

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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By

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ABSTRACT

BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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Each of these short stories is told in first-person narrative perspective and explores the arbitrary and relational nature of language and how language functions in narratives. Although each piece aims to establish a distinct voice from the other stories, the collection as a whole is largely influenced by Saussure's theories of the linguistic sign and Derrida's discussions of differance and supplementarity.

In the same way that Saussure dispels the notion that signifiers, such as sound images or words, bear a one-to-one correspondence to a signified concept, essentially a finite meaning, these stories aim to further demonstrate the arbitrary nature of language by showing that the letter "I" from each of the first-person narrators serve as a vehicle for a different voice and a distinct signified identity. This exploration of the various identities of I enables the stories to also contend with the theme of meta-narrative which enables an underlying discussion of personal life lessons which are not necessarily confined to the writing discipline.

And as Derrida defines his term of differance as the postponement of a finite meaning, these stories explore writing as a process to engage in the struggle to achieve meaning and the play of differences between the signified and signifier. These stories also experiment and employ, at times, Derrida's supplementarity, the process of substituting and replacing one term or concept for another which adds a supplement to the original signified meaning, thus changing the original meaning and resisting a definitive meaning.

This compilation of stories also strives to demonstrate a writing process that proceeds from language and rejects the traditional plot-driven narrative. In turn, each of the stories experiments with language, in terms of defamiliarization and irony to varying degrees. While these stories seemingly narrate a handful of personal experiences where life proves disappointing but also offer underlying commentary on the writing process and the theories that CSUN teaches, they ultimately hope to empower the marginalized voices and writers by encouraging them to explore more adventurously with language, to develop a strong, distinct, and self-reflective voice, and to discover the personal value of writing for each narrator.

MY HOMECOMING AND TEN MILLION OTHER THINGS: HOW TO FIND YOUR STORY

When I was a little girl, my grandmother told me that if I worked hard enough and went to a good college, I would get a good job and live happily ever after, and then, I grew up and found out that she'd lied.

My story is nothing new, especially where I come from, where most families only had one parent and one too many mouths to feed and people think less about giving their kids a better a life or making the best out of what they have but more about getting by. My mother died when I was little and my brother was even littler, and for years, I watched my father struggle to feed us and be there for us when we needed him, and the way I saw it, I had two choices: stay and follow the same overdone story line with no surprises, or leave, and try to make something out of myself, save myself and hopefully my family along the way.

So when I received the acceptance letter and scholarship to University of Redlands, I thought I had earned my way out of Lawton, a small town but a major city in Oklahoma, the place that I promised myself I wouldn't let myself get trapped in, the place where the sky is not the limit but Fort Sill, a military base where no wanted to end up but almost everyone worked, served as the whole Northern border. The rest of the town funneled towards the South where the Lawton Airport functioned as the valve, and although the airport made Lawton seem like a destination, the geography suggested that the airport was a gateway out, and when I boarded that plane, I clutched onto my ticket out of the place where dreams are forgotten, the place where people are raised to settle.

Because of my ticket to fly, my permission to soar to great heights, I rode off into the sunset only to learn that a Bachelor's degree, working two jobs, and maintaining a high grade point average just made me generic. I was qualified like everyone else which made me under-qualified, which is what they said when I didn't get any of the jobs I had applied for. However, I was fortunate enough to be offered all of the unpaid internships in Los Angeles that I had originally wanted but left no time for working at a paying job on the side but received the words you can't put a price on experience as consolation. So although the airport had once offered me hope as a launching pad for departures, what was it now that I no longer had a destination?

The road back home is humbling. I walked up the same front steps into the same house on the same block where I had always considered my beginning, but now the steps creaked more so than before, the paint was fading and crumbling, the place seemed more cluttered and uglier, and I could see the cracks in the foundation and the structure, but the truth of it all was that nothing had changed, nothing except me.

My dad carried my luggage up the stairs and placed them outside of my old bedroom door and mumbled, "Good to have you back." He cleared his throat, and I waited for more, but he scratched his head and disappeared down the hall.

I walked into the room that used to be mine and somehow had become my little brother's while I was gone. The room needed to be mine again, but I couldn't remember what was his and what was mine, and now that he was deployed in Iraq for six more months, I didn't know how I was supposed to fit myself into this house and the remaining pieces of this family again, let alone how I was supposed to fit an apartment's worth of stuff into a single room in a house, but I placed all of the things I knew were mine on the

west side of the room. And as I worked towards the east, I arranged things in a progressive wave from what could have been mine to what was his but should have been mine. I scanned the small spectrum of me which faded into the things, that at the end of the day, I simply wasn't, or maybe it began with the things that I wasn't but could one day be and ended with the things I was.

I flipped through pictures of people I didn't know anymore, classmates sitting at desks or lined up in front of our school for the annual class picture, relatives eating pumpkin pie and ice cream after a holiday feast, friends I once hung out with after football games or on random Friday nights at the ice cream parlor, teachers awarding me or celebrating whatever recent accomplishment, and all of the other fragmentary moments of a past self. I unearthed mounds and mounds of clothes, everything that no longer fit me, and in turn, I no longer fit into. I knelt on the floor lost in the middle of all of the relics of my former selves and headed towards the foot of my bed, where an old forgotten hope chest sat, and I slid my sweaty palms over the smooth surface. The box was locked with no key, or memory of a key, in sight. I paused for a moment, hesitant as to what I was about to do, and broke the lock. I opened the box and ran my fingers over and through the three million paths I could have taken, the three million things I could have been, the three million lives I could have led. I uncovered three million unchosen choices, three million unpursued dreams, three million missed opportunities. I saw the three million fading accomplishments and the three million superficial compliments and was simultaneously blinded by the fact that I unleashed three million regrets, three million doubts, three million disappointments, three million failures, three million

fears, three million apologies. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever be anything but sorry.

At the very bottom sat my unfinished diary and the book that my grandmother had left to me when she died. It was the copy of *Hansel and Gretel* that she read to my brother and me every time she put us to bed, and on those nights, I felt so safe tucked under her arm and knowing my brother was snug under her other arm. Even though I hated the story because the witch lured the children in with a house made of sweets and a glimpse of a better life but instead imprisoned them, I loved *Hansel and Gretel* because Gretel's clever thinking not only rescues her brother and her but also enables her to bring back enough riches to save her father.

This time I read the story on my own, not under the safety of my grandmother's wing, knowing everyone hates the witch as an evil villain who preys on children, but I saw how easily it could be to forget that she, very much like me, was duped by children's tales. But then I also read my favorite part of the book, on the inside of the front cover was the inscription that I read every night before I went to bed for at least a year after my grandmother died. I never understood the words then, but in the way that words mean one thing at one moment in your life and then those same words can mean something completely different at another moment, I read all that I had left of my grandmother:

“The first part of our lives is largely written for us, the way people and things damage and ultimately break us, but it's up to you to mend the pieces back together, and that's what I wish for you— for you to find the authority to rewrite your memories and most importantly your story. With all my love, Grandma.”

And I wanted to do so, I wanted to do all of those things and more, but what did I have to go off of? A dusty bookshelf of fairy tales, a whopping wad of moments of time passed, and an unfinished diary with complaints and lists. Somehow I needed to confront all of the pieces of me and suture them together to reconcile them within me. So, I looked back inside of the old hope chest only to find more emptiness. I had found three million things I forgot existed, three million things I had given up on ever seeing again, three million things I had still been searching for, but I gathered myself together again to pack away my heart and soul into the chest and smiled at the three million fond memories I've made, the three million nice gestures I've done, the three million hearts I've touched, the three million paths I've crossed, the three million times I've had someone to turn to, the three million awkward moments I've survived, the three million movie or dream-like moments I've experienced, the three million tears I've shed, the three million minutes I've spent laughing. These were the only things that belonged in that chest. I could keep what I could not hold, even while I loved what I had. And with that, I sealed the lid and tucked the chest away in the closet only to be forgotten and stumbled across again.

Over the next few months, I thought about what I really had and exerted every effort to write and complete my diary. In order to move forward, I could only work my way backwards. I read my earliest writings, and I remember birthing those words being so proud that I could feel myself developing and maturing and getting closer to the person I thought I wanted to be, but now, I knew I could no longer build upon those words. I ripped out the pages dedicated to self-pity and the mocking unaccomplished

lists, hopes, dreams of another me. Had I continued on that path, I would have drowned myself and everyone around me.

People have different notions as to what signals the transformation from child to adult. Some say it is when a girl prefers the smell of flowers over fruit fragrances. Some say it is when a person learns to tolerate the taste of vegetables, maybe even like them. Some say it is when the word "magic" no longer exists, and the intangibles are things of the past. However, I think it is in that moment in which you realize as a child, you thought you knew everything, but as an adult, you realize you know nothing at all. I burst through the bedroom door and crossed the threshold with the scribbles of broken dreams and burned them in our fireplace. I watched the pages of false promises to myself turn to ashes of simplicity and innocence.

So, again, what did I really have? A brother who had been deployed to Iraq while I was off selfishly trying to find my own way? A father who had worked his entire adult life at a military base that still had the nerve to overwork his aging body? A glimpse of a mother and a ghost of a grandmother? A grandmother whose husband died while he was serving in the military and left her to raise seven children by herself? A grandmother who didn't complain or cry but marched out of her front door and found three jobs to make sure her seven children didn't have to worry about food on the table or a tomorrow? A grandmother who was anything but a witch who lured unsuspecting children with sweet lies?

Once upon a time, I had a grandmother who wanted more for me than a marriage of convenience, a grandmother who paved me a path, an escape, from the inevitable life in Lawton. She implanted the seeds for a stable life not dependent on anyone else for

happiness, not dependent on anyone else but me, and for now, that was a good enough beginning.

But then I tried moving on to what had happened in California, but the words never came out right. It was so silly and incredible that I was ashamed to tell anyone the truth and tried to write possible alternative stories that I could tell people. So many hours were spent where a blank page belittled me and forced me to confront the things that I was too scared to say out loud, let alone admit to myself in silence. When words failed me, I was forced into action, to make anew of the old, so I rearranged all of the pieces I had and repositioned, replaced, revised, remade, and rid myself of some of the things I wanted to work but just didn't anymore, but the work was never done, just redone and redone and redone.

When I finally reached a place where I felt okay, I got up from my desk and walked down to the kitchen. My father who had I had seen very little of since I had moved back stood over the kitchen sink washing dishes like he did every night after work. He turned around to dry his callused hands on the dish towel and asked, "Are you going to the homecoming game tomorrow?"

"I wasn't really planning on it."

"I know you locked yourself up in your room since you got here."

"I know."

He hung the towel on the oven handle. "Not ready to face them yet?"

"No, it's not that," I lied. "I just needed some time to think some things over."

"When your mom died, I never really wanted to face anyone in town either, but things go on." He wiggled the knobs on the oven. "Did your brother tell you that he

didn't play in his homecoming game? I think he really could have been a great football player, but that last injury was the end of his career, and I think he knew it. The coach just should have let him play because no matter what could have happened, it was his last game anyway, and at least he could have played knowing that it was the last time he'd ever play."

Stunned by the most words I ever heard my father say to me, I stammered, "Yeah. He told me. He was pretty upset about it. Like you said, the way it happened, he didn't know the last game he played in would be his last."

My father leaned against the sink, not looking at me, but gliding his finger along the grout of the kitchen counter and then crossing his arms across his chest as he continued, "I can't say that I ever understood you. I knew I always loved you, but I never understood why you wanted to get out of Lawton so badly. I never blamed you though. I just didn't know what was best for you or even what to do with you, but I can see how unhappy you are now. I don't know of anything that would make you fit in." I always feared that my father and brother thought I believed that I was too good for Lawton, for our home, for them, but that wasn't it. I wanted to grow. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to make a life for myself, and Lawton was a great place to start, but it's not where I wanted to end up, and after everything, I just didn't want to live a life where I already knew how it ended. I didn't want an ordinary life. I wanted an extraordinary life! "Look, I know I was never the best father, but I get that we all need to battle our own ghosts, and we can't change our past or where we came from, but just remember, you can always change where you're going. That's about all of the fatherly advice I have for you," and he started to leave the kitchen and walk towards his bedroom.

“Dad, you’ve always been a great father. It’s not about that, never has been either, but at the end of the day, I’ve always wanted to make you proud.”

My father, incapable of smiling, turned to face me, revealed his reddening cheeks and asked me, “So, uh...you want to go with me to the homecoming game tomorrow night?” while he shuffled his feet.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I said, and I didn’t. Along with the rest of the town, almost twice their size since they were bundled in their winter gear, we crammed ourselves in the stadium to watch the homecoming game. The town seemed to have multiplied since I had been gone, but that was the inevitable course in Lawton. Kids from my brother’s grade had kids of their own, or were married, or both. Kids from my grade were already divorced, or still married, or remarried. People in Los Angeles would ask me what was so special about homecoming games in Lawton, and I’d try to explain that it wasn’t the fact that the businesses that made their employees work on Christmas Eve and Christmas were the same unlit businesses that closed up shop early on the nights of the games, but the magic in high school football was the fact that the helmeted high school boys served as vehicles for lost dreams and ancient desires. They played out the same story line: a battle between two where one wins, and one loses, but we still watched because each game was a different story— the same game was different and multiple stories.

To a parent, the game documented a moment when your son learned heroism or disappointment firsthand. For former players, the game was a treasured or nagging history. For some of the boys, it was a scramble for a tomorrow. For the others, it was a hunt for closure without any regrets. And sometimes, it was all of those things:

competing against one another, discovering how to co-exist with one another, learning their roles, finding their places, and fighting and facing their fates.

As for this one, the beginning demonstrated little significant movement. The two lines arranged themselves to face the opposing line, and in one instant, the lines fell apart and scattered, clashed without grace, and collapsed with no substantial progress over and over again. I squirmed with overwhelming anxiety as the clock ran down, and the lines inched towards an end zone and the awaiting goal posts but failed to find the right momentum to carry them over, over and over again. But after exhausting what felt like every option and the feeling of failure sunk in, a structured play started to develop at a painfully slow rate, and field goals were finally made.

At first, I honestly had no idea who I wanted to win or which end zone would be the promised destination for me. After all, I returned to this place with no ties, but I wholeheartedly feared the lack of options Lawton offered. Working at the Indian casino seemed the most appropriate way to go for a bit, and then I considered exploring my options in various clerical positions. I knew I wanted to avoid Fort Sill, but a city job or working at the Goodyear Factory or Cameron University started to seem like logical and viable options, but I didn't want to find myself stuck there. And underneath it all, I still yearned to go back in time to the place that was my favorite disappointment. Although it seemed like a simple choice needed to be made, to fight for one or root for the other, the truth was that there was nothing I could do.

The two forces maintained a stagnant equilibrium. But as the time dwindled, the pressure increased, and I submitted myself to watching my old school edge ahead, but I couldn't stay and watch it unravel in that direction. It wasn't about my old high school or

my brother's old team, or my brother's lost chance, or Lawton, it was the idea of settling that unnerved me.

And in that critical moment, I learned that I will always love the losing battle.

I gravitated towards the running back of the losing team and tried to understand why I had such a keen interest in him. I heard from the people around us that he was a good kid from a poor family, or was he just a poor kid from a good family? Then again, he could be anybody, but he was the source of all movement, even if it was negative movement. He offered so much potential.

He slipped through gaps, slammed into and spun off of obstacles repeatedly, hoping and searching for an opportunity. He fought, pushed, slid, and downright ran against every jolting force, push, and pull away from his desired end zone. He was the guy who expended masses of energy which made no impact, but he was propelled by sheer will.

He was the girl who fought so hard to stay out in California away from the dead end that was Lawton. He was the she who was lured out to California, a haven made of sweet treats and promises to a lost little girl who wandered too far from home. He was the girl who worked two dead end jobs to pay off the school that cost her so much that she had to work two dead end jobs. He was the she who worked in a coffee shop to pay off the school that would one day get her a good job so that she could live happily ever after. He was the she who was reprimanded by her manager for enforcing policies and then instructed to look away when the drug dealers came in constantly throughout the day and paid for their drinks with the money they stole from her tip jar, even if some were courteous enough to reach for the money when she turned her back to make their drinks.

He was the she who stood up for what she believed in, lost everything, and wondered what she really ever had and who she ever was.

He was the she who felt sorrow and compassion for one of the regulars, a little old lady, who lived across the street but drove her little green pick-up truck to the coffee shop every day. The little old lady who always wore a pair of sunglasses and either a blue coat reminiscent of Ludwig's Bemelmans' Madeline or a raincoat similar to that of Paddington Bear except that her rain coat was yellow. The little old lady who set her Hello Kitty bag down onto the floor littered with pastry crumbs every day, while she scanned the pastry case until she picked up her bag and stood at the register and asked, "How much is that chocolate chip cookie?"

And every day, the young girl humored the old lady and pretended to check, "Mmmm... It looks like it'll be a dollar and sixty-five cents today."

The little old lady stepped back in shock, and her mouth made a stunned hole. "A dollar, sixty-five?! That's outrageous." The little old lady would then pull out her Ziploc of coins and would start counting her change while she shouted, "For a cookie? You should tell your boss that a dollar, sixty-five is outrageous for a cookie."

But one day, the little old lady walked in, placed her Hello Kitty bag on the floor, while she scanned the pastry case and asked the manager, "How much is that chocolate chip cookie?"

The manager didn't even bother to pretend to look, "It's a dollar and sixty-five cents just like it was yesterday."

This time, the little old lady said nothing but pulled out her Ziploc and placed only pennies on the counter, and when she ran out of pennies, she placed her nickels on

the counter, and when she ran out of nickels, she placed dimes on the counter until her Ziploc bag was empty.

“Looks like you’re nineteen cents short, Ma’am.”

She reached down for her cup with the little red lipstick stain. “Well, then I’ll just have a refill.”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. It’s not a refill if you didn’t buy the first cup.”

She tucked the cup back into her bag, collected her change and her Hello Kitty bag, and took a seat.

The young girl approached the manager, “Why is it okay for the drug dealers to take money from our tips, but you couldn’t let her take money for a cookie?”

“Because there are a lot of those guys back there. She’s just one lady. Plus, they have money. When they need to eat, we make a lot of money off of them.”

“Then, why couldn’t you just let her have her coffee?”

“Because then she’s going to expect it all of the time.”

“You let the drug dealers do it all of the time.”

“I’d really watch your attitude,” he warned.

The young girl resumed wiping the counters, while the little old lady carried out her other daily rituals. She sped-walked between the maze of tables and displays of merchandise in the store, and after she completed her fifty laps, she unfolded the newspaper over her face and took a nap.

The manager poked the little old lady who let out one last snore which woke her little old self up. The newspaper slipped from her flushed face and skidded across the

floor, as the manager informed the little old lady, “I’m sorry, but we can’t allow our customers to sleep in our stores.”

The little old lady didn’t move or acknowledge the manager. She stared out the window at the cars zooming by, carrying the people who were rushing towards the places they needed to be or towards the people they needed to see. As a new flood of people clogged the store, the little old lady shuffled to the bathroom. When she got out, she swiped her belongings and expelled herself from the store.

A teenage girl, who spent hours trying to look like a girl who just woke up in the clothes she wore to a wild party from the night before, told the manager, “That little old lady just pooped on the bathroom floor.”

The young girl laughed to herself, believing for a second in karma and fairy tales, as the manager disappeared and returned at her side. He handed the young girl a mop and wished her good luck. As the young girl scrubbed and scraped the poo off of the floor, the young girl convinced herself that she deserved better. She made herself believe that she could do better. She planned to get another job to supplement her second job. She thought of all of the free time she would have to apply for a real job or increase her availability and get more hours at her second job. She hoped for a job that would pay her just enough to let her pay for rent, utilities, food, and gas, and to let her pay back the loans for the schools that didn’t get her the jobs that would pay her just enough.

So, with a soiled mop, a lofty heart, and a silly dream, she announced, “I quit.”

Over the next few months, she filled out application after application and went on job interview after job interview. As time went on, she was spending too much money on gas, so she took the bus which used up the time to look for other jobs, to attend other job

interviews, or to be worked at her only current job. When she had exhausted all resources and time ran out, she learned what “hiring freeze” meant. She learned what generic felt like. She learned that being qualified made her under-qualified. She learned that she was too old and too poor to have principles. She learned the pain of giving up a dream and starting over. She learned about the fear and regret of running back home.

And in those final minutes of the homecoming game, she knew the running back would learn too that doing everything within his means doesn’t guarantee anything. She knew the running back would learn too that doing everything isn’t always enough. She knew the running back would learn too that working hard and possessing skill doesn’t necessarily get you where you want to go. She knew the running back would learn too that time caves in on everyone.

And in those final seconds of the homecoming game, at the very bottom of the soul of the young girl, there was a little girl who still believed in fairy tales. The little girl believed, as if a mere fact, that the running back could still make a comeback and win the game. But every adult, who gave up and lived in lands where fairy tales are inherited lies, knew that the running back would lose. But the young girl hoped with every jagged shard of her young little heart that the running back would win. The young girl wanted the young running back to win, to delay him from learning disappointment, loss, and failure, to prevent him from walking on that bus and returning home in shame.

That was the magic in high school football: the possibilities.

The young girl thought of those rare instances when the losing team escaped defeat in the last moments of the game when time caves in. She thought of those rare instances when a poor young girl works her way through school and scales over the

socioeconomic ladder to her happily ever after life. She pleaded to let the losing team win. Let the losing team win so people could believe in miracles. Let the losing team win so people could believe in fairy tales that their grandmothers once read to them. Let the losing team win for the running back who worked so hard but failed to make an impact. Let the losing team win for the young girl who used to tip over cows, the cows that made the milk that made the lattes that the snooty Los Angeles people drank. Because at the very bottom of our souls, which we might have forgotten about, that's the story we want to be ours-- or at least, that's the story that I really wanted to be mine.

SPLIT PS: HOW TO FIND AN ENDING

I saw my X at the Safeway next to the CVS on L St. NW. She was sniffing the Ts and wearing the green T, with its tag dangling by a string, that she used to wear as PJs, and no matter how many times I washed it, it would always smell like lemongrass and ginger. But at least now the T hugged the lines of her form and white fleshy skin. When I had first met her, she was flat, dull, and quite frankly, just plain unattractive. Her features were unimaginative, and I would like to say she had a face only a mother could love, but the truth was that her mother didn't really love her, and her mother didn't not love her because of her face. Her mother was the kind of woman who believed in spankings and beltings and did not have the heart to embrace a child who reflected such an image of her.

No one knew that the pipes from my X's thoughts to her speech were constructed in the same fashion as the plumbing of old houses with galvanized pipes. Her corroded pipes constricted the outflow of her words and caused her internal pressure to crack her pipes which then leaked little drops of sentences and syllables before they could ever get spoken. Little xs should never be expected to describe the blockages and clogs inside of them, but my X's mother did and would not tolerate the sputtering fragments and bursts of sobs and wails. Her mother forced her to sit in a corner until she could find something worth saying, but more importantly, something worth listening to, and that is exactly why my poor little x spent her childhood in an absence of words, a childhood spent suffering from the internal pressure of nothingness.

But now, she stood there returning all of the Ts back to their original places but turning them upside down. She had the same black Is that she did when I first saw her, narrow but always begging to be filled with meaning, but this time, those black Is were filled with something else, maybe a presence that was more authoritative, more controlled, more comfortable, or just more than anything that was ever in them before.

She rolled along and tugged at each of the floppy rectangles with SKUs and prices until she looked up and saw me surrounded by piles of produce. She gasped and pushed her squeaky cart towards mine, and I heard her familiar words ripple across our clinking metal carts, “You-hate-Ps.”

She had caught me red-handed fondling the Ps. I hated her Ps which she loved so dearly and tried so hard to get me to like, but I just couldn't. I often wondered how something as trivial as Ps could be her favorite thing in the world, but they, like narrow black Is, appeared everywhere, and I couldn't find a way to love those Ps the way she did, and that was one of the many ways that I couldn't be what she wanted me to be and probably what ultimately disappointed her the most.

On our last night together, she had researched recipes many weeks prior and took a half-day at work to prepare Ps in every which way. She braised them and glazed them, roasted and broasted them; she even tried to sauté, flambé, brûlé, and soufflé them, but I hated them all equally, similar to the way that Americans hate the French, or more likely, the way that the French hate the Americans. I couldn't force myself to say those four little words that every girl needs to hear from her boyfriend at one point or another: I like your Ps. I couldn't say what I didn't mean, and she couldn't hear what I didn't say, so we sat in silence.

That must have marked the beginning of the end because the next day, she left me a babbling note, which I assumed was her trying to explain us and ultimately why she was ending it and what she was looking for which wasn't me, but a girl who suffers from rotting pipes can't be expected to say the right words. Like a faucet that has been turned on for the first time in a long while, she sputtered and splattered, and what came out oscillated between flat and rancid to small and moving gushes, but like most endings, ours didn't sit right with me. No one is really good with endings, and the hardest part is accepting that it's over, but ours just didn't make sense; our ending didn't give me the closure that everyone needs.

But there we were, a pair of Xs, almost a year past the ending but in the middle of another end. While she petted the pears in the cardboard bin, I pretended to sort through the grapples and Valencia oranges until she said, "I'm-seeing-someone." She pried the picture that was stuffed between her ID and ATM card. "Here's-the-new-U."

He had a swollen honeydew head and had no waist or build so that his sides fell straight down to his banana-boat feet. "He looks more like an I than a U," and handed her picture back, "but you were an I when I last saw you, but now you're a U too." Those stupid Ps kept her as skinny as a green bean pole, but now she stood there, not voluptuous but at least she now had smooth curves that weren't so tough on the eyes and a choppy flow of words that weren't so harsh on the ears since they seeped together. But she didn't care what I thought of her now and wouldn't care that I thought I was now more attracted to her and not just attached to her because of some sense of responsibility or duty.

She asked, "Why-do-you-like-Ps-now?"

“Why did you end things with me?”

Her words now squirted forcefully out and crashed against together, “Why-do-you-like-Ps-now?”

“Who says I like Ps?” I asked as I walked away until her cart slammed into mine, and all of my Ps spilled out and rolled around the bottom of my cart. “I’ll tell you the truth, the whole truth, if you tell me why you ended things with me.”

“I-hope-you-choke-on-your-Ps-and-die,” and she rolled away, but at least this time I could see it for myself.

But then, I did what any normal person would do: I followed her. I followed her down the frozen goods section where she debated between Dreyer’s no sugar added vanilla and Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Monkey. She took even longer to choose tater tots over crinkle cut fries, and I continued to follow her up the cereal aisle where she paused in front of the boxes of Honey Nut Cheerios, which she used to love but chose not to grab. I watched her as she stared at the wall of pasta sauces, all in thick glass jars, while she scanned the nutrition label of the gummy Spaghetti-Os trapped in aluminum cans. I finally got the chance to corner her in the deli section. She was caught in a cul-de-sac of freshly cut rib-Is and T-bones with her rump pushed up against the other roasts, “I’m looking for a better ending.”

“All-ends-are-dead. That’s-why-they’re-called-ends.”

Almost a year ago from that very moment in the dead meat section, I had left to go to work, trying to save up for the house down the street that she wanted to one day own, the house with two-stories and enough bedrooms to let each of our three future children have his or her own space, preferably all his, but one extra guestroom just in

case there was an accident to be had, but she had moved out all of her things. She didn't leave any kind of a sign as to where she went or enough for me to even understand why she had to go. It was just me with too brief of a note and too big of an apartment and too tight of a lease trying to fill all of the spaces and make ends meet. "The truth is I still hate almost everything I end up with when I try to make Ps. They're mushy, cheesy, tasteless, and more than anything, dry, but when you left, I tried to make Ps because I wanted to like them. I thought I was supposed to like them, but then I realized it was about starting off with Ps and adding things and changing them into something else. It was about adding things until you sparked the right flavors. I get it now. I'm sorry I didn't get it earlier, but I get it now."

She wandered a bit forward and swirled her index finger on the glass case of C-food. She said, "Don't-worry-about-the-ending. Keep-going. You'll-find-it," almost as if to the little crabs piled up on each other on a bed of ice, but then she leaned in to kiss my cheek that I turned, and our lips, that could never find the right words to say, met for one brief moment. Our kiss felt the same with the soft pressure and the melancholic but gentle energy just as I had remembered, but it didn't feel the same. She tasted different and smelled different, and her green T now smelled like cough medicine, and I could see she was no longer my X, but that's the funny things about Xs, Us, Is, and Ps: they always change.

She linked her arm with mine, and we strolled past the gray-shelled shrimp, the slabs of white, red, and orange fish meat, and the lobster tank on the way to the shelves of dairy products. I asked, "It was nice sometimes when we were together, right?"

"I-just-don't-understand-why-you-couldn't-have-liked-my-Ps-before."

“Well, why couldn’t you have explained it to me or even told me why you left?”

She stopped and gawked at me. With the halo of lights from the case of packaged cheeses, she looked almost saint-like with wings of mozzarella, parmesan, Monterey jack, swiss, brie, ricotta, and mascarpone. “You’re-no-better-than-my-mother.”

I quickly linked our arms back together and led her down the aisle of bags of chips, pretzels, popcorn and tins of nuts and jars of dips when I said, “For what it’s worth, your thoughts and speech are more fluid.”

“Sometimes-you-have-to-thread-Ts-and-Ls-together-and-find-the-right-union-to-get-a-better-flow.”

We reached the checkout lines, and I felt this need to say something worth remembering, something to fix or make up for all of what we had damaged and hurt in the past, but all I could come up with was, “One last thing. You’re nothing like your mother, because you, you have the strength to love everything you create.”

She smiled at me and squeezed my hand before letting go, and it was time for me to finally let go of her. We split into two different lines, on two different paths, with her cart filled with a couple of Ts and Ps and mine with the scattered Ps scrambling, still trying to find their way at the bottom of my cart, with me wondering what was I to do with all of these Ps, these fragments of a bachelor life, these pods of a broken life, these pearls of a broken heart, these pieces of a broken past?

Maybe that’s how I failed her was by not understanding how throwing Ps, Xs, Is, and Us together constantly changes and evolves them, like the way she had changed with the new U added to her life. He didn’t hold the same impact I always imagined he would have had on me, and maybe that’s why I wasn’t intrigued to see or know more about him,

but nonetheless the addition of him changed the story of us because now she was just an X, and not just my X, that you awkwardly bump into at the store and shouldn't be kissing in the cold cuts section, maybe not at all.

But sometimes, Us or Is become Xs, which is followed by a new U, and in some minute way, a new I follows because every time a new letter is added, the story and all of its letters are forever changed.

The tricky thing about endings is that they rarely ever satisfy anyone. Not many people like to see things come to an end, even though we all know it has to happen, but we can't agree on a perfect one. Most stories usually end in marriage, which in reality is usually just a tragic mistake, or in death which might bring some sense of relief, but either way endings never please everyone, but this was the only way I found some sense of finality and closure for myself in the story of Ps, Xs, Us, and Is. And I'm not trying to salvage anything, but I am hoping to find some sense of Ps and quiet.

THE POSSIBILITY OF MY TWO CENTS

I wish that people could buy common sense. Maybe if they had to pay for it, more people would have it, but maybe that's just asking for too much- but maybe it's not, and maybe common sense could be packaged and sold in grocery stores near you.

Maybe it could be displayed by the registers next to the magazines that make money off of people who no one knows but everyone wants to know about. Maybe common sense could be displayed with the candy or individually wrapped gum. Maybe it could be tucked in shiny silver papers, and be chewed on until it lost its chemically constructed flavor or artificial color, and be spit out. Maybe it would end up shoved under a table, or caught on someone's shoe, or maybe it would find itself entangled in some unlucky child's hair, and maybe that child would be me. But maybe, just maybe, common sense would become the most popular impulse buy.

Maybe if common sense were dipped in chocolate or filled with caramel or were more than four hundred and ten calories and eleven grams of saturated fat, maybe kids would learn to love it, and maybe women would learn to crave it. Maybe the whole world could get addicted to common sense if it were locked it up behind glass cases with the cigarettes and nicotine patches. Or better yet, maybe common sense could be ground up and sealed in metal cans, so every adult could brew a quick cup while they get ready for a day they are already late for. Maybe if common sense had a rich aroma but tasted like dirt, maybe every adult would learn to need it, and maybe they would wait in an unusually long line with everyone else who woke up too late to brew their own cup, and maybe they would overpay for it.

Maybe we wouldn't live in a world where people choose to pay for convenience if they could just buy common sense. Maybe common sense could be crammed into miniature packages and found next to the toothbrushes that are smaller than your finger, or the stumps of deodorant, or tiny plastic containers of nothing, maybe people would be willing to pay ten cents on the dollar and would carry common sense wherever they may go; but again, maybe that's asking for too much.

But if it weren't too much to ask for, maybe we could see that we aren't the only ones in the store searching for that something. Maybe we could see that the deal, 'buy two, get one free,' is really only tricking us into buying three of something we only needed one of. Maybe we could see that we really aren't going to lose fifteen pounds in a week; and even if we did, we'd probably still be as unhappy as we are with the fifteen pounds. Maybe we could see that sugar-free is just as bad as sugar, but just in a different way. Maybe if we could buy common sense, we could see that we are all hurting equally, just in different ways, but maybe that's asking for too much.

But if it weren't too much to ask for, maybe I could remember not to buy organic bananas because they spoil faster than I can consume the cheaper bananas that are sprayed with chemicals and pesticides to make them last longer. Maybe I could remember that even though bananas are loaded with potassium and are a low-calorie breakfast, I still won't eat them because I don't like the way they taste or the fact that they are yellow, but maybe I could learn to like bananas.

Maybe I could learn that the produce man doesn't really know the difference between a tangerine and a mandarin, and maybe I could learn that the box boy isn't really checking in the back to see if they have any more of the shampoo that makes my hair

smell like guavas. Maybe I could learn that it really isn't their job to cater to my every request, and maybe I could see that the lady that just cut me off to get in line before me is actually in a hurry to get to somewhere as important as the place I have to be. Even if she isn't, maybe I could learn to let it go.

Maybe I could learn that even if I bought my mother her favorite fruity cereal for her every week, or her favorite rocky road ice cream, she still wouldn't love me as much as she loves my brother, but maybe I could learn she just loves us in different ways and has different ways of showing it, and maybe that isn't so.

Maybe if I stopped buying canned dog food, my dog would stop pooping in my husband's shoes. Maybe I would learn that the man I married isn't the man I'm married to anymore, and maybe I will see that I don't really love him for who he is. But maybe, I will see that he is a good man, but I cannot love him for all he is worth, and maybe I will learn that if I don't love him now, I probably won't learn to love him later. But maybe if I saw this, I would see that staying in it together for the kids is probably not a good idea, but maybe it is. Maybe if we do stay together, maybe our kids will learn to hate us, and they probably will, but maybe it will only last for their teenage years, but it probably won't.

But if our kids' hatred for us lasts only throughout their teenage years, maybe that girl scanning our groceries would see that her boyfriend isn't really hers, and maybe she will learn that he will never leave his wife. Maybe she will learn that she is a perpetrator as much as she is a victim when she will probably learn that he lies about where he is and who he is with. But hopefully, she'll never have to learn that she is not the last woman

he thinks about when he falls asleep like he says she is, and she probably won't, but maybe it'll be better for her if she did. And maybe, just maybe, that girl is me.

And maybe if we could just buy common sense, we would be able to afford compassion and kindness and the power to see our worth, but maybe that is asking for too much— but maybe it's not, although it probably is, but really, this is just my two cents.

THE DIFFICULT FEAT OF BEING A SHOE

For those who think the mall is for the shallow-minded, I believe that they are right, but I also believe that the underlying problem exists in the department stores and that the problem is inherent in the name, in every name, label, and word, but the department store is exactly where I once met a shoe who taught me to think outside of the box. Although she had been walked on, kicked around, and was black and blue all over, she had a dream of a better life.

I grew up on the second floor of Macy's where organization and classification are just an ignorant way of looking at segregation. Scarves are not allowed to linger with the purses, the purses are separated from the wallets, the wallets are herded away from the watches, and the appliances are kept on an entirely different floor.

While they may not call it segregation, they call it departmentalizing and their classifications impose unwritten laws, a social code, a system that we are all imprisoned to and most have accepted. Even my mother forbade me from hanging out with the Stilettos who were always showcased in the front because she said that we were better off without them since everyone knew that Stilettos showed too much skin, and heels like that were only made to pierce hearts, but these are the things shoes who aren't Stilettos say about Stilettos. My mother believed that we, Sneakers, were the prominent race. Sneakers were sturdy, hard workers, not considered beautiful but appreciated for our reliability and ordinariness. At first, I was fine being a Sneaker living amongst the other Sneakers on our block with the occasional Tennis Shoe as a neighbor who always moved out shortly thereafter. We once had a couple of Loafers move in next door, but they kept

to themselves and refused to associate with the rest of us on the block, and the other Keds and I would try to sneak a glimpse of the Loafer life which was pretty unexciting since they were always lying around refusing to be bothered by or with the world. Once, when we got caught gawking at them, I asked them why they never wanted to speak with us. Neither of them looked up, but the brown Loafer said that they were just too sophisticated for our kind and suggested that we should run along, which we did, and when I told my mother, she told us that they were very old-fashioned and as rigid as their soles.

My mother wasn't as narrow-minded as the Loafers considering she let me kick it with other shoes of different brands, different colors, different sizes, but she definitely wasn't considered progressive since she was highly prejudiced against the Stilettos and always reminded me that things would be different once I got older. I don't blame her-most shoes just don't know any other way to live. As Keds, we are free to run and play with all kinds of shoes, but we are not allowed to live on the same block unless we are the same brand, and we are definitely not allowed to marry any other shoes that are not our other halves. No matter what type of shoe we were, we already had our partners made for us at birth although we spent most of our retail lives apart. More often than not, the girls were sent to the showroom to grow up and earn the money, while the boys waited in the backroom for that fateful day when they were reintroduced and placed together in their cardboard bed, and rode off beyond those glass doors, never to be heard from again.

And when I was a Ked, that's just how I thought life worked, always had to be and always would be, but I never considered the possibility of things being different. I just accepted our restricted life just the way that only Keds can accept every shoe for who they are and not what they were considered by the rest of the world, and that kind of

acceptance, I wasn't willing to give up, especially when families were breaking up, and it seemed like the whole world was unraveling, and all my mother would say was, "That's life." Keds were getting abducted and two Sneakers from next door kept sneaking out at night to meet up with a gang of Clogs and would get escorted back home by the night mall cop, and eventually, without further notice, those two Sneakers were snatched up, bagged, taken away, and their mothers squeaked for weeks, until finally, they too were wheeled away in cardboard boxes, and we've never seen them again. And when one of the Timberland Boots down the block and a Donna Karan Pump from another block in the front fell head over heels in love and wanted so desperately to run off and tie the knot, and their families forbade them from ever seeing each other again, my mother said, "That's life."

The Timberland family told the pump that they were impressed with her lineage but maybe if she were a Flat, things would be different. They asked her if she could imagine what their offspring would look like and how they would grow up so confused and ridiculed by the rest of the world, while the Donna Karan family did not waste their time to dance around the issue and said that they would not tolerate being embarrassed by their daughter marrying a common worker shoe. Their exact words were, "Some shoes were born for a life of luxury, while others were meant to work unlike their marriage as a Boot and a Pump." Shortly thereafter, the Donna Karan Pump moved out with a pair of Sandals but returned to the halfway house, and when my mother heard that the Donna Karan Pump landed in the halfway house, she sneakered, "What did she expect would happen to her after trying to run off with some old Boot?"

Parents warned their Keds not to hang around the halfway houses in fear that they would get Ked-napped or worse, and parents threatened their Keds that if they were bad, they would end up in the halfway houses and living a hard life, if being able to live a life at all. Moved by my mother's lack of compassion, a part of me was not only disappointed in my mother and wanted to do one thing that I knew would disappoint her but another part of me felt compelled to visit the halfway houses out of curiosity or necessity, I'm still not sure. Not that I ever spoke to the Donna Karan Pump or was planning to, but I just needed to know if she was alright, just needed to know that the way the world works is not fair or right, and maybe a part of me needed to be consoled more than she did. I didn't find her that night, and I didn't find the consolation I was looking for, but instead I found the faint hope that life didn't have to be like this at all.

The night air was cool, crisp, and well-ventilated mainly because the thermostat had been re-calibrated and the filters had been changed earlier that day, and the faint white lights draped down into the darkness and fell in neat puddles across all of the departments. Off to the side of our own department, in the middle of darkness loomed the rows of towering metal structures bare of any architectural or aesthetic touches which housed hundreds and hundreds of shoes, all scuffed, battered, and squished together, and I couldn't help but wonder who could live like this. There were shoes sprawled out and loitering around the bases of these structures or barely hanging on or wrestling with each other over room, higher and higher up as the towers reached for the sky. And as I stood there in awe, weighing the presence of the towers itself to their reputation, I heard faint little squeaks in the tower furthest from me, and I followed it, until I saw a skinny Stiletto

peering out over the wire balcony weeping over the garden of panty hoses beneath her, “Why, oh why, am I shoe? Deny thigh father and refuse thigh name.”

My mother was right about one thing, the Stiletto showed more skin than I was accustomed to, and she looked bare and delicate unlike the ferocious man-eaters that my mother always made them out to be. I debated whether I should hear more or just speak until I asked her, “What’s wrong?”

She gasped and leapt back into her room, “Who are you tiptoeing through the night?”

“It doesn’t matter. We wouldn’t be able to be friends. I’m just a poor shoe, and you’re a glamorous Stiletto.”

She scuffed, “Glamorous?! If my life were so glamorous, I wouldn’t have ended up back here!”

“Is living here really as bad as they say?”

Her squeaks got louder, “It’s worse!” She began to tell me about her life when a beautiful pair of burgundy Nine West, size 9, Wedges invited her to live with them. The Stiletto quickly agreed to and was reunited with her other half in their cardboard bed until they reached their new home not saying anything to each other because they had no idea what to say to the other having just met and knowing that they had only a lifetime to spend together. Being newlyweds, the Stiletto was ecstatic over her new home with her very own kitchen, bathrooms, bedrooms, and living quarters. She hugged the stairs and carpet and kissed the marble, tile, and hardwood floors and made beautiful music with the floors of her new home which her supposed other half considered unnecessary clatter.

While they settled in their bed, the Nine West Wedges urged the Stilettos to go out as a consummation and initiation rite of passage. While the Stiletto was not fond of being dragged and scraped against the asphalt and sticky, unclean floors, her other half proved to be a heel and got hammered the way that all of us who are broken need to in a desperate attempt to mend ourselves. She indulged herself and got a little tipsy and woke up alone and single again. She moped at first but then stumbled upon the concept of freedom. In the walk-in closet, the shoes were free to neighbor other shoes regardless of type, brand, or color. And while old habits die hard, most shoes still paired off and had their cliques, there was not the rigid antagonism and segregation that is enforced in the department stores; there wasn't even a strict one-to-one correspondence between the shoes. Some shoes were free to pair up with other shoes, and this is where she fell head over heels in love with an athletic shoe whose wife had run off too. She always had a weakness for athletic shoes but was never allowed to admit it in the retail world but she no longer had to resist the sleek, buff, and comfortable nature that the athletic shoe valued and boasted, but she later found out that athletic shoes are also tough and rough when he kicked her around and walked all over her until the Stiletto found enough courage to kick him to the curb, but then the Stiletto was returned to the halfway house to put her life back together and lost her newfound and short-lived freedom.

While my whole life had revolved around location and placement, in that moment I did not find myself at the halfway house but in a place where words would not do justice to what's inside, to what's felt, to what's needed to be said, or to what's needed to be heard. My whole life, my whole world, my whole journey up until that very point had been limited by its rigidity and expectations and social constructions and relational

significances that I could not think for myself. I could not divorce ourselves from our pre-assigned other halves. I could not talk or walk to my own beat. I could not find fluidity or rhythm. I could not run wild and free. I could not run and play. I could not go another minute without second guessing myself. But I was just a Ked. I didn't know that these were the thoughts I was thinking.

The Stiletto continued, "It's so much better beyond those doors where shoes of all different kinds are free to live and roam with and love other shoes," and she hopped down from her balcony until she got a closer look at me. "Oh, wow!! You're a Sneaker. You're just a Ked. Why am I saying all this stuff to you?"

Uncomfortable by being considered "just a Ked," I naively confessed, only to confirm her observations, "I've never really seen a Stiletto this close before. My mother always told me not to talk to them and stay as far from them as possible."

She scuffed, "All of the other shoes say we have no soles, and we're always out for a good time, but we have our problems too, you know?"

At this close, I could see that this Stiletto was black and blue all over, and she was scraped pretty badly on her bottom, and her label was peeling off. "You're a Michael Kors?! Boy, your family would kill you if they found out you ended up here!"

Her straps slumped, "You know, misfortune knows no labels, no names, no types, no colors, and no sizes. Misfortune hates us all equally."

"Equally? What do you mean?"

"Equality is something that may not make much sense, but it's something that everyone should have."

Not sure if she answered my question, I admitted, “I used to wonder what it was like to be a Michael Kors or a Coach shoe, but I guess it’s all the same, yeah?” Ashamed to elaborate further into my fascination for the residents of the Michael Kors or Coach block who were always being held up on acrylic pedestals and loved and coveted by most. In high school, the Michael Kors and Coach shoes were always selected for the prom court and had prime choice in who would escort them to dances or just out on a regular day. Regardless of what these shoes looked like, they were always considered beautiful and surrounded by crowds, and no matter what my mother said about them, there was a part of me that wanted to be a Michael Kors or a Coach. “Hey, can I ask you one question though? Do you sometimes wish you weren’t a shoe?”

The Stiletto clacked, “It would have been a lot easier if I wasn’t a shoe. Can I say I am happy that I am a shoe? No, not really, but I have a dream that one day my Keds will not be judged by their color, their labels, their design, or anything but the content of their character. I have a dream that my Keds will have the freedom to make their own choices and decisions for themselves. I have a dream that there would not be a fixed correspondence or such rigid social constructions and expectations. While I know I will never see this in my lifetime, and my Keds probably won’t either, I still have this hope within my sole that it will happen for some shoes some day.”

I wanted this night to last forever because I knew I’d probably never see her again, and I knew that if I could see her again, I wouldn’t be allowed to. So, I talked to her until the store lights turned on and headed back home, and as much as I tried, over the course of the next few weeks, I couldn’t forget all of the things she said, and I couldn’t stop wanting some form of liberation. So, I started hanging out with the watches, but all

they could tock about was ticking and time, and it wasn't fun hanging out with them since they lived in glass houses and couldn't throw anything. I tried kicking the Fossil watch a rock, but he explained that watches can only keep time which didn't make sense because they could only give me the time but refused to give me or anyone else any of their time.

I tried hanging out with the necklaces and bracelets, but they were too noisy and gangly and awkward. I tried hanging out with the perfumes, but they spit when they spoke. I tried hanging out with the belts, but they always buckled down and got serious when things started to seem fun again.

It wasn't until I met the purses and bags that I started to think being friends with others who are different than you was actually possible. The purses literally just hung around all day without a worry in the world. They had no pre-designated partners, they weren't even expected to marry. They might marry a wallet here and there, but there was less of those hierarchal expectations and restrictions placed on them, and I envied that the purses' inner beauty counted almost as much as their outer beauty, but the thing I loved the most was that they were valued by how much they were able to hold which essentially meant their capacity for life.

The downside was that the purses carried a negative reputation on the second floor because a lot of them wore baggy clothes, and were usually caught for shoplifting and whacking others, but I was careful to not upset any of them, and I always felt like in some way I could pair up or complement them in some way, and they really weren't the troublemakers everyone made them out to be, but I still had to sneak my way over there and hang around with them. One thing that I wasn't crazy about them was that they

were mostly hung up on their own ideas and former loves so they came with a lot of emotional baggage, but they never made me feel like I was an outsider or judged for being just a shoe. I finally felt happy and like I had gotten a taste of what that Stiletto had talked about until word got back to my mother where I spent my time.

She screamed asking me why I was doing this to her, and didn't I know that the other shoes were talking about us, and what's so wrong with being a shoe anyway.

"Mom, don't you ever get tired of living like this?"

"Like what?"

"I just always wanted to travel the world some day. I wanted to live in a house--"

My mother interrupted, "And how exactly are you going to do that if you aren't here where a pair of shoes can invite you to live in a house with other shoes?"

"That's another thing... Don't you ever wonder what it would be like to be with other shoes? Or at least have the freedom to do so?"

With utter disappointment rolling off her tongue, she replied, "I like the way things are. You're so young. You don't appreciate the value of knowing where you stand in the world."

"Where's the fun in standing around, waiting on someone else, only to kiss the ground someone else walks on, and not truly living life? Like I was saying, I want to travel the world, live in a house, run free, and just be me. I don't want to hear what everyone else is saying or what is expected of me or what I'm not allowed to do."

My mother asked, "What's so great about living in a house? You don't know the kind of shoes who will end up taking you home. There are crazies out there. You'll probably spend most of your life locked up in some closet, or worse, you'll end up

walking on eggshells all of your life, or worse, you'll spend your whole life being walked all over, or worse, you'll end up living in the halfway house and the cycle will repeat, and then you'll never make a good life for yourself."

"What's so wrong with that? I want to make mistakes. I want to be walked on and used and abused."

"See, you, young ones think it's so glamorous to be worn around town and shown off. There are two types of shoes: ones that gets worn out and the others that are shown off. I don't want to ever see your sole crushed, damaged, or hurt, and I want you to age happily."

And that was just it-- we had different concepts of happiness, and I'd never be happy being a shoe living with the shoes in the department store. This was more than teenage angst and rebellion running through my laces, this was about principles and real freedom. I couldn't stop hanging around the purses even though my mother warned me that they were just old bags that would eventually sack me, but it was nice that I wasn't going to be forced into some loveless marriage that I had no say in or submit myself to the ways of a world that only valued similarities and couldn't appreciate me for my differences. So I did what all shoes are expected to do: I ran. I ran far away from home.

I wandered the department store and would only peek at my mom's house at night until I think she finally moved out, and I overheard some mindless shoe clatter that the Donna Karan Pump married her betrothed other half and was expecting twins that fall. And although I never learned what happened to the Michael Kors Stiletto, I have high hopes that she made it out of the halfway house and she found some beautiful walk-in

closet like the one she fell in love in with, where swarms of shoes are allowed to intermingle with one another without judgment being passed.

I get it now. I know my limitations as a shoe. I cannot rewrite the ways of our world. The pressure of always being a polished shoe crippled me in so many ways, and as much as location and placement had controlled my life, I learned about relocation. Although I had been clearly marked as different, different from the belts, the watches, the purses, the Stilettos, the Michael Kors, the Coaches, the Donna Karans, different from the rest of the Sneakers, different from my mom, I will always be defined in opposition to all of the things I am not. But if there were a chance that maybe, just maybe I could marry or pair up with something completely different than what I am or what most would never consider pairing me up with, then maybe a true meaningful relationship could be made, and maybe new meanings could be made for the world to accept, but this is just a simple dream of a shoe who cannot change the world.

OF ALL THINGS I'VE LOST: HOW TO REWRITE YOUR STORY

Would you live your life any differently if you were told today was the first of the last days of your life? I start my day by offering to take my grandparents to the doctor, and they accept, saying this is a real treat and that they will take me to breakfast afterwards. Although I have my own key, Grandma meets me at the red door with the bottom lock that always get stuck, hands me a stack of yellow Post-its and a pen, and tells me to write my name on them so that I can stick them onto the things I want when they go “just so there’s no dispute over who gets what,” which she says every time with her back to me as she waves her finger in a scolding manner while returning to the kitchen.

As cheesy as it sounds, I want to write GINA in all caps, underlined, and with a little heart at the end and stick it on my grandma and my grandpa, but I don’t because I’m embarrassed at how serious I am when I think this. Instead I ask, “Where’s Grandpa?”

Grandma answers, “Oh, he should be in his room,” and we go in there to find little newspaper clippings littered across the peach carpet that is still plushy even after ten years when they pulled out the hard, golden-yellow carpet that looked like crushed yarn and left squiggle imprints on my face when I accidentally fell asleep after playing with my cousins at the park, or the beach, or the yard, or wherever Grandma and Grandpa had taken us that day. While Grandma talks to me about her day of opening the mail and organizing their medications, she wipes her nose with the tissue she always has tucked between the wristband of her watch and her wrist as she picks up the scraps of paper off of the floor and places the crumpled gray balls into a shoebox.

“What’s that?” I ask.

She looks around wondering what I am referring to until I point to the spot where the shoebox vanished under the bed skirt. “Oh, every morning your grandpa cuts out the Dear Abby section and puts it in his pocket, and they must slip out when he does his morning exercises or walks around the house because I find them everywhere, so I just put them here for him.”

Sometimes if I come right before their dinnertime at six-thirty, she tells me that Grandpa is taking a bath, and we wait until he comes out struggling to put his sweatshirt over his worn, almost transparent undershirt. He asks me for help since Grandma is busy, and I thread his long arms that were once strong enough to lift a fallen car off of his co-worker through his sleeves, and he hugs me, and he smells like Irish Spring and Old Spice, and he gives me a big, sloppy, wet kiss that I always hope he never sees me wipe off. On the days that I used to come around two in the afternoon, he would be on his exasperatingly long walks along the LA River or the Griffith Park Equestrian Center or both like when he used to take me along even though seven year old legs aren't really made to walk six miles without a rest, or those same days when I was seven, and I would wake up around nine, and Grandma would be scrubbing the floors, and Grandpa would be outside doing work around their garden which was more like a jungle back then. I miss those days that Grandma used to tell me that Grandpa was doing work in the garage, but no matter where Grandpa emerges from, he always greets me with, “Hi, Baby!”

But today, I am taking them to the doctor's office where I wait in the lobby reading all of the celebrity magazines although I don't recognize half of the people because it's been years since I've watched television or movies because life is so crazy, and I spend every spare moment with the people I think I'm going to lose, knowing that

I'm the one who probably needs to see the doctor more than they do but am content being the ignorant chauffeur pretending that I'm not the girl who didn't sleep for the last year in college because she was scared that her phone would ring telling her someone else had passed away or gone into the hospital where things didn't look so good and maybe she should consider coming home. No one ever wants to be that girl. So, I sit and wait until I see the six-foot, five-inch doctor, with gray skin and a dull balding head hold the door open for my grandparents. My grandma leads the way, still clutching her notebook in which she had written all of her questions she had thought up since the last visit two weeks ago, and my grandpa, who probably hasn't heard my voice since I finished puberty when his hearing dwindled into deafness, walks towards the door before he turns around and shouts, "So, Doc. How many years do you think I have left?"

Distracted as he flips through his checkbook with his tapered soft fingers with untrimmed nails, the doctor replies, "Probably five years," and my grandpa turns to go before he hears the doctor finish with the very important words, "at least." My grandpa waves his hand in thanks without looking at the doctor who chuckles and stares at my grandma, "Mrs. Kozai, aside from the diabetes, he's a healthy guy, and I don't see why he shouldn't live another ten years."

My grandma still hugs her notebook close to her side where the sides of her cardigan button together snug against her frail frame until she nudges her glasses further up her nose, and I wonder what she's thinking. She smiles and thanks the doctor, and we follow Grandpa to the car. I stand behind him as he half-waddles-half-hobbles to the car and asks, "So, where do you two want to eat today?" even though I already know the answer will be McDonald's.

To my surprise, my grandpa asks, “Do you like IHOP?” His eyes are bright and hopeful, and his smile is contagious as he waits for my response, which is a feigned reluctant nod, and Grandma rummages through her purse saying, “But Daddy-O, I didn’t bring that coupon. I think I left it on the fridge, but do you think they’ll take this expired coupon? It’s from last month.” Grandpa doesn’t hear and continues to navigate me even though I can see the blue, white, and red IHOP sign while Grandma sits in the back holding onto her expired coupon.

We are seated, and Grandpa disappears behind a menu, and I know I won’t see him for another couple of minutes. “What are you getting, Grandma?”

She laughs, “You know I always look, but I always get the same thing: two eggs, bacon, and toast.”

The waiter comes and asks if we are ready to order but does not bother to look at any of us for responses. My grandpa smiles and says, “Can I get a Sausage McMuffin?”

The waiter rolls his eyes and exhales, “Sir, we don’t serve Sausage McMuffins. That’s McDonald’s.” And at this very moment, I’m happy that my grandpa can’t hear the disgust and agitation in the waiter’s voice.

My grandpa chuckles at his own joke, orders the Breakfast Sampler which has two pancakes, two eggs, two sausages, two strips of bacon, two slices of ham, and hash browns, and then requests a pot of decaf, a glass of water so that he and Grandma can take their medications, and a side of sugar-free syrup. Grandma scolds Grandpa that his sugar count will be too high tomorrow morning, and they both don’t see the waiter roll his eyes as he walks away, but I do, and I glare at him, and he has the nerve to smile at me like we’re long-lost friends.

I overhear him telling jokes at every one of his tables as he refills each glass of water before it reaches below halfway and lingers to chat about the Dodgers. He brings out our three plates and decaf coffee but no water or sugar-free syrup. My grandma repeats herself and says, “Grandpa, you shouldn’t eat all of that because your sugar will be too high tomorrow morning,” and my Grandpa politely asks the waiter, “Can we get a cup of water and some sugar-free syrup?” and aligns all of the food on his plate so that they are perpendicular to each other, not before he tries to offer one piece of each kind of breakfast meat to Grandma and me. Even though I’m starving, I decline and save one little triangle of French toast for my grandpa, and my grandma doesn’t catch on as she remarks on my ever-shrinking appetite.

My grandma tells me about how she had asked the doctor to test her for Alzheimer’s and dementia at their last visit because it’s getting harder for her to remember things and today they received the results.

I ask her, “And how did that go?”

She smirks and looks at me from the side of her eyes like she knows that I already know the answer. “They found out that I don’t have either.”

“I figured as much, Grandma.”

She pulls that Kleenex from under her watch and dabs her sniffing nose, and Grandpa eats in silence.

Grandma continues to look at her plate and confesses, “I feel so sorry for him. You remember how much he used to talk, but now I think about all of the things he’s missing out on. Remember he was such a sociable person and wanted to talk to everyone?”

I think back to all of our family gatherings where there were too many familiar faces without names, and I can see vague images of Grandpa smiling and laughing at forgotten jokes and words. I remember how whenever we went out to eat at restaurants like Sizzler and the little hidden Japanese restaurant in Glendale where he would get to know all of the waiters and waitresses and their family histories, but most of all, I remember my grandpa singing in the cramped station wagon lugging five out of seven grandchildren from schools, parks, beaches, and back to the house where Grandma would be waiting with her most delicious meals for us on the dinner table. But I tell Grandma, “Yes,” because I don’t want to add to her ever-growing list of worries that I’m already forgetting them because I also remember when I was eight and sitting at their kitchen counter doing my homework, and Grandma asks me if I remember my other grandma at all, and I’m too young to know when to lie and reply, “No.”

My grandma stops wiping the counter with her blue and white rag. (Or were they the yellow and white rags back then?) She looks down at me with pity and sorrow drooping down her face and dragging her eyebrows and lips towards her heart as she says, to herself more so than me, “That’s horrible. She was such a wonderful person. She was so good to me. And I hate to think that she won’t see you graduate from high school. That’s my only wish, to live long enough to see each of my grandkids graduate-- but if I don’t make it to all of your high school graduations, maybe you guys won’t even remember me either.”

And here they are now, off to the side of an IHOP restaurant, with their once full heads of black hair which are now sparse and grayed, as gray as their eyes have become. My grandma’s appetite has shrunk, and my grandpa’s hearing has disappeared. It was as

if they had looked the same since I was born, and then one day not so long ago, they looked old and continue to look older every time I see them, but what I can't get over is that it was as if they had aged overnight.

Grandpa continues to chew and stares off at nothing until he announces, "If I only have five years to live, I think it'd be wiser to cash out all of my investments and disperse them out now so that you guys won't have to pay taxes."

I try to reassure him, "No, Grandpa. The doctor said that you have *at least* five but you could live up to ten or more--"

"No, I asked him point blank, and the second answer was just a joke."

"Grandpa, he was laughing at your question, not because he was joking," I try but I can already see that he's made up his mind that he will only live five more years.

Grandma continues to work at her plate and without looking up, she says, "I'm ready to go. We had a good life together, and that's all that matters."

But what about my good life? I can't imagine any kind of life worth living without them in it, let alone a world without them in it. I barely started living, and I want to live a long, happy, and full life with them, and it unnerves me to think that they spent sixty years married together, and here they are at the end thankful for the time together but facing the fact that they too will have to one day part, not this life, but from each other. I never imagined there would be a day where the thought that my grandparents who had never spent more than a few hours apart were only meant for each other in this life, in this world, would ever cross my mind.

Grandpa takes his pills with his coffee and tells Grandma to do the same, and Grandma tells him not to eat his pancakes without the sugar-free syrup and that he can eat

them tomorrow for breakfast and then laments the missing coupon, and Grandpa exclaims, “Babe, it’s okay, we don’t need a coupon,” and winks like they’re living on the edge.

As we pay our bill, and the cashier refuses to accept the expired coupon, we leave, and I hope that the waiter dies instead of my grandparents, but then I think it’s not his fault he’s an asshole, and I’m an asshole for sincerely wishing he would die instead of my grandparents, and it’s really not his fault that I’m deathly afraid of losing my grandparents and act out against horrible, unsuspecting waiters.

When we get back to the house, Grandpa unlatches the red gate that he painted in his olive green jumpsuit after he retired. Now he hangs onto the branches of the plumeria trees and clutches the ledges of their house to keep his balance because he is too stubborn to use his cane. Once inside, he tells Grandma to talk to his stock broker about liquidating their investments, and she asks me to help her start cleaning out her house because she can’t sleep thinking about how much stuff their kids are going to have to clean and sort out when they go. A part of me considers confessing that I’ve been secretly stripping things in their house of yellow Post-its with greedy relatives’ names, and a part of me considers reassuring her that she’s going to live a lot longer, and a part of me feels like curling up in her bed like I used to when I was too scared to sleep by myself in the kids’ room because their street was too dark and busy and dangerous.

We hear the backdoor shut, and Grandma opens her linen closet that holds everything but linens and pulls out a cardboard box that once held oranges delivered from her brothers’ farm in Fresno but now holds all of the free toothbrushes, tubes of trail-sized toothpaste, spools of dental floss, dental floss picks. Grandma beams with

excitement when she finds a lone pack of dental floss threaders floating in between because she normally has to buy these at the store but quickly wonders what she will do with the rest. She asks me, “Gina, can you use these?” Although I know there are enough dental care products in this old produce box to last me a lifetime, I tell her to use it because she will live a long time and never know when she’ll have guests over who will have forgotten their toothbrushes and toothpaste at home, but she tells me that I was the only grandchild who ever slept over.

She shuts the closet door and moves on to her room and unburies all of the snacks people have given her over the years that she stored in her executive desk that she wonders which of her kids will keep because she believes that it’s a good desk so someone must take it. She has always had a hard time throwing food away if it’s still good, regardless of what expiration dates say. Even when I was little and would leave a few grains of rice in my bowl, she would tell me, in between the swift glides of her chopsticks which guided the remaining grains into her mouth, how her parents never let her waste food. Now she feels overwhelmed by all of the food stored in her sturdy executive desk, so she tries to move onto the bedroom where my dad and his brother grew up in, and she tries to unload the closet with all of the washed Styrofoam containers that she now uses to pack her homemade snacks and prepared vegetables in for us to take to our homes.

At a loss for what to do or what to say, I search for my grandfather who is standing in his garage of mounds of browns and heaps of black. He stands there leaning against his work bench in the very center and tells me, “If ever in your life, your stuff has been robbed from you or you have been forced to give up everything you own, you just

won't be able to let go of anything, and you won't even be able to think of throwing anything away. But when I die, I won't care, and you can throw everything away, but for now, while I'm still alive, I just can't let anyone throw my stuff away." This is the first time I hear him voluntarily talk about the internment camps as he stands in a dim room which is covered in grease and taps the leftover carburetors, engines, exhaust pipes, oil pans, and all that is left of the gas station and auto repair shop he once owned with three of his brothers. To everyone else, this may be just stuff, the Yuban can that holds his nuts, bolts, and screws is just trash, but to my grandpa, it still has a purpose, it still has a use to offer him, and to him, it once held the coffee that he brewed to keep him awake so he could attend to his job with the city, drive over to his family business to pick up the books so he could work on them after practicing with each of his four kids for basketball, baseball, football, or softball before he drove them home to dinner and then finally got to work on the books before he went to bed only to start the routine all over again. What will this coffee can be to the next person?

In his garden sits a spare toilet that houses a sego palm that they once rescued from the neglect at our house. What will this mean to anyone else? Or the yellow plastic Play-Skool wagon that housed all of the three crayfish that Grandpa caught for me by the LA River during that one summer but had spent all of the other summers giving my little cousins rides up and down Grandma and Grandpa's driveway or as place for me to read or nap in their garden, what will this yellow plastic Play-Skool wagon be for its next owner?

My grandpa asks me, "Do you know what you want of ours?" I follow him back inside of the house placing my hand on the small of his back to make sure he doesn't fall

backwards as he climbs up the steps to their house like he had for the first ten years of my life. He shows me his favorite Donald Duck belt hanging in his closet, and he beams with pride as he tells me that my cousin wants this belt when my grandpa is gone. I figure this is why he stopped wearing his Donald Duck belt and had been wearing a generic navy blue belt, but I have never seen my grandpa so happy at the thought that my cousin wants something of his, a little piece of our grandpa to keep with him forever, but I don't want toothbrushes or an endless supply of toothpaste or a belt or a discarded carburetor or a sego palm in a toilet or a yellow plastic Play-Skool wagon. What would a discarded carburetor be without its neighboring engines, exhaust pipes, and oil pans? What will an abandoned granddaughter be without her remaining pair of grandparents? What will I be without you two?

Of all the things I've lost, you will be the two that I miss the most. Who will accidentally call me Julie when asking me what I want for lunch? Who will I sneak sweets and snacks to even though I know it's bad for you and your diabetes, but I can't resist because I know how much you love food? Who will be as excited to hear my voice when I call? Who will ask me to teach them how to use their DVD player every time I visit them? Who will forget what I taught them to do when trying to use the DVD player the last time I visited them? Who will leave me multiple minutes of distant conversation and white noise on my voicemail? Who will make notes of our conversations when I call and talk about my day just so she can remember what we talked about and later look up words or things I said that she has never heard of? Who will write, "Gina likes this!" on recipes in her cookbook when I eat more than four servings or mention in passing how much I enjoyed eating it? Who will tell Grandma to call me on Girl's Day every year

even though I don't know anything about Girl's Day or if it really exists? Who will give me Christmas cards signed to the wrong grandchild? Who will watch television and hold my wiggly puppy like a waiter carries his dishes?

Who will sneak me his favorite snacks from his secret stash between his bed and the wall when Grandma is in the other room? Who will make me my favorite Fresno stew and spinach salad that your sister gave you the recipe for and the sweet and sour chicken wings that you always make for Thanksgiving and Ramen with an egg dropped inside and the Kozai potatoes with bacon and onions? Who will teach me about our family history and answer all of my questions about when you two were in the internment camps? Who will remember and know about all of the relatives I've never met? Who will show me the bright side to every situation and listen to every word I have to say? Who will love me unconditionally the way that you two do even when I disappoint myself? Who will tell me I'm the best thing that ever happened to them? Even though, in reality, you are the best thing that happened to all of us, especially me.

My grandpa leaves me to go into the toy room which is now the computer room to play solitaire on the computer, and I hear Grandma on the telephone with a telemarketer trying to sell her a two-year contract for more cable channels for her money, which I know because my grandma still doesn't know that she always presses the speakerphone button when she answers the phone. As the telemarketer emphasizes that she will be locked into a two-year contract and will have to pay even if she doesn't like the package or decides to go another way, and my grandma sounds panicked as she asks the telemarketer, "What if I die before then??" The telemarketer is as quiet as I am, and we all sit in the dead awkward silence in separate rooms and separate places and separate

stages of our lives. Grandma finally ends the conversation by saying, “Thank you, but I think we’ll pass.”

I think of all of those other times when my grandma would answer her phone, again not knowing that she pressed the speakerphone button and I could hear CVS’ automated message greet her. And every time, she would greet them excitedly back, “Oh! Hello,” in the same way she responds when her grandchildren call her just to say hi.

I would then hear, “We are just calling to inform you that your prescriptions are ready,” in the most mechanical and robotic voice ever which would also mispronounce hers or Grandpa’s name.

But then I would hear right after in the most grateful voice ever, “Oh! Thank you so much! We’ll be right down and pick them up. Bye!”

I smile to myself and laugh at the adorableness of my grandma and cringe at the thought that I could lose all of this in one split second or over the course of five too short years. I run into the other room, whining, “Grandma, I don’t like that the doctor just gave Grandpa an expiration date, and I feel like he just decided he’s going to live for only five more years.”

Grandma starts laughing, “No, Sweets. It’s not like that. We’ll be happy to live longer, but we just have to keep in mind, at our age, that we don’t have that many years left, but it’s okay. We had many good and full years together.” She smiles and rubs my hands like she always has since I was little, “Just never get old.” And then she thinks more and says as she gets up, “But that can’t be helped. We all do... What should we keep? I guess we’ll keep it all, but did you see anything that you wanted from us?”

“I guess keep everything that still works” are the only words I can muster without crying, but I don’t say that I have all that I need from you two. I don’t have the heart to tell her that I don’t want any thing to remember my grandparents by. I don’t need any thing to remember my grandparents by. Every thing pales in comparison to my grandparents in the same way that life will pale and just won’t be the same without them. I don’t want them to know that I am their most selfish granddaughter and want to keep them forever until I leave this earth. It doesn’t scare me at all that this is where the story ends because I refuse to take some of their things and make them my own like the frame with the embroidered pair of golden bunnies on a square of silk that she has willed to me and my older cousin because we were born in the year of the rabbit because I don’t want it to be the frame that I will to my grandchild who is born in the year of the rabbit. I want it to be my grandma’s forever. I want to be my grandma and grandpa’s forever, but that can never be...

My grandpa calls me into his computer room and asks me why the toolbar of his computer is on the side, and I move it back to the bottom where he is used to the toolbar being, and he is amazed by my rudimentary computer skills and tells me I should be a computer engineer. I say, “Oh Grandpa, you think the best of us even when it’s really nothing,” but I know he doesn’t hear me as he urges me to play a game of solitaire on the computer so he can watch and is again in awe of the speed that I can play solitaire even though I’m trying to go slower so that he doesn’t feel bad, but I turn to face him and tell him, “Grandpa, I don’t want you to think that you just have five years left because if you believe it, then you’ll give up and make it happen.” He is slumped in his computer chair and his head stoops forward so that he can try to read my lips, and he shakes his head to

tell me that he doesn't understand a word I've said. So, I shout, "Grandpa, I don't want to go on without you two."

And his tanned skin blushes as his whole face crinkles up in a smile, and he says, "But you must. Gina, most of your life has been written for you and now is your time to start rewriting your life for yourself."

"But Grandpa, I don't want to lose you."

He looks up towards the ceiling as if trying to remember the right words to say, and he shrugs his shoulders as if to tell me he's going to give his best shot, "Sometimes you'll have to get rid of people and things that you really want to keep but just don't work anymore, and things like your life may get really ugly and worse for awhile, but it'll get, forgive my bluntness, but I won't say your life will get better, but you'll make your situation work for you, for a different purpose, and your life will go on to become an even more beautiful story, and it'll be yours." I say nothing, and he mistakes this for not understanding, so he tries again, "Imagine this house once you have emptied it of all of its contents. Mostly you guys will keep what still works, and you'll have to throw away a lot of the things that you might think are beautiful or that you love, but it doesn't work in your house, whether it doesn't function or it doesn't match with your décor or the story that your houses tell. This house will look ugly, showing all of its flaws which you couldn't see before and all of its hidden treasures that everyone forgot about, and then this empty old house will be ready to be filled with another family's story-- just like you. You are going to grow up to be a wife, a mother, an aunt, a grandmother, and you will start telling a different family's story-- your own family's story."

"But I don't want to stop telling your family's story."

He doesn't say anything because it's unlike him to talk about himself, but this is what he should have said. "Then don't. I know you think that we are so concerned with you guys getting what you want of ours because you think that it's like us to worry about our last gesture as some way to please you or give you whatever you want, but we hope that maybe you guys will keep a little piece of us when you go on without us. So it makes us happy when there are things that you want of ours, so that way we can feel like you will carry a piece of us with you when you go on forever. So, do you know what you want from us?"

These are the words that I don't say but should. "Grandpa, I have all that I need from you. I have your values. You have taught me that our family is of the utilitarian nature as the plastic tofu containers have become your favorite key and coin and golf ball holder, and the plastic cookie containers have become Grandma's favorite pill bottle carrier, and I too will forever keep only the things that work and offer some sort of use, and I promise to live as you do and make use of what I have, but most importantly, to make the most of everything that I have and to see the best in everything I encounter.

With your words in mind, I will rewrite today. Today, we went to the doctor's office, and he told you that you are as young as you feel, and you will stay that way as long as you make up your mind to. And we won't go to IHOP, but if we did, we would have used a coupon because it's expensive to live forever, but instead, we go to Las Vegas because we are not concerned with time since we have an endless amount. We eat a brunch buffet at Paris or the Bellagio or at one of your favorite casinos Downtown, and Grandma, you have your voracious appetite again, and Grandpa, you get to eat every carbohydrate you see and will not suffer any repercussions, and I get to see my favorite

sight: Grandpa eating and enjoying his food and licking his plate clean even after five mountainous plates of food.

Just for today, Grandpa you have perfect balance and race Grandma again back home and maybe even win this time. Just for today, Grandpa, you have perfect hearing, and you hear Grandma's voice again and fall in love more deeply even though that's not even possible, and just for today, Grandpa, you can hear my voice and what it has become since you last heard it, and you realize I'm not the great singer you once thought I was, but just for today, you call up everyone you ever wanted to on the phone, and just for today, you call up each of your daughters and you will sing your favorite songs with them. Just for today, when I pass by your room, I won't see newspaper clippings scattered on the floor, but I will hear Frank Sinatra and Rosemary Clooney crooning at the top of their lungs.

And just for today, Grandma, you put your chores, the mail that keeps piling up, and the prescriptions that need to be refilled or remembered to be taken, away and play double solitaire with me and we laugh the entire time as I lobby for us to cheat just so that we can play another game. Just for today, Grandma, you sleep soundly through the night without a single worry, and just for today, we will curl up in your bed, and it will be as big as it seemed when I was five, and just for today, I will be the one that wakes up every hour to make sure that you are sleeping as soundly as your granddaughter did when she was scared of the world because it was too dark and busy and dangerous. Just for today, you will not feel sorry for anyone because you are too fulfilled and happy with all of the blessings in your life and you don't need to feel guilty for it. Just for today, you

will throw away your notebook with questions, and you will not be satisfied with leaving this world tomorrow because the world is at your feet.

Just for today, I will forget that we will have to say goodbye. Just for today, you will speak freely about yourself, and I will write down every word and keep each of your stories with me forever. Just for today, you will remember how you two started dating and when you decided to get married, and just for today, those pieces of your story won't be lost. Just for today, I will tell you how it's been an honor being your granddaughter and being a part of your family and legacy and the story of you two, which has been nothing short of a fairy tale, and just for today, you will believe me and understand the depth of what I say. Just for today, you will know how much you mean to me and how much I love you. Just for today, you will know how thankful I have been for the best years of my life, and even the worst, because you were a part of it, and just for today, we will live like there is a tomorrow. Just for today, we will be happy. Just for today, I won't be the girl who has known loss all of her life and will say, of all of the things I would have had to lose, you two would have been the two that I would have missed the most. Just for today, we will rewrite an ending and say that there is no end. Just for today.