

Crying from the Ground

by

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We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
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1

A dream I had that prompted all this: we're out to eat and the wrong food comes out. Then God apologizes for the mix-up, fires the Devil, and leaves us with the bill. The following pages are notes for my in-progress memoir, "Crying from the Ground." It's about my family. It's about lying and killing.

I'll start here with a defining childhood moment. I first caught wind of my parentage in the second grade. It was our town's unspoken secret until Sherman Davis called me "incest baby" at lunch. Thinking this a weak insult (fond image of grandma's incense burning on the coffee table?), I laughed and said, "at least I smell good!" Apparently, I did not. The number of students willing to break bread with me decreased over the succeeding weeks. Once I traced this phenomenon to Sherman's comments, I consulted grandmother.

"A what?"

"An incense baby," I said again.

"William—" She began to dismiss me with a turn and a sigh, the way adults do when confronted with a child's nonsense. Then she paused, but I couldn't see her face because it was fixed on grease stain on the wall above the stove. "Who said that to you?"

"Sherman Davis."

"Don't listen to that boy," she said to the stain. Something was burning in the oven and I felt like I was in trouble.

Grandmother was spared the hard talk for another four years. I learned what an "incense baby" *really* was in the sixth grade. Biology: Genetics. When Sherman discovered that his harassment had a scientific basis, that inbreeding between close relatives causes defects, diseases, and disorders, his campaign took on an air of righteousness.

God (through Sherman) asked me (in front of everybody): “I know you must call her *Maunt*, but do you call him *Funcle* or *Duncle*?”

An appeal to the reader: do not hate Sherman Davis. He died suddenly while sniffing his mom’s nail polish remover in a local bar’s bathroom six years later. When they found him tucked between the toilet and the wall, he was barefoot and his pockets were inside-out. His father and all the money had disappeared one night when Sherman was eight years old. Early in high school some of the older kids started calling his mom the Charlotte Harlot—no explanation needed. He had it harder than I did, and although we had our feuds, my education and home life were mostly peaceful, if not lonely, affairs. His short life was riddled with conflict and, in retrospect, I’m glad that I could at least provide an easy outlet for his anguish.

“I don’t call them anything,” I said. “I don’t know them.” It was true; I remembered only silent wisps of my mother.

Sherman, the innocent and disgusting child, sucked on the thick river of mucus that always flowed from his nose (he may have been snorting classroom materials by then) as he generated a new set of generic genetic insults. He didn’t have much to work with. I was bookish but not a shrimp, not nonathletic but rarely included in the roughhousing of my peers. The flavor of bullying I was subjected to in school was lazy and halfhearted, done almost out of obligation—the unspoken agreement that if someone *must* be picked on at recess, it may as well be the inbred reading under the tree. I was the only Almen with bad eyesight (of course!) and flat feet. I have no further complaints regarding my childhood.

I’ve just suggested that I was an avid reader. Still am. History is my primary interest and specialty. Without jumping too far ahead, I’ll note that my college education consisted of equal parts history and literature, the latter for which I had a vast enthusiasm but a complete

incompetence. “Finding the meaning,” that illusory objective, was something of a vice for me; I enjoyed doing it, but I was *always* wrong. This is why, once I have compiled these notes and fragments, I will send them to be stitched together by a ghost writer (hello, ghost writer; feel free to butcher this baby). What I lack in organizational and literary know-how, I hope to make up in my practiced memorization and reconstruction of the past.

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You can imagine the struggle of growing up with the label of “inbred” on your back. I’d been called an abomination by a few cruel children. I came to identify with Frankenstein’s monster (how apt that Creator and Created have become conflated in recent years), but *only* with the creature’s newborn purity. His rage confused me. I’ve attribute this sentiment to the bubble of relative ease that surrounded me growing up. The Cold War was in its death throes before I knew what war was. My nook of consciousness existed outside the timeline of anxiety that my family—and the world—were each tethered to. If not for my DNA, I’m not sure I’d have anything of interest to report other than nineties nostalgia.

Now I’ve come to associate myself with Victor, sewing together pieces of people in my own image. Or maybe I am the sailor who finds him and writes it all down. Ignore my imperfect metaphor; I exist somewhere in that Holy Trinity of characters and so does my ghost writer. But why pursue this project? I have a young daughter that I’ve neglected to mention up until this point. I write this challenging history, in part, as a moral guide for her. To show her, as I like to “dad-joke,” that Almen are created equal. To aid her in discernment of character. To provide a road map for forgiveness.

I am sure she will have a few things to forgive me for.

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Now that I've stated my thesis—all this talk of childhood brings into focus my sole guardian during those soft formative years, grandma, Lilian Almen.

Lil was an aspiring poet throughout her teens and recorded many bites of wisdom which I have here plagiarized from her diary. I preempt the question of ethics on this matter by noting: these documents practically sought *me* out. They fell to me as a recent graduate, just after I met my mother in 2003. During mom's exodus from our family home when I was just a baby, stowed away in her luggage were a few of grandma's belongings. I doubt that, despite her spite, she stole these documents willingly; she would have had no use for them at the time. She has only recently learned to read.

I found Lil's diary (I'll go on using names rather than familial titles for the sake of developing the reader's sense of intimacy) while rummaging through the clutter in one of many purposeless storage rooms in Marianne's current home. Her Plyushkin's was, in my unprofessional opinion, an offshoot of her Aphasia—a material mode of expression to cope with the silence. Allow me to stand up from my armchair and stretch. I digress to the earliest chronological moment of interest, to the first union of my relevant and available ancestors: Lil and Frank Almen's wedding in 1962.

A poem from her diary, transcribed for my sake into prose:

Frank got drunk by accident. Mother was there in spirit, resting her eyes at the Village Inn across the street. Father leaned on a girl at the open bar, his usual: whiskey neat, marriage on the rocks. The rest were strangers or acquaintances. Lil could not ask for a more perfect wedding day.

The son-of-a-general slew her lonely girlhood; a football prince drove it to a Shakespearean close. She knew happy stories ended in weddings, learned that in English class. She learned

Frank's name in English class too, tried it on. Lilian *Almen*. Mrs. *Almen*. Lil Miss *Almen*.

Frankly perfect.

Here ends my transcription.

Cute, but poor poetry by my estimation. Sorry grandma (she'll never read this). Let's dissect. What this passage lacks in aesthetics, it provides in unfiltered vulnerability. Lil's bar was so low her parents could only manage to squeeze some cash under it. Grandpa Frank, whose pure soul I've reportedly inherited, was a blinding sunbeam worthy of worship. I suspect that, had their love not been eclipsed by his fate in Vietnam, the events of the following decades would have been a bit brighter.

I should retire the essayists style for a moment and embrace the scene. The reception was a violent wave of affection for the groom. You could've filled the bleachers at St. Mary with just the tuxedoed crowd of boys who each thought they were Frank's best man—pals he'd only known a year. Lil had known them all since kindergarten.

Everyone floated around angelic tablecloths bathed in golden lights. Crunchy flower petals littered the floor. The warm, piny air vibrated with the band's playing. Lil soaked in ecstasy on her wedding-throne as Frank did laps. Her eyes caressed every guest—how her relationship with her *husband* brought people together! How things fell into place! Even the girls she'd only had acquaintances with over the years had lined up to be chosen as bridesmaids, to don the sleek purple dresses in the image of her beauty. There must've been a mistake at the post office and God only just received her prayers all at once. Yet how He delivered!

She reflected on their vows. Statements of permanence, assurance, proof—nothing had ever secured her so. She'd memorized hers months ago and imprinted his in her psyche as he read them. She whispered them to herself now. The music faded and she spoke in his voice:

“I, Frank Almen, vow to love, protect, and support you, Lilian Almen, for all our days, until death do us part. I promise to always be the best husband, father, and friend that I can be. I will give you everything that is in my power to give until I have nothing left.”

He’d have nothing left in seven years.

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I should mention that this is a ghost story. Readers may wonder at this flippant revelation. But understand, this spirit has been such a common fixture throughout my life, so pervasive that only its occasional absences are noteworthy. Sometime early in my childhood, soon after my acquisition of language, I first felt its presence. It wasn’t mad, nor sad, nor happy. It only observed neutrally, a gray little watcher in the periphery.

I was frightened for the first few years, unnerved that something was watching me from the corner of my empty room as I played with toys or read my books. Then I started talking to it. In whispers (as to not concern Grandma) I asked it questions:

“Who are you?”

“Who are my parents?”

“Who am I?”

It answered my simple questions in a speech spanning years. I’m still pressed to that dark corner, listening.

2

Let’s get the final pieces on the board. I’ll jump to how I first met my father in 1992.

It was a sunny Sunday morning when a local lawyer knocked on our front door. I was playing with plastic army men on that hairy green rug in front of the TV. The green wisps were elephant grass and Grandpa (whose helmet I covered in black marker) was leading his squad

through it to save a few POWs. Grandma allowed the visitor in and interrupted my operation. Their first greetings are muffled by memory, but I recall bits of their discussion as the suited man walked through the door frame.

“—your son’s case. May we sit and talk?”

The air shifted. Hello, my invisible friend!

“Will,” Grandma said to me, “head up to your room.”

As I gathered my things I peered up at our guest. His age didn’t seem to fit his position, all baby skin with boyish glasses, short slicked hair atop a lanky frame. No one had yet told him, at twenty-eight, that his suit was a size too big. Grandma stood beside him covered in silks, prints, and jewels. They both watched me.

My pockets bulged with my plastic prisoners. I passed the adults and started up the stairs. At this point I understood the basic history. Mom and Dad were brother and sister. Dad was in jail for it, Mom exiled. Beyond those facts swirled a sea of ambiguity and this man was tall enough to be a lighthouse. Of course I eavesdropped from the banister.

The adults were cloudy black reflections in the oven door. I tucked my head away as Grandma put a kettle on and peeked out again when I heard her sit.

“Well, John,” she said. (I wrote all this down).

The man’s murky shadow shifted. “I’ve been corresponding with Jason. I plan on representing him in his parole process, pro bono. I’ll be working with his case manager to—”

“Why?”

“His sentence allows for the possibility of parole after—”

“Twelve years. I’ve been counting. But why are you interested in getting him out? And why are you telling me?” This tone of voice was reserved for misbehavior. It was odd to see it used on a grown stranger.

“He is entitled to apply for parole.”

“How did you find his case? Last I checked he was refusing visitors and ignoring mail.”

“We’ve been writing.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I’m local.”

“You contacted him?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Talk paused. Water started bubbling on the stove. “Do I need to call my lawyer?” the lawyer said. Grandma swatted the joke out of the air. “Sorry. We were friends in school. I just want to make sure he gets a fair shake. I studied law to serve my community.”

“By letting him out?”

“It’s just justice, ma’am.”

The water whistled then screamed. I backed up the stairs again, but not before seeing a glimpse of Grandma’s face at the stove. It had drooped and lost its color. Lily Almen was a young mother and an even younger grandmother—but in that moment I saw a sad old lady wearing hippie clothes. I heard the clang of mugs and the pouring of hot water.

“Just milk. Thank you.”

“I don’t remember you.” If I were Grandma’s Grandpa, I would reprimand her poor manners. But Lawyer didn’t seem to mind.

“I lived on Church Street. My parents are Patty and Samuel Clementine.” Slurp, throat clear.
(Trying to make your job easier, ghost writer!). “I used to deliver papers around here.”

“I’ve met them. Didn’t know they had a boy.”

“They mostly keep to themselves.”

She leaned in close, probably gave him hairy eyeballs, and I had to strain to hear. “You *know* what he did?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said. And when she didn’t sit back, he continued. “He was found guilty of incest and first-degree rape.”

I didn’t know that word.

“Keep your voice down,” she snapped. “And, what, you think he deserves forgiveness? How can I grant that when hasn’t acknowledged what he’s done to this family?”

“Forgiveness isn’t my purview. Due process is.”

“Pfft, process. *Process* put Jason’s father on the other side of the globe to die for nothing. Maybe we should give common sense a try.” John took a long sip of his tea. “Do I have a choice?”

“In whether he is allowed out?”

“Exactly.”

“No.”

“Then why bother me?”

“I’d ask you to speak to him, to convince him to apply.”

She let out a cold noise. “Why force him out if he wants to stay in?”

“If you spoke to him, you’d see he’s changed. The board takes all factors into account before releasing him.”

“I’m sure you understand why I’m not interested.”

John set down his mug and with sudden fortitude said, “Every boy should know his father.”

Grandma, flustered and offended, stood. “I’ll decide what my boy should do. I think it’s time for you to leave.” I scurried up the steps again at the signs of movement in the kitchen.

“I’ve overstepped. My apologies,” he said. Footsteps entered the living room and headed toward the door. I hadn’t learned enough yet! “I only meant to discuss your son’s case. I’ve gotten to know Jason’s story intimately. I hope—oh!”

I sprang from my hiding place. The words raced out of my mouth before my bug-eyed grandmother could stop them. “Tell my dad something?”

“William!” she yelled. She was pale, figured I’d been listening.

John smiled, took off his glasses, and wiped them with his tie. “Sure. What would you like to say to your father?”

“That I forgive him.”

The purity of the request shook both of them. John nodded, put his glasses back on, and said to no one in particular, “Good day.” Then he was gone.

I have a collection of ironic little tidbits that I’ve accumulated throughout life. They’re all written down somewhere. Iceland is green and Greenland is icy. The first stall is cleanest because everyone thinks it’s dirty and avoids it. As soon as John was out the door, Grandma told me a new one. Lawyers are liars.

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Despite what this vignette may have suggested, in the next month Grandma and I visited the infamous Almen demon. With the power of hindsight I’ve deduced a number of motivations for her acquiescence to the good lawyer’s will. Sure, my innocent strength (or naivety) may have

warmed or annoyed her back into her religious principles. Adults and all their worldliness—always fixating on the impossibility of ideals, only to be out-christed by a child; it must sting! No, what I suspect really plucked that string was John Lawyer’s faux pas, his inability to remain silent. Lily happened to agree that every boy *should* know his father, and this simple axiom exposed within her a blind spot she was all-too-willing to previously ignore.

I was not privy to the following fact at the time: Lily Almen had a third child, a sickly boy born years after the death notifier delivered the news about poor Frank. Though she insisted rather feebly that the boy was her husband’s through some spin-off of the immaculate conception, no one knew who the father was. She named him Frank Almen III, or Little (Lil) Frank—an eternal punjunction of their names. She would have given anything for him to meet his father, real or otherwise. This boy died of some illness of the heart a few months before I entered the world. In fact, I slept in his crib.

Jason was first held in a castle of a facility in Raleigh called Central Prison. My research tells me this is the first penitentiary ever constructed in our state back in 1880. Fitting, a primordial abode for the Almen original sin—he ate the apple, was not his brother’s keeper, yadda yadda. You’d be surprised to know that Grandma didn’t raise me religious! After a several years at Central, he was transferred to Neuse Correctional Facility (or noose—geographical awareness left my adolescent mind as I briefly assumed he was being sent to the gallows), a few miles from home. This was in ‘94 after some trouble with his cellmate at Central. He was in Neuse for two years and was in the process of requesting, through his lawyer, to be transferred to the (full circle!) Federal Prison Camp at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base for safety purposes. Turns out, convicts don’t like rapists. He was murdered in his cell while waiting for an answer.

I've gotten ahead of myself. I can already hear you, ghost writer: by telling the reader what happens at the end, you spoil the story! Perhaps. As a child I had a "bad" habit of flipping to the last page of a book and reading it before the beginning. Rebuttal: everyone knows. I will die and you will die; we have so much in common. Don't we listen to stories not for the bare facts, but for the unfolding? For the meaning-ful circle-s? For the con-text?

Enough craft talk.

That hour drive west was my own yellow brick road. It was my first time out of Goldsboro. The familiar ratty landscape softened into trimmed fields and straggly trees, then crystallized into buildings taller than I'd ever seen. An eerie calm had come over me (not shared by Grandma, whose skinless knuckles strangled the steering wheel), like nothing was at stake. I wasn't visiting my father; I was taking a city trip. Father wasn't in prison at all; he was home with mother. I was not of incest born! Excuse my illusions of a functional family. I coped with truths dressed up as lies.

We arrived at our destination in Emerald City and I thought it was quite beige. A tower here and there must have been where the sorcerers hunched over their tomes. Never mind the fanged dogs and razor wire. Some fellows with wands enchanted us inside. Grandma did some paperwork. We left our things in lockers then waited and waited, then went out to a court with tables that looked like the cafeteria at school and waited some more. Here I was sweating. It was cold even though things were painted red.

After a while he appeared—the dual-faced Oz, half behind the curtain. He wore a gray sweater tucked into slacks that the facility had given him, but even at a distance his nice clothes seemed to chafe against him. As he walked to the table, he shifted his gaze from the floor to the

two of us, back to the floor, and back again. I'd seen this at school before. I half expected him to ask if he could sit with us.

But he didn't. He got to the table and stood there for a moment, looking somewhere in between the two of us. It was common practice to give a brief hug to your imprisoned loved one. Neither of us moved, though I felt compelled to. Nothing happened for far too long.

Then he said, "I wasn't expecting this—thank you," and sat.

I held back a cheery "you're welcome!" like a sneeze. In the car, Grandma had drilled into me not to speak unless spoken to (by her).

"How are you, Jason?" Grandma said.

"I am," he said with an empty stare, "as well as I deserve." He fiddled with his collar, then his sleeve. It was an exhibit at the zoo. Do something! "I'm in no place to ask . . . has life treated you alright? How is Marianne? And . . ." He looked at me blankly, with almost a hint of fear. Grandma let the silence linger, but Jason wouldn't finish his thought.

"Life is fine," she began in one emotionless slew. "Will is in sixth grade. I am his guardian. Marianne has taken up in one of our rental properties. I haven't seen her in some time. She's happier on her own."

"I see." He seemed to ponder something sad. Grandma's posture became more rigid. He turned to me. "Sixth grade!" he said awkwardly, "what are you learn—"

"Will is not here for your sake," she snapped.

The table radiated quiet misery. I wanted to say fractions, mitochondria, the American Revolution, but I was afraid we all might blow up. Instead, I studied the scarecrow across the table, thin and ruffled. He drooped but his complexion was bright. The hair I now saw was longer and grayer than what the family pictures had shown. It cradled his narrow stubbled face

and ended around his shoulders. His nails were a little too long. He shifted and a fluorescent light appeared from behind his head and burned my eyes. I looked away.

“We are visiting for our own peace of mind,” she continued. “I’m told you’re applying for parole. Is this true?”

Jason smiled close-lipped. He shook his head. “Apparently.”

“What does that mean?”

“I suppose my dear lawyer let you know. He has me considering the option. He’s put together a compelling argument as to why I should.”

“You sound reluctant.”

“I’ve been content with my punishment. But John makes a good point. I can do more good out there than I can in here. That is a noble goal, right? To do good by others?”

Grandma crossed her arms, raking her jewelry together. “Sure.”

“I understand your skepticism.”

“Do you?”

“I can recognize a rhetorical question, Ma.”

“We will leave right now.” She grabbed my wrist too hard and made to get up.

“No!” he half whispered, half screamed. A guard looked in our direction but didn’t seem concerned. “Please stay. I am sorry.”

Grandma watched him for a moment, perhaps even pitied him. “For what?”

“For all I have done.”

“An example?”

“Please, don’t make me say it.” His voice shook like he was about to cry. Then he straightened. “It has been nice to see you. But I will not tell a lie before the Lord.”

I was frightened by his sudden shift. Grandma was unphased. “Then tell the truth,” she said.

Jason looked at me. “This boy,” he said, shuddering, “is a miracle. I only mean to protect him and his mother, my sister. God has given me this chance.”

“*God* put you in here to protect them,” Grandma said. She stood and signaled for me to follow. “I’ve seen enough. Perhaps I’ll be seeing you at your parole hearing, if I bother. Goodbye.”

Jason deflated, looked dead. Grandma tugged me away from the table.

“Bye Dad,” I said, looking back.

Only the eyes of that gray slumping figure followed me. His mouth barely moved. “I am *not* your father.”

An inverse of that pivotal *Empire* moment, Maury-style! How unglamorous. Luke had it much easier; the fabric of the universe instantly told him whether Vader told the truth, with a wise green mentor to verify.

All I had was a ghost who spoke in riddles.

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Bless the Almen memory. It’s one of the few positive qualities we all possess. Ask us for a detailed account of the past and we will deliver, in our own way. In college I’d nitpick fiction in the first-person. How can the limited narrator (when depicted as a normal person who lived through the events of the story) recount the past with such clarity, record the characters’ words so faithfully? One may argue each story carries an implicit argument that the narration is a plausible reconstruction of the past, that it is written in a manner “close enough” to what really happened. Others will say that it is an oversight of the medium. (“No way Walter wrote down *everything* Victor said *as he said it!*”). It probably doesn’t matter. My professors would politely

ask me to direct my eager mind toward less granular topics. And yet I return again to this nagging (non) issue!

Do you believe that Jason and Lily Almen spoke in exactly that manner? Does it matter if they did not? I can assure you that everything that I've written here *did* happen. The only "lies" or misremembering you will find are those of unimportant omission/alteration: the name of the guard in the booth, the singular strand of long blond hair that rested on the table, the fact that I very badly had to use the restroom by the end of the visit, and the like. I do not mean to throw myself in with that lot of "unreliable narrators;" this is a memoir, for God's sake! Though, as I write this aside I can see how it may work against me (looking at you, Nick). Now I'm getting (carr)ied (away)! Perhaps I'll scrap this. I leave this up to you, ghost writer.

Following our trip to Central Prison, Grandma kept burning our food and dropping our plates, so we started eating frozen stuff out of the package. It was better than the burnt rubber, so I had no complaints. It was an uncomfortable time, and I remember it fondly. We developed a stronger bond after the visit; I'd "grown up" after facing the insanity from which I'd spawned; she'd unraveled, loosened up after years of keeping me safe by secret. The cards were on the table and we were finally playing the same game.

As she'd later explain, seeing Jason brought her back to a tragic trifecta of fate that infected the Almen household in the seventies. This was a can of worms still only partially opened in her psyche. I'll let you judge, ghost writer, the type of woman she was during that pivotal decade of our family history, how much culpability she had in the suffering. I am inclined, given that she was like a mother to me, to be lenient. But the jury may decide otherwise.

When she bounced back, she was a new woman. Rather, she was the woman that had raised me, only enhanced. She was more attentive to me. She brought me out on business. She'd always

received checks from the government for Frank's loss and reaped the benefits of his investments—so we'd lived for years. Now she read books on real estate and made her own deals. There was a noticeable change in the quality of our lives, not in our material conditions, but in the general air of contentment that settled on the house. These were the glory days of my childhood, where, in memory, each day looks like a golden summer morning. Grandma didn't attend Jason's parole hearing. She didn't mind his status until the prison called and said he was dead.

It was as if I were her only child and companion. As I grew older (do not worry, I only skip the occasional play-date and good grade), I became somewhat of a confidant. I learned, through her, the strings of events that lead to this nexus, this cozy bastion of humanity on the edge of a struggling town, a speck in a hurling world. What a precarious balance of things to wind up sane! We are far more fragile than we think.

Grandma eventually retired the hippie garb. She wore budget business casual, nothing flashy. She still wore those giant hoops and sometimes you could catch her in prints on a laundry day. The tenants liked her as much as one can like their landlord, though they hardly saw her. Property managers looked after our little brick houses. They were in and out, took no interest in me. Perhaps this shift unsettles you. It was a more gradual process than I let on. Large-scale change is less glamorous than the movies suggest. Especially when the strapping hero is in her late sixties.

Was all her wealth accumulated to spite Jason in the hypothetical scenario in which he was released on parole? Maybe. I suspect that, upon seeing Jason after years of stagnation, she was reminded of pain and subsequent promises she made to herself in the wake of his crime—promises she'd been inconsistently fulfilling up until this point. All it takes is a perfect

combination of external stimuli to push a human into its ideal form. For grandma, seeing her son unchanged after all those years conveyed to her a mirror of herself—the outdated clothes, the same daily routines, the unrealized use of all that was left of her dear husband (his resources).

This is *my* speculation; we never entered such cerebral territory.

I was granted security clearance to “the full story” when I turned eighteen. She figured I ought to know where I came from before I go where I’m going. With college on the horizon, she sat me down. Over the course of a week, I relearned Genesis. Here are the important bits.

3

Lil was an unhappy only child. Her dad sometimes hit her mom, and her mom sometimes hit her. She felt this was normal, thus it was not what made her unhappy. No, she was unhappy because she was lonely. Everywhere she looked there was companionship. Mom and dad were a pair, no matter how unstable. The kids at school were always dating. The two stray cats that lived in the broken-down truck next door had each other. She was always, for some reason or another, an exile from birth. And the longer she pondered over this prophecy, the more catastrophically she failed to socialize.

I want to draw a distinction between my upbringing and hers. It bears repeating—I was a happy fellow! Any isolation that I experienced was warmly welcomed, if not self-inflicted. I was an insular little thinker. She was a tortured artist, growing increasingly unapproachable through her pre-pubescent years. Her report cards suggested not that she was stupid but that she was wholly apathetic to institutional education. She spent her time writing or painting, though both habits ceased after high school. Each adult in her sphere thought that, based on her attitude, she either had everything or nothing figured out about her future.

She wasn't bullied, but she didn't have many friends. This was likely her own fault. She carried a larger chip on her shoulder than most over some vague injustice that she couldn't name. What household didn't have the occasional haymaker? Her introversion fostered both messiah and pariah complexes that each took the reigns as convenience required. This is not me pontificating; this is her own analysis, informed by years of therapy! Yes, the post-Jason era not only saw her finances grow, so too did her psychological self-awareness. Before our first interview, she told me: "You'll see that I have wrongfully judged situations and people alike. Some people won't admit to that. Some people won't—and perhaps—shouldn't—confront their greatest weakness. Cowards may recognize the power of weakness and weaponize it."

She'd just finished reading Sun Tzu. What a start! "In your opinion—what is my weakness?" I asked.

She smiled at me from across the coffee table. On it was a picture of her and grandpa at their high school graduation. The living room was filled with such artifacts. "You rely too much on your books to explain things. The world is a ball of chaos, of fluctuating extremes. Stories cannot explain it. I used to be the same way." She glanced at the photo of Frank. "But you take more after your grandfather. You're not a recluse like I was at your age, despite what the world has thrown at you. You seek truth and humanity regardless of your comfort. You have his bravery."

I blushed. "How do I keep my weakness in check?"

"Whoever figures that out first will teach the other." She winked. "Where should I start?"

Lil was a late bloomer. She "got beautiful" suddenly over the summer of 1961. All the students in her class had quietly noticed, but still left her alone due to her crescendoing unsociability. Some guys whispered that they'd "been with her;" none of these claims were ever corroborated. Girls boxed her out of their circles. Teachers accepted her unteachability. She was

poised to pass undetected through her final year of high school, and to fall into God-knows what kind of life after graduation.

New arrivals were rare at St Mary's, so when Frank Almen II arrived (whose dad was a decorated military man, whose mom was well-bred southern belle—according to the rumors), he was greeted with near-celebrity status. He was a strapping concoction of his parents' genes: just above average height, thin and muscular, bluish eyes and blondish hair. Those who first met him fell under his charm but later couldn't explain why. The old Almen blood contained something unpinnable. Frank, above all else, had *presence*.

They met in English class a few days after the start of the new school year. Lil knew there was buzz about a handsome new boy, didn't care. He was just like the rest (she'd just read Salinger). Several administrative bumbles saw Frank's schedule changing daily. He walked in on a Friday afternoon, politely asked what class it was, then took a seat right next to our heroine.

The popular kid and the outcast fell in love. The end. What a cliché!

A pet peeve of mine among writers: the willing use of tired old tropes with a veneer of self-awareness slapped on as a new coat of paint. Ironic acknowledgment of your unoriginal thought does not excuse its flatness; it makes it much worse! You've discovered that you've sinned and doubled down on Judgment Day. One must find a new way to express the thought or jettison it from the work completely. I prefer the latter option. Now, given that my work is one of non-fiction, I can't ethically alter the event of my grandparents' first meeting for the sake of entertainment (can I?).

"Can I borrow a pencil," Frank asked Lil. I think not.

What really happened is that neither Frank nor Lil interacted with each other until just after Thanksgiving, when Lil returned from break with a nasty black eye. Before you jump to

conclusions, this injury was an accident. Her household followed the tradition of breaking the wishbone, and Lil, having snuck a bottle of wine up to her room before dinnertime, was a bit impaired by the beginning of the ceremony. Summoning an unreasonable amount of strength, she yanked at the forked little bone until it snapped and her fist went straight into her own eye. Despite her pain and effort, she came away with the short end.

Frank, still relatively new in town, had not been briefed by his gaggle of followers as to the extent of Lil's near-complete isolatory spiral. That, or he didn't care. He glanced at her in class and saw the mark on her face.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Lil did not respond. She heard the question but assumed it was directed at someone else. He leaned in. "Is someone bothering you?"

Lil recoiled, startled. She had forgotten about her eye. Embarrassment was a foreign feeling that came creeping back in at this barrage of attention. "No more than usual," she muttered.

Frank ignored her bitterness. "That's quite the shiner. How'd you get it?"

"I got into a fight with someone who asks too many questions."

"Well," he said with a laugh, "don't give up. You'll get him next time."

Lil took a lot of pride in her wit. Sensing defeat, her face reddened, and she beamed at him with hatred. If she couldn't beat him with ice and attitude, she'd boil him in embarrassment. She smiled like a witch. "Truth is, I got drunk and stabbed myself in the eye with a bone."

Truth is, the truth sounds alluring without context.

"That's insane," he said. "What were you drinking?"

Her smile evaporated (is he being playful?). "Wine."

"You like wine."

"Yes."

“Me too. My father made sure our new house had a cellar. He probably has a hundred bottles.”

“Nobody needs a hundred bottles.”

“It’s a collection. He shows guests when they come over. So do I.”

The bell rang and the last few straggling students took their seats. Frank smiled at Lil and shifted back in his seat. Class began.

By now she’d read enough to sense his subtlety—the charm, the wit, the suggestion of invitation. But she second-guessed herself. Friendship—dare-she-even-say *romance*—hadn’t entered her equation in over a decade, when boys and girls alike would chase her around the playground. There’s been a misunderstanding. Some of the stuck-up kids must’ve put him up to it (*go see how that freak got that mark on her eye!*).

At least she gave them a good story.

//

Only, the next day Frank leaned over again.

“It’s healing fast,” he said. “How come you don’t talk much?”

“How come you talk so much?”

“Did I offend you?”

“No. I don’t get offended.”

“But you act offended when you don’t answer my questions.”

“I don’t have to answer anyone’s questions.”

“Why talk at all then?”

“It’s my voice and I can use it when I want to.”

“Do you want to talk to me?”

She hesitated, a misstep that cost her the spar. “No.”

“Alright,” he said. He slid back and twirled his pencil. She kept seeing the yellow flash in the corner of her eye.

“That’s annoying,” she said. He ignored her and spun the pencil again. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Twirling your pencil.”

“I don’t *have* to stop twirling. It’s *my* pencil and I can use it how *I* want to.”

Mockery with a lighthearted smile? No petulance, just charm. It was working (admit it!). She wanted to hit him, to get close and hit his face, to bruise his soft-looking, baby-blue-eyed face. Hormones would thwart her isolation just before the finish line. Attention starvation reared its massive horned head and she decided that an angel of light was still an angel. She stared at him. He wasn’t looking.

“You’re trying to get to know me,” she said. “By teasing me.” It was simple and direct, like a machine learning to make a friend. The shift took Frank by surprise.

“Yes. I am,” he said.

“Okay.” She sat back in her seat and waited for class to begin.

//

It went on like this. They warmed up to each other during those colder months. First came small conversations, little nothings. Then there was substance, depth, humor (in that order). Frank made Lil laugh for the first time on December thirteenth, 1961, with a joke she wouldn’t repeat, not even in writing. By spring they spoke before and after class and would meet again when school was let out on the front steps. The warm weather only expedited their fall; soon they

walked together, shoulder to shoulder. Yes, grandma has always been a flighty one, prone to polar shifts.

I apologize for breaking that cardinal rule of *show, don't tell*, but this isn't a romance novel. Ghost writer—you'll have to fill in the blanks. Consider yourself lucky; I waded through countless hours of interviews and pages of diary to curate the focal points. Do you think it's easy to pick out and polish gems of meaning mixed in the mundane? Authors of fiction are gods to their creations, yet I feel just as powerful with my flashlight in this basement; you see only the skeletons I illuminate. Did Michaelangelo really “find” David in the marble and set him free? What a blurry line between memoir and novel. Who will play king of kings in this purgatory? (*Marvel at my moir-vel ye mighty and despair!*). Me? No.

I revoke my apology. This isn't about the individual players; it's about my family at large, about the movement and transfer of identity. What a silly aside in the midst of a personal narrative. All I mean to say is that, through my family, I'm saying something about society, about the human condition—right? But Tolkien (whose unambiguous explications of good and evil I admired in college) hates allegory. I should take this advice into account. Or perhaps I ought not listen to those who write fiction at all. Artists obscure reality and I am no artist. This is, after all, real life we're discussing!

Redirect your attention to the topic at hand.

As my youthful grandparents became closer, the attention upon Lil shifted. Having never been at the center of much, she was shyly receptive to the guarded yet friendly advances of those she'd always considered malevolent. Frank introduced her to people he'd known for months as if she hadn't known them since kindergarten. Things were falling into place faster than she could consider them. Soon she'd be like the rest. How quickly her complexes were leveled. The desire

to rail against her burgeoning sociability faded and she recognized the bane of her adolescence for exactly what it was: a phase.

Let's enhance a moment: their first date. It was at a busy diner in town. School had just let out and it was a warm April day. Lil, Frank, and several others from their class were crammed into a small booth drinking coffee because that was the cool thing to do. Everyone chatted but Lil—old habits. Her quietness, long judged from afar by her peers, now generated a calm bubble of charm. She was a staple.

Such was Frank's power. He was a masterful recontextualizer. Through some benign Socratic method, he'd have all in agreement as to Lil's latent qualities, all stating that they always had admired her from a distance, always had wanted to be her friend. You begin to understand why, by their wedding, she orbited him with intense pleasure. Once she'd fallen under his wing, she evolved into that repressed social creature that had lashed out by antithesis all her life and was happier for it.

After coffee the gaggle disbanded at once and only Lil and Frank remained. They ordered some food—for Lil a waffle with whipped cream (breakfast at midday? an ironic little symbol of sweet beginnings, if you ask me—I intrude for the last time!), and for Frank a triple-decker turkey sandwich with no tomato. The waitress took their orders and left the soon-to-be lovebirds to gawk at one another.

Conversation led them to family life. Frank began.

“What's it like at your house?”

“Cozy,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “I have plenty of time to read.”

“Your parents must be real quiet,” he said.

“Not really.”

“No?”

“Mom is. Sometimes.”

“So you take after her.”

“Definitely not.”

“Well how’d you become who you are today?”

She wanted to say “*You! You’ve turned me into someone I didn’t know I wanted to be!*” but instead said: “Do we have to *take after* anyone?” She paired the question with a scrunched looked of disgust.

“I’d say so. Personalities are just a bunch of ideas about the world, passed on,” he said.

“Least that’s what I think.”

She pondered his sudden foray into the philosophical and said, “Well if that’s true, anyone with bad parents is doomed.”

“There are other influences.”

“What are yours?” she asked, hoping to deflect the conversation to his domestic situation.

She wasn’t embarrassed about her own per se (she was), but she’d heard the stories of his breeding. Life in her little brick house was dysfunctional at best, and a little violent at worst. Her mother Helen was part-time invalid and her father Gene was a full-time drunk—best not to scare Frank off with this information.

“Father smokes cigars on the porch with other military guys. Mother has other mothers over. I have three older sisters who are all gone and married. I learn a bit from each of them. I’ve got friends at school, people I pass by on my bicycle, the mailman, the milkman. A whole bunch of people I take after.”

“Well my family is small,” she said. “And I’ve learned from a few fictional friends.”

They were interrupted as the waitress brought out the food. She wore a pink button-up dress, tied at the waist with an apron. Lil straightened the creases on her school uniform. The waitress was pretty, blond, and tall, seemed a few years older than the two of them. Lil monitored Frank's awareness of her presence, looked for any fleeting glances or intentional avoidance. She cringed. Embarrassment and jealousy had taken the reigns of a life once devoted to utter shamelessness. And all for a boy. A weight lifted in her chest when he casually gave thanks. His eyes had remained on Lil the entire time.

Part way through their meal Lil noticed Frank grimacing.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," he said, but his eyes fell to his sandwich. Lil saw that it most certainly was not a turkey triple decker with no tomato. Rather, it was something white and creamy, perhaps a bad attempt at tuna or chicken salad.

"They gave you the wrong thing."

He shrugged and nibbled the crust. "No big deal."

"You're gonna eat that?" She was half confused, half annoyed. It was slop.

Again he shrugged and took a reluctant bite. As he chewed, pain etched across his face, the waitress appeared from around the booth. Lil looked at Frank, then her, then Frank again, waiting for him to say something. She was about to speak on his behalf when—

"I ordered the turkey," he said, a bit breathlessly.

The waitress apologized and took the food back. Frank seemed a little quiet. Maybe he was not the type to send food back, and she was too pushy. Since they'd met, she had noted his tendency toward agreeableness in the face of conflict—something she found foreign having been on the fringes of social life since early childhood. This difference of personality was manifesting,

here, on something that seemed like a date. A date! She got the awful feeling that she'd just mucked something up. She fiddled around with a piece of waffle.

“Did I make you uncomfortable?”

Frank was yanked out of thought. “What? No.”

“I just—it’s important to get what you pay for.”

“I agree,” he said. “I hadn’t noticed until I’d already taken a bite. And by that point, I figured it was too late to send it back.” He smiled. “But you’re right.”

That made sense. She could admire the desire not to make extra work for another person, and to not waste partially consumed food. While she held on principle that you ought to get what you asked for and not suffer from the mistakes of others, she could see how a genuine sense of compassion or selflessness could lead a person to not raise the issue. (If you ask me, the teenage brain looks far too deeply into matters such as these. You seem a little neurotic, Grandma!). She felt an overwhelming fondness for him wash over her, not in spite of their difference in temperament, but because of it. Here was a person wholly apart from her whose values could align with her own—a good, caring person. Frank was a character—her character, for she suddenly felt quite possessive over him—and his role in her life became clear. Company, attention, confidant, resource. Love! Lover!

She blushed at her internal processing. Frank was staring blank out the window. How easy it would be to scrunch him into a ball and carry him around forever. To flatten him into a bookmark.

“Is this a date?” she asked. There was a swelling joy behind these words that she’d never felt before, that she was barely able to contain. Frank snapped away from the window with a surprised, yet pleased, look in his eyes. Yes, he must’ve been thinking the same thing!

“Yes,” he said.

And the right food came out.

4

I’ve already discussed their wedding a few months later. It was a charming affair. But here is a sticking point that I discovered by cross-referencing Grandma’s interview with her diary.

Focus, despite my discomfort and yours, on the consummation of their marriage, in which a crucial oversight in their fledgling relationship became apparent. Then we will move onto more thrilling events.

Up to this point, the pair followed traditional routes of adolescent purity and gave themselves, untarnished, to one another. Lil, though somewhat surprised that Frank was still a virgin despite his charisma and charm, had no reason to doubt his word on the matter. With red cheeks they discussed before their wedding day the degree to which they were both spiritually and carnally devoted to one another and to no other, had never belonged to anyone other than the other, and emphasized the indefinite nature of such a promise. This was enough to secure Lil’s investment in marriage.

But! In the mix of all this talk of love, all these undercurrents of sexual desire, the byproducts of human union were neglected from the conversation. Not once did these kids mention *kids*. There was some unspoken (dis)agreement between them; Frank wanted children and assumed that this was the natural order of things. It was an unconscious drive that, until that night, never warranted scrutiny. Lil wanted . . . well, I’d rather enter the scene and let *her* tell you.

Reconstructed from her diary:

Frank had mostly sobered up by the time they got to their hotel. He was a pleasant drunk—something that she'd never known existed. Eruptions of affection spewed forth from him in the taxi, little kisses, big poetic exclamations of her inner and outer beauty. Around him clung the sweet acidic smell of whatever he had been drinking with his groomsmen, but she didn't mind. She was floating on the night.

He carried her to their room. It was a coily furnished little box overlooking downtown Raleigh. Lots of carpet and curtain and a king-sized bed. Tomorrow they'd leave on a flight to Cape Cod, where they'd stay for a few days whale watching, camping, and fine dining. Gene and Frank Senior orchestrated this getaway, the latter paying for the brunt of it. But none of this was came to Lil's mind.

(I've arbitrarily shoehorned the next day's events into her perspective because I squirm at my own proximity to my grandparents' most intimate moment. Forgive me—I will be more faithful to the truth. But I will not douse in vibrant imagery my grandmother's sex life! Nor will I recount it at all, come to think of it. I will merely record her own analysis of the event, stripped of uncomfortable detail.)

It was awkward and embarrassing and mostly good. Before it began, when they had just entered the room, they each seemed to forget why they were there in the ecstasy of one another's company, until Lil grabbed Frank and initiated the whole ordeal. The truth was, she was more excited than anxious for the act that would seal them together forever, for what she considered (at the time) to be the pinnacle of intimacy, for the ultimate confirmation of her non-aloneness. Pleasure had much to do with it—but it was a variety of emotional comforts that stimulated her more so than any physical externality.

In her mind there did rattle a small fear that was dwarfed by these other feelings; she did not want to get pregnant! The idea of sharing Frank's attention so soon after gaining it froze something in the pit of her abdomen. As they neared the climax (bear with me) of this interaction, her latent fear broke into a nonverbal discomfort with whole situation and she had a burning desire to ask him, politely, if he would mind *not* finishing inside her to prevent the formulation of one Jason Almen. She stifled this request for fear of displeasing her gyrating new husband, and with an overriding primal urge, forced the fear from her mind and the carnal deed was done.

In writing about this night, she noted the following:

1. "It is not the process of pregnancy or childbirth that frightens me; it is the thought of ourselves (Frank and me) being divided among other players, of the redistribution of our love that must follow from its zenith, the colorful play of light that dances in the sky as its source disappears behind the horizon. I do not want to trade the sun for a son."

2. "Frank is of such a pure and understanding disposition that, had I asked him to stop, he most certainly would have, and would have then discussed the matter with me civilly. My own experiences with an explosive father and an unresponsive mother painted my assessment of options in that moment."

And 3. "If I am pregnant, I will do this thing for him. Under these circumstances, my ideal pathway is to double down on motherhood so as to attract him to the greatest capacity still available to me."

Allow me a sudden dismount from this memory within a memory; I think it we've seen enough. Needless to say Grandma glossed over many of these details as we sat in our living

room in that summer of 1998. Only later did I get to dig into some of those deeper motivations that formed the basis of our intergenerational sample. Her analysis was plainer, dulled by time.

“Believe it or not, I never wanted children,” she told me from across the coffee table. Her gaze circled my face, repelled from it like the wrong side of a magnet. “Not before your grandfather, anyway.”

The smoke detector above us let out a shrill beep, indicating low battery. My ghost must’ve wanted an intermission. Good timing—we already know the outcomes of this marital hiccup—myself being one of them!

//

I ought to arrive at the juicy stuff soon. My reader was promised the aforementioned lying and killing, was teased with an incest plot, and yet I’ve gone on about my grandmother’s fluctuating teenage temperament. An apology is *not* in order (I do believe this character sketch is relevant), but I will digress and arrive at our first real tragedy—the event that I’d argue set things spinning.

Grandpa was drafted to Vietnam in 1972 and never came back home. Grandma described the years leading up to this moment as tranquil and fruitful. Their money first came from a job Frank picked up on the tail end of high school at a real estate agency, the owner of which his father knew. Being a quick learner, he applied those principles acquired from his job and purchased a few rental properties of his own around Goldsboro, the likes of which Grandma (with the boost of military checks) lives off of to this day. They moved in together shortly after their honeymoon.

Lil conceived on her wedding night (just her luck) and gave birth to Jason in May of 1963. Despite her lack of motherly instinct and desire, she fell comfortably into the role, seeing how

much it pleased Frank. In fact, she adapted to such a degree that she considered motherhood to be a benign inconvenience—one that, at its best moments granted spikes of endorphins and at its worst induced blood-boiling rage. Luckily, she mostly experienced the former emotion, and as a result of this change of heart agreed, within a year, to undergo the process once more. And so Marianne entered the frame.

An aside on the “frame:”

I’ve asked myself at various points in this project (which I have been chipping away at for the better part of a year), *why begin where I’ve begun?* Surely there are relevant factors and players outside the scope that I’ve set here for the reader’s entertainment. You wouldn’t believe how chafing this garment called “memoir” can be. There ought to be a law that says the following: grandparents must explain in full detail the qualities and lives of *their own* parents and grandparents succinctly to *their* grandchildren. This interaction should be recorded. If such a law were instated, the need for this work would vanish. You and I would be able to trace these issues back to Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve, God and Satan, and whoever screwed things up before all of them.

I’m struck by the self-consciousness with which I write. Do other writers apologize so profusely for not encompassing the entire truth? It’s a tiresome affair and it is over.

“You’da thought your mother would’ve been the problem—how loud and needy she was, even as a toddler,” Grandma said. The sun was setting outside, slipping rays through blinds like jail bars. “Jason was the quiet child. Took after me, I guess. Come to think of it—” she paused and looked down at her lap “—they both did. With her affliction and all.”

“You were saying about grandpa. The draft?” I interrupted; I thought I knew enough about the dreaded siblings. I wanted the heroics, the admirable tragedy.

“Yes. The first draft missed him. The second one got him,” she said. (Ha! In more ways than one!) “Or I should say, he was exempted during the first years, before the lottery. Then the lottery called his number in ‘69. Your grandfather was all for the war when it popped into the public consciousness. So was I. Goodness—how much people change. Don’t blame us; it’s much easier to see a thing is wrong in retrospect.

“You know that your great grandfather was a well-decorated military man—a high-ranking general in the Air Force. He was always wanted his son to follow in his footsteps,” a note of bitterness, “and succeeded at least in planting a bit of hawkishness in him from a young age, even if he ultimately declined to enlist. This conflict of values of course manifested in the late sixties when Vietnam became a flash point for the youth, and your grandfather had to decide whether his loyalties to his nation or his family were greater. He’d often say, ‘If I didn’t have all of you to care for here at home, I’d gladly be over there fighting for our country. The only reason I take the exemption is for the sake of my family.’ This was enough to appease his father—barely.

“And I occupied a similar head space. Of course, I didn’t want my husband to go off to war and leave us behind, but that patriotic sentiment was infectious. A perfect storm of factors kept me content until he was taken. I was safe enough in his company to want war, while also uncomfortable with the thought of arguing for him to stay. When the day came and his number was called, he went like everyone else. His father promised to keep an eye on us and send a monthly boost; he was still working at Seymour. That seemed to put his mind at ease as he went.” Grandma leaned forward and took the framed photo off the coffee table, caressed it with the back of a finger. “He always cared so much.”

“So grandpa wanted to go to Vietnam, but also didn’t want to go. Was he relieved when his number was called?” I asked.

“He was . . . quiet about it. Solemn, like it was some kind of divine alignment. Like God set his priorities straight for him. He went pale when his number was up. I’ll never forget it.”

“When did you start opposing the war?”

“Soon as they told me he died, I’m embarrassed to say. Should’ve been against it from the start. Should’ve cut off his finger, fed him some blood. Especially since we left with nothing to show for it just a year later.”

“What if we had left with something to show for it?” I asked. Keep in mind, this was the summer before I left for college. I only vaguely knew what a communist was. Some big red boogy men on the other side of the sea. “Seems wrong to judge a thing morally based on its success or failure. Would it have been a good thing if we’d won?”

“Makes no sense to think like that,” she said. She put the picture down with more intensity than she probably intended. “We’ll never stop meddling. Everything’s too big and is only gonna get bigger till it all collapses. Doesn’t matter what ideology is at the helm. Best you can do is look out for yourself—because whatever ‘team’ you’re on won’t give damn. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Where were we?”

“Grandpa left.” The words gave way to a sad pause, and I scrambled to fill it. “Were there letters? You must’ve written each other.”

“He was only there long enough to write once. I don’t know if he got my response.”

“Do you still have that letter from him?”

“Somewhere.”

“I would love to see it.”

“I’ll find it for you,” she said, and got up with an urgency. The armchair creaked as she ejected from it and scurried from the room. I sighed. It all suddenly felt like pulling teeth. Was I approaching a sticking point? I listened as grandma rummaged through a closet. From the table, the portrait of Frank Almen III smiled at me.

//

Grandpa’s letter offered little of interest. He sent love to his darling, remarked on the characters of his fellow soldiers (including a lookalike, one Private Altman—you couldn’t make this up), and lamented the sad contradictory beauty of the place he’d just arrived to wage war. Eighteen-year-old me wanted battle stories. I see now the haunting nature of that singular letter, the lack of promise that one’s story *must* continue.

“How did you find out?”

“His father came before the telegram did. Soon as I heard that knock on the door, I looked out the window and saw his car. I knew. I answered the door. He stood there in his suit with his hat off and a look on his face. Not a look like he regretted the whole ordeal, because he didn’t. He knew what war was about and accepted the loss before he lost it. He was sorry for me.

“Well I haven’t spoken to my father in law much since the funeral. Not his fault, all mine. But he sends us some money sometimes from out in Texas where they live nowadays. He must be getting up there. Wonder if he’s changed much.”

“I never knew I had living great-grandparents,” I said.

“Don’t mind it,” she said with a snort. “My parents are dead and we’re only on a monetary basis with the other side.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing I’m proud of.”

“Well?”

There was silence for a minute while grandma tried to construct a favorable transition. I felt my ghost-friend looming, a shadow that sat with us in the television’s inky mirror. “I won’t lie to you Will. I did things after your grandfather’s death that are painful to recall.”

I smiled and softened. “I won’t think any differently of you. You raised me well and for that you have my unconditional love.”

“You should never love anyone unconditionally,” she said (and killed the moment). “I’ll be straight with you. I joined several anti-war groups shortly after Frank was killed. I fell in with bad people. I had a child with a man I barely knew. All while my kids were alone at home.”

I tried to hide my shock (unsuccessfully). “You abandoned them?”

“I wouldn’t have called it that at the time. But yes, I would say so.”

“What would you have called it?”

“Liberation. Revolution. Gaining consciousness. Nice words that skirt around a heavier concept: Responsibility.” She let the word ring for a moment. “I don’t mean to be didactic. You’ll encounter all this in school. All I mean to say is, I failed, in those crucial years, as a mother. And for that I have no excuse.”

“You blame yourself for what happened between them.”

“Not entirely,” she said, rubbing at her eyelid. A tear was trying to escape. “There was evil in Jason that had nothing to do with my immaturity. It had only to do with malice and cruelty. To take advantage of someone without a voice, your own blood nonetheless—it’s sickness. He denied it until his death, pissed in everyone’s face and said it was raining, took up *religion*. If all *that* was because of my mistakes . . . then I’ll answer for it one day.

“But that’s not what my gut tells me. I had a hand in it all, sure. But I never pushed anyone so far as to commit such a heinous act.” She sighed and permitted a warm smile. “You’ll be the judge, of course.”

My head was spinning. Bombs were falling on history. Grandma shared the blame for the fragmentation—to what degree, it was unclear. I wouldn’t find out for a few more years (when I stumbled across this handy diary, of which we will explore momentarily). Let’s wrap up this scene.

I tried to keep my head on. “Would you rather discuss the child you had with the stranger or the violent anti-war groups?” I asked. (What a horrible choose-your-own-adventure prompt.)

“Such a journalist. Don’t get *too* wrapped up in my stories. They are, after all, only stories. You take what you want from them,” she yawned. “All this dredging through the past has me fatigued. We’ll start again after I rest.”

Luckily, diaries do not need naps.

//

I’ll spare you my diatribe on the artifice of this transition. No, I did not have access to these documents at the time. I’m being aesthetically playful! Jumping through time like *Absalom!* If Faulkner can do it, so can I.

Whether intentionally or not, Grandma left out heaps of detail when she woke up. Here’s my reconstruction of events, straight from the horse’s diary:

She hadn’t written in her diary from the moment that Frank left, until the moment she met Alexei Bonell, whose first name suggests some Russian heritage. In truth, the name on his birth certificate was just “Alex;” he tacked on the “ei” when he started attending student communist party meetings. Long ago, he’d cringe to have you know, his ancestors were French. Poor Lil

discovered these bits of minor treachery only after their fling fell apart. Here I go again, spoiling the future. It's no secret that Alexei is a shady character; any discerning reader would detect this subtext early on had I wished to delay this subversion of your expectations.

Lil's state of despair post-widowing crept into the new decade, where her grief found a new outlet. In Spring of 1970, she'd grown accustomed to spending her days sitting by the television and radio, captive to rotating news reports of civil unrest. There sparked within her some unconscious affection for college anti-war protesters that filled the hole her marriage left. During this time, she noted in retrospect, her connection with her children began to wane.

She decided, on a whim, to hire a babysitter and travel to Raleigh and wander around a few college campuses. She was still young enough to fit in, being herself just past college-age, and might be approached by a few passionate representatives looking to win support for their movement. Her assumptions were correct; she was handed several pamphlets and thus had her itinerary set for the coming months. And so, with each approaching date, she enlisted that babysitter (a local elderly woman named Trina or Tina or something like that), who became somewhat of a staple in the household going forward—and off Lil would go to sit-ins and speeches, walk-throughs and walk-outs.

Students rarely asked for her affiliation with their institution. They were glad for strength in numbers. On the off occasion that she was asked, she'd lie for no good reason, said she'd come from another school to support this organization or that one, kept a rotation of unfalsifiable yet unassuming answers. She felt the ecstasy of integration. She kept quiet at speeches and consumed, half-heartedly (she later admitted) but with manufactured enthusiasm, the tenets of communism, the policy prescriptions of the civil rights movement, and the social demands of feminism.

It wasn't that she disagreed, or even agreed with her new companions. If you haven't caught onto my own analysis of dear grandma, it's that she's somewhat of a reactionary, easily shifted from polar end to polar end. Nothing wrong with that; one can make an argument that this characteristic is one which makes her most human, that this quality has plagued humanity's social history for generations—the push and pull between “too far” and “not far enough.” Where would we be without our extremists, our moderates, our infighting? Every ideology has an autoimmune deficiency. But let's not get too theoretical, for we know grandma certainly wasn't.

The circumstances under which Lil and Alexei began their relationship were unremarkable and do not warrant the Frank and Lil treatment. This is not my bias, but rather Grandma's. The love they shared was shallow and opportunistic by her verbal accounts (which I prefer over the written in this case), despite its culmination in the creation of another child. I'll only provide a brief section on the initiating incident.

They crossed paths during a protest-planning meeting on some campus just after the Kent State Massacre. It let out just after sunset and Lil found herself splintered into a group that had plans for the night. Next thing she knew, she was sharing a twin bed as a seat in a cramped dorm with her fellow revolutionaries. Just beside her was Alexei, who had longish black hair and a tinge of red in his scruff. His mustache connected to his beard only on one side of his mouth. She found him slightly revolting at first glance, but stifled any crueler judgments. She caught herself thinking, “He seems too young for me,” before kicking herself in bewilderment.

Five or six other students packed into that small room carrying weed, beer, and cigarettes. It was Lil's first time getting high. It made the room feel bigger, the space between the occupants grow wider. She fell into conversation with a decreasingly repulsive Alexei who, equally impaired, took a liking to the way he was being looked at. They spoke first about surface-level

politics (yessed one another until adequately socialized), then about the science fiction novels that they enjoyed and about their predictions of future technology, then, naturally, about the personal tragedies that had plagued their lives—the likes of which are always stirred up when the brain lacks inhibition and dignity. (Not criticizing. I've been there!)

Lil spoke not about the loss of her husband in Vietnam, nor about the hardship of single motherhood, but reached back to the neglect and abuse at the hands of her parents. Alexei hinted at but never outwardly described some horrific event perpetrated by his father at his expense. Multiple times he riled himself up like a shaken coke bottle, never to be opened. Grandma still couldn't tell me what Alexei's father did to him, if anything. Later that night, they spoke about the nature of the universe, whether love or chaos or justice or nothing lay at its core.

“It's love,” Alexei said, voice quivering at the magnitude of its own profundity. “It's all love. Everything is, revolves around, and ends with love. Everyone can choose love and peace and forgiveness, even the most evil people. That's why we are all here together *right now*. Everyone in this room has chosen love. Because it is the only way.” Something in his voice captured the attention of the whole room, drew them from their own meandering conversations. Through the smoke and low light, a deep radiance of agreement manifested in a few moments of silence.

Lil marveled at Alexei in a drunken stupor. “Do you love your father?” she asked.

The silence held its breath.

Alexei looked at her like a startled animal. “No,” he said, and he seemed to gag on the word. The other occupants of the room whispered at the sharp edge of the question, at its shattering of the sudden peace. Alexei's eyes were closed when he spoke again. “He is not a person.”

Something in Lil stirred. She didn't know if it was because he said something profound or idiotic, if it was because she hated or enjoyed him, if it was because he was handsome or

hideous. Maybe it was because he was the nearest living creature to her in the room. But from that moment, she decided that they would be *something*—because, for better or worse, she deserved him.

5

What ensued from that night onward is my grandmother's shame. Attached by a thread to every cultural trend of the decade, she and Alexei hopped around from place to place, living on a network of communal youth couches, dirty motels, and vehicle back seats—engaging in most of the nefarious activities that these locales imply. Close readers will ask: What about the children? What about Frank? These are valid questions to which I have no rational answer. My ghost writer will have to make some sense of this. Grandma says it was her way of coping, that she wasn't in her right mind from the grief of her loss. Read further to determine if this is an acceptable statement.

You'll recall the babysitter from earlier, whom I misnamed. Her name was Catherine (not Tina), and it is no surprise to me that my grandmother struggled to remember this small fact. While I never met her, she was the de facto primary caretaker of Marianne and Jason from the early to mid-seventies while their mother was off gallivanting. I'll take a moment to elaborate on this arrangement.

For the latter half of 1970, when Lil's activism and vacuous actions were first gaining momentum, her years of practice as a motherly figure compelled her, at the very least, to search for a means of safely storing Jason and Marianne (who were, at this point, seven and six years old, respectively) while she "figured things out." Catherine was the container. Her husband had been dead for years. Her kids were themselves middle-aged with kids and scattered across the country. She enjoyed the presence of children and gladly welcomed the job for small sum of

cash. For several months Lil welcomed Catherine through the door and briefed her on the needs of the children before leaving for Raleigh under the pretense of “working to provide for her family.” Once Catherine could clearly be trusted, and the children seemed content enough, Lil had a key cut for her. With that deed done, she began leaving earlier, leaving instructional notes for Catherine, leaving the children in the dark hours of the morning.

Catherine slept over often. When Lil said she’d be away three days, Catherine brought her nightgown and folded herself into thirds on the sofa. When Lil would return crusty eyed and swaying in the middle of the night, naive old Catherine would say, “You poor thing, doing a man’s work,” and would make her some tea. She was a mother to them all, and like too many mothers went unappreciated in her time. (A moment of appreciation for Catherine.)

Now, I mentioned earlier that *my* mother, Marianne, suffers from aphasia, and you may be wondering about the logistics of dealing with such an affliction during her childhood. The ball didn’t get rolling on federal accommodations for disabilities until the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and other subsequent legislation, and by that point Marianne had attended (and been removed from) one public and two private schools for her perceived “unteachability.” By that time she was nine years old and had thoroughly slipped through the cracks of the system. With her father gone and her mother “out working,” Marianne’s only advocate was her elderly babysitter, whom herself hadn’t engaged with an educational institution in several decades. A feeling of “we’ll get around to solving this eventually” had overtaken Frank and Lil during their first four years with their silent daughter, a feeling which faded when the war broke up the family. Then her condition simply became an irreversible fact of life.

Jason, on the other hand, did just fine in private school until the lack of authority at home caught up with him and he had a long streak of pre-pubescent rebellion. Teachers telephoned and

wrote home with reports of disrespect and disruption but reached no one. Expecting these calls and letters, Jason would unplug the phone and intercept the mail to keep Catherine (and by extension his absent mother) in the dark. This behavior worsened from, say, 1975 to about 1978, when Jason's activities began looking less like normal childhood development and more like moral degeneracy. I'll illuminate this in a moment, but first I must reintroduce a minor character.

Little Frank Almen III came onto the scene as a bump in my grandmother's stomach in '78. Lil and Alexei finally threw caution to the wind one night while tripping on mushrooms—a sexual session in which (as I've discerned from her diary) she superimposed the image of her husband over her actual partner in a pseudo-religious hallucinatory experience. While her first impulse was (in alignment with Alexei's pleas) to abort the fetus, a sublime lingering feeling that this was *Frank's child* dominated her decision to ride it out. It did not, however, alter her lifestyle otherwise.

Being old enough to understand the implications of a spontaneous pregnancy, and already harboring suspicions of his mother's constant absence, Jason found himself suddenly disgusted by her presence and expressed as much in a few explosive episodes. Their relationship, during what brief interaction they had, began to subtly decline. In 1979, Catherine gained a new, smaller client. Little Frank was born shrieking at five pounds and two ounces, with a myriad of health issues which kept the mother and son in the hospital for weeks.

Alexei railed against the pregnancy for its entirety, a conflict that destroyed the duo. He fell off the map three months prior, in shaky agreement with Lil about the fact that the child was not his. They never saw one another again.

When Little Frank came home from the hospital, Jason was largely indifferent to his new brother. Marianne was enthralled. Living a relatively uneventful life, she latched onto this

opportunity to care for the child—much to the relief of Catherine, who wasn't getting any younger. Speaking of the old babysitter reminds me, once again, of Jason's descent.

After Little Frank's birth, things were normal for a bit. Lil was home more often, caring for the baby with help from her daughter. Jason was on his best behavior at school, feeling threatened by the scrutiny of his mother's proximity. Catherine had a few months off, but still visited on occasion. Once Lil had recovered and Little Frank's condition was stable (sickly and weak as he was), the babysitter was back on payroll to facilitate further trips to God-knows-where. Only, now, Lil had determined that her two older children were mature enough (being sixteen and fifteen) to not need full-time supervision, and so (feeling the tightening of funds post-childbirth and pre-perpetual-vacation) paid old Catherine merely to check on the kids daily.

Of course, Catherine went above and beyond to look out for the Almen kids, but age is a stoppable force and her duty an immovable object. For some time she'd spend most of the days caring for Little Frank and would leave only when exhausted at dusk, in need of her medication and a hot bath. She'd leave notes for Lil about the kids; who knows if she ever read them.

She died of a heart attack one day in 1980.

Jason saw them carrying her out of her little brick house as he rode his bike home from school. He told nobody. Instead, presumably to maintain his teenage freedom, he rushed home, collected all the notes Catherine had written to his mother, and practiced replicating her handwriting until he could fool himself with the quality of forgery.

And for the succeeding months his mother unknowingly paid him to babysit himself.

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We've arrived at the rock bottom of the Almen family history.

Grandma couldn't remember where she was returning from when she found Little Frank's frail frame in his crib. All she knew was that she had been away for days. The baby had been dead long enough for his soft extremities to turn blue, for his excrement to have dried and hardened around him. It was nighttime and the only other sound in the house was Marianne whimpering upstairs. Lil was in shock of course, but managed to think, "My God, the poor children have been alone in this house with a corpse." Before I proceed, I'd like to allow grandma's account of events to take precedence, for fear of my own misrepresentation of this pivotal moment. Let's return to that coffee table in 1999.

"I'd never dealt with death so directly before," grandma said. My heart was tripping over itself and my pencil was moist in my grip. I sensed our proximity to the defining moment, the revelation. "I peered into the kids' rooms. Marianne lay in bed, facing the wall, weeping. I'd figured she'd seen Little Frank and got scared. I checked on Jason—sound asleep. I can't explain how it felt, like I was vibrating. The air was sticky . . . and thick. It was a disgustingly hot night.

"I went back downstairs and called nine-one-one in a daze. It felt like Little Frank's room had a bomb in it, or some disease. I couldn't go back in. They came and looked at him for a second and they knew. They took him away. I should've been there, knowing how sick he was. That's why I was never home. I couldn't face it." Grandma dabbed her eyes with a tissue drawn from the box on the table. "I can't tell you how ashamed of myself—"

"Grandma," I said. And for a moment I wondered who I was to pass judgment or to offer consolation for events I was hardly a part of. If God exists, I'm relieved of duty. If not . . . I love and appreciate my grandmother despite the dirtier aspects of her humanity. "Everyone makes mistakes."

“Maybe,” she said, regaining her composure. I could tell that something within her sensed the frailty of my reassurance, that it was done out of familial obligation. That made me feel weak. (This is not my own therapy session; feel free to cut, ghost writer.) “Once they took my baby away, the house was static. The commotion had brought Jason downstairs and he saw them take Little Frank away under sheets. ‘It’ll be okay mom,’ he said to me, or something along those lines, and put his arm around me. I shiver to think about it now, but in that moment, I marveled at the man he was becoming and cursed the mother that had failed him. Marianne remained upstairs until I went and coaxed the poor thing down.

“Grief changed me that night, in a deeper sense than the loss of your grandfather did. I’d been at my lowest for a long time, stuck there. But I felt then an urge to exist in my pain and fight it. I wanted my two remaining children there in front of me. I wanted to hold them, for them to rally around me. I felt the animal drive to cut my losses and provide, to persevere. And I had them there, on this sofa—and I didn’t know what to say. Marianne squirmed to get away from her brother; I’d soon find out why. I only thought she was distraught, confused—the way she kicked at him and stared. I had no idea what he’d been doing to her. The three of us sat here quietly, Marianne shaking, until she bolted upstairs. Jason fell asleep in that chair you’re sitting in now. I hardly blinked.

“Next day everything fell apart. Jesus. That day, a long line of sin reared its gnarled head and found our judgment was long overdue. I know what I’ve done. But I paid for generations.” She paused, reluctant to continue. I nodded her on. “Morning came and Marianne was sick because *you*, pea-sized as you were, were causing a ruckus in her belly. I had no idea. My daughter was fifteen, didn’t go to school, barely went outside, no friends, couldn’t socialize. Didn’t think another person had ever touched her besides me, her father, Little Frank—and Jason. Had no

reason to suspect she was expecting. I thought she was sick with grief, but she had a fever, was sweating, holding her stomach. When she started vomiting I had a wild notion; she looked like me with my morning sickness—a spitting image. I felt stupid, dumbstruck by exhaustion and grief from the previous night. But after I'd given her some acetaminophen, I went rummaging for the leftover pregnancy tests I had from Little Frank's conception.

“Funny—I knew I'd bought five and had used three in '78. But there was one left! Didn't think anything of it till later. I brought her sniveling and swaying into the bathroom and demonstrated what to do. I felt insane, like ought to have been institutionalized. I paced outside and gave her some privacy. When she was done, I snatched the thing from her. I couldn't believe my eyes.

“I ran to the telephone all hysterical to dial the babysitter. Must've tried ten times. No answer. I yelled up to Jason, who was, of course, cool as a cucumber—asked him if any men had been around past few months, any friends of his, anything. He said 'no,' the devil. So I jumped in the car with your mother and took off to pay Catherine a visit.

“I got there and left your mother in the car and nearly burst down the door. I needed to tell her everything, to ask her things I should've already known. I was treating that door like the back of a church pew the way I was pleading with it. Didn't even notice the 'for sale' sign on the lawn.

“Some neighbors of hers were walking down the street and looking at me all concerned. Asked me if I needed anything. Said I needed to talk to Catherine. They said sorry, she'd passed away months ago. And then I was spinning.

“I drove home slow because I knew I could lose my grip at any moment. It didn't seem possible. I could've sworn I'd seen her, what, a month before? But I was making things up. I

thought I was writing to her all that time I was away. I barely skimmed the notes ‘*she’d*’ leave me because they rarely said anything new. I bet he did that on purpose. Boy, did I know nothing.

“Got back home and Jason was gone, bike and all. I was so naive, didn’t even consider it could’ve been him. I put Marianne in bed and sat there next to her, my mind completely blank. Reality was falling apart.

“Then I look across the hall and see Jason’s door cracked open, and I’m compelled to go in. I’m quiet, like I’m trespassing.” Grandma’s voice hushed. I noted her shift in tense, nightmare-like. Immediacy. “I search around, knowing that whether or not I find anything there’s a good chance I’ll end up an invalid. I lift up his mattress and all the evidence is right there. I looked right past all that normal crap a mother’d be concerned about—the cigarette case, the pornography, the flask. I saw all the notes and money I’d left for Catherine, and worst of all, I saw that missing pregnancy test. Used and positive.”

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I soaked it in, the most complete version I’d yet received. I saw each scene unfold with its imaginary figures, a biblical story with no other moral than “neglect bad.” It was hard to believe that I’d been conceived from such misery and tumult, that my easy childhood had spawned from utter chaos. Above all, I wrestled with the strange concept that the woman in front of me had experienced so much before my consciousness even existed. In a very real sense, none of this was real to me!

“I imagine you confronted him,” I said, breaking a pause that had stretched a bit too long for comfort. I was anxious to hear the climax, despite knowing the ending.

“I did. He came home and I had it all on the table. Marianne was hiding behind me. ‘Explain this,’ I said, and nothing else. He was shocked that I’d found it all. He had this ridiculous

confused look on his face. They say that's a sign of psychopathy, when you can't fathom that others might be smart enough to catch you. When he went to speak, Marianne recoiled. That was all I needed to see.

“I have just as much to explain as you do,’ he said, and his voice was shaking. ‘Less, even.’ Then he looked behind me at Marianne and said, “What are you doing, standing behind her? I’m the one’s been taking care of you.” Marianne flinched and tugged on my sleeve, and I looked down at her. She lifted up the flap of her dress and showed me a landscape of welts and bruises across her thighs and, more distressed than I’d ever seen her, pointed at Jason. And I just lost it. I let twenty-four hours of anguish out on that boy, and we screamed at one another, and I don’t even know if we were saying words. He went scrambling out that front door with a few new bruises of his own.

“Then it was just me and Marianne again and I was so fatigued I didn’t know what to do. It was abundantly clear at that point what was happening in my absence. Logic dictated I ought to call the police and report a crime—but Jesus, to do that on your first-born child! I couldn’t bring myself to do it until an hour after he’d gone. Silly, the things that made me pause. I told them everything and they sent out some patrols to find him.

“Didn’t take them long. They found him up fifteen minutes in Faro fixing the chain on his bike. They took him in and questioned him, sent some officers here to question us too. Jason denied everything, even taking the money. They had a doctor examine your mother. Everything was lining up, so they put him in jail until his day in court.

“When that day came, your mother, being witness to her own defilement, put the final nail in his coffin with her testimony.”

I shook my head. “How did she testify?”

“Nodded ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Drew a picture that nauseated the jury.”

“And what was his defense?”

“Oh, they hardly let Jason speak. He’d become too unstable, lashing out at everyone. You know he denied everything until the very end. His lawyer argued it was all circumstantial, but Marianne won the jury over, thank God. Charged him with rape in the first degree.

“Of course, that wasn’t the end of our legal troubles. There was more of a spotlight on our domestic affairs, as there ought to have been, in the immediate aftermath. I was investigated by CPS, had to prove that I was homeschooling your mother, even though neither she nor I seemed capable of fulfilling that standard. But we made do, kept squeaky clean until the debris settled, and life went on. I couldn’t see it at the time, but I now consider that era a rocky new beginning.”

“But things fell apart between you and mom when I was young,” I said, for the first time in our conversation, with certainty. I’d found my footing in tangible history. I sensed myself here, a small yet radiant agent.

“Yes, a rocky beginning. But that’s another story,” grandma said, and yawned. “One you already know.”