From Edenville: Essays

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The Projects: 3.6 miles from Edenville

Three miles outside of Edenville sits the Borough of Chambersburg, about 13 miles north of the Mason-Dixon line. Chambersburg lies between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, in a region commonly referred to as Alabama. You could say I live in Alabama.

But Chambersburg has a city life of its own, with a Main Street branching off from the square where Route 30 and Route 11 intersect. South Main Street takes you past the M&T Bank, the Cumberland Valley Animal Shelter and Thrift Store, the old Capital Theatre, and several Mexican goods stores, like El Gallo Garcia and La Michoacana. Next you pass the Franklin County Shelter and its wooden benches filled with men and women waiting for the doors to open at night. Heading west from there takes you over the train tracks bordered by row houses, the First Lutheran Church, and a CVS. Finally, South Main Street takes you to the Southgate Mall and Shopping Center, Southgate to everyone in town. Just beyond this lies the Projects, or the public housing section.

My parents always told me to avoid the Projects. Watch out for who’s around you when you’re there. If you drive through the parking lot of Southgate, lock your car doors. My mother, sister and I used to cut through Southgate Mall on our way to school, avoiding eye contact with the people sitting on the sidewalks and loitering outside of stores such as Big Lots, Chinawok, Las Palmeras and the Family Dollar.

Just recently my mother and I went shopping in the Big Lots at Southgate. As we drove through the parking lot we passed a woman walking with anxious shuffle. She kept waving at the cars, trying to get them to lower their windows, as if she wanted a ride or to tell them something. Her hair was frazzled, as if she had just removed a hat, her hair lifted up in all directions. “What do you think is wrong with her?” I asked my mother, watching her through the glass of the window. “What does she want?” My eyes instinctively checked the lock on the car door—it was secure. “I don’t know,” my mother replied, “but the sooner we are done here the better. This is crazy town.”

My father, David, grew up just beside here, in the Projects. He opened packets of crackers and cans of soda in the aisles of the ACME grocery store when he was hungry, wolfing the contents down or stuffing them inside his jacket for later. He walked ten blocks or so every day to the Central Junior High School on Queen Street—rain, snow and shine. He later drove a Harley to the Chambersburg Area High School several more blocks away. My father has a favorite story from his childhood he tells more than any other. “When we lived in the Projects,” he says (which is about as descriptive as he’ll get about his childhood), “my best friend Harvey and I got into all sorts of trouble.”

One night my father slept over at Harvey’s house. They snuck out the top floor window and slid down a drainpipe alongside of the house to the ground below. I picture them making their escape like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. My father and Harvey would push Harvey’s parents’ Oldsmobile far enough away from the front of the house until they could start it without waking the parents, and then they’d free ride through the Projects. “Harvey was driving so fast,” my father recalls, and here he starts to laugh, “that when he hit the incline right before the train tracks we caught air and went flying. On the other side was a homeless man walking at night. We gave him a real surprise as the car banged across the tracks. I can still see the whites of his wide eyes.” My father demonstrates with an expression of silliness and terror.

My father lived on Spruce Street, located just between Redwood and Pine—three streets lined with white clapboard trailers. The streets surrounding the area contained their own rows of brick, concrete, or plastic-sided houses, perpetually tired and worn, their paint peeling and metal rusting. The houses on Redwood Street and Pine Street still stand. In the
spring of my eleventh grade year, I found myself in the passenger’s seat of my mother’s silver Honda idling just outside number 10 Redwood.

It was hot in the car and I was nervous, my eyes flitting between the small wooden porch leading to number 10 and my mother’s face. “It’s okay, honey,” my mother assured me. “I’ll be here to pick you up at 5:30 sharp.” It was currently 3:30 and I’d just arrived from my private high school outside of town, changing my navy kilt for a pair of jeans in the car as we drove. The kilt was bound to draw too much attention. I had joined the National Honor’s Society in the eleventh grade. Each member was required to participate in hours of service.

Now, instead of a small trailer home, workers had transformed number 10 Redwood Street into NETwork Ministries, a youth organization that offered after school care and activities for children and adolescents in the neighborhood. This was the first evening I’d volunteered my time with the children just arriving from school.

When my father heard that I was volunteering in the Projects he was furious. “They want you, a girl in high school, to volunteer down there?” he asked, his arms crossed over his chest. I assured him that it would be fine, as leaders were always present. I would never be alone.

“But you’ve got to drive there,” he said. “You’re gonna be in and outside of the building.” He responded this way for minutes and days, describing the crime in the Projects, that I’d never be going there at night for any reason, and he’d be purchasing me Mace at his earliest convenience. His fears eased as time passed and the shock of my returning to the place he had run from subsided.

My mother took me to NETwork the first few times; later I drove myself. I volunteered into the summer, building relationships with the kids, helping them with homework or playing basketball outside. I even spent time weeding in NETwork’s community garden, located behind the center. The children and volunteers, as well as anyone from the Projects, could garden and purchase vegetables.

Over time I’ve been able to glean stories of my father’s childhood in the Projects, stories I know he keeps close. He shares them, a bit bleary eyed from the drink he keeps tucked slightly out of eyesight so as not to encourage us. His mother, Joyce, divorced his father and married a man named Bud. Bud became my father’s stepfather. I only met him once, after Bud and Joyce moved from Spruce Street across town to Scotland Avenue, but that was enough for my mother’s sense of obligatory exposure I should have to my father’s childhood.

My Aunt Sissy talks about Bud (whose real name was Larry) only sometimes. She always begins the conversation with, “Bud, that son of a bitch.” Then she tells stories from her and my father’s childhood that are a mixture of joy and pain. I’ve mostly heard her say, “Bud beat us good.” My father and Aunt Sissy picked on their brother Jimmy most evenings, all good fun, until Bud found them out of bed and beat them with a belt.

My father has a favorite saying: “Travel light, freeze at night, wait for dawn.” “Travel light, freeze at night,” is a soldier’s motto, meant for packing gear light to ease a journey. My father always added “wait for dawn.” He tells me this whenever I complain about school or people that bother me. It’s always those words, spoken both in jest and seriousness—an all encompassing mantra: “Travel light, freeze at night, wait for dawn.”

My father kept his head down in high school. He spent summers and school years working at Kentucky Fried Chicken just off Interstate 81. His manager, impressed with his work, gave him extra hours under the table, more than the legal limit a fifteen-year-old could work in a week. I’ve seen a great photo of him that his sister took—he’s wearing an apron tied around his neck, his hands and wrists covered in flour, dipping coated wings in a hotflash fryer. He takes a moment to look at the camera and grin, his face shiny, the heat of the kitchen palpable in the black and white photograph.
My father saved his money and ran as far from Spruce Street as he could at age eighteen. First he went south to Parris Island, where he was arrested with a friend while under the influence. The cop took pity on them when he saw their Marine Corps fatigues and gave them a ride instead. Then my father went west to Camp Pendleton in San Diego, where he burnt tires on the beach at night and drank by the light of the fire with other young men in his unit.

He ended up, though, after his time in the Corps, returning to his family. They had moved from the projects across town to a slightly less depressed area of houses on Scotland Avenue. He joined the ARMY National Guard, working at restaurants and the Letterkenny Army Depot as a technician on tanks and military defense weapons to make more money. He took care of his mother, avoided his stepfather, and, as I picture him, waited for dawn.

Several years after this, when my father was twenty-five, he met my mother through a mutual friend (at a funeral, nonetheless, but that’s another story). My mother likes to tell us of the day she went to pick up my father for their first date. She lived up towards the mountains, in the small town of St. Thomas. And while she visited Chambersburg, she wasn’t very familiar with the area my father lived in.

So my mother, in a little pickup truck, rounded the corner onto Scotland Avenue, anxiously checking house numbers for a match to those written on a paper stuck to her dash. She spotted a particular house, its beige siding and brown shutters long overdue for a good coat of paint. Sitting out front in a folding chair on a small patch of summer-browned grass was a large man with a stomach round from drink, his hair and beard black, his eyes deep-set and hooded. My mother prayed silently that the address numbers my father had given her didn’t belong to that house with the large man sitting out front, holding a beer, leering at passersby.

They did. Dreading having to stop and talk to the man (who was my father’s stepfather Bud, though my mother had no knowledge of this), and altogether wondering whether the thought of dating my father was worth it at this point, my mother kept driving. She decided to make one more round in her truck, and this time, standing on the sidewalk in front of the house on Scotland Avenue, stood my father, lanky, with puffy brown hair and wire-rimmed glassed. I’ve seen the pictures; I know how my parents looked when they met in the ‘80s. My father was in the truck so fast, my mother barely had time to change gears.

Historians often discuss the concept of contingency. Events that have happened only happened because of prior conditions—and those conditions, of course, are part of a fragile web of previous prior conditions, interacting in unmeasurable ways and complicated ways. Change one strand, and you might have a different spider entirely. Whenever my mother is altogether mad at my father, she likes to say that she wishes she had kept driving that day, right on past him as he stood on the side walk waiting for her. I am glad she didn’t.

But I wonder, often, what it would have been like had the string of contingent events worked out differently. What if, I thought, as I sat working with children the age my father once was in the place he lived—what if my father would have had more guidance as a young man? What if he would have gone on to college instead of joining the Marine Corps? When my sister and I return home on breaks during a college semester, sitting at the kitchen table with our textbooks and laptops laid out, my father looks at us and tells us to be grateful. If he would have had our opportunities, if things had been different, he would be a different man. He would have fulfilled his dream of becoming a history professor, wearing woolen cardigans and giving lectures about World World II to students, his book collection steadily growing as his hair greys. He still wears the cardigans, but the professorship escaped him.

Instead he stayed in Chambersburg, earning money to support his mother, his siblings, and Bud. My mother might have kept driving, but she didn’t. The Projects shaped my father in ways I cannot know. It sent him packing, but he came back. He married and
stayed in the National Guard. And today he, along with my mother, support me in the education that they never had. So when I do stare down daunting tasks, or when we’re a few miles from the end of a hike and I cry tired feet, my father just shrugs and says, “Travel light, freeze at night, wait for dawn.”

The garden behind NETwork Ministries consisted of rows of tomatoes, corn, lettuce and green beans, as well as sunflowers and wildflowers. When the afternoon’s weeding and watering came to an end, I would put my tools away and wipe the grass from my pants and the sweat from my forehead. The sounds of children shouting and playing at the houses around me mingled with the horns and bass music blaring from passing cars and SUVs.

I looked out at the rows of vegetables, each kind planted in their own pine boxes filled with rich dirt tilled by many hands. They sat in the space that was once Spruce Street. The houses there had been so dilapidated they were torn down. And in place of the heaps of scrap wood and shingles, grass grew, and from that grass, a garden. I discovered later, as I mentioned this all to my mother, that the ground where it grew on Spruce Street was the exact location of David Koontz’s three room white trailer.
Scotland Avenue, Chambersburg, PA: 3.5 miles from Edenville

When I take Edenville Road into town, I head from the country towards Main Street. I stop at the light on Commerce, first, and it is here as I wait for the light to turn green that I often find myself caught in the fragile game of what if? It’s the longest light in Chambersburg, unfortunately, so there’s time for this game. I stare blankly at the lights changing and then catch myself, chiding my irresponsible lack of attention at that moment to the road, but my mind remains tethered to the thoughts that surfaced during my momentary blip before the lights.

It goes something like this. If I were to turn left here on Commerce, the street becomes Philadelphia Avenue, a broad road of grey brick houses with wide white porches and manicured lawns. Philadelphia meanders past Wilson College, a campus of rich stone dorm buildings, old white Victorian manors, and students lounging in Adirondack chairs scattered across green grass. Philadelphia becomes College Avenue, curving past more student apartments, flanked by large white columns.

Eventually College Avenue becomes Scotland Avenue, lined with row houses of dingy red brick, beige plastic siding, and white-painted wood. On Scotland, bikes laden with children teeter off sidewalks. Kids and teenagers skateboard into the street, weaving between the parked cars alongside the road—elicitng a select word or two from myself when I fear I might hit them. People sit on stoops talking and smoking. Signs stating “Beware of Dog” hang on fences and behind the glass of curtained front windows.

My father’s mother, Joyce, lives on Scotland Avenue. I call her Grandma Kriner. She lives in a two-story tan clapboard house, built up against the sidewalk and the street. Dark brown shutters hang from the windows, and several broken chairs and a rusty grill sit on the front porch, accessed by several wooden steps. I’ve only been inside her house once in my lifetime, despite the fact that I live only fifteen minutes away just outside of town.

My mother tells me the story of when we visited her. I was three years old, with baby-fat legs and short curly hair. I remember, in a series of collected images, hazy at the edges. There was a dark living room with a high ceiling (probably an average height, but in my memory I am short and the ceiling is dark and cavernous). The walls were covered in wooden paneling. A hallway led back and away from me. The heavy TV box sat in the corner hissing static, its screen grey noise. My mother held me on her lap the entire visit.

I haven’t been back since. That’s the entire memory that exists of my grandmother’s house. Now, at the light, I could turn left onto Philadelphia Avenue and take it all the way to Scotland, to her, but I do not. I take the right like I always do and head towards Main Street, thinking about my father’s family.

My Grandma Kriner’s eyes are startling blue, eyes that look at me through the face of my father as well. Her expression tends towards one of constant surprise, or suspended enthusiasm, as if she’s sitting in her chair just waiting to share something or insert herself into the conversation. The food my mother prepares for her delights her. She takes second helpings when she eats meals at our house, sometimes taking thirds. Following the meal, she loves to have fresh fruit for dessert and hot tea that I always make her. And when she leaves for Scotland Avenue at the end of the night, she carries with her Tupperware containers stuffed with leftovers.

Grandma Kriner calls my father Davie, short for David. No one else does this but her, except for my father’s sister Linda, who says “Davie,” only when she’s feeling cheeky and poking fun. “Isn’t this just lovely, Davie?” my Grandma Kriner asks, holding up something my mother’s given her to eat. “Davie, isn’t it lovely?”

I am told that Grandma Kriner’s hair was once red and wavy. Now, however, it is straight and hangs limply across her forehead, dyed a strange mixture of dull orange and grey
blonde. I picture Joyce attempting this herself before a mirror in her bathroom. How she must lift up each section of sparse hair and coat it with the dye, turning the grey into a shade only slightly different.

I drive past her house but never stop there. Even now, as I make my way towards Main Street, I picture the grey roads of Chambersburg seen from the sky, stretched out like a grid beneath the clouds. My little silver car makes its way through town, away from Scotland Avenue, and I ask myself, what would happen, right now, if I turned my car around and went there?

In Jeredith Merrin’s poem “Family Reunion,” she writes of how we as people are cut off from our histories. In response, she offers these questions:

…What if you turned back for a moment

and put your arms around yours?
Yes, you might be late for work;
no, your history doesn’t smell sweet
like a toddler’s head. But look

at those small round wrists,
that short-legged, comical walk.1

Lately I’ve been entertaining the thought that as I age I come closer to being the oldest member of my family—that one day I will have questions I cannot ask because those with the answers aren’t sitting at the table anymore. And as is the case with my Grandma Kriner, I have chosen to drive past her house, but not stop there. I have never immersed myself in her story—the story that gave the world my father. He looked up at the sky from Scotland Avenue and imagined a different life—one he found, after he left Chambersburg for the Marine Corps. He finally settled outside of town in the country, on a side-road just off the main road of Edenville, with a view of the Appalachian Mountains out beyond the cornfields across from our house. There, with my mother Jody, he raised my sister and me. We grew up beneath cherry trees that rained pink petals in the springtime, far away from his streets.

The ACME grocery store in the Southgate Shopping Center of Chambersburg, where my Grandma Kriner shops and my father stole food from as a child, has gone through several changes over the years. First as a County Market, then an Ames department store. I knew it as a Gold’s Gym until that closed down not long ago. Soon, the building will be torn down and a low income senior living center, or more Section 8 housing, built in its place.

My Grandma Joyce, sitting at our table for dinner only a few months ago, described an afternoon she had leaving the Family Dollar at Southgate. As she was walking to her car in the parking lot, two high school kids came up close to her and went for the strap of her purse. “Bastards! I called them,” she said, her eyes wide and hands waving as she recreated the scene for us. “And then,” she said, “I took my purse and beat the one boy with it, until they both ran away. Damn straight,” she finishes, flicking her grey hair out of her eyes.

1 Jeredith Merrin, “Family Reunion.”
My Aunt’s name is Linda, but we all call her Sissy. She gets drunk on weekends and jokes about the photos people post of her online, her eyes in the pictures bleary from alcohol. She sits outside of bars, buzzed, listening to live music sung by gravelly voiced men. On my way through town I drive by those bars—Fran’s Inn and the Jolly Tavern—and I think of her. I only drink at small gatherings in my home with close friends, or with my father when he opens a bottle of wine alongside his own spaghetti dinner.

Aunt Sissy smokes packs of Marlboro cigarettes every day. When she smokes them at our house she goes out onto the deck or the front porch to do so, slipping her pack discreetly out of her purse, winking at me as she goes. I do not smoke, but I never tell her to stop or ask when she’ll quit.

She has many tattoos—a rose with thorns on her right ankle, a dolphin leaping out of the ocean on her left wrist, and up by her collar bone, half hidden by her shirts, a heart with red flames burning around it. In the middle of the heart was her second husband’s name, but she had that filled in when he went to jail. I do not have any tattoos, but I run my ideas by her when I see her. “Ah,” she says, lifting her eyebrows conspiratorially, “you’ve finally decided to cash in your tattoo card.”

She dresses up for Halloween in garish costumes. One particular Halloween my father took my sister and I down to her house on High Street. She stood on her front porch in a thrifted, stained wedding gown splattered in bright red paint, handing out candy to local kids, all the while cackling gleefully. She strings the bushes with cottony webs, hangs skeletons from the windows, while the yard of my home is bare. No candy-takers come out to our road in the country.

She brings my Uncle Jimmy and Grandma Kriner along on visits to my house, always for Christmas, and sometimes just for an hour or two—to have coffee made fresh from the pot. We drink it around our wooden table in the kitchen while she shares a scandalous story from work or an embarrassing moment from her and my father’s childhood.

She brings the family to my house, while I visit her home with my dad once or twice a year, typically for the holidays. My sister and mother stay home most times, avoiding the atmosphere of smoke and cursing, barking dogs, and the others typically inhabiting my aunt’s house—her boyfriend who works at the Cold Storage facility and his kids, my aunt’s daughter Autumn and her kids, my grandma talking loudly from the plaid couch and my uncle’s quiet presence in the corner.

Aunt Sissy takes my coat and discreetly says, “I’ll hang it in the back room.” I know she’s being nice—maybe I won’t smell like a smokestack when I return home, as my mother fears, if my coat’s hanging away from everyone else. My aunt yells at my father and I to get a plate, meaning that there’s food cooking in pots on the stove. My father and I tentatively eye them up, gingerly ladling out baked beans on paper plates followed by sloppy joes and a dip for tortilla chips. “It’s a new recipe,” my aunt tells us, as I put no more than a small spoon-full on my plate. Soon, though, I get more, and I sit on the plaid couch with the barking dog’s mangy back curled up against my jeans, listening to my aunt asking me how school is and if I’ve got a fella yet, and by the time I leave, I forget about the smoke clinging to my clothes and my hair and the back of my throat.

Each Christmas she gives me a necklace—necklaces I know she pulled from dusty jewelry boxes in her basement. Others are handmade with do-it-yourself bead collections purchased from Big Lots. The necklaces tread a thin line between wearable and gaudy, but I keep each one hanging on hooks in my bedroom, adding another year to year. While she gave me pieces of her past life, I knit her a soft fuchsia scarf, a simple single-stitch pattern. She put it on and wore it in the warm house for the rest of the evening.
She finds rickety oak chairs, peeling shutters, and rusty bed frames along the side of the road, then turns them into new creations. She sands, paints, stains, hammers, and within a week a set of white shutters hangs in the window above her kitchen sink. “One man’s junk is another man’s treasure,” she says, while I find old chairs and haul them home, my head brimming with possibility. My chairs, however, always end up sitting in the shed.

She swears the skin beneath her chin looks like the neck of a turkey, and I grumble about my large nose and feet. We discuss our hips, standing side by side, and although we complain we end up laughing. I am much younger than she is, “But,” she says, pointing to her neck, “you have this to look forward to.”

Her hair looks like she styles it with heat tools from the 1980s, except for one long, thin braid that falls about ten inches below the rest of her shoulder length brown hair. She always slips a glass bead with flowers painted on it at the end of the braid, before the small elastic. When I was younger I’d take beads and a bright elastic and try to mimic her, swishing my shoulders so that my braid would hit my face in the same way my aunt’s does when she turns her head too quickly and injures those standing close to her.

She works as a teller at the M&T Bank downtown, while I am a student. I’ve been told she’s the best teller in Chambersburg—that when people approach the high counters they choose her counter specifically, even if there’s a longer line, just to talk to her. I’ll be shopping for clothes or groceries and run in to someone who knows me because they know my aunt, or only stops to talk to explain how they’ve just seen my aunt at the bank.

Just recently, a man passed a note across my aunt’s counter at the M&T—in it, he explained that he was robbing her, he might have a gun, and that she should give him all the money she has available. My aunt kept her composure and passed him the special fake bills encoded with tracking numbers that the tellers are provided with should they be robbed. And, my father explained to me later as he regaled me with all the details, my Aunt Linda even asked the man, “Do you want a bag to put all this in?”

I avoid busy places for fear of seeing someone I know, but my aunt knows many of the people in our town by name, especially those that live in the Borough. Between her bank job, her part-time job at Bill’s Kwik Check Market selling gas, lottery tickets, and beer, and her frequent bar visits, she comes into contact with anyone needing fuel, money, or alcohol. This accounts for quite a lot of people in my town.

My family, for instance, purchases the PA lottery scratch-off tickets at Bill’s Kwik Check. My aunt, seeing us coming in the door, waves us to the counter, asking which it will be. My mom picks out scratch-offs with names like the Triple Play, Mad Money and Wonder Bucks. The last time my mom, dad and I thought we won big we had purchased the ticket from my Aunt Linda. At 8:32 p.m., my mother and I jumped into the car and sped off to Bill’s to claim our cash prize. My father, anxious to know if we’d read the prize amount correctly, stood in the lit garage as we backed out of the driveway and into the night.

“I’ll be chain-smoking until you get back!” he hollered, and my mother didn’t even mind at that moment—there was a chance we’d won and we had to get to Aunt Sissy. I pictured all the other scratch-off winners that race to her, even those who only want to claim their five, ten or twenty dollar prizes. “Just remember,” she tells us as she hands us our cash, “to put some of that in the plate tomorrow.”

I live in the country across from green fields and golden wheat that stretches away towards the base of Blue Mountain where the sun sets each night. She lives in a small house on High Street, a minute from Main Street and the Fire Hall, surrounded by hundreds of row houses. And like I do, my aunt sees the sun set from High Street. She rushes outside with her camera and captures the sun sinking behind bricks and plastic siding and peeling paint, the light bathing the houses in the warmth of yellow and orange and red.
Cigarettes

...Yes, they kill you, but so do television and bureaucrats and the drugged tedium of certain rooms piped with tasteful music where we have all sat waiting for someone to enter with a silver plate laden with Camels and Lucky Strikes, someone who leans into our ears and tells us that the day’s work is done, and done well, offers us black coffee in white cups, and whispers the way trees whisper, yes, yes, oh yes.

—B.H. Fairchild, “Cigarettes”

Two summers ago I worked a maintenance job as a painter for the Borough of Chambersburg, scraping old metal and paint chips off roofs to be primed, pushing brushes and rollers across concrete blocks of school hallways that hadn’t seen a fresh coat since 1972. The first school the Borough sent me to, along with five other college-age workers, was Chambersburg Area Middle School South, the very same school my grandparents worked at years before. My grandmother Lois Koontz (grandmother by marriage) worked there as a custodian for twenty-one years, and my grandfather, Donald Koontz, or Pappy, worked as a custodian at many schools in the Borough longer than that.

My duties as a painter inside and outside the building did not include custodial work, but my job brought me into close contact with custodians, whom we commonly called the janitors. They were our supervisors on the job and supplied us with all the tools we needed—screwdrivers, safety goggles, scrapers and the occasional Popsicle pulled from the depths of the rusting freezer in the teacher’s lounge by the library, a kind gesture meant to ward off the hot summer sun.

It was a strange feeling, as I watched the various custodians—Tim, Jake, Marv, Reggie, and another older man whose name I never got—perform the tasks that my own grandparents had done for a quarter of their lives. One janitor in particular—whose name I never asked—was especially surly. He pushed his cart down the halls slowly, watching us with suspicious, darting eyes. He always criticized our mistakes first, appearing around the corners when we dropped paint, tipped ladders, or allowed our laughter to reach the higher decibels. One day I decided to ask him if he had known my grandmother, Lois, back before she died in 2005. “She worked here,” I said, “My grandpa Don did, too.”

The custodian’s tight eyebrows relaxed. He grinned, even. “Lois? ‘Course I knew her—we all did.” He stood closer to me now, his hands still resting on the cart laden with trash bags, yellow gloves and brooms.

“She was my grandmother,” I said, “on my dad’s side.”

“Yeah, Lois—I knew her,” he picked up again, “We had the same side of the building. She had the floor below me, and sometimes I’d clean the stairwell between the two for her cause her back hurt and all.”

I nodded, smiling, happy to hear what he said, suddenly remembering my grandmother’s back pain. I wanted him to tell me more—any little detail he could remember. The color of her lunch box, even, or what music she played on the radio.

“Hey,” the custodian said, looking at me, “this one time Lois brought in her two little grandkids—I remember a girl about this tall.” He held his hand around two and a half feet from the ground. “That you?”

I shook my head and explained that I’d never been to this school before. Lois had grandchildren by blood from her first marriage—it was probably one of them. He left soon
after and we both got back to work. He remained surly after that encounter, but always nodded to me in the halls as we passed.

I wish I could have said I was the toddler Lois took to work to show off to her fellow custodians. But I did not grow up knowing her and Pappy Koontz the same way I knew my mother’s parents, the Millers. Yet, after working that job, I felt I knew something intimate about them, something that went beyond our conversations during holidays or the rare Koontz family reunion we attended, the rarity being my family’s attendance, not the reunions—they were held each year.

My stronger memories of my grandmother Lois and Pappy Koontz take place in their trailer, sitting on couches that smelled like smoke, ashtrays in use on the coffee table, the side table and the kitchen counter. At our house my father always smoked outside, removing his jacket and hanging it on a hook in the garage. He had learned to bridge that gap between where he’d come from and the home he’d built—although not altogether smoothly. My parents fight about my father’s smoking—Pappy Koontz died, after all, from the smoke working its dark magic in his lungs.

When I went to work at the school that summer, it had been ten years since Grandma Lois died and two since Pappy Koontz followed her. They resurrected themselves in those hallways. Pappy Koontz and his second wife Lois had swept, walked, and mopped through those hallways for years, and I felt like I knew them better after I’d been there than I ever had during the scant collected days of exchanging gifts and small talk we have with those we don’t really know except that we’ve come from them and ought to see them at least regularly.

My grandfather was the lanky man with the sharp nose and sarcastic eyes pushing the mop. Seeing the other custodians do their job recalled to me all the times I’d seen him sitting at our kitchen table when he did drop by for a quick visit to talk to his son—his hands gnarled, wrapped around a white coffee mug, coffee being his drink of choice at any and all times of the day. He refused removal of the ball cap sitting on his bald head, even at the table.

I think back now to when I was a child and he and my dad held conversations at the table, talking hunting and how they both meant to fix up the old truck sitting by the side of the house. How Pappy Koontz had a box of *Hunting Illustrated* and some thirty-threes and seventy-eights to bring over. I listened to the sound of their voices, too young yet to understand what hunting meant for them or to know the joy that accompanies hearing James Taylor and Randy Travis on vinyl.

But I remember sitting at the table, my eyes riveted to the raised rectangle over my grandfather’s heart—the box of Marlboros covered by the thin white fabric of his T-shirt pocket. It was just an impression of the pack—seen but unseen—an emblem of the differences between us that mattered, really, not at all.
Coffee

My father owns four coffee pots. He keeps the ones not in use wrapped in plastic bags in our hall pantry, waiting until the fancy strikes him to use the 10 cup pot instead of the 12. This past semester, I tentatively asked my father if I could take the 4 cup coffee pot off the shelf to my apartment at college. He agreed, but as I toted the little 4 cup out of the closet and placed it on the growing pile of apartment items, I saw my father eye it up with a wistful glance.

The 4 cup is a stumpy, white ‘MR. COFFEE’ brand pot from the early 2000s, hardly much in the scheme of things, but within four minutes the pot brews enough coffee to split between 3 people in small mugs, 2 people in large mugs, or, as I normally go about things—all 4 cups in one sitting myself, in my favorite 50 cent Goodwill mug.

Coffee caters to the night dwellers and early morning risers. It’s ability to offset the natural circadian rhythms of the human body kept me wide awake for nights spent reading and writing. During my first semester of college this was a God-send, until it betrayed me. I eventually realized that falling asleep at 4 a.m. after a night of drinking the stuff left me shaking in my dreams, my body caught in a sleep paralysis so secure I felt as if someone were ripping my brain from my skull as I flung myself awake.

Following that first semester in college, I worked an entire summer of ten hour days as a painter of school buildings in my Borough. At 5:45 a.m. I’d arrive at work, bleary eyed, to a red sun rising in the early morning sky, already craving that first sip of coffee waiting for me in my Thermos. My first break came at 8:15, when I’d squat on the sidewalk or in a hallway, unscrew the Thermos cap, flip it over to use as a cup, and pour. I hardly waited for the java to cool. It was a break, a breather, a pick me up that got me back up off that sidewalk and painting for the next 8 hours.

Painting schools meant working amongst the various custodians and maintenance staff of my town—men and women who had worked the better part of their lives maintaining those buildings. I still think of Marv and Reggie, who kept their coffee in 2-quart Stanley Thermoses, most likely the original olive green ones with the large clanking handles manufactured in the 1970s. Or Tim, who made coffee every day in the teacher’s lounge where we kept our lunches—a lounge that smelled perpetually of microwave-revived meals and Tim’s burnt coffee.

My grandfather drank a strong cup of joe. He retired after twenty years from the Chambersburg Area School District as a custodian, and he was the greatest coffee drinker I’ve ever known. He’d enter our house, take off his jacket, and demand a fresh cup as soon as he sat down. My father, of course, would already have a pot brewing.

I come from a whole family of coffee drinkers. Those on my father’s side all smoke, and their nicotine saturated bodies burn through caffeine at twice the rate of non-smokers. They hit the coffee hard, preferring large quantities of cheap grinds. It’s what we exchange at Christmas and for birthdays. Tearing open tissue paper on holidays reveals the coffee purchased for special occasions—Starbucks Pike Place or Christmas Blend. It also functions as a farewell when we part ways at the gas station or grocery store—“Come on and stop by for a cup. Bring Uncle Jimmy, too.”

My mother’s side of the family enjoys more obscure, pricier coffees. These types of coffees sport witty names accompanied by descriptions of blends from across the world. The first coffee I remember really noticing, a blend of beans from South America, Africa, India and Indonesia, came from my mother’s sister—my Aunt Debbie—who lived in Anchorage, Alaska. It was, and is, called Raven’s Brew, and across the front of the shiny red foil bag labeled “Raven’s Brew House Blend,” a black raven stretches its wings.
My father soon realized the beauty of this coffee after my Uncle Mario and Aunt Debbie sent a few bags back to Pennsylvania with my mother. After tasting Raven’s Brew, my father promptly mail-ordered several more blends from the company. His coffee pots soon ran on overtime, until the Raven ran dry and he went back to his red plastic tub of Folgers.

My favorite Raven’s Brew, and also the company’s most popular, is called Deadman’s Reach. Its tagline reads, “Served in Bed, Raises the Dead.” On the cover of the bag a skeleton with a raven perched on its shoulder offers up a cup of the bold brew with its bony white fingers. Perhaps the reason I love displaying the empty foil coffee bag with its macabre illustration on the corkboard above my desk is really because of its aching accuracy (not to mention the kick-ass artwork). Coffee drinkers really are skeletons, rising like death in the morning, the veins in their brains tight and desperate for a fix. Headaches lurk in the dark recesses of their nerve tissues. If the coffee gods aren’t appeased within the hour the rest of the day is hell.

Is this enjoyable? I ask myself at 2:30 a.m., as I pour out a third consecutive cup and sit down before a pile of work on the table. I’m now a senior in college, but still haven’t learned from my first year as a student. I look from the coffee in my hand to the dark circles beneath my eyes gazing back at me in the reflective surface of my computer screen. My daily rituals belong to the psychoactive drug. I grind, rinse, measure. I wait for the brew, meditate on what life would be like without it, pour and later repeat.

My sister once called me a coffee-whore. And it’s true—much like my father’s side, I’ve never shunned Maxwell House, Folgers, or the Eight O’clock Coffee my great grandma Koontz swore by. No coffee is too far gone, especially if milk and sugar can save it. Burnt coffee is still coffee and will get the job done. I have only one concern—is it decaf?

Death before decaf, we say in my family. Especially my father, who becomes irritable when he’s denied his brew. Six and seven-hour road trips to the beach are interspersed with frequent McDonalds and Dunkin’ Donuts stops, all for coffee. During a hardcore streak of three to four nights spent sleeping four hours or less per evening, anything will do—even the suspicious looking stuff in the dining hall I’ve heard people call battery acid and mud, black liquid so thick a horseshoe could stand up in it. In those moments, good or bad, I’ll drink it.

In my junior year of college, I spent a semester studying abroad in Oxford, England. Coffee followed close behind me there, as I ducked in and out of cafes bursting with coffee of all kinds on my way to the Bodleian. Lattes, cappuccinos, Americanos, flat whites, black coffee, white coffee, and the ever popular espresso. One of my favorite stops was Queen’s Lane Coffee House, where I tasted Turkish coffee for the first time, its finely ground beans simmered in a copper pot on a stove. It was a far cry from the Maxwell House of my home. Placing my orders at Caffé Nero—the British versions of Starbucks—was a difficult transition.

Not only was English coffee culture foreign to me, but each night, after studying, I returned to my home in the Oxford suburb of Headington. Forty-two American students gathered together in a Victorian English house—tasked with writing copious amounts of papers for tutors—meant that the swapping of coffee strategies was inevitable. I became acquainted with the AeroPress, the French Press, the porcelain coffee cone, the vacuum pot, the moka pot. Who knew there were so many ways of making coffee? My upbringing in a family of strictly automatic drip coffee makers did not prepare me for that, although it meant that my education in Oxford moved beyond English and history and into the realm of a hot beverage that crossed continents. I still, however, found myself hunting through the aisles of Sainsbury’s for that inexpensive ground blend—I missed my father’s coffee pots.

I did make one coffee discovery abroad that I soon mastered and brought with me back home. I had my first Irish coffee sitting across from my friend and fellow traveler at the
Woollen Mills, a restaurant overlooking the Ha’penny Bridge in Dublin, where I gulped the stuff down in a frenzy of first tries. 1 cup freshly brewed coffee, 1 tablespoon brown sugar, 3 tablespoons Irish whiskey, and 1-ounce of fresh cream, slightly whipped. I discovered it again later that night, sitting in a different restaurant. I drank that coffee slowly, looking at the neon lights shining across the black waters of the River Liffey at night.

I drank Irish coffee in Dublin wide-eyed and in love with the newness of it. I can close my eyes now and still feel the wooden chair of the pub beneath me and the coffee glass, topped with foamy whipped cream and sprinkled with three stray beans, in my hand. I’m always grateful when the jolt of a caffeinated cup keeps a withdrawal headache at bay. But there’s an intense pleasure in having coffee for the sheer enjoyment of it, in lingering over a cup in a café with friends.

Coffee is there in the joy and the sorrow. *Make coffee, cause I’m coming over,* my sister says. And I know something’s right or something’s very, very wrong. My best friend often requests the same, and soon the little 4-pot kicks into action. Coffee becomes a synonym for *Let’s vent and laugh about last night,* or the more nuanced and nerve-inducing statement: *I have something I need to tell you.*

Several years ago I read Giuseppe Ungaretti’s poem “In Memory of,” in which Ungaretti memorializes his friend, Mohammed Sceab, who took his own life. Ungaretti says of Sceab’s displacement from his homeland:

> He loved France
> and changed his name
>
> He was Marcel
> but wasn’t French
> and no longer knew
> how to live
> in his people’s tent
> where you hear the Koran
> being chanted
> while you savor your coffee.²

As I read those lines I understood why Ungaretti chose to bring, of all the images associated with Sceab’s loss, *coffee* into the poem. I imagine Mohammed Sceab sitting at a café across from Ungaretti, sipping coffee, and perhaps Ungaretti is speaking but Sceab does not hear as he takes a sip, sitting in his mind beneath a tent instead. Perhaps the Parisian coffee was fine—even exquisite—but the coffee of Sceab’s homeland far greater, a poignant reminder of distance and family and loss.

Making morning coffee in the quiet of my kitchen is a solitary task. But it continually takes me back so swiftly. I’m lying awake at age thirteen after a night of reading, listening to my father’s feet on the kitchen floor as he rises for work at 3 a.m., the aroma of a strong, straightforward cup filling my back bedroom. Next, I’m sitting with my mother on Sunday mornings in my pajamas after wickedly skipping church. She waits for me to say *when* as she pours coffee into a teacup—as she stirs in milk and sugar and carries it to the table. In another moment I’m giving the grin of triumph to my friend as we duck into a café and successfully order steaming hot mochas after walking five hours through London’s rain drenched streets.

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Coffee takes me back to my Aunt Debbie’s kitchen in Anchorage where I sat while she made Deadman’s Reach (and she’s been dead for eight years). As I stand in a robe in my apartment, my bare feet cold on the brown laminate floor, I’m sitting with her at her table, our hands wrapped around fresh, steaming cups.
Cowan’s Gap: 21 miles from Edenville

During summers when I was younger, my family and I would make the thirty-minute drive on Route 30 West up to Cowan’s Gap from our town of Chambersburg. The Gap, as we call it, was the place to be for birthday parties, weekends, and family reunions. It featured a wide man-made lake carved out by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. My grandfather swam across it once when he was a boy scout. Men fished in canoes. Couples and families took paddle boats out (the kind with the hand held rudder that caused fights over steering privileges).

The lake, tucked close to the mountain, had a little sandy beach, the water roped off to stop you from swimming in too deep. Its waters, as you looked out and across, gleamed black and blue and indigo. Where you swam, though, within the rope—that water was a brownish yellow, and through it you could see the minnows dart and the rocky, sandy bottom. The fact that the water was yellow was unfortunate—you know where the yellowness came from but it didn’t seem to matter after you had been in the water for a few hours. We splashed under the hot summer sun, the water hot in the sun and ice cold in the shade cast from the shadows of the pines close to the green banks. We swam to the rope and back, and out and back in again.

As the day passed the sun would hide its face, creeping further and further behind the mountains. My sister and I, our hair dripping wet, clambered on up the sandy beach to the picnic tables beneath the towering pine trees where families kept their coolers and baskets of hot dog buns and crinkly packages of chips. We shivered beneath the shade of the trees, our damp toes picking up pine needles as we waddled to our parents who stood waiting with towels in their outstretched arms to wrap us firmly up in.

At that point, if we weren’t too tired, we’d tug on shorts and a T-shirt over our wet skin, wring out our hair, and take the obligatory walk around the lake, past the concession stand selling funnel cakes, hot dogs and ice cream, past the beach, through the trees, over the dam that kept the Little Aughwick Creek at bay, and into the trees, cloaked and heavy against the mountain, silent and whirring with the sound of insect wings and rustling leaves. My father would point his hand up into the mountains, towards the cabins and the smoke rising high above the thick wash of green pine and brown trunk. “Black bears, girls—those are all you’ve gotta be worried about.” Of course there was much more to be worried about—venomous water snakes just off the edge of the lake, rattlers, mountain lions—but my father never mentioned those. Instead, he always made sure to walk the mile or so trail with us.

On the way home, at the end of a long day of swimming and walking, my parents would make a stop at the Milky Way Restaurant in Fort Loudon, with its burgers and fries and grapenut ice cream (the vanilla ice cream cool and sweet, the grapenuts crunchy). My mother, Jody, is the expert on grapenut ice cream. She grew up in St. Thomas, not far from the Gap, and every Friday night her father, John, would drive the ten minutes up the mountain from St. Thomas to Fort Loudon with her in the truck the color of robin’s eggs just to get some scoops at the Milky Way.

“I remember camping at the gap in the summer, in the camper,” my mother recalls, as if she were sitting in the wide front seat of the truck beside her father just now, the leather of the seats worn and scratchy against the backs of her legs. “And by camper, I mean my father’s pickup truck with a cab put over the bed, and blankets and pillows thrown in the back.” My mother tells me how she, her sister Debbie, and her friends Sue and Annette all went along. My grandfather slept across the wide front seat behind the wheel, the truck pulled in to a grassy spot just off the parking lot. “In those days you didn’t rent a space if you were portable,” my mom says. “My father made the best breakfasts on a camping stove that burned kerosene. We had lunch at the concessions stand, then drove home to St. Thomas.”
My mother, Jody, would have been ten or eleven in this memory, and on those trips to Cowan’s Gap she and my grandfather could both relax, breathing in the mountain air. My mother’s mom, Bonnie, ran a tight household. Keep the clothes ironed. Only eat snacks standing over the kitchen sink. Saturdays are house-cleaning days. “Your grandmother was never there, though,” my mother explains to me. “She worked evenings catering hotels, and was away during the day. Saturdays and Sundays were the busiest event days. I saw her in the mornings, but I was really raised by my grandparents who lived beside us.”

My mother’s father, John, was a master carpenter who spent his nine to five days at a woodworking shop in town. My mother remembers him coming home from long days at work with crisp, brown paper bags of penny candies in his hands. He was a quiet man who wore his dark hair like Elvis and called my mother Jo. And it was on those Saturdays, if my mother and her sister and their father finished cleaning early, that they would pile in the truck and head up to the Gap to camp, the working man’s weekend vacation. For a little while, my mother could escape a stifling house to run barefoot, swim in dirty lake water, and sleep unperturbed in the back of a truck beneath the stars.

It is these images I like to picture in my mind when I think of my grandfather John—as I’ve seen him in the rare photograph—in dark jeans and a white T-shirt, casually leaning up against a truck. I imagine him sitting beside my mom on a weathered stump or plastic folding lawn chair, quietly passing wood from a neatly stacked pile to a blossoming campfire. He hands my mom cones of grapenut ice cream on a warm Friday night, teardrops of ice cream already making their way down the bumps and grooves of a hearty waffle cone and over the tops of my mother’s ten-year-old hands.

These events happened, and my mother cherishes them. I know she does because she keeps the oak hutch and the washbasin and the cherry coffee table my grandfather made. She’s taken my sister and I to the Milky Way and walked with us round Cowan’s Gap. But to leave the story there would tell only a half-truth. I wish I could watch my grandfather and mother sitting around the campfire on their little grassy space beside the truck they’d carved out as their own for a weekend escape. I wonder if my grandfather’s eyes would hint at was coming. In my mind I see my mother wading into the lake—she swims until she cannot touch the sandy bottom, until she passes beyond the rope that contains the safe swimming area and continues out somewhere deep. I see her standing on the dam that holds the lake waters back—a long wall of pale grey stones—and her father is nowhere to be seen.

On the night of her high school graduation, my mother went home to her bedroom in the white house on the main street of St. Thomas and went to sleep. She was eighteen and had spent the night with her boyfriend before returning home to her house on the main street. She had a summer of catering jobs lined up for herself to make money for nursing school in the fall. My mother’s sister, Debbie, had moved out several years earlier after rebelliously marrying a young man from her high school class to get away. But when my mother woke up the next morning, she was alone. During the course of the night, while my mother slept, both of her parents moved out. They took themselves and their belongings and went their separate ways. They left silently—or, my mother says, “I was the soundest sleeper alive.” They even took their furniture.

My grandparents divorced, and for reasons that are their own, they left my eighteen-year-old mother to wake up in an empty household. My grandmother contacted her several weeks later, explaining that she was living in Maryland with her boyfriend, a man she met while catering. John, however, remained silent and out of contact. I wonder at what point in waking up that my mother realized she was alone. Could she sense it yet when she blinked her eyes open, stretching? When she set her bare feet on the cool wooden floor and ambled down the quiet hallway? As she called out her parents’ names, the volume of her voice gradually increasing?
My mother struggled to maintain the two-story white house on the main stretch of St. Thomas. Her grandparents, who had lived in the right side of the duplex, had passed away several years earlier. With her parents gone, she faced paying the rent on her own, as her family hadn’t owned the home. The two-story property, with its small backyard, took time, energy, and money to maintain. As summer became winter, new challenges presented themselves. “People knew I was alone,” my mother explains, “and they took advantage of that. They stole fuel from the heating tanks. I just couldn’t keep up with it all.” There were people that stepped up and helped my mother out. Her boyfriend’s family cooked her meals and let her stay with them on evenings when staying in her home alone seemed too daunting.

Within a year, though, my mother had to move out of her childhood home. She lived with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend for a little while, but Bonnie soon asked her to leave their small home. My mother moved in to a small apartment in Hagerstown, but after nine months of struggling through nursing classes by day and working as a waitress at night, she could no longer afford school. I like to joke that my mother has worked every job available in food service within a fifty miles’ radius of the Mason-Dixon line (and I’m proud of that; she’s lived so much), but it’s more true than not. She worked as a bartender at the Country Club and country clubs (she can whip up a Whiskey Sour or Old Fashioned faster than I can blink). She likes to tell how she paid a month’s rent to her nasty landlord in tip-money she made from one weekend bartending. “I paid him in $1s. He hated me for it.”

And, all the while, my mother searched for her father John. He was silent as ever, as quiet as the night sky they camped beneath at the Gap. He had packed up and driven away from St. Thomas like he’d never even lived there. He did not get far, though; my mother found him three years later up past St. Thomas, past Fort Loudon and the Milky Way, just a few minutes before you take a left off the main road and onto the mountain drive that leads to Cowan’s Gap.

John had spent those three years doing what he did best—carpentry. Just off the main road, obscured by some trees, he built a cabin. Made of honey-colored cedar wood, low-slung with a wide front porch, about the size of a trailer—it sat concealed amongst pine trees and oak trees and tall, uncut grasses. He had been there all along. My mother tells me she was furious. Elated. She sat in her car by the road, held the steering wheel, and looked at the mailbox and the wooden front door with its perfectly sanded frame. She called her sister Debbie sobbing then drove away until another day when she got up her courage to go back and knock.

In the end, my mother began working as a waitress in the hotel business for the one person she hoped she would never have to take orders from again—her mother. Bonnie married her boyfriend and stayed, for a time, in Hagerstown. That man, Ronnie, became my grandfather—my Pappy. I wonder if it is hard for my mother to hear me call Ronnie that.

Ronnie, not John, went to all my birthday parties. He taught me how to play cards. He stood by the field at my sister’s soccer games and sat with my grandma on our couch every Christmas since I was born.

My mother never spent another Christmas with her father after her eighteenth year. Her story tumbles into mine as the Little Aughwick Creek flows from the Aughwick. Despite what John did, my mother still wanted my sister and I to love that storied place. And we have. I’ve explored the trails there, set up a tent, built fires in the grass with my father. In a beautifully recursive gesture, my mother gave to me the part of her childhood she wanted to preserve, despite the pain it caused. She kept me from swimming past the ropes, from floundering in the deep waters her parents left her to tread alone.

Years after my mother found John, he moved in with another woman. Cancer killed him when I was three, fifteen years after my mom found him, and I swear I remember, hazily in some part of my mind, her placing me gently on the white T-shirt covering his emaciated
chest as he lay dying in his bed. John had sold the cabin by then, moved out and into a larger home, but even then every time we drove up to Cowan’s Gap I paid attention. I’d wait till we passed Fort Loudon, until we’d been driving for a bit, and then there was the bend in the road with his cabin just sitting there, the liveliest of haunted houses. In those years my mother simply told me, “There’s your grandfather’s house.”

As years passed I pieced together the deeper story, the events falling together like planks of planed wood. I still wait to see the cabin on the rare trips my family makes to the lake. I crane my neck out the window in anticipation, the pine trees shooting by in blurs of dark green. It passes quickly on the right side of the road, a warm flash of amber wood, like a bee darting through the dark woods of fairy tales. I catch it again at the close of day, as we make our way home from the Gap.