

**FINDING FATHERS:
NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY IN THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

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“...historians have not yet tried to analyze and grasp the underlying structure of consciousness which both governs and informs oral history interviews. Although many oral historians have discussed the necessity of undertaking such an analysis, few have tried.”

– Ron Grele, “Listen to Their Voices: Two Case Studies in the Interpretation of Oral History Interviews,” 213

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
CHAPTER ONE	17
Paula Marks	18
CHAPTER TWO	33
Kristen Richardson	35
CHAPTER THREE	45
Angel Martinez	46
CHAPTER FOUR	56
Bryan Whalen	58
Conclusion	70

“A life history is a living thing. It is a work in progress, in which narrators revise the image of their own past as they go along.”

– Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 56

INTRODUCTION

Sitting at my desk today, going over the things I planned to tell you, I tried to remember the ways I used to fit them together into a perfect little cause and effect narrative, and I wondered, again, about the other possible ways to tell this story.

The way it was told to me, my dad got hooked the first time he tried cocaine. But I didn't hear that version of the story until I was eleven, six years after the last time I saw him. And at that point, it was actually something of a relief. I had friends whose parents were divorced, so I knew “divorce” didn't necessarily mean one parent left forever. Addiction made so much more sense to me than the alternative possibility—that he had just stopped loving me, a misunderstanding that nevertheless continued to shape the way I related to the world for more than a decade after, and thoroughly solidified my lifelong obsession with the tangible power of stories.

He, I found out later, didn't know his dad either. His mother, my grandmother, a famous civil rights leader and pretty superb human being in every area except motherhood, had sent him off to be raised by nuns and simply never told him who his dad was. She, I found out just two years ago, when getting ready to write a version of this story for a friend, was one of eleven children and had also been sent away because her parents couldn't afford to raise her.

Sorting through the fragments of stories I picked up after he left, I started to assemble a timeline of my dad's life before and after me. The more I found out about him, the better I felt I understood his decision to leave, and his addiction:

He was weighted down by the other lives he'd lived before he met my mom—the name changes, the families he'd abandoned, the crimes he'd committed. I sincerely think he wanted to be a good dad, and in short bursts it seems like he really was; but I also think he carried this suspicion that something inside him was rotten and unlovable, which is pretty much the saddest thing I can think of. The first time I considered that possibility I was twelve, and since then I've wondered if his life would have been different if he'd had someone to confide in, someone to show the parts he thought were rotten, who would tell him they weren't rotten at all, just slightly fermented—like wine, or kimchi. I hope he finds that person. For reasons beyond general altruism or longing, reasons I can't fully understand, I hope someday he can forgive himself enough to come find me. Not even to be my dad, but to answer my questions; to tell me our story, to help me tell mine. So I'll no longer have to wonder and guess.

This story has grown with me, and changed. But even now, the version of the story I tell depends on the time and the day, and who's asking and why. Like Portelli, I think all stories do, but in particular stories like this one—those stitched from fragments of second-hand information with threads of conjecture—stories born from uncertainty, which is really what this project is all about.

In late December 2016, I caught the end of an interview with author Michael Lewis on NPR's *To The Point*. The topic of the episode was "The Year in (Fake) News," and Barbara Bogaev was subbing for the show's usual host, Warren Olney. At just over a month after the election that put President Donald Trump in office, the election that taught us all about confirmation bias and would later introduce us to the concept of "alternative facts," the question of the day—Why [are] so many of us are willing to believe unreasonable things?—carried special urgency.

Lewis was on tour with *The Undoing Project*, a book about a Nobel Prize-winning theory of the mind as told through the story of its founders, Israeli psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. And I was on winter break from Columbia's Oral History Master's program, driving around Los Angeles without anything that felt like a feasible thesis project.

At the time there were about seven ideas kicking around in my head, which I'd divided into two distinct categories: historically significant ideas, and ideas I was actually interested in studying. *Finding Fathers* was in the second category, along with every other idea that dealt with the way everyday people construct their life history narratives. From the onset of the program, I'd been interested in life history production as a *cognitive* if subconscious process of information-sorting and meaning-making. A lifetime of reckoning with the way new information about my father's story prompted changes in my own, left me with an acute awareness of the complications of life history production, and the potential value of information that had been left out of the primary account of history. But most of the works I'd read in my first semester with OHMA approached these concepts from within specific historical or social contexts, if at all, which made many of their insights difficult to generalize and apply elsewhere.

Interviewing people who had searched for their estranged fathers (the first and fundamental idea for this project) appealed in that it seemed to offer an opportunity to examine life history construction in more general terms. In early drafts of my pitch for this project, I explained that my narrators believed their fathers' absences had left "holes" in their life histories; that their searches might then logically be read as conscious efforts to "fill" those holes (or: construct life histories); and that focusing my interview sessions on those efforts would invite a thematic examination of that construction into the interview itself.

I'd already done two interviews for what I was then calling "my side project," but I still couldn't fully articulate its academic utility, and I struggled with the semantics of its central questions: What are people looking for when they go looking for their estranged fathers? What is the content of a story about absence? And how do we navigate the holes in our life history narratives?¹

"[People] will do almost anything to avoid uncertainty," Bogaev said, echoing a point Lewis had just made. I turned up the radio.

Forty years ago, Kahneman and Tversky authored a series of ground-breaking studies that changed our collective understanding about the decision-making process. Their experiments revealed the ways that the mind, which heretofore had been assumed rational, in fact, systematically erred when tasked with making judgments in uncertain situations. "Rather than think probabilistically about things that were naturally probabilistic," Lewis explained, "people

¹ My thesis advisor, Bill McAllister was the first to notify me that using the term "holes" was inappropriate because it implied life history narratives could be "whole." (Thanks, Bill!)

would tell stories that make them seem certain”—even when presented with evidence to the contrary.²

In the face of uncertainty, they concluded, “[n]arratives are stronger than facts.”³

Of course Lewis and Bogaev were talking specifically about the election—about our propensity to believe anything that confirms our existing worldview, and about the appeal of a candidate who claims to have all the answers to our problems—but just hearing the term “uncertainty” seemed to unlock a fundamental component of my project. I’d spent the last four months studying how people construct their life histories narratives, and somehow this was the first time I’d considered the psychological component of that production. It wasn’t “holes” my narrators confronted when searching for their fathers, it was narrative uncertainty.

I pulled over, scribbled some notes, and ordered *The Undoing Project* on my phone, in the parking lot of a Chase Bank.

Over the next two weeks, I read about the genesis of Kahneman and Tversky’s pioneering research on human judgment and fallibility. They believed the key to understanding the way something works was to study the mistakes it makes. For them, “[e]rror wasn’t merely instructive; it was the key that might unlock the deep nature of the mechanism” (129). So they studied error, and from it, derived three heuristics: availability; representativeness; and anchoring and adjustment. These fundamentally changed the discourse of economic and decision-making theory; prompted major shifts in the industries of military, education, aviation, medicine, government, and banking; and were credited for the powerful trend to defer to algorithms over

² I had already observed this impulse in my interviews, but I struggled to explain why it was happening.

³ Kahneman and Tversky, that is.

human intuition. But Kahneman and Tversky realized there were even broader implications to their work, and set out to share it with experts in other fields in the hope that their decisions could be improved by making them aware of their biases. Historians were among the first groups targeted.⁴

Like economics and sports recruitment, Kahneman and Tversky believed historical judgment is part of a broader class of processes involving the intuitive interpretation of data. But unlike the experts in those other fields, they believed the very job of the historian, “tak[ing] whatever facts [he] had observed (neglecting the many facts that [he] did not or could not observe) and mak[ing] them fit neatly into a confident-sounding story” (207), was also its chief occupational hazard.⁵ In 1972, Tversky addressed a group of historians at the University of New York at Buffalo on the subject:

All too often, we find ourselves unable to predict what will happen; yet after the fact we explain what did happen with a great deal of confidence. This “ability” to explain that which we cannot predict, even in the absence of any additional information, represents an important, though subtle, flaw in our reasoning. It leads us to believe that there is a less uncertain world than there actually is, and that we are less bright than we actually might be. For if we can explain tomorrow what we cannot predict today, without any added information except the knowledge of the actual outcome, then this outcome must have been determined in advance and we should have been able to predict it. The fact that we

⁴ At the time, greater interdisciplinary collaboration had prompted new criticism in academia, and a big push to make academic history more “useful.” In his essay, “For Those Condemned to Study the Past: Reflections on Historical Judgment,” Baruch Fischhoff notes that while there are four reasons to study the past, behavioral scientists (like Kahneman and Tversky) only concern themselves with one of them: the “develop[ment of] systematic knowledge about our world [...] that may eventually improve our ability to predict and control” (79). Notably, the second reason to study history (to create a group or national *identity*) wasn’t seen as particularly relevant to that other endeavor.

⁵ While many historians were calling for more statistical approaches to historiography (most notably, Lee Benson, whose collected essays *Toward the Scientific Study of History* was released earlier in 1972, the year Tversky addressed the historians at Buffalo), Kahneman and Tversky were quick to reply that “[p]eople are very good at detecting patterns and trends even in random data” (205).

couldn't is taken as an indication of our limited intelligence rather than of the uncertainty that is in the world (207-208).

Kahneman and Tversky went on to show that when faced with an inaccessible past, the mind arranged historical facts in order to make it feel less uncertain. They named this tendency “creeping determinism,” and decision analysts quickly responded by developing a simple (if unpopular) answer to it: ask decision makers (in this case, historians) to “make explicit the thinking that went into their decisions before they made them” (209).⁶ The system was imperfect, to be sure. And while it ultimately did little to help historians improve the way they evaluate data, it did at least prove effective in helping them separate historical information from historical invention, or, as we in oral history call it, “imagination.”

In his essay “Listen to Their Voices,” the former director of Columbia’s Center for Oral History Research, Ron Grele suggested the key to analyzing the underlying structure of consciousness that governs oral history interviews “lies in the imagination of [the narrator] and how he uses that imagination to construct a history” (222). Portelli echoed this idea in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, albeit using different slightly terms. He referred to it as “[t]he discrepancy between fact and memory” (26)—an imaginative in-between where we can access the *meaning* of the event, which is the very focus of our oral history research.⁷

⁶ From *The Undoing Project*: “When Richard Nixon announced his surprising visit to China and Russia, [Baruch] Fischhoff asked people to assign odds to a list of possible outcomes—say, that Nixon would meet Chairman Mao at least once, that the United States and the Soviet Union would create a joint space program, that a group of Soviet Jews would be arrested for attempting to speak with Nixon, and so on. After the trip, Fischhoff went back and asked the same people to recall the odds they had assigned to each outcome. Their memories of the odds they had assigned to various outcomes were badly distorted... [O]nce they knew the outcome, they thought it had been far more predictable than they had found it to be before, when they tried to predict it” (206).
⁷ “Indeed, if oral sources had given us ‘accurate,’ ‘reliable,’ factual reconstructions of the death of Luigi Trastulli,” he wrote, “we would know much less about it” (26).

But as clear as Grele and Portelli were about the value and meaning of this imaginative impulse in the oral history encounter, how exactly one might locate it was a lot less clear. Life history production, like all historical production, involves selecting and evaluating historical information from which narratives are built.⁸ So borrowing tactics from decision analysis, I reasoned, focusing our questions on *how* narrators source and use historical information to build their life histories, might help oral historians locate the imagination (or, historical invention) in the encounter—the necessary first step to analyzing the underlying structure of consciousness that governs oral history interviews. In the pages that follow, I offer both a formal proposal and demonstration of this practice.

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Before I go any further, I want to state that this methodology would be completely inappropriate for many oral history projects—particularly those focused on vulnerable populations, and populations facing cultural silence. The oral history encounter requires an atmosphere of safety and trust, which this does nothing to nurture. At best, this methodology offers an attempt to formalize a specific part of our practice within more securely equal encounters.

Moreover, because oral history work generally assumes people are experts in their own life histories,⁹ I understand that the idea of questioning narrators about particular details of that history seems a little strange. But my narrators offered at least a partial exception to that rule, which is why I was drawn to them in the first place.

⁸ All of which is done in the face of uncertainty, generated naturally when attempting to reconcile a past and present moment—more on this later.

⁹ That is, experts in their *experience* of history. (“Everyman his own historian,” no?)

Each of my narrators believed there was information about their lives being held just out of their reach; information they felt was not just desirable, but integral to a comprehensive expression their own identities. The absence of their fathers, and the uncertainty it generated in their life history narratives, cleared sites for conscious historical construction—for imagination—which could be excavated and analyzed within the interview itself.¹⁰

So, as my narrators recounted stories about their fathers, I questioned the details. I asked them: “How did you know?” “Who told you?” “Did they tell you that directly, or was it more of a vibe you got?” and so forth. And to the best of their abilities, they explained. My narrators had travelled to distant cities; conducted interviews and field work; and dug through archives of letters, journals and photos for historical information from which they could construct plausible stories about their past. They approached their life history construction the way Kahneman and Tversky said historians approach their work: “tak[ing] whatever facts [they] had observed (neglecting the many facts that [they] did not or could not observe) and mak[ing] them fit neatly into a confident-sounding story,” and they did so consciously, proudly.¹¹

But there were other moments in our sessions where the construction was not so conscious, moments where, in a single breath, my narrators perpetuated family mythologies with total confidence while admitting that pieces of the story didn’t quite add up. In one case, these

¹⁰ But why not study people who had been adopted? Or those with absent mothers? Since I was actually studying the imaginative impulse in the construction of life history narratives, I wanted to be sure my narrators had *some* historical information available to begin that process. And since clinically speaking, we never have to have physical contact with our fathers (mothers at least have to gestate and give birth), they have the capacity to exist as almost entirely imaginative figures in our life histories.

¹¹ My donor-conceived narrator talked me through a search that involved traveling to Canada, and cross-referencing the surnames of every med student, resident, and doctor at the university hospital in Edmonton, Alberta where she was conceived, during the four years when her sperm was most likely donated, against the surnames of third and fourth cousins she found across three different DNA sites.

narrative fallacies¹² started to present themselves as early as in my narrator’s response to my first (and perhaps most innocuous) question of the interview: *Would you tell me the story of how you got your name?*¹³

We discovered these sites together, and quite accidentally. Many of them were historically insignificant and emotionally uncharged, which ironically made them more interesting for me as a researcher. The oral history cannon is full of theories about how and why memory manipulates factual details and chronological sequences.¹⁴ While I don’t disagree with my predecessors, framing and analyzing life history narratives outside of a specific historical context convinced me of three things that may complicate their theories:

1. Memory is not the only impulse that distorts the past. The mind is a sense-making organ that constructs narratives to navigate a world full of uncertainty.¹⁵ So in addition to our current considerations for analyzing the space between historical

¹² A term coined by scholar / statistician Nassim Taleb to describe how flawed stories of the past shape our views of the world and expectations for the future.

¹³ She said: “My mom and dad were watching *Rocky III* in the movie theater, and the cast list was scrolling down. They saw the name ‘Paulo’—he was a sound designer or something—and my dad said, ‘What about that name?’ My mom was like, ‘We’re having a girl.’ And he said, ‘Then just change it to an a—Paula!’ ...I tried to find that sound designer but I haven’t found anyone who worked on *Rocky III* named ‘Paulo.’”

Later, when I followed up with her about it via text (to confirm that I’d checked and that nobody named “Paulo” worked on *Rocky III*, which made sense because it was released in 1982—almost three whole years before she was conceived), she said, “it may have been *Rambo* or *Rhinestone*—I’ll ask my mom.”

She later reported “My mom said it was just some Sylvester Stallone movie. I must have just assumed it was *Rocky*.” But why not *Rocky IV*, which was released the year she was born (albeit a few months after)? She couldn’t say. But with very minimal googling, I found her namesake: Mark de Paulo—Sylvester Stallone’s stunt double in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*.

¹⁴ In *Luigi Trastulli*, Portelli explains that the working-class people of Terni’s memory of the incident is manipulated to serve three major functions: symbolic, psychological, and formal—all specific to his analysis of the event.

¹⁵ In fact, the whole field of narrative psychology is based on the idea that narrative is the default mode of human cognition.

information and historical invention, I would like to submit that “narrative fallacies [also] arise inevitably from our continuous attempt to make sense of the world” (Kahneman, 199).¹⁶

2. While these inventions may not necessarily appear historically significant or emotionally charged, they nevertheless have the potential to reveal deep insight into a narrator’s consciousness. Whether or not that consciousness is able to be accessed and analyzed—by either interviewer or narrator—without fuelling more invention, is another issue altogether.
3. Our narrators may indeed be experts in their experience of history, but a life history narrative is constructed of more than just experiences. It’s a synthesis of experience and mythology and conjecture, shaped by culture and influence—which can make it hard to know exactly what we’re analyzing, unless we make a more concerted effort to distinguish between them.¹⁷

NOTES ON FORM AND MEANING

I have no doubt there are more compelling ways to tell the stories you’ll find in the chapters that follow. Good stories provide simple, compressed, coherent accounts of people’s actions and intentions, but this thesis isn’t necessarily concerned with telling *good* stories.

In lieu of a more formal explication of this approach, and because I do believe narratives are stronger than facts, I’ll offer an anecdote. After I’d finished my fieldwork and started transcribing the last of my interviews, I realized, entirely by accident, that all of my narrators had

¹⁶ From his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

¹⁷ Luisa Passerini calls this “accumulated subjectivity,” but I’m going to avoid the label for now, because it seems to imply a greater degree of subjective coagulation than some of my narrators exhibit.

had intimate relationships with either 12-step programs or formal support groups at some point in their lives. In two of my sessions, the narrator mentioned support groups as an aside; in another—the only session with a narrator I know personally—support groups didn't come up at all. And if my last narrator hadn't explicitly told me that storytelling was a huge part of Alcoholics Anonymous (which then cued me to read about the significant role it plays in all support groups), I wouldn't have even known why that information was critical to a formal analysis of these narratives.¹⁸ *Good* versions of those stories probably wouldn't have included that detail at all, but without it, I believe any formal attempt to analyze their structure would have been misdirected.

Luckily, *Finding Fathers* isn't focused on analysis, either—not yet, at least.¹⁹ For now, it focuses on the development and practice of a new methodology for locating what Ron Grele calls “the imagination” in the interview encounter, the crucial first step to a formal analysis of the historical perspectives on which the analysis is built. Each of the following chapters contains excerpts from different interview sessions, which have been ordered chronologically and edited to showcase this process while maintaining a necessary level of narrative coherence for the reader. Up to this point, I've mentioned my narrators' stories only in passing to illustrate specific theoretical points I make in the body of the introductory text. Moving forward, however, their stories will take center stage and my notes on form and function will be sequestered to footnotes.

While this introduction has weighed heavily on the theoretical side, I've tried to include details about the genesis of its methodology to emphasize that I recognize this too is part of an

¹⁸ 12-step and support groups teach a very specific style of storytelling that focuses on moments of transformation, forgiveness, and lessons gleaned from experience. So although the fact of this group work may seem extraneous to understanding the actions and intentions of three of these narratives, it is absolutely crucial to understanding their form.

¹⁹ This project lays groundwork for the book I will ultimately write about narrative uncertainty.

ongoing process of narrative construction—an attempt to formalize an idea that stems from a specific perspective of the world, informed by a specific experience of it: My dad left when I was 6, and I’ve spent the rest of my life inventing stories to make sense of that. I’ve also tried to show the limitations of that subjectivity, and of this project as a whole.

When Kahneman and Tversky observed a new flaw in human perception and judgment, they would test it on their colleagues—certified experts in logic, statistics, and rational thinking—to emphasize that the errors they observed weren’t merely traps for fools, but reflective of an innate and often subconscious function of human cognition. In this spirit, I’ve continued to share stories about my own experiences with conscious narrative construction, to demonstrate the fallibility of my own subjectivity, and elucidate some of the subtler observations I make in the primary interview sessions.

Although *Finding Fathers* should be read primarily as a methodological experiment, it is also a story, made up of many stories, with the aim of showing the function and challenges of stories.²⁰ The interviews that constitute the bulk of its pages reflect both an active historical construction and a collaborative excavation of the strands of information we use to weave together stories about our fathers, and about ourselves. It is a flawed, limited project, to be sure, but it is fuelled by the belief that while “certainty is bound to escape us, the search provides focus, shape, and purpose to everything with do” (Portelli, ix).

²⁰ A reference to *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Nassim Taleb’s introduction to narrative fallacy: “There is a contradiction; this book is a story, and I prefer to use stories and vignettes to illustrate our gullibility about stories and our preference for the dangerous compression of narratives.... You need a story to displace a story. Metaphors and stories are far more potent (alas) than ideas; they are also easier to remember and more fun to read” (xxvii).

“Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off.”

Anton Chekhov

CHAPTER ONE

There's a box under a bed in a storage room at my parents' house. I've never seen the box but I know what's inside.

Before my biological parents got married—a ceremony conducted by a justice of the peace and witnessed only by strangers—my maternal grandfather hired a private investigator to look into my dad’s history. He never told my mom about what he found, or even that there’d been an investigation at all. He just put everything in the box, and put the box in deep storage, for her to find someday—and she did, almost a decade after he died.

We’ve talked about it fewer than a handful of times, but I’ll never forget her muted horror when she found it. I still don’t know if she’s read through everything inside, but she’s told me bits of things. She told me my dad had been in the national guard, and deserted (she thinks that’s why he changed his name); and she told me the name of his biological father, which he himself never knew.

The topic of the box came up again last time I was home doing fieldwork. She offered to show it to me, but with a caution: “Whatever you think you know about him,” she said, “it’s worse.”

A long time ago, I decided not to go looking for my dad. I knew my mom didn’t want me to, that she thought he was dangerous; and I sensed that even my curiosity felt like some kind of betrayal. So I made peace with the idea of not knowing.

But the presence of the box opened up a new and seemingly inevitable line in my story. Like Chekov’s gun, quietly hanging on the wall, hovering just above the action, the box seems poised to blow and redirect the all of the players on stage.

Before I finish writing this book, I’m going to open the box.

PAULA MARKS, 32

MSW Candidate - Koreatown, Los Angeles, CA

Over the last two years, Paula Marks has confronted her own share of boxes. Her father left their home in Beverly Hills, California when she was 7, and when she finally found him again, nearly twenty years later, he was working at a storage unit in Salem, Massachusetts, with nothing to his name but some house plants, a yellow vintage bicycle, and 150 of cardboard boxes. He died four years later, surrounded by his boxes, in the VA housing she found for him.

Paula is one of my closest friends. We've known each other since we were 10, and I remember when she flew to Massachusetts to clean out his apartment. I remember she went through every single one of his boxes. "Looking for stories," she said. Or clues. Anything that would help her understand this man, her father, whom she had only just started getting to know.

She found that most of the boxes contained trash: old homework assignments and tests from college; newspapers; naked photos of ex-girlfriends; and textbooks for online business courses. Only four of them had stories, she told me. Journals and letters that she packed up and shipped back to her apartment in Los Angeles.

She hopes the things inside the boxes will form the basis of a book she's writing about her father, but she still hasn't looked at everything. I think she's scared, as I am, that in the end, none of the things she finds will help answer her questions or tell his story—or her story.

You'll notice the word "because" occurs frequently in this session. To me, the word signals an attempt to build a narrative from historical facts or events, which requires at least some imaginative effort and may be worth investigating. I treat other causal language (like "so" and "the reason why") in the same way. While not all of these moments are necessarily worthy of investigation, for the purpose of this project, I occasionally questioned these moments—particularly when Paula's explaining other people's actions. This transcript has been edited, but I've left a number of my questions in at the beginning, in places where the interview covers more innocuous territory, to show how the method I'm suggesting works.

Paula questions a number of details in the stories her parents told her over the years, but there are dozens of strange details she doesn't question. A formal analysis of this session might look at her patterns of questioning to see if the unquestioned details support a particular vision of the past that the questioned details do not.

January 10, 2017, 3pm

I grew up in Beverly Hills but my mom used to call it "the Slums of Beverly Hills" because there were apartments a block away from us. I actually hate that she would call it that.

There were apartments in the area, but we lived in an Orthodox Jewish community on a street with all houses. It was a great neighborhood! I actually had to go to Orthodox Jewish pre-school even though we weren't Orthodox because it was the closest thing to our house that my maid could walk me to. So I grew up having to pretend I was Orthodox.

I know your mom's house, and it's interesting that she characterized the neighborhood as the slums of Beverly Hills even though you had a maid who walked you to school every day. Did your maid live with you?

No.

She just came to walk you every day?

Yeah, well she'd clean the house and then she would walk me. At the time my dad was in and out so he would walk me sometimes, but my maid was like *the* person that walked me to school, until I went to high school.

You just said your dad was in and out—what did you mean by that?

When I turned five my parents divorced.

First of all, they got married because I was going to be born. That story has changed so many times. I've been told that they got married:²¹ before I was born; before my mom was pregnant; and then like just a few months ago, I was told they got married because I was conceived.

I don't know what the fuck the nature of their relationship was—it wasn't a relationship. [My dad] met my mom because he was renting a garage from her.

***In Beverly Hills?*²²**

In Beverly Hills. He was basically a nomad. He had just broken up with someone, and for whatever reason, he had two cars. One was a VW Microbus and one was a VW Bug, and he needed a place to store one of them. My mom had this garage and she wanted to charge him a lot to house [it] because she was single parenting my [half-]brother. And then I guess they got to talking.

***Your half-brother lived at home then?*²³**

My brother lived at home at the time, and he was going to college at UCLA. Or he was *about to* graduate high school / *going to go to college*.²⁴

²¹ She acknowledges the narrative revisions, but attributes them to ambiguous external forces.

²² This question was motivated by the seemingly strange prospect of someone choosing to rent a garage in one of the most expensive residential zip codes in the country.

²³ This question is motivated by a vision of history that seems inconsistent with the one we just saw: On the one hand, Paula's mother has a maid come to her house every day, and on the other, she's scheming for ways to make money.

²⁴ The question prompts her to acknowledge that the timeline and circumstances are iffy.

My mom was always trying to find extra ways to make money. Once she tried housing a foreign exchange student from Japan. But the other method was to have someone rent part of the garage. So [my dad] rented the garage, and within a two-week period they fell into a relationship.

I found letters he wrote to my grandma (his mom) about how my mom was a really emotional person, and that she just needed a shoulder to cry on. He said that she was a nurse from Beverly Hills, and that maybe this was a chance to be with someone who had a job. It was very coordinated and not romantic at all. It was an exchange.²⁵

He was her person to vent to and she was the provider, the one that gave him shelter and food. He worked as a manager at tuxedo store, but he didn't really want to do much. I think he struggled with a lot of mental health issues that just weren't addressed.²⁶ My mom would always get on his case about not having a job or not doing enough, so he was always— It was very draining for him.²⁷ So when I turned five, they got divorced, then apparently he impregnated some other woman and my mom went on a *crazy trying to figure out if it was during their marriage* thing.

Then when I turned six they got back together again. I'm actually wearing— this is the wedding ring they gave each other. [She indicates the ring on her necklace.] Three rings woven together: gold, rose gold and silver. It was supposed to represent them being together for me, a second chance. But they got divorced again within nine months.

They got married again?

Yeah so he would live in these small apartments, and I remember visiting. But it was always more like I came over and then I had to tell him why he needed to pay child support. Or he would come over to play a board game.

The last memory he had of me as a kid is that he came over and asked for a glass of water and I had to ask my mom if it was okay to give him a glass of water. That was his last memory of me as a kid.

What's your last memory of him as a kid?

There are two memories.

²⁵ This is a great example demonstrating how she used specific historical sources to construct a narrative about her family history.

²⁶ While this idea about her dad also reflects imaginative construction, saying "I think" signals a greater consciousness of that act.

²⁷ In these interview transcripts, I've used an emdash with a space to the right to denote a place where the narration broke or trailed off. While ellipses are frequently used to this end, oral history transcription has veered toward the emdash to distinguish broken narration from omitted narration (which is noted with an ellipses).

In one, I was playing Candy Land with him and a best friend— this is so traumatic in my mind, I don't know why it was— but I remember him favoring my best friend, and feeling so like *my dad doesn't want me*. That was the feeling I had. I ran into my room and threw the game pieces underneath the door and said, 'You just spend time with her and not me!' I didn't get a lot of time with him, so I think that in my mind, I decided he was favoring her or something. That was one memory.

The biggest memory was when I was seven. This was before he decided to move out of California completely. For my seventh birthday, he dropped off this big box with a bunch of random things in it: from a stuffed monkey to really shitty plastic jewelry to a cassette case full of dead bugs.

I threw the bugs in the air and I screamed. I couldn't understand why he would give me dead bugs for my birthday. My mom had been in the shower at the time, but she ran out screaming naked with a towel on her head, and then called him and told him he was a horrible person. She later told me that apparently he said that the dead bugs would turn into gold the hour of my birth (which is 1:03 pm) and that I should have waited.²⁸

No one had explained to me that maybe my dad was going through a psychotic break of some kind. No one gave me the understanding that this was a person that had mental health issues.

So from that day forward I decided he wasn't my dad and that I was never going to want to see him again; that I didn't need a dad and I could move forward in life without him. From then on, when people would say, 'Where is your dad?' or 'What does your dad do?' I would just say, 'Oh I don't have a dad.' And my mom would just say he was a sperm donor. She still says that: *He was a sperm donor*.²⁹

He would send letters to express his care or love for me, but I never got to read them until later because my mom kept them from me. She would hoard his letters. Sometimes she would share them with me, but most of the time she would forward them back to him. So I never got to really see that he was checking in.³⁰

But I know he cared. I got to know that when I finally found him. [She snuffles and wipes her tears.] That he cared.

Do you have any pleasant memories of your parents together when you were younger?

I only know about pictures.

²⁸ She cites her mother for this additional piece of pretty crucial information that complicates her memory of the event.

²⁹ In these interview transcripts, I've used italics to connote approximated dialogue (distinguished from direct quotes) and internal monologue.

³⁰ This demonstrates how knowing previously withheld information has recolored her reading of the past.

You don't have any memories?

No—just pictures and videos.³¹

Can you tell me about your favorite picture or video?

There's a picture of me as a newborn baby. They would go on road trips and one of the pictures is of us in Santa Barbara. It's me in a baby carrier, and in the sand he'd written: *I love you comma daddy*.

I remember going to Massachusetts when I was five. I remember the energy of his family and I remember it being silly, but I don't remember feeling like it was safe necessarily. My grandma was an alcoholic³² and her temper was very *out there*, and she would be angry a lot. But then his sisters, my aunts, were really silly and fun. I remember that, and my grandma's dog, Rainbow. I remember playing with Rainbow a lot.

I remember there are videos³³ of us dancing together—to Janet Jackson and Madonna and stuff like that. Paula Abdul. Those are really cute because I'm five and I'm sassy, and I'm wearing these boots with a tutu. And he's really getting into the dancing with me and I'm turning to the camera and being a silly dancer, and my mom is hamming it up with us.

I know that there were fun moments like that, but I don't really remember being in that experience. I only remember it from the video. A part of the reason why I collect memories on like Instagram with videos or photos or whatever is to remember. I feel like a lot of my life has been having to remember stuff through these mediums. Probably because of the trauma. Trauma will make you forget things.³⁴

I remember once when we were 11 or 12, you told me that your dad was 'a homeless.' In the absence of these memories, I'm curious about how you got that impression of your dad—and

³¹ This was a critical moment in the interview. It offered a clue about the construction of certain narratives I was hearing (in the absence of memory, they were likely pieced together from external information), and the emotional perspective that lay under them (that they tended to skew negative).

³² While it's possible that five year-old Paula diagnosed her grandmother with alcoholism, it's perhaps more probable that this was something her mother told her later, and she then synthesized into a narrative.

³³ "I remember there are videos" shows the difficulty in distinguishing a memory from a medium.

³⁴ Three years ago, Paula was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which makes it hard for her to remember things. She generally talks about it a lot, but she never brings it up in the interview. This is another reason why I think it's so crucial to interrogate the historical information presented in the interview before beginning a formal analysis. (While I'm sure trauma manipulates memory, I'm certain MS does, and it would be so easy to falsely attribute the effects of one to the other.) Nevertheless, I'm not sure my interview strategy would have extracted the MS information from her.

the other impressions of him you had, too. Where did you hear that your dad was ‘a homeless’?

I guess I’d heard that he had moved back to Massachusetts, where he’s from. He had been staying with his parents, and at the time I said that [about him being ‘a homeless’], his parents had just died and, according to my aunts, it was clear that he’d had a psychotic break.³⁵

When my grandpa died, [my dad] started building furniture out of cereal boxes. And he would break into the house when his sisters were trying to sell it. His mind just wasn’t right. When they finally kicked him out, he was working at a gas station and staying in the bathroom there.

He lived in the gas station. That was probably around the time when I told you that he was a homeless. No one explained these things to me. They just said *he’s a free-loader* and *he doesn’t have a job* and *he doesn’t eat very much*. Occasionally I got letters from him saying things like, ‘I live on a box of pasta a week.’

I came up with my own conclusions based on those details.

You said that you were told that he didn’t have a job and he didn’t work very much—was that your aunts telling you, or your mom?

It was my mom mainly. My mom would say horrible things about him: that he was a free-loader, and that he needed to pay child support. The constant battle was *he’s not paying child support and he should be paying child support*. There was no understanding of the fact that he didn’t have a job to pay child support. *Well he needs to work so he can pay child support*.

When you work low paying jobs—like at a gas station—you end up not making enough to pay child support. But the fact that he was living in the gas station and *still* paying child support—! It wasn’t like we got nothing. He would send \$200 per month, here and there. And he would calculate it in his letters. At the end of the day, he was living on \$163 a month. Essentially he was living in extreme poverty, which I didn’t really understand until I met him.

***Had you revisited those letters before you met him?*³⁶**

A little bit, but it wasn’t really until after I met him that I started reading the letters and understanding a little bit more about where he was coming from. I think that when someone has

³⁵ This is another really important citation. It indicates Paula had been *given* this idea that her father had mental health issues, which (as we’ve already seen in the story about the bugs, and will continue to see moving forward) is used to explain and even justify a lot of his behavior—including leaving her. Because so much of the meaning of the narrative hinges on the idea that her father had mental health issues, the most glaring problem with my part in this interview session is that I never asked whether or not her father had been formally diagnosed. So I followed up with her about it after the interview, and she confirmed: no, he had never been formally diagnosed. Although there does seem to be plenty of evidence to suggest that he did,

³⁶ This question is trying to establish a timeline for the turning point in her narrative.

a mental illness, it can be really hard to know how to take care of yourself. And I don't think he ever got a handle on that. He was so used to living off of other people's good will—including my mom, including the gas station owner who let him sleep there.

Then once the gas station closed, someone else found him and was like, *Well, you can work at my storage unit.* They brought him in and he worked at the storage unit as like a general manager—just like in the office, admitting people into the storage unit. Then he was staying in the bathroom of the storage unit; that was where he slept.

Then one day that person found him in the bathroom was like, *You can't sleep here, what are you doing?* Apparently this guy had a house across the street and was willing to let my dad stay there. So then, by the good will of this person, my dad finally had a house to stay in.

He could have been living in a bathroom for the rest of his life, or on the streets. He would often say he was fine with that; he was fine with being on the streets. He would rather do that than pay into the system or have to fight to be able to afford things. It wasn't worth it to him. Paying for child support wasn't worth it to him.

Wasn't worth what?

Like he wasn't seeing the benefit of paying child support, which is fucked up but also— If I was in his position, and I wasn't making enough to live on, I would probably do the same thing. The money was going to support a child that he didn't originally want.

***Did he tell you he didn't want to have a family?*³⁷**

Yeah, when I met him he said, 'I was not fit to be a father. I didn't necessarily want to have a child, but your mom really wanted a kid. It was like I was on a schedule to give her one.' Maybe they did get— I don't know, it keeps going back and forth, but basically she had him on a schedule of when to have sex to have a baby. I was the kid she wanted, my brother was the kid she didn't want. This was her chance to finally have a kid that she wanted.

You know what might be helpful for us is in telling this story? Because there're so many conflicting stories in your story, maybe we can try to say my mom says this and when I met my dad, he said this, or I grew up thinking this and then the letters that I've read have said that. So we can try to sort out both what information we know and how we know it.

That's kind of why I'm trying to write this book; that's kind of what it's like. It's like piecing together all these things that don't seem to string together.³⁸

³⁷ This idea that she was unwanted seems to fuel her perspective considerably. I ask this question to ascertain exactly how much of that was made explicit (historical fact), and how much was imagination. The ambiguity in her answer prompts my next suggestion.

³⁸ Everything that comes after this point reflects Paula's very clear attempt to make the pieces of this story coherent, circular, and causal. It's full of serendipity and "magic," which didn't make

Once my dad had me he said I was the best thing that happened to him. That's what he says. He said he cut the cord the day I was born. He said he gave me my first glass of water. That's the first thing he said when I found him.

I guess this is a good place to start talking about your search. Let's start with how you decided to find him and how old you were, what were you up to?

I was 21, maybe 22 or 23. I had graduated college and I was working as an NBC page, backstage with "The Tonight Show." And I'd started to look through letters from him. Letters my mom had saved. He had mentioned "The Tonight Show," because he used to suit up people from the show. My dad worked in a tuxedo shop, so there was this weird synchronicity of that.

There was a real glamorization of media [in his letters], and in a way, I think I was living his dream or something. At least in my mind. Maybe I was just fantasizing. But it was 2008, and there was that writers' strike. So there were no jobs, and I had to say goodbye to "The Tonight Show."

I started working at "Access Hollywood," and during that time, I fell off a cliff while hiking. And because of the falling and facing my death, and breaking almost every bone in [my body], my relatives from his side got in touch.

My mom had been in contact with my cousins and his sisters intermittently throughout my life. [She] would send them pictures of me, and sometimes she would send pictures of me to my dad. She never knew where he was but she knew she could always contact him at his P.O. Box. I mean she could *send* things to his P.O. Box, but she wouldn't know if he got them or not. So he always had some level of knowledge of what was going on of me, but it was always through my mom, which is a lens that can be quite distorted and catastrophic.³⁹

Anyway I had a cousin get in touch who had lived with my dad as a teenager. He resented my dad because my dad would make him pay rent and try to get him to do chores. I guess there were other [reasons why they didn't get along], too. I think my cousin suffered from depression and it was just probably hard having two people with mental health issues living together.⁴⁰ It was interesting because my cousin got to experience growing up with my dad during formative years, but I didn't. So we got in touch I said, 'Have you been in touch with my dad? Do you know where he is?'

sense to me until I started reading about the shape and function of stories in 12-step programs. Again, it didn't come up in our session, but Paula is a member of two.

³⁹ Paula acknowledges a bias in one of her main sources of information.

⁴⁰ Knowing now that neither of these people has been diagnosed with mental health issues, and that Paula has nevertheless *chosen* to include that detail in the narrative makes it a particularly useful site for analysis. It invites us to ask: what is the function of mental illness in Paula's narrative, and how does it support a specific perspective of the past?

That was kind of what sparked me wanting to find him. I was asking my cousin and my aunts where my dad was and no one really knew.

You said something about falling off the mountain and how facing your death—

Yeah, almost dying makes you want to know who you are.

You feel like your dad is a part of that?

I always knew there was a part of me that I just didn't understand. I was like why am I funny? My mom isn't funny. Why am I creative? My mom's creative but in different way. Why am I a deep-thinker? My mom doesn't seem to be that way. I just wanted to know that part of me.

You assumed those were things that you could attribute to your dad? You were looking for some part of yourself?

I was looking for answers.

While I was recovering [from my fall], I applied to grad school for interactive media at NYU. I've always wanted to go to New York, but once I got there and sat in on classes I was like, *this is not for me. I went to film school and it was just like this and this is bullshit and I'm not going to go do another bullshit thing. And I might need to be more practical.*

The reason why I always thought I had to be practical was because I grew up with a single mom and there was no room to be a dreamer.

Yet your mom really pushed you into arts all the time.⁴¹

She did but I think I always felt the pressure to make money versus enjoying the process because I was a kid actor. You're a kid actor, you're making money to live.⁴² I made money to go to college as a kid actor. I sat in on the classes like this is not my thing and then I felt this pull of *I'm in New York, I might as well go and see his hometown and see if I can find him.*

So I took the Chinatown bus to Boston and then I took the train into Salem, then I walked this long bridge from the train station all the way into Salem. I forgot what it's called, but I remember

⁴¹ Again, I would hope that even if I didn't know Paula intimately, if I didn't know that she had grown up with means, that she was a child actress, that she took ballet lessons and had been trained as an opera singer, I could still read this as evidence of a specific, and perhaps very distorted, perspective of her life. Even if I had missed all the other cues, she literally just said she went to film school.

⁴² By this point we'd already established that she 1. grew up in Beverly Hills, 2. had a maid who came every day, and 3. went to film school, but she still sees herself as having struggled financially and sacrificed creative expression because of it, so I decided to pull back on questions intended to elucidate that narrative.

my aunts saying [my dad] would bike ride across this bridge, so I thought I would find him there. That was my idealization of finding him.

I get to the end of the bridge and there's nothing romantic about it. There's a roast beef restaurant and these three mentally disabled ladies standing around arguing about roast beef. The town smells like mildew and there's like this old motel—Sail Ship Inn or something—and there's a bunch of automotive shops, but it's like there is just nothing to Salem.

I end up at Ocean Ship Auto and there's this guy there working on a car named Ray. I tell him that I'm looking for my dad. I describe him and I say his name is Jeff, and Ray's like, 'Well there's a Jeff that always comes to my AA meeting. I don't think he has a daughter but maybe you want to sit in on this meeting.'

I started talking to other people at the auto shop and this one guy offered to drive me around the city. I trusted this guy to drive me around Salem! Which is weird. I was so going with the flow thinking *I'm going to find my dad*. There was no question in my mind. Just this weird pull of *I'm going to find him and that's going to be the story, and I'm going to get to write about it and it's going to be sensational.*⁴³

Ed. Note: Here, Paula talks about her first attempt to find her father. Due to space limitations, I've cut this section in favor of more imaginatively dense narratives. The text that follows is from the same interview, and follows sequentially from the prior text.

Within a year or two I ended up going back to Massachusetts because [my ex-boyfriend Matthew's] family was there. That was when I tried to find him the second time. His mom suggested I try calling the police to see if there was a record or something, so I called and they said, 'There's been a dispute with a customer but we can't tell you where, so you need to come in and prove you're his daughter.'

We drove all the way to Salem from their house, which is like an hour drive. And then when we get to the police station, as soon as I walk in, the policeman is just like, 'Oh, he's across the street.' I said, 'I thought you needed my ID and information?' And he's like, 'Yeah, I know who you are. Your dad keeps pictures of you.' We didn't even need to drive because it's across the street, but we had this van—Matt's family's van—and I was freaking out. So my ex, Matt, says, 'I'll walk in and I'll confirm that your dad is your dad.'

He walks in and out quickly, and he says, 'Yeah, it's your dad.' And I freak out. We're in the van and I see my dad walking out, and it's this frail version of a man I once knew,⁴⁴ but still with

⁴³ This is the only time Paula offers an alternative motivation for wanting to find her father.

⁴⁴ Paula has written extensively about her search, and consequently this section feels almost scripted. The writing lives just underneath her spoken words, but it's occasionally visible in hyper-stylized lines like this one: "this frail version of a man I once knew."

the fanny pack that he always used to wear—the khaki pants, the fanny pack and the leather jacket—that was what characterized my dad.

He was looking around like *what just happened?* I tell Matt to drive around the block because I can't handle this right now. And we drive around the block, and then finally we get out and walk into this storage unit. It was an old fire station—all brick. And his yellow bicycle was right there. It was a vintage bicycle (he loved vintage bicycles). And there were plants (he always loved plants). It's funny because we had those house plants at home, but I didn't know it was because of him. He used to say he liked having plants around to oxygenate the air.

We walk in and he says to my ex, 'Hey, where did you go?' And Matt's like, 'Are you Jeffrey Marks?' My dad says yes, and Matt says, 'This is your daughter.'

He couldn't believe it. He said, 'One second,' and he took his fanny pack—he was shaking—we didn't know it at the time, but he had Parkinson's. He's unzipping it and he pulls out this photo of me as a baby, a newborn, and—I always forget this part of the story⁴⁵—along with the photo, slipped out this deed to this land that he owned in Arizona.

And it was as if those were the two things that mattered to him most, the two things that he had held on to. He said, 'I cut your cord the day you were born and I gave you your first glass of water.' He would say that in every letter, but just hearing him say it was like—I don't think I cried at the time. I think I was just on this high of finding him.

He goes, 'So what are you all about?' I was like, 'I don't know what to say—I work in entertainment.' I don't know.

We ended up having an Italian dinner at this old jail that had been converted into a restaurant, which is just so ironic because it was the jail that he had been put in when he tried to break into my grandparents' house. It was also the place that my mom would have wanted him to be. And that was our first dinner. Our first meal together was in this old jail.

He had roasted garlic and pasta puttanesca and pizza. He talked about being a tuxedo manager and just trying to make his life important. He took us back to the house where he had been living for 12 years and it was very sparse. There were hats along the walls, hanging on nails. He liked hats—because he was balding—and jackets, and that's what he had on the walls. He had a Chinese calendar on the wall, too, and a plant where we sat down.

I filmed it, but what's sad is that it's on an old hard drive and I honestly don't know where it is. I probably need to find it. It was just weird. The first comment he made was, 'You're chubby,' or something about me being chubby.

⁴⁵ In retrospect, this is evidence of a conscious attempt to construct the narrative, but unlike my last narrator, Bryan (who notified me when he was “laying groundwork for something later”), it seems important for Paula to narrate the story as if it were *unconstructed*.

Every year after that I would visit during the holidays and see him for a few days and we would stay in touch. Then once [the storage facility owner who'd let him live at this house] found out that I was in his life, he said, 'Listen, he's so old, he can't do the shoveling that he used to do,' or the managing of the office and all that. 'We need to find him housing. I can't house him.'

At first this guy wanted to put him in like a hostel for homeless people where everyone had to share a bathroom and my dad was not into that. So within the first year of knowing him I had to find him housing, SNAP benefits, veteran's benefits, health benefits, and get him hooked up with a cell phone.

It was the first time we could have regular communication because of the cell phone. We got him moved into this apartment—and this is crazy too—the apartment was subsidized housing for older people, but it had been his old kindergarten classroom! I'm not kidding! This is how crazy the world is! How connected everything is. He was living in his old school, and across from the Veterans' building. So it was perfect. Everything he needed was right there. It was like the stars aligned and everything kind of worked out.

I think from that experience I learned⁴⁶ that things flow and things connect, and things work out the way they are supposed to work out. If you don't necessarily force it—and yeah I was kind of forcing it by trying to find him—but I think everything that lined up was— It was all kind of magical how everything was happening.

Can we rewind for one second? You said it was really weird when you finally got to meet him—what did you mean by that, and do you feel like you got the answers you were looking for? Do you feel like you've found the missing piece?

No. I'm always going to try to unravel this person.

This person—meaning you or him?

Me, him—everything.

So at the storage unit where he was working, he'd kept 150 boxes in one of the units. Now when I had to relocate him, the guy was like, 'You need to get these boxes out.' Well, my aunts didn't know what to do other than to just put the boxes back into his apartment. So there were 150 boxes lining the walls of the apartment from floor to ceiling. That's how he lived the last four years of his life—with boxes surrounding his life.

I thought those boxes would tell me the story; I thought they would give me the answers. But in the end, after going through all of them, after he died, they all just had books, or magazines, or— There were letters, and random pieces of paper, and— Of all those boxes, there were only four that had stories, and I still have yet to go through the stories, because it's— I don't think I'm ready yet.

⁴⁶ Direct evidence of her incorporating (or falling back on?) 12-step story form, which focuses on the lessons learned from actions.

I know I want to write the story, and I want to use the letters to inspire the story. I know there's letters from the entire time he was in the military, so that would maybe tell me a little bit about his mental health. And there's journals from when he was living with my mom. I've read a couple of those, and they give a little bit of understanding of where he was coming from mentally. He wrote this one letter or journal entry that said something about how he was concerned about my health as a baby. He wanted to leave, but he didn't know how to do it without messing me up. Seeing that gave me relief, knowing that he cared enough to be concerned on that level. It sucks that he left anyway, but it gives some perspective into what was going on.

I think every time you make a connection with anyone it leads towards something, towards answers. Towards an understanding of who you are and an understanding of who other people are. So the more connections you make, the more you understand about yourself.⁴⁷ If I didn't find him, it would be more of a missing piece.

I don't feel necessarily whole, but I feel like he was a huge part of my understanding as a human being, because connecting him to those resources, connecting him to a better life, getting him to a place where he could die in dignity was why I want to do the work I do. Because it showed me I can do it, and I can change lives and I can do good. I know that I have made an impact in my dad's life. And it's shown me that I can do it for others, and I have! In the four years that I got to know him, I've grown the most. Since he died a year ago, I have done more than I have ever done in my life. So he's a huge part of who I am.⁴⁸

How did you pick the things that you saved, when you were going through his stuff?⁴⁹

Oh my God. I can't even tell you about the process of going through 150 boxes of shit. Seeing naked pictures of old girlfriends, and homework assignments from when he was in college— He used to do these courses like in the 80's and 90's—courses on how to be a businessman. Like how to make sales? Tons of stuff about that. So I kept elements of those things because I wanted to understand where he was coming from, like what *made* him—

He wanted to be a doctor, and there were old chemistry assignments with his grades and stuff. But then he was a tuxedo manager. Then he wanted to be a business guy, and then he tried to sell vitamins, and then at one point he tried to sell penny stocks. He was just always trying to do stuff to make money, and so I tried to keep elements of those things, to get a picture of that.

But ultimately it was the letters. It was the journals and pictures that I found, and they were all mixed together so I literally had to go through everything page by page. It was all dusty and moldy so I had to wear a face mask.

⁴⁷ More 12-step rhetoric.

⁴⁸ There is huge effort to turn this into a positive story about growth and learning, even where the surrendering to god narrative doesn't necessarily fit.

⁴⁹ This is probably the most important question in our whole session. Ostensibly, I'm asking how she evaluated different pieces of information when constructing her father's story.

I was on a mission to piece together the story and I only had a day and a half to clear out his entire apartment. I consolidated the letters and stories into four boxes and then I shipped those boxes to myself. I have those four boxes in that office and I still haven't gone through them because a part of me thinks maybe it's better to just create the stories in my head than to like sort through them, but I do eventually want to get through them.

Before we wrap it up, I want to give you an opportunity to say anything that you feel like you didn't get a chance to say. I know that there's a lot more to the story, a lot that has to do with your mom and about who you are now and what you are doing, but it doesn't have to be said here unless you want to.

Remember the deed to the land that he had pulled out of his fanny pack [along with the photo of me as a newborn]? I ended up going to the land and scattering his ashes there just nine months ago. That was emotional.

I'd just wanted to find this land. I wanted to know why he was there. And I finally got to see what it was all about. The land was beautiful, and unmarked. It totally made sense why he chose it; no one would find him. He never wanted to be found and that's what that land was about.⁵⁰ There were no markers, there was no way to—

I wanted to take him where he wanted to end up. He bought this land and wanted to end up there, but he never paid enough taxes to keep it. So I'm scattering his ashes, and there is a rainbow in the background. And I'm getting to the end and I landed at this piece of driftwood right there [she points to it]. It's a triangle with a circle in the center of it and that's— It's funny because the circle is like The Big O tattoo on my back, and the triangle is the symbol of a recovery.⁵¹ I am in recovery for all the shit— all the relationships that I— all the bullshit. So landing at that driftwood was kind of like, I guess that was what ended the story a little bit.

And then there's these two beetles randomly in the desert. One is dead and the other is dragging it. They are getting near my feet. And there was this moment of like *this feels like the dead bugs that were in the box he gave me when I was seven*, and like, this is a chance to recover from that trauma. Like that driftwood and the beetles being right there in my face. It was just like, in a way, it was kind of like me dragging my dad's dead body. I don't know, I just felt like so complete after that.

⁵⁰ This line motivates my next question. She offers so many explanations for existence of this land, and does so with such certainty, but initially it's unclear if any part of her explanation was based on an actual conversation with him, or if it was entirely imagined. (The narrative symbolism of a big open space is not lost on me.)

⁵¹ She literally offered a 12-step symbol *in* the story, but the limitations of my knowledge at the time prevented me from reading it as the interpretive cue it was.

*Do you think he was happy you found him? Did he ever tell you?*⁵²

Yeah. He never said outright ‘Thank you for everything you did.’ It was more of ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you,’ and I could feel it.

I just wish more people got to meet him, like people that mattered to me got to meet him. Because he was a funny guy. He was just like a weird funny guy.

CHAPTER TWO

I wasn’t looking for my half-brothers when I found them; I was looking for a UCLA coffee mug.

And between the time it took for me to have the thought *I want a UCLA coffee mug* and actually set my fingers on the keyboard, I’d forgotten what it was I was looking for. So naturally I googled “Alzheimer’s disease,” instead.

⁵² Here, I wanted to take one last opportunity to solicit her perspective directly. This question roughly translates to: What did he say about his feelings, and how did you interpret what he said?

My paternal grandmother died of Alzheimer's in 1999. We'd met only once, when I was twenty months old, but I read about it on her Wikipedia page. Her work as a labor organizer and a Communist made her just famous enough to warrant some modest biographical scholarship online, so I skimmed the internet for information about when exactly her Alzheimer's set in.

I learned that she'd been married once, to the Party's Texas gubernatorial candidate, Homer Brooks. That she'd been blacklisted for her Party affiliations, and literally chased out of San Antonio. And that even though she was hounded by the FBI for years, there was little to no information about her life in California, where my dad was born. He was her only child, but he never appeared as more than a footnote in any of her biographies, and never by name.

I read through dozens of articles and obituaries before I found them, in the last line of a book review in *The Catholic Observer*: "Many of Emma Tenayuca's relatives still live in San Antonio. She has several grandchildren, too, including a granddaughter named Emma."

Several grandchildren.

I ran a search for the only member of my dad's family whose name I knew: Sharyll Tenayuca, my dad's cousin. Facebook had just launched a new layout that listed family members on your front page, and I instantly spotted Aaron, her second-cousin, my eldest brother.

It's almost impossible for me to articulate exactly what seeing his face did to me because I don't think there's adequate language for either the way we build identities from stories, or the way they can be forcibly revised by serendipity. Suffice it to say, seeing Aaron unraveled something fundamental to who I thought I was.

My dad and I had a special relationship that's hard for me to explain now, in light of everything I've learned, but I think I thought we were each other's favorite people. I always assumed my dad had had other children after he left—he wasn't much older than I am now, and still very handsome—but no matter what, I would always be his first born, and that would always make me special.

That story had been my armor. But seeing Aaron's face—like my face, but older—forced me to confront the fact that it was only a story, that it had always been. Aaron was his first born; I was not.

Still, I told myself, I would always be his first girl, and that would always make me special.

On July 31, 2017, seven years after I found Aaron, and four years after I found our brother Jeremy, I found my half-sister, Angela—his first girl.

KRISTEN RICHARDSON, 40
TV Editor – Los Angeles, CA

Kristen Richardson reached out to me on Facebook. She's a good friend of a former colleague of mine, who'd seen my open call for narrators. When I asked her to introduce herself, she said this:

Um, well. I'm like, what are all my pigeonhole terms?

I'm a queer, polyamorous pansexual in a long-term nesting partnership with a lovely gender-queer adoptee woman! And I think all of those just basically say: other, other, other. We're also inter-racial. Because you know, why not? And because she's adopted, she also considers herself trans-racial, which means you were raised by parents outside of your ethnic background.

She continued for another couple minutes before mentioning she's donor-conceived, "which is why I'm speaking with you, I guess!"

Kristen was conceived via sperm donation in the late 70's, at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, in Canada, but she didn't find out she was "DC" until she was 15—a few weeks after she came out to her legal parents. Consequently, the way Kristen talks about searching for her biological father is as inherently political as the prospect of finding him is dubious.

Doubt may in fact be the most powerful force in her story, which is one of the things that makes the interview so interesting. Reading through these excerpts from our session, you'll notice a more segmented style of storytelling; and a higher frequency of questioning her own statistics, community, and perception, as well as the likelihood of finding her father. She is simultaneously logical and deeply intuitive, and cites sources for her own historical information without me prompting her. She is a film editor, after all. And therefore trained in the perceptive elements of narrative construction.

You'll also notice that she has little tricks for this too. At the beginning of our interview, Kristen explains that her family moved around a lot during her childhood. So when I ask her questions about turning points (like her legal parents' divorce, or coming out, or her mothers' second marriage and divorce), she begins by thinking back to where she had a memory—that is, in what home—which helps her contextualize the incidents within the larger timeline of her life.

March 15, 2017, 11:15am⁵³

My mother was seven months pregnant when she was smuggled out of Canada so that I could be born in the states. I think the derogatory term is "ice back." They actually took all the furniture in a different vehicle so it wouldn't look like that's what was happening.

⁵³ I began the session by asking her to tell me about her home growing up.

I think my parents were pretty poor while they were together. So the first place that we lived, I have one memory of it vaguely,⁵⁴ but we moved into a mobile home park when I was less than a year old. We were there until I was four, and my parents got divorced when I was three. My mom met the person that would become my step father when I was four. So we moved from a mobile home to like a six-bedroom house that had absolutely no furniture because my soon-to-be step-father was going through a divorce, and the wife got all the furniture. So yeah it was weird, I guess.

Then we moved to Lake Elsinore when I was in first grade, and we lived in a mobile home on a bunch of undeveloped property. Kinda like outside of Lake Elsinore. (The area didn't have a name, but Elsinore was the closest place.)

That was first through eighth grade. It was a little difficult, that period of time. That area had a very high crime rate. And then we moved to San Diego when I was in high school. We had lied and said I lived with my uncle so that I could get into this public arts magnet school, and then once I got in we actually had to move there.

They got divorced when I was 16. And then my mom and I moved to an apartment in a similar area.

So yeah, a lot of movement. Meanwhile, my dad moved up to the Bay Area for a year or two when I was 3, and then he moved up to Vancouver. Back up to Canada. I think he was there until I was like 13. Then he moved to San Diego for 9 months, and then he disappeared.

We got into a fight and he disappeared for a year and a half. When I found him again he was living in Missouri. We worked on repairing our relationship, which was a challenge. He lives in the middle of the country and he's a Republican, but he's ok with gay rights and things like that—to the point where he even got a "no h8" tattoo, and he doesn't have other tattoos.

So that's the one things about our relationship that I did appreciate. He's very supportive of that. But generally we had a really really rough relationship. And then most recently he decided not to come to my wedding. We haven't been speaking since then.

What brought them from Canada to the U.S.?

⁵⁴ In a section I edited out (only for the sake of staying focused on the exercise), Kristen told me her first memory was pre-verbal, but she also checked herself on it, acknowledging the problems with that idea.

Honestly I don't know.⁵⁵ But my dad was American, and he'd moved to Canada to dodge the draft. Then Carter pardoned the draft-dodgers, and he was finally allowed to come back to the United States. That was right before I was born.

Do you remember when you learned that you were donor-conceived?

Yes. My parents are really good at choosing terrible times to do just about anything: I had just come out, like a couple weeks before, and my mom had a hard time really processing that. She does revisionist history, but she was actually pretty terrible about it for the first like nine years. She thinks she was fine, and that's like totally not what happened.

How old were you?

Fifteen. My dad had flown out to see me and he was staying at my uncle's house. My mom and I were clearly not getting along at that time, so I was going to go stay at my uncle's house with my dad that weekend. And when he came to pick me up, they sat me down in the living room and they told me that I was donor-conceived. And initially I remember thinking that that made so much sense.

Oh I didn't even tell this story either: When I still at that first house—so, four or younger (I think I was three). My mom used to listen to a lot of talk radio, and one day we heard a story about an adoptee or something like that. I remember really resonating with their story. And I asked my mom if I'd been adopted. She said I hadn't, and I didn't believe her. So I asked for proof that I hadn't been adopted. So she took me home and she showed me pictures of herself pregnant and she said, 'See you're in here!'⁵⁶

And that convinced me that this feeling I had wasn't real. But then once I found out I was donor-conceived, it was like *Oh, THAT'S what I was picking up on*. This feeling I had of like, *there's something not quite right about this scenario* was real. My intuition was accurate.⁵⁷

And it was so clear, even when I was young. You know, at that age, you think your mom is this all-knowing being and you have to listen to her. And yet, I recognized that I knew more in trusting that feeling than someone I should theoretically be able to trust above all. I think that was a major lesson in self-trust.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ “I don’t know,” has come to be my favorite answer to an interview question. It seems to signal a narrator’s critical eye to the information they’ve been presented, rather than an absence of information.

⁵⁶ Right out of the gate, Kristen demonstrates a critical engagement with her sources.

⁵⁷ Without prompting, she offers this narrative which introduces us to her system for evaluating historical information.

⁵⁸ More evidence of the support group lesson-driven form we saw in Paula’s interview.

I completely believe that science is a real thing and I also accept that science doesn't have all the answers. And when science doesn't account for things that seem phenomenal, then it's probably because science hasn't caught up yet.

Do you remember how that felt? Aside from the feeling that it made sense? You seemed to indicate that it was tied to the fact that you had just come out.⁵⁹

I'm sure that triggered it, yeah. Why choose that moment to throw out this relatively big piece of information that relates to my identity? I also realized that their intention was to never tell me. I think the whole coming out thing triggered something that motivated one of them—I think it was my mom, I'm not sure—to want to change [the family] dynamic in some way.

Whether that's conscious or not, I think that's what it was. Because actually in retrospect I think my mom did a really good job of setting up my entire life so that she was the only one I would be close to. This was a moment where my dad was there for me more, or accepting in a way that she couldn't be for me at the time. So why not just use that as the time to let me know that *oh, he isn't even really your father*.

I'm sure none of that's conscious. But just looking at her behavior since, I could see how that would be something that she would do.

How did you respond to them in that moment?

Pretty nonchalantly. With an appropriate amount of teenage apathy [she laughs]: 'Yeah, that makes sense. I didn't think we were related.' [She laughs again.]

Did they tell you anything about your donor and how they chose him?

They didn't. They were assigned back then.

Do you have any pleasant memories from that time before your legal parents got divorced?

[It takes a very long time before she tries to speak, then she starts crying.]

It's ok, you can take all the time you need.

I mean, one of the things that I've acknowledged is that. For the most part. My life has gotten substantially better the older I've gotten, and the less I've been involved with my parents. [She laughs through her tears.] So that's kind of a hard realization.

⁵⁹ This question was prompted by an interpretation I made in the interview. Kristen appeared to draw a connection between the timing of her coming out and her parents telling her she was DC, and since it seemed like a pivotal perspective, I wanted to clarify.

Like sometimes I wonder what it would feel like to have had even a somewhat normal-looking childhood where I felt safe, and both parents were present. And this is in no way saying that the person that was my legal father should've been there. In some ways I think I was probably better off that he wasn't, but looking at some of my friends' parental situations, I just think, *Man, that is so foreign to me.*

So pre-divorce, you're talking 3 or younger. I have two memories of waiting up for my dad to come home from work, and he worked late because he was the manager of a restaurant. And I have no idea why my mom let me stay up or if she even knew I was awake. I have no idea. But I remember waiting up for him, and then he got home, and he watched TV. And I wasn't really allowed to watch TV at all, so that was one of those *things* that was like—

[It takes her a long time to speak again. When she does her voice is broken.]

I was just thinking that's probably why it's one of my favorite things to do on a Sunday night.⁶⁰

My nesting partner Olivia is like, 'Ugh! You're so into TV!!' But it probably has a reason. I remember seeing *Snow White* in the theater, I remember seeing *E.T.* at the drive-in. And then I remember that I really wanted this bike. It was like a Kiki and Lala bike, and we did not have money. I cannot stress enough how little money we had. My parents told me that they used to collect change off the street,⁶¹ and then once they had enough they would use it to buy an ice cream cone for me.

But they got me that bike. [She breaks again.] For my third birthday. And I distinctly remember riding it the first time and I was like, "I'M THREE!" [She laughs.]

That's beautiful.

I think the only other memories early on that are happy are of drawing. Because we definitely did art time, and one Christmas— I don't know when this was but it was still that first house, so four or younger.⁶² Um. My mom let us paint on the windows, and that was pretty cool.

So yeah, that's it. Those are pretty much the good, pre-father moving memories. And after that I remember being sad all the time because I never saw him. There was maybe six weeks each summer, and every other Christmas, so— We didn't spend much time together.

⁶⁰ Kristen's story is not without causal narratives, but she presents an awareness of that, and a consciousness of her desire for narrative coherence.

⁶¹ She is amazing at sourcing her own information without me prompting her. Saying "my parents told me" acknowledges

⁶² This is another example of Kristen showing her narrative construction. Because her family moved around a lot as a kid, she uses the location of the memory to logically fit it into a life history timeline.

*With these DNA tests you've taken—were you hoping to narrow things down? Because you didn't have any information, correct?*⁶³

All I have is where I was conceived. So that's a starting place. I'm on all three of the DNA sites and I didn't get any matches closer than second cousin, and even second cousin was 'second or third,' and it was someone who's anonymous. So I reached out, but so far they haven't responded. I only have one of those. The rest are like third or beyond, and I've written to some of the third cousins and haven't really gotten a whole lot of information.

So the step I took after that was, most recently, in January of this year—and it took me several years to pay to do this, because it required flying to the University of Alberta, Edmonton, because they wouldn't send me this information when I'd call and ask for the record of the med students and residents from that year. They said, 'oh, it's all in our archives and we don't have the manpower,' and all that stuff, so they're like 'you need to come in person.'

So I ended up flying out there. The first day I went, the person who was supposed to help me didn't even show up to work. Like, they just left me the books. And then initially even the books omitted the years that I needed! It went right up to two years before the years I needed. I was trying to pull anybody that might have been a med student or resident or faculty member involved in the med school—that's a pretty wide range. Because they could've been graduating that year or they could've been starting that year. Who knows?

And of course there were four years missing from the record, and those were the most likely years [of my donation]. Then I found out that they had photos of each of the graduating classes. So we went to this hall that was like covered in their photos and I took pictures of all of the years, and I thought I got all of the information and then I realized *Oh my god it's only last names and first initials. That's not going to get me all of what I need!* So I still needed the original information, and I find this out like an hour before my flight.

And I did finally end up getting a complete list of all years for both. But it's like, a lot of names. So I haven't gotten to the place where I sit down and write all of the names in to a spreadsheet but whatever. What I am going to do is get all of the names entered into a spreadsheet, along with what year they were there, and then cross-reference that with all of my closest surname matches on all three DNA sites. But I've got about three thousand family matches across the three sites so, starting closest and working my way backward and just seeing if there are surnames that overlap.

That's my next step. And then I would write to both the person on the DNA site and also try to find the graduates. Which will probably be easier to do, because as long as they're still practicing, I should be able to find them through government sites.

⁶³ Knowing her donor was assigned, and that she didn't really have any information from which to even begin building an image of him, I'm looking for any other historical information I may not have anticipated.

If your DNA didn't have a bunch of hits, that means that at least theoretically, his other possible donations didn't result in conception, and you don't have half-siblings running around. How does that feel?

I actually do want to find half-siblings. Because I'm an only child so that would be kinda cool. I also think the most likely half-siblings I would have would be the donor's natural children. And those people are less likely to be on a DNA site than a half-sibling conceived via artificial insemination.

The other thing to keep in mind is only 10% of DC people know we're donor-conceived. I don't know how accurate any of these stats really are, because we're another one of those groups that isn't studied much.⁶⁴ Like, there's more information on adoptees, and there's not really a ton of information on them, but they've made more progress than we have collectively.

But it doesn't seem that unlikely because I've noticed a trend among donor-conceived people—at least the ones that show up in groups—that almost all of us find out after some sort of traumatic experience that triggers being told. So like, for me, it might have been this coming out that triggered it. But some people find out when all of a sudden they need a kidney and it's like 'oh no we don't need to test that side, sorry.' And I do know someone with a story like that.

I also have a friend—this is maybe not my story to tell, but I'll tell it anyway. I have a friend who thought she was a carrier for a genetic disorder and chose not to have kids because of that, and lost a really important relationship because that gentleman really wanted his own children. And then after her legal father died, she found out that she wasn't related to him, and wasn't a carrier for that disease. Yeah.

What would it mean for you to find your father?⁶⁵

What would it mean. I would just feel like this missing piece of this puzzle had been solved.

The other thing that I completely recognize as not having grown up around my extended family is—I couldn't have been raised in a more different way than my family in the Mennonite community. And yet, when I see them, which isn't frequent—I think the last time was like 12 years from the time I'd seen them before—I noticed that there's certain similarities. Like our sense of humor is similar.

And they often talk about how humor is cultural, but we had no part of the same upbringing—at all. And yet we laugh at the same things. And maybe it's all coincidence, but I didn't really know much about Mennonite community apart from what my mom told me was her experiences as a woman, so a lot of sewing, a lot of farming, a lot of cooking, a lot of cleaning. That kind of thing. I didn't know about being a man in the Mennonite community, but from the moment I

⁶⁴ Kristen is really well read on the issues concerning her search, but the doubt she expresses about those statistics is even more useful in understanding her relationship to DC culture.

⁶⁵ This is an indirect question about the way she relates to her life history narrative.

lived outside of dorms, I had an interest in refinishing furniture and I would try building things myself—

And then I found out, like after visiting them years later, that all my cousins are woodworkers, ya know? And my uncles work with wood. One of them makes wooden bows, and the other one makes houses. But like, they're *all* woodworkers. And it's stuff like that where I'm like maybe it's a coincidence, but it felt like it was in my blood.

And then there are other things. Like they're all hunters and I'm a pacifist, and I would never want to kill anything. But when I was up there I wanted to try shooting a bow and arrow, and two of my cousins have literally won national competitions in archery. And my first time out I got a bulls eye into a cluster! I'm not amazing at most any sort of sport-type thing, but I was just like *Damn, maybe there's something to this being—* I don't know. I just don't know.

They were also like, 'I can't drink vodka.' That was another thing! Didn't know at all! I got so sick the first time I ever had— and it was like two shots of vodka! I can drink seven tequilas and be fine. (This was in my early 20's but no longer.) But then I go up there and told them I didn't drink because of that, and they were like, 'Oh was it vodka? And I was just like, oh, yeah, we can't drink vodka.' And I know that's like a DNA thing, right? But it's just like those kind of things that aren't going to show up on a DNA test. Humor definitely won't, you know?

And those are the piece where *I wonder what are my that from this other family I've never met and maybe will never meet.*

I guess because my mom and I are not talking right now and I'm clearly not close to my extended family. My nesting partner and I had 100 people at our wedding, and not one person in attendance was biologically related to either of us.

I forgot that was one of the things I wanted to ask you about. You said your legal father just didn't show up?

[She laughs.] Yeah no, so my mom and I have had a very difficult last several years. I think most of her adult life has been dependent on a man financially for periods of time. Most of it. And she's gotten money in very unconventional ways. Not illegal, just to clarify. But just unconventional. And when she stopped having money available or men that were supporting her financially, she turned to me and it created a lot of stress in our relationship. In part because she was also living with us—for like, a year and nine months. And it was taking a toll on my relationship with my partner, and it also made being poly very challenging. On top of that, she just acted very entitled—to not just live there but to act in this weird kind of—

My therapist said 'You're a parentified child.' So in some ways you take care of your parents but then they also feel like they have the right to: a. not live by your rules, even though it's your house; and b. impose their own beliefs on your life. It's infuriating. And it was an extended period of time.

And I finally gave her an ultimatum to either look for a job or move out. And one hour later she had her bag packed and was moving. But it turns out she didn't really want to move, of course. So then she was like, 'You threw me out!' and I was like, 'Noooo, you just didn't want to live here under my rules.' And I wasn't even asking her to get a job. I just wanted her to *look* for a job. And I feel like that was fair.

And my reasoning for it wasn't even so that she could pay for more things, it was so she'd be out of the house more. Because in between jobs I'm at home a lot, so I would just end up in my room all the time. Like I was a teenager, in my own house.

So after this happened with my mom, I was talking to my dad and he then responded with: 'See? It's very difficult to live with your mom. I can't be blamed for leaving.' And I was like, 'Wait let's get this straight, you could've at least stayed in the country.' You know?? [She laughs.] 'You could've divorced her and not moved to Canada.' [Her voice starts to shake again.] And he thought that was very hurtful.

I wasn't mean about it. I said it with about the same nonchalance that I just told it to you with. It was just more of an *I'm not going to let you completely abdicate all responsibility for abandoning your three year-old*. But he didn't want to hear that. And then he said, 'Do you even want me at your wedding?' And I said, 'Of course, I want you at my wedding. Very realistically, we aren't close and I don't think we're ever going to be close, but you are the only father I have.'

And I should also clarify that my step-father passed away, but he definitely would have come if he'd been alive. But yeah so— he was the dad that was left.

And he's like, 'Well I just don't think we're gonna come.' And I called, I emailed. We sent an invitation, and I heard nothing back. And then recently for my birthday, which was almost a year after that altercation, he sent me a card and said he wanted a do-over. And I'm struggling with this, but it's a weird place to be because I recognize that he just does not show up for me.

So I wrote to him and I said, 'I'm not mad at you, but I don't think I can really invest anymore hope that this relationship will never give me anything close to what I'm putting into it.' So that's tough because I think there's a chance he might die sometime soon. His health isn't very good, so I'm struggling with that a little bit. And the guilt that society puts on you about forgiveness.⁶⁶ And I'm like, *Well, I kind of have forgiven him, but that doesn't mean I want him in my life*.

It's really just frustrating, and when we talk it's usually not— I don't get a whole lot out of it. And it's really very hard. He might answer once every four times I call, and he literally never calls me. I don't know why I should fight so hard for a relationship that is so fraught.

***When you meet your biological father, how do you imagine the conversation going?*⁶⁷**

⁶⁶ More 12-step rhetoric.

⁶⁷ Compared to Paula, Kristen showed very limited imaginative construction during the interview, and I wondered if my questions had been too rigid. This question was intended as a variable to the experiment; an explicit invitation to explore a more imaginative space.

[She's crying.] I honestly have no idea. And I don't know likely it is that I will meet that person.

Um. Like I know some people that have found their biological fathers through the DNA sites, and the variation on stories is like pretty much what you'd expect, from 'I have no interest in seeing you' to they now take vacation with their biological family. It's that extreme.

And um, that dream scenario was actually with a woman who I met like six months before she found her biological family. So that was one of those things where we were all talking as she was going through that process, but she has a friend who's a genealogist who did that for her in her spare time, but she said that if you were to pay someone to do that it would've probably been like a thirty-thousand-dollar expense, because she worked on it for over a year as a side-project for a friend.

So I don't really have thirty grand to throw around. [Laughs.] But it is one of those things where I've said if what I do doesn't become fruitful— I mean, I don't even know if this person will still be alive by the time I would theoretically have enough money to do something like that.

But in terms of questions, I mean more than anything I would want to meet any relatives I was closely related to. Half-siblings.

I'm actually just as interested in meeting a half-sibling as meeting my actual biological father. Like, either would be amazing. So I guess I should be more hopeful that I could find—they're less likely to have died by the time I— [She laughs.]

Yeah I'm curious. Like what's the history of where the family came from, because I have it narrowed down by region but not by country. And then what sort of common interests run through most of that family. I'd be curious to know.

I mean I think I would get a lot out of even just a single dinner. Just like hearing how those people interact with each other. Yeah. I'm curious what everyone does for a living. Not in a financial sort of way. That's one of those questions that really bothers me too. I think a lot of people say, 'Well aren't you worried they'll think you're looking for money?' And I'm like, 'Why is that where everyone goes to??' In the grand scheme of things, knowing my biological heritage is ranked way higher than possibly getting some money.

I think obviously, ideally, it would be awesome if there was a sense of connection and a willingness to meet me in a relationship. I also understand that the worst case scenario would be that he has no interest. Even in most of those experiences, the bio-father is willing to share medical history. So even if just a minimum I got that out of it would still be better than what I have now. [Laughs.] Yeah.

Plus like a surname might be enough for me to research of that other information. But yeah, those are mostly. Those are the things I want to know.

CHAPTER THREE

I have fragments of a memory of one Christmas at my maternal grandparents' house. I don't remember that anything remarkable happened, just the fact that it did happen, which was itself remarkable.

It was remarkable because my grandparents were Jewish. They were not religious necessarily, but so culturally devout that they would never consider bringing a Christmas tree into their home, except this one time I remember they did. I don't think they even decorated it, and honestly I doubt they had anything to decorate it with, but I also clearly remember feeling like there just wasn't enough time. I remember everyone was rushing around and smiling, like elves in Santa's workshop. I remember it was the best Christmas I've ever had.

My mom has always said that with regards to my dad, every decision she made was to protect us, and I always assumed she was referring to the violence. I know he was violent; I still remember the hole he punched in the wall. But working on this project, and talking to my family about it, brought up new stories that shed light on, and complicated, those old ones.

"It wasn't just the violence she wanted to protect you from," my cousin told me. "It was the way he was always making you promises he wouldn't keep." I asked her to clarify, and she told me about this one time he'd promised to celebrate a special Christmas with us. "Christmas with all the trimmings," she said. "With a tree and presents and a ham, *and gumdrop skies!*"

And then my mom brought us over to his house on Christmas Eve, and he wouldn't answer the door.

In retrospect, I'm sure it was that one Christmas at my grandparents' house—my very last Christmas—but I don't remember any of the sad stuff. The sad stuff is completely gone, like I've edited it out, like it never happened. And even though the sad stuff colors the happy stuff, I'm really very happy that I know.

ANGEL MARTINEZ, 42
Technical Writer - Glendale, CA

Angel Martinez “found [her] father in a box of photos under [her] mom’s bed.” It was the first thing she told me during our pre-interview. She was 6 at the time, but she didn’t decide to start searching for him until she was 23—five months after he died.

When we met at her home in Glendale, she’d been busy packing. She and her partner Brian were moving to Sacramento for work. It’ll be the furthest she’s ever lived from her mother, who still lives in San Diego, where Angel grew up.

Amid the chaos of packing and moving, Angel still knew where the photos were, and retrieved them during our session. For her, the cool, comfortable, smiling faces in the photos were evidence of the kind of man her father had been, and way her parents had been together. Her parents dated for only 8 months, and never married. And for decades after their split, her mother wouldn’t talk about her dad, and Angel felt too guilty to push the subject.

After his death, the photos became the basis of Angel’s inquest into her father. She talked to her uncles and other people who had known him. More than anything, she told me, she just wanted to know what he was like.

The information she got was general, but it was still a relief: “Ok, so I don't come from like, a rapist or a murderer, or drug-addict, or a deadbeat,” she laughed. “I don't have demon blood in me, so we're good!”

While each of my narrators offers a unique story, for the purpose of this project, Angel’s story is perhaps the most different. If we think about the search for fathers as a search for narrative coherence—for historical information from which to construct it—the death of Angel’s father, before meeting him, limited the availability of the first-hand information. Neither Kristen nor Angel have met their biological fathers. But while Kristen’s story is full of dubious possibility, Angel’s story is explicit about the imaginative efforts she’s made to navigate this space, in the absence of possibility.

March 16, 2017, 11:15am

I remember it very distinctly.

I was six years old and my mom was out of the house—I don't know where she was—my grandparents were watching TV, and I was doing what I normally did: just occupying my time, by myself.

I crawled under [my mom's] bed, and I saw this old, beat-up cardboard box that I'd never seen before, so I pulled it all the way out. I opened the lid, and inside I saw a bunch of pictures—lots of pictures of my mom when she was young—and a little Ziplock bag. And then my eye caught the image of this man inside the bag, and I literally thought: *That's me!*

I knew instantly that I was looking at my father because I look exactly like him. So I opened up the bag, and I slowly poured through all of the pictures that he was in. He looked happy and handsome. I saw a couple pictures of him with my mother, looking like they were having fun, and I was just like, *Why?, you know? I don't understand what happened—I don't understand why he's not here.*⁶⁸

I felt really guilty after that, too. So I put the pictures back in the Ziplock, and I put all the evidence back in the box, and I shoved it all under the bed. I felt like I was betraying my mom. I felt like, if this is hidden under her bed, she doesn't want me to talk about it. If it's hidden under her bed, she doesn't want me to see it. And if I see it, I'm doing something bad. So I kept it a secret for years. For years.

I also distinctly remember, for years after that, looking in the mirror and hating my face. I hated my face because I looked exactly like him and he wasn't around. *Why can't I have a different face? Why can't I just look like my mom?*⁶⁹

It was a really traumatic moment for me. For a six-year-old. Because before that it was just—I remember leaning my head against the car window, driving around with my mom in her old '69 Ford Falcon, and anytime I would see a homeless person who was black—a homeless *man*—I would wonder to myself, *is that my father?*

Sometimes I would get up the courage to ask her, because I'd never seen a picture of him before that. 'No, baby, no. That's not him.' And then she just wouldn't say anything else. So I knew from her response, even as a child, not to open this discussion. Not to go there, not to ask her.⁷⁰ She would never get upset, but she would get irritated, you know? She just didn't want to answer the question.

⁶⁸ In the absence of any information from her family, this becomes the question she needs to invent stories to answer.

⁶⁹ Angel's biracial, but phenotypically black, like her father. Her mother is a very light-skinned Latina. I note this here to contextualize the story that follows.

⁷⁰ A familial expression of Passerini's silence.

Years after I found the photographs, and I just blew up at my mom: 'TELL ME ABOUT HIM!' [So she] told me that when I was two years old he asked to see me. And she said, 'Ok, meet me in the park.' She said that he had a blast with me—he played with me, held me. She told him 'I'll never stop you from seeing her, but I want money in my hand on the first of every month.' The way she tells the story is exactly like that:⁷¹ 'I want money in my hand on the first of every month.' And then she never heard from him again.

So *he met me*, but I don't remember it.

And that's all I got.⁷² So after that conversation, there was just years of just melancholy. And just hiding from the world. Wanting to hide. That was the predominant emotion of my youth: just wanting to hide. Immobile on my bed doing nothing. That was almost every day of junior high. And, you know, looking back, it was all about one thing: I just don't want to be rejected. And the conversation I had in my head was: Maybe it's because I'm ugly. Maybe it's because I'm fat. Maybe it's because— It's all me, you know what I mean? Something's wrong with me that he wouldn't want to be in my life.

Would you tell me a little bit about where and when you grew up, and a bit about your home?

I grew up during the Reagan era in San Diego, which is a Republican town. Military town, really. It's kind of an anomaly in Southern California. And I grew up in a very traditional, just, lower-middle class neighborhood, and I was bussed to school.

My mom went to school and worked full-time, *and* she raised me, so we lived with my grandparents for—well, for most of my life, actually, if I really break down the number of years. There were various times when cousins or uncles would come through the house, if they fell on hard times and needed a place to stay. So there would often be uncles on the floor or on the couches, stuff like that.

Most of my uncles had drug abuse problems, alcoholism. My grandfather was a hard man when he was younger. Kind of verbally abusive to my grandmother—and physically abusive—when they were younger. And growing up, he was really the person that I looked to as my father. He was the closest I had. And then my uncles took after him that way, because that was their example, you know? He was really harsh on them as children. And so there was a lot of drinking at the house. A lot of drug abuse. That's kind of what I grew up with—seeing a lot of—but then my mom is so anti-all of that. She was really my moral compass.

When I was a kid, I remember being asked by my English teacher in high school: 'Do you talk about morality with your parents?' I said, 'No, we've never spoken about it.' I'm the moral

⁷¹ Here, Angel acknowledges the construction of her mother's story about her father, which makes us aware of a kind of pre-existing script to parts of this narrative.

⁷² This is a clear offering of the raw information from which Angel constructed her childhood narrative of not being good enough.

replica of my mother and we've never spoken about it. It's just, you know. Me and my mom. So even within the context of living with my grandparents, when I was growing up, it was still very much her and I.

When did you start to realize that your home situation was different?

I didn't even know what to think—that was really the biggest issue. I didn't know what to think about not having a father. There wasn't an incident; it was more like an overall feeling. Like when my friends would talk about their fathers, I would have nothing to say. And so I tried not to think about it. I tried really hard not to think about it, for a long long time. And that just didn't work, so I thought about it *all* the time, and it preoccupied my mind. But no there was no one incident.

You know, my uncle—one of my uncles—told the story of my father coming to Christmas. The only time he came to Christmas. My father walked in the front door and my grandfather walked out the back. Because [my father] was black. Literally didn't come in the house the whole time. Wouldn't be in the house with my father.

So it really was like a fully—everybody knew him.⁷³

They knew him. They all knew him and they never spoke to me about him [until after he was dead]. It's— not cool.

How would you describe yourself when you were a kid? What did you like to do?

I was super introverted. Really withdrawn. There was only one other kid on my block, in my neighborhood, and she was much younger than me. She was my best friend on the block but being that much younger than me, we played very—what I would always perceive as very *young* games. So I stayed young-minded for a long time, and very sheltered. *Super* sheltered. Super shy.

I spent a lot of my youth in the VA hospital children's area. Being watched while my grandparents were at their appointments. It's weird. You're asking me about it, and I'm thinking about it, and yeah, that's kind of strange: I didn't have a lot of kid friends; I hung out with my mom and her adult friends; and I spent a lot of time in the VA hospital—That was my youth!

I made a lot of games up in my head, put it that way. Oh, I would pretend I was a banker, and my grandmother would buy me these receipt books and I would write receipts like, 'Here's your invoice, Grandma!' What kid does that? And I had a LOT of stuffed animals. A lot. And boy, they had full-on conversations, in my head.⁷⁴ Woo! Nobody should be alone that much.

⁷³ I asked this to get a better sense of the availability of accessible information about her father.

⁷⁴ Even with all of the stated imagination in her story and the ample silence around her father, Angel's narrative pretty much sticks to her experiences.

I was a really sick kid. A very *ill* child, so— You know the solitariness goes with that I think. I was in the hospital every two weeks for years with just really bad asthma, where I would just stop breathing, or really bad allergic reactions. Surgeries on my ears for ear infections. So, you know— Having to take care of a sick kid while you're holding down all of these things—I think it made [my mom] a little hyper-vigilant.⁷⁵ So then she just like encapsulated me. From everything, you know? Which is a natural reaction, I think.

I was perfectly normal and healthy until I was five years old. And then when I was five, I just got sick. To this day I can't figure it out. It's an idiopathic presentation of the way asthma comes on. I've been to specialists— it doesn't just— you're not normal and healthy and then all of a sudden you can't breathe for the rest of your life.

So being in the healing arts,⁷⁶ I've delved into this as well: the psychosomatic, emotional basis of disease. And, you know, asthma is a disease of smothering. It's called 'smother love.' And so, I think her guilt just enveloped me. She isolated me and kept me sheltered from the world but in a smothering type of way because she just felt SO bad that I didn't have a dad, and loved me so so much, and wanted to protect me so so much, that the closest I can get to thinking where it came from was that. Just an *I need autonomy somehow and I'm going to make myself sick to get it*. You know?

Because that's a very real response, you know? All the Louise Hay⁷⁷ and self-help books, the psychosomatic stuff—they all say the same thing with asthma. It's the smother-love. Being *too* sheltered, too smothered with love, so.

I get bouts of it once in awhile, but since I've been here in LA, on my own, not really. Not really. You know I moved to LA, and I really haven't had very many asthma problems at all. No, my asthma pretty much stopped as soon as I moved up here [from San Diego].

That's amazing, you'd think it would be the opposite.⁷⁸

Yeah, you'd think the opposite! So for me it really has less to do with the air quality. It's totally emotional. I was 35 years old, and I told [my mom] I was gonna move up here, and it took two weeks—it was very sudden. I said, 'Mom, you don't understand. If I don't leave now, I'm gonna

⁷⁵ This is a projected causal narrative, the kind we saw frequently in Paula's interview, but I didn't push back on this because, one, she used "I think," which again, demonstrates a more conscious construction, and two she has a background in holistic healing, and corroborates this idea with literature from inside her community.

⁷⁶ Before transitioning into her current work, Angel taught massage therapy for twelve years.

⁷⁷ Louise Hay is a self-help / motivational author. Her most notable book is called *You Can Heal Your Life*, about the power of positive thinking.

⁷⁸ There were a lot of fantastical implications to her perspective here, for instance, that she gave herself asthma, and that it could be cured simply by moving to a city famous for its poor air quality. Still, I wanted to acknowledge the possibility of such implications while encouraging her to expound on those ideas.

resent you for the rest of my life. I love you, but I'm gonna resent you. So I gotta go, so that I don't end up hating you for tying me to you forever.' And now I've had some space, I've had some time. And now it's like ok, now *I* want to invite her back into my life, you know what I mean? So we'll live close—maybe not in the same house—but close.

She's a very emotional woman, and you would never know. Just. I think of my mom as the ocean. Really, as the ocean. Just deep wells of emotion. But it's hard to get it out of her. And it's the same with talking to her about my father, you know what I mean? It's very difficult to get that out of her. But extremely hard-working. Hardest working woman I know. I'm sure a lot of people say that about their moms but. That's what I remember her as. Being a hard worker. And always providing for me.

So when you finally did talk to her about it, how did you approach her? Was there something that happened that made you decide it was the time?⁷⁹

I really didn't talk to her mom about it until after I found out he was dead. And the only reason I talked to her about it was that I needed his birth date to find him. And it was very abrupt. I was very abrupt with her.

I'd belonged to a spiritual community at the time.⁸⁰ And one of my mentors in the spiritual community said something to me that just blew everything open. She goes, 'I just want to point something out to you. Something that I've noticed since you've been here a few years.'

I was trying to get out of the work that we were supposed to do. It was a ranch, so you know, we're picking fruit and maintaining the ranch—it's physical—and I was trying to get out of it because my back was out. And she goes, 'I just want you to know that I've noticed your back goes out every Father's Day.'

And I was like—lightning bolt! [She laughs.] You know what I mean? Like, why does it take somebody else to figure that out? And I'm talkin', not just like back *hurt*. Like, every Father's Day I would be laid out unable to walk, unable to move. For a week! And then it was over. It was every Father's Day, and I just didn't put it together.

It was just too striking, and so it was like ok, I can't avoid this anymore, and I can't be laid out anymore. So I made a pact with my body. I said *ok, I'll look for him, I will ask my mom*. And that's when I started looking. And uh, I didn't really know what to do, so I just went online and started typing in his name. You know, you come across the Find Your People searches so—

⁷⁹ This felt like a good way to ask her for the logic of her strategy for learning about her father from her mother, which might help me get a more specific idea of the way they exchange information.

⁸⁰ It seems important for me to acknowledge my own bias here. This line cued me to understand that everything that comes after this is from the perspective of a Believer, someone looking for meaning beyond the worldly meaning; more clearly and directly than people who have been coached to do so in 12-step. Consequently, I hold back on my questions here.

I was at work one day and I finally just sprang for it. I think it was like thirty bucks. I punched in the birthdate that my mother had given me. I remember the sound of the click. It was an old-school mouse, so it was the heavy click—you know what I'm talking about. That super heavy click. *Click.*

It's thinking. The wheel's spinning. And then it pops him up: 'DECEASED.' Born in Ohio, died in New Mexico—in April of that same year.

And I just— It was like a— You know if you get really close to a tuning fork that's just been struck, you can feel the vibrations? It was like a very discordant tuning fork vibrating through my whole body.

And I was just rooted in my chair. I physically couldn't move. I couldn't orchestrate my limbs, you know, going any direction. I just kinda sat there in shock for a little while. And then I went to the bathroom. I didn't cry. And then I came out, and I was kinda mopey, and then I went back into the restroom.

And that's when this woman, Urlene Richardson realized something's up. I remember her walking me out from the office to the outside, and it was like a procession it was so slow. I just couldn't move. I was dragging my legs. And the second that she put her arm around my shoulders I lost it. I just lost it. I started bawling like a crazy person. In the middle of this computer school, where I was working as a technical writer.

And then we finally make it outside and I was just— I was crushed. I was crushed. We made it outside to the cafeteria, and she did her best. Really the best thing she did for me was being there at the moment. The physical touch, just comforting me that way.

Every time I've talked about it with people it's just like, 'Oh, well, you're probably better off not knowing him.'

I don't, why you— I understand that's probably all you can think of to say, but it's really a lousy thing to say. Why would you tell me I'm better off? Maybe I'm not better off. Maybe it would've been awesome to have a fucking father, you know? Maybe it would have been great. Why are you telling me I'm better off? You have no idea, you just don't know what to say.⁸¹

And so I stopped talking about it. Because I would always get that response. *Well, my dad abused me and blah blah blah and you're probably better off that you didn't have a dad so.* I just felt like wow, there's no place for me to even process this.

⁸¹ Here, Angel is responding to 'them' through 'me.' I have italicized this because it is an imagined dialogue, not a quote.

Do you understand the abandonment issues? [Laughs.] Ya know? There's no reason for him just not wanting to be in your life? No, you don't get that. You don't get that. You don't understand what that's like. So stop telling me I'm better off. You have no idea how many fucking times I was looking for my father on my back with my legs open, you know? Don't talk to me about 'I would've been better off.' I would have been better off having a dad in my life. I would've been better off having somebody to tell me I'm beautiful. So I wouldn't go looking for that in the wrong places. Awful things. Awful things that I did to myself.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you. For. Um. Yeah, I know.⁸²

It's where we are.

And hopefully we make it out.

Yeah. It really— That day was really the day that everything shifted. And that's when, really, the healing started. Because that's when I first really addressed the issue in the first place.

How did you decide it was time to talk to your mom?

A couple years after that, I did what's called a 'tableau experience,' which is a psychodrama experience facilitated by psychotherapists. 'Family Sculpting,' it's called.⁸³ What happens is that you're in a group, and the facilitator asks you questions about your life, and you walk up [to the front of the group] and pick people to play members of your family. And you pick somebody to play you, so you can watch yourself.

And there's something that happens in the group. Like, they *become* the people—they become *you*! So you can watch yourself from an outsider's perspective, and see the dynamics of everything. The facilitator told us that it changes things in the real world. And what came out of it was my mother's overwhelming guilt, which I had never been privy to. I'd never known that she felt that way.⁸⁴

I went home that night from the family sculpting and told her what I did. I told her the question that I asked: 'Why can't I trust?' Why can't I rationalize myself into it? What's holding me

⁸² I'd be remiss if I didn't note that I was crying here, and that Angel reached out to comfort me.

⁸³ Family Sculpting is a form of family therapy, where a psychodrama is initiated to remove individuals from their life experiences with the intention of showing them how they may have been impacted by a traumatic event, from the outside.

⁸⁴ There's no doubt these giant silences in our family histories leave ample room to project into, but as a matter of explicating the narrator's method, it's useful to note that while Angel challenges her mother's narrative about her father's family (they're deadbeats and the like), she takes the insights gleaned from this imaginative exercise as historical fact.

back?⁸⁵ And she just burst into tears. She just cried and cried and cried and cried. I'd never seen my mother cry like that. Barely ever saw her cry to begin with, but [especially not] like that. Bawling and bawling, in waves that just kept coming out. Wave after wave of emotion.

And I was really stunned. For me, the work had been done at the family sculpting session. I went through my tears there. So I came home and just listened to her. And I felt so bad. I felt like I just wanted to take all of that from her. I just wanted to lift it off of her, so she wouldn't have to carry it anymore. Because. [She chokes up.] I mean— she did the best she could. And she did a good job. [Laughs.] So.

I've been really working on that with her. Telling her how awesome she is and telling her what a good job she's done. Telling her she doesn't have anything to worry about. I've really made a concerted effort to try to keep doing that. And that was the day that really broke all of it open.

When you started looking for your dad, did you have a sense of what you were looking for?⁸⁶

You know, in the beginning, I just said to myself: *I'm looking for his contact information*, and I really wasn't thinking beyond that. I'd never had these daydreams of what I would say to my father. I never allowed myself to. I could really only muster the one step at a time.⁸⁷

[My mom] gave me this image of [him and] his family as deadbeats, people she didn't want them influencing me—people she didn't want me to be like. And my uncles gave me a different image, I just had to be pointed about [the way I asked them about him]. I had to ask them: “Did you know him? What did you think of him? What was he like?” And they said he was a cool dude. They liked him. [She laughs.]⁸⁸

My uncles gave me this image of my father as a really laid back, funny, fun guy. The guy everybody wants to be like. Man's-man type of thing. And that eased a lot of my tension. *Ok, so I don't come from like, a rapist or a murderer, or drug-addict, or a deadbeat. He's just a normal human being.* [Laughs.] *I don't have demon blood in me, so we're good!*

After that, I became softer with my mom. I wasn't as aggressive. For so long I felt that she just didn't want to tell me anything. Trying to get any information was like pulling teeth. So I would get mad, and I would be aggressive with her about it.

⁸⁵ This part is so interesting to me because she is literally illustrating the process of looking outside of herself for a narrative that will provide causal answers to her psychological questions / resolve her psychological issues. In fact, this whole practice is beautifully illustrates Kahneman and Tversky's assertion that people prefer stories to facts.

⁸⁶ After her description of the family sculpting exercise, I wanted to give her a chance to talk about this emotional search more explicitly.

⁸⁷ Kristen basically gave the same answer.

⁸⁸ Evidence of Angel weighing different historical sources against each other.

But I softened. I really softened with her. And then the conversations became much easier. She was still uncomfortable, but she would do it. She saw that it meant a lot to me, and then I started prefacing the conversations with, 'Mom, I'm not doing this or asking these questions because I think any less of you. You're my mom, you're always my number one.' And that softened it too. That made it easier for her to open up. Helped absolve her of that guilt, you know?

'It's true: we never moved. He always knew where I was, you're right about that. That's him. And I don't blame you for that.' She was still timid, and she was still scared. And hesitant. But she would elaborate. She would tell me things.

Just the simplest of things, like, 'How long were you guys together, Mom?' I didn't even know how long. 'Was it a fling?' *I'm a November baby, so I know what y'all were doing on Valentine's Day, ok? Tell me I don't know what's up.* [She laughs.] *I know that day you got kicked out of your house is because you didn't come home.* (She got kicked out at 27 because one night she didn't come home to my grandfather's super traditional Mexican household.) *27 years old? Doesn't matter, you're still the baby.* So she got kicked out for three days, because she didn't come home. Valentine's! So the simplest thing like *God, how long were you guys together?* They were together only eight months.⁸⁹

The craziest thing! Ok, this is my third relationship, ever! (Long-term relationship.) First two boyfriends? I was with them for eight months. I didn't know the eight-month thing until after. WHAT?! I mean it's just like— it's in this DNA, it's in the cells. Like we're just born with all of this baggage.⁹⁰

I asked her things like: 'What was he like?' And that's finally when she started telling me, 'You know, he was very intelligent. And that's why I liked him. He was a smart guy; he had plans. He had goals. Yeah, he was the custodian, and so he mopped the floors, but it was a technical-type of custodian.' (He was like custodian to science equipment.) And so she liked his intelligence.

He made her laugh, which is a big thing. (Brian makes me laugh, everyday, and it's huge.) He was fun; she felt very relaxed around him; she liked his family; and they were together eight months. That's really all I have. I don't have a very accurate picture.

But like I said, I never daydreamed about *Why weren't you there for me?* Because that was never my question. My question was always *Why wasn't I good enough?*

⁸⁹ In this section, Angel basically spells out how she used historical information to reconstruct a historical narrative.

⁹⁰ In *this* section, Angel takes the narrative a step further, projecting the *meaning* of the history outward to explain her own behavior.

CHAPTER FOUR

By all accounts, my dad was an incredible runner, although I never actually saw him run.

I grew up telling people he qualified for the Olympic trials, because that's what my mom told me (because that's what he told her). And when I got a little older, I'd offer it as an explanation to my soccer coaches, who were dumbfounded by my speed. *That was what he left me*, I'd think, *his name and his legs*—like I was a pedigree racehorse; like I was sired by Secretariat.

Then over a decade later, I found out it probably wasn't true.

In 2012, the year I found Aaron and Jeremy, I also found Episode 18 of *This American Life*, which was produced by my cousin in 1996, and featured my mom telling a story about my dad. Mom had mentioned it off-handedly, as an explanation for why she didn't like the show. "They take people's stories and *use* them," she said. Something vague like that.

I was interested in radio production, so it seemed weird that nobody had mentioned it to me. But when I pulled up the episode on their website, I started to understand why. The theme of the episode was "Liars," and it began like this:

...[W]e were together for a couple of years before we got married. And he would tell me these things, and things just kept not adding up. One of the instances that I can think of is that one day... he told me that his mother had died. And I gave him tea and sympathy for weeks. We didn't even really leave the house.

Then he moved in with me, and we started getting letters from where I knew his mother lived with his mother's initials on it. And he said, *Well, my mother had nine brothers and sisters, and this is coming from my aunt. And my aunt has exactly the same initials that my mother had.* And one day, I just opened one of those letters. And I read it. It was like, 'Dear son...' (And it didn't say, 'Dear son, I'm writing to you from my grave.') 'Dear son, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Love, Mom.' Hmm, this is interesting. What about these letters? *Well, these letters were written to me before she died.* 'Oh! She postmarked them from purgatory?'

And the lies only got crazier from there. At one point, my dad disappeared for months, and when he reappeared, he said he'd been held captive by the mafia. (Then, a month later, my

parents received a box containing the clothes he'd left with, and a letter from a woman who called herself his wife—apparently, my dad said she was “a mafia princess.”)

I'd never heard any of these stories, and I wanted to talk about them. But I knew my mom had been mortified by the success and proliferation of the story—which ran every April Fool's Day for years—so it took a while before I worked up the courage to talk to her about it.

In the meantime, I reconsidered everything I thought I knew about my dad, which ultimately wasn't very much. So when I finally approached my mom about the episode, I questioned her in the same way I've question my narrators: “How did you know he qualified for the Olympic trials?”

“He told me,” she said, and immediately understood that it, too, was probably a lie. Even though they ran together every day, and she could see what an impressive runner he was, she admitted that she'd never actually seen him finish a race. “Sometimes you want so much to believe somebody, even if you know that they're a liar, that you try to keep from putting them in a position where they're going to lie. So you don't ask them anything,” she explained.

At the time, my mom's conclusion would seem perfectly logical—the mind derives meaning from the way information is presented, and within a limited scope, all of the information presented to her indicated an affirmative—but in hindsight, it seems totally preposterous. So, in preparing to write this chapter introduction, I started to search databases of marathon finishers in Tucson, where they'd lived and ran. My dad said he'd won a handful of races when they were together, and I wanted to see if I could verify any of them. Unfortunately, most of the race result databases I found didn't go back as far as I needed them to, so I actually couldn't disprove it.

I did, however, discover a single race result for my half-brother, Jeremy. He came in first place.

BRYAN WHALEN, 32

Headhunter / Creative Writer – Silver Lake, CA

Over the years, Bryan heard a lot of stories about his dad, although generally they weren't told to him directly. Bryan's mother is in Alcoholics Anonymous, and "a lot of it has to do with storytelling," he said. She used to take him to meetings when he was young; that's where he started to pick up on what happened.

Bryan has a PhD in creative writing, and an acute awareness of his own narrative entanglements. Consequently, there are times when he stops our interview to point out a problem with his story: events or perspectives that may have been conflated; narrative inconsistencies that may boil down to a semantic disagreement; moments where narrating the spirit of the past may be complicated by his present vantage; and other moments where he may have just used his imagination to fill the gaps in the story. He shows an acute awareness of how family mythology is produced and does his very best not to perpetuate it.

More than anything, Bryan struck me as deliberate. He was kind and generous, like someone who had spent a lot of time meditating on the type of person he wanted to be in the world and decided this would be it. There was a distinct absence of cliché in the way he told his story, or in his analysis of it.

Last year, Bryan drove across the country to meet his father. On the way, he stopped to interview his mom, his half-sister, and his step dad—all of whom contributed their own stories about his father, which Bryan and his filmmaker friend captured on tape. They're currently editing the interviews into a short documentary.

When I arrived, he was working on his book project: a novel about a young man spending a summer with his estranged father. The lead characters are modelled after him and his father, he told me, but the scenario is imagined. He only teared up once during our session, during the beginning, but it was hard to assess what exactly brought it up. Perhaps the tears may have been left over from something he was writing when I arrived.

Bryan's father's name is Mike, but you'll notice Bryan occasionally calls him "Bruce"—the name of the father in the book he's writing.

June 20, 2017, 1pm

To a certain extent, when you get older, you realize that your parents are just human beings. That they have their own conception of their lives. And as the only child to a mother who really raised me more than anybody, our stories were very much linked.⁹¹

[Mom] was really my only source of information about Mike. And I guess I would have seen the world through what she told me. She's a very sweet woman, and she told me she didn't like to talk about him when I was a kid because she didn't want to influence me. She really wanted me to have my own opinion, but I still picked up on how she felt about him—the awkwardness around that. My mom is in AA, and a lot of that has to do with storytelling. So I remember growing up, going to meetings, and my ear being really tuned to when she was speaking. Picking up on the story that way.

I also remember the story slightly changing over time. When I was really little, I didn't ask a lot of questions about Bruce [i.e., Mike], so I think I just filled in the gaps and assumed he left us. But then as I got older, I realized that we left him.

And I know—I knew he wasn't a good guy. For a few reasons. One, I thought I was a great kid, and so if he didn't want anything to do with me, then there must've been something wrong with him. Two, I knew that as a father you're not supposed to *not* show up in court to claim custody. Three, I knew he had a drinking problem.⁹²

And that kind of leads into— later in life, mom's story started to include abuse. And I don't really remember that being part of the story when I was a kid. And maybe she was protecting me from it. Or maybe, the more she told the story, the more it changed. And then I would write about it, and she would read some of the writing, and then this mythos started to be created around the story.

I'm sorry, can we rewind for a sec? I forgot to ask you to introduce yourself. Would you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about how you got your name?

My name is Bryan Whalen, I'm 32 years old. I live in Los Angeles, California, and we're talking about my father. His name is Bruce.

No— Oh my God, I'm mixing him up with a character in my book!

⁹¹ Right out of the gate, Bryan asserts this narrative entanglement with his mom.

⁹² He's really very good at spelling out how and what historical information shaped his perspective.

His name is Mike Carlton. So I was born Bryan Matthew Carlton. But sometime after my mom left my dad, and the court proceedings had been dealt with, she switched my name to her maiden name. So my whole life I've known myself as Bryan Whalen.⁹³

Mom left Bruce [Mike] when I was nine months old.

Is Bruce your father-character's name?

OH MY GOD, YES! Yeah, that's really wild. I'm really struggling to separate! I just was in the book a second ago, so— Mike.

After I met *Mike*—I met him last year, last December—I remember talking to one of my uncles about this question of abuse, and my uncle said, 'I don't think she ever mentioned that to me, because I would have beaten the shit out of him if I'd known.'

That's more or less exactly what I'm looking for. These questions about how we form these images of our fathers in their absence. Had your mom specifically told you that she didn't like talking about him? You'd mentioned that before. Was that a vibe you'd gotten?

It was stated, but much later in life. Memory is all over the place, too, so I don't remember her saying that as a kid. But I don't remember specifically *asking* her about Bruce either. I remember it more as a vibe.

God, I did it again! *Mike!* I don't remember specifically asking her about *Mike*, but there was a vibe that it made her uncomfortable to talk about him.

It was later, when I was asking about my childhood, that she told me she didn't talk to me about him because she didn't want to influence me.⁹⁴ That's not to say she wouldn't answer questions I had, if that makes sense. Anything I asked, she was pretty open about. She tried to give me the story and answer my questions. But I don't remember asking as a kid. I do remember asking as an adolescent, when I started to get more curious. And definitely I asked again last year.

Did you ever ask specifically about what lead to your mom leaving? If there was an incident in particular.

[This answer] is definitely tied up with my mom's stories and my own storytelling, so— I think the physical abuse [in the story] is a little bit blurry.⁹⁵

⁹³ I really liked beginning these interviews with this name question because they invited my narrators to muse on the politics of identity that often comes with bearing the name of someone you don't know. Bryan picked up on that immediately, as reflected in the untraditional language he uses to introduce himself: "I've known myself as Bryan Whalen."

⁹⁴ Consequently, Bryan has to confront silence, instead.

⁹⁵ At the expense of offering any kind of direct narratives, Bryan pauses to highlight the narrative entanglements in his answers.

When I talked to Mike [last year], he was shocked that she had said that. But he also said he may have grabbed her: ‘I may have shaken her, but I never hit her.’ So— I think it would've been one of those really-not-ok situations. Definitely. I think he had a temper, and he would've grabbed her *hard*. He might not have *punched* her but—⁹⁶

I also know that there was— There's a story Mom tells about him pulling a plant out of the wall—it was hanging from one of those macramé things—and throwing it across the room, and the pot shattering. I was crawling on the floor and she realized it wasn't a safe environment for me. That was kind of a breaking point.

There's also this other really great story (and I say ‘great’ because I can see the colors): She had bought this variety pack of different eye shadows. And she loved it. We didn't have a ton of money, but she said it wasn't expensive and she'd been looking at it for a long time and she really wanted it. And then when he came home, he got upset with her for spending their money, you know? That kind of thing. I think he'd just get upset over anything, but that's what it was that time. So he just grabbed the pack of eye shadows and he threw it into the wall.

I always imagine all these colors going everywhere— all these powders.

But if you were to ask my mom about the breaking point, she would say it was the macramé planter and realizing *oh man, this is not where I want to raise my son*.

These stories—were these the ones you heard in her AA sessions? Or were these things she told you directly?

They definitely blend. The more you tell them, the more they change. And then taking them and turning them into my own stories, that changes them again.⁹⁷ But she's definitely specifically told me about those outside of AA.

I don't remember them striking me very much. I don't remember caring about Mike as a kid. I had friends who had similar stories who were really interested in finding their fathers. But I was never interested in [him]. Mom always made sure to tell me that I was great. She didn't necessarily say that it was his loss or something like that, but that's what she was trying to teach me and I eventually did pick that up.

There's also a story that I just heard from her when I was conducting interviews last year. She says when I was five— [He laughs.] I apologize, this is heartbreaking. When I was five, I blew out the candles on my birthday cake and I told her that I wished for a father, and she was just like ‘Oh.’ [Laughs, again.] But I don't remember necessarily being very shaken up about it as a kid, or reacting to those stories in a very emotional way, or anything like that.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Here, we can see how the semantics of the story have the potential to drastically change its meaning.

⁹⁷ More evidence of Bryan's self-awareness in the process of constructing his narrative.

⁹⁸ Here, Bryan offers a nod to the emotional block between his present vantage and his childhood vantage.

When we talked on the phone you told me that it wasn't until you were 25 that you got really interested in searching. Do you remember what had happened or was it more gradual?

When I was 6 or 7, Mom married Tom, and that was a really strained relationship—for them and for me. When they divorced, when I was 27— I think they were married for like 20 years, actually— there were a lot of things going on in my life: I was living in Australia; I was working on my Ph.D.; and I was separated (by distance) from the girl I'd been dating for a really long time. Mom was getting divorced from Tom, and I remember that being a really good thing.

It was a good thing because she wasn't in love, and hadn't been for years. For years she'd just been putting up with less-than. But months after their divorce, I remember talking to my mom on the phone—she was here in California—and something broke in me.

I just remember saying, 'I'm so sad. And I've been sad for so long.' And I didn't necessarily know why at that moment. I mean, I thought it was because of my girl being overseas, but I figured out that I'd been thinking a lot about Mike, and that with Tom gone—

It was really interesting because even though that relationship was strained, [Tom] had been there, you know? And it just was so clear that he wasn't there anymore. They were divorced, so he was now my *ex* step-dad. And it really clicked with me at that point that my mom was my mother *and* my father. That she had raised me, that she had been there the whole time. And all of a sudden I felt this loss in the sense of— It wasn't that I wished that things had been different or anything like that. It was just this understanding that everyone around me, or many people around me, had an experience that I couldn't— That I would never understand.

I'd never taken that on. I'd always been like *I'm great, this is great, I was raised under good circumstances, and I've traveled to many places*⁹⁹—I'd traveled to Australia, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, and I'd seen how many stories other people have and what kind of lives they had—and I just wouldn't allow myself to really feel any sort of pity— But it clicked in me then that it *was* sad, in a sense, just because there's this experience that you'll never have. And that just—that just sucks.

I still didn't really do anything about it. I don't remember starting to research Mike or anything like that. I still hadn't met Barbara, who's my half-sister. And the only contact we'd had with him at that point was an email he'd written to Mom in like 2010, asking for her to release him from back-child support payments that he'd never paid.

He had prostate cancer, and I think he was having a tough time getting benefits because he essentially had a criminal charge [on his record] for not having paid child support for so long. He was asking that she contact Ventura County to have him released from those payments.

⁹⁹ Bryan explains the process of confronting his own narrative, in light of this huge change to his family dynamic.

So all of a sudden I had his email, his home address, and his phone number. And I'd never had anything like that. And then, probably maybe nine months later, I was hanging out with my buddy on the Gold Coast of Australia, and he was telling me about *his* dad, who he didn't know. His dad was from South Africa and his mom wouldn't give him the contact details. And for him, this was more of a thing that he thought about.

He said, 'If I had his contact details, I'd reach out to him!' And I was like, 'Well I've got *my* dad's number.' And he was like, 'You should call him!' And I was like, 'OK!' [Laughs.] I think we were drinking wine—

And so I just remember stepping out onto the balcony, and calling Mike for the first time from the number on that email. Talking to him for the first time ever. And that was really funny because the first thing he said was, 'OH! Bryan! I've always hoped that this day would come!' The second thing he said was, 'I looked you up on Facebook, but I wasn't sure you'd want to be my friend.' [Laughs.]

So then we were Facebook friends. But there was no— it didn't go anywhere from there. Maybe he wrote to me a few times? I could easily look it up. I could count how many correspondences there were. At that point I think it was just straight up curiosity. We wrote a few times back and forth, kinda just light stuff, and then one time he didn't write back and I was just like *fuck that*, you know? I'm not going to invest in this just to get let down. So I let that go. And then in 2012, [Mom divorced Tom and] everything came up again.

In 2015, I moved back to California after living abroad for ten years, and I knew I wanted to meet Mike. But it wasn't at the top of my priority list. I knew he lived in Georgia, but it always seemed really weird to me to go out of my way to meet this guy who doesn't even pick up the phone to call, who's never been there—when I have family up north who I don't get to see often enough; when I have friends who I don't get to see; when I've got a million other things to do. It wasn't a priority.

I started working for a company that was all about pain in different people's lives, and how it manifests in a lot of different ways. They did a lot of documentary work, so you could talk to someone about fibromyalgia, or you could talk to someone about their parent's death when they were a kid—it could be anything. Whatever their story was, whatever they had been through.

Then the night of my birthday last year—my 32nd birthday—I was talking with my good buddy who's a documentary filmmaker and we decided to do this. We were just walking on the beach (and drinking again), and he was like, 'You should do this. You should go meet him now, and I'll document everything.'

The next morning, I told my whole family. I just started talking about it because then I knew I would do it.

So we started setting that up last year during the holiday season. I was going to interview my mom; and Barbara, my half-sister; then I'd fly to Texas to interview Tom; and then drive from Texas to Georgia to meet Mike for the first time.

When you decided to start looking, and you started interviewing people, I assume you talked to your mom about it. I'm curious about how that confrontation went, and how she took it. How she felt about it.

In the interview with Mom, I asked her how she felt about [the project] and she said ‘Part of me feels like a mama-bear.’ Like, ‘I just want to wrap my arms around you and not let you get hurt again. But the other part of me is really proud and excited for you, that you're pushing directly toward this fear.’¹⁰⁰ This thing that you've been wanting to do—on some level—your entire life.’

It's hard to speak objectively about mom. Even though we didn't talk a lot about him as a kid, and she would have definitely wanted to protect me from him, and there's no doubt in my mind that she's happy, in a sense, that there was never shared custody—and frankly I am too. If I had told her at 12 or 13 that I wanted to go meet him, I think she would have facilitated that. She just wanted what's best for me, and if I made it clear that that was a priority, she would have helped in any way she could. That's— that's what I think.

I never heard her say ‘Fuck Mike.’ It's always— she's really— she's really AA. [Laughs.] She's like, ‘He wasn't a great man, but he gave me two of my greatest gifts: He gave me you, and he gave me my sobriety.’ Because he was the one that suggested they go to AA. And she stuck with it; she's still sober. So she's like that.

My half-sister, Barbara's story is pretty different from mine because she remembers growing up with Mike, and she remembers when he left. She also remembers him coming back into her life, and she remembers me as a baby. She remembers she was there when, or, soon after they brought me home from the hospital. And she remembers being fascinated with me. She said Mom just sat there staring at me for hours, lovingly.

That's definitely one of the best things that's come from the story, later in life. That reunion with this sibling that I didn't grow up with but who I'm really close to now.

How did you find out about Barbara?¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ I was so moved by this idea of “pushing towards fear” that after my interview with Bryan, I called my mom and told her I'd decided to find my father. I didn't realize the sentiment was based on 12-step philosophy until I started reading up on it later. Here, he's quoting his mom, and in retrospect, he nods to the AA connection a few lines later (when he describes her as “really AA”), but he also echoes this mantra later, to explain how he's different from his father.

¹⁰¹ This question interrupted the flow of the narrative, but it seemed necessary for the purpose of tracking the *process* of constructing the narrative.

So she saw that Mike and I had become Facebook friends, and she looked me up. We tried to meet up for years, but I was abroad. And then, when she saw that I'd moved back home, she wrote again. And I just wrote back to her and we set up a time to meet.

She knew Mike as well. Her story is really similar to mine, but really different as well. There's more about that, I can tell you interesting things about that. One of the most interesting things—Ok so first off. Mike's had three wives. His second wife is Barbara's mom.

So is Barbara younger than you are?

She's older than I am.

So your mom was the third wife.

The third. But he's had four because he's married again. [Long pause, assessing the best way to proceed.] Oh god. It's not that convoluted but it is.¹⁰²

Ok, so essentially Barbara is older than I am by like four years. And like I said, she remembers Mike. She remembers growing up with him, and she *idolized* him. Completely idolized him. Just like Mom said: he was cool, he was handsome, he drove a sports car, he was a pilot—she remembers going on flights with him over the Channel Islands. She just remembers adoring him.

But one thing that came up was that he was still married to her mom when he met my mom. And this whole time, Barbara thought that my mom knew that he was married. I knew that wasn't—that's not like my mom; it just didn't make any sense. So I asked her about it and she just said, 'Yeah, I know. He told me he was getting divorced when we met, but he wasn't.'

Mom remembers going to his house one time to— Mike wanted to get his stuff and Barbara's mom was just like throwing shit. And it was like really violent, or just scary. Barbara remembers that too. I would've been the baby in the backseat, and she would've been the little toddler in the house. So it makes sense from Mom's perspective; she thought *oh, she's just harboring animosity.*¹⁰³

Mike shared custody with Barbara's mom, so she would go and visit him. She remembers going down to the house when my mom was already gone, and she remembers spending a summer with him. And then all of a sudden, she remembers he was just gone.

At one point he disappeared for years. And then she's in high school, and she gets a call from her aunt or something that Mike is gonna pick her up. Like, out of nowhere. And he comes to the school and they're hanging out for the day, and she just said it was so weird. And she remembers

¹⁰² In less than a minute, Bryan says his father had three wives, and then four. It's one of the only times we see him struggling to push forward in the narrative, and I think it's because he's having to juggle different timelines of varying priority. This fourth wife has no bearing on Bryan's narrative, so the fact of her existence is almost extraneous to the story.

¹⁰³ This section reflects the collection and sorting of multiple accounts into a single narrative.

he wasn't anything like she remembered as a kid. He was just like a haggard man who'd been in prison, she found out, for awhile. And all of a sudden this illusion just burst. I think after that he just disappeared again.

She was really screwed up for a while, she said. At one point, she was getting married to her first husband and she wanted Mike to be there. She doesn't know why, she just did. She says right before she walked down the aisle with him, he told her that he was really sorry, and that he knew he hadn't been there, but that he wanted to be there from then on. And then he just disappeared again. She said it was just heartbreaking.

When I spoke with Tom, he and mom had been divorced since 2012. That divorce was not easy for him, and for a second, it felt like our relationship was going to break because of it. But when I went to visit him— [Chuckles.] He's such a sweet man. Even though he was a terror growing up with, he's turned into a sweet old man.

This is what he said: 'I don't care what anyone says. I don't care what your mom says or what you think. I don't care. I'm your father.' Like, 'When people ask me how many kids I have I say three.' (Because he has two from his first marriage.) And he just made that abundantly clear. 'That guy's not your father—I am.' And, 'I know it was strained growing up, but that's just how it is and I don't care what anyone says.'

I'm just laying the groundwork for something else.¹⁰⁴ So leaving that conversation, I still was like, *That was really sweet but I was raised by my mom.* You know what I mean? She taught me how to shave. Do you know what I mean? As a symbol. Yeah— [touches his face and realizes that his facial hair is in a bit of a state] which I don't do. [Laughs.]

And then we went and met Mike.

I sat with him for— I don't know— three hours? In his kitchen just drinking coffee and talking. Asking *hard* questions. I tried to curtail my anger but I didn't go easy. I asked him, 'Don't you think it's a little bit weird that I'm 32 and I'm knocking on your door, and you've never once reached out to knock on mine?'

It was really weird. Going into it, I'd imagined that I would knock on his door, but his door was barred by this small gate to keep the dogs in. And the gate was zip-tied, so [when I got there] I just had to kind of call out like 'Hello!' and then the dogs started barking and then he came to the door.

And it was essentially like, 'Hey Mike, how's it going?' And he was like, 'Hey, thanks for comin out!' And then I said something like, 'I'm pretty nervous—I bet you're nervous too.' And he said,

¹⁰⁴ Again, evidence that Bryan is doing his best to be transparent about his narrative construction.

‘I didn't know how to greet you! Do we shake hands? Do we hug?’ And that was funny because it was totally what I'd been thinking, and I'd already decided to keep things kind of professional. Then I just patted his dogs, and we went in.

I talked to him about the abuse. At certain times, he tried to say, ‘You know, it's more important that the mother is in a child's life than the father.’ And I said, ‘Sure, but that doesn't mean you can just give them up. As a parent you have a responsibility to raise your child. Don't you understand that at all? You've abandoned five kids.’¹⁰⁵

‘Oh I haven't abandoned them.’ He was just full of excuses. He was *so* full of excuses. If you were to watch the interview, you wouldn't know where to cut it, because his—he had no clear answers. I would ask him a question and he would tell me a story that vaguely related, but he really couldn't *own* it, at all.

And eventually I remember saying, ‘You know, I can't speak for all of the kids you've had, but I can speak for myself—and I can kinda speak for Barbara—and we don't want to hear all these excuses. The only thing we want to hear is that you're sorry. That you fucked up and that we can move on from there.’ And he's like, ‘I AM sorry,’ you know? But he didn't just say that. I kinda had to—

He said he was pretty fucked up, basically. He said he was going through a lot, even when he and my mom were together. He was an air medic during this thing called the ‘San Ysidro Massacre,’¹⁰⁶ where this guy walked into a McDonald's and just like killed everybody. He was one of the first responders. And he told me about babies—dead babies. Dead women and children. And how that really fucked him up. How he came home and just—he said he was just different after that.

He wasn't diagnosed with PTSD until years later, but he told so many stories. He told about how after, I don't know—I don't know the timeline exactly. At a certain point he went to prison because he'd um—he had another really long excuse, but he—essentially he'd stolen a helicopter. Or he'd ‘borrowed’ one, when his pilot's license was expired, or something. Anyway it was grand theft, and he was locked up for that.

And just to quickly rewind, I think the PTSD is really interesting, but you have to remember he'd already done this to four other kids at that point. You know what I mean? Like, he had a family of three when he was getting his pilot's license in Texas. Then he met Barbara's mom, and then his wife left him and moved, and—I don't know. It's interesting, but I always had that in my mind when he was telling the story.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Earlier in the interview, in a section I cut for length, Bryan mentions that Barbara told him their father had been married to someone else before her mother, and he'd had three other kids with that woman.

¹⁰⁶ The San Ysidro Massacre took place in July of 1984, five months before Bryan was born.

¹⁰⁷ Evidence of the way that Bryan is critically engaging with the historical information his father uses to construct his narrative.

But ok, moving forward again. He just gave me a really long hard luck story that went on for a really long time. Sometimes really random stories about working and struggling to just keep his head above water. Like he couldn't pay child support; he didn't have any money; he was struggling to get by—struggling to find work. He just sounded like life had kicked the shit out of him.

A lot of times in the U.S., I think we're taught that you make your own way, to a certain extent. Like, my mom came from nothing and she built a business and she has done more in her life than she ever thought she would. In the U.S. you're kinda taught that you kinda get what you deserve or something. And he didn't seem to buy into that story as much. When he responded it was all the things that had happened to him, and no real awareness at all that part of his story was that he hadn't taken ownership for a lot of things including his kids or the choices that he'd made. No sense of responsibility at all. Which I thought was really interesting. And I would press him on it, but he really didn't grasp it.

At a certain point during the interview, he took the mic off his shirt and said, 'Yeah, nope, this is over. I want you to turn that off.' It had become confrontational, because I wasn't going easy at all. Eventually I got him to come back around by saying, 'You know, I want you to be able to tell your side of the story. Everyone else has had a chance to tell their side on camera, and I want you to have an opportunity to do that also. That's why we want to film this. I'm not trying to make you look like a monster.' And he agreed and we carried on.

Going into that interview, a lot of emotions came up— I felt like a little kid, and I was so scared. I wasn't really sure what he would be like, and I tried not to have too many expectations about how the conversation would go or what would come out of it or anything because I just didn't want to get let down.

But when I left the interview, I was on top of the world! I remember thinking of the color yellow, and being like, *Holy shit, this dude's a coward, and I'm nothing like him.* That was the biggest thing.

I think, my entire life, that had been the real question: What is he like, and how much am I like him? And I left it going *I'm nothing like him. Holy shit, I'm nothing like him—That's awesome.*

I'm not a coward. I mean, I just did THIS! I pushed directly toward my fear. And that had been my New Year's resolution—just to keep pushing towards the things I was the most scared of. So that was a major revelation.

Then the other one was feeling like I wanted to call Tom right away, which was really interesting. I wanted to call mom, I wanted to call my fiancée; but I wanted to call Tom first. And to a certain extent, I realized that—I realized that maybe that's just what a father is. Just someone who's *there*—who just shows up, to a certain extent. Someone who raises their hand.

I wasn't Tom's kid, but he did his best. He was shitty but [laughs] he's better now. He came to my engagement party, even though that was the first time he'd seen mom since the divorce. And I called him on Father's Day last Sunday. We talk. The whole thing really brought us closer together. And that was a pretty big revelation so.

Yeah, maybe he wasn't the best dad, and I was raised by a lot of different men and women, but he was there. And he's asserted that: 'I'm your father.' And that's good enough for me, you know?

I got this one still photo of my dad and me: I'm sitting up straight, and I'm talking to this guy, and he's slouched over, with a cigarette in the ash tray. And he just looks so cowed. That was a big thing that came out of this: this understanding that, to a certain extent, I think I've always identified in opposition to what that person is in my life.

Even when I was a little kid, I remember knowing that I would be a really great father, when the time came. I was just positive about it. I wasn't sure how I would be as a husband. Because as a teenager and through my twenties, I've just, like, loved women, you know? But I knew clearly that I would be a good dad, no matter what. It's funny that I could disconnect those things in my head—father and husband. But um.

In the interview, I got to watch how he treated women throughout his life, and I could see some similarities there. I think I came out of it certain that I don't ever want to be like that. Then, all of a sudden—I don't know. I was like engaged a few months later.

I was ready. Just to commit and to tie together the image of father and husband as a single unit—and not think of them separately. I'm going to be a good husband *and* a good father. And really feeling that when I left. That I was, I don't know—like I was an adult. Like I was ready to be an adult.

The last question I had was about your book— about the story of Bruce, or the character of Bruce—how is he modeled after your dad and to what extent are they different?¹⁰⁸

All the characters are modeled off of real people. From the uncles to the mom. But by fictionalizing it, I think, I'm able to almost look at—I don't know if I'm able to look at it more objectively, but I'm—I can get rid of the idea of an objective perspective at all, and just understand that stories are subjective.

¹⁰⁸ This question was really prompted by a perceived lack of emotional weight in the way Bryan talked about meeting his father. The existence of Bryan's book project, like Paula's, and Angel's Family Sculpting exercise, all felt like ways to approach a real-life narrative from outside the narrative, in a space where it would be ok to consciously use fiction to fill in the emotional "holes."

This is a story of a kid spending a summer with this father that he never had. And as much as I find the story really interesting, I also think that you can turn up certain things and turn down other things to make it more entertaining for a wider audience. So Bruce is *really* modeled after Mike, extensively, but the bulk of it is imagined. Because I never have spent a summer with him. And then the character who goes to look for him is also 19, you know?

But in terms of a lot of the analysis, or anything like that. In terms of like looking at fatherhood in modern America, that definitely comes from first hand experience. Yeah.

CONCLUSION

At this point, it seems somewhat inappropriate to write anything under a chapter titled “conclusion”—both because this thesis constitutes the beginning of an ongoing project, and because, as a methodological experiment, it is still too small to yield any *conclusive* information. So instead I’ve written some *concluding* thoughts, to help review my intentions and observations, and put a pin in the project, for now.

In oral history practice, we often strive to ask questions that will generate the richest, most detailed, and *longest* stories,¹⁰⁹ as though minimizing the narrator’s engagement with the interviewer would yield a purer historical source. Our analytical practice is founded on the belief that the symbolism, form, and psychology in these stories reflects our narrators’ historical perspectives, and that we can access and analyze them after the interview. But if this project has taught me anything, it’s simply that there is demonstrable value in more direct narrative engagement during the interview encounter.

To reiterate a point I made in the introduction, I don’t doubt that our narrators are experts in their experience of history, but I do believe life history narratives are made up of more than just experiences. By interrogating the construction of the narrative within the interview encounter, we’re able to separate historical information from historical imagination, in a manner more in line with the dialogic spirit of our practice. In addition to events and feelings, this approach can help us develop a lexicon of cultural influences and historical information sources, and identify other forces and forms that have contributed to the shape of the material we’re analyzing.

¹⁰⁹ A whole section of Jerry Albarelli’s class is devoted to developing just those types of questions.

During the last three months, I spent a lot of time reviewing Grele’s analysis of the garment industry workers in “Listen to their Voices” as well as the highlights and margin notes I made the first time I read it. From his observations on the form of two separate narratives, Grele extrapolates two distinct, robust perspectives on the history of the industry and argues that in oral history practice, “[i]t is structure and form rather than specifics which give us this meaning” (234). In many ways, I think that essay sparked the development of this project, but revisiting it again, in light of the work I’ve done on *Finding Fathers*, I wondered, half-jokingly, if anyone bothered to ask if his narrators were in 12-step programs.

Not that either narrative seems to indicate this, necessarily, just that when making declaratives about our narrators’ perspective, it might be good to rule out any affiliation with an organization noted for its direct, tangible influence over the form and style of the life history narratives of tens of millions of people worldwide¹¹⁰—two of whom were interviewed for this project. I can’t say that 12-step and support groups are the only kinds of organizations that coach their members in specific forms of life history, because until about a month ago, I didn’t realize *any* organization did that. What we can say on the basis of rather limited evidence,¹¹¹ is that narrative form *can* be directly shaped by more than our historical perspectives, and questioning the specifics of that construction is crucial to helping us understand exactly what it is we’re analyzing.

Finally, while I have yet to test the methodology on anyone outside this group, which admittedly skews toward a greater awareness of the construction of their life history narratives, these are some of my provisional observations from its practice:

¹¹⁰ As of January 2017, AA alone counts 2.1 million people among its members.

¹¹¹ This is another little formal shout out to “Listen to Their Voices.”

- Some narrators took more naturally to how and what I questioned, and ultimately required little guidance when engaging this way. I hesitate to attribute this tendency to any one characteristic—especially based on such limited fieldwork, so I will simply point out that Bryan and Kristen, the two narrators with formal training in story construction, required almost no prompting.
- Causal language like “because,” “the reason why,” “so,” and the like, particularly when used in reference to other people’s actions, can provide good cues to sites of imaginative construction.
- “I think,” on the other hand, can indicate an awareness of uncertainty with regards to a specific idea or event, which cues us to a more conscious act of construction.

Like Kahneman and Tversky (and Grele and Portelli, too), I believe focusing our research on the discrepancies between historical fact and historical invention—on error, or imagination, or whatever we choose to call it—has the potential to reveal the deep mechanisms of our practice, the underlying structure of consciousness that governs oral history interviews. And while there is still no way to account for all of the limitations to our immediate knowledge or our ability to engage critically with the information our work yields, I’m certain the efforts we take to expose our limitations can only arm us to transcend them.

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