, determined. No black eye. No bruises. The fact that he hadn't cried made me feel worse. Buttoning my emotions, I waited for him to finish his phone call.

"Jaime picked me up and brought me here," he said, hanging up. Jaime was an older friend of his whom I only knew through her reputation for hanging out with disparately younger guys. "Are you okay?"

I pulled him into a hug. He tendered a hand on my neck and kissed my cheek. "I'm good now," I said, wiping my eyes. "I'm just glad you're okay." We pulled closer, drops of water ready to merge.

"Do you want to stay the night?"

"What about your mom?"

"She's out." *She's at the bar* is what he meant.

"So ... "

"So I want to give you your birthday present." He took me by the hand and led me inside.

It took a few more minutes before I calmed down. John gave me a glass of wine to sip while he put a cheap, itchy comforter on the floor and lit tea lights, because that's what people did in the movies. With nervous hands we pulled off t-shirts. Our inelegant fingers wrestled with belts and pants buttons. Eventually we were in boxers, letting the air prickle across our skin. Goosebumps. Nerves.

"Are you okay with this?" I whispered.

John inched closer and put a hand on my chest. Smiled. Leaned in to kiss me. His free hand slid to my waist, and I was naked. For the first time I was suddenly aware that you can't be any more naked than when you have an erection.

So what now? Who does what? Do I ... or does he ...

Instead of worrying we traveled that road together.

Paths of adolescence.

It was only us.

"I love you."

We were vast.

"I love you, too."

We contained multitudes.

At the start of school on May 1st a student ambassador came to my classroom with a note from John.

Sarah's in labor. I need a ride.

The hospital was 30 minutes away. My little hatchback could make it in forty-five.

"When did it start?" I asked as we got on the highway.

"In the middle of the night."

"How'd she get there?"

"I don't know."

"Where's your mom?"

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He huffed amusement. "Got home late. She can't drive."

"What about your grandparents?"

John rubbed his eyes. "I don't know."

There was always an *I don't know* when it came to his family. I don't know why this happened. I don't know how I'll do this. I don't know where to find X, Y, or Z. It was never easy, but John knew enough to try and figure it out. Knew that if he didn't get to where he needed to be, or do what he needed to do, then it was too late. Survival was his mantra. Survive and thrive, my love, just a little while longer. Another year or two and we could get away from this place. With all of the unknowns in his life I hoped he knew he was safe with me. One day we would load up my Nissan, get on the highway, and never look back.

The baby, named Benjamin James, was born before we arrived at the hospital. No daddy's name on the birth certificate. No daddy in the waiting room. It could have been an immaculate conception if Sarah didn't look half-broken and tired when we found her in a post-delivery room. Lolita makeup smeared, cracked, exposing the strained and blotchy skin underneath. Her face brightened when she saw John. Their smiles were identical. Their hug was a reunion full of shared experiences, shared secrets, and unspoken bonds. One of those moments of human contact promising that everything would be okay. Nothing in the past made a difference, and the future didn't exist, because nothing else matters when two bodies become one.

Sarah stayed in the hospital for a few days to recover, cradling her firstborn while she figured out what the hell to do with it. The day she was discharged her friends threw a party. She had a lot of catching up to do. Menthol cigarettes. Ice cold beer. She'd been responsible for nine months, so now it was Miller time.

Meanwhile, the war for baby Benjamin James had reached an impasse. Jane knew she was running out of time and became determined. She called her lawyer. Talked to her husband. Talked to her social worker. Created a list of reasons why letting her adopt the baby was in everyone's best interest.

The day things took a turn for the worst Jane stormed into the theatre carrying bags of fabric destined to become costumes. "This is ridiculous," she said. "They're giving the baby to somebody else." Jane sat on the edge of the stage, staring at the empty seats. "People are spreading lies about me. Saying I'm not fit to be a mother. I mean, I'm totally capable. Look!" She pulled a stack of wrinkled papers from her purse. "Here's proof of income. Home visit authorization. Observations. Right here – see it? – it says everything's acceptable. Eric and I are ready. Nursery's finished. Toys in a trunk." Her eyes narrowed. "I bet that bitch, Laurel, did it. I bet she talked to Sarah." That bitch, Laurel, was in a show a little while back, and though no one got along with her I doubted she cared enough to get involved. Jane let out a barbaric yawp, and stomped her feet. "Sarah promised me!"

I didn't have the balls to tell her that fourteen year-olds aren't eligible to make that kind of decision. It didn't help Jane's argument that Sarah, hand on the Bible, swore she never made that promise.

When I told my mother about Jane's monologue to the invisible audience, Mom admitted that she was the one who spoke to the social worker. My mother used to be a social worker. They have a secret language, I suppose.

"It's intuition," Mom said. "I don't have a good feeling about her. Like, I don't know, an undiagnosed personality disorder. Going from happy to crying in thirty seconds is what a baby does, not its caregiver. Anyway, I'm not going to lie just to make problems disappear. Or to make dreams come true."

My mother, the sage of West Pine Street.

Within a week baby Benjamin James was placed in the arms of a stranger. A few days later he was placed in the arms of permanent strangers. Even now, every year on the first of May, I think about him. I hope he's living in the best of all possible worlds.

By the end of my senior year it was painfully clear that I wouldn't graduate on time. Though I had read three hundred year-old works of classic literature, studied French for 4 years, and been onstage for nearly

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a decade, my math scores were still abysmal. If I wanted to graduate I had to pass Algebra II in summer school. Luckily, John would be in the class too. He didn't suck at math. He was just getting it out of the way. Still an overachiever in an underwhelming situation. He promised to help me.

Together we toiled through algebra, spending after-hours in each others' arms.

One afternoon, John and I had a picnic along the stream that flowed behind the theatre.

"You really want to be an actor?" he asked.

"I'd love it. But you know I'm not a fighter. Seems like I'd really have to push to get anywhere."

"That's what's keeping you? The fight for fame?"

I fed him a slice of apple covered in Nutella. "If I stay here and do theatre I know I can get parts. There's only one of me. But in L.A. or New York there are thousands of me's. That's a lot of guys fighting for an Oscar."

He shrugged. "Somebody's gotta win Best *Supporting Actor*."

"It's just a fantasy," I said as I wiped my fingers on a leaf of grass.

"Fantasies make things interesting."

"I guess."

"What other fantasies do you have?" He propped himself up in an awkward, sideways pose. He winked, then tilted his head to the side door of the theatre. He knew I had a key, and he knew no one would be inside for another hour. "You wanna go rehearse with me?"

"Rehearse for what?" I said, blood rushing southwards.

He leaned in. "Don't worry. You know the part." *Wink*.

We had sex on stage, in an empty theatre, with all the lights turned on. The set was a hotel room. It was our first time on a bed. I imagined it was a hotel on our escape from Tennessee, somewhere on our journey to find Paradise.

Jane spent the summer moping around, indignant, still offended, and still childless. For the final show of the season she had been planning

Twelfth Night. She expected me to audition, but I had to regretfully decline. Perhaps unwilling to admit that her tutoring skills had failed, Jane told everyone (anyone who would listen) that I was woefully intimidated by Shakespeare. She said it would reveal to the world that I wasn't as great as I thought I was. On other days Jane told people that my mother refused to let me be in the show. Supposedly we got into a fight. Supposedly I cried, insisting, accusing my mom of holding me back from my dreams.

Mom heard this and was quick to put the record straight. She and I had both agreed that passing Algebra was more important. Shakespeare had survived four hundred years without me. One more summer wouldn't hurt his feelings.

We didn't talk to Jane much after that. Eventually we didn't talk to her at all.

As the summer went on my relationship with John began to change. At first his occasional need to go out and do stuff was perfectly reasonable. I wasn't naive, I just had too much trust. Then on a Friday night in mid-July, me, John, and a group of friends were supposed to see a midnight movie. Late in the evening, as a thunderstorm rolled over the mountains, John called and said he wanted to talk. It was the first time I'd heard that phrase.

A car full of his friends drove John to my house. I had nothing in common with any of them. They were older, making their own mistakes by the handful. John met me on the front porch. When I hugged him he didn't respond.

I pointed at the porch swing. "You wanna sit down?"

He shook his head. I sat anyway. His friends watched from the car, like co-stars peeking at the show from backstage.

How was your day? Fine.

Excited for the movie? I can't go.

What's wrong? I'm going to a party.

Call me later?

"I want an open relationship." A what? Why? Ours was fine. Closed. Safe. He continued. "It's not like we see each other very much, except for

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school. We're drifting apart. You'll graduate in a couple weeks and you'll be doing your own thing. I'm stuck at school for another year. We're living two different lives. It's for the best."

"I don't want an open relationship. I only want you."

John lit a cigarette. My mom hated smoking, but he obviously didn't care. "I'm not asking," he said. "I'm telling you."

"But ... No. We can figure this out." I wasn't being dense, not playing stupid. I really didn't understand. John and I never had fights. Just differences. Somehow I knew this wasn't either of those. This was the end.

He shook his head. "I need a lover, okay? Not a mother." The dagger in his voice told me he'd been rehearsing that one for a while. His friends in the car probably helped. Thanks, reprobates.

"That's not fair," I said. "John, I don't drive you home after school and work because I want to be your mother. I do all that and take care of you because your own mother won't."

Lightning.

Thunder.

John stared for a long moment. I didn't mean to be so honest, but I didn't expect to be in front of a firing squad. Eventually, he shrugged. "I think we should break up." He tossed the cigarette into the yard. Red cherry embers sizzled instantly. "It's better this way. We want different things. Have fun at the movie."

Rain steamed on the ground as John walked to the car undeterred. The thunderstorm didn't stop him any more than I could. He got into the front seat and exchanged a quick word with his friends. Smug faces stared from the back windows as the car launched forward.

My world had just ended. Everyone else was going to a party.

When I told my mom about the breakup she was supportive, but I could tell she was mostly relieved. "I was worried about you," she said. "You're eighteen. John isn't. If his family decided to call the police because you two were ... together ... it could've been bad."

"But his sister had sex with a nineteen-year-old." My protest was pointless. Facts don't matter when the world is based on lies.

"I don't think his family will press charges about that. But you, I

think they might have."

"Why me?"

She put her hand on my shoulder. "Honey, it's not *you*. It's what you represent."

Summer school was difficult enough without the distraction of having my ex-boyfriend sitting nearby. We didn't speak except when we had to. No one knew what I was going through, and I honestly didn't want them to. Priorities had changed. All I wanted was to pass the class, get my diploma, and get as far away as I could.

To distract myself I bought a book. *You Are Psychic*.

It taught me to meditate. How to initiate astral projection. How to read auras.

During breaks I closed my eyes and cleared my mind. John had consumed such a big part of my energy that I had to get it back somehow. I protected myself behind a shield of silver light. My defenses were up. Peace and warmth. The universe could not see me.

Then it broke.

Shattered.

I opened my eyes just as John entered the classroom. My shield of silver light vanished. He did that to me and he wasn't even trying.

I spent the rest of the day shaking on the inside. The rest of the week spent wondering how he did it. Either I wasn't as strong as I thought I was, or he was stronger than I thought he was. No, just being there was all it took. Our connection had been so strong that cutting him off cold-turkey wasn't possible. I had a lot of work to do if I was going to protect myself.

I didn't have to wait long. John wasn't in class the next day.

"Family emergency," the Algebra teacher said.

I ran into Brandi later on. She was in summer school too, because she sucked at History. "It's John's granddad," she said.

"What's wrong with him?"

She shrugged. "He's sick, I guess." Then tipped an invisible vodka bottle to her lips and winked.

I spent the weekend worrying, but telling myself it wasn't necessary anymore.

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John was back in class on Monday. He looked like half a person. He sat at his desk doing work, not engaged like normal, not asking questions, not pushing the lesson farther than where we were.

At lunch I felt him watching me for a long time. Eventually, he came to my desk.

Our eyes locked. Blue on blue. I'd looked into them so closely that the color became a non-thing. I had kissed those eyes. Brushed my thumb across his brow. Seen them open in the morning. Now they were the eyes of a stranger. "I guess you'll be happy to know my granddad died the other day."

"Why would I be happy about that?"

"You know." He shrugged. A slap to the face. An old man pulling me out of my car.

"I'm sorry," I said in earnest.

"Yeah. Right. Sure you are." He went back to his desk.

I thought about that accusation for a long time. If John knew me he knew I was being honest. Why wouldn't he take me at my word? Years later I realized he did understand, and he was using it against me, making me question my reasoning. My own sincerity. It was the nastiest thing he could have done to me, and he knew it would hurt like hell. It felt stupid to think that we were ever honest with each other.

After finishing summer school I didn't stick around and get a diploma. I moved out of state and began a new life. For two years after the break up I still saw John in strange places; his memory was in the classic literature section of bookstores; his doppelgänger worked at a cafe; his laugh sat behind me in a movie theatre. Eventually he left me alone. Now he's become a sense memory that I can use while acting in local theatre. I never tried going pro. It's more fun being a hero on occasion, because I still don't have the fight, nor do I have the desire.

My Theatre Lab friends have had some successes of their own. Christina made it to New York, has worked on Broadway and made some TV appearances. Robert's rap career never took off, and the last time I saw him he was working the drive-thru at PAL's fast food, which has yet to become a national chain. Chris worked for a long time at a movie

theatre before going to school and becoming a visual effects artist. He was part of a team that won an Oscar for its work on an Ang Lee film. And Brandi finally found a place that's more over the top than she is. She became a Disney mom, focusing her energy on family vacations to the happiest place on Earth where everything is a lie.

Speaking of families, Jane and Eric eventually became parents after years of trying. They have nine kids. Seriously. Two are their own, born the normal way. The others were adopted from a variety of sources, and all with a variety of physical or mental handicaps. Jane must be happy having so many people depend on her for every aspect of daily life. Everything was a show for her, and she always wanted to be the star. At long last she has her captive audience. It's been twenty years but I still wouldn't trust her to keep a secret.

Two years after moving away I came back to town to visit my mother. Late one night I drove the streets, conjuring memories, and found myself at a familiar Waffle House. Inside I found a familiar face. Blue eyes seeing mine before I could run. John pushed his school work aside and invited me to sit.

The first thing he said was, "I'm sorry."

He said he was sorry for the way things ended. Sorry for the things he said to me, the accusations he made. He explained that the situation at home had been rough and he didn't have anyone to talk to, so, naturally, he took it out on the person closest to him. When you feel like things are out of control you take control of what you can. Unfortunately that thing was our relationship. He went on to say that there was someone at that party he and his friends were going to. He didn't have the balls to say he was interested in that person, and didn't know how to work through those feelings. Instead, it was easier to break up and turn it around on me. That made him feel better for a little while, though it wasn't smooth sailing after I left. He said his parents fought to claim him on both of their taxes, but John, always looking out, managed to get judicial approval to marry at seventeen. He married a high school friend and took her name. His parents couldn't touch him. Sarah couldn't be touched either, due to being incarcerated. Out of respect, I didn't ask what she had done.

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The whole time I listened without commenting, though my stomach churned and my mind raced. Hearing an explanation was worth the troubles it caused. I wish the reunion had lasted longer, but it didn't. John had to leave because he had school in the morning. "I'm sorry," he said again.

I wished him the best, and we hugged before saying goodbye for the last time.

Over the years I've kept up with him through mutual friends and social media. John is a husband again, married to another high school classmate, Andrew. I can't help but wonder if he was the "guy at the party" John talked about. Regardless, they became parents when, a few years later, Sarah gave birth again. This time she kept things close, letting John and Andrew adopt the little girl. Their family flourishes, and, for the moment, the family name lives on.

The selfish part of me wonders if that could have been my life. Would John and I be where he and Andrew are now? Would I have a daughter? Or was it written in the stars that we would be forever connected and forever apart? The mean-spirited part of me thinks I would feel better if John had been forced to stay in our hometown, if he worked at a job that he hated and never found success. If I knew that he woke up disappointed everyday for the last twenty years then maybe I would feel better about where I am.

But that's not me. I wouldn't want to be that person, and I wouldn't want that life for John.

I know I'll never get over him, but it won't be the end of me. I've spent those years predominately single, a solo voyager. There have been some relationships since him, some very good ones, but nothing like the first time. To be honest, it was like a drug and an impossible high. For twenty years it's been easier to avoid the drug than deal with the crash and depression of sobering up. Instead, I have those moments of being jealous. Who wouldn't be? Knowing that John is happy sometimes hurts, although it's not his fault. I have to remind myself that he's not being mean. Healing is a long road, and the journey is more important than the destination.

I guess my journey started at the end of that summer, driving a

Nissan hatchback over the mountains and out of childhood. The first detour was a memory wrapped in an itchy comforter, lit by a million tea lights like they do in the movies. There, John and I held each other. Everything was perfect. What we did was in near silence, yet there was music. Loud music. A cacophony. And if music was the food of love, I wanted it to be a duet with John. The sound of his breathing in sync with my heartbeats.

"What're you thinking about?"

"I was wishing we were both made of water."

"Why?"

"So we could merge together."

"Plato said that. Soulmates used to be one person who was separated by the gods. He said we spend our lives looking for our other half."

I remember kissing his forehead and pulling him tight. "I'm not looking anymore."