Co-Constructing a Mother

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Co- Constructing a Mother

by

Alana C. Claxton

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Honors-in-Discipline Program
in Communication Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
East Tennessee State University
Abstract

This project seeks to understand the construction of a personal narrative concerning a primary parental figure using the process of collaborative autoethnography. In order to properly encapsulate the author’s lived experience, primary influential factors were considered imperative in allowing for a fuller representation. Thus, the author’s story joins those of her siblings to highlight the paradoxical process inherent in unearthing one’s singular perception. This project primarily aims to explore the complexity of autoethnography while simultaneously interrogating the cultural discourse surrounding motherhood and academic writing. By having a close and personal understanding of the subject matter as well as the research participants, the author was provided a unique glimpse into the ways family stories are both co-constructed and individually recounted.

*Keywords:* autoethnography, narrative, storytelling, siblings, mother, discourse, collaborative autoethnography
Acknowledgements

This thesis would be non-existent without the help and support from some very dear individuals.

Dr. Herrmann, I realize that I am but one of many students to whom you have provided guidance, encouragement, and faith in one’s abilities to. I have no idea where I would be today if you hadn’t gone out of your way to suggest that maybe, just maybe, I’d be suited to Communication Studies. As I write the acknowledgement page of an Honors-in-Discipline undergraduate thesis in Communication Studies, I can’t help but smile at the absurd and serendipitous nature of meeting you. Thank you.

To my brothers, where do I even begin? The four of you are my world, I was beyond fortunate to have four constant companions during my youth and am especially grateful to each of you for agreeing to participate in this thesis. I would be an incomplete human without you all and even though I wrote a thesis about us, words simply fail to express how much I deeply love and value our relationships.

Lastly, I want to thank my partner, Jake. Your patience, warmth, and uncommonly understanding nature were priceless during this research process. I don’t know what I’d do without your support.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................... 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue ............................................................................................................ 6-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Frustrating Thing About Autoethnography ............................................ 19-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mem(our)ies, One .......................................................................................... 26-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Illusion of Method .................................................................................. 28-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Memor(I)es: One .......................................................................................... 35-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Brother #1 .................................................................................................. 38-51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mem(our)ies, Two ....................................................................................... 52-53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The Confusion of Method ............................................................................. 54-57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Brother #2 .................................................................................................. 58-75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Memor(I)es, Two .......................................................................................... 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Brother #3 .................................................................................................. 77-96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Mem(our)ies, Three .................................................................................... 97-101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Brother #4 .................................................................................................. 102-125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Memor(I)es, Three .................................................................................... 126-127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue ............................................................................................................ 128-130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References ....................................................................................................... 131-138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A .................................................................................................... 140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B .................................................................................................... 141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I want to share with you some things I’ve learned about mothers, mothering, and the institution of motherhood. It’s important, I suppose, for you to know what I know so we can all be on the same page, though I suspect much of what I’ll share will feel familiar already.

To begin, let’s clear our minds and try to conjure up an image of a good mother. Maybe you simply pictured your own mother, or maybe, like me, you imagined someone resembling the Blue Fairy that finally turned Pinocchio into a real boy. Regardless of the differing images in our minds, we can now ask how they got there and what they might have in common.

So, why did the Blue Fairy immediately spring to my mind? You could answer this question in a variety of ways, but one widely acknowledged response is culture. This is rather elementary, I know, but one explanation for why the Blue Fairy seems like a good mother, is that culture informs and influences how we think about ourselves and the world around us (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). This raises the question of how culturally accepted values and norms come to be known. How do we know what’s acceptable, what’s normal, what’s beautiful, or (for our purposes) what’s motherly? If the Blue Fairy is any indicator, I think we can safely suggest media plays an important role in determining good mothering standards and we wouldn’t be alone in our suggestion (Gibson, 1988; Valdivia, 1998; Johnston & Swanson, 2003a; Johnston & Swanson, 2003b; Hanson, 2006; Brydon, 2009; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). While the Walt Disney Company is responsible for the Blue Fairy along with numerous other iconic motherly depictions, it is not the sole producer of monolithic mothering messages. In my own memory, I can easily recall commercials, books, toys, theatre productions, television shows, magazines, and songs that all featured a similar type of mother or mother figure. She sang lullabies, baked
cookies, did laundry, wore dresses, gave hugs, and always kissed goodnight. In short, she was a dream come true.

While it would be a stretch to assume Western culture demands all mothers be blue fairies, the reality of mothering expectations isn’t too far off. A brief overview of some current academic articles, websites, online videos, and magazines provides a rather limited view as to what constitutes a good mother. In short, a good mother doesn’t have, want, or need a career as she is perfectly satisfied and fulfilled by her mothering role (Valdivia, 1998; Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002; Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Oliver, 2011; Shipps & Caron, 2013; Couvrette, Brochu, and Plourde, 2016). Additionally, a good mother should be married while also remaining dutifully “beyond sex” thereby allowing her “to cater to her children without distraction” (Valdivia, 1998, p. 270; Johnston & Swanson, 2003a; Shipps & Caron, 2013). Good mothers are happy mothers and are easily spotted by their happy, well-functioning children (Valdivia, 1998; Brydon, 2009; Psychologies, 2010; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Oliver, 2011; Dorgan, 2014). These ideal mothers are solely devoted to ensuring their children succeed and will graciously “set her own goals and interests aside, devote herself entirely to her children, and will not make life choices that may impede her children’s development” (Couvrette et al, 2016 p. 292; Valdivia, 1998; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Psychologies, 2010; Oliver, 2011). Good mothers are patient, self-sacrificing, thoughtful, altruistic, and “should have all the time and love in the world to give” (Christopher, 2012, p. 75; Valdivia, 1998; Gorman and Fritzsche, 2002; Johnston & Swanson, 2003a; Bell, 2004; Brydon, 2009; Oliver, 2011; Couvrette et al, 2016).

Much of the good mothering mandates fall under the category of intensive mothering which “promotes the image of the sacrificial mother, equates dependency with intimacy, and deems the maintenance and nurturing of relationships as the sole responsibility of the mother”
(Oliver, 2011 p. 18; see also Johnston & Swanson, 2006). The prevailing guidelines present mothers with a choice: be a good mother or be a bad mother. For those more visually inclined, I have created a flowchart (see Figure 1) summarizing the societal path to becoming a good mother. The asterisk in the first box is meant to indicate the requisite unseen questions that determine whether the candidate is allowed to question their good or bad mother status. These questions serve as a filtering mechanism by applying an automatic mothering stereotype or label to any candidate that answers “no” to the following questions (Johnston & Swanson, 2003a; Astrom, 2015). Are you White? Are you middle-aged? Are you a member of the middle or upper-middle class? Only once the candidate has satisfactorily answered all three questions can they then proceed to the flowchart.
Figure 1

Are you a woman?*

- Y
- N

Are you married?

- Y
- N

Ever divorced?

- Y
- N

Consider yourself a sexual person?

- Y
- N

100% selfless

- Y
- N

Have happy children?

- Y
- N

Ever need time away from your children?

- N
- Y

100% patient?

- Y
- N

Believe you’re a natural born mother and nurturer?

- Y
- N

Good mom!

Bad mom!
Of course, the reality of mothering is much more complicated than the prevailing either-or dichotomies. As Johnston and Swanson (2003a, 2003b) explain, popular culture presents mothers with several double-bind messages that prove extraordinarily difficult to navigate, let alone reconcile. Johnston and Swanson (2003b) point to the “mommy wars” that pit the professional woman against the good mother:

Despite increases in the number of employed mothers, these two identities remain culturally constructed as mutually exclusive. This double bind is evident in the popular press, in which Hewlett (2002) noted the trend of professional women to delay or forego children, and Schlessinger (2000) advised career women to get a parakeet, not a baby. The good mother is constructed as selfless in the domestic sphere. The good professional is constructed as promoting self, demonstrating independence, lacking in natural mothering qualities, and fulfilling her potential in the public sphere (p. 224-225).

The reality is that neither women nor children are given realistic depictions of modern mothers. The dearth of complicated, messy representations of real mothers is an issue under seemingly constant construction. Until recently, most writing on mothers focused “more on what it is like to have been mothered than on what it is like to mother,” a paradoxical perspective in which the mother is the main focus but is denied a voice in the creation of material (Kinser, 2008 p. 23). Mother-centric texts are integral to understanding the reality of mothering from the perspective of those most impacted by the institution of motherhood. At the risk of sounding like a disclaimer, I must state I am writing on having been mothered from a wholly child-centric perspective. Allow me to explain.
See, I was worried about depriving my mother of her voice and her agency by excluding her from the project’s production. I felt bad, almost guilty, about not including my mother’s perspective and a few times I got so worried I considered scrapping the whole project. I didn’t want to produce something that simply furthered good/bad mom stereotypes, especially not after having read about the insane cultural pressures mothers face. I felt I was doing a disservice to my mother, to my female professors, my future self, even to feminism in producing my mother-less story. It wasn’t until after I spoke with one of my professors that I felt somewhat better about my approach. In answering my fears about depriving Mom of her voice, my professor reminded me that, “The inclusion of one voice doesn’t mean the canceling out of another. It’s not a zero-sum equation” (Dr. Amber Kinser personal communication, March 13, 2017). I realized that was it. I wasn’t seeing my, or really our, story anywhere I had looked. Naturally, I haven’t read every article or book detailing every last mother-child experience. However, I realized my researching and reading was one part gathering information and one part looking for our story. Since I have yet to find it, please consider what follows as a representation of more voices looking to be included. For this is not solely my story I intend on sharing, but rather my story alongside the stories of my brothers.

Siblings

I have four brothers. I am the only girl and middle child. In order of birth, the sibling line-up is Jon, Keith, myself, Alex, and Thomas. I remember my two older brother’s ages by my own, as we are only a few years apart. If I am twenty-six, that makes Keith twenty-seven and Jon twenty-eight. For my little brothers, I subtract four years from my age for Alex and five for Thomas. I suppose you want to know some tidbits about each brother, something to make them real and relatable. I, however, can’t exactly speak for them so I shall let them speak for
themselves. Shortly before the completion of my project, I texted my brothers asking for pseudonym suggestions. Here are their replies:

Thomas: “Lol José”

Alex: “I want to be Alana.”

Keith: “I want to be God. Beezlebub is also acceptable.”

Thomas: “Oooh, or Belial.”

Jon: “Tom Savage.”

Thomas: “Belial is a good one, too. Anything else you need from us?”

The takeaway point is one I cannot stress enough – I dearly, dearly love my brothers.

As I explain in Chapter One, autoethnography is a complex methodology. In regards to this project, my initial approach was limited to exploring how I perceived and understood my mother. I intended on utilizing the narrative freedom granted by autoethnography to “interpret and show the complex contingencies of relationship life in [its] rich, ironic, and immediate detail” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 167). I quickly realized, however, that my perspective of my mother does not exist in a vacuum and did not come about solely through my own interpretations and experiences. There were four other variables I had to consider – my brothers. As with any research project, the introduction of a new variable demands the collection and review of surrounding literature.

In contrast to the wealth of family research, the study of sibling relationships is remarkably limited (Fowler, 2009; Cox, 2010). What research is available, though, positions the sibling relationship as one of significant influence and importance throughout an individual’s life.
span (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Fowler, 2009; Cox, 2010; Davies, 2015). Seen as a true “cradle to grave” relationship, the sibling relationship is considered “the most enduring relational tie of most people’s lives” and thus deserves more than a cursory glance (Fowler, 2009, p. 51, see also Cicirelli, 1995). Though it is beyond the scope of this project to produce an exhaustive list of sibling relational effects, sibling relationships have been noted as having a far-reaching and long-lasting impact on cognitive development (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Cox, 2010), self-esteem (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003), identity formation (Cox, 2010; Davies, 2015), and identity management (Bochner, 1976; Davies, 2015). Furthermore, siblings have the potential to take on a prominent role throughout the lifespan (Fowler, 2009, see also Goetting, 1986). As Fowler (2009) notes:

During childhood and adolescence, siblings provide mutual comfort and emotional support, and serve as allies for siblings during parent-child conflicts. Some young siblings may even assume caregiving duties to compensate for “parental inefficiency.” Most siblings remain important to one another in young and middle adulthood, and continue to exchange aid if it is needed (p. 52).

While sibling relationships are generally considered beneficial, as with any relationship, there are downsides. Caretaking on the part of one (typically older) sibling to another may increase self-competency as well as facilitate a closer, more nurturing bond between siblings (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Fowler, 2009). Conversely, the caretaker may find themselves in a confusing dual role, requiring them to “perform traditional parental duties, such as assigning chores or telling a younger sibling to do homework, while still being a sibling” (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003, p. 21). Furthermore, the absence of the custodial parental figure during the
work-day, “might enhance sibling relationships…or exacerbate conflict-ridden sibling interactions” (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003, p. 13).

Regardless of whether a sibling relationship is prone to conflict or not, the nature of most sibling relationships allows for rich topics of research. Davies (2015) points to the lateral nature of the sibling relationship as one reason to pursue further study. Lateral here refers both to comparable “education systems, jobs markets, and cultural signifiers” (p. 687) as well as a “possible way to understand the relational formation of the self which looks in all directions for sources of influence” (p. 693). Davies (2015) suggests that understanding self and identity might be better achieved “through a conceptualization of individuals as embedded in webs of relationships with others” (p. 680). By approaching perception as a complex, joint process of construction, it appears my brothers are more than helpful, they’re necessary.

My/Our Storying Process

Before proceeding, let me give you an overview of the methods that informed (or should I say, confused?) my project. As you will find out, my approach is rather unorthodox and slightly manic. While this was not on purpose, I intend to include as much as possible in hopes of shedding light on the frustrating reality of research, especially research concerning sensitive and personal topics. I do not recommend mimicking this approach at all, nor do I see it as a limitation of my overall project. Rather my aim is to be as honest as possible with the belief that there is nothing wrong with exposing the messy and imperfect nature of qualitative research.

My project is, of course, a personal one and as such it can be hard to determine a definite beginning point for the research process. I have written intermittently about my mother in personal journals for years and believed that any prolonged, intensive writing on such a personal
topic would exist exclusively outside the realm of academia. My writings could become a book or short story but they certainly wouldn’t be considered research. I accepted this separate-worlds mentality for years, believing that when I finally had some time (i.e. when I was done with school) I would sit down and write it all out. Thankfully, I was introduced to the world of qualitative research and, more specifically, autoethnography. I came to see that I didn’t have to wait or separate the scholarly from the personal. My thesis project provided ample space to dig into the depths of my experience while autoethnography provided the tools I needed to bridge the personal with the academic. Autoethnography allowed me to “connect personal (insider) experiences, insights, and knowledge to larger (relational, cultural, political) conversations, contexts, and conventions” and was an invaluable catalyst and aid throughout the lengthy research and writing process. (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 25).

As the brief overview of sibling literature suggests, the impact of sibling relationships is far-reaching and profound. Frankly speaking, I knew this to be personally true long before I reviewed any current sibling relationship literature. At some point during the research and writing process, my project split into two parts. One part was obviously about how my brothers and I talk about and view our mother. The other part was how to go about talking about our experiences in an academic setting. In Chapter One, I highlight the complexity and difficulty of ethnographic writing. I wanted to show, rather than define, how I came to use and view one of my research methodologies. Similarly, in Chapter Three I explore my confusion surrounding the genesis of research inspiration as well as the difficulty in outlining a clear direction before delving into research. Essentially, I have to wonder which comes first, the research questions or the research, the literature review or the lived experience, the data collection or the choice of methods. I feel as though the research timeline is far more malleable and retrospective than most
scholarly articles admit (Tracy, 2012). Furthermore, I believe exposing the entire research process can potentially provide a realistic (rather than idealistic) guide for novice qualitative researchers, like myself. My research wasn’t so much an outlined process as it was an unfolding series of unexpected insights, infuriating dead-ends, and never-ending frustrations. It truly was (and still is) a journey rather than a destination (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

I chose autoethnography as my primary method simply because I knew about it. I also knew from the very beginning that I was going to incorporate my brother’s experiences and perspectives in conjunction with my own. I didn’t necessarily begin with my autoethnographic writing and then come to realize I needed my brother’s voices, neither did I read sibling literature research and only then decide to include them. My personal experience informed and influenced my research “process” from the onset with the chosen research methods and literature primarily viewed as means to an end. I needed a method that allowed me to incorporate both mine and my brother’s experiences and I needed a literature review that covered all the primary bases (mothering and sibling literature) of my research.

I was wary of reviewing too much sibling or mothering literature prior to speaking with my brothers as I wanted to talk about their experiences and was afraid the literature might subtly guide our conversations or “endow [our stories] with meanings that weren’t available at the time these events were lived” (p. 427), a process Bochner (1997; see also Hacking, 1995) refers to as “semantic contagion.” Thus, my review of literature came largely after I spoke with my brothers. The conversations I recorded and transcribed can be considered a form of narrative interviewing (Gemignani, 2014; Ellis, Kiesinger, Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Gudmundsdottir, 1996), while the casual (unrecorded) conversations and text messages along with the fact that my “data collection” started well before this project began, fall under friendship
as method (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). I knew of these methods prior to speaking with my brothers, however I did not extensively research either method until well after our conversations.

I fully realize that a review of pertinent literature can guide the researcher in developing research questions as well as helping the researcher to be more informed and sensitive. It is not my intention to deride the standard researching and writing process, but rather to offer a different version and in doing so help “encourage readers to think about taken-for-granted norms, experiences, and practices in new, unique, complicated, and challenging ways” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 33).

From the onset, though, my project has been nontraditional. My university institutional review board (IRB) eventually deemed my project as falling outside the realm of human subjects research and therefore outside the purview of standard research guidelines (see Appendix A & B). I found it both funny and frustrating that in order to be deemed non-humans subjects research, I had to produce informed consents and a list of my intended questions on top of filling out pages of questions pertaining to the medical nature of my research. Although the hoops I jumped through were eventually regarded as largely unnecessary, the final verdict, while welcomed, still left me confused. Did I need informed consent signatures or no? Were they really that necessary or did a verbal confirmation prior to beginning our conversations suffice? Informed consents are traditionally utilized for the protective role they provide to both researcher and subjects.

However, as Adams (2008) notes, most IRB requirements such as informed consents apply to “research being done on strangers with whom we have no prior relationships and plan no future interaction” (p. 185; see also Ellis, 2007). Seeing how this was not the case for me paired with my IRBs final decision, I chose to forgo the traditional informed consent process and opted
instead for verbal affirmation that each participant knew what they were doing and were okay with proceeding.

At this point, I would very much like to outline a straightforward, linear path of events that guided my research project from beginning to end. But, frankly speaking, as I write even this sentence, my project is not yet complete. It seems that in attempting to uncover the messiness of lived experience, the safety of neatness gets thoroughly left behind. There is no guidebook. There are no set rules. There is no right or wrong way to accomplish your goals. Moreover, your goals can become lost, inconsequential, or be entirely re-conceptualized during the research and writing process. If you’re confused, then we’re on the same page.
Chapter One: The Frustrating Thing about Autoethnography

“Hey, how’s it going?” Jake asks as I slump into the passenger seat of his truck.

“I’m so freaking frustrated with this, I don’t know how to do it.”

“Do what?”

“My thesis.”

“O…k. So, what’s up?”

“I’m trying to write the first part, right? Just the ‘here’s what autoethnography is, here are its goals, here’s why I chose it, blahblahblah’ and I can’t. I’ve written some of it, like I’ve defined what it is but I hate it. It’s absolute garbage; it feels ‘inappropriate and artificial’ (Bochner, 2001, p. 134). And I don’t know, the more I look at what I’ve written, then go back to the reference articles and books, the more I think I’m writing it all wrong.”

Jake gives me a half worried, half supportive look.

“The problem is that I know what autoethnography is, or at least I feel that I know what it is, but I don’t know how to autoethnographically write an autoethnographic thesis. I don’t have a model to follow! It’s frustrating and infuriating. I mean even the few thesis papers I’ve read that utilize autoethnography all follow this format that feels somewhat at odds with autoethnography (Tracy, 2012). You know like when you did your undergraduate research for GIS, how the format or template for a thesis is pretty much one way and one way only?”

Jake nods to let me know he’s listening.

I continue, my words picking up speed as I go. “You’ve got your introduction, then your literature review, then you explain your methods, followed by your data, you discuss that data, you write a conclusion that covers any benefits or limitations of your research, and then you’re done (Tracy, 2012). There’s all sorts of names for this format. I tend to think of it as ‘the norm’
but obviously, there’s more articulate terminology. Bochner (2001) refers to it as a ‘monolithic conception of social science inquiry’ (p. 134) - a truly academic phrase if I’ve ever heard one. While I’m keener on Ellis’ description as simply a science model that ‘simplifies, categorizes, slices and dices’ (1999, p. 671). Anyways, ‘the norm’ seems unthreatening and simple enough to follow but what’s unspoken is that it’s a model popularized by and beneficial to hard science methodologies (Tracy, 2012). Y’know, where the researcher assumes that ‘standard disinterested, detached, objective perspective’ (Bochner, 2001, p. 135)? ‘The norm’ sees personal experience as bias-prone and an obstacle to generalizable knowledge (Ellis, 1999). This science model is extremely pervasive in academic literature and I didn’t quite realize just how prevalent it was until I sat down to write. I’m in the introduction, literature review, and methods portion and the only way I know how to write them is in that style – impersonal, objective, scholarly.”

“Yeah,” Jake replies, “that’s how my GIS thesis was, no real need to get up close and personal with land-use change on the Cumberland Plateau.”

“I can almost understand the reluctance from a hard science perspective, but when researching and writing on social sciences I don’t understand the push to write like a robot. Why not ‘examine emotions emotionally’ (Ellis, 1995, p. 307)? Honestly, I feel like I’m contradicting everything autoethnography means or represents when I read over what I have so far. It’s just so...typical and formulaic and just not what I consider the point of autoethnography to be. Almost as if I’m forcing two incompatible pieces together and just hoping they work. What was it Herrmann said? Or did I read it? God, I don’t know, is there a difference? Anyways, ‘square peg, round hole,’ that’s what it was and that’s how it feels (Herrmann, 2012, p. 146). It feels like I’m only halfway doing autoethnography, y’know?”
"What do you mean?"

"Well, ok. Let me back up. I'm sorry, I'm kind of all over the place, just stick with me for a second, all right? Talking out loud helps me sort out my thoughts. So, autoethnography, when you break the word down, seems kind of dangerously simple. You’ve got auto- which means the self, -ethno which means culture, and -graphy which means writing (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). So, essentially an autoethnographer writes about culture from their own perspective (Adams et al., 2015). But that's just the basic definition and it doesn't really tell you anything about the complex, unruly, intense, or emotionally charged nature of autoethnographic writing (Bochner & Ellis, 2006; Herrmann & Di Fate, 2014). And the most frustrating thing, in a kind of ‘no rules’ way, is the complete absence of concrete guidelines, you know the ‘do this, don't do that’ rulebook you've grown so accustomed to in academia. Autoethnography can take on so many different forms, I mean—"

I hold up my hand, counting on my fingers.

“There’s poetry, short stories, novels, photographic essays, layered accounts, journals, and the list goes on and on (Ellis, 1999)! Autoethnography is so decidedly ambiguous about what you should or shouldn’t do with it and focuses more on what the text does, y’know, what its goals are. I think it was Bochner (2001) who — and I’m probably butchering the quote — said that narrative writing is less about facts and more about meanings, more focused on local stories and less concerned with master narratives, more storytelling and less essay writing. Which is all well and good but the translation of those concepts into a thesis is where I run into trouble.”

Realizing I’ve talked the entire ride home and we are now parked in Jake’s driveway, I sigh and say, “I’m sorry, I’m just stuck right now.”
Jake reaches over to grab my book bag, “Well, let’s go inside. I’ll make dinner while you talk it through with me. And give me a kiss, I haven’t seen you all day.”

***

“That’s a really good beer, isn’t it? More like an IPA than a Pale Ale,” Jake says while grabbing a beer of his own.

“Yeah, it’s good.”

Jake laughs at my far-off expression, “You’re cute. So, talk to me, you don’t think you’re doing your thesis right?”

“Well, that’s the rub. There’s no hard and fast or right or wrong way to do autoethnography. See, because the definition is so deliberately open to interpretation and any autoethnographic text is bound to be radically different than the next, it’s hard to get a clear handle on whether I’m really doing autoethnography. It’s almost easier to say what autoethnography isn’t than to nail down what it is, which honestly, might be by design (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).”

“But you’ve done it before, I’ve read them. They’re really good.”

“I know, I know. But I’m telling you, I feel like up until this point, I’ve only been halfway doing autoethnography. I didn’t really know what to do so I wound up just making a weird sort of amalgamation of ‘standard, academic writing’ sprinkled with relevant personal stories. Almost like an ‘Insert Autoethnography Here’ slot amidst the exact opposite of what autoethnography actually is. I mean, maybe I’m wrong in feeling this way but I honestly don’t think I got it. Technically speaking, I’ve written autoethnographic pieces before but I don’t believe I’d fully grasped what autoethnography was or its goals. But who can blame me!” I ask while throwing my hands up.
Jake laughs at my rant continues, “Seriously though, we go our entire educational lives being taught there’s research and there’s literature and the two should be kept miles apart. And, as students, who were we to question whether or not that’s wrong or right? I mean sure I was kind of frustrated by the process of writing research papers but I couldn’t quite articulate why I was frustrated, y’know? I just figured that it gets easier to don the ‘voice from nowhere’ with more practice (Bochner, 2001, p. 138). But it never really did. If anything, I just got more frustrated and disillusioned with the whole process and came to kind of despise academic writing (Tracy, 2012). God, I certainly never sought it out on my own. I mean, have you? Do you go to a bookstore and think ‘Jeez, I wish they had some academic journals I could peruse?’”

Jake chuckles and shakes his head, “Nope, I find academic writing kind of insufferable to be honest. Never really enjoyed it while I was in school.”

I place my beer down and shoot both hands out in front of me in emphatic agreement.

“I know, right?! That was even a point made by Bochner (1997) — yes, I’ve read a lot of his stuff — where he kind of states that ‘the norm’ style of writing inadvertently hurts the academic world. He says something like, the publications go unread by undergraduates, graduate students find them inaccessible, colleagues and scholars don’t even finish reading them, and no one outside of academia really knows they exist (as cited in Richardson, 1997). Which is why I definitely don’t want to do just another standard, objective research project with narrative pieces throw in. I don’t want to produce something that the reader comes in and out of, y’know? I do it all the time! I just kind of half-read my way through the scholar-talk and only become engaged when a story shows up.”

I begin to pace the short length of the kitchen while Jake sautés greens with garlic.
“Remember that one piece I read, the really big one about the woman, Carolyn Ellis, who
described her experience with her partner who died from emphysema? (Ellis, 1995)”

Jake pauses, searching his mind and slowly replies, “Ye-e-e-sss”.

“Well, it was just so…so amazing. And profound and inspiring and exactly what I
imagine autoethnography should be or hopes to be. Y’know, real and emotional, something that
sticks with you and won’t let you go. That was engaging. But it was still an academic text, which
was awesome! And she asked all these questions, right? That I honestly feel kind of nicely sum
up what autoethnography hopes to accomplish. Wait let me go find it, I don’t wanna get it
wrong…”

I walk into the living room and pull out the giant 3-ring binder from my cloth bag.
Walking back into the kitchen, I locate the questions, “Yeah, here:

Did my story engender conversational response toward the text as you read? Did
you want to give the story to others to read because you think it speaks to their
situation? How useful would this story be as a guide if you encountered a similar
experience in your life? Did this narrative make you think about or shed light on
events in your own life? Did the words I wrote elicit from you an emotional
response to examine? What did you learn about yourself and your relationships
through your responses to my texts? (Ellis, 1995, p. 319)

“Huh.”

I smile at Jake’s distant interest, happy I have someone to talk my thoughts through with.

“See, so the point isn’t to shove your personal story just anywhere, I mean hell Ellis’
(1995) entire thing is just 300-plus pages of her story and then her explaining the reasoning for it
after the story is finished. And that’s the beauty, and the difficulty, of autoethnography; it posits
that the story is enough (Herrmann & Di Fate, 2014). That the point is to think with, rather than about the story and to view the stories as complete models for theorizing (Bochner, 2001).

Ethnographic writing focuses more on creating space for conversations about how people live rather than focusing on controlling and abstracting (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Take, for instance, this conversation we’re having. We’re talking about autoethnography, right? And we’re discussing some pertinent literature on autoethnography, right? So, why do I need to explain autoethnography in another manner if the point is to reflect on lived experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2006)? There’s this quote that actually kind of asks just that, yeah, let me…find it…Here!

Yeah, ‘How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments of life? You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story’” (Bochner, 1997, p. 5; see also Coles, 1989).

“Makes sense to me,” Jake says matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, me too.”
My phone buzzes.

“Hey, remember when Mom called that waiter a faggot? Idk what restaurant we were at, but yeah. I’m sure I’m not the only one who remembers.”

Little unexpected but of course I remember. Bet Jon does too.

Heading into the kitchen, I look down at my phone and wonder who will reply first. He must be referencing the Ruby Tu-

Jon interrupts my thoughts, “Haha, I totally do. Mom and Dad were married and it was after the UT-UAB game. Mom acted like she was 90 years old the entire time. So, we go to Ruby Tuesday’s and since the waiter forgot our appetizer, he became a faggot. She was on one that day.”

My mind immediately steps back into the scene. Bits and pieces fly in, attempting to recreate the experience. It’s cool. Dim. Quiet inside. Circular table. What can I get started for you guys? Waters all around. Unexpected appetizer. Kind of unusual for her. Oh right, he’s paying. Food gets ordered. Drinks come out. No appetizer yet. Did the waiter realize? Did he stop by and notice? Had it even been ten minutes? Don’t remember. Remember her, though. She starts slowly. Takes them a long time to get an appetizer out, she says. Poor waiter doesn’t know what he’s walking into. He refills our drinks. She pounces. ‘We’ve been waiting over 30 minutes,’ she says. ‘Where’s the appetizer. What sort of business. This is outrageous.’ Poor waiter apologizes, turns to go check on the food. Out of nowhere, he’s a faggot. Poor waiter hears the words at his back. She’s so freaking loud. Just another dinner with mom. Business as usual.

I reply to the thread, “Yup. Still makes me cringe to this day.”
Keith reveals why he asked, “Ah man, I wish we were still at dinner. Mom tried to deny it to an extent. Claimed she didn’t remember lol.”

Jon weighs in, “I bet she doesn’t. She’s been terrible to so many waiters, it blends together.”

The conversation ends. I’m reminded of how frequently we reminisce. How most of our interactions revolve around her. How we keep telling the same stories over and over, to each other, to new lovers, to co-workers. I recall an old group chat where we joked about writing a book, saying it’d be a shame not to, saying maybe someone would get a kick out of it. “We should really be writing all of this down,” we said. “Yeah, we should,” we agreed.

Yeah, we should. I think.
Chapter Three: The Illusion of Method

“Do you wanna go to the gym with me?”

“Ok, but only if I get to talk to you about this stupid thesis.”

“Yeah, sure.”

My little brother and roommate, Thomas, waits while I change into my work-out clothes. I choose the pink lined shorts with a pink mesh top, admiring the way the colors complement one another. *Am I one of those girls now? Who matches her gym clothing?* I shrug. *Maybe today I am.* I come out of my room and immediately launch into conversation.

“Ok, so I’m not really sure how to structure my thesis. And the whole methods section itself is really starting to piss me off. It’s just such a lie!”

Thomas hands me the car keys and we leave the house. Shutting the car door behind me, I continue my rant.

“Autoethnography is supposed to be this process, right? Not this step-by step recipe that you follow, but an ongoing *process* of discovery, insight, and revelation (Adams et al., 2015). Ok, maybe those are all synonyms but you get what I’m saying, right?”

Thomas takes a drink from his water bottle as we round the corner of University Parkway and State of Franklin Road. “Yeah, yeah. It’s different from traditional research. Or at least it seems to be.”

Nodding furiously as we pass the hotel we work at, I quickly respond, “Yup! It’s *soooo* different. And it leaves me wondering how am I supposed to do a methods section without lying? I mean, really though, how many research papers have you written that you knew exactly what you were looking for, exactly which direction to take, and exactly which research questions to ask *before* you did anything (Tracy, 2012)? I mean who can honestly say that’s what they do? Or
am I the only one who just kind of makes that shit up at the end and just places it in the beginning sections like-”

I lower my voice, “Oh yeah, that’s totally what I was looking for right from the very beginning, pretty incisive huh? I mean come on! Who actually does that!? God, especially in qualitative research. You remember that one class I took where my group went and looked at gendered health and beauty products? Man, when I was writing that paper I put in all these research questions that ‘guided’ our study and it’s just like bull.shit. We didn’t know what we were looking for! We figured it was worth looking into, read some stuff that more or less told us it was a good idea, and then went for it! But it’s not like we could’ve written that in our methods section, y’know!?”

Thomas laughs at my mania as we pull into a parking spot. As is customary of our interactions, one of us is ranting while the other is waiting for the rant to die down before offering advice. Recently, Thomas had frequently played listener to my long-winded rants, making me wonder if he ever got tired of it.

Thomas, sensing a rant-break, snaps me back to the present, “I mean, no. I don’t think anyone has that much foresight. I think it’s just accepted practice and everyone kind of overlooks the absurdity of it.”

“Yeah! But I don’t- or really- I can’t overlook it! I mean seriously, to do a research paper right, which of course I’d like to accomplish at least once in my undergraduate career, I should do it in stages. You know, this amount of time reading literature, this amount of time writing the literature review, this amount of time formulating a research game-plan, this amount of time writing about the game-plan, this amount of time gathering the data, etcetera, etcetera (Tracy, 2012). And, welp, I’ve already fucked that up just by merit of my research topic! I mean, are
researchers just liars or selectively honest? Because there’s just no way research is as planned and neatly executed as most articles suggest. I mean especially in the qualitative realm.”

Thomas and I walk through the gym doors and swipe our student I.D.’s. Looking at my old picture always shocks and - being one of my least favorite pictures - embarrasses me too. One commonality, among many, that camera-shy Thomas and I share. He laughs again. “Duh, Alana. Are you just now realizing this?”

As we head towards the locker room rental counter, I laugh with him. “I mean no, but I don’t know I just feel…tricked. Or maybe just confused about how I’m supposed to write a section explaining my research process when I’m not done with the research process yet. Autoethnography is just different, it doesn’t work that neatly, y’know? And it definitely shouldn’t go at the beginning of the thesis because then it’s a lie!”

I approach the student worker behind the counter and ask to get a locker. Taking Thomas’s jacket and wallet, I head into the women’s locker room. Most days I enjoy the tucked away, warmly lit, quietly feminine area as gyms tend to make me nervous; there’s always too many eyes in too big a space. But as I robotically place my items into the tall locker, I barely notice my environment. The conundrum of methods in autoethnography fully occupies my mind.

*How the hell do I do this? It’s not like I had some grand plan to begin with, so what do I do with what I have? How do I explain my research process when it’s not done yet? I mean, am I allowed to not have a clear plan? To just kind of see what happens?*

I close the locker door and take the key with me. Heading towards the exit, I spot the scale. Even though I know what it will say, I step on it anyways realizing if it wasn’t there I’d never think to weigh myself. *Weight is weird,* I think while looking down at the results. I clear the number and leave the safety of the locker room.
“I weigh the same as I did my sophomore year of high school. That was eleven years ago.”

Thomas shows no surprise as we head towards the treadmills. “You’re an extremely small person, Alana.”

“Yeah, I guess. Are these two all right?” I ask, pointing to two treadmills.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Stepping onto the machines, we both increase the incline to the maximum level and set the timer. I quickly jump back into the conversation.

“So, funny thing is I was saying all this to Dr. Herrmann the other day and he gave me these articles to read that more or less echoed exactly what I was saying. There was one that really hit the nail on the head, or at least boiled it down to more defined terms. It kind of said the frustration stems from an inherent mismatch in writing style and research method (Tracy, 2012). Basically, we’re taught to write deductively which, of course, clashes with the inductive nature of qualitative research (Tracy, 2012). What’s more, academic journals routinely favor linear, formulaic writing. (Tracy, 2012). So, it makes sense that it’s drilled into our heads since our professors more or less succumb to using deductive writing in order to get published. But then the article goes on to say that the contradictory goals of inductive research and deductive writing can be toxic to researchers and cause confusion and angst (Tracy, 2012). And, of course, I’m reading the article thinking no shit.”

Thomas laughs at me, “Well, at least you’re not the only one who’s frustrated. That’s kind of cool.”

“Well, yeah, of course. I mean I really liked the article; it was spot on. But now here I am, still confused and angst-y and one-thousand percent consumed with how to write the
freaking methods section! I mean, what do I do with that information? It’s still expected of me! It’s all well and good to write about how deductive approaches can stifle ‘the ephemeral art of interpretative data analysis,’ but what do I do with that, exactly (Tracy, 2013, p. 113)?”

I look over at Thomas’s straight posture and realize he’s trying to keep his abdomen engaged while walking. I attempt to straighten my form as he laughs at the space in front of him, “I get what you’re saying. It’s my understanding that the methods portion of most academic texts is primarily there for replication purposes. Which kind of seems like that doesn’t apply to what you’re doing?”

“I know, right? So, I guess the question is, what’s the point of a methods section for an autoethnographic thesis? I mean, I guess there’s merit in showing readers how you went about your research process. And don’t get me wrong, I sure would love to see a methods section in an autoethnographic thesis that doesn’t read like every other methods section I’ve come across. I just have a hard time believing an autoethnographer planned everything they were going to do prior to beginning their research. How do you even do that in this situation? I mean, we’re talking about memory and perception here! I can’t explain how I went about gathering my memories or your all’s memories, at least not in a way that’s considered properly academic. I remembered something and wrote it down. I asked you all what you remembered and wrote it down. We helped remember certain memories together and, wait for it, yep, wrote it down. It wasn’t exactly a method as much as it was just, conversations.”

Sighing, I look at the wall of televisions in front of me. An audio-less *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) shows the leading lady faint and plummet into the water below.

Thomas watches as the boozy pirate dives into the water, “Kind of sounds like you’d be better suited writing a novel.”
For a brief second, I panic. *Did I choose the wrong topic? Am I just writing an autobiography and calling it research? Why didn’t I just choose to analyze a movie or something? I don’t have time to change my topic again. God, Herrmann would kill me. Fuck, maybe I really screwed up here.* I search my mind for a way to reconcile the growing knot in my stomach.

“Well…I mean, yes and no. Writing a novel and writing an autoethnography aren’t exactly mutually exclusive processes or concepts. Actually, autoethnographies borrow loads from literature and they can incorporate all sorts of literary devices like dialogue, first-person voice, vignettes, and whatnot (Adams et al., 2015). So, it’s really not a question of should, it’s a question of how. Do I do what Ellis (1995) did and write it like a novel and leave the ‘academic’ stuff at the end?” I ask, putting air quotations around academic.

“Oh do I use a layered account, like Herrmann (2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2016) does in his pieces? Do I attempt to pull a Bochner (1997; 2001; 2012) and incorporate extreme levels of introspection in between crazy amounts of literature? Should I echo Ellis (1999; 1995; 2001), or even Ellis *and* Bochner (2006), and use conversations to try and narratively guide the reader through the research process? And if I choose that route, how in-depth does the guided tour go? I have no idea! I mean, I suppose I could always opt to frame our stories theoretically or conceptually, like Adams did (2006; 2012), and do a half analysis, half story approach? Or should I just say fuck it and do what Hunniecutt (2013) did and go for a more traditionally formatted thesis? There’s just so many formats that I like and think are genius. And I keep reading more all the time, like Kinser (2008; 2012), Lindemann (in progress), and of course, Dorgan (2014) and I love them all! But, they’re all so different! So, I read one and I think yeah, I’ll do it *that* way, then I read another and I’m like, or maybe *that* way, and on and on. But most
of what I’ve read are all articles, y’know? Well, except for *Final Negotiations* (1995) but I mean, I can’t really write a novel-sized thesis, can I? I sincerely doubt I have the time. I feel like I’m making this more complicated than it needs to be but also feel like it’s just extremely complicated.”

I stop talking and remove my hand from mid-air, resting it on the treadmill railing. Looking over at Thomas, I can’t tell if he’s concentrating on what I just said, the exercise, or the movie. His eyes glance over at me and quickly dart back to the air in front of him. “Isn’t that what you always do though? Opt for the more complicated route? Not to say that’s a bad thing. If anything, I think your end product is always way better because of it.”

I scoff, unable to take a compliment. “Here’s hoping. I have no idea how this is gonna turn out. I could finish it and they could reject it and say it’s not a thesis. I mean maybe. I don’t really know, but I’m not gonna rule it out at this point.”

The timer reaches the thirty-minute mark. Thomas hits the stop button on the machine, “That’s not going to happen, Alana.”

Thomas is covered in sweat and breathing heavy. I point at myself and then at him, “I feel like I’m doing this workout wrong. No one would believe that we just did the same exercise.”

Thomas laughs, “There’s a lot of factors here. My core body temperature consistently hovers around the surface level of the sun, whereas yours does not. Plus, cardio always kills me. We’re just different.”

“True.”
Chapter Four: Memor(I)es, One

I can see it so clearly in my mind.

It’s 5 am and my bedroom door opens wide. The bright, hallway light floods my bed. I am instantly awoken but pretend to stay asleep. My faux slumber is in vain as my mother proceeds as usual.

“Alana…,” she whispers.

“Alana, wake up…,” her voice increasingly slightly.

“Alana, get up,” she says loudly. “I can’t find my shoes.”

She doesn’t bother stepping into the room and nudging me awake or even turning on the light to ensure I get out of bed. She doesn’t need to linger or prod; she knows I’ll get up.

I grumble myself out of bed. I’m tired but not too tired to be angry. My half-awake mind snatches at my anger and imagines me telling her “No” or to “Fuck off” as I turn over in my bed and coolly instruct her to “shut my bedroom door, ‘cause I’m trying to sleep here.” I revel in my imagination as I sleepily stumble into her huge bathroom.

She’s standing in front of a mirror in her bra and pantyhose, curling her massive brown hair into her signature, full-bodied hairstyle. For as long as I can remember, her hair has looked the same. It’s gone through varying stages of poofiness but has largely retained its original blueprint. First, she curls it, then sprays it, then she runs her long, red nails through her curls to make the entire hairstyle one giant poofy wave. It works on her. She looks good somehow. Sexy, even. For a split second, I can see how she’s been married five times. Or is it six? Who’s really keeping count? Not her, that’s for sure.

Her reflection instructs my reflection to find her black shoes. “The ones with the gold buckle,” she says. Right, I think. She has about twenty pairs of black shoes, seven of which have
gold buckles, and six of which she can’t possibly wear with her present outfit. A part of me is grateful she didn’t wake me to find her clothes. That’s always twice as hard as finding a shoe, as the number of black slacks she possesses is three times the number of shoes and is generally accompanied by increased levels of pickiness.

I internally groan and walk into her massive closet. There are clothes and shoes everywhere. I had cleaned and organized this very closet not two weeks ago, a feat that had taken approximately three days to sift through the hundreds of clothing items and organize them by function and color. Now, as I expected, my labor was wasted. Looking at the explosion of suits, skirts, blouses, and slacks haphazardly hanging from the racks of clothes and littering the floor of her walk-in closet, my spirit is vaguely crushed.

I climb over heaps of clothes and attempt to locate the holy shoe. Five minutes later, I appear with two pairs of black, gold-buckled shoes and show them to her. She shakes her head no. “You know, the one with the shinier gold buckle than the one’s you’re holding.” Sadly, I do know the one. While I was scavenging through her piles upon piles of shoes, I was looking for that exact shoe. Naturally, since I couldn’t find it, she had to have it. The two pairs of shoes in my hands were apparently too dull for her. They must have clashed with her shiny, gold bracelet lying on the bathroom counter. I helped her clasp the bracelet to her skinny, tan wrist and drug my skinny, pajamaed person back into the closet.

I knew it wasn’t in the closet. It was probably downstairs in the kitchen. I angrily shuffled through the pile of shoes for a few more minutes before eventually proclaiming they were nowhere to be found.

“Look under the bed,” she says. I drag myself over to the California King Size bed and kneel. I pull out three more pairs of black shoes but don’t bother showing her; they didn’t have
buckles so as far as she was concerned, they don’t exist. She had lost her only wearable shoes, the only shoes she possessed, the last shoes in existence.

I’m waiting for her to get mad at me and my uselessness. I’m way ahead of her though. My sleepiness has dissipated and given way to a seething anger that is fueling me. I hate her.

She walks past me as I’m still searching under her bed, “Well, you’re going to have to clean that closet today, then.” I blink back angry tears as she leaves the room. I hate that she can’t clean her own goddamn closet. I hate that I’ll spend my entire day cleaning up after my mother. I hate that she won’t appreciate it. And I hate that I’ll be doing this again next week.

She walks downstairs and pours her coffee into her travel mug. Her missing shoes are waiting by the green velvety couch, where she presumably took it off the day before. Admitting nothing, she yells for me to come downstairs. I let out a shaky sigh and look at the alarm clock. *It’s ok, I think, She’ll be gone in ten minutes.*
I see my brother standing in line at Starbucks, he turns his chin up, letting me know he’s seen me too.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Thanks for meeting me.”

“Yeah, no problem. I’ll get your drink since you drove to meet me.”

“Cool, thanks,” I say. As the line moves forward, I ask, “So, when are you leaving to head back to Nashville?”

“Probably on Monday or Tuesday, I have an interview in Knoxville right after the holiday so I won’t technically be going home but I have to leave here regardless.”

“God, I can’t believe tomorrow’s Christmas. Wonder how it’ll go?” I ask as I eye the sugary holiday drinks on the menu.

“Yeah, I was wondering the same thing. It’ll be the first time we’ll all be at Christmas in like, what? Three? Four years?”

“Something like that. I imagine it’ll either be a complete disaster or surprisingly tame. Is Kayla coming?” I ask as he pulls out his gold Starbucks card with his name etched on it.

“Nah, she’ll be at her family’s. Said she’s disappointed she’ll miss all the excitement. She really wants to meet Alex, but I told her there’ll be other times. Besides, like you said, it could be a total disaster so maybe it’s best she isn’t there,” he says as we reach the counter. “Hey, can I get a grande peppermint mocha with an extra shot? And whatever she wants.”
The Starbucks employee rings him in and turns to me, “Hi…umm…can I just get a tall soy milk latte with an extra shot?”

Jon hands the employee his card, as I step back from the counter. “Well, I think Jake’s coming so he won’t miss any of the fun.”

“Nice. So, how’s that going? Still good?” Jon asks as I look for a table to grab.

“Yeah, it’s great. Kinda rocky at first, but it’s fine now,” I say, thinking it’s nice of him to inquire. Pointing to a table near the corner, I ask, “Is this ok here?”

“Fine with me,” he says, as we make our way over to the table. As I pull out my phone and charger, Jon sips his coffee. “So, Mom, huh?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I laugh as I pull up the recording tool on my phone, “I figured it was about time one of us did something, y’know?”

“Can’t say I disagree, pretty overdue really.”

I set my phone face down in the middle of the table, “That’s what I thought.”

I look at him and grin, “Well, are you ready?”

“Sure,” he shrugs.

***

Driving home, my mind is filled with our conversation. He was kind of uncharacteristically brief. I switch my phone volume to the speaker output and listen to our conversation the entire drive home.
I begin with my opening question, something to help frame the conversation, “What’s a good mother?” I ask.

“Hmm…,” he says, giving himself a few seconds to think, “I think someone who is loving, supportive of their children but also probably not afraid to discipline them as well. It’s a tough question to totally answer since obviously I can never be a mother myself, but I think ideally the perfect mother would have qualities like understanding and patience. That about sums it up, I think.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” I say, “Alright, so if that’s a good mother, then what’s a bad mother?”

He quickly responds, “I think it’s as simple as saying someone who doesn’t possess those qualities or someone who possess maybe the opposite of them. You probably want me to elaborate on that.”

I laugh, “Mmmhmm, yeah that’s kind of an obvious answer.”

“True,” he says, “Well, a bad mother is probably someone who’s selfish, impatient, lacks good listening skills, and is unable to teach her children the necessary skills they’ll need to become productive adults. She’s probably vengeful, bitter, stubborn, I already said selfish, right?”

“Yep,” I say.

Searching for more answers, he responds, “Ungrateful, maybe? Resentful. I think those are all the ones I can think of off the top of my head.”
“Ok, those are great,” I encourage, “So, if you had to sum Mom up in one word or phrase, what would it be?”

Without missing a beat, he answers, “Complicated.” I hear myself laugh through my phone speaker and smile along at his concise, yet accurate description. “That’s good,” I say between laughs, “All right, what is one of the happiest memories you have of Mom?”

“When you say happy, what do you mean?” he asks.

“Just a memory that makes you happy when you look back on it,” I say.

Jon isn’t satisfied, “But does it have to be the happiest memory or just a happy one, period?”

I can hear myself becoming amused at Jon’s signature obsession with semantics. It is kind of what he does for a living now, I suppose. I hear myself respond to him, “Just a happy memory or one that isn’t unpleasant.”

Jon searches his mind and locates a memory. “I guess law school graduation, that’s a good one. I guess having everyone there, including her, witness something that I’d worked really hard for…the support as well as the recognition, were good feelings.”

“From Mom?” I ask.

“Yeah,” answers Jon, “I think having everyone there made it more of a group effort. But there was also a level of achievement on my own thinking that I had at that point, educationally, officially surpassed her.”

“Oh, right,” I say. I never really thought about it that way, I think. It’s true though. Mom always said she wanted to go back and get her Master’s. But she never had time, what with the
kids and all. And now with the felony, it’s not an option anymore. Thinking about where Mom’s life wound up makes me sad.

My voice interrupts my train of thought, “Ok, now do the opposite,” I say. I can hear my smirk, as I explain, “You can preface this by saying that you don’t know if it’s the most unhappy memory you have but, give me one. Tell me about an unhappy memory.”

Not needing to clear up word choice, Jon swiftly responds, “Probably the worst one that comes to mind immediately was — and I may be mixing up stories — but I think Keith got caught with Beano or something and he was forced to mow the yard in like Mammaw’s dress or something. He couldn’t go to church camp and I think she broke his glasses or lost his glasses and he went a pretty decent length of time without proper eyewear. That was a pretty shitty one. She just didn’t seem to give a shit. So, it wasn’t something that directly happened to me but obviously, you feel for your sibling.”

He’s right, I think, he is mixing up stories. Doesn’t really change them though. Keith accidentally sorted a sock incorrectly while folding laundry so Mom made him mow the yard in one of my oversized dresses. The other story involved Keith getting caught trying to take her Beano to camp, so she revoked his camp privileges and told us she was sending him away. That “the agency” would pick him up while we were gone. I vividly recall both memories as I’m driving. They still manage to upset me all these years later.

“I remember that,” I offer as I take a long sip from my coffee. I clear my throat, “How do you think your relationship with Mom has changed over the years?”

“Well, I think it’s definitely one that’s had peaks and valleys,” Jon says without missing a beat. “I think growing up, you’re relatively close with your mother, or as close as you could be
with our Mom given she wasn’t really around a whole lot. Then you have teenage years where you start to realize some of her blatant hypocrisies, unyielding rules, and just refusal to listen. I’d say around college I tried to really impress upon her that it’s important she made an effort to look at her children as blossoming adults and treat them as such. I feel like she didn’t truly grasp that. She failed to heed that, rather. And then obviously, I pressed charges against her once she committed credit card fraud. So, then there was a point where a relationship didn’t exist.”

“What was that, like two years?” I ask, remembering mine and Jon’s Mom-hiatus several years back.

“Two or three, yeah,” he says. “I think you went back a good six months or so before I did so that’s where it gets confusing. Since then, I’d say it’s a good relationship but on the same token I think she treats me differently than she treats the other siblings. Quite honestly, I think she’s afraid of pissing me off. So, I think the relationship dynamic is different there. It seems like when I’m home she’s bending over backwards to, I don’t want to say take care but, make sure I’m comfortable.”

Knowing exactly what he means, I ask, “Does that make you feel weird?”

Jon responds, “Little bit. On the one hand, it’s nice but on the other hand I always wonder, ‘Do you treat everyone else this way?’ I don’t know and you guys don’t stay with her a whole lot so it’s different in that regard but I wonder, is it just her being a mother? I mean, she never sees me. Or is it her doing what she thinks will make me happy so I’m not angry? I don’t know. I wouldn’t say our relationship now is defined by fear but I think she is definitely afraid of pissing me off or doing something that will cause me to cut her off because I think I’ve shown that’s not an issue.”
“So, you think she’s just really afraid of losing her kids?” I ask.

Jon pauses to consider the question, “…I think so. Especially given her relationship with me and her relationship with Alex. I think anyone who’s really stood up to her and cut her off, from then on she kinda bends over backwards to make herself feel needed.”

Agreeing with him, I move on to the next question. “So, kind of a similar question but, how would you say your communication with Mom has changed over the years?”

“Other than the obvious childhood to adult progression, I think the roles change to a degree,” Jon answers. “I think for a while even once you hit college, she still, I wouldn’t say talked down, but she would talk to you but she wasn’t truly listening. It was more her talking about what she wanted to talk about and inquiring about your life but it was all surface level stuff. Then comparing that to present day, I mean I give her credit. She seems like she at least attempts to find out what’s in my life.”

“Do you divulge?” I ask, although I suspect I know the answer.

“A little bit but not too much,” he responds.

I continue my inquiry. “Did you used to divulge more or have you always been guarded in terms of what you share with Mom?”

“That’s the thing. I truly can’t remember if I did or not. It’s one of those, I don’t have a problem telling her what’s going on in my day to day life or telling her what’s going on in my job or girlfriend but I don’t go super into detail. It’s one of those, she can be a decent sounding board at times even though I take her advice with a grain of salt. But I wouldn’t say it’s too personal,” he says.
Further explaining himself, Jon says, “I guess the best way to sum it up is, in college when she was calling me I used to kinda roll my eyes, let out a deep sigh, like ‘Ok.’ But now, I wouldn’t say I look forward to it, but it’s kinda like, ‘Well, let’s see what she needs.’ I think she’s also good about, when a conversation comes to an end and that’s it. We don’t have anything else to talk about.”

Clarifying his last sentence, I ask, “She doesn’t drag on?”

“Right.”

_Nice to know I’m not the only one who hates long phone conversations_, I think as I pass a slow driver in the left lane.

Curiosity piqued, I ask him, “Can you remember any specifically good conversations that you had with Mom? Did she ever make an impact in a conversation? Positively?”

Jon hmmm’s his way into an answer, “I feel like every now and then she has. Career-wise or she’s made comparisons that, again, I take with a grain of salt but she’s compared her relationship with her husband to mine and my girlfriends and just gives out advice like ‘Oh well yes well my partner likes this and well this annoys me. So, I get where you’re coming from.’ I can’t remember specifics but I would say there’s been some good ones.”

_Jon is being so level-headed, I think. Their relationship sounds way nicer than I thought it would._

Out of the blue, I ask, “If Mom were to die, what would you say at her funeral?”

“I have no idea,” he says.

“Would you want to say something?” I wonder.
Jon stumbles over his words, “I don’t know… I mean who would I… wh-I guess it depends on who’s at the funeral.”

Trying to picture the morbid scene, I ask, “So, if it’s just us it doesn’t matter?”

As I consider the image in my mind, Jon responds, “Well, I guess that’s what I’m wrestling with. I mean, what needs to be said between us that we don’t already know?”

*Good point,* I think.

Unsure of how to answer the question for myself, I turn the question to Jon. “How would you feel?”

“I think, obviously, I’d be sad,” he says matter-of-factly.

*Yeah, me too,* I think. Wondering further, I ask, “Is it because it’s required of you to be sad?”

Jon’s voice gets quieter, “I don’t know. I haven’t really thought a whole lot about it, her death...” As his voice returns to normal, he says, “I feel that I’d be sad because you lose a parent. I don’t know what to compare that to though.”

*Me either,* I think.

Jon finishes his thought, “I mean it’s one of those like, yeah, she hasn’t been great. But, she did raise us.”

*Perfect Mother’s Day card,* I think as I turn off the highway.

My voice changes tone as I ask my favorite question, “If you had to choose one mediated image of a mother as being most like Mom, who would it be? It can be from anywhere like a
comic book, movie, television show, commercial, whatever. Just someone that reminds you of Mom.”

“Cersei Lannister,” Jon says, without hesitation.

Laughing, I ask Jon to explain his reasoning, “She loves her children deeply but is selfish, shortsighted, and ends up doing what is sometimes not in their best interest at times. Unwittingly, rather.”

“Alrighty!” I laugh.

Moving the interview along, I say, “Ok, so my next question is, how do you think having siblings influenced your perception of Mom?”

True to form, Jon responds logically, “I think that’s hard to answer because then I would have to know what it was like without having siblings.”

No shit, I think as I stop at a red light.

“Do you think it would have been different?” I ask, hoping to get a better answer.

Jon doesn’t budge, “I’m sure it would have been different,” he says.

Over-enunciating my words in annoyance, I ask, “Hypothetically, how do you think it would have been?”

He finally gives me an answer, “I think it would have been different in the sense that you wouldn’t have a sounding board or other people in the same control group, so to speak, that could kind of sympathize or understand the general situation. I think, having a group (group being siblings) allows you to understand what was normal or acceptable and what wasn’t as far as her behaviors go.”
“Perfect!” I exclaim. “Alright, how did other people’s moms such as friends, relatives, etc. influence how you viewed our Mom?”

“I don’t really think it had a huge influence,” he says quickly.

“You don’t?” I ask.

Explaining his reasoning, Jon says, “No, I think for the most part it wasn’t hard to ascertain after a while that a lot of what our mom did wasn’t normal. So, at that point you already kind of knew it, so meeting other moms, I mean maybe it served to confirm it but it’s kind of something you already knew. I think you can attribute a lot of that to media, too.”

“So, you’re saying you never did any comparative analyses with our mom and other people’s moms?” I ask.

“I’d say the only mom I ever compared her to would have been her sister. But, no not really, to answer your question,” he says, shrugging his shoulders.

“Ok,” I say, “How did you describe Mom to other people growing up?”

“I feel like I usually didn’t,” he says.

Not what I was expecting to hear, I ask, “You didn’t describe Mom at all?”

Jon sticks with his answer, “I mean, when did you ever really have to describe your mom to your friends?”

*All the time!* I think, remembering eventually summing her up as crazy to easily explain why I couldn’t go to a sleep-over, or a birthday party, or swimming, or to the movies, or, or, or…
Thinking maybe he didn’t understand the question, I try a different approach. “Did you ever talk about Mom with your friends?”

Jon thinks for a moment and says, “Not beyond like, ‘Oh my mom’s not letting me do this,’ ‘Oh, Mom wants me home at this time.’ Generally, among my friend group, we didn’t have long conversations about parents because at that point we were self-absorbed and more focused on what’s going on in your life. There was never time to be like, “Let me tell you about my mother.” I mean I might have said, ‘My mom’s being a bitch” in regards to her not letting me go do something.”

Abandoning the question, I try another. “Do you think your perception of Mom is different from that of your siblings?”

Jon answers, “I’m sure it’s different in some ways but I think as far as the broad strokes go it’s not much different, no. I think maybe I might not be as harsh on her as the others but that’s not to say that I’m still not harsh on her.”

“So, we’re probably all harsh, there just might be varying degrees?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “I think on one end of the spectrum you probably have Keith and Alex. And I think I’m probably near the middle slash maybe the top or the beginning of the spectrum.”

Laughing at the idea of a Mom Perception Spectrum, I ask, “And what would you label the spectrum?”

Jon replies, “Hatred on one end to understanding on the other. Like recognizing her flaws but also not being afraid to mention some of the good affects she had as well.”

“I like that,” I say imagining the spectrum in my mind as looking similar to this:
“Do you disagree with that?” Jon asks me.

“No, no. I agree,” I say, wondering where I fall on the spectrum.

Jon nods while I ask the next question, “How does your perception of Mom benefit you?”

A long pause follows as Jon thinks.

Eventually he says, “I think having the trait of being aware or being able to see people for what they are is helpful in general. Maybe being able to recognize a parental figure in such a complicated way kind of helps in other ways. It’s helped in my adult life in the sense of you’re not too naïve to not see through or recognize other people’s bullshit.”

“I like that,” I say. “On the other side of the coin, would you say that there are any costs to how you perceive Mom?”

“I don’t truly know if it’s a cost, but I think something that maybe all of us struggle with is attachment or fear of loss or abandonment. I think we all deal with that to a degree and I think that’s a side effect of our relationship with our mother. And kind of on the same lines, I think letting people in is tough, guardedness is maybe a cost of having such a complicated relationship or feelings about your mother,” Jon says.
“Ok, ok,” I say. “I think we already kind of answered this one but, meh, why not do it again! What would you say has influenced your perception of Mom the most?” I ask.

Jon considers the question, “I guess it would be siblings but I think generally living it through is kind of the best way to feel influenced.”

“And…Cersei Lannister?” I ask, “Does she fall under the good mother or bad mother category?”

“Hmm…” Jon pauses, “I think that probably depends on who you ask. I think she truly loves her children and wants to do what she thinks is in their best interest. However, she has too many personal issues to realize that a lot of the times her actions contradict or hinder her goal of helping her children. So, I guess she’s a good mother in the sense that she loves her children and wants what’s best for them. I think she’s bad in that some of her choices or attitudes have resulted in her having raised one very bad child and two children that are kind of too naïve to function in the world. So, I guess you’d have to go with bad mother but I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

*I’ll say*, I think as press stop on the recorder.
Chapter Six: Mem(our)ies, Two

My phone is repeatedly buzzing. I’m busy working on a project so I don’t bother looking. When I finally take a break, my phone shows 32 unread text messages. I laugh, knowing they’re from a group message thread with my brothers. My two older brothers have been swapping stories about Mom for over an hour and as I read each story, I vacillate between mild amusement and disgust.

One message, in particular, makes me pause. Keith’s long text talks about two golden retrievers we used to have, Sam and Sydney.

“Idk why,” he says, “other than Mom just didn’t want them anymore and saw her opportunity to get of them. But you all were at church camp, it was that year she didn’t let me go. And she just up and told me to get the dogs and put them in the car. I remember I had to get some frozen pizza and lure them into the backseat. When they were in the car, we drove out to the middle of nowhere and she dropped them off. I remember them running off into the grass, playing and shit, and then we just drove away. I don’t think she said a word to me the entire time.”

I shudder, remembering the younger, playful Sam and the protective, older Sydney. I finally reply to the thread, “Hey Keith, do you remember what you were thinking when Mom got rid of Sam & Sydney? I don’t know what I would be thinking. Even now the whole thing is pretty sad/horrible.”

It takes him a few minutes to reply, when my phone buzzes I see a wall of text, “No, sorry. I was trying to remember my mindset but at that point I was totally in Mom’s domain. I think I was terrified to be honest. She spent that whole week beating the shit out of me on and
off, so I can remember being somewhat glad her focus was off of me. Plus, she had broken my
glasses and I couldn’t really see much of anything, which was another large concern of mine.
And of course, the whole time she’s telling me she’s never getting me another pair and that’s
what I deserve and shit. I remember I had to let the dogs out of the backseat, I may have even
walked out into the field a little bit, if memory serves me right. She had me bring some of the
pizza with us, so I think I was using that and throwing it for them. I was pretty much numb to the
situation to be honest. I was also wondering what she was gonna do to me. I think maybe my
brain went into self-preservation mode and kinda numbed me to it all. I was just along for the
ride in her crazy world.”

My phone goes silent for a few minutes as I read and re-read his text. Finally, Jon
responds to the thread, echoing my thoughts exactly.

“Jesus Christ.”
Chapter Seven: The Confusion of Method

“Am I allowed to use this?” I wonder aloud.

“Huh?” Jake asks as his head jerks up off the couch.

“Oops, sorry,” I say, patting his arm, “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“No, no. I’m awake, what’d you say?”

I grin at his standard denial of snoozing and resituate myself. “Well, I just don’t know if I can use this.” Pointing at my phone, I shake it a few times for added emphasis. He looks at me and waits.

“These text conversations I have with my brothers, I just don’t know if I can use them in my thesis. I’d really like to though, because they get at the real stories and kind of show another way that we interact with each other, y’know?” I say, scrolling through the hundreds of text messages I’m referring to.

“Didn’t you interview them, though? Isn’t that what you’re using?” Jake asks.

“I mean, yeah. The interviews are great. And I’m sure I got some pretty good stuff about sibling impact and the cultural pervasiveness of the institution of motherhood. But it’s the stories I really care about. I think they show something...real that the interview format just can’t touch.” I stretch my legs out over his. He automatically begins rubbing his hands lightly over my shins.

“Well then why not use them both?” he asks as I reach for the laptop and set it on my lap.

“That’s what I want to do but I don’t know if I’m ‘allowed to,’ y’know methodologically speaking.” Jake smiles at my air-quotes and rolled eyes as I carry on, “Technically, I’m using autoethnography to explore my stories and narrative interviewing to explore theirs. But really,
I’m just scouring my memory and theirs for stories. And the text messages are one of the main ways that we reminisce. The problem is that some of them are from waaaaaay before I started my project so I don’t know if I can use them. Really, I don’t know if I can use any of these text message conversations, since they don’t neatly fall into mine or theirs but ours, y’know? Plus, they’re in no way a calculated, methodological approach to gathering information. Which I think is a good thing, but don’t know if anyone else will.”

Jake nods along, letting me know he’s listening. I find the file I was looking for and double-click on it. Locating the document with my notes on narrative interviewing, I open it up and begin reading aloud.

“Ok, so here’s what narrative interviewing is. Also known as interactive interviewing, it is ‘an interpretive practice for getting an in-depth and intimate understanding of people’s experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics’ (Ellis, Kiesinger, Tillmann-Healy, 1997, p. 121). Which, in its astounding vagueness, brings me right back to my original quandary,” I say as Jake smiles at my frustration. “I mean, it’s not like a want a check-list but phrases like ‘joint sense-making’ and ‘blurred researcher and respondent lines’ don’t really help me (Ellis et al., 1997, p. 121). Not only is that a given in this project, it doesn’t help that all of the examples I have of narrative interviewing follow a pretty similar outline. Of course, you’ve got your standard researcher(s) interviewing a stranger about a life experience or personal topic (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Ellis, 1999; Gemignani, 2013) and then you’ve got the ones that look more like mine. Typically, the researchers and respondents know one another and the interview setting and structure is much more informal (Ellis et al., 1997; Hunniecutt, 2013). The problem, though, is that regardless of formality they’re still interviews. They might look like regular conversations to an outsider, but they’re still interviews
for the purpose of research, as opposed to just…texts. Is that too informal? Are they closer to memory and therefore just autoethnography? What about the text conversation from last night? I wasn’t just talking to myself, I was talking to my brothers so can it really be just autoethnography? Am I getting too tripped up by the terms *auto* and *interview*?” I look up at Jake, his head is back to its pre-conversation position on the couch cushion.

Grinning, I quietly return to my document. *I feel like I’m missing something.* I scan the article titles on the screen. My eyes eventually pass over, then return to an article I’d read several months prior. *Friendship as method* (Tillmann-Healy, 2003)...*didn’t Herrmann bring that up the other day? I don’t really remember spotting any similarities between my project and this one but I guess that was before I considered using our texts. Meh, can’t hurt to read it again.*

***

Jake’s dog, Willie, barks at the neighbor’s car pulling in. Jake wakes up, hushing Willie.

“So, did you figure it out?” he asks.

“Ma-a-aa-ybe?” I say as I read over my highlighted portions. “I just read, well re-read, this article explaining friendship as method. It’s essentially slower paced narrative interviewing, as far as I can tell (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). The most useful part to me is this — ‘calling for inquiry that is open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich, friendship as method involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 734). I know it uses the word friendship but it seems to cover really any lengthy emotional investments and/or long-term relationships, which is good since that kind of sums up my brothers and I (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Wish it was called sibship as method, that’d be perfect,” I laugh.

Jake sleepily manages a half-smile. I love that he at least tries to seem interested.
I shut the laptop screen and place it back on the table. “So, I guess, I’ll be combining all three methods? Autoethnography, narrative interviewing, and friendship as method. Well, at least now I can use the text messages, so there’s that. Although, I kind of feel like I’m making the methods fit my approach instead of ensuring my approach fits the methods. Am I doing that? And if so, is that a bad thing?” I ask.

    Jake snaps awake with a “Huhh…”

    I lift my legs off Jake and stand up, “I think it’s time for bed,” I say.

    Jake agrees and mumbles back, “I think so too.”
Chapter 8: Brother #2

“Do you have to work today?”

“No, I’m off. Wanna watch an *X-Files*?”

“Yeah! But can I interview you first? Since we’re both kind of free right now?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Ok, lemme get my phone.”

I go to my bedroom and grab my phone, as I walk back into the living room my cat, Niko, trails after me. I plug my phone in and sit down next to Thomas on the couch.

“Alrighty, you ready?” I ask.

“Ready,” he says.

I press the record button and turn to Thomas, “What’s a good mother?”

Thomas starts off slowly, “I guess a good mother…” he pauses, “…would depend on your perspective. If you were the mother then I guess, a good mother would be someone who takes sufficient care of her children. And by care, I mean provides for their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing at all times. Beyond the basics of food and shelter, but also supports them in their endeavors. But, if you're the child, I guess a good mother is just someone who makes you feel like they love you? It's a lot simpler or at least when I think of my relationship with my mother, it's simpler. Because if you know that your mother loves you and you have this sort of warmth with that feeling, to me that more encompasses a good mom than just a checklist of items. I don't know though, because for a mother it's more of a concern and for a child it's more of a presence.”
I smile at Thomas’s response. To be expected, my younger brother is both well-articulated and thoughtful. As I nod along, Thomas continues his train of thought, “A good mother would be attentive, caring, and would probably be as objective as possible. Guiding, too. I think in a lot of ways you could say that a good mother is selfless just because being a parent or a mother is something that requires that, because it’s such a huge burden to have to raise another human. So yeah, I would say selfless as well and patient. I mean I don’t want to say just general positive attributes but a lot of the things that make a nice person in the general sense apply to being a good mother with more emphasis on the emotional aspects of being a good or supportive person. Just because that, to me, is a very important part of being a good mother.”


“What I think a bad mother is?” he suggests.

“Bingo.”

Thomas breathes out slowly, “So, a bad mother is probably kind of similar regardless of your perspective. Because someone who doesn’t provide those things probably hasn't convinced the child that they love them. So, if you don’t care for or provide one or multiple of those things, be it their physical well-being or if you don’t support them emotionally or if you don’t express your love to your child, they’re not going to think that you care about them. And in that way, you’d be a bad mother because you wouldn't be fulfilling the role of what a good mother does. And of course, all of the opposite descriptors come to mind for a bad mother. She would be inattentive, selfish, cold, or uncaring.”

Thomas begins to say something, then immediately reconsiders, “See I don't think harsh or mean are good words to use because even though I guess that sort of does come to mind, those
words are more applicable to scenarios than they are a person. I mean if they were applicable to a person I guess that would be a trait of a bad person but most people aren't just wholly mean all the time. But I guess if someone were they'd be a bad mother. So maybe careless is a better word? You know, there are a lot of ways to be a bad mother that don't make you a stereotypically bad person unlike the good mother portion. You wouldn't want a careless mother, y'know?"

“Yeah, I guess not,” I say as I hear our other cat, Tim, scratching at the door.

“I hear a TimTim at the door,” I say, getting up to let him in. Returning to the couch, I ask, “If you had to sum up our mom in one word or phrase what would it be?”

Thomas laughs and looks down at the couch, “Well…” he says as he studies the couch fibers, “I'm trying to think of a word for someone who doesn't understand the way the world works around them. So maybe that's my phrase. Yeah, our mom doesn't understand the way the world around her works in terms of how she interacts with it. I think that kind of covers her in a nutshell.”

Agreeing, I move to the next question, “What is one of the happiest memories that you have with Mom?”

Thomas is silent. As I wait for his answer, the washer noisily switches cycles. After a minute, I laugh and say, “Prolonged pause.”

He laughs and continues thinking. After several moments, I say, “It doesn’t have to be the happiest memory ever, just something you think of and aren’t upset by.”

Thomas laughs once and lapses back into silence.

“…”
We look at each other and laugh again. Thomas shakes his head apologetically, “I honestly can't think of a single memory that was just really positive. I can think of interactions with her that weren't negative.”

“Ok,” I say, “can you think of a particularly strong one or just a specific one?”

“Umm…” he says, “I think that’s where I’m hitting a wall. Nothing stands out as being particularly happy or good. It's like the best times ever were when things were just ok and not...awful. I can think of times when we used to watch movies or something or play board games but there's not one specific memory of me being like, ‘Aww, we played games all night and it was a great time.’ That just didn't happen.”

“Ok,” I shrug, “Well, maybe you’ll have better luck with this one. What is one of the unhappiest memories you have with Mom?”

“Whew...” he says, resting his elbows on his knees. “I think the first one that comes to mind is that time we went to that public pool? We went with Aunt Jan and CiCi?” He looks at me for confirmation.

“Uh huh, uh huh,” I say, realizing which memory he’s thinking of.

He continues, “I don't know if it was the first time I ever got caught in a lie with Mom, but that's definitely the worst feeling I've ever had. Really the worst interactions with her is when we would get caught. Or when, I guess me specifically since this is about how I feel, when I would get caught lying to Mom. That was always just the worst. And that specific time I just
remember she was so horrible not only that day but for months afterwards, like for the whole summer practically. So, Aunt Jan had invited you, Alex, and I to go swimming with them at a public pool and Mom was supposed to have been out of town with her husband for the whole day. So, even though you didn't ask her it didn't seem to matter, because she says no to everything anyways. I guess that was always the mindset growing up and even now, which is that she just doesn't understand when things are fine and should be allowed. Which I guess every kid thinks that, but I feel right about that even as an adult, whereas I feel other people wouldn't. So, she found out, obviously. She had come home early, I don't remember why, something was wrong with her car or something and she called and asked where we were and I said we were home. Then she said she was at home and that feeling - like in that moment of ‘ah shit.’ You get caught in a lie and with her. I guess it must have happened before even though I don't really remember. But it was just a very familiar ‘this is the worst thing I could've said’ feeling of just complete dread. And that day she was horrible, as to be expected, you know just lots of yelling. I don't remember specifically what she said that day except that when I told her I was sorry that I had lied she just said I was sorry I had been caught. Not that I was sorry for having done it, which probably did have some truth to it but I still don't think that's something you yell at a child.”

“Do you remember how old you were?” I ask, thinking I was probably in my early teens then.

“I think I was 10 or 11,” he said, confirming my estimation, “it's hard to remember though. This was a good bit ago, we were in the Rosehaven house so I had to have been about that age. But the worst was just how long it lasted, how long she stayed angry about that. Which was the rest of the summer. And this happened at the beginning of summer. So, for like the
whole three months of summer, she was furious with Alex and I. I remember, I would see her in the morning and she would say that she didn't love us. She would invite people over, like her husband’s family, to go swimming at the pool and play games and have Alex and I just stay in our room. She was just very awful. Gosh, I wish I could remember all the names she used to call Alex and I. She had little insulting nicknames she would call us during that time period. All we were allowed to do was clean. I remember the only time we were happy was when she wasn't home. And it's funny because there are other memories exactly like this. It's the same formula of getting caught in a lie and the punishment being so extreme. Which is funny because that never seemed to stop us from lying to her.”

I laugh at his last statement and move to the next question, “How would you say your communication with Mom has changed over the years, if it has at all?”

He responds easily, “I would say the baseline for the communication has not changed. It's always been pretty superficial and as infrequent as possible. I generally only talk to her because she's talking to me. Because I don't want to talk to her, because she's hateful. I don't think that's changed. I just think that where I've gotten older and I don't live with her anymore and I don't have to report to her anymore, that I just don't talk to her nearly as much. Because it always was forced from her end, but now where she isn't able to exert nearly as much of an influence on my life it's just much less communication. But I'd say that the frequency and format is exactly the same. I would still more often than not lie to her about things just because it's easier to. I still don't view it as worth getting into really anything important with her. I'd say, pretty much, it's just very superficial.”

“You think it probably has always been that way?” I ask.
“Yes,” he says confidently, “I think now I can label it more accurately and have a better understanding of it. But I can say now, probably couldn’t when I was younger, that I'm confident in the way that I talk to my mom is kind of like the way someone talks to a workplace acquaintance that they don't work with anymore and they don't really want to be interacting with and they're just trying to end the conversation so they can go about their day.”

I laugh at the comparison, as Niko jumps between Thomas and me and looks for an available lap, “So, it's more like a social obligation?”

Thomas reaches over to pet Niko, “Yeah, that's a good way to put it,” he says.

“Well, alright then,” I say, looking down at my list of questions. “Ooo! Good one! Ok, so if you had to choose one pop culture representation of a mother as being most like Mom, who comes to mind?”

Thomas grins and shakes his head, “I could probably think about this for hours,” he laughs. “But the first thing that pops into my mind is the evil stepmother from Cinderella. Because when I was younger, I definitely saw our mom as being evil a lot of the time. That combined with just the lists of chores she used to give us that seemed oddly Cinderella-esque to get to do the most simple of things. Like if you wanted to go over to your friend’s house for three or four hours, I remember you'd have to do your own cleaning list beyond what she had asked just to be like, ‘I've done these chores for you, I've done all the tasks, I've picked up every grain. Can I go to the ball now?’”

I laugh, “God, so true!”

Nodding, Thomas continues, “And half the time she'd still say no, just like the evil stepmother. I’d say that's a fairly fitting comparison although there are probably others that
would come to mind. Especially as she’s gotten older. I don’t think that model really fits to how I view her now but for the majority of my life that’s how I viewed her.”

“Can you think of one that sums up Mom now?” I wonder, not having a readily available answer of my own.

“I think it’s harder to choose one as a descriptor now because I view her as a more complex person than I used to. Just because, she’s definitely changed. It’s not just that I notice it more now or anything. She just really wasn’t this way when I was younger. Now, she can be a lot sadder. But she’s still equally manipulative and still very hateful so it’s really hard to think of an existing cartoon or an idealistic depiction of a mother that fits that model. Just because that’s not something that would be in media, for the most part,” he says.

“Yeah, that’s a tough one,” I say. “Moving on! How did having siblings influence your perception of Mom?”

“W-e-e-I-I-I-I,” he says slowly, “It was validating. When you have more than one person agreeing with you that she’s so awful and that her punishments are very unreasonable, that’s helpful. At least, if you feel someone else understands what you’re going through you don’t feel so wronged by it. You’re still very upset about it, but at least you’re not alone? I would say it would have been much harder to be an only child of Mom’s. That person would just be ruined.”

I laugh as he says, “So, I’d say it’s been very protective, or it’s protected us, I think, to have each other or at least for me it has. Because even if there were times when my siblings couldn’t necessarily directly help me, just their presence in sharing the punishment made it feel more like a community hatred than an individual one, you know? A group effort. But I’d say the
biggest boon from that is definitely the validation that came out of it in our feelings of being wronged. I can’t really think of anything else…” he says, trailing off.

Then, catching himself, he adds, “I will say that it’s one thing to think that she’s doing you wrong because she’s harming you. But there were times when I wasn’t being punished and I still thought it was very wrong and extreme. I guess that’s another thing, it wasn’t just validating but it also demonstrated that even if it wasn’t me being punished I was still capable of seeing how awful she was. So, I guess you get to see other examples of her interactions that I wouldn’t have had if I didn’t have siblings because it would have been all about me. Then, I feel my analysis of her wouldn’t really be accurate because it would be very me-centric. But in this case, it doesn’t have to be for me to still say that she is, yeah, just the worst.”

“Since you had four other examples?” I say.

“Yes.”

“Ok. So, how did other people’s mothers influence how you viewed Mom?”

Not needing to think, Thomas says, “On the whole, they made me think less of her, if possible. Just because all of my friend’s parents seemed so nice. Even the friend’s parents I didn’t particularly like, like Ricky’s super religious family. His mom was sort of overbearing and wanted to make everything religious or if it wasn’t religious she didn’t want Ricky doing it. But she was still very sweet. Which is funny because it’s not like our mom wasn’t nice to guests. She was polite when guests were around and I don’t technically know that Ricky’s mom wasn’t. But I guess with our mom being nice when guests were around, that wasn’t directed at us. There’s the difference in my perception of it because if I’m the guest and it’s my friend’s parents, their niceness is directed at me which was never the case with our mom’s false guest niceness. So, it
was a lot easier to see through. But I also know that I had tons of friends whose parents were just so nice. I used to talk about how nice Abby Potter’s mom was so much that Mom openly resented her. She’d be like, ‘Why don’t you just stay at her house for dinner?’ And you could tell she was kind of kidding but that’s not something a parent says to a child, is it? That’s something a child says to another child.”

Thomas shakes his head and pats Niko’s head.

Curious, I ask, “So, what made Abby’s mom so nice?”

“She was just so willing. Anything Abby and I expressed that we wanted, she was just right there to help us. She would play games with us or suggest things for us to do for fun. You know the whole house was our playground, which was definitely not a thing at our mom’s. It was just a completely different world. I hated going home when I visited Abby’s because it was so much nicer, there’s just no comparison. She cooked for us all the time, she would drive us everywhere, and she just generally seemed like a much more fun, happy person to be around. Which was almost foreign at that point in my life, in terms of things I thought moms could do. So, it was like, ‘Oh, she’s so cool, she’s a cool mom!’ When really having met a bunch of other parents since then, I think that she’s just a happier person? Because she didn’t do anything a whole lot differently than a lot of my friend’s parents who were also just nice, happy people.”

“Huh,” I say, remembering how infrequently any of us had friends over.

Thomas checks my phone to make sure it’s still recording as I ask the next question. “When Mom would come up in conversation with a friend, coworkers, acquaintances, or whatever how did you describe her?”
Thomas starts his answer with a laugh, “Well, I know for a fact that the most commonly used phrase for me, when describing Mom to a coworker or friend, is that she’s the worst person that I know.”

My loud laugh causes Niko to jump off the couch. Thomas brushes cat hair off his lap and continues, “Which is not to say that I think she’s the worst person. But she’s the worst person that I feel I know intimately, for sure. I definitely don’t know any other awful people as well as I know Mom. So, I’d say I describe her as she is. Although that is always from my perspective when I’m talking to others.”

Thomas considers his last sentence, “You know, usually the first time you make a claim to your friends or your coworkers that your mother is a horrible person, you instantly feel this immediate need to defend it just because of the societal norms about mothers. You know that ‘love should be unconditional,’ ‘I’m sure she cares about you no matter what.’ So, you start to expect to hear those things and you feel like you need to start an itemized list of all the bad things she’s done so you don’t have to hear it.”

Knowing exactly what he’s referring to, I ask for a sample from his itemized list.

Thomas says, “I think the quickest thing I always mention is how much she’s fucked us all over with college. I talk about how she’s forced all of us into thousands of dollars of debt in loan money because she refuses to support us financially. Because she has ridiculous aspirations of all these crazy nice things she needs to own rather than caring about her children doing well in life. That’s a big one for sure, especially since it’s voluntary on her part. I guess for me specifically though, I always say how she claims me as a dependent even though she hasn’t actually financially supported me in like three years. But she’s claimed me as a dependent every
year since then and claims that she doesn’t know how to not do that, even though it’s a very simple thing.”

“I keep trying…” I say, in my best Mom impression.

Thomas rolls his eyes and laughs, “Yeah. Right. I feel once I bring that up, there’s nothing you can say. That, to me, isn’t something that you can defend from anyone’s standpoint, other than saying that she’s a bad mother. Which I guess is what I’m looking for people to agree with so that I can proceed with talking about her in the way that I do without feeling as though I am wrong for doing it.”

“That’s a good point,” I say. Tim goes to the front door and meows, I get up to let him out while asking, “So, how do you think your perception of Mom is different from that of your siblings?”

Thomas inhales sharply, “Well because I know we all have our unique perspectives of Mom, I’m sure they all are different. I’d say mine’s different from Alex’s, definitely.” He laughs as I ask him to elaborate.

“I mean, it aligns with ours in that she’s just the worst. But Alex’s perception of Mom, or at least my understanding of it, seems to take things a lot more to the extreme than the rest of us do. He can do anything as hateful as he likes to Mom at any point because he feels that she’s wronged him so horribly. Which is funny to me because out of all of us, I feel like Mom has done the least to Alex. So, I don’t understand his perspective, but I guess that’s not what this is about. His perspective is that, somehow, he’s been horribly wronged by her and she’s to be taken advantage of at every turn because that’s just the only way to deal with her. And I know at some
point there was a similar mindset among you, Keith, and Jon around the time when she committed fraud and stole thousands of dollars from you so unreasonably.”

Thomas’s words pick up speed, “You all had that same sort of extremist view that she needed to be taken advantage of at every turn because that’s all she was going to do to us anyways and she was just awful. And the only reason to ever talk to her was just to keep up the façade and that she just truly was the worst. But - ” he says, his words slowing, “- I know that’s changed since then whereas for Alex it hasn’t. So, I’d say that’s different because I think generally, we’re all open to Mom at the very least as a nice way for us to all be together in the same place at the same time. Because that was never something I was thinking about or actively appreciating when we were younger and all living under the same roof. Whereas now I really do appreciate it, but that’s less about her as a person and more about just the social role or function that she fills.”

“Mmmhmm,” I say, not wanting to stop his thought process.

“Overall, I’d say we all have our own individual takes on her. But I’d say the unifying theme is that to some degree all of us do sort of take advantage of whatever she’s providing or whatever role she fills more than we seek her out for a motherly role. I don’t think any of us do that really. I think if any of us look to her for guidance it’s just because she’s more experienced. We’re never looking to our mother; we’re looking to the most experienced person that we know best.”

“I can see that,” I say, admiring Thomas’s insightful answers.

“But overall,” he says, “it’s more about what can we get out of her now with the least amount of interaction. But I guess the way my view differs, I don’t know if this is different so
much as we just never talked about it? But I know something that I think about Mom all the time that I never hear us talk about is, it’s sad to think about her? A lot? Just because she is such a sad person now and because when you don’t look at her motivations for things, sometimes she doesn’t seem so bad. If it weren’t for this extreme selfishness and greed that kind of seems to get in the way of all her other positive attributes. But when I think of Mom, it’s usually a very sad thing to think about. Not that it makes me sad it just seems like looking at something pitiful. I have a lot of pity for Mom and I don’t know that I’ve ever heard that from any of my other siblings. But then again it could just be undisussed because, like I’ve mentioned, all we have discussed is what we don’t like about her so I think feeling bad for her is something that was just never on the table.”

“I think you’re right,” I say. For a moment, his answer makes me feel guilty. Not wanting to completely derail the entire interview, I ask the next question. “How do you believe your perception of Mom benefits you?”

“Well,” he begins, “because of the way I behave and talk about her, if I didn’t see her the way I did, I would feel like a bad person for doing it. But more than that, I’d say my perception of Mom allows me to have a better understanding for others when they talk about not just their parents or their mom but just anyone that they feel is wronging them in some way. I feel like I’ve thought so much about our mom and her motivations that my viewpoint of her helps me look at other people’s motivations more closely. I spent so long trying to interpret her actions through a lens that is somehow positive that it’s easier for me to give other people the benefit of the doubt. And I’d say that’s a direct result of my viewpoint of her.”

He trails off. I notice he’s still thinking and refrain from interjecting. A few seconds later he adds, “But it’s also been very protective. If I didn’t view her as someone who is wholly a bad
person then I would probably feel a lot worse about the things she’s done to me. Because if someone’s does something bad to you and they’re a bad person it’s not your fault. So, you don’t feel so horrible, you just feel wronged. But feeling wronged is a lot different and a lot better than feeling like you are the things that she’s saying about you. Or you are the person that she’s making you feel like you are and she’s the one in the wrong. And so, if I didn’t have that perception of her and if I viewed her as my mother, being this person who’s always right, I would just be so upset, all the time. I’d fucking kill myself.”

“That’s pretty freaking insightful,” I say. “To sort of continue that question, would you say that your perception of Mom harms you in any way?”

Thomas takes a drink from his water bottle, “I would say that it’s harmful sometimes. Just because I know it can be very caustic socially to say things like that out of context. I have to always be mindful of who I’m talking to and how much I’ve told them about Mom before I can just say things offhandedly about her. But that’s really a minor inconvenience at most. You could say it’s harmful in that I don’t have this feeling that I was raised by a warm loving parent, in any sense. But I don’t think that you could definitively say that, I’d say that’d be more of a claim. I don’t feel worse off because I don’t know what it would have been like, so I wouldn’t say harmful but I think it leaves me in this place of questioning that things could be better. But not overtly harmful, no. Which is funny because she as a person is, but I don’t think my perception of her has hurt me in any way. Except, maybe sometimes when I was younger I had sort of a longing for a better parent, but I don’t have that anymore. So, no lasting effects that are obvious to me?”

“Hmm…,” I say, “Maybe perception is the wrong word. Maybe just, in general, having been raised by someone like Mom, how do you believe that has negatively affected you?”
“I’m definitely a much more cynical person,” Thomas says immediately, “which I think has its uses. But still, I don’t think is a great thing. I’ve been very disillusioned with a lot of things, most of them from a very early age, which I’m pretty resentful of. I feel like I was sort of robbed of a lot of my childhood, just because a lot of it is so negative. I mean I can’t think of a single overwhelmingly positive memory of my only parent that I was raised by. What does that say about how my childhood was? So, there are definitely a lot of negatives. I guess if we’re not just talking about my perception of her and just how I was raised by her in general? I’d say I would probably be a much happier person if I had been raised by a more caring person. I tend to be distrustful and immediately view others as manipulative even if I’m not certain that they are. That’s just where my mind immediately goes, so I guess that’s another thing that’s been damaged. A lot of things emotionally, I would say, I would be much better off. But I’d say that’s the primary thing, oh, except for my financial wellbeing being crippled as well. So, a lot of real things. There are tangible and intangible consequences both of which are pretty bad.”

Thomas laughs weakly. “Yeah,” he says to the floor.

“All right,” I say, feeling bad about putting a damper on his day. “Last question,” I say, “If you could name one thing that has influenced your perception of Mom the most, what would that be?”

“I would say other people’s moms, especially my friends. That was why I always wanted to be at my friend’s houses when I was growing up. Not even just when I was growing up, the entirety of the time when I was living with Mom, I always wanted to be at someone else’s house where someone else’s parents were. Because no matter who they were, no matter which friend it was, their parents were inevitably nicer than she was. So, I’d say that was very eye-opening to how awful she was. Because nowhere I went, even in more dysfunctional households where their
parents argued or sometimes their parents could be mean, I still never wanted to be anywhere less than I did at my own mother’s. So, yeah I’d say that was definitely the most eye-opening thing.” Thomas nods as he finishes answering.

“Do you have anything else you want to add?” I ask.

“I’d say when you look at it all empirically you get this image of her. That she’s really awful and that’s she’s done all of these awful things and these things are what make her terrible or at least prove that she is. And I’d say that’s accurate,” he laughs and continues, “I don’t think that’s an unfair way to talk about her. I think that it can be sort of dehumanizing to look at someone’s actions though and that ultimately, we don’t know her motivations for doing a lot of the things that she’s done. We didn’t grow up with her experiences and so I’d say that it does feel unfair at times. But I’m not saying that that doesn’t make her a bad person. I’m not defending her actions, I just think that sometimes it’s easy, especially when someone has done so much. Just because we know more about her than pretty much anyone. It’s easy to get this sort of group mentality going about how terrible someone is, when you’re looking at this and this and this and you’re agreeing and everyone’s just agreeing about how awful it was. You get sort of worked up and caught up in it and I think that makes it easy to forget that she is a person and I think on some level everyone deserves to be able to defend themselves.”

His last sentence, like most of his answers, makes me think. “Do you think we’ll ever give her a chance to defend herself?” I ask.

“No. But that’s just because of who she is as a person. Because her defense of herself, I don’t think I could believe even if it were true. Just because I know how emotionally manipulative she is and how she’d say pretty much anything to convince herself that she was a
good parent, so I don’t think there’d be a point in doing it. I’d like to give her the chance to defend herself, I just don’t think it’s possible.”

*Good answer,* I think. As I hear Tim scratching at the door again, I turn the recorder off and get up to let him in. Thomas finds the next *X-Files* episode and hits play.
They feel like dreams, but they’re not.

I’m sitting at the edge of a twin sized bed, flipping through a picture book, and reading out loud. “See here?” I say to my two little brothers, “This is how potato chips were invented.”

I’m herding them into the bathtub and helping them get in. They wriggle and squirm as I soap them up. “Tilt your head back and close your eyes,” I say as I rinse out their hair.

I’m choosing two pairs of red shorts to go with two striped shirts. I tell them, “Wake up guys, let’s get ready for school.”

I’m singing them the lullaby from their *Prince of Egypt* children’s book. Humming, “Hush now, my baby, be still love, don’t cry.”

I’m chasing them around the house, as they run from The Tickle Monster. They scream with laughter as I yell, “I’mgonnagetyou!I’mgonnagetyou!”

I’m packing lunches and making pancakes. I’m tucking in and kissing goodnight.

They feel like dreams, but they’re not.

I’m eight and Thomas is three. I’m eight and Alex is four. I’m nine and he’s four. I’m nine and he’s five. They feel like dreams, but they’re not. They feel like babies, but they’re brothers.
Chapter Ten: Brother #3

“You cut your hair,” I say as Alex gets into the car.

“Yeah, I think Erica cut it too short but it was like five bucks so I can’t really complain,” he shrugs while touching his dark, wavy brown hair.

“Well, it looks good,” I say. “Have you been to that new coffee shop?”

“No, I heard about it though,” he says as I back out of his driveway.

“I went last week and it was really cute, slightly hip but not in a pretentious way, y’know? Wanna go? We could talk there if that’s cool.”

“Yeah, sure. Sounds good to me,” Alex says.

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“Alex?” the barista says as she sets his latte on the counter.

My younger brother gets up from the couch to grab his coffee. He sits down with a sly smile as I hit record on my phone.

“All right Alex, what’s a good mother?”

“That’s difficult,” he says, “I guess a good mother’s compassionate, caring, accepting, understanding, stern but respectful. One who, not necessarily demands but earns or has the constant respect of her children because she’s their life force, their protector, their provider. Societally speaking, mothers have always been the source of warmth and all that good stuff.”

“Right,” I say, immediately remembering how quickly Alex speaks. “So, on the other side, what’s a bad mother?”
Alex squints his eyes and laughs, “Umm…Neglectful. Really not around, I guess? Unconcerned, probably one who loves herself more than she loves her children.” He looks at me and starts to laugh again.

“Anything else?” I prompt.

He smiles and says, “I guess selfish. Yeah, a bad mother would be selfish, I’d say. It all comes from them not fully accepting the responsibility of the life that they brought into this world, since no one ever asks to be born. They did choose to keep the child and so to do that is selfish, I think. Because you have a little carbon copy of you but you’re not gonna take care of it fully.”

“Ok,” I say. As I imagine carbon copies of Mom, I ask, “If you had to sum up Mom in one word or phrase, what would you say?”

Alex laughs again as he answers, “The first one that came to mind was selfish. But I guess Mom is…,” he pauses to think, “…powerful but dangerous because not many people cross her and make it out well…She’s also confusing, I’d say, and bougie?” he adds.

Laughing, I take a drink of my coffee and look at the next question, “What is one of the happiest memories you have of Mom?”

“Jeez, that’s a tough one,” he mumbles. Looking into his drink he jokes, “I need some stronger coffee.” Several moments pass as Alex thinks.

Eventually, I laugh and sarcastically ask, “Is it because you’re having to figure out which one’s the happiest?”
Alex looks up from his mug and laughs, “I mean I guess it’s one of those…umm…the happiest…,” he says, drawing out the last word.

Sensing he’s stuck, I expand the question, “Or, what’s a particularly warm memory you have of Mom or a good conversation? It doesn’t have to be something that produces your own Patronus or anything.”

Alex laughs at the reference, “When we were all younger, Mom showed her love most through purchasing us things or spending money. But I think one of the times, and it’s not a happy memory but, there’s one I remember when Mammaw was in the hospital. It was Mom’s birthday and Mom was pretty drunk. I remember Mom would hide airplane bottles in Mammaw’s shower. But she went to see Mammaw and Mom was talking about how, ‘Isn’t it funny how “x” amount of years ago, we were in the hospital together?’ And Mom was like, ‘At least we’re here together now and yada yada.’ And Mom was genuinely hurt. I think it was good to see her being more human. It was Mom’s birthday and she was like, ‘We spent the whole day together, so many years ago.’ Y’know, when she was born. And it was nice to see that side of Mom.”

“You got to see mom be more vulnerable? Or try to make someone else’s situation better, so it made it seem like she wasn’t so self-centered?” I ask.

Nodding, Alex explains, “Yeah, everything was about her mom then. She obviously loved her mom, but her view of family was always very negative. So, y’know…,” Alex trails off, mentioning Mammaw’s eventual passing.

“Gotcha,” I say, “All right, so now can you give me one of your unhappiest memories you have of Mom?”
Under his breath, Alex says, “There’s so many.”

We lapse into another extended silence. Not wishing to interfere with his thoughts, I listen to the two men next to us talk shop.

Alex brings my attention back as he clears his throat, “I’m thinking about all the different fights and how crazy she was all the time. And all the times she told us she didn't love us and to go live with our fathers. But, I think what I’m gonna go with is the time when we were in the car. Mom started off asking us if we thought she was a terrible mother and I was like, ‘Well, you're not terrible. You could always be worse.’ Which was the letter I wrote on her behalf for the judge which was, ‘She's not that great. She's pretty crazy but could've done us a lot worse.’ But then she followed that up with talking about the prosecution against her and how she was going to kill herself if she was going to be incarcerated. And at that point I was really like, ‘So, you did something wrong and because you're going to have to pay for it, you’re going to kill yourself and abandon the rest of your family? You know, us.’ At that point, I saw her as completely selfish. Like, you really aren’t capable of caring about anybody other than yourself right now so you’ve just answered your own question. Now ask us again if you think you're a terrible mother.”

Alex laughs as I wonder which prosecution he’s referring to. He continues, “Because that's just, wow. Growing up, you become numb to all the insults and all that kind of stuff, but when she said that, I was just like, ‘Ok, well cool. Good to know that we don't matter.’” Alex lets out a short laugh.

“We had an inkling but thanks for confirming!” I say, winking at an imaginary Mom.

Alex laughs as I ask the next question, “How has your relationship with Mom changed over the years?”
“I guess you hold your parents in such a light for so long as a child until eventually you just get numb to it. For a while we were all hurt, I mean remember how cruel she was at times? The randomness? How undeserving? But the more I got older, the more I came to understand her and it became more of a pity. I think she’s been humbled? Maybe? I think so much finally broke her down because she’s not used to being dependent and you know, now she is,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding my head, “I think for a long time she was used to being emotionally dependent on someone but not financially, so there was this sort of ‘I still control the pocketbook but I need you’ thing going on.”

“Well,” Alex says, “And I always told her as a kid, ‘There’s a reason why no one’s talking to you right now and if you keep it up, you will die alone.’ But I was always obsessed with psychology so I guess early on I began to understand her more? Watching her and how she could control the whole room and be anybody, from conversation to conversation. But it didn’t seem like she was doing it because she needed to, it was almost like it was second nature or something, y’know? It wasn’t diabolical, really, but more about power. She liked power. And I think seeing her lose it all, was kind of cool. But I guess now it’s more like an understanding? But, I still don’t trust her.”

“So,” I say, trying to understand, “that’s been one thing that hasn’t really changed?”

“I mean, yeah,” he says, “Nothing she could do would ever surprise me. That’s something Aunt Kay even said once. She said, ‘I don’t know why your mom stays away from us because she acts like anything she could ever do would surprise any of us. But she’s our family, we accept her. We can’t change her and we love her.’” Alex crosses his arms and nods.

I laugh at the thought and say, “Wise words from an unexpected source.”
Alex uncrosses his arms and gestures in agreement. “Right, right?” he says, “from the one person who is most like Mom.” He laughs, “But I definitely understand her more and I respect her more now because I think she understands a bit more now.”

I tilt my head and ask, “What leads you to believe that?”

"I mean,” Alex says, squinting his eyes, “I don’t know how long it will last, watch her get on her feet and it will change. But she really gets how alone she is. And I think she’s trying to keep the peace rather than egg it on between all of us. And she makes efforts, I think more? Maybe? Where we try and do stuff or talk and whatnot. But I’m more indifferent to her behaviors now so that’s probably why. Maybe respect was the wrong word. I mean, she’s got lots of talents. She’s wicked smart. But I don’t think she respects herself and I think she’s scared and humbled. And I think it’s easier to see now. I mean, understanding is a gateway to respect. You don’t have to actually agree with the person but you can respect their decisions and I think she’s doing what she can, for now,” Alex shrugs his shoulders, then quickly adds, “I mean, she’s still insane.”

I drink the last sip of coffee and set the cup down, Is understanding a gateway to respect? Moving to the next question, I say, “Hmm...ok. How do you think your communication with Mom has changed over the years?”

Alex’s eyes scan the room as he says, “I was more direct, more open, more, ‘You’re gonna die alone. You better be careful.’ Or when she would start flipping out about something like when I organized all the bowls and showed everyone how to keep it organized, and then she’s flipping out because it’s dirty. I was like, ‘Well, you all aren’t keeping it clean. That’s not my responsibility if you’re not gonna be a part of it.’”
He reminds me of the never-ending challenge of keeping the overflowing pantry, kitchen, and cabinets clean and organized. I remember entire days spent arranging shelves of soup, vegetables, grains, and breakfast foods all in vain. And I can vividly see her grab a lidless container from the cabinet, curse in frustration then demand the nearest person ‘clean out that fucking cabinet.’

Alex finishes answering, “I guess I talked to her less emotionally? I guess? Before, when she would go off on something, I would shut down but, I guess now it’s more apathetic? It’s not indifferent or not caring, it’s just like, ‘Ok.’”

“Would you consider it close? Or distant?” I ask.

Alex shrugs his shoulders, “A little both. I think it’s a close conversation but it’s never an emotional one, at least not for me.”

I try to expand on my question, “Do you ever get into really personal conversations? Do you ever feel like you can open up to her?”

“Well no,” he laughs, “I mean not fully, because I can’t trust her. It’s more like these are facts I know, it’s not like, ‘I feel this.’”

“Oh,” I say, “So, more like discussions?”

“Yes.”

“Got it, makes sense,” I say.

Alex explains further, “But it’s very casual, it’s more small talk these days. Less small talk back then. But I think it’s almost shifted. I think she sees us more as equals? She doesn’t
have controlling factors over much of us anymore, I think she likes to keep a little bit. She likes to help out but I think it’s more about being useful rather than controlling."

“You're probably right,” I say, thinking Jon or Thomas had mentioned something similar. “Alrighty,” I say, “If you had to choose one mediated image of a mother as being most like our mom, what’s the first one that comes to mind?”

Alex throws his head back and laughs, “Probably cause it’s the most fresh in my mind is the mother from Arrested Development.” I laugh as I picture the boozy character.

Alex describes her further, “She tells her kids that she had to drink all the vodka or else it would go bad. And she’s like, ‘I love all my children equally, except Jobe.’ She’s a more animated version, obviously.”

“Is she?” I joke.

Alex laughs again, “I also think about the mother from Weeds,” he says. “She snaps and she’s very dominating and she’ll do anything for her kids, but at the same time she will set them straight. Plus, she’s terrified of being alone. She’s always hopping from guy to guy and every kid she has is from a different father.”

“Right, right,” I say, seeing the similarities.

“Or maybe Celia Hodes!” He says, clearly having fun with the question. “If you could combine those two. Because Nancy Botwin’s a lot more caring and she actually misses her husband, or her original husband, at least. But after, she uses men as stepping stools and then throws them away when they’re not useful.”
“I always thought,” I say, “especially where Celia was concerned, that one of the main differences between Celia and Nancy were their kids? The kids treated their mothers differently and it seemed like there was a lack of respect on Celia’s daughters end, while I think Nancy's kid respected her a little more.”

“But I haven't seen the entire show, so maybe that changes,” I add.

Alex quickly responds, “Well Silas really didn’t. Or he didn't really respect her but he wanted desperately for her to respect him and so he tries to assume the male leadership type thing. To try and show that he cares, while his mother's just trying to protect him and be the mom still. I think another big difference between the two moms is that Celia is constantly demeaning. She’s very insulting.”

“That's a good way to put it,” I say. “It was kinda how she showed that she was the mom. It’s like I have the authority, I can say this to you because I’m your mother,” I put air quotes around my sentences as Alex nods.

“Yeah,” he adds, “and she’s always drinking.”

“And she hates her husband,” I add.

“Definitely.” Alex laughs, “And there was a brief period where she was a lesbian so…I think Celia almost nails it.”

“She's more like Mom?” I ask, laughing with him.

“Yeah, definitely,” he says. “There were times with Mom where she was the only person that could do that kind of stuff to us. God forbid anybody else. She was oddly protective and damaging. But I think Celia’s funny. Reminds me of Mom looking over her appletini one time
telling me, ‘You know you’re the reason I drink.’ I was in middle school and I remember, I just laughed.”

“God, her appletini phase!” I say, remembering her brief obsession. “Good times, good times,” I mumble, “Ok, so how did having siblings influence your perception of Mom?”

Alex briefly considers the question, “Well, I think being a younger one was good because I feel I had an advantage. I got to watch you all interact with her at different stages and that’s why sometimes I had the upper hand with her. I was always more stubborn and I would get her to breakdown and apologize or I would just leave with no consequence. It was kind of a double-sided thing and I got to see that. But it also gave me tools for defense. Watching you all interact and seeing the blackmail but also seeing the perks. You know getting to weigh the options, seeing the controlling side, seeing the perks. There were a lot of perks.”

“The perks of…what?” I ask.

“Just her money,” he says, “You guys always did the whole ‘grand and big’ thing with the limo rentals and the nice cars. Granted, you were all paying lots of money for them which was the downside. There was the ‘this is the life you can have but it’s gonna cost you’ part of it and I think that shaped my interactions. I made sure to never give her a controlling factor. Y’know, I paid for my car myself and it gave me a sense of independence and it helped me be stronger.”

“Ahh,” I nod, “Anything else?”

“There was also more of us than there were of her,” he says. “But, we never really bounded together. We’ve never actually unified for a common goal for anything. Which is probably for the best because then we could do anything. But that’s what Aunt Jan always talked
about she was like, ‘I don’t know why you all don’t see each other.’ Sometimes I wonder if Mom maybe subconsciously or consciously made sure there was a constant divider. But I think there was also that support system sometimes."

I feel a tinge of guilt at his answer. *I guess we don't make as much of an effort as we could*, I think. I look down at my lap as Alex continues.

“There were the times though, when it was also terrible because Jon and Keith would say, ‘Mom gave us permission to beat you because you’re a little shit.’ Who knows if that’s the truth or not but they said it so it happened!” Alex throws his hands in the air and laughs. “I can remember one of the earliest times I got grounded was for defending myself and it was because I got the first star in Mario Party!”

Alex rolls his eyes and launches into the story. “The game had just started and Jon and Keith were like ‘Don’t get that star, we’re gonna kick your ass.’ We were on the Nintendo 64 and I got the star. I was thinking, ‘Well, it’s not fair for me to not get it,’ so I did and they beat me up for it. I remember, I took one of my toys and I hit Jon in the eye with it while they were pummeling me and Mom grounded me!”

Alex shakes his head, as his voice returns to normal, “So, there was also that. Since I was younger I was never heard as often and was constantly pushed back. What I said didn’t matter because there was the majority of whoever saying something else so I was like, ‘Ok.’ So, I think that helped me keep my distance, which turned out being probably one of the best things. It made me a stronger person, so that’s good. There were the times, when you were writing letters on Keith’s behalf and that was good. I think you three benefitted more from the support group.’

Alex’s last statement confuses me, ‘Who? Me, Jon, and Keith?’ I ask.
“Yeah,” he says.

_**Ohhh, he must be talking about when I would write letters to Mom asking her not to send Keith away.**_ I think, as Alex goes on, “but in the younger days, you kind of were the mediator in all of it. I guess we all benefitted the most from you,” Alex laughs at that and smiles. “None of us are really close with any of the others. Ultimately, I think anyone of us trying to do it on our own would’ve killed her. Because at that point it would’ve been about survival.”

We laugh as I say, “So, we were buffers as well.”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding his head.

I look down at my questions and ask the next one, “So, how did other people’s moms influence your perception?”

“I guess...,” he pauses, “...they helped reinforce that she wasn’t the most traditional in her ways, with you know my friend Jamie’s parents being married and still together. Like it was great,” he says tilting his head down, “and this has nothing to do with it, but for conversation’s sake, they were both engaged to somebody else, met each other on a train, and a week later they’re engaged to each other.”

“Wow,” my eyes widen.

“Right?” He smiles, “That’s fairytale stuff, and they're still together, still going strong.”

“It’s someone’s fairytale, while it’s two other people’s nightmare,” I smirk.

Alex laughs and says, “Maybe they found happiness, you know?” He shrugs, “Which was good because Jamie was a very good friend of mine. And Jamie’s mom was always saying, ‘I don’t want Alex talking negatively about his mother while he’s here because it’s rude to
disrespect his mother.’ But Jamie would be like, ‘Mom you don’t understand, she’s cray-cray.’ And her mom'd be like, ‘But still, it just upsets me because you know I’m a mother.’ And I’d just laugh.”

“There’s different kinds of mothers,” I say

“Right?” Alex laughs, “And then there’s Jan, you know Mom’s sister. Seeing her as completely accepting and understanding and offering wisdom from her own mistakes and knowledge of all this stuff you need to know about life like colleges, the world, politics, art, music, film. Seeing, you know, as soon as you got to one end of the spectrum like, ‘they show their love through love,’ they also lost out on I guess other things. We were very materialistic, growing up. Whereas, they might have a great mom, we had better financial support?”

Alex tilts his head, “Which I guess is also important but also an understanding of what not to do? I think that’s something that you said once was, ‘Showing someone how to not be a good parent is just as good as showing them how to be a good parent.’ Showing someone what not to do is almost the same as showing them what to do.”

_Do I still think that’s true?_ I wonder as Alex continues, “Mom was also very hardworking and none of the other mothers that I saw around were as persistent or were as powerful as Mom was. Mom had a lot of power, just in her personality, her money, her job, her demeanor, and her appearance. You know beauty is power, the way a gun is power. But you could tell that those other moms weren’t dangerous. Our mom’s dangerous, she kills animals.”

I shake my head, “God, so true.”
“But,” Alex says, “it helped gain perspective. She’s not the greatest, she’s not the most compassionate but she’s also doing other things for us and she could be a lot worse. I think it helped me see the light more. At the end of the day she’s still here.”

*Hey! Jon said something like that!* I think as I ask the next question, “When Mom would come up in conversation with friends either now or then, how did you describe her?”

“Crazy,” Alex says immediately, “Or a sociopath.”

“Me! Too!” I exclaim. I make eye contact with the table across from us and quickly look away, “So, do you still describe her that way?”

“I don’t know,” Alex says simply, “She’s obviously capable of emotion for something else, like the memory with Mammaw. I mean, she got in a lot of arguments with family over her care because at that point in time she really did know best. But now she’s got all the sociopathic behaviors.” Alex counts off on his fingers, “She doesn’t have much concern for human life. She values relationships with unconditionally loving animals that she has complete control over and is also their life source. She’s manipulative and she’s really good at feigning emotion. Which are all characteristics of a sociopath.”

He drops his hand and shrugs, “It’s hard to tell sometimes though because a lot of it comes from fear. When she’s upset about something or she’s hurt it’s usually mostly about herself. I wouldn’t say she’s a true sociopath? Because I think we all have very sociopathic behaviors. But I don’t know, I still describe her as crazy. I’m like, ‘That’s my mom, can’t really change her.’ I think now I just accept it more. And before I was trying to change it, now it’s more, ‘Whatever.’”
Alex’s last statement resonates with me. “Yeah,” I agree, “before, I would say crazy because there was a certain amount of shock value. Whereas now it’s more like a point of fact? There’s really no shock there anymore.”

“Yeah,” Alex says as he rolls the coffee mug in his hand, “We would talk about how crazy she was and people were like, ‘Uh huh.’ I was always like, ‘The things I would/could tell you would scare you.’ There are some terrifying memories like with Keith sitting outside waiting to be taken away. And just the angry, hateful things she would say but I think now it’s just like, ‘She’s crazy’ but…” he trails off.

“It’s almost like I don’t really have to prove it? To people anymore? You know? Like, I don't get out the laundry list of things as often,” I say, finishing his sentence.

“Right,” he says, “it’s like, ‘We’re fine now I guess. It’s complicated’ he says with a smile.

“Preach,” I laugh, “Ok, how do you think your perception of Mom is different from that of your siblings?” I ask.

“I think that I gained perspective from watching you all. I remember Keith saying to me once whenever I moved out of the house - which I never did out of anger. I told Mom, ‘I’m not mad at you, I can’t trust you and right now I just need to spend some time on my own. I’m tired of being around all of this all the time. I can’t live like that, you’re crazy,’” Alex says as he points to an imaginary Mom.

“And she was like, ‘I’m sorry.’ And I said,” Alex puts his palms in the air, “‘I’m not the child you need to apologize for, I had a great childhood, all things considered. The child you need to truly apologize to is Keith because he’s the one constantly fighting for your affection and
you have always deprived him of it.’ And it was really funny at the time because Thomas was in a relationship with a guy. And she said to me, ‘You know a lot of guys - you know gay men - they start blaming their mother for things.’ And I just started laughing at her. I was like, ‘You don’t get it. I’m not mad. You’re just crazy. I just watched you steal the identity of my siblings for boobs and you justified it by saying that their credit scores would go up.’ Not the point. It’s not the point,” Alex laughs and shakes his head, “you’re not justifying it. What you did was wrong. I mean granted, you should have asked them. Cause they would’ve said no!” he says, “Like you don’t need tits for my 16th birthday.”

I laugh at Alex’s expression as he continues, “But going back to Keith, I remember him saying ‘Why can’t you just play the game? Why can’t you just play the game, Alex? It’s not that hard.’ My thing is, I don’t understand why a relationship, especially one with our family, should be a game to play. I’m not going to pretend to be anything, or to like anything, or to do anything to make any of you all happy because I don’t have to. You all are stuck with me, you’re gonna have to deal with it or not. It’s not my concern. Imma do me, see ya at Christmas.”

“You don’t think that you play a game with Mom?” I ask. “You think that everyone else does and you don’t? Or that Keith does and you don’t?”

Alex considers my question and explains, “Well, I don’t know if that’s the truth anymore. It was just something he had said at one point and I was like, ‘That’s not something I’m ok with. I’m not gonna do it anymore, I’m tired of it.’ I’m tired of playing the game, I’m tired of biting my tongue when Mom says things or when she calls my friends whores for no reason or makes fun of something I like and I’m over it. You know and I’m separating myself. I’m truly taking away all of the power and gaining my independence.”
Curious, I ask, “So, how do you think each of us views Mom?”

Alex laughs and takes a deep breath, “I can’t exactly speak for any of you all. But I think, especially with Thomas, maybe there’s more of an emotional attachment? I’ve always felt that Keith loved Mom the most or craved her love the most because he was the one who didn’t have it. He kind of got the shit end of the stick constantly. So, I think that he’s the most hurt by her. I think he’s still hurt by her. I think…there’s something there. He’s got mom issues. Which makes sense with the borderline bigorexia type thing. He’s always been obsessed with his body and that’s a big sign, that’s borderline eating disorder. So, there’s some kind of psychological trauma. I think Keith was the most traumatized and for good reason.”

“I think Jon,” Alex continues, “maybe views Mom more as his mom, plain and simple. I think Jon genuinely loves her. I think he cares about her now. Because he does, he makes good efforts. And he got his attitude out early. He’s always been the firstborn, he’s always very combative and a smart ass. But I think Jon still has a very sentimental connection with her. I mean because Jon’s very independent. He’s got this degree. He’s been making good money. He doesn’t need her for anything anymore and I think he sees her in a very classic mother-son relationship.”

Alex points at me, “You, I think, are similar to Mom in a lot of ways and you’re very different in a lot of ways. You’re a lot more compassionate, clearly, but I think you view Mom as…something good. I’ve heard you say a lot about how we wouldn’t have turned out the way we did. We’re all very interesting individuals and we’re all wicked smart and we’ve got great genes, stuff like that. But there are differences and you’re similar- you’re the only daughter and you always kind of had that place in the family. So, any of the times you all did have spats it was really serious because you saw the negativity with her happen a lot more than it was directly
aimed at you. So, I think those times hurt the most but at the same time you were the first to make amends or to fix something when you all were fighting. You’d rationalize it as, ‘This is stupid. If I can’t see my brothers because I’m mad at Mom, we’ll get over it.’ And I think you have a lot of understanding because you’re a lot more intuitive than Jon is. Keith’s really intuitive, too. Jon’s smart, he’s analytical but I don’t think he’s as intuitive. I think you have one of the most widespread perspectives maybe? Because well, one you’re insane because you’re a Gemini, you’re two people.” I laugh as he says, “But I think you see her for what she is and you accept it and I’d say you’re the most to shrug at it.”

“Thomas,” Alex says as he looks up at the ceiling. “The youngest, the baby. I think he fears her the most. He’s still having to lie to her about his plans for New Year’s. He’s the baby and I think he holds on to that maybe subconsciously. I think he feels that he doesn’t want to disappoint her or sadden her, so he walks the most on eggshells around her. But I think as he’s gotten older, he’s gotten more of a sarcastic key with her. He sticks up more for himself now but I think some part of him is afraid of either upsetting her or her upsetting him. I don’t know that they’ve ever truly gotten in a really big fight. I know when the whole thing with his phone and the whole Jason thing happened, Mom told him that the thing she was most upset about was him lying to her. She was like, ‘I don’t know why you wouldn’t think I would be ok. You’re still my son.’ So, I think they’ve always had a very emotionally close relationship without ever talking about it. They’ve always just had that bond because he was the youngest. He was the little cuddler and I think he holds onto that but also resents her. I think that’s why he stays at arms-length.”

“Interesting,” I say. Alex laughs at my face as I ask the next question, “How do you think your perception of Mom benefits you?”
“I feel I’ve always had a bit of an upper-hand when it came to Mom because I’m very stubborn and I know her tricks. I know her tactics and seeing how she does things has always aided me. I knew what to expect and it was a good tool. It was a good defense mechanism, like a game of chess, if I know how you’re going to react no matter what then it might hurt for a minute but at the same time it’s not gonna matter. Now it’s almost indifference because I know that she can’t hurt me. She can’t take anything away from me in my life. She can’t do anything wrong like when she used to call my work places. I always made sure that all my employers knew that she was insane. I think when you know what’s gonna happen, you’re more prepared. I’ve always been prepared to some extent to handle when it would get bad. But on the positives, I think it helps me because I know that just a small conversation will make her feel a little less lonely.”

_Aww, that’s nice_, I think, and genuinely mean it.

“_I think it’s aided me now,_” Alex says as he points to his phone, _“I talk about it now with my friends. The power roles have switched and Mom needs a relationship with me whereas I don’t need a relationship with her.”_

“_I think most of us feel that way, y’know?_” I say, then ask, _“How would say that your perception of Mom has hurt you?”_

“_I don’t know that it necessarily has?_” Alex says. I raise my eyebrows and he explains, _“I know stubbornness can be bad and you don’t want to be too arrogant, but I don’t necessarily know that it’s hurt me. I think it’s only led to benefit me in personal ways, psychological ways. It did most to protect me more than anything.”_
“Hmm...,” I say as Alex quickly shrugs his shoulders. Sensing that he might be tired of answering questions, I see that we’re at the last question, “What would you say has influenced your perception of Mom the most?”

“I’d say definitely you three, older siblings. I wasn’t living it then, I got to watch it. And there’s not just one child, there’s three, so each one’s going through something different and each one’s handling things differently. And as each one steps into the other one’s shoes, you get to see it all over again. It’s like watching a preview of a movie over and over again. Or finding the soundtrack, reading the storyline, looking up the Wikipedia and then by the time you actually get to it, you know everything. You’re more prepared. You’ve studied for a test the best way you ever could and I think that probably was the most beneficial thing for me.”

I smile and admire Alex’s comparisons. He adds to his answer, “That, and I’d say talking with her elders and her peers. Conversations that I had with Aunt Kay and Jan helped me gain more understanding of her past. That was good because with you all, you see what she’s doing now and how she’s reacting as a mother, whereas from them you know they’re looking at her through a different film. Aunt Kay saw her as almost a daughter and Jan saw her as a sister. And it was interesting to see that. It was like her origin story.”

“Good answer,” I say, “looks like you pass.” Alex laughs as I ask, “Anything else you’d like to add?”

“I don’t know, I think we’ve already discussed everything. All in all, it could’ve been worse. She’s not the best of people, by no means nice, but I think the best thing about her is us. Maybe we’re her redeeming quality?”
My phone buzzes.

“Remember Mom making us put Sassy in the garage so she could poison our neighbor’s dogs? Wasn’t it because they kept knocking our trash cans over?” Keith asks.

“Ohhh shit!” Jon responds, “I think her rationale was that they barked at us.”

“I thought it was because they were eating Sassy’s food,” I say.

“Pretty sure it was because they were knocking over the trash cans, guess the reason doesn’t really matter, they fucking died either way,” Keith texts back.

“Yeah, didn’t she smother some steaks with antifreeze and leave them outside for those poor dogs to find?” I ask.

Keith’s text pops us as mine is sent, “I remember how sad David was on the bus, talking about how his dogs were sick as fuck and we were like ‘Hmm…that’s weird.’ Then they died.”

“Definitely ranks as one of her greatest hits,” Jon says.

“It was interesting to me that no one said or did anything to try and stop her. I guess we just all knew there was no reason but, sheesh,” Keith replies.

“Yeah, I only recall feeling awkward about David’s questions. As far as Mom was concerned, I think we were just happy she wasn’t poisoning us. Plus, we were pretty young,” I say.

As I wait for a response, I open my computer and scroll through these pages. My words and conversations fly off the page and a familiar feeling pops up. I know how this makes her
look; I know how this makes her sound; I know this could hurt her. It’s not my intention. It’s not anyone’s intention, but it’s there nonetheless.

Is this wrong? I think. Words and phrases flash through my mind as I run my hands through my hair. Am I “fostering matrophobic sentiment” (Kinser, 2008, p. 34)? Is that all this is about? Or is this just a revenge text (Adams et al., 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016)? Am I deliberately painting her as the “terrible mother” (Gibson, 1988), the “Monster Mom” (Hanson, 2000; Dorgan, 2014), or the “Machiavelian manipulator” (King, 2015)? Am I just trying to convince the reader she’s a Bad Mom? I’m not, am I?

I search my mind for the right answer to those questions. I come up short. My gut instinct says “no,” but I can’t quite un-see this image I’ve created of her. I feel guilty and small, in front of an ethics tribunal, having nothing to say to their questions.

“Does your mother know you’re writing this?” they ask.

“No,” I admit.

“Are we correct in assuming, then, that your mother was not interviewed during this project?” asks the committee.

“Yes, you’re correct,” I say, as I hypothetically shrink to half my size.

Hmmm’s all around, as I continue getting smaller.

“And, Ms. Claxton, have you considered the damage your writing may cause? In regards to your mother?” they ask, pointing to my project as evidence.

“Well-,” I chirp.
“And,” they interject, “are you aware of any benefits your writing might have, with specific regard to your mother?”

I open my mouth and nothing comes out. I try it again, only to manage a meager, “I…I wanted to g-get our s-s-stories, to open up c-conversa-”

A stiff hand shoots up, stopping me, “We’re asking about your mother, Ms. Claxton, please refrain from misdirecting the jury. If you cannot provide sufficient evidence for the committee, we will have no choice but to deny your project as failing to meet the ethical guidelines for the research of relationships.”

I desperately want to convince myself I mean no harm. I read and re-read the literature to bolster my conviction. But, it seems the questions of ethics can’t be read or rationalized away. If anything, the more I read, the more convicted my ambivalence becomes. I tell myself it’s not her story, it’s ours; but she is obviously implicated in our telling (not to mention, easily identifiable). I tell myself I’m dwelling “in the flux of lived experience” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433) but I’m afraid I’ve dwelled insensitively. I hope for evocation and connection, yet I know my words could alienate and hurt her. I realize, rather unsurprisingly, that writing about a complex relationship stirs up complex, messy conundrums.

While my IRB (Institutional Review Board) might not have classified my project as human subjects research, it still presents several ethical dilemmas involving personal relationships (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I’m caught between balancing what “I owe readers and academic colleagues in terms of telling a ‘true’ story, and what I owe [my brothers and my mother] in terms of loyalty, friendship, and confidentiality” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 141). On the one hand, I have a story filled with vivid details that I feel deserve telling, on the other hand I
have a living, breathing mother who would be devastated by those very details and what they insinuate. I’m very much afraid of furthering a stereotype yet my fear doesn’t change the stories, nor would I feel right in toning them down to minimize potential harm (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I think to myself, my brothers and I would never tell if we knew she was reading. And it’s true. I say, I’m not against her eventually reading it and knowing the stories we carry; but we’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Rather our telling was the point, not her knowing.

It isn’t easy, though. I have continually vacillated between guilt and acceptance throughout the writing and research process. I want to “resolve these ethical issues” and “be able to live with myself and my own ethical choices” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 149). Yet, perhaps it’s fitting I feel constantly torn, as the ethical dilemmas I face are but a reflection of my relationship with her. This realization allows me to accept the messy and difficult reality of telling as necessarily befitting a relationship as complicated as ours.

I wish to minimize hurt while telling an important story, a seemingly unresolvable ethical dilemma (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I instead resolve myself “to reproduce what happened in ways that preserve the reality I’m seeking to depict for the reader” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 152). I can live with the potential ramifications of my work, yet I don’t pretend the matter is ever truly settled. I accept that “one is never finished making ethical decisions as long as one is interacting with or writing about others” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 150). I also know I can’t know all the ways my words will impact others or myself (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I realize it’s not supposed to be simple. Stories never are.

I was recently asked to consider if I had fully articulated the ethical dilemmas inherent in my project. The question also asked about my ethical treatment of the storytellers and the story subjects. So, I went back to the literature and read more articles discussing the complexities of
relational ethics (Alcoff, 1992; Ellis, 2007; Adams, 2008). They, however, told me nothing new. During my research and writing process, I came to terms with the lack of “definitive rules or universal principles” in writing ethically about intimate others (Ellis, 2007, p. 5). I simultaneously understood that the lack of hard guidelines did not absolve me of the personal responsibility I take on in producing this text. Although I consider it an obviously unsettled subject matter, the fact remains that this text will be fixed once it is submitted (Adams, 2008). In releasing these words, I am allowing my brothers, my mother, and myself to be confined in a small way. The text only shows so much yet can be taken in a wide range of directions that neither I nor my brothers have any control over. I know this. I accept the uncomfortable nature of sharing lived experiences and I do not wish to alleviate the discomfort whatsoever.

I do wonder, though, who exactly am I providing a deep articulation of my ethical dilemmas to? If I have come to terms (as much as one can reasonably come to terms) with my relational ethics decisions, is the articulation really for me or is it for my readers? I can’t help but think that this is the section where I alleviate your (the readers) discomfort. If I talk enough about ethics and show enough personal anxiety or distress over the possible ramifications of my work, it seems I can relieve my readers (at least somewhat) from the burden of uneasiness. That, however, is not my goal. If anything, I want my readers to feel uncomfortable, to be unsure about their feelings towards the stories and the characters, and to want me to explain the feelings away. Only then, are we all connecting on some level and only then are we getting at the true messiness, complexity, and irresolvable conundrums of lived experiences.
Chapter Twelve: Brother #4

Every time I hug him, I feel smaller and he feels bigger. Yet, I’m wary of interviewing my big brother, Keith; I’m scared that I’ll hurt him.

He re-arranges a table for me to set my phone on and sits down in his office chair. I smile at him and begin.

“What’s a good mother?”

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I hug him goodbye and go out to my car. I let out a deep, shaky breath and go home.

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Several weeks go by before I read over our transcription. “It makes me so sad,” Thomas hears me say.

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“Probably Neil’s mom,” he says, referring to his friend. “Just how she is. She’s always treated me better than Mom ever treated me. She’s told me before how capable she thinks I am, how smart I am, and all that. The other day we were talking, and Neil’s been going through some stuff with his girlfriend, and she said that she talked to Neil and she told him that she didn’t even wanna know specifics about it. That she knew he was gonna be fine cause he had me. She just really makes me feel valued and treats me how I feel a mother should treat a son.”

Keith nods at his words, “She calls me her son and I feel that from her. I feel that she really does care about my wellbeing and thinks about me and wants the best for me. I feel that’s an important thing, being attentive. She’s just a very caring and generous person. She’s always made me feel like family. She’s just such a warm person and there’s never been a time when I
thought to myself, ‘God, what a bitch.’ She’s never bitchy, she’s just loving. She’s just a good person.”

I’m not surprised at Keith’s lengthy reply, rather I enjoy the time spent listening. I give him a chance to add anything further, then move on to the next question, “What’s a bad mother?”

“It would have to be the opposite of that. Basically, inattentive. I mean, Mom’s always been pretty self-absorbed. I always felt that she put her relationship before her kids. And I always felt like that wasn’t something a good mother would do. I mean, how many times has Mom been married?”

_Eight, I think, if you count our dad twice._

Eric continues, “You’d think at some point she would’ve been like, ‘Well these kids are the constants, I should look after them.’ I know that she did financially, and I feel maybe in a lot of ways that’s what Mom sees as being a good mother. I feel that she thinks because she didn’t walk out on us, like she says our dad did, that makes her a good mom. I mean hell she threw that in my face a few times. I’m sure you’ve probably heard it. Y’know ‘at least she stuck around’ but I don’t really think that’s enough. Plus, Mom wasn’t ever really there that much. It’s just never seemed like Mom has really wanted much to do with me. We’ve never really had much of a relationship. It really wasn’t until I started dating Kelly that me and Mom even started to establish a relationship. I just always felt Mom was really controlling, she was manipulative, and money hungry. Even now, the only reason I hear from her is because insurance is due or something like that.”

I’m not surprised at the direction Keith’s answer take. I nod and allow him to keep going with his answer.
“But, I feel, to an extent, maybe she’s calming down more in her old age. Maybe the trial humbled her a little bit. She’s much more approachable now as a person. I think that definitely helped to establish a relationship but, growing up I don’t know. Mom sat there and fucking told me she hated me in the living room at the Rosehaven house. It all stemmed from a conversation I was having on the phone, the night before with Mara. I was really upset and I was telling her, ‘I just feel like my mom just fucking hates me. I don’t get it.’ Then she just sat there in the living room like, ‘Oh you wanna cry on the phone? Saying I hate you? I do fucking hate you.’ Yeah and it’s like, ‘Well...ok.’ I guess that clears that up!”

He laughs and continues, “So, on the one hand I’ve always had a big heart so even now it bothers me to think that Mom could read this stuff and feel bad. But I don’t even know if she would feel bad. And at the same time, it’s the truth. I didn’t make her say some of the stuff that she said to me. I can remember after I moved out, Mom called me one day and I was sitting outside and this was one of those things, like her telling me she hates me, that I’ll just never forget. It was such a defining moment in our relationship. She would call me and that feeling of like ‘Ah goddamnit, Mom’s calling. The fun’s about to be ruined.’ It just dawned on me in that moment, ‘I don’t have to answer the phone. I live by myself. I pay my own cell phone bill. I pay my car bill. I depend on her for nothing. I don’t have to talk to her if I don’t want to.’”

Keith shrugs, “And I didn’t answer. I think that really helped. Even now, I don’t talk to Mom because I really don’t want to. If I wanna talk to her then I will. I can stomach being around her. I do feel she’s kind of a different person and maybe even feels some remorse now? But she’s never come out and said it. I don’t know that she ever would. I guess to actually answer the question, I feel she’s been Mom in the sense that she gave birth to us and we resided in her household. But besides that, I’ve never heard her tell me that she’s proud of me. I’ve never
had her tell me the things that you would normally feel towards your child, like affection or love. It may be she’s just never showed me that or maybe Mom’s just not capable. Maybe she’s just a bit of a sociopath. I agree with what Aunt Jan has said over the years. That Mom loves us in her own twisted little way. I do agree with that because I can recall times that Mom would take me shopping and buy me stuff. It always felt like she was trying to make up for either the way she treated me or not being there. It always felt like she was trying to make up for something, like that was how she said ‘Hey I do care about you or I do love you, I’m gonna buy you some stuff.’

I sense Keith is done answering and I go to the next question. “So, if you had to sum up Mom in a few words or a phrase what would you say?”

“Nothing good,” he laughs, “that’s for sure. She’s a manipulator. I think everybody in her life, whether they know it or not, has been manipulated by her. Chances are they’re probably only in her life because she can manipulate them. Obviously, there’s an exception for us, being her children. But growing up, how many different sides to Mom did we see that nobody else knew existed?”

I nod my head as he laughs, “I mean we’d joke about it going to church, she’d be cussing us out on the way there and then be the one raising her hands, dancing and singing and shit. She’s just fake as fuck. She’s always been fake. She’s always been very manipulative and vindictive and controlling. If I didn’t know better I’d think Mom had a lot of problems in her childhood like, she dealt with a lot of shit or something.”

Keith grins and shakes his head, “But I don’t really know if that’s the case. Maybe Mammaw was a basketcase, too. Maybe she chilled out in her old age but I’ll never know that. Mammaw was always nothing but sweet to me.”
The room takes on a sadder tone as he looks at me and says, “If you can remember, Robert was always the favorite grandkid and then all of a sudden it changed and she was like ‘Well, Keith’s the favorite now, sorry Robert.’ And I truly believe that’s because maybe she felt for me.”

His voice breaks slightly, “And I feel her and Aunt Jan talked and Aunt Jan probably told her some stuff. But maybe she just picked up on that being something I needed.”

He looks down at his armrest and picks at it slowly, “I don’t want to say sociopathic but I feel that’s the best term; it seems to sum up all of those traits. I’ve never really seen Mom show empathy. I’ve never really seen her show remorse. She didn’t even come to Aunt Susie’s funeral!”

Keith’s eyes dart up and widen, “That fucking blew my mind. How could you not come to Aunt Susie’s funeral? It bothered me a lot. Her son Evan, if you remember, when he was telling us he was glad we were there he said, ‘I hate that your mom isn’t here. I’m sure she’s very busy.’ He was just so sure there had to be something like- she was detained and couldn’t be here. I remember thinking, ‘No, that’s not the case at all.’ Obviously, I didn’t say that, but it was just a such a shitty thing.”

He shakes his head and continues, “I’ve always felt like Mom just lived in her own reality. Rules don’t apply to her and she can treat people however she wants and they just have to deal with it. I feel that Aunt Susie’s funeral fits that logic because the beef she has going on with our fucking family...”
Keith lets out a laugh, “- number one, it’s obviously petty as can be. You would think you’d be able to put that to the side. You don’t even have to talk to anybody if you don’t want to!” His voice shoots up, then normalizes.

“But she should’ve shown up and she didn’t. I’ve never once heard her say, ‘I wish I had gone, I regret that.’ Nothing like that. So, I guess sociopath is just the best word for it. Yeah, it just sums it all up. She’s just someone who doesn’t show a lot of, or any, emotion or remorse. I’ve just never seen that from Mom. The only emotion I’ve ever seen has been negative. There really has never been much positive reinforcement. I always wondered if it was different for you and Jon. Obviously, we were treated differently but I always wondered, ‘Does she tell Jon and Alana she's proud of them and support them and push them?’ Was that ever a thing that she did?” Keith asks.

I think about it and say, “Beyond writing it in a birthday card? No, not really. She doesn't really do that…” my voice trails off and comes back with the next question.

“What is one of the best memories you have of Mom?”

“A good memory that has Mom in it?” Keith narrows his eyes.

I shake my head, yes.

The room goes silent.

“…”

“…”

“…”
After several moments, he says, “Honestly, the only thing I can think of is when she would take me out and buy me stuff. In particular, when she bought me the Xbox360. That was such an unexpected thing, she was just being cool for whatever reason. We were all about to go to the beach and maybe it was because my friends were there and she was trying to act like ‘the cool mom.’ But I remember we were all in the sunroom in the Rosehaven house, talking about the 360 and Mom expressed interest and asked, ‘Is that something we can get?’ And next thing I know we’re heading to Wal-mart. She’s like ‘You drive.’ So, we all got in the car and she was just…cool. I don’t know if she was doped up or something but we went to Wal-mart, she bought the 360, and I got Oblivion. I just couldn’t believe she did that.”

He shakes his head and grins, “It’s just so out of character for her. But honestly that’s really about the only thing. I know she took me shopping to get clothes and things like that. I mean most of my memories of Mom are negative. I spent most of my time actively trying to avoid her.”

He laughs again, “I’d always stay down in the basement and anytime she got home I’d hear her high heels up above me and it was like ‘Fuck.’ It was just the worst, because there went my fun. Whatever I was doing, whether I was bothering no one, or doing my own thing, she just never wanted me to be having fun. She just tried to ruin it. I felt like she was such a miserable person, she delighted in making other’s miserable and she was never really happy. I’ve always avoided her. I’ll deal with her if I have to but the less interaction I have with her normally the better off I am.”

“And,” I continue, “What would you consider to be one of the worst memories you have of Mom?”
“I’ve got a bunch of them,” he says, “Right off the top, I can remember when we lived in Cookeville and I was getting ready for school and she came downstairs. She was being mean to me and I don’t remember what it was exactly but I know I was bent down. I was trying to get ready for school and she was spouting off. And I remember she kicked me in the back and she had her high heels on. I remember standing- I just snapped - and screaming ‘Fuck you!!’ in her face. I finally had enough of her and it seemed from that day on things changed a little bit. I don’t know that she ever hit me again after that or tried to.”

Keith switches memories and continues, “I can remember one time I had found a bunch of pictures of Steve when we lived in the Cookeville house and her husband had that barrel that he used to burn stuff in. And I’d taken these pictures and I was burning them because Steve was always a fucking prick to me. I mean he was to you too, so I’m like, ‘Fuck this guy.’ And Mom found out about it and gosh she got so mad.”

“I’ll never forget it,” Keith shakes his head. “The thing I remember most about it is, she’d get pretty vicious with the belt. She used to fucking wear me out. She’d hit me anywhere. And I remember this one because she hit me in the head and the belt wrapped around and the fucking metal part connected and it hurt like a motherfucker. I’ll never forget that. She chased me down the driveway hitting me with the belt. But that’s the thing, I don’t feel Mom ever took the time to educate or explain. She was never like, ‘Hey, this is why I’m doing this. You need to be smarter or whatever.’ But I remember, one time,” Keith switches memories again, “I had a stick that was on fire and I don’t know where I was taking it. I was walking outside and had walked past the van. I don’t remember if maybe the gas tank was open or what it was. I don’t know why the gas tank would be open in the driveway but I do seem to recall that was the issue. But I walked by the van with this stick that was on fire and it wasn’t like I was actively trying to stuff it in the gas
tank-” he laughs at the thought, “-or anything. I was just moseying along and I can just remember her beating the shit out of me.”

He holds a finger up, remembering, “But the thing I remember about that incident is she made me wait in the room with my pants down. She wasn’t in there yet and it was just such a shitty feeling. I knew she was gonna beat the shit out of me. That belt fucking hurt, man, you’d always instinctively put your hands back there just to soften the blow and she’d just fucking smack your hands with it. Yeah…,” he sighs and looks down at his hand, “I don’t have any good memories really. Most of them are all shitty.”

“Oh, man!” he laughs and continues. “I remember, we all went swimming, with Aunt Jan and Uncle Jack. You remember that?” He points at me as I smile and nod. “It was such a joyous occasion. I remember being in their van as we were leaving the hotel and this fucking psycho pulls up next to us honking their horn,” he pantomimes the action, “and acting fucking crazy. Then they pull up next to us and I’m just like, ‘Holy shit, go on you crazy ass! What the fuck?!’ And then we realize,” he puts his hands up in surprise, “Oh god! That’s Mom!” God that was the worst, that was so fucking terrible.” Keith shakes his head and laughs, “Oh god, I’ll never forget that. That was so shitty. She flipped the fuck out because we’d went swimming with our Aunt and Uncle.” Keith’s signature laugh hangs in the air.

“Didn’t she threaten to call the cops?” I ask, “And have them arrested for kidnapping?”

“Yeah! Yeah!” He says, “They said that they went straight to the police station, right after we left, because they were so worried about us. I mean, that’s just crazy. But that’s just the way things went with Mom. I feel like she just didn’t want us to have fun. I mean, especially now I’m that an adult it’s like, ‘What’s the issue?’ he laughs and throws his hands up. “I get that
you could be upset, if she was this loving, affectionate, caring mother like, ‘Oh, I was just worried about where you all were.’ Well, you obviously had a pretty good idea because you came straight to the fucking hotel, y’know?’”

I laugh as he continues. “I mean you saw who we were with so what was the issue? It was such a huge fucking deal and it was like she just straight up wanted us to be miserable or something. It’s hard to put it into words because it doesn’t make sense but that’s the only thing that I can figure. I’ve never understood a lot of her actions but especially that one. I’ve never understood why she freaked out the way that she did. Other than she just didn’t want us to be with Jan and Jack.”

“Yeah, me either,” I say, shaking my head. “So, how would you say your relationship with Mom has changed over the years?”

“We somewhat have one now,” he says. “It’s definitely changed in that I realized I didn’t have to talk to her. I can keep her at arm’s length. She only knows what I tell her and I like that. I don’t know that I’ll ever have a relationship with Mom like most people that I know. It doesn’t really bother me because I do feel like I’ve replaced her in a lot of ways. I have people that I feel really care about me. Mom and I are like strangers. I don’t feel like she really knows anything about me. I don’t…know that she ever really will.”

Keith’s voice gets quieter, “She’s never tried to get to know me or what my interests are. She probably doesn’t even know what my favorite color is. Y’know, stuff that I think is just a testament to where she has lacked as a parental figure.”

I instantly feel like I should know his favorite color. *Wasn’t it green, growing up? Has it changed since then?*
Keith continues, “But as I got older, I’ve rationalized a little bit. I know it probably wasn’t easy on her, having five kids by yourself. Even though she made good money, she also had a pretty high stress job. So, I can look at it and see how maybe it was her job that was making her miserable. Maybe she felt like she was stuck because she’s got these kids and she has to support us.”

Keith shakes his head, “But I still can’t justify hardly anything that she did. Really anything at all. So, the relationship that we have will probably always be what it is. She’ll always be at arm’s length. I don’t know that I would ever trust her enough to let her in. She’s done enough damage.”

We laugh as he says, “But I guess it’s evolved in that I do feel as she’s gotten older something has changed. I don’t know if maybe the trial thing humbled her a little bit? But who she is now, I don’t care to go to dinners and stuff. Y’know we can talk, but so much of me feels like it’s an act.”

Keith laughs and points at an imaginary Mom, “I know how you are, I’ve seen fake shit before. I’m just waiting on the other shoe to drop. I’ve said that for quite some time and it hasn’t yet but there’s still this side of me that’s like, ‘I know you.’ Keith’s eyes narrow, “A tiger can’t change its stripes.”

He lets out a big sigh, mentioning our stepfather, “I feel for Dan and I also wonder if maybe that’s helped her. I’ve always felt Mom needed help in some way. I was never really sure what it was or what it could be, medication or probably just a joint really,” he laughs. “She just needed to chill out so much but I mean now that she has, that’s the only way that’s it’s changed. Which is that I had absolutely no interest in having a relationship with her and it’s not even that I
have interest in it now it’s just, I look at it and think, ‘Ok I can stomach you. I don't absolutely fucking hate you so I’ll come to dinner.’ Even today, she’s texting me, trying to help me with this moving situation, but she just gets on my fucking nerves man.”

Keith laughs and shakes his head, “She's asking me all these damn questions and I’m like, ‘I’m an adult. I will handle my shit because I fucking have to. You have never been here for me. You’re not gonna handle this shit.’ So, it’s annoying to me when she’s like, ‘Well is water included? Are you gonna have to make a deposit on your electric?’ Why the fuck do you care?” He asks, throwing his hands up. “I didn’t even bother responding because bitch it’s none of your fucking business.”

“Seriously, like why?” I ask, getting angry along with him, “Are you paying for it?”

“Yeah!” Keith says, “we don’t need to make small talk. Fuck off! It was annoying to me and I didn’t respond to her. It was two or three text messages and I was so fucking fed up with it!” Keith laughs, “I realized I have more control over my life than she does, especially once I got out from under her roof. I realized that she only knows what I let her know and she can only get to me when I let her get to me. So, it doesn’t bother me now because I feel like I’m in control. Since I can stomach her I don’t care to be amicable but as soon as she starts on her shit, it’s not gonna be a thing to cut her out of my life completely because she really isn’t in it. She never was.”

Feeling more justified by my anger, I ask the next question, “If you had to choose one mediated image of a mother as being most like Mom, who would you choose?”

“I don’t know that there was any one character that has reminded me of her,” he says, “but I’ve always viewed her as the villain, if you will, to my story. If I’m the protagonist, she’s
the antagonist. She’s always trying to thwart my plans and get in my way and do some evil shit. I would just say that she’s the villain to my story, and always has been.”

“Concise,” I say, “Alright, so how do you think having siblings influenced how you perceive Mom?”

Keith immediately responds, “It helped me to not feel crazy, especially with you and Jon. We heavily relied on each other even though it was never spoken or anything. I always saw it as we were all in it together, having to deal with Mom through her bullshit. It’s not like any of us were on her side or anything. We all just had this common enemy.”

Keith shrugs and continues, “I mean, you notice a disparity in how she treated all of us. But I never was jealous or anything. I never felt like it was anybody’s fault, as far as my siblings went. I never felt any resentment or ill will towards them. I just felt like Mom didn’t like me as much. But I never really cared that much because I did have a really good relationship with you and Jon.”

I smile as he continues, “And throughout so much of our childhood I feel like we really had a sense of togetherness. It was us united against this common enemy. And even though we couldn’t do anything to help each other, it was still somewhat comforting to know that I wasn’t alone to an extent. And plus, with the whole craziness, there’s so much that even now when I talk to Zoe I don’t say much about it. I know it’s a red flag in a relationship to girls if a guy doesn’t have a good relationship with his mom. Normally, that’s an indicator, or can be. And I’m just like, ‘Well, you have to understand, it’s not because I’m a shitty person or anything like that.’”
I laugh at Keith’s expression, as he says, “So it helps, like when I was with Kelly, and she was there and we were all talking about it. She had heard some of it from my side before but to hear other people chime in and say, ‘Yeah, this was real shit. This is what we dealt with and what I dealt with.’ I can remember her saying, ‘I can’t imagine.’ So, I think it helped.”

Keith nods and slowly continues, “But it’s interesting now that I’m sitting here talking about it. I never thought about resenting anyone. I didn’t even really resent Mom for it. I just always felt like she was a crazy ass and there really wasn’t much rhyme or reason. She just didn’t like me and that’s the way it went. But it was pretty obvious to me that she treated me a lot worse than everybody else. I find it interesting that I never held that against anybody. I don’t know why I would have, but I’m glad that I didn’t.”

He manages a half-smile, “I mean we were all in it together. And maybe you all feel differently but I always feel like I got it the worse from Mom. But I don’t think any of us had a cakewalk. Maybe Thomas but even then, I feel he just kind of knew how to play the game. Jon was interesting, though. I think I learned a lot from seeing how Jon and Mom interacted. I can remember the first time I ever heard Jon backtalk Mom pretty hardcore. We were living in…whatever house it was that she was married to Dan?”

“Autumn Knoll,” I say automatically.

Keith nods his head, “Autumn Knoll, yeah. Me and him shared that room and Mom was in there and they were arguing. And he just went the fuck off on her, just cussed her out, might of even called her a cunt. I just remember sitting there thinking that I was about to see all hell break loose. I was just like,” Keith’s eyes widen, ‘Holy shit, I can’t believe you just said that.’”

“Bye Jon,” I say.
“Yeah,” Keith laughs, “but it just shut her down. I don’t know if it caught her off guard but I learned something that day. That you can kind of give it back to her and the world isn’t gonna end. And I’ve always felt like him and Mom have a weird relationship, like they understood each other. Of course, I feel her, Jon, and Alex all share some similar qualities, whereas you, me, and Thomas are similar.”

I nod, having thought something similar before.

Keith continues speaking, “Even with the whole trial thing, I’ve always looked at that like if it hadn’t been Jon that was leading the charge, would things be different? If it had been me, would she have given a shit to have a relationship again? I don’t feel she would have, but I mean maybe there’s something to the first born. Also, I feel Jon did things right and so did you. Obviously, she wanted us to do well in school and I always feel like she looked at me as a fuck-up or that I was just lazy.”

Keith squints his eyes, and tilts his head, “Looking back, I can rationalize it a little bit and see that maybe as a parent it would be frustrating that your child is pretty much skating by in school. And it’s not like I couldn’t have done the work, I just didn’t wanna fucking do it.”

He laughs and shrugs, “And you and Jon were making A’s & B’s. I can remember when progress reports or midterms or report cards came out I was always like, ‘Guys, let’s not show Mom until the weekend’s over.’”

I laugh, remembering clearly, as he says, “Or I’d always fucking try to lose mine. It was always such a shitty thing for me when it was announced that progress reports were coming out at the end of the week. I was always like, ‘Fuuuuck.’ But I felt like you and Jon followed the rules and that’s kind of what she wanted. I never really thought about it back then but I just
wasn’t really interested in doing any of that. So, I don’t know I’ve always felt like Jon and Mom seemed to have an understanding to an extent. Maybe they’re just kindred spirits? It just seems like no matter what they do to each other, everything’s still cool. It’s the same way with Alex. You’d think Jon would resent Mom and vice versa or Alex would resent Mom and vice versa but they don’t. There’s just this understanding.”

He looks at me and says, “With you, obviously, you were the only daughter. I felt like Mom treated you a little differently because you’re a girl. But growing up, I felt maybe you and Mom had this mother-daughter bond thing going on? But...I guess the more I think about it, I know that wasn’t really the case. Maybe she tried to force that sometimes? But it did seem like you and Mom had a pretty decent relationship. But at the same time, I felt you and Jon were just good kids, if you will. You never really got in trouble in school or otherwise. So, in comparison to me, if you’re gonna direct your frustration and anger at anybody it made sense for it to be me. I guess I deserved it out of anybody.”

I shake my head as he adds, “But I felt like you and Mom had a pretty decent relationship. I felt it was better than anything I could hope for. Even better than Jon’s, because Mom always tried to like look out for you all a little more? Y’know, me and Jon were always living down in the basement and you, Alex, and Thomas were always up there with her,” he laughs, “in the ivory tower. I just felt like she kind of put you all above us, to an extent. Especially me, I guess she put everybody above me.”

Keith stops and then continues, “But as far as I’m aware you didn’t really start having speed bumps until you started standing up for yourself, like with the whole car thing. I remember you all getting in that argument in the hallway at Autumn Knoll and you left to stay at Jan’s. I remember that, it just seemed like you got fed up with her taking your car away or using it for
whatever and you decided to stand up for what you thought was right. It seemed at that point, you all started to have squabbles but up until then you pretty much just did what was expected and what she wanted, so everything was kosher. Same way with Alex and Thomas. Maybe Mom disliked Alex, in comparison to Thomas. I mean, Thomas was always the baby of the family but I don’t necessarily think that any of us had a good relationship with her. I shouldn’t say good, really more like workable. Whereas with me, it was just more of like, ‘let me just avoid you at all costs.’”

Keith’s trademark sarcasm makes me grin. I look down and ask the next question, “How do you think the way you view Mom helps you?”

“I don’t know that I would use that word,” he says, “I mean, it’s helpful in some situations but I also think it’s the root of a lot of my trust issues, especially with women. I don’t really trust people. It takes a little while. I feel I have a pretty good read on people for the most part. I feel like I’m a very aware person, so I feel it helped me in that sense? I will say that it helped me because, growing up, I always looked at Mom and thought to myself that this was someone that I did not want to be. I saw the way that she was fake as fuck to everybody in her life. I’d have all these people at work be like, ‘Oh, your mom is so nice’ and I was always like, ‘Yeah, I’d like to meet her. Like, you have no fucking clue.’”

I laugh as he says, “I’ve told so many people that I looked at her very early on and decided that I was not gonna be fake. You like me or not, that’s who I am. I feel like that’s helped me. I feel like people appreciate realness and it’s definitely something I value.”

Keith tilts his head, “I feel like…she taught me how to manipulate people. And maybe it’s not even true, but Aunt Kay verified it. Anyways, Mom told me at a very early age they
tested me and ended up wanting me to get with some psychiatrist. She said the psychiatrist had me for however many hours and he kept trying to distract me with games so that he could ask me questions. I apparently just kept telling him, ‘I know what you’re doing and I’m not falling for it.’ So, he told Mom that I was very, very good at manipulating people and that that she needed to be careful in how she raised me. And Mom was like—"

I laugh and sarcastically say, “Duly noted.”

“Yeah,” he laughs, “she was like, ‘I went home and cried. I was like, how am I gonna raise a child that’s smarter than me?’ And I’m like, ‘I fucking bet you did.’”

Keith furrows his brow. “I always wondered about that, especially that last little part but then Aunt Kay told me about it. When I worked at Newbies, it just came up in conversation one day and she was like, ‘I can remember them testing you.’ So maybe it wasn’t so much that she taught me but I definitely feel like I have a very good sense of if someone’s trying to manipulate me? I’m sure I can be manipulated. I’m not gonna be brazen enough to say that I can’t, but at the same time I do feel it’s prepared me to an extent to. And I think it would be pretty tough to manipulate me or really any of us.”

“So,” I say, “in that way maybe being raised by Mom, weirdly benefited us? This sort of adverse benefit?”

“Yeah,” he says, “I think it did. Obviously, our childhood could’ve been worse but at the same time I don’t feel like any of us use it as a crutch or as an, ‘Oh, feel sorry for me.’ I feel we just played the hand we were dealt and thankfully I think we came out pretty all right. I think a lot of that had to do with our coping skills and having one another. So, I think in some ways and maybe in more ways than even I know, it has benefited us. But I don’t think that was the goal.”
Keith shakes his head and loudly laughs, “I don’t think this was some strategic plan like, ‘I’m gonna do this and do that and they’re gonna turn out with these great coping skills.’ I don’t feel that was it at all. I feel like we could just as easily be damaged goods and, to an extent, I feel like I am.”

Looking at Keith, I feel that he means it. He pauses and lets out a sigh, “But being aware and not making excuses and just looking at something for what it is and dealing with that, has helped to not be a crutch and not feel sorry for myself and turn out alright. But it definitely was not a plan. She was just a pretty shitty parent.”

I let the last sentence linger before asking, “How did other people’s moms influence how you viewed Mom?”

“I feel like Aunt Jan, for the longest time, was the person we could go talk to. I feel like she was a mother to us first. And now, I know I can talk to Neil’s mom. I appreciate her and I appreciate the things that she does for me and how she makes me feel as a person. She makes me feel cared for. You don’t know how many times I have gone to their house and it’s come up in discussion what I dealt with that day from Mom and his mom has begged me multiple, multiple times like, ‘Come on, we’re going to get your stuff. You’re coming to live with us.’ But I never did because I thought, ‘Mom’s gonna flip shit.’”

Keith leans back in his chair and laughs, “Of course, I did there for a little while after I moved out of Kelly’s and that was such a good feeling to me. I felt like I was finally home to an extent?” he says, and then quickly follows up, “I mean, obviously, no one will ever replace you and Jon, Alex and Thomas. You all are my family but you know that saying about friends being the family you choose? That’s absolutely what Neil’s family has been to me. They have been the second family to me in so many ways, more than I ever got from Mom. And it helped me. I don’t
really know if it changed the way that I viewed Mom other than it just gave me more of this sense that I there wasn’t any point in worrying about it. Mom’s gonna be who she is. I may never earn her love or affection and I just have to be alright with that. I see who she was as a person, growing up, so I never really worried. Why the fuck should I care if this crazy-ass loves me or adores me?” he laughs.

“It’s just as well if she fucking hates me because I pretty well fucking hate you too!” he says, then continues, “But I’ve always known that’s not how it should be and I’ve always been somewhat envious to an extent of these people that have a great relationship with their mom. But at the same time, it’s not me, it’s the mother. I have a great relationship with Neil’s mom and I’ve had a great relationship with literally every other mom I’ve ever met.”

“But,” he pauses, “I don’t know that it really changed anything other than I just saw it as something I didn’t need to bother with or worry about because I had fulfilled that need. I had a mother figure, so she can fuck off.

I grin and look down at my questions, “When Mom would come up in conversation with friends? How did you describe her?”

“Bitch,” Keith says

I burst into laughter.

“Yeah,” he resumes, “like, ‘God, she is such a bitch.’ And all my friends knew that too. Anybody who’d been to my house for any length of time and Mom had dropped her little fucking act, were like,” Keith slows down each word, ‘Goddamn…your mom…is such a bitch!’”

Keith smirks, “And I’d be like, ‘I fucking know! That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. She’s just fucking hell on wheels dude, all the time.’ Especially seeing how Neil’s parents
treated him. They obviously want him to be happy and they’ve had absolutely no problem with his friends coming and staying. But with Mom, I always felt it was the exact opposite. It’s like she has a sense for it like, ‘Keith’s having a good time, I better go put an end to this.’ It’s just how it felt.”

Keith runs his hands through his hair, “She’s just always been a bitch and honestly at one point or another she’s been a super fucking bitch to one of my friends.” He chuckles and says, “I can remember Neil was like, ‘Man, I’m sorry dude but your mom is a bitch.’ I’m like, ‘Don’t fucking say you’re sorry. You don’t have to apologize to me, I know she’s a bitch. I’m sorry that you know her.’”

Keith continues his thought, “There was someone I saw just the other day on New Year’s Eve and this chick comes up and she goes, ‘Is your mom so and so?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, that’s her’ and she’s like, ‘Oh my god, I met your mom.’ And I’m like, ‘I’m sorry.’ That’s the first thing I say. ‘I’m sorry.’”

I smile as he gives another example, “I had this guy IM me a few weeks ago, he was like, ‘I went to wherever the other day and I met your mom.’ And I’m just, ‘I’m sorry.’”

Keith chuckles between words, “I am sorry that you had to meet that person.’ Obviously, they kinda think, ‘Oh, it’s funny’ and in a way, it is. Obviously, she doesn’t act that way to them but that’s how I feel about it. It’s like, ‘I am sorry that you crossed paths with her. Hopefully it was a pleasant experience but if not, it’s probably gonna go down as one of the worst ones that you’ve ever had. You are gonna understand at least my feelings to an extent.’ And I know I’m not alone in that.”
Keith looks at his phone, noticing the time. I ask my last question, feeling I already know the answer. “Would you say that there has been one thing that has influenced your perception of Mom the most?”

“Yeah,” he says, “her telling me she hates me.”

He sighs, “It was confirmation for me. I always felt there was just something about me. It’s been weird, like the only word I know for it is jealousy. That’s how she’s treated me. I don’t feel I’ve ever really done anything to deserve it, and it makes absolutely no sense why she would be jealous of me so I don’t think that’s what it is. But, I don’t know, it’s the only the thing that fucking makes sense to an extent. But it always bothered me. I never felt like your mom calling you should be cause for your potential day to be ruined. I had the ringtone set for her and as soon as it would go off it was like, ‘Goddamnit man, uhh.’ I had to fucking talk to her and that was just the worst. I can just remember thinking, ‘It probably shouldn’t be that way so what could it be? Does she just fucking hate me?’”

The room is quiet, as Keith shakes his head.

“Like I said,” he explains, “me and Mara used to talk on the phone for a long time so I have no idea how long Mom was on the phone sitting there just listening to my conversation. But I feel that’s just a testament to who she is as a person. I feel for any type of parent that if you hear your child on the phone upset because they think that you hate them,” he pauses and lets out a crude laugh, “you’ve got a choice to make there. You can either be like, ‘Hey, it’s not like that,’ or you can do what she did. I mean she made fun of me!” he exclaims. “And then fucking said, ‘I do hate you.’ I’ll never forget that, I had nothing to say to that. I was just like ‘Ok, it makes sense.’”

I wonder, “Did she ever apologize for that?”
“No,” he asserts, “fuck no. What do you think? I don’t expect her to apologize for it, why would she? Even if she did, I probably wouldn’t accept it because I honestly believe that Mom just never liked me. I feel like she said it out of anger but no I don’t feel like she regrets it.”

“She probably doesn’t even remember it,” I add.

“Probably not,” he shrugs, “but I’ll never forget. I mean it would have been different if we had been arguing. But nope. She had just gotten home from work, we were at the Rosehaven house and she was in the kitchen. I was sitting in one of those armchairs and word for word what she said to me was, ‘You want to sit there and cry on the phone that I hate you? You’re right I do fucking hate you.’ I didn’t cry, it didn’t even really cut me that deep. It was just confirmation. It makes sense. She has always treated me like she fucking hates me. And I feel like to be as savage as she was, like when she would beat me, and I don’t use that term lightly,” he emphasizes his words, “she beat the fucking shit out of me so many times. I feel like in so many ways I have been her punching bag and her outlet for letting out whatever. I don’t feel like she’s ever stopped to think what impact it could’ve had on me. I don’t know that she even cares…”

He looks at me, “Do you plan on showing this to Mom?”

“No,” I answer, “it’s not about what she thinks it’s about how we think about her.”

“Right,” he says, “I don’t know what understanding there is to gain really. I mean, in conversation we all see Mom the same way. She’s pretty much been a burden on most of us for our entire lives for different reasons. I think it all boils down to just who she is as a person, I mean she’s sociopathic.”

He lets out a laugh, “Some people just shouldn’t have kids and I feel that Mom is just one of those people. After being with Lilly and living with a kid, I realize I do not want fucking kids.
Fuck. That. Your life is not your own and I feel like maybe Mom is too goddamn selfish. You have to live for them and I feel like she resented that. I feel like she got knocked up and maybe she felt trapped. And I’ve always thought maybe she’s just someone that never should’ve had kids and ended up with five of them. Maybe she tried to make best of it and maybe I wouldn’t do any better. But who knows? I mean we’ll never know.”

“It’s not like we can verify anything,” I offer.

“No,” Keith agrees, “that’s why I was wondering if you were planning on showing any of this to her because I see it as fruitless. She’s just gonna sit there and cry and put on the hysterics. Maybe she’ll apologize. But maybe you all are like me. Her apology wouldn’t mean anything to me. I’ve made my peace with it. What’s done is done, her apologizing would do nothing.”
Chapter 13: Memor(I)es, Three

Mom finds the CD and inserts it in the player. She skips past the first song and maxes the volume.

“I-I-I...don’t want a lot fooor Christmas...” rings out through the house and I turn to look at Mom.

She has her eyes closed and is swaying to the music, “The-re is just one thing I-I need. I don’t care about the presents...underneath the Christmas tree. I just want you for my ow-wn, MORE than you could e-ver know-w. Make my wish CO-OME tru-ue-e, ALL I want...for Christma-a-s is-s-s...”

Mom opens her eyes and points at me, “You-u-u-u...”

We decorate the house and dance, playing the second song over and over and over.

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To this day, I listen to that song every Christmas and to this day it still makes me cry. It’s not a sad song by any means, if anything it’s upbeat and torturously catchy. I know every word and rather enjoy the hell out of it. But every now and then, I’ll hear the bells of the opening track and immediately fall to pieces.

I see her pointing at me, her dancing, her handing me ornaments and garland. I see Jon and Keith bitching at how loud the music is. I see me not caring. We’re having fun. We’re having girl-time. We’re being like every other mother and daughter.

I know I was happy in those moments. I know because of the sadness. The weight of these happy memories crushes me, collides with everything else, and confuses me. They stick
out. They don’t fit. I don’t know what to do with them so I tuck them away until sense memory kicks in.

Obviously, there were more happy times. Nothing’s that simple, that black or white. She was and is Mom. She was and she wasn’t both a bad and good mother. I accept the conflicting emotions, the contradictory perspectives, the then and the now, the highs and the lows. Simply put, I deal. I deal through writing. I deal through talking. Sometimes, I deal through crying.

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My phones buzzes.

Keith finally responds to my last text, “Yeah, we were definitely young. I mean, we knew what she was doing, we were just powerless to do anything about it. So, I’m sure you’re right. Just glad it wasn’t us she was poisoning.”

“You bring up a good point,” I text back, “I don’t ever really remember what went through my mind when she would do crazy stuff like that. I remember feeling bad or sad sometimes, but I don’t remember feeling anything strongly towards her. She was like a weather system. She just…happened. And we just had to wait til she was through.”

Keith texts back, “That’s a damn good metaphor. We just weathered the storms, best we could.”

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Here’s what I’m not going to do. I’m not going to break apart the interviews and thematize them. I’m not going to pull out certain quotes and explain their hidden truths. And I’m not going to link everything back to the literature review. I hope I’m not disappointing anyone.

Here’s why.

I undertook this project not under the assumption that I could “figure out” my past, but rather so I could create a space for our stories to be heard. I do not wish to invalidate these stories by suggesting there exists some deeper significance beyond what myself or my brothers said or experienced (Parry, 1991). I especially do not wish to suggest any worth or meaning is derived via only analysis, categorization, and abstraction (Ellis, 1995; Bochner, 1997; Bochner, 2001; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Herrmann & Di Fate, 2014). I see no merit in comparing our stories to a normative structure, rather I opt to “move beyond the disposition to categorize and reduce [our] stories according to the degree to which [the stories] exemplify a particular discrepancy from a norm described by a theory” (Parry, 1991, p. 40). In doing so, my goals echo Ellis (1999), in that by exploring our lives, I hope to shed light on a way of life. Moreover, I aim to “provide a point of comparison for your life story” (Ellis, 1995, p. 335).

I follow in the footsteps of those before me and hope “to open conversations about how people live, rather than close them down with definitive descriptions and analytic statements about the world as it “truly” exists” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 435). I choose “not to break stories down into their component parts but, rather, to think with stories and through stories” (Herrmann & Di Fate, 2014, p. 300). I do so by challenging taken-for-granted norms of research and writing, and “encouraging multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, and plural voices”
I happily present myself as a vulnerable, reflexive researcher and see my project as continually shifting and ongoing. Through my research and writing process, I have resisted the urge to “simplify, categorize, slice, and dice” (Ellis, 1999, p. 671) and rather, attempted to be comfortably uncomfortable in not knowing, or even looking for, the big T truth.

I will, though, share some parting thoughts on what I would do differently if given the chance. As I previously mentioned, my IRB required me to provide a list of questions along with several other documents before deeming my project non-human subjects research. I feel that in creating a list of questions, I found it difficult to not use them. Looking back at the conversations, I can see that I might have occupied the role of researcher rather than sister and that this might have impacted the types of answers I received. If I could have a do-over, I would forgo the research questions altogether and simply tell them I want to talk about Mom. Perhaps I would tailor each interaction and begin with a story about that brother and my mother to jumpstart their memory and more subtly guide the conversation into a story-based encounter. It was the stories I was after, the lived experiences that can connect the readers to the pages, those details that are remembered long after they’re read.

I realize now, it is both frightening and therapeutic to let your stories stand as they are, in all their messiness and complexities. It is difficult to not wrap everything up nicely and make order out of chaos. I want to move on, set aside, get over, and explain. Like Kinser (2012) I pretend if I research enough, write enough, and think enough I can eventually release myself from a subject, never to worry about it again. But I choose, for now, to let the story be, to set it down and back away. I hope in having helped these stories come to light, they may “connect to larger stories of culture and humanity” (Parry, 1991, p. 37) I hope that by sharing our experiences, they connect with your own. I offer a snapshot of a real, breathing, working mother,
in all her glorious contradictions. I offer a web of relational impact, as we couldn’t help but involve one other in each of our stories. I looked closely at a subject, in the hopes it could inspire you to do the same.
References


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Schlessinger, L. (2000). Parenthood by proxy: Don’t have them if you won’t raise them. New York, NY: Cliff Street Publishing


November 3, 2016

Dear Alana,

I have reviewed your submission for “Co-constructing a Mother”. After reviewing the submitted Form 129, I have determined that the proposed activity IS research involving human subjects according to the definitions established by the Department of Health and Human Services or the Food and Drug Administration.

As such, the project “Co-constructing a Mother” is subject to the purview of the ETSU IRB. Please call Janine Olive at 439-6054 if you require assistance with completion of any of the IRB required submission documents for this study.

Approval must be obtained from the ETSU IRB prior to beginning this project.

Sincerely,

Brittany Wilkins, Ph.D.

Vice-Chair, ETSU IRB
November 23, 2016

Alana Claxton

Dear Alana,

Thank you for recently submitting information regarding your proposed project “Co-constructing a Mother.”

Upon further review, it has been determined that this proposed activity as described meets neither the FDA nor the DHHS definition of research involving human subjects. Therefore, it does not fall under the purview of the ETSU IRB.

I understand that we initially stated that this project would fall under the purview of the ETSU IRB, however with the additional information provided in the New Protocol Submission process, it becomes clearer that the project does not fit the definition of human subjects’ research that states it must be both systematic and generalizable.

IRB review and approval by East Tennessee State University is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are human subject research in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Thank you for your commitment to excellence.

Sincerely,

Stacey L. Williams, Ph.D.
Chair, ETSUIRB
VITA
ALANA C. CLAXTON

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