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### All in the Family: A Collection of Essays on Family and Mental Health

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All in the Family:  
A Collection of Essays on Family and Mental Health

Kiana Govoni

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 12, 2020

Dr. Sarah Fawn Montgomery, Thesis Advisor

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### Critical Introduction

I was inspired to write this honors thesis because I wanted to share my experiences dealing with mental health issues and nontraditional family dynamics. I struggled, at the beginning of the project, to find nonfiction books that closely resembled my life and experiences. I am a black woman, but I grew up in a white family. Finding memoirs on adoption and nontraditional families that were similar to my experiences was difficult because many narratives on adoption focus on the adoptee's search for their biological family. Such memoirs also have themes of cultural loss and struggles with identity. I never felt the desire to learn about my biological family, so it was frustrating to see adoption narratives that mainly focused on themes of an adoptee wanting to discover their biological roots, and in turn, a part of their identity.

I read popular and successful adoption memoirs such as Nicole Chung's *All You Can Ever Know* and Mary-Kim Arnold's *Litany for The Long Moment*, and both memoirs also describe feelings of racial and cultural loss from not knowing their biological family history. As a black woman, I didn't feel like I lost a part of my culture or racial identity, so I couldn't relate to those themes. Many stories written by writers of color talk about race relations or discrimination, and tokenization can become a concern in literature. As a writer, I don't want to feel obligated to write about certain themes simply because of the color of my skin. I want my essays to add more nuance and give another voice and perspective on adoption and adoption memoirs. The adoption itself doesn't have to be the main focus in an adoption memoir, and other themes can be prioritized.

Another theme that I focus on in my essays is mental health, and I also struggled to find mental health memoirs that were similar to my own experiences. I have had anxiety almost all my life, and people who have anxiety can have a wide range of symptoms. Many memoirs on mental health however, feature characters who seem sensationalized and who have symptoms

that are portrayed in excessive and humorous manners. I wanted to avoid those tropes in my essays, and so I set up themes and realistic portrayals of mental health, as well as themes of adoption and nontraditional families in my essays. The first essay, “Safe in My Bedroom” emphasizes the difficulties I had with anxiety and attending school. I also explore my family dynamics and the issues families can face if they are separated by mental health issues and age gaps. I portray my family dynamics in a way that feels relatable and realistic without sensationalizing adopted children and making them into caricatures. I also discuss how mental health issues can have a large impact on families. I portray the disconnect in my family and how school was also a source of separation. The pressure to go to school despite my anxiety played a major role in my struggles with mental health, and the pressure to succeed strained family relations.

I also write about the time I spent in a psychiatric facility to offer another perspective on why children get institutionalized. People often assume that children are sent to psychiatric facilities because of severe behavioral issues and acts of violence. I show the children in the facility as they were and provide a picture of how I lived with other children and how my experiences didn't align with other popular depictions of psychiatric facilities. In memoirs like *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, characters are put into therapy or institutions where they encounter over-the-top and mentally unstable characters.

It's a common trope to portray characters in psychiatric facilities as unpredictable, manic, strange, and potentially dangerous. I argue against that image by showing my time at the facility and the people that I encountered. Like *Running with Scissors*, the memoir *Priestdaddy* by Patricia Lockwood presents eccentric characters in addition to family dynamics that often feel extreme and chaotic. Many memoirs on mental health include such characterizations of eccentric

family members and unbelievable family incidents, and I wanted to challenge that trope in this essay.

The second essay, “The Dogs were Different” also introduces themes of mental health and nontraditional family dynamics. I focus on my dogs and the impact they had on my life and my anxiety. I argue that animals can feel more like family than parents or siblings and that they can help people overcome adversities, hardships, and mental illness. Conversely, I also explore how my dogs acted as a source of connection and disconnection between me and my family. My struggles with interacting with certain members of my family were lessened because of the dogs. However, I also portray how my dogs caused disconnect between my mother and me and how isolation and miscommunication can impact a family. My relationship with my dogs is the focus in this essay, but my mother also has a major role. I talk about the issues that I had with my mother and the evolution of our relationship in this essay.

My mother and I used to have a close relationship, but her lack of understanding of my anxiety separated us. I show how misunderstandings on mental health can strain family dynamics and how unrealistic expectations on recovery can also create distance and more problems. I compare the relationship I had with my dogs and my mother, both of which come back in later essays, especially as I reflect and explore their deaths. I go more in depth about the symptoms of my anxiety and describe how therapy and meetings with mentors became a part of my life. People who suffer from mental health issues and anxiety can experience many different symptoms, and I wanted to be more transparent in this essay about my symptoms and what I did when I was feeling anxious.

Talking about mental health should not be a source of discomfort. While the memoir *Monkey Mind* portrays anxiety in a way that I believe is too sensationalized at times, the author

does a great job giving an in-depth look at his anxiety and how it impacts his everyday life and relationships. I sought to do the same thing with this second essay by exposing my past habits that might seem strange and embarrassing with an emphasis on how much I depended on my dogs. What I want readers to take away from this essay is that people have different coping mechanisms when dealing with mental health problems and that it's okay to find comfort outside of family.

I continue the exploration of mental health and nontraditional family dynamics in my third essay, "My Routines Like Scripture." I show how people with mental health issues can still accomplish things in their lives. There's a common misconception that anxious people cannot do things out of their comfort zone and that if they do something seemingly difficult, that they are lying about their mental health issues. I argue that anxious people can still do things that make them anxious, and I support my argument by showing how I was able to travel alone to Japan for a semester abroad. Even though I don't focus on my classes or the experience of going to a university in Japan in this essay, I use my time in Japan to portray how my anxiety didn't hold me back from doing what I wanted to do. However, I do not understate or undervalue the role of anxiety in my life and how I still struggled with anxious feelings that I couldn't control.

Just as in previous essays, I also explore themes of nontraditional family dynamics that further complement or challenge themes I set up in previous essays. I explore how family fears can hinder a person's ambitions and influence their anxiety or mental health. I describe my parents' fears of me traveling alone and how those fears had influence in my life. The influence of parents is also a prevalent theme in *Monkey Mind* and *Running with Scissors*. At the start of this project, I originally wanted to challenge the belief that a parent's attitude or perspective on life fully impacts their child's mental health. I do believe that parents influence their children but

that family dynamics are complicated. After reading many memoirs and reflecting on my own experiences, I recognize that my parents did influence me. I do not, however, blame them for my anxiety, and I show how I was able to go to Japan and make my own decisions. Even though the influence of parents is also seen in the memoir *Educated* by Tara Westover, I took inspiration from how the author went to college alone and traveled overseas despite the fact that she had never left the country or her family before. The separation from her family helped the author to learn more about herself and her beliefs, and I also show how the separation from my family taught me what I can accomplish in this third essay.

The final essay, “Anxiety Is in My Bloodstream” connects the themes of mental health and nontraditional family dynamics that run throughout the collection. The essay ties in family challenges discussed in the first two essays and shows the journey of leaving home and returning home, which is discussed in the third essay. I further explore themes of anxiety and how anxiety can overcome a person during stressful times like when a family member is dying. I introduce more family dynamics and how difficult it was for me to be around my family when my mom was dying in the hospital. The role of expectation versus reality and the role of healing and acceptance is important in this essay.

Though the memoir *Ordinary Light* by Tracy K. Smith focuses on many themes such as growing up and racial identity, I was inspired by the author’s relationship with her mother. The representation of the relationship between the author and her mother was candid and believable. “Anxiety Is in My Bloodstream” sheds more light on my relationship with my mother and how influential mothers are. Many memoirs that I read had a focus on the relationship between adult children and their mothers. *Monkey Mind* and *Running with Scissors* also include depictions of their mothers, and I wanted to add to the narratives that explore these types of relationships. In

this final essay, I write about the death of my mother and how my anxiety hindered the way I coped with losing her. I explore more of our relationship and how my anxiety and her Alzheimer's and dementia separated us during the last few years of her life. I also challenge the idea that a death in the family brings distant family members together and forever changes the dynamics of a family in a positive way. I also challenge the belief that people can overcome mental health issues during important situations. The impact of my mother's death still has a big presence in my life today and writing this nonfiction essay felt like a way for me to grieve for her.

I want my essays to show how multifaceted family and mental health is. I started this project disheartened because many of the books I researched didn't represent my experiences or show, in my opinion, a positive depiction of family or people who suffer from mental health issues. However, as I continued to read and research, I discovered more memoirs that really delve into family and mental health while giving honest and thought-provoking portrayals. Popular memoirs may share common tropes and themes that don't speak for everyone and perpetuate certain stereotypes, but there are memoirs out there that offer new and unique perspective. I seek to publish each of my essays and hope to inspire people to share their stories even if they aren't frequently represented in the mainstream media.

### Safe in My Bedroom

I sat with my parents in the psychiatric facility where I was going to stay for a week, my school district demanding to know if I was psychotic or just mildly disturbed. My mom was quiet as she sat in the chair next to me, but the heat of her concern seeped into the walls. I was only thirteen years old, small and defenseless, and she worried that I would be raped or sexually assaulted in a place hundreds of miles away from our home.

I don't remember if she held my hand or rubbed my shoulder when she sat next me, but I imagine that she did. She liked to sneak in a hug or gentle touch of her hand in public when I couldn't brush her off. My dad sat on the other side of me and talked to a stoic man who sat behind a desk, reading my story.

The office we were in was small, with just enough room for a man to sit behind a wooden desk and stare at wide-eyed parents and children who looked to him for guidance. The man was quiet as he read the story that landed me in the facility for seeming too disturbing. He flipped through the pages, reading quickly, and said that my story was just like a fantasy story. He didn't seem concerned.

My dad laughed awkwardly and wouldn't stop talking about how the school was overreacting. The man indulged him with a patience he must have carefully honed over the years, and my mom and I were silent and outwardly calm as we listened on.

I didn't tear up or cry when the stoic man silenced my dad's rambling and decided that it was finally time for my parent to leave. My parents rose to their feet, their aching, elderly limbs cracking like peanuts, and hugged me goodbye. I barely reacted to their departure because I felt surprisingly at ease.

I was in a place my mom feared I would be raped, but I felt fine. I wouldn't have to go to school for a week.

~

I didn't always fear school to such a terrifying degree. But I always had an attachment to my mom, a need to breathe in the smell of her clearance perfume, cling to her small chubby hands, and merge myself into the soft flesh of her tummy. I would choke when we were separated. Freeze. Feel something stale but solid form in my throat that made me fearful and ill.

My mom and I would often take naps together or watch old television shows during the day when my dad was at work and my brother and sister, who still lived at home, were at school. I would play with the hair on my mom's chin and snuggle up to her for as long as I could, feeding off her warmth. My mom liked to have me close, her youngest daughter and youngest child, and she would often tell me how lucky she was to have me.

I can't remember how often she told me the account of the social worker who called her late at night in May of 1991 and told her that she had a baby born with crack cocaine in her system. My mom was fifty years old at the time, but she raised four biological children, had one adopted son at home already, and fostered close to half a dozen children by that point. She would later take in one of my half-sister's months after getting me and then stop fostering children, happy with the small family she created.

My mom held onto me from the moment the social worker handed me over. My journey from being taken away from my biological mother in the hospital to entering the foster care system ended once I was put in my mom's arms. She never let go of me until she had to enroll me in kindergarten and push me into a new world without mothers. The stress made me sick, but it was bearable, and I survived.

My mom used to do my hair in thick, beautiful braids with beads for school, and I always wondered how she learned to style black hair like she was a professional. She was a white woman with little exposure to black hair, but she always braided my hair with precision and care.

What I remember most about kindergarten was how quiet I was and how I always tried to stay motionless in my seat next to a boy whose face was always wet with slobber or boogers. The promise of my release home calmed the pressure in my throat, the pressure in my legs.

I didn't refuse to go to school often, the times where I would cling to my mom crying or run off when the bus came only happening a few times in my kindergarten life. The actual musclebound, heavy fear of school would come later.

~

The facility was in a city I can't remember anymore. My dad drove us in a beaten-up blue minivan that wouldn't have turned any heads in the suburbs, and it could barely do sixty miles an hour on the highway without making ominous noises. We were out of place in the city, but I was happy to be out of school without consequences. I wouldn't have to wake up the next morning, refuse to go to school, and get lectures from my mom or a phone call from the school asking about my whereabouts.

Now at twenty-eight years old, I look back on that time in my life and wonder about the expectations I had when I got out of the car and followed my parents into the facility. Entering a college classroom makes me queasy as an adult, but I walked into the facility with bravery and nonchalance when I was an anxious child. Being out of school would have felt amazing, but I wasn't staying at a resort. I should have been more afraid.

The inside of the facility was clean, simple, and warm like a suburban home. I think that might have helped ease my parents' fears before the stoic man said it was time for me to settle in.

I don't remember him staying for long once my parents were gone. I don't remember if he gave me any encouraging words or reassured me that I would survive.

A male and female counselor, people whose names and faces I cannot remember anymore, took over for him, and led me to the living room. We shared little conversation because I didn't talk to anyone unless I had to, and I think they were used to quiet kids following them into the unknown.

A teenage boy and three little kids eventually came out of their rooms to meet me a few minutes later. The children were happy to see a new face, and they jumped up to greet me with wide smiles and bucked teeth.

Elijah was a skinny blonde boy. He was quiet and friendly, but when he angered, his face bled like a deep wound and his screams sounded like death screeches. I think he had a mood disorder, and his anger reminded me of my brother Aaron whose fits of rage also stained his face a grotesque shade of red.

The other boy, nameless now, had dark hair and dark eyes. He was the jokester of the group who never stopped moving or talking. The little girl had a wide grin that always revealed when she was up to no good, and she and the jokester boy scared me the most at first. Their outgoing and energetic personalities forced their way into my space, and I didn't like it.

The teenage boy was seventeen and his name was Kevin. Kevin would become my crush and the one I gravitated to the most, but the children would grow to feel more like my siblings. More so than my real siblings who were miles away from me and the facility.

~

I'm the youngest child in my family. My parents had three biological daughters and one biological son decades before they got me. My sisters are old enough to be my parents, and I

never had a close relationship with any of them. They didn't teach me how often to change my pad or give me advice on how to angle my face to kiss a boy. They didn't share their bras, combs, and hand-me-downs with me during our youth and growing years. We didn't have a youth together.

They were married with children before my body was fully developed in my biological mother's womb, and we only saw each other during my younger birthday parties or holidays. They felt like older women who were friends of my parents. I try to envision now how our lives would have been if I grew up with them in seventies, or them with me in the nineties. I can't see it.

My eldest brother Vince, my parent's last biological child, is only fifteen years older than me. I saw him the most when I was growing up, and unlike my sisters, he didn't have any children. He was in the navy and then worked odd jobs that kept him outdoors. I admired him and his independence and how his solitary life wasn't seen as mental instability—how he had my parent's respect.

I knew I had my parents' love, but I doubted that I had their respect. What was there to respect or admire? I was the girl afraid of everything, a girl who couldn't do something as simple as go to school. I felt my shame and believed it found a home inside my parents as well. I wanted to make them respect my choices, but my anxiety was in control.

My dad understood me better. My issues with school, while troubling, didn't seem like a big dilemma to him. He believed that I could just drop out of school and find blue-collar work if my anxiety persisted. He was a quiet, introverted man who was anxious around too many people. He never hung out with friends when I was growing up, and he preferred to read the Bible, listen to country music, or watch baseball alone.

The difference between my dad and I was that he could survive the outside world. He got married at nineteen, had four children, worked in multiple factories for decades, and became a foster and adoptive parent because his wife didn't want to stop being a mother.

My mom didn't understand anxiety the way I wanted her to. She was an extrovert and thought that not talking to people was rude and un hospitable. She wanted me to be sociable and go to school every day. She dropped out of school because she had poor vision and a learning disability, and I don't think she ever got over that.

I'm not sure if she wanted to drop out or if her parents made her, but she always sounded embarrassed and called herself dumb whenever she saw me working on my homework—laughing at herself and saying how lucky I was to be smart.

She was labeled the dumb one in her family, the dumb middle sister in a family of six, and grew an intense, laser-eyed focus on the importance of school. She stopped going to school in middle school, just like I did, but our reasons were different, and she didn't understand that.

My mom couldn't fathom that my school issues and anxiety wouldn't heal themselves like a body fighting off a seasonal cold. I had to get better because I was, as she reminded me so much, smart. She couldn't go to school because she wasn't smart enough. I was just quiet and afraid. I could go if I got better.

~

I tried to isolate myself at the facility, afraid that my anxiety would overwhelm me if I stepped over the threshold of my door. I felt physically sick the first few times I was asked to join group activities and talk, the sounds of the children, a constant *bang, bang, bang*, in my head. Their bodies pressing close to me felt almost as bad as shattering an already broken bone. I

stopped growing used to people's skin or clothes touching me by that time, and I didn't want to change that.

I didn't have dinner with my family at home anymore unless I was forced out or if I wanted my dogs to be around the family and not just my gloomy aura. I lived with my parents and my two siblings who were the only other adopted children in the family. My sister Ella was my half-sister, and she looked like a young version of our biological mother—tall and broad, thin faced, but with big doll eyes and a bigger smile. I was short and thin, baby cheeked, and with big teeth that I hid behind closed lipped smiles. I must look like my father.

My parents also took in my adopted brother Aaron after his birth mother gave him up. Oversized head and bleeding in his brain, he would have learning disabilities all his life and have anger issues that he struggled to control—times when he would get so angry that he would put holes in the wall, damage the doors, throw things around the house, and threaten us all. He scared me like a monster in the closet that terrorized young children, and I hated being around him.

Aaron and Ella were closest in age with me, Ella a year older, and Aaron, seven. We hardly stayed in a room long enough together to catch a glimpse of each other's silhouettes unless we were fighting with each other or with our mom. My mom was almost constantly at odds with one of her children as her loving, but attention-seeking behavior drove us away or led to loud shouting matches or cold silence at dinner.

I still loved my family, but I couldn't be near them. I wouldn't let my mom hug or touch me anymore, and I didn't want to be around her, not even to sit next to her at dinner and have my arm brush against her as I reached for the salt. I see now how hard that must have been for her.

She lived for affection and needed to have her children love her as much, if not more than, she loved them.

She was generous with her love and went to all my appointments, but I stayed away from her because she didn't understand my anxiety and why it affected my life so much. I kept away from her as much as I could, but I couldn't ignore anyone at the facility and especially not the children.

I was standoffish at first to the children's touch and conversations, but they were persistent. The way they went about their days as though there was nothing squeezing their throats encouraged me and pierced the tiny holes in the walls of my anxiety. We played games together, did chores together, and went to group and did activities to learn how to control our emotional responses.

I opened up and talked about my fears of people and how at middle school, I felt like something was being taken out of my body. I admitted that I felt contained, unsafe, and surrounded by walls and students who never let me pass to safety. I talked about how my anxiety felt like my stalker, the creep lurking around every corner, and how much I loved my room and the safety inside it.

Kevin was a comforting presence during those talks. He showed me what it felt like to be around a boy who I liked and could talk to—to be around a boy who was safe and didn't scream when he was angry. The only other boys I saw on a daily basis back home were my brother Aaron and the boys at school, the ones who only talked to me when they wanted me on their sports team at gym or wanted to hear me scream to show them that I could make noise.

I could talk at the facility, at my own pace, at my own volume, and that cancelled my urge to flee—to flee like when I was in school and always ran to the bathroom to eat lunch alone

in a quiet stall—to flee like when I ran to the guidance office to complain of this persistent and chronic school ailment that made it hard to breathe.

~

My mom liked to brag about how smart I was to everyone she talked to. I always hated how she singled me out in front of strangers and especially my siblings who would just nod, smile, or not respond. Looking back now, I realize that I was lying to myself in a way. I disliked her bragging about me when I was there, but I treasured having my mom's love and praise and having something precious to give to her even when I was at my lowest point. It reminded me of snippets of my golden years.

I used to be a sociable girl. My elementary school years were my brownie points, and some of my best school and life memories that I had. I had a posse of girls who were my best friends, and I was the athletic friend who played basketball and danced ballet, tap, and jazz. I liked going to school every day. I did wake up in the mornings, on occasion, with a twinge in my side and the feeling of a small, bleeding hole in my heart that warned me of the dangers of school. But the wounds only bled slightly, and I could stitch myself up and go to school with only a slight stumble in my steps.

Children sitting behind me in old school desks didn't feel like an ominous threat, and I could go to school and not run and hide in the bathroom every opportunity I had. My sister didn't have to constantly tell our classmates and peers why I wasn't in school, and I could wake up in the morning and not feel like there was something shapeshifting inside my body.

I could not begin to image then how much my life would change—how I would later walk my first steps into middle school alone, all my friends having moved away. That bleeding wound inside my heart wouldn't heal or scab over. My fears would fester, my anxiety rising

taller and wider than the space I kept between myself and every potential threat around me. School became the epicenter of danger.

Aaron would go to school every day and get a certificate of completion instead of a diploma at age eighteen. Ella would graduate high school, go to college, and not take the one class she needed to graduate. My mom, to my knowledge, would not badger her about the importance of finishing school like she continued to do with me.

I resented Ella because it seemed like my mom didn't pressure her as much to succeed at school and life, and I think my sister resented me just as much. Resented me for having my mom's attention and encouragement to succeed and make her proud.

~

My parents visited me every day that I was at the facility. My dad was always quiet but friendly, and my mom's fears about my safety were washed away by my reassurances, the happy children, and by the reports of my progress and success. Hearing that I had been attending group therapy and talking to other children must have felt like she was hearing assurances from God that I would dropkick my anxiety out of existence.

Those reports gave us all hope. If I could survive at the facility, then I could learn to survive outside it. We truly believed that, but I realize now how simplistic a belief that was. I made progress at the facility largely because I didn't feel completely outnumbered, or forced into a small, steel cage.

My fears weren't shunned at the facility—fears of going to the bathroom with other people there, of eating lunch in the cafeteria, of sitting in the middle of a classroom or walking the crowded hallways because it didn't feel safe in any way. I felt safe at the facility, and that

was a major reason why I was succeeding there. I could digest the small number of people in my orbit, and I wanted to stay with Kevin and the children who felt like my siblings.

None of my siblings came to see me, and I don't know if my eldest siblings even knew that I was away at a psychiatric facility. My parents might have pretended, if someone asked, that I was shut up in my room. I was always in my room and hiding with the dogs if someone came over for a visit, so that would have been a believable lie.

We used to have family gatherings at my home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I would be in bed before the first knock sounded on the front door. I would listen to the sounds of my family living without me as the hours passed, and I would only open the door to tell my mom that I wouldn't come out when she came looking for me.

I would learn, later in my adulthood, that most, if not all my siblings experienced anxiety and depression themselves. When we sat down and talked during the few times that we saw each other, whispered confessions of past and current anxieties would tumble out of our lips. Hearing about my siblings' anxieties shocked and excited me when I first heard them because they never appeared to be anxious whenever I saw them.

I realize now that was ignorant of me and that a lot of people have anxiety that they don't show in public. If my eldest siblings did know that I was at the facility but didn't visit, maybe that didn't mean they didn't care about me. The symptoms that bled out of me and led to my time at the facility could have hit too close to home—felt too similar to bear.

~

My parents picked me up after my seven day stay at the facility. During that short time, I learned that I liked being around people—people who understood me and made me feel

comfortable. I learned to enjoy talking to other children and stand so close to them that our arms touched when we did the dishes together or sat side by side during group activities.

I hoped that this inhouse transformation, this rejuvenation, would transfer to every aspect of my life, and that little by little, my anxiety would waste away like morning dew. I said my goodbyes to Kevin and the kids in the morning, and I wanted to hug Kevin and tell him how much his quiet kindness meant to me. I couldn't bring myself to reach out to him or release such vulnerable words, and I still regret that to this day.

The stoic man and the counselors told my parents that I wasn't a danger to myself or society. He said that I was ready to go home and attend school like a normal girl with the help of therapy and my school's guidance. My parents and I believed him but came to find out soon that I wasn't ready to go back to middle school. I would never be ready.

I would go back to middle school for a few weeks consistently after going home, but I wouldn't conquer it. My anxiety would morph into a new super strain that no amount of therapy or prescription medication could cure, my dreams crushed and swept away.

My dad and I would accept it, but my mom would hold on the longest to our old hopes and expectations, holding on tight with determined, but fractured fingers. But in the end, even she couldn't hold onto unattainable dreams forever. She would eventually let me drop out of school at sixteen after I was sent to three alternative school for troubled teens and refused to go to school anymore.

We didn't know this was going to be my imminent future when we left the facility behind us. I was hopeful after I got into the van and sat in the backseat, my eyes peering out the window at a city I would never see again. The low hum of country music filtered out of the radio and settled in my bones as the van shakily brought me and my parents back home.

### The Dogs were Different

A loud firecracker bang and my mom's screams woke me up in the middle of the night. My mom screamed so loudly that I thought she tumbled out of bed and broke her back—snapped her spine like a toothpick. She had a bad history of falling out of bed, but I never heard her scream like that.

The lights in my parent's bedroom were on when I stormed inside, and the first thing I saw was my black lab Riley lying on the rug near my mom's side of the bed. My dad stood with my mom near the door of their bathroom, and he pat her back gently as she screamed and moaned. I asked my parents what happened, and my mom turned her red face to me and said that she tripped over *the damn dog*. She started to moan again almost as soon as the last sound pushed past her clenched teeth, and she didn't speak again.

My chest felt heavy and clogged like it did when I ate too much chocolate and made myself sick for days. I went over to my dog Riley and hugged him close to me. I was already picturing hospital trips, scrutiny from the extended family, and more complaints from my mom about the inconvenience of having dogs.

My mom's screams also woke my older brother Aaron who slept downstairs. My brother's blood burned when he was scared, and my mom's screams scared him into a silent, worried rage. I took Riley to the living room while my dad and brother helped my mom back into bed.

My other dog Jay-R slept in his bed in the living room, and he didn't stir when I coaxed Riley onto his orthopedic bed. The whole family tried to go back to bed but only the dogs slept comfortably, the rest of us restless and grasping for a touch of sleep that wouldn't reach us easily.

My mom iced her shoulder and moaned on the couch for the next few days until she couldn't handle the pain anymore. She and my dad went to the hospital and came back in the afternoon, my mom's shoulder in a sling. She broke her collarbone.

I met up with a friend a few days after my mom's diagnosis, and we sat in my kitchen with my dad, talking about the incident. I told my friend how worried I was about Riley getting hurt if an accident like that happened again. He was already eleven with bad hips and arthritis, and I couldn't stand the thought of him being in any danger. When there was a lull in the conversation, my dad spoke up and added, *and your mother too*, like I missed an important ingredient on our shopping list.

My friend and I stared at each other in disbelief, and then we laughed until I started to frown and contemplate my thoughts. My mom was in her seventies, but her safety didn't even occur to me. All my concerns of preventing injuries and elderly broken bones sailed over my mother and landed centerstage, bullseye on my dog only.

~

I got Riley when I was fourteen and in and out of therapy and alternative schools. I went to a psychiatric facility when I was thirteen because of a story I wrote, and leaving the facility behind felt like walking towards an anxiety-free existence—a life of emotional success and peace. When that didn't happen and I had to go to alternative schools for troubled kids, I sunk further into depression and anxiety.

The only things that kept warmth in my body were food, television, and my dogs. We already my dog Jay-R, but my siblings and I wanted another dog. My dad saw a sign one day advertising purebred, champion Labrador retrievers, and our family agreed that a lab would be a good family pet. My mom didn't want another dog, but a lab was a breed she could tolerate.

Riley was small with a round stuffed-animal face, his breath smelling like old, sour milk when we first got him. I loved him the second I held him in my arms.

I always loved dogs, and I grew up with a Labrador retriever, Saint Bernard mix named Hercules. Hercules and I shared the same birthday, and he was my eldest brother Vince's dog. He stayed with us when my brother moved out, and we all loved him like family. He was with us all throughout the day, but my mom disliked dogs and wanted him to sleep in the basement at night. Hercules died alone in the basement when he was twelve years old.

I remember waking up the next morning to my dad's solemn face, and the thought of Hercules dying by himself almost drove me mad. I loved Hercules and mourned him for a long time, but I didn't have the bond with him that I would later have with my next two dogs. Hercules was in my life when anxiety didn't consume me, and I didn't have to lean on him for additional support.

I took what happened to Hercules, all the love we gave him and the shame I carried over his death and vowed never to let that happen to another pet of ours. I didn't allow my next dogs to sleep in the basement, and Riley slept with me. Riley was sweet, affectionate, and he didn't like to be outside for too long. He was obsessed with white bread and loved eating. He was just like me. All I did was eat Dunkin' Donuts for breakfast, McDonald's for lunch, and candy for dinner and dessert in between resting and watching tv.

My mom liked that I found comfort in Riley, but it pained her that I wouldn't show her any affection anymore. After the failure that followed my return from the psychiatric facility, I couldn't stand to be around a mother who thought that anxiety could be cured with a maternal hug and a motivational speech. Looking back now at age twenty-eight, I think I was also unconsciously punishing my mom for what happened to Hercules.

She wouldn't let Hercules sleep with us at night, and I wouldn't let her stay in my room. I used to be close to my mom, sleeping next to her for the first seven years of my life, and she yearned for that closeness back. But I didn't want her near me or my bed because I had replaced her with Riley, a dog who I felt understood me and my anxiety better than anyone else.

Riley and I watched movies and tv every day, Japanese anime on Adult Swim at two in the morning, and Sports Center, FX and Lifetime during the day. I liked to sleep or sit on the floor, and Riley took my bed. My parents and siblings found that arrangement, my mom complaining that my sheets smelled like dog and that I treated myself like an animal by sleeping on the floor. She didn't understand that the disorientation and dizziness that came from my anxiety couldn't kick me off my feet when I was on the ground.

When I did sleep or relax in my bed, Riley's weight and warmth kept me from feeling like I was completely alone in the world of people who could have simple conversations without feeling like they were going to vomit. We were lazy together—a sad, lazy girl and a fat, lazy dog.

Riley protected my door anytime someone took the time to check to see if I was still breathing. His presence acted as a shield, a barricade that I could cling to and keep between me and everything outside my door unless I chose to go outside. I went to my alternative schools when my heart could handle it, went to therapy when my heart couldn't handle it, and went out with mentors who tried to show me that the world wasn't a horror movie.

I only went out of the house willingly for my dogs. I went with my dad every time he took the dogs to the vet. Being outside in the real world threatened to crack my bones, but I handled it with Riley at my side. My dad was also a dog lover, and having Riley and Jay-R brought a smile to his face even when my mother and sister Ella were screaming at each other, or

when my brother Aaron was having a fit and threatening to kill the whole family. My brother's mood disorder made anything set him off, and he had to threaten us to expel his frustrations and rage. He terrified Riley when he was mad.

My sister Ella and I screamed back at Aaron and told him to stop scaring Riley when he was rampaging around the house. I was bold with my protectiveness. Riley was a part of me, an extension of me, and I wouldn't let my brother scare him even when I so scared that I wanted to disappear. My mom always stared at my brother in disbelief like each fit was a new phenomenon that she couldn't believe. She wouldn't walk away.

My dad, a pacifist, forced my brother to go downstairs or picked up the phone and threatened to call the police if my brother wouldn't calm down. That usually shut Aaron up, and when he went downstairs, the rest of the family slowly dispersed like a herd of antelopes after the threat of a lion attack was over. The dogs came into my room with me, Riley shaking and acting how I felt but refused to show.

~

Fighting around an animal didn't always feel like such a capital offense. We had my dog Jay-R, a beagle-basset hound mix, for two years before we got Riley. He was a different breed of dog. If someone was angry or yelling in the house, he simply barked or ignored the offender like they were classless, wannabe criminals. I was twelve years old when Jay-R sprang into my life, a gift from a distant family member.

I was a more active part of society at twelve, still having a group of friends who slept over my house often. Jay-R entertained us, a group of young, energetic girls, and kept us busy chasing after his floppy ears. He was an outdoor dog and was happy to walk the perimeter of the backyard, howl into the air, and chase any squirrel who got too close to him.

I still had spells of anxiety pains and times when I needed to be alone during this time, but I didn't start having my serious fears of the world or school yet. I loved being around Jay-R and watching his antics outside and around the house—pulling my mom's socks off her feet, trotting around the house like a horse, and going crazy for used tissues and napkins. Jay-R gave me something wild but comforting to focus on and love.

It was easier to let my fears and anxieties fade away around Jay-R. When my brother's anger burst out of him, Jay-R played with his favorite tennis ball, and I sat next to him and watched him, pretending that my ears were turned off and couldn't understand human speech. If my mom was arguing with my sister Ella about how unloved and disrespected my sister made her feel by seeking maternal affection with other women, Jay-R would be trotting along in the backyard or eating a wad of nasty tissues that he dug out of the trash.

My mom was in her sixties when my sister and I were teenagers, and she couldn't do many outdoor activities with us. Ella made friends with older women from church and school who were decades younger than my mom, and I used to find that strange. I see now that my sister was just like me. She found comfort and understanding in something outside of our family, and she didn't want to let it go.

When I was angry and fighting with siblings or my mom about my anxiety or something stupid, Jay-R would pull me through the haze of my anger and distract me with his floppy ears, chaotic energy, or something potentially valuable that he had in his mouth. His habit of tugging off my mom's socks was like high quality entertainment in my family, and we could forget the heat of our anger, sadness, or indignation.

My mom never found the sock-pulling funny: she was not an animal person. She loved buying new furniture and gifts for family and friends, and she didn't like the dogs getting in the

way or taking money that could go to more important things. She petted the dogs on occasion, called them good boys when they sat peacefully in the living room, and bought them blankets from Savers. She didn't go out of her way to play with them or engage them, but I know that she liked them more than she claimed. Jay-R was like her arch nemesis when he was a puppy, but I saw her feed him table scraps and have private conversations with him when she thought no one was looking.

Jay-R gave the family something to talk about. My eldest siblings, Vince and Brie, visited occasionally, and they loved dogs too. The glue keeping my throat closed disappeared when we all got together and talked about Jay-R and Riley. My words flowed as easily as they did when my best friend and I talked about things we wouldn't dare mention to anyone else—things like what we liked to masturbate to, how constipated we got when we were on our periods, and about past traumas that still made us squirm with discomfort decades later.

I could talk to my siblings like they were my friends when the dogs were the topic, but it did get harder to talk at all when I got older and was stabbed with debilitating anxiety and depression. Riley matched my personality and was happy to stay at my side when I just wanted to sleep, but Jay-R was an outdoor dog and grew bored and anxious if he stayed inside too long. I let him out of my room and kept him there, Riley guarding my door with vicious growls that kept Jay-R away when he wanted to come back in.

It was only after I dropped out of high school and went to community college that I started to be with Jay-R more. I was still anxious during this time but having the ability to leave class or the school when I was anxious stabilized me. I could go to school, do errands around town, and enjoy being outside and not alone in my bedroom.

I started to take Jay-R and Riley's diets more seriously and play with them more outside and out in town. It felt like a personal achievement to push myself past my limits for my dogs. I could deny my parents and my siblings my time and presence, be the sister who stayed in the background and the anxious daughter who never showed herself. I wanted to be more than that for my dogs. I wanted to be visible.

~

Jay-R got his paw caught under Riley's collar one afternoon when he was jumping all over him. I don't remember exactly when it happened, but Riley had to be five years old or older, towering over Jay-R. The collar tightened around Riley's neck and Jay-R's paw, squeezing them into a frenzy. The dogs were entangled in such a way that we couldn't free them easily, Jay-R wailing, and Riley choking as the collar squeezed his throat.

My dad had to get a bolt cutter to cut them apart, and I'll never forget the way the dogs lost their footing and fell to the deck floor. I couldn't get the image out of my mind for months. I worried each time they went near each other afterwards, terrified that somehow, they would get tangled again and that I wouldn't be able to separate them.

The dogs went back to their old routine of bickering and bantering, and I had to stop myself from fearing them being together. There was a gravitational pull that kept them in each other's peripheral vision, and deep down, I didn't want to separate them. Riley and Jay-R reminded me of a tamer version of my siblings and me. We only ever came to blows a few times that I can remember, pushing or kicking when we were young enough to not seriously damage each other. We mostly kept to ourselves as we got older unless we were yelling at each other.

I wanted to avoid my brother Aaron when his face went red and stay away from my sister Ella when she came home from a sports game she won and showed me, without meaning to, that

she was better than me at living. We kept our distance, but the dogs, as cranky as they could be to each other, liked to share the same air. I envied them.

The dogs attacked with their teeth, and my siblings and I devoured each other with our words or our silent contempt. We swallowed resentment willingly and used it against each other when we took the time to sit down and talk. The dogs were different, better. They wouldn't share food but could drink out of the same water bowl. They used to play together too, but that stopped when Riley outgrew Jay-R.

They later became agreeable roommates and mostly kept to themselves and came together to sleep and relax. When the dogs annoyed each other to the point of drawing blood, I got a feeling in my chest, a jagged hole. Riley was over thirty pounds bigger than Jay-R, and I feared that he would go for Jay-R's head and tear it off. My brother yelled and threatened Riley each time the dogs fought, blaming him because he was the bigger dog. Jay-R always started the fights, but Riley was guilty in my brother's eyes.

I found that judgement grossly unfair and hypocritical of my brother. Aaron was bigger than me and my mom, but when he was angry, he got in our faces and towered over us without provocation. I wonder now if seeing a large dog like Riley fighting against a smaller opponent reminded Aaron of his own actions. Maybe by wanting to punish Riley, he was trying to punish himself.

For all the posturing and canine stare downs, the dogs didn't seriously hurt each other much, and when one was sick or injured, the other was usually there, acting as a comfort pillow to lean on. Jay-R once got heatstroke on a warm spring afternoon, and he had to stay at a veterinarian hospital for almost a week. The medical bill was staggeringly high.

My dad used his credit card, and we made sure to never let Jay-R stay outside for too long at once again. My mom didn't complain about the hospital bill, Aaron didn't act out, and I didn't stay in my room all day thinking that the world was out to take away everything that I loved.

~

When they became seniors, Riley got kidney and liver problems and bad arthritis in his hips, and Jay-R started to go blind and deaf. Jay-R liked to roam the kitchen and the hallways, walking like he was in a trance. My mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and dementia around this time, and she started mirroring Jay-R's noisy walks throughout the house.

My mom was the only one in the family to ever get Alzheimer's. She was sick with diabetes and a host of other medical problems, but Alzheimer's felt like the final period ending her story. The family didn't talk about it often, but we couldn't ignore it. Alzheimer's lived in everything she said and everything she did.

I could hear both my mom and Jay-R roaming around the house at all hours of the day and night, making strange and desperate noises like there was something caught in their clenching throats. They scared me because their noises didn't sound safe or human.

Riley would be on his orthopedic bed, watching them move but unable to lift himself without help. He grew mean during the day towards Jay-R, growling when he walked too close to him. Jay-R, lost in whatever there was controlling his mind, never seemed to notice the barred teeth or the rumbling growls.

The changes in their personalities chilled the house. My dad gave the dogs more table scraps to comfort them, and our former talks on the dog's crazy antics changed to solemn discussions on how much medicine we could give them without accidentally overdosing them. I

was older then, old enough to clench my anxiety in my hands, squeeze its messy insides into juice, and pour it down the drain. I could be to my dogs what they had been to me during my bad years—comfort and safety.

I went to Japan for a semester abroad, thought about staying for a year, but came back for my dogs and my mom after one semester. My mom and the dogs were too old and frail, my dad overwhelmed and frustrated. I'm glad that I returned when I did. Riley died barely two months after I came home. He was thirteen years old and died in the vet's office, comfortable on a big orange blanket with sweets to warm his belly before the vet euthanized him. I stroked his back as he died.

Jay-R died less than a month after Riley. He was fifteen and died on the kitchen floor. He couldn't get up or go to the bathroom anymore, and I kept him warm and fed him pieces of Wendy's hamburgers before the traveling vet arrived and euthanized him. My parents watched from the living room, my brother, with his head down, stood behind the kitchen table.

My dogs were both dead, the dogs who helped me confront my anxiety or stayed by my side while I was buried underneath it—the dogs who I had loved for more than half my life. I kept their pictures, toys, and collars in my room, and I smelled their collars whenever I needed a dose of the happy past.

I thought there was nothing left to talk about with my family after they died, nothing to hold onto. A link was severed, the buzz of disconnection ringing in my ears. The house grew quieter without them, only my mom's solo steps leaving echoes in the house. I was relieved that my dogs were at peace and free of pain, but I hated the silence and that large part of me that still wanted to resurrect them even at the cost of their comfort.

My mom would die barely a year after the dogs, but by then, I had already tasted and swallowed the breeze of death on my tongue. I already started my journey through my thoughts on life and death. The disbelief that I couldn't plan ahead and prepare for death's arrival tore me down, one outburst of overwhelming grief coming out at night when no one could hear me cry.

### My Routines Like Scripture

Before I went to Japan for a semester abroad, my hematologist told me that I might have leukemia and that traveling would be unwise. The nurse who always pricked my finger to check my white blood cell count said I could catch a cold on the plane ride that could be detrimental to my health. She severed the flow of our one-sided conversation after that warning and wiped the blood off my finger with an alcohol wipe.

I thanked her when she told me that I could go back to the waiting room and that my hematologist would see me shortly. She didn't mention the dangers of planes or colds anymore after that, and with each visit and finger prick, we would talk about my classes or her new puppy who she doted on like a favored grandchild. We didn't talk about cancer again.

Leukemia was a bitch, and I didn't have the time or the patience for it. I applied to study in Wakayama Japan weeks before my doctors discovered that my white blood cell count was much lower than normal. My anxiety made me fear death ever since I was a child, and I struggled to keep the possibility that I might get cancer and die under my heel.

Going to Japan had been a dream of mine since I was a teenager who saw traveling to Japan as the green light proof that I could shed my anxiety like reptile skin. I thought that like baby teeth, my anxiety would fall out of the bleeding spaces in my gums and that I would become a strong woman if I traveled far away from home.

I was going to Japan regardless of what my hematologist thought, though my determination to leave my bedroom and my country for six months felt like an attack on my mental health. I thrived on following routines as though they were scripture to appease my anxiety, but I had tear up my routines if I wanted to successfully get to Japan.

I had a bone marrow biopsy before I left the country, but I wouldn't get the results until weeks after I settled down in Wakayama. I accepted that because I had to accept it. Cancerous cells found in my bone marrow could break me to dust, but I couldn't dwell on it obsessively. I had to focus only on Japan.

I put my medical records in a folder that I safely packed in my luggage, keeping them within reach but out of sight. When I finally rolled my luggage into Logan Airport in Boston and prepared to board my flight, I awakened to the sounds and smells around me—to the anxiety that lurked underneath the edge of the composure I convinced myself I wouldn't let go.

~

The first and only long-distance trip that I took by myself before going to Japan was when I went to the Japanese Embassy in Boston Massachusetts to pick up my visa. I went with a friend a few months prior to fill out the application, but I decided to retrieve it alone. If I couldn't accomplish a simple forty-five-minute trip to the capital of my own state, how could survive a semester in Japan without some divine intervention?

I packed Ritz crackers and Ginger Ale for the trip in case I got hungry or motion sick. I didn't get motion sick often as an adult, but I also wasn't used to being away from the driver's seat once I got my license, my stomach as stretchable as silly putty when I was in the back or passenger seat.

My dad dropped me off at the closest train station so that I could take a train to Boston. He couldn't drive into the city because he was elderly, and I couldn't drive because I was afraid: driving in major cities wasn't a part of my routine. The potentially dangerous and hazardous streets of the city were like radioactive warning signs flashing before my eyes.

My routines were simple and safe—come home immediately after school, eat the same meals every day with exceptions for fast food and extra dessert, work the same shifts at work but never on a day off because I needed at least twenty-four hours' notice to make changes in my routine. Planning things in advance was also important to me, but that didn't alleviate my anxiety at the prospect of driving in unknown areas.

My dad made me promise to call him when I reached Boston and waited in the car until my train came and took off with me on it. I was twenty-six years old then, but I was also my dad's youngest child, the one who from middle school to my late teenage years struggled to be a functioning human in society. I think he still saw me as that girl who always ran to her bedroom or the bathroom when the simple things in life chewed her to pieces.

Maybe he still saw me as the young girl who sat quietly in the passenger seat when he drove her to weekly counseling appointments or when he picked her up from school when the school bathroom didn't protect her enough anymore.

As an adult, I learned to drive myself from town to town and could take the highway and venture out to new areas if I studied the directions for at least a day or two beforehand. I could get places without my dad, but I didn't like worrying him. My dad thought that Boston was a dangerous city, and Japan was something else entirely.

Japan was as far away from home as it could be, and places far away always had dangerous edges if I went by myself. My family and I only ever traveled to Maine and New Hampshire, two neighboring states, to visit my dad's sister or to go to the amusement parks Story Land and Santa's Village when I was a child. We went to Disney World once, but my dad stayed home while his wife and children enjoyed teacup rides and roller coasters in Florida.

We never traveled anywhere new or different, and going to a foreign country was as new and different as my parents could conceive. My dad didn't try to prevent me from going to Japan, but I knew he was going to worry until the moment I returned home safely. I didn't tell him this, but I worried too and quite a lot. I worried that my plane would crash into the ocean or that murderers and human traffickers would capture me in Japan.

I read too many horror stories about how black people were treated in Japan, and as much as I told myself that didn't happen to every black person in Japan, I still feared the heat of racism sticking to my back. I feared that my anxiety would lay eggs inside my brain and make my new life in Japan feel like a terrible parasite that I willingly gave to myself.

~

The plane rides went smoothly from Boston to Los Angeles and from Los Angeles to the Kansai International Airport in Osaka, Japan. There was no turbulence or nosedive descents into a saltwater grave, but I never left my seat on either flight even after having many cups of cranberry juice.

I originally thought of starving myself for the entire trip to prevent upset stomach and having to go to the bathroom. I eventually ate and drank, but I never moved from my seat to relieve myself. Going to the bathroom would require me to get up, walk down an aisle where people could stare at me, and go into a bathroom that might smell like diarrhea. I didn't want to get blamed for any lingering bad smells, so I stayed put and silent with the taste of cranberry juice on my tongue and with beef stew warming my stomach.

I arrived in Japan around nine at night and got on a bus that would take me to Wakayama. The bus seats were more comfortable than the plane seats, and I took comfort in the red stop buttons that glowed above my head. I looked out the window and at the shops and signs in large

Japanese characters that I hardly had the time to read as the bus zoomed past them. I wasn't in America anymore, but I didn't just acknowledge that I was truly in Japan as I looked out the window. I felt how Japan entered me and how I, in turn become a part of it.

Japan came to me at the right time when I was a teenager who had nothing to do but stay at home and eat and watch TV with my dogs when my anxiety kept me immobilized. Back then, I only had one friend who I barely spoke to and constant therapy sessions and meetings with the school board to discuss my frequent absences. Discovering Japan—the language, music, and TV, gave me something to look forward to, and I wouldn't let any of Japan's essence bleed out of my life.

The bus dropped me off at a bus stop in Wakayama city after eleven pm, and I had to cross a street alone with my luggage. I passed an open supermarket called Messa on the way, and Messa and one apartment building were the only things that stood between me and my dorm. My dorm looked like a giant white toaster, and I marveled that I wouldn't have to travel far to go grocery shopping. I didn't know it then, but I was already making plans and new routines follow.

I rang the bell of the international dorm and waited for the student who was supposed to let me in and show me to my room. A boy opened the door for me and helped me with my luggage. He was from China but gave himself a Japanese name and spoke to me in English. I was hot, sweaty, and my wrists hurt carrying my luggage, but I felt more calm than nervous meeting a new person. The boy stood so close to me that he could probably smell the airport, bus, and my stress sweat mixed into one, offensive odor.

I talked to the boy and somehow didn't feel like an outdated robot. I used to hate my voice as a kid and how my words sounded ugly coming out of my mouth. My voice too high, panicked, and noticeably anxious to anyone close enough to hear me try to speak. I still feel, at

times, that my voice gives away everything about me and that I'm better off letting others speak for me. But I didn't have the option to stay quiet on my first night in Japan or on the next days, weeks, and months to come. I had to speak for myself.

~

I didn't talk to my older siblings much about my plans because we barely talked, all of us living separate lives. My brother Aaron still lived with me and my parents, but he mostly stayed downstairs. I didn't speak with my sister Ella much since she moved out of the house with her boyfriend and two children a few years earlier.

Ella was a working mom, a girlfriend, and a woman in the beginning stages of a new life. I felt like I was only an anxious girl—a girl who was determined to make changes in her life but often got tangled up in fear and anxieties and let time pass her by. I felt like my sister was far ahead of me and that she carried on the traditions of the women in my family.

Looking back now, I think my desire to be just as good as my sisters also influenced my decision to go to Japan. All my sisters were in relationships and had children in their early twenties. My mom was married at eighteen and had three children in less than five years. I was twenty-six, single, and childless. Going to Japan would prove that I could do something extraordinary too, and that I didn't have to have children to be seen as a successful woman.

My mom knew that going to Japan was one of my dreams, but I don't think that she believed that I would ever get there or that my anxiety would take a step back and let me pass. She worried about my safety being in a foreign country and tried to persuade me to stay home by reminding me that a Japanese soldier hurt her uncle in World War II. My mom Alzheimer's and dementia often made her say bizarre things, but she seemed so earnest and comfortable in her reality when she talked about my uncle.

She didn't get defensive or bewilderingly confused and heartbroken like when she claimed my dad slept next to women who only she could see. Or when she said we weren't living in our home anymore and that nobody could stop her from going home. I could try to reason with her about her other delusions, but her uncle was not a delusion. Maybe that's why my mom wasn't defensive when she warned me about Japan, and I told her that she was overreacting.

I needed to go to Japan because we were both sick in different ways. I was sick pretending that I wasn't worried about cancer or that I could deteriorate on the inside like my mom seemed to be doing—sick with worry that my time was running out, and that if cancer didn't get me, my incessant anxiety and my mom's impending death would skin me raw and kill me.

My dad would later get the results of my bone marrow biopsy and tell me over the phone that I didn't have leukemia, and I would feel a strange mixture of nonchalance, relief, and anger. I tried to reassure myself that I didn't have cancer as I went about my life in Japan because I felt alright. That's how I always lived. I needed proof that I could see with my eyes or feel with my fingers to believe in something terrible and unavoidable.

I didn't have leukemia, but that fear of depleting time, falling behind, and my almost frantic need to banish my anxiety and prove that I could do things would stay with me while I was in Japan. I pushed myself but to a degree that I could handle. I took public transportation and went to my classes every day. I signed up for trips that I wouldn't have signed up for back home, hung out with friends, and called home once a week. I didn't worry about constantly checking in with my family because I didn't want to. Japan wasn't meant to be stressful. It was supposed to be relief.

Having my own space away from family gave me more responsibilities and confidence, and I hoped that my family could see a change in me and how I let my body speak for me. I Skyped with my parents, my dogs, and my brother Aaron every Sunday, telling them about my days and how I was surviving just fine.

Nobody tried to hurt or kill me, and I wasn't a victim of a hate crime in Japan. People stared at me, but they also talked to me, greeted me, and no one ran away from the sight of me or refused to sit next to me on the subway. I hoped that my parents' fears for me dwindled not just every Sunday, but every moment that I was away from them—just like my own fears continued to shrink to crumbs in my hands each morning that I opened my eyes in Japan.

~

Wakayama was America or America was Wakayama. In many ways, that was true, and in many more, it was not. Wakayama smelled like fresh air and nature trails though there were more buildings and concrete where I lived in Wakayama City. It reminded me of my hometown back in America, the town of cranberry bogs, where people held doors open for strangers and smiled. Very few people rode bikes back home, but there were a lot of people in Wakayama who rode their bikes no matter the weather.

Buses were relatively cheap and convenient, and I rode a bus to school every day in Wakayama. I didn't think that I would like to take public transportation in Japan because I would be the passenger, the one dependent on the bus driver to keep me safe and bring me where I needed to go. But I grew to love how being quiet on the bus was required and how not sitting in the driver's seat allowed for a different form of comfort.

The bus trips were nothing like when I was a kid taking a bus to and from school. I hated the steel walls, bumpy roads, and endless stops where I couldn't get off if I needed to catch a

breath. But I never needed to press the red stop button in Japan and dash off to breathe. People stared at me every time I got on the bus, but it didn't affect me as much as I thought it would.

I didn't like the stares but reasoned with myself that it was normal and that my European friends in Wakayama also got stared at every time they left the dorm. I continued to leave my room and walk the streets of Wakayama, ride on buses and trains, and walk into stores and expose myself to looks every day. I thought that, with each outing, I handled it well because I had no choice. But I handled it not only because I had to, but because I could.

I did make new and comforting routines in Japan. I went to Messa, the grocery store, every afternoon and night for my meals. I went Lawsons convenience store as soon as I got my electricity and water bill and stood in line with other Japanese men and women to pay it. I went to class every day and took a bus to the train station and then walked for twenty minutes from the station to my university.

I always had lunch with two British girls and an Australian girl. I hung out with them outside of class at least a few times a month by going to the mall or museums, and I Skyped with my best friend in America every Saturday night. I met up with Japanese students once a week for a cultural exchange program and worked at a small English school five minutes away from my dorm. I helped adults practice their English, and I made the equivalent of almost twenty US dollars an hour.

I see now what I couldn't see in those months of tutoring. Those sessions that I thought were merely a way to earn money awakened something in my voice box. Helping someone express themselves strengthened my own words and gave me confidence.

Trips to world heritage sights, temples, and traditional dinners were always available, and I made them a less frequent part of my routine. I went on a bus survey trip once with three men I

never met before. My university asked if I would be willing to go on an overnight trip to help evaluate the ease with which English speakers could read directions in English.

Two men who worked for the city of Wakayama drove me and a Chinese male student all around Wakayama for an entire day. We went to temples, tourist attractions, rural towns, and world heritage sights. We went to dinner at the end of the day, stayed overnight at a hotel, and took a bullet train back to Wakayama city in the morning. I want to say that my decision to go on the trip alone was made possible only by my courage, bravery, or stupidity, but that would be disingenuous.

I already backed out of one trip to stay with a host family for a weekend because I feared bugs and unfamiliar bedrooms. If I didn't go on another trip that I promised to take, I would look terrible. Unreliable. The one American, making lies and not keeping her word. I packed my backpack, took a bus to a convenience store in another part of Wakayama, and met up with the three men.

When I think of that trip now, I think of my dad. He didn't want me to go on the trip with three strangers, and I wonder how he felt when I was journeying so far up the mountains in Wakayama that my ears rung. My sister Sam once told me that when she was younger, my parents used to scare her about the dangers of faulty seatbelts and getting into terrible crashes. Would my dad have worried about my seatbelt snapping apart or wrapping around me like a boa constrictor while the car crashed or fell over the mountain top?

I hope he didn't feel that way because whenever I look back on that trip, I remember how even motion sickness and popping ears didn't diminish the wonder I felt when I left imprints of my footsteps across rural Wakayama—the joy I inhaled when I got back into the car and traveled to more destinations to view, discover, and leave more proof of my existence behind.

~

I was unhappy during the final hours of my time in Japan. I didn't want to go home, and I almost cried. I loved my family and missed my dogs, but I feared returning to them. I would return to aging dogs who could die faster than I could blink, and my mom's Alzheimer's and dementia wouldn't be the only thing that would greet me at the front door.

My mom would be almost completely deaf then, falling all the time, combative, and so consumed with her beliefs and her delusions that she wouldn't just feel like a woman who wasn't my mother. She would feel like a stranger who scared me and made me yearn for the freedom of Japan where I lived alone.

I didn't know what coming home would mean for me or how I would relearn to live with my family again. I was leaving behind the proof that I could overcome my anxiety and accomplish something new and outside of my comfort zone. I shed my skin in Japan in a way, and I feared my old skin regenerating and stretching over my bones.

The plane rides home were long, and I drank a lot of cranberry juice again. I scrolled through my phone and looked over a picture of me standing before a shrine and a waterfall at Kumano-Kodo, a Japanese world heritage site. One of the men I went on the bus survey trip with took the picture for me.

Looking at it now, I see myself as I was. I am wearing the outfit I wear almost every day in Japan—a white hat, a black and purple jacket, and a white scarf. My hands are safely tucked in my pockets. My smile isn't overly large, but it is content and genuine.

I feel many things when I look at the picture now. I mourn, but I also feel happy. I feel hope.

### Anxiety Is in My Bloodstream

Eight months have passed, and I still haven't visited my mom's grave. She died in a hospital, in a bed of white blankets that kept her warm as roasting marshmallows when she was alive. Dead, the blankets covered her and held her down like a rusty anchor, fusing her into the last bed she would ever feel beneath her failing body. She wore a clean hospital gown that protected her modesty when she passed away.

When she was alive, she liked to wear ratty nightgowns that showed the outline of her breasts, her brittle ankles and weak calves exposed to the heated bedrooms and chilly hallways in our home—nightgowns stained with dinner, secret dessert, diet soda, and blood—blood from the thousands of times she pricked her fingers to test her sugar levels.

I immortalized two of her nightgowns and wore the purple one as a second layer of skin to keep me warm in my grief during the one time I allowed myself to cry for her. I wore my mom and myself as one grieving person, her nightgown protecting me from my anger and remorse, my guilt that she's not here with me anymore. My guilt that I wasn't there when her heart stopped, when she took her last breath, or when her face was still soft and white with wisps of facial hair that I loved to pull on as a child.

Her face was frozen in a waxy, yellow photo of death when my dad and I went to tell her our goodbyes. The false teeth that she took such care in fitting into her mouth were missing and her mouth was wide open in accusation as if to question the fairness of her mortality and why I wasn't there with her in the end.

I promised her that I would visit her again at her future gravestone, but I haven't. I lied to her like I found myself doing many times during the last few months of her life—during the last few years of her life if I'm being honest with myself. I still haven't visited her for many reasons.

I am anxious. I am guilty—guilty that I let excuses and anxiety keep me away from my mom before, during, and after her death.

~

The hands of death have only brushed by me and grabbed someone connected to me, sparsely throughout the years. Both my grandmothers died when I was a teenager, and I only saw them occasionally. I'm not sure if I loved them. A friend's brother died in a car accident, and a girl I once knew hanged herself. I used to have her funeral card on my mirror, but I threw it away after a few years. It felt disrespectful to take it down, like I was throwing her away. But I couldn't bear to look at her every day any longer.

My biological mother died of a drug overdose when I was thirteen. I never met her, and I didn't mourn for her. I went to her grave because my mom wanted me to go, but my biological mother was just the stranger who gave birth to me. I used to cry in bed as a child just thinking about the horror of unavoidable death, of my parents leaving me so they could go to heaven.

My parents were in their fifties, and looked, to my young eyes, ready to die at any time. I didn't know how much time they had left with me, and I believed that I had to protect them from death. Child me would have killed me now, the twenty-eight-year-old failure, for how I wasn't there to pull our mom to the safety line separating the living from the dead. I know now that I can't vanquish death, but I still feel a hollow wound in my chest.

My mom was only seventy-six when she died, and I believed that the Alzheimer's, dementia, diabetes, liver problems, watermelon stomach, and all her other ailments could be managed. She was supposed to live until her late nineties, and I had promised to give her at least two grandchildren by the time I was thirty-five.

When I was younger, I wanted to have a lot of kids. I'm not sure if I still want kids anymore as I enjoy having time to do what I want and prefer dogs over babies. But I still remember how I always pictured my mom being in the delivery room with me, holding my hand and helping me through the delivery like she couldn't with any of her other adopted and biological daughters.

My mom complained that her daughters denied her that gift, and I promised her that I wouldn't shut the door on her when I was ready to have a child. I don't know why my sisters didn't want her with them when they gave birth, but my mom would be with me where she belonged.

I also promised my mom that I would graduate from college soon and be the first one of her children to have a college degree—my degree a middle finger to the anxiety of my youth that tormented me until I dropped out of school at sixteen. My mom would share my success, and I would financially provide for her and my dad. She only had to do one thing in return for me. All she had to do was live.

~

I didn't fulfill my promises or keep my plans in line, but my mom did get something she desperately wanted before she died. The family who rarely visited her gathered around her bedside and took turns holding her hand and telling her that they loved her. We were like one, big family and mom would have smiled ear to ear seeing her immediate and extended family forming a protective circle around her, massaging her scalp, and rubbing her cold feet.

My two older brothers stayed in my mom's hospital room so long that I could smell them before I saw them. My four older sisters who I rarely saw stretched and contorted their bodies to get as close to my mom as they could. My aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews were so present

that I could see them even with my eyes closed. I was surrounded by people, and even the air I breathed was too congested.

Everyone was kind and hopeful for my mom's recovery, but my anxiety woke with a roar, a shout of indignant rage, and I retreated to the far corner and bit my lips raw and silent. I was exposed but absent in the family's presence, and I let myself go quiet and invisible like I always felt during family gatherings when I was a child.

My symptoms burst open—aching pressure in my shoulders, in my throat, upset stomach, heartburn, tingling all over my body. The cold sensation of a dark shadow hovering over my head with monster claws pinching the back of my neck.

The warmth of adrenaline battled against the coldness in my bones, and I couldn't turn my back on my family. I didn't like people standing too close to me or unbreakable crowds, my brain setting off warnings to flee for survival. Anxiety tackled my drive, my logic, my tolerance. I wanted to tell my family to fuck off, to scream in their faces—*fuck you for invading and fuck you for showing me how my anxiety will never leave me alone when I'm around people.*

My mom was dying, but my anxiety took over my thoughts. It became my focus as family members crowded around my mom's hospital bed, and I was mad that my anxiety wouldn't leave me alone during this critical time. My family's presence shouldn't have even registered in my mind, but I couldn't ignore them or pretend that they didn't exist.

I wanted them to leave so that I could breathe easier and because they weren't a part of the pack anymore. My sisters didn't contact us much and everyone else were like old substitute teachers I vaguely remembered. They didn't support the pack structure, and they didn't belong anywhere near the dying matriarch or the grieving patriarch.

My dad was the alpha who took on the burdens and heartbreak when taking care of my mom at home. He stayed silent when she accused him of forsaking their marriage and keeping her locked up in the house. He calmed my brother Aaron who paced around the kitchen with jerky movements, curses and acidic words bursting from his lips, distraught over the deterioration of our mom.

Aaron had better control over his anger problems in his thirties, but he couldn't keep quiet when my mom's delusions acted up. His anger didn't scare me like it did when I was a child or a teenager, but I retreated when he fought with my mom and even when he didn't. I immersed myself in studying, reading, writing, exercising to stay healthy, and anything that allowed me to be in my room for long periods of time.

I was convinced that I was doing what I had to do for the future I promised my mom, and the need to push forward and succeed kept my door sealed shut. I hated myself and my actions when my mom was in the hospital, and I tried to make up for lost time, making promises to bring her to Disneyland if she just opened her eyes.

I went once or twice to the hospital early in the morning to be alone with her. I could have kept my position during the day and late hours of the night, but my anxiety scoffed at that suggestion because my family was always there. I had to disperse to keep my feet moving one in front of the other, steady as my heartrate should have been.

My eldest sister Brie and her husband were there when my mom died around two or three in the morning—when my dad and I were home and in our beds, clinging to hope but not daring to stay with her in case our hopes were crushed.

I convinced myself that I was ready for my mom's death months before it happened. The mom I grew up with already died silently, and this new mom didn't smell, look, or act the same anymore. This mom was thin and as breakable as a porcelain doll, emotional like a child, and always complaining.

My mom was always a short woman, but she seemed even shorter and small, her face so thin and hollow with thinning black hair that she refused to stop dyeing. Her lips were always chapped, mouth always open to talk or complain. She complained that I didn't spend enough time with her and that I was taking too long to graduate—that nobody wanted to take her out and do things with her.

The mom who I slept next to every night for the first seven years of my life was gone, the mom who braided my hair and went to all my dance recitals and sports games without fail, dead. The mom who hated gory movies but spent my sixteenth birthday watching a cheesy slasher with me at the movie theatre was forever out of my reach.

I told myself that if I could handle the death of my dogs, I could handle hers. My dogs were my lifeline, and they let me be myself and were happy to be by my side. My mom was happy to be with me too, and maybe that was the problem. She always wanted to be with me when all I wanted to do was be alone and work for the successful life that I promised us.

I told her this every time I denied her a hug or a request to lie down together in bed. I was an anxious introvert, but she was an extrovert, and I deprived her of her needs with the excuse that I was always busy and always anxious. Always anxious—that is true. I've come to accept that I will never get rid of my anxiety. Anxiety is in my bloodstream. It keeps my heart beating and it keeps my thoughts moving in every foreseeable direction.

I will never be without anxious thoughts or fears, fears that I'm going to fail at life, get cervical and breast cancer or leukemia. Fears that my throat will permanently close and that I'll choke to death on all the foods that tear apart my stomach. Fears that someone on the internet will find my address and murder me because predators can sense fear just by looking at a person's name on a screen.

I am always anxious about something, but I see now that I still could have shown her more of my love and given her more of my time in a way my anxiety could handle.

~

My mom started to calm down the last few months of her life. She no longer argued that we were living in the wrong house or that friends who had died were in the driveway, waiting to take her out. She seemed happier. Freer.

I came home from work one evening and was surprised to see an ambulance in the driveway. I looked in and saw my mom on a stretcher, talking to a first responder. She seemed alert and in good spirits, and my dad said that she wanted to go to the hospital because she wasn't feeling well.

My dad looked unconcerned as he said that to me, his back hunched over with the weight of years of blue-collar work and taking care of my mom wearing him down. He always went with my mom to every doctor's appointment and hospital visit, but he was tired that night and wanted to go to bed.

He planned on visiting my mom in the morning to talk to her, but he didn't know that she would be unconscious by then and would never wake up again. It bothers my dad that he didn't say goodbye to her when the ambulance took her away that night, and it bothers me that I don't remember the last thing that I said to my mom.

I wrote my mom a poem and read it at her funeral. The poem was called *Waving Hello*, and my dad cried when I read it to him. That was the only time I saw him cry for her or anyone else. He was experienced in recovering from the deaths of the people he loved, and he always moved on and adapted.

He was calm and collected in the hospital while my mom was slipping away from us. He let family members bring him food while he sat rigid, tapping his feet, and looking like he wanted to flee. I know that he was happy that my mom was getting one of her wishes, even if it became a dying wish in the end.

The family stayed together in the hospital and then for the funeral preparations and the funeral service. My three oldest sisters flittered around the graveyard like hosts and talked to people I never met before. My dad's cousin who visited every few years without announcement came with her son. Her son told me that he liked my poem.

My Auntie Jana came with all her adult children. Her sons and grandsons reminded me of a high school gang—loitering, smoking in a group, and moving with casual swagger.

My mom's parents and other deceased relatives were buried near the spot where her gravestone would go, and one of my Auntie Jana's sons warned my sister Ella not to step on his father's grave. The other son stuck close to his children or walked off on his own, smoking, and wiping the tears from his eyes.

A hole was already dug for my mom, and I looked down into where her casket would be lowered as my sisters and my dad stood by me. We talked about our fear and our regrets, how I promised my mom so much but gave her so little. We talked about special memories of our mom that were so different because we had two separate moms. Mine was a loving but elderly woman

who walked with a cane and then got sicker with time—theirs a vibrant young woman who did things I never thought she could do.

My anxiety was stable during the funeral and the graveyard service. It let me breathe, let me speak before a large group of people, and be close to them in our shared grief. It let me think back on my accusations and fury at my siblings' presence at my mom's bedside and come to a realization. They were my mom's children as well, and I—like them—spent time away from her.

We all left her at one point, sought to forge our own lives, and while I went back to her, they grew their own families or lived their own independent lives. They weren't wrong to do so, and I couldn't hold their absence against them. We would break off again after the funeral and go back to the way things used to be, but during the service, the family was all together.

~

I will visit my mom's grave one day. I will finish everything that I swore to do or make new aspirations as I continue to grow. I will do things at my own pace as my anxiety continues to play games with me and makes me unravel when my plans fall apart.

I feel something different now mixed inside the carnage of my anxiety. I have my doubts, my fears of people and the outside world, and this internal clock ticking in the back of my head. The urgency is still there, the guilt and anxiety, but it's quieter and there's also positive determination and less of a feeling that I'm failing my mom by not being where I want to be yet.

When my anxiety controls my limbs and I have to lie in bed, I don't assault myself with insults. I remember the night I cried for my mom and put on her stained nightgown—how even though she wasn't with me anymore, she would never be too far away.