2015

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Available at: https://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2015/iss1/11

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I was conceived in the bathroom of a dive bar in Valparaiso, Indiana. No doubt compelled by the sweet smelling joint that was wrapped in twisted tissue paper and pinched between her thumb and first finger, my mother held nothing back. I was five. My mother no longer felt pressured to hide her addictions from me after she absconded with my older half-sister and me on a power trip from our rental home in Lynchburg to a suburban town just an hour’s drive outside of Los Angeles. She held the joint out for me to suckle, laughing when my young lungs choked at the bitter burn of smoke, and told me a story. My mother, in her early twenties, had been casually dating my father’s younger brother. My father had been in the midst of a rocky marriage to an older woman. One too many shots of tequila on her part, a moment of weakness on his. It wasn’t supposed to happen, she sighed as she exhaled a cloud of smoke in my direction. And yet, there I was. An accident. The unwanted outcome, as she explained it, of a one night stand.

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As part of our second-grade curriculum, Mrs. Edmunds was required to teach the life cycle of the butterfly. Yet there was something about the way she described the colorful creature that deeply resonated within the core of my being. From where I was on the rug with neon letters and numbers drunkenly mixed, at a time when it wasn’t politically incorrect to sit Indian style, I listened with rapt attention.

Overcoming danger at every turn, blending in with their surroundings to survive, a single caterpillar’s chances of reaching metamorphosis were extremely narrow. But for the ones who made it, she gestured to the diagram on the chalkboard, they emerged even more beautiful because of the struggle.

My mother had been arrested the summer before
second-grade. I was seven years old. Mrs. Edmunds’ body was soft and plush like the oversized Winnie-the-Pooh teddy with the red belly shirt that my father had given me when he picked me up from Dulles Airport. I had wrapped my too-skinny arms around the bear and pressed my face into its velvet fur, feeling the fibers rub back and forth against my cheek while my father had awkwardly shaken the social worker’s hand.

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By the time I was eight, the intermittent pay phone calls and cheap scribbled birthday cards from my mother stopped altogether. I just learned to shut down that part of me, the part that ached for a mother to braid my hair, scold me for wearing clothes that clashed, do that thing where they lick their finger and rub a smudge from the side of your cheek while you tried to squirm away.

But my father was the mile long gravel driveway’s familiar crunching at 5:30 p.m. every weekday, the old Ford truck roaring in with the broken muffler. He was the sound of footsteps as they ascended the wooden deck stairs into the kitchen, his tan and stained Carhartt coat carrying in the aromas of sweat, sawdust, and a faint musk of Brut aerosol deodorant that had managed to cling to his skin throughout the workday. He was the crinkled forehead and the exasperated growl when he caught me making a wish on a dandelion. He was the one who taught me how to stretch a piece of yarn between two pikes stabbed into the red clay to keep my tomato plants in a straight line. He was the sounds and aromas of dependability. He was all I had. I would sit on the rusty tailgate with him as he popped open a beer and tell him about my day. His was the deep tenor that howled off-key to “Man of Constant Sorrow” as it crackled from the truck’s speakers. He was the goatee that tickled a kiss on my cheek, the small squeeze, and the “I
love you more” each night before bed.

He was the underpaid carpenter who trod down the hall to the kitchen at precisely 4:30 every morning for his first cup of coffee; two splashes of cream, no sugar. His t-shirt was clean, his Levi’s were faded but patched, his steel-toed boots dusted off. “Be proud of what you have,” he would tell me, “Even if it’s not much.”

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“In the light of the moon, a little egg lay on a leaf,” Mrs. Edmunds read, turning the pages of the painted book. “One Sunday morning, the warm sun came up and POP! Out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar.”

She was beautiful, I thought. Her hands, soft with age but assured with the confidence that comes with devoting over thirty years of her life to educating children, danced gracefully as they turned the page of the book. As I listened to her read, I imagined her on a stage, the curtain black with a single beam of light illuminating her gray curls as they danced along to her words.

Lost in my own thoughts, I had forgotten to leave the classroom when they called for my bus, and was forced to wait for my father to leave work to collect me. When all of the other students had drifted onto school buses and carpools and Mrs. Edmunds and I were alone, I hesitantly shuffled across the brightly decorated classroom to the blackboard where she stood, swiping the white dust with a felt eraser. I watched her move, her body swaying gently into the labor of the movement, as though she had turned such a menial task of housekeeping into an elegant dance. The overwhelming urge became too much for such a tiny person as me to bear. I wrapped my still-too-thin arms as far around her waist as they could reach, digging my fingers desperately into the squishy flesh of her back and enveloping myself within her. I rubbed my face back
and forth, feeling the microfibers of her shirt caress my cheek like a mother’s kiss. I felt the warmth of her bosom against my forehead, heard the lub-dub of her heart like a steady drum, and for a moment, I was whole. She quietly set the eraser in the tray and squeezed me back. She had probably heard that I was the kid whose mother had been arrested over the summer for narcotics and child abuse, probably heard that my father worked twelve days a week to afford hand-me-down clothes and store brand macaroni and cheese. She was silent as she gently swayed back and forth, gently combing my thin tangled hair away from my face until it lay smooth. Then she turned back to the board and continued to swipe away the dust.

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By the time my father hooked up with my mother that night at the bar in a moment of drunken weakness, she was already beyond help. Not long after high school, her first foray into adulthood found her caught in a group of the wrong people, doing every drug that she could get her hands on and giving away everything she had to offer to get her fix. Her pregnancy announcement highlighted the betrayal: the betrayal of my father’s already rocky marriage, and of his brother. With no other alternative, my father found a small house outside of town and settled into an uncomfortable cohabitation. My mother spent most days laid out on the couch, the ashtray filled with cigarette butts, dropped ashes scattered all over the carpet (to keep the moths away), watching daytime soap operas. “Her stories,” she used to tell me. “I have to catch up on my stories.”

My father learned early in their strained relationship to handle her from a distance. Throughout her pregnancy, he followed her from bar to bar, bribing bartenders to serve her nonalcoholic drinks, flushing her drug stash down the toilet
after he came home early to find her passed out on the couch, the television blaring, and my two-year-old half-sister crying in hunger. He didn’t know what to do, he said, when he’d discovered a strange man sweating over her swollen body, when he’d found out the bartenders had been handing her the money he’d paid them to keep me safe. At night, my father told me later, he would drop to his knees and beg God to keep me safe, and if He did, he promised that he would never leave my side.

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“The butterfly is very tired when she emerges from the chrysalis. And so she rests.” Twenty-two round noses pressed against the aquarium glass of the butterfly farm. We’d squealed with excitement and felt the caterpillar’s legs move across our hands like sticky tape. We’d ooh’d and ahh’d in wonder when the brown chrysalises were discovered hanging from the placed branches. But by far, the emergence of the first butterfly was the most incredible thing our young minds had ever witnessed.

Unrecognizable, she crawled her way out, sticky and damp. After awhile, her wings slowly began to open and flap. She moved to the edge of the branch, flapping her wings, and lifted off before falling in a spiral to the bottom. I cried out.

“She’s not very good at flying just yet. Having wings is new to her,” Mrs. Edmunds reassured us. “But she’s not ready to give up just yet. She’ll learn. Just watch.” She turned her crinkled brown eyes in my direction, staring with the intensity of a messiah who imparts deep truths, the secrets to life itself. In the butterfly’s fall, she saw the drive to succeed, accomplishment through failure, and the beauty of grace through it all.