

The Sophia Poems

BY

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THESIS

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This thesis is dedicated to my advisor, Cris Mazza, who took a chance on me and guided me every step of the way. She criticized my work to make me better and defended me when I needed it. More than anyone else I've known, she has influenced my writing and thinking.

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Abstract

The Sophia Poems is a collection of personal, non-fiction essays written as a type of memoir. They are connected but can be read as stand-alone essays as well. The two principle connecting themes are the author's marriage to Sophia, as well as its dissolution, and the location and function of his house, located in the Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago. The house and neighborhood serve as a complicating factor in the marriage. However, those aspects were not the primary cause of the divorce.

The title of the dissertation is a misnomer, since there is only original poem included. Rather, it is a reference to the author's position as an instructor of poetry at a community college (both poetry as literature and creative writing) as well as a reference to the title of a portfolio of poems he wrote in a graduate workshop while at UIC. These poems were originally a tribute to his ex-wife, though the inclusion of the title serves as an ironic title.

Rather than in poetic form or traditional essay, *The Sophia Poems* are written in vignettes, as a stylized prose-poem form, which attempts to capture the poetic equivalence while still remaining true to the non-fiction essay tradition. However, the stories are not presented in a chronological order.

The intent of the dissertation is to portray the complicated nature of divorce. Although there is a case to be made for right and wrong action, those actions are understood and interpreted differently by perspective. The answer to the question of "Who is at fault?" is therefore never clear.

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Chapter One: Why I Moved to the South Side of Chicago

I don't remember exactly what year it was that time I had lunch with my friend Bayo Ojikutu, but it was definitely before 2016, the year when everything in my universe was ripped apart. It's something we do every year. He visits my summer class at the University of Chicago as a guest speaker, and then we go out to lunch somewhere in Hyde Park. These lunches are mostly unremarkable: we order food, talk about teaching, wives, the kids, the neighborhood, and then we split the check. That year, we went to Medici on 57th Street and sat in the upstairs outdoor beer garden. We were at a little two-top off to the side, far away from the other diners. The sky above us was bright and blue, but it wasn't too hot. He ordered pizza, and I ordered a burger. He was wearing a yellow polo shirt with thin and thick blue horizontal stripes. I remember these little details because this was the time I told him why I moved to Bronzeville in the first place. And telling him this story was memorable because Bayo is my only black friend.

It's an odd thing to admit, that I only have one black friend. I could mean it as either a source of shame (I have *only* one friend) or as an assertion of a racist lack. White people frequently use this phrase to absolve themselves of having racist beliefs (or other iterations of prejudice). So I want to say, with all intentional and awkward self-consciousness, I do have other black friends. My Facebook profile shows black neighbors, black colleagues, black tennis partners, and most of my former students are black. When I say that Bayo is my only black friend, I mean 'friend' in a real sense. With Bayo, I can act stupid around him. I can admit things. I can make fun of him or ask him for advice, and he can do the same with me. Since I'm older and increasingly homebound

because of my kids, my real friends have dwindled down to a few people, despite my claim to 700 friends on Facebook. Bayo is on my short list.

We didn't grow up together; our friendship is only about ten years old. We met in a professional capacity. He was giving a talk at Oakton Community College, and I introduced myself afterward. It turned out that we had a mutual friend. Bayo's a writer, a good one and has written two award-winning novels. After we met, we saw each other again at parties thrown by the mutual friend. Later, we were both invited to be part of a writers' group organized by said mutual friend. We exchanged drafts of our writing and got to know each other that way. I met Sophia through this writers' group, so it was a pretty big deal to me at the time.

It turned out that we had a few things in common. We both had strict fathers and serious Catholic mothers. We both teach. We were both married. We have young kids. We both lived on the south side and love pro sports, especially basketball, though our allegiances are rival teams.

However, in some ways, we're opposite. He was born and partly raised in on the south side of Chicago, and then in his teen years, his family moved to the newly-integrated, working class south suburb of Chicago Heights. I grew up in a wealthy all-white suburb of Cleveland. He went to public schools; I went to private. He likes soccer; I like tennis. But the most obvious difference between us is that he's black, and I'm white.

Hyde Park, where we have lunch every summer, is pretty racially integrated, at least for Chicago. It's also economically diverse, though that barrier sometimes seems even more intractable for its residents. One of my friends at University of Chicago said

Hyde Park is the one neighborhood where blacks and whites unite against the poor. And it's like that. There's the university and then there's the neighborhood surrounding the university. Hyde Park is a tale of two cities: the best of times, the worst of times. And it's also perfectly situated in between our neighborhoods, at least at this time, him in Woodlawn on 61st Street and me in Bronzeville on 35th Street, both predominately black and predominately poor neighborhoods.

When Bayo and I talk, whether it's over lunch or drinks or dinner, we talk about everything except race. This is odd because the issue of race consumes his writing; his novels *47th Street Black* and *Free Burning* both grapple with black identity on the south side of Chicago. But this topic is not simply an academic pursuit to us. I teach English at Prairie State College in Chicago Heights, and almost all of my students are black, and many of them are graduates of Bayo's high school alma mater Bloom Trail. He teaches at DePaul and the University of Chicago, my alma mater, and almost all of his students are white. I grew up in a white neighborhood and now live in a black one; he spent high school a white neighborhood, but which is now mostly black.

I think we've wanted to talk about race, but neither of us has ever brought it up. If we started talking about it, I'm afraid we wouldn't be able to stop. Or we'd get into an argument and never speak to each other again. Despite our daily preoccupation with the subject of race, I feel as though the conversation could be catastrophic because both of us are a tiny bit radical on the subject and, thanks to our upbringing, a tiny bit conservative. When Bayo was growing up, his father made him wear a sport coat whenever he went into the Loop. Bayo cannot abide the contemporary state of hip-hop and regards it as

trash. As for me, I spend most of my days telling my students to take their headphones off while they are in class and that they need to read the assigned text. We are old men.

The neighborhood is what we talk about when we want to talk about race. At this lunch, I told him a story of how I was pulled over in Bronzeville for driving with my lights off. The cop pulled next to me rolled down the window and asked me to turn my lights on. I did and drove away. He told me the same story about him in Woodlawn. But in his version, the cop pulled him over and detained him for 45 minutes. He was driving a nice car, wearing a sport coat, and his four-year-old son sat in the back of the car, absorbing every detail. We could trade stories like this for a long time. I get away with everything, and he gets punished.

Then he told me that they were moving out of Woodlawn to Oak Park, for a variety of practical reasons. Oak Park is where Hemingway was born. He famously said the town had wide boulevards and narrow minds. But it's not really like that anymore. Still, this was a surprise for me, and bad news for sure.

"You're moving to the suburbs?" I asked. "I guess that means 'goodbye for good' because this will be the last time I ever see you."

He laughed. "I'll come to the city all the time. We're right off the Green line." The Green Line runs by my place. It's the oldest El in the city, but also the one with the reputation for being dangerous because it connects the west side to the south side. The administration at the University of Chicago even advises its students not to take it because of 'gang activity' nearby and instead, recommends that students take the Red line, which has far more crime than the Green line. But racism perpetuates this stigma about Green line.

“Sophia and I are not driving to the suburbs to visit you. No way am I dealing with a commute on the weekend,” I said, half serious. “Once you get comfortable with your big living room and big backyard, you’ll never come into the city again.”

He laughed and shook his head.

“Plus, you’ll have to cut the grass on Saturdays, and on Sundays you’ll have pool parties or barbeques. You’ll have a full driveway for basketball. You’re never coming back here. You’re not my first friend to move to the suburbs. I know how this goes,” I joked.

He laughed again. I admire him, and I’m proud to make him laugh. “How are things in Bronzeville?” he asked, trying to change the subject. His grandparents lived on the south side, not far from where my house now sits, so he’s interested in the gentrification going on. I have no delusion that I am the poster boy for that gentrification, although it didn’t exactly work out the way I thought it would. Even more than ten years after the housing crash of 2007, my house is still underwater. But Bayo was interested because we were still the only white family in our neighborhood, so the proposed gentrification didn’t bridge the segregation gap on the south side.

“Good. Everything is good.” I said. “Oh, Sophia had her bike stolen out the garage.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah, it was kinda my fault. I left the side door open.”

“Still. Awful feeling,” he consoled.

“But things are good. Sophia is doing well. The neighborhood is fine.”

Then, for reasons I'm unsure of, I launched into this long story about why I moved to the south side. He sat back and patiently listened to the whole thing.

I grew up rich. Big house in the suburbs. Lots of brothers and sisters, and we all had our own cars. Mom stayed home. I even learned to play tennis at a restricted country club. Despite being only ten minutes away from downtown Cleveland, black people didn't live in our suburb; because of the aggressive police department, they knew better than to even drive through it. Other than watching the Cosby Show, Diff'rent Strokes, and Sanford and Son, I was unconscious of race. We never had any racial tensions in our neighborhood because there were no other races with which to have tension. I remember that there was one interracial couple who moved down the street from us. Everyone joked that they lived in a gray house. We rode our bikes by them and stared. They stayed there for maybe six months.

In America, this is really not that unusual. Blacks make up 13% of the U.S. population, and 60% of blacks live in only 10 states. In my high school and college there were a few black students, but I almost never interacted with any of them.

Then I moved to Chicago, to Lincoln Park, and this was 1999, when all the 20-something white yuppies lived there. I followed my college girlfriend to the city and that neighborhood. I got a job as a high school English teacher at a Catholic high school in Chicago Heights, so my commute was about an hour long. I had a good deal of black students—not the majority like my classes now—but more than I had ever been exposed to. I had a hard time navigating my cultural distance from these students, everything from

the slang they used to the formulaic way they were taught to write. My difficulties could have been explained in different ways: I was a new teacher with zero teaching experience; I was living in a new city; I was teaching at a school that had a good academic reputation, but not the same elite status as my own high school. Plus, at 23 years old, I was teaching kids who were 17 or 18. It was weird for all of us.

Before 2016, I used to describe 1999 as the worst year of my life. That year, I broke up with my girlfriend, got depressed, and then gained 15 pounds. Plus, my teaching was horrendous. I would stand in the shower each morning, letting the water warm me up in my cold studio apartment, saying to myself, “What am I going to teach today? What am I going to teach today?” I would have nightmares about my classes and found myself waking up in my bed shouting at my students. I would cry on my drive home. Sometimes I was so exhausted that I would have to pull over and take a nap in my car before I could complete my commute. I would pull into the parking lot of a McDonald’s and get a few minutes of fitful sleep.

My classroom experience vacillated between me being overly strict and overly lax. One time, when one of my black freshman students didn’t have his textbook, I called him out in front of the class. He had to explain to everyone that his mom did not yet have the money to buy it, but at the beginning of the month, she would be able to. So he had to live with that humiliation for the rest of the year. Within two months, I had completely lost control of my classes; I spent most of the period trying to regain order, but even when I got control, I had nothing to teach. The students could see me sweating through my shirt.

On top of all this, I was paying \$700/month to live in a studio apartment and another \$125 for an uncovered parking spot in my building. My salary was 25 thousand to teach five classes, with an average of 28 students in each class. I was working full time and going into credit card debt just to live in Lincoln Park. Plus, since I had broken up with my girlfriend, I no longer had any friends in the city. I suffered from urban isolation, and on weekends, I would go to Lincoln Park bars by myself.

Over Christmas break, I went to New York to visit my family and reset my life. On New Year's Eve, I lost my wallet in a cab. For the flight home, I got through airport security just fine because it was the year 2000, and security didn't care who I was, as long as I had a plane ticket.

I got into my car at 4:30 in the morning, which was only about two hours earlier than normal for me. I wanted to get to school extra early to make copies and organize lesson plans for the new semester. As I drove south on the Dan Ryan Expressway, I could see White Sox Park towering over the white neighborhood of Bridgeport. Then to my left were the endless rows of the Stateway Gardens and the Robert Taylor homes in black Bronzeville. The Dan Ryan is a monument to racial segregation on the south side. Other than the Great Wall of China, it's currently the largest public works project built to separate racial groups. In the dark morning I could see a few lit windows in the buildings, but they were already largely vacant, with even a few burned out and boarded up apartments. Since I had lived in Chicago, I had heard a lot of rumors about the dangers of the south side. I had stopped a few times along this stretch, for gas or to pull into a McDonald's drive thru on my way home. But my pulse would always flutter. I felt self-

conscious in my teacherly dress pants and tie. Plus, I was driving my Dad's old Volvo, still with Ohio license plates.

As I was driving that morning, the car started making a loud knocking sound. All of a sudden, everything went quiet: no electricity, no engine, no power brakes or power steering. I was able to exit the highway and make a turn onto one of the side streets. For the life of me, I don't remember which street. It could have been anywhere between 47th and 87th Street. Today, the distinction between those streets is so clear in my mind, but at the time, all numbered streets carried the same amalgamation of danger and discomfort.

I had no wallet, so no money or identification. I had no cell phone, which was still normal back then. I walked to a pay phone and made a collect call to my ex-girlfriend. She did not accept the charges. At 4am, it was still dark, but people were walking around. One guy passed by me, laughed, and said to me, "Man, you are in the wrong neighborhood." He could probably see the fear on my face.

I walked to a gas station and talked to an Indian cashier behind a thick layer of bulletproof glass. He let me call a tow truck. I talked to the guy and said I was going to leave my car and take a cab to school. I figured that someone at the school would have money to pay for the cab. The cashier then allowed me to call a cab company who estimated that it would be a \$125 fare, with an out-of-the-city surcharge. I told him not to bother. Then I called in sick to the school and then called the tow truck back and asked that he pick the car up as soon as possible. I wasn't sure if the cashier would have let me make all these calls if I were black, but I was certain that if I was black and stranded in a white neighborhood, I would be stuck there.

With all of my own racist notions bouncing around my head, I walked back to my car, fearing for my life. I had a tie on. How could I explain to would-be muggers that I had no wallet? I sat in my freezing cold car for a half hour before the first car stopped alongside of me. A woman rolled down her window and asked if I was OK. I said, “Yes, a tow truck was on its way.” She offered the use of her cell phone, and I said “I’m fine.”

The next person, probably commuting to work and in a big rush stopped, too. He asked the same thing and offered to call someone for me. “Thank you, but no,” I said. “I’ll be fine.” Another half hour went by, and I could no longer feel my feet in my dress shoes. Almost like a biblical story or a joke, a third person stopped. She too offered her cell phone.

My worries had mostly dissipated, and I felt foolish. Every single one of these people had been black. I thought about Lincoln Park, where people don’t even make eye contact when you walk down the street on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Here, people stopped on their way to work, in the cold weather, to help a stranger. I would have never done that in Lincoln Park.

While all of this was going on, there was this one other guy who had been circling the block. He was carrying a flat shovel and had looked at me sitting in the car a few times. By now I had been waiting for two hours, and it was light outside. He approached my car and stood right in front of the driver’s side door. The car had power windows, which were dead, so I had to open the door to talk to him.

“Hey, you look really cold,” he said. “You wanna come inside for a cup of coffee?”

I laughed and said, “Thank you, but I’m waiting for a tow truck and don’t want to miss it.”

“I think you could take the chance. My house is right on the corner,” he pointed.

I said no and thanked him.

Another half hour went by, and the man came out again.

“Just come inside,” he said.

Summoning a bit of courage and desperation, I followed him inside his garden level apartment. I used his bathroom. He poured a cup of coffee for me in a used Dunkin Donuts Styrofoam cup. I didn’t care; I was freezing. We talked. I told him that I was a teacher. He said he was shoveling sidewalks that morning. He told me his name, but I can’t remember it now. Through the translucent curtain over the garden level window, we could see the tow truck pull up.

The driver of the tow truck got out just as I was walking outside to my car. He was a white man, and was about 10 feet away from me when he shouted, “How do you like this nigger neighborhood?” He said it loud enough for anyone to hear. I just stood there dumbfounded. Then he said, “Normally, I would never come here, but I could hear over the phone that you were white.” Again, I said nothing. He went on to say that the traffic had been bad on the north side, that he thought that I’d left the car and he was sorry it took him so long.

I don’t remember how I reacted, but I went along with it. I said nothing back. I needed a tow, and I didn’t care who he was or what he said. I just watched him hook up the car. I sat inside the cab with him and watched him make an illegal u-turn, blocking four lanes of traffic. A driver drove around him as he slowly made this turn; she wasn’t

close to hitting him, just going around him. He laid on his horn and yelled out the window, “You bitch! You nigger bitch!” We drove to the north side, and I continued to sit there in complicit silence.

When we got to my garage, which was that Jaguar-Volvo dealership right off the Kennedy Expressway, I went into the office and explained my problem of not having any money. They said that they would pay the tow truck driver for me, but they couldn’t do it right away because the guy who cuts the checks for these things was not in yet. I said it would be great if they could make the tow truck driver wait as long humanly possible. The man smiled at me and said he would do his best to make him wait.

After that year, I moved to the south side and started grad school at the University of Chicago. I lived first in Hyde Park, then I moved to a black neighborhood called Oakland—one of those Chicago neighborhoods that north siders have never heard of—at 43rd and Lake Park Ave, right across the street from where Muddy Waters used to live. This place was nothing like Lincoln Park; when you walk down the street, everyone makes eye contact and says hello. One time, when I left the trunk of my car open, a woman rang the bell, and asked me if I wanted her to close it. Culturally, it was like living in a small town middle America, without the white people.

I moved back to Hyde Park again, and then, some years later, I bought a place in Douglas, more commonly known as Bronzeville. Sophia and I had been dating for a year at that time and decided to move in together. We weren’t yet engaged, but it was moving in that direction. We lived a single-family home as part of the mixed income housing project after the last of Stateway Gardens homes were torn down. This development was, of course, an improvement of the poorly-designed and poorly-managed public housing,

but about a year into our living there, the housing market crashed and construction stopped because of stagnant sales in the market rate housing. Although construction has started again, Chicago Housing Authority has not nearly replaced the public housing that was lost, and most of those former residents have moved to the south and west suburbs, places like Chicago Heights, where I now teach and make my living.

“You need to write this story,” Bayo said to me as he was signing his credit card receipt. But we didn’t start a discussion about race that day. Even today, when the topic comes up, we sidestep it and talk about it a way that avoids controversy. The topic is too difficult for discussion over food and drinks. In class, my students tell stories of police harassment and job discrimination. The parents in my neighborhood tell me about the worries they have for their children, the physical violence inflicted by police, poverty, and proximity.

I think about how distant I am from the heart of my own story. I’m the product of expensive private schools, and I now make a good salary teaching underprivileged students, most of whom are products of underfunded public schools. I grew up wealthy but I chose to live and teach in poor neighborhoods. It’s awful, but I sometimes feel like I’m in one of those shitty movies about the white savior teacher who teaches students of color in the inner city. In the movie version of my life, my white guilt drives me to become a teacher. With my exemplary teaching, I open their minds to poetry, but then they teach me a thing or two about life as well. The reality is that most of these teachers

are either burned-out or scared of their students. Even with great teachers, schools can't change the way privilege is bestowed.

The most complicated part of my story is about the black gentrification of Bronzeville. It's still predominately black, so a tension exists between the wealthy black property owners and the people living in Section 8 housing. In the park, class divisions run deeper than racial divides. I know many of my neighbors, but I socialize mainly with the other homeowners. They are the same way. I see the kids in CHA apartments frequently. They come by to say hi to my kids on the playground or talk to me while I'm working in my garden. My other neighbors, who are black and wealthy, don't speak to them and don't want anything to do with them.

Places like Chicago Heights, where I teach, have a lot of racial tensions precisely because they are integrated communities. Homogenous areas, like the one where I grew up, have few racial problems because the racial prejudice is invisible. When I talk to my black students about racism, often times, they just want white people to admit that they are racist. White people fear that label and think they'll have to wear a white 'R' on their clothing for the rest of their lives. My black students can admit when they have racist thoughts. They see it as an admission of their human nature.

When I look back at this story, I remember how desperate I was for help, how bad everything was. And people came to help me, precisely the same people who I assumed wouldn't help me. They stopped whatever they were doing to help me. We don't expect this kind of help from strangers living in a major metropolitan city. Despite all the things that politicians and the talking heads on cable news say about violence in Chicago, especially on the south side, I will say: I hope nothing bad ever happens to you, and I

hope you never you never get stranded in your car, but if you do, I hope you're on the south side of Chicago.

Chapter Two: Something There is That Doesn't Love a Wall

Sophia and I used to live together in a house in Bronzeville, a predominately black neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. We were the last family on our block to put up a privacy fence in our backyard. It wasn't something I wanted to do, but my Sophia was getting tired of the intrusion problems we were having. We talked about it and agreed to put one up. I was saddened by this decision, partially because I kind of liked all the intrusions.

The main issue was that the neighborhood kids were now exclusively using our backyard as a cut-through from the CHA apartments to the park. I liked this problem because it reminded me of something I used to do as a kid, cutting through backyards to make my neighborhood travels a bit shorter. When I got caught, the owners of the house would just yell at me; they never put up a fence. But the kids in our neighborhood did it all the time, and they would even come up the steps to our back porch and knock on our door while Sophia and I were watching TV at night. The backdoor was all glass, and they pressed their faces against it to see inside. I paused whatever show we were watching, got up, and opened the door. Most of the time, they were there to ask us for candy, which was another recurring practice that Sophia was getting tired of. Our other neighbors had already put security fences around their yards, so we had to do it too.

These were kids that I knew from the neighborhood, but I didn't know their parents. I had never even seen their parents, even though some of them were about 7 years old, a few of them maybe younger. They were literally taking candy from strangers, but they didn't seem to care as long as there was candy to be had. I wasn't doing anything

wrong, or at least, that's the way I saw it. I remembered from my own childhood in Rocky River, Ohio, visiting houses in the neighborhood and getting treats from neighbors. Our next-door neighbor, Mr. Hill, used to give us Fla-Vor-Ice from his basement freezer. I thought that this was just something neighbors did. And these kids became more than just neighbors, especially Tyrese, a kid with a big smile and ears that stuck out.

I first met Tyrese when I was throwing a housewarming party right after we moved in. I got a keg and invited all of our friends from the north side. A few of them were pretty skeptical about the neighborhood, even asking me if their cars would be safe parked outside. On the back deck, we played loud music, grilled burgers, and drank beer bongs, generally making a bad first impression with our neighbors. That's when Tyrese wandered into the party. It was dark out when he walked up the steps to the back deck. At the sight of a seven-year-old black kid at this party, one of my friends turned to me with a concerned smile and said, "Umm, Patrick?"

"Hi," I said. "Can I help you?"

"Y'all having a party?" he said.

"Yep, it's kind of a party for adults, though."

"Y'all drinking beer?"

"Yes," I was pretty drunk at this point since it was my party and I didn't have to drive. I'm a pretty calm drunk, so I acted as though this encounter was natural. "Hi, I'm Patrick," I said and extended my hand.

"Hi," he said quietly and gave me a shy handshake. "Mind if I get a burger?"

“Sure, I’ll get you one.” I moved over to the grill, which was cooking the second round of food.

“Sophia and I just moved into this house.”

“Sophia your wife?”

“No, we’re not married. She’s my girlfriend. She’s inside.”

“You got any kids?”

“Nope, no kids.” I looked down at one of the burgers that seemed done, and asked, “Cheese?”

“Yeah. Yes.”

“Can I ask you your name?”

“It’s Tyrese.”

“Do you live here too?”

“Yeah, me, my mom, my sister, and my niece moved here. We’re over there.” He pointed to one of the apartment buildings behind our house.

“That’s great. Well, I guess we’re neighbors then.” I slid his cheeseburger onto an oversized bun and gave him the paper plate.

“Thanks.”

“You should probably get going though. Your mom probably doesn’t want you here without her being here too. Plus, this is a party for adults.”

“Yeah, ok. Thanks for the burger.” He walked down the steps and out into the back alley. My friends stifled their laughter until he was gone.

My friend Kelly shook her head at me. With a big drunken smile on her face, she asked, “Patrick, what are you doing? Just feeding the neighborhood kids?”

“Well, what was I supposed to do? Send him away?”

“Yes, that was totally inappropriate. You can’t just feed a random kid like that.”

I suddenly felt very nervous. What if the burger wasn’t cooked enough and he gets sick? What if his mother comes over and asks why I’m giving her kid food at some party filled with drunks? I started thinking of my defense, “Well, what was your kid doing wandering around the neighborhood late at night?” I would ask her back.

But I knew that was a ridiculous argument. I started questioning myself and whether my reaction would have been the same if Tyrese were white. I knew immediately that my actions would have been different. I would have shooed a white boy away and would have probably chastised him for wandering into a party without a parent. With this kid, I welcomed him into the party because I saw him differently, as though it were only natural that he would come to a party at night without a parent and ask me for food and that I would give him a burger. I knew that my altruism toward him was rooted in my own racist notions.

The party died down after that, my friends all being thoroughly satisfied that they got what they came for, that my move into this neighborhood would be a spectacular failure. We had lived there for two weeks, and I already was embarrassed.

The neighborhood’s official name isn’t really Bronzeville. It’s supposed to be called “Douglas,” after Stephen A. Douglas, famous for the Lincoln-Douglas debates and for beating Abraham Lincoln in the 1858 Senate election for the state of Illinois. He was called the “Little Giant” because of his oratory skills and the fact that he stood at 5’4”, a

full foot shorter than Lincoln. Douglas also ran against Lincoln in the 1860 presidential election. Douglas was nominated by the northern Democratic Party, which favored the principle of popular sovereignty on the issue of slavery, that individual state governments should decide whether to be a free or slave state. The southern democrats held a hard line on the issue of slavery, that all new states should be slave states and honor the slave holdings of the south, so they nominated their own democrat John C. Breckenridge, who split the party's votes in 1860, allowing Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican candidate in history to win the presidency. Prior to his election, Lincoln had lost an election for a seat in the Illinois General Assembly, one for the US Congress, two races for the US Senate (one against Douglas), and one campaign for the vice-presidential nomination.

After the election, Douglas moved back to his estate on 35th street on the south side. He supported Lincoln and the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War, but in April of 1861, he died of typhoid and willed his estate to the federal government, which created Camp Douglas, first used as a Civil War soldier training camp and then a brutal prisoner-of-war camp. After the war, the camp was dismantled and became a neighborhood where newly freed slaves settled in Chicago during the Great migration, creating what historians called the Black Metropolis, and what whites called the "Black Belt," until finally, the residents (and real estate agents) settled on the name Bronzeville, which sounded more like a celebration of blackness. The name "Douglas" fittingly fell out of use, but he's buried there on 35th Street in an empty but well-attended park honoring him and him alone; it's a Chicago landmark and on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. Over his tomb, a 43 foot white marble obelisk stands. On top of it is ten-foot statue of Douglas.

The morning after our housewarming party, I was cleaning up the mess in the backyard, when Tyrese wandered into the backyard again, this time with a little girl who was four.

“Hi,” I said, surprised again. “Tyrese, right?”

“Yes, what’s your name again?”

“Patrick. And Sophia is in the house. Is this your sister?”

“No, my niece.”

“You mean your sister, right? If she’s your niece, you’re her uncle.”

“She’s my niece. I’m her uncle.”

“Umm, ok. She’s your sister’s daughter then, right?”

“Yes,” Tyrese said, visibly annoyed to have to explain this again.

I walked over to the little girl, and extended my hand to introduce myself. She didn’t take my hand. “What’s her name?” I asked him.

“Shy-yell,” he said.

I saw that both of her shoes were untied, and I said so. I bent down in front of her to tie them. I felt the sensation of her hand on my head. She was petting my hair and said, “Your hair, it’s so soft.”

I got up quickly, and said, “Let me get Sophia.”

But Sophia was coming out the backdoor already. “Hi guys! Hey, you’re from the party last night? Tyrone, right?” I cringed.

“Tyrese,” he said.

“Oh, sorry. Tyrese. Yes, of course. And is this your sister?”

“She’s my niece.”

Sophia looked confused. I confirmed that she was his niece, though I was still skeptical.

“What’s your name?” Sophia asked the girl.

“Shy-yell,” Tyrese again answered for her.

“Oh, that’s such a pretty name. How do you spell it?” An odd question, except that Sophia’s an editor.

“C-H-Y-A-I-L.” Tyrese spelled it.

“Such an interesting name!” Sophia gushed.

“You got any food?” Chyail blurted out.

“Chyail!” Tyrese said, giving her a look.

“No, that’s ok. I think we have something,” Sophia said. She went back into the house. I looked at these little kids standing in my backyard and didn’t know what to say.

“You had a good time at that party last night?” Tyrese asked.

“Yeah, it was a lot of fun. We were celebrating moving to the neighborhood.”

“And it’s just you two in that house?”

“Yes, just the two of us.”

Sophia and I were about to get renters to move into the basement to help with the mortgage, but I wasn’t going to explain that to a seven year old.

She came out and gave them two individually wrapped pieces of dark chocolate. They took the pieces and left. I wondered if they would even like it because it was 75% cocoa. I wondered if we would ever see them again.

For the early part of the 20th century, because of redlining, housing covenants, and other practices that reinforced racial segregation in the city, Bronzeville was the only place where blacks could live and work. It even became thought of as an independent economic enclave within the city, giving rise to black owned businesses and a hotbed of black culture, writing, art, and music. When desegregation began in the 1950s and 60s, wealthy and middle-class blacks moved to other neighborhoods and the suburbs. Bronzeville residents began to shop and find employment in the Loop, so the local stores went out of business. Desegregation destroyed Bronzeville's vitality, or so the story goes. In reality, throughout Jim Crow years in Chicago, Bronzeville was an untenable place to live. The black population was exploding in Chicago, but Bronzeville wasn't getting any larger nor was new housing being built. Freedom of choice as to where black families wanted to live isn't to blame for the economic depression that Bronzeville experienced, nor is the freedom to shop and work in all parts of the city. Rather, desegregation allowed white owned businesses to ruin black owned businesses by luring black consumers with temporary lower prices and the novelty of shopping in areas previously restricted. In addition to this, the city government was able to use repressive municipal regulatory and taxation policies, in a previously unregulated (and unprotected) economic realm, to undermine competition from black owned businesses. These are the real forces that destroyed the vitality of Bronzeville. This nostalgia for the old Bronzeville has a lot to do with why Chicago decided to reinvest in the area and thus, why I eventually moved there.

I moved to Bronzeville because Chicago decided to build a development of brand new houses and condos called Park Boulevard. It was the only place in the city where I

could afford a brand new house. But the house needs a bit of historical background too. In 1958, Stateway Gardens, a massive public housing project, was built on the site where our house now stands, on 35th and State Street. It was one of the many identical high rise apartment buildings on the east side of the Dan Ryan Expressway, like the Robert Taylor Homes and the Harold Ickes Homes, both named after black advocates of equal housing practices in Chicago. The Dan Ryan itself was line drawn by Richard J. Daley, like a man-made river, or a partition to racially segregate the white neighborhood of Bridgeport from black Bronzeville. On July 24th 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech in front of these south side slums, declaring that Chicago was the most segregated city in America. The Stateway Gardens housing project was designed to literally ghettoize the neighborhood by concentrating impoverished residents, one family on top of another, in these cheap, unlivable high rises. The drab modernist architecture of the buildings hampered an experience of a true neighborhood; they even looked like they were built essentially to warehouse people, away from the Loop and away from white neighborhoods. Outside of the buildings, there were some open swatches of green space for recreation, though the grass was quickly reduced to bare soil. Inside, there was not nearly enough living space for the residents. In addition, the buildings were mismanaged: elevators constantly broke down, heating was lost, trash wasn't disposed of, which led to infestations, water pipes burst, power outages were common, and fires broke out from the cheap wiring installed. Then other problems ensued, which inevitably follow a concentration of poverty: drugs, gangs, and murder. These were the problems that caught media attention in the 1980s and 90s. These problems led to Richard M. Daley's The Plan for Transformation in 2000. The people living in these buildings were displaced, the

buildings were razed, and room was made for a plan for low-rise, mixed income housing. The Chicago Housing Authority promised to replace all the lost public housing with better housing, creating a real neighborhood, without the overt gentrification that happened with the destruction of the Cabrini-Green projects on the near west side. The plan was for one-third public housing, one-third affordable-income housing prices, and one-third market rate housing. It was called Park Boulevard, a name that even evokes urban gentrification. And that's where Sophia and I come into the picture. We were the posterboys for southside gentrification, the token white couple moving in the neighborhood.

In March 2005, before I even met Sophia, I put down a deposit of \$1000 on a house that was going to be built in this neighborhood. I went to an open house for the new neighborhood and saw a miniature scale model of what the neighborhood would look like, and I even got to point to a little house and say, "That's the one." The real estate agent walked over to a map on the wall and pushed a pearlized ball head pin into the corkboard, staking my claim to the house. It was the first pin on the map.

For our first Halloween, we didn't see Tyrese or any other kid in the neighborhood, even though I bought a Costco sized bag of candy. Sophia and I slowly picked at that bag all winter long. We enjoyed how quiet the neighborhood was with most of the other houses still vacant. We gradually decorated the house, hanging our personal photos and art collections together and trying out different furniture arrangements. When

spring rolled around again, I started working on a backyard garden. I was digging up a large strip of sod when Tyrese came up from behind me and said hi.

I must have jumped in surprise because he laughed at me when I turned around. I said hi back. He asked me what I was doing. I told him, and he asked if he could watch. I said sure. Tyrese overturned an orange Home Depot bucket and watched me work on a bright spring day. I asked if he wanted to help, but he was content to just sit quietly and watch. Plus, he said he didn't want to get his shoes dirty. They were all-white shoes; I couldn't discern the brand.

I'm a teacher by nature, so I just started explaining what I was doing, that I was rolling up the sod and planning on throwing it away. Then I was going to spread my compost as I was planting the tomato seedlings. I showed him my composting system and how I built my own compost barrel, which I rolled a few times, and then asked him to smell it. He said it smelled like dirt, which is what it's supposed to smell like. Then I showed him an earlier stage of compost, kitchen clippings that had been sitting in a plastic trashcan under my porch all winter long. I took off the top and asked him to smell it, but from far away. He took the slightest whiff from a few feet away and started coughing. I laughed this time, and he told me it smelled like dookie. He asked me why I would keep my garbage. I said it smells like poop because it's fertilizer, but that this compost probably needed more carbon, and that I needed to put in the rolling barrel because it needs oxygen to breathe a bit, to get more oxygen, and soon it will start to smell like dirt like the other stuff. Tyrese was skeptical and shrugged his shoulders. At the end of the day, I went inside and gave him a piece of Halloween candy.

The next day was Sunday, and he came back to help with the planting. This time, he came with old sneakers and sweatpants. I gave him a pair of garden gloves and a little shovel, and we got to work. As I did the row of tomato plants, he did a long row of pepper plants. When he was done, I had him do it over, digging the hole a bit deeper and packing the dirt a bit more firmly, but we were done in no time. I gave him a watering can and told him to give each plant a big drink. A few of the plants flopped over with the water, but I just replanted them.

I asked Tyrese to wait in the backyard and then drove to Home Depot for bags of mulch. I dragged about ten of them from the car to the backyard. I cut them open in the center with my hand shovel and instructed him to carefully spread the mulch around the plants. Usually, I just dump the bag out on top of the garden and just spread it by hand, but since that might prove to be too rough for the seedlings, Tyrese and I scooped the mulch out by the handful. We were both sweating when we were done. I went inside for two glasses of ice water and brought them out. I sat down on the grass, and he sat on an orange bucket. We didn't talk, just admired our hard work, the contrast of the black mulch under the bright green seedlings and the pipe tobacco smell of the new mulch. We sat there long after we'd finished our water. I thought that giving him a piece of candy wouldn't be sufficient payment, so I gave him five dollars and a piece of candy.

That evening, I was pretty proud of myself, so I told Sophia what we did that day. She expressed a bit more reservation about entering into an employment relationship with a little kid, especially since we didn't know his parents. Again, I hadn't thought about it. He was just this cute little kid who came by and wanted to help me in the garden. I'm good with kids, probably because I was one of nine kids and I have 18 nieces and

nephews. Kids just feel comfortable around me. Tyrese must have spread the word about me because it wasn't long before I became like the pied-piper for the neighborhood.

When summer rolled around, all the neighborhood kids were coming into the backyard for visits. Sometimes, it was to see if I needed help planting flowers or picking weeds in the garden, but Tyrese was the only kid I employed for these tasks. Most of the time, they wanted a piece of Halloween candy or a glass of water after playing outside for a long time. Sometimes, they needed air for a deflated basketball, and I had a bike pump and a needle for doing this. By the end of summer, Tyrese and Chyail were coming into the house to talk with either me or Sophia. Then Tyrese's best friend DeShawn starting coming inside, along with his little brother Dewon. But the group of kids was much larger than this, and I had trouble remembering all their names. Some of them would be around for a week, and then I wouldn't see them for a month, but a group of 20 kids would come by the house on a regular basis. During this time, I never met any of their parents.

Kimball Hill Homes, one of the nation's largest privately held homebuilders, had been commissioned to build Park Boulevard. My uncle Isaac was the Chief Operating Officer for Kimball Hill, and was a close friend of the CEO and owner David Hill, who inherited the company from his father Kimball Hill. My uncle Isaac was a lawyer by training but had worked in home building industry for his entire career. When the company US Homes went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy, he was tapped as the new CEO and asked to bring the company out of bankruptcy. He did just that and then stepped

down. He worked for a few other companies before his close friend Dave Hill asked him to help his company and the housing boom they were experiencing. Isaac agreed, and one of his main projects would be Park Boulevard. Since Kimball Hill had exclusively built houses in the suburbs of cities, this was a new and risky venture for the company, even with the city's sweetheart land grant of these city blocks, which were CHA property and shouldn't have been gifted to a private firm for building, even if the properties included some subsidized and public housing. My uncle was the one who called me up and encouraged me to put a deposit down on the house because he thought the price of the house (\$454,000) was much lower than market value; he said I would make money even if I just flipped the house. My mom told me to do it because, in her words, "Everything Uncle Isaac touches turns to gold."

This purchase made absolutely no sense for me. I sold my condo in Hyde Park and gathered every penny I had toward the down payment. I had a job as a community college professor and was almost tenured, but my salary was around \$50,000. I had a car payment, student loans, and the spending habits of the Prodigal Son. I went on nice dinner dates, bought new clothes, and took trips to New York, California, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Peru. I was spending every dollar I earned and even going into credit card debt. I was having fun with my job and salary. Of course, I was thinking about the future in some abstract way. I wanted the wife and kids, the house, the dog, and the picket fence. But before Sophia, I hadn't met anyone I was serious about. My dad encouraged me to buy the house too, even though it was well out of my price range. He said that maybe I could teach extra classes and even summer school. He suggested that I could get a renter for the basement bedroom, get a night job bartending, and start to discipline my

spending. He said that it would be difficult for the first year, but I would grow into the mortgage. He said that if I wanted to attract a wife, I would have to build up a little equity. I said that I didn't want to attract a wife like that. I wanted someone to fall in love with me for who I am. He scoffed and said, "Patrick, no woman has ever fallen in love with a man for *who he is*."

Then I met Sophia in the fall of 2006, and we fell in love instantly. She kept a separate apartment, but essentially moved in with me. She lived only a few blocks away, so it was easy. Eventually, I showed her the house, which was under construction, and she looked at it, and the neighborhood around it, which was pretty much vacant, and nodded and seemed to say, "Yeah, I can work with this." So we talked about marriage and how many kids we wanted; her answer was four, which was more than I wanted, but I nodded, and thought, "Yeah, I can work with that."

So in October of 2007, two years after I had pushed that little pin in the corkboard, I applied for a huge mortgage. Sophia and I moved into the new house, to the very vocal displeasure of my Catholic parents, especially since we weren't even engaged. On the day that I closed, I had a queen-sized bed delivered to the house; it was the only piece of furniture I had in the house. We ordered pizza, got a six-pack of beer, and ate some pot brownies that she had saved for the occasion. That night was the White Sox's last home game of the season. We sat in the master bedroom, tipsy and high, and watched the stadium's fireworks as the Metra train rolled back and forth. We made love and passed out on the mattress with no sheets and slept there that night. We were the very first people to move into the entire development.

I lined up two local students to rent the basement bedrooms and share a bathroom; they each paid \$500/month. I asked Sophia for \$400 a month because she didn't have a job. After the renters' contribution, I paid a little less than two grand a month, which was more than I could afford, but I taught an extra course at my college. Somehow, we managed to make ends meet without me getting a bartending job. Eventually, people started moving in, families who bought houses at the market rate as well as families who qualified for the Section 8 or affordable rate housing available in the development.

In 2010, our second Halloween, Tyrese came over during the day to show us his costume, which was a skeleton body suit with an open-mouthed skull mask. We carved pumpkins, and Sophia fried the seeds on a skillet for us. We lit candles and turned off the kitchen lights to see what the Jack-O'-lantern would look like outside at night. Tyrese had never done this before and was beaming when I turned the lights back on. That year, more kids came to the house for trick or treating, but we still had a massive bag of candy left for the rest of the year.

One night that winter, Tyrese came over again just as we were ready to start making dinner. He was wearing a winter coat, a backpack, and a school uniform underneath; he was on the verge of tears. He was locked out of his apartment and didn't know where his mom was. I let him in and asked him to sit down. He gave me his mom's phone number, and I left a message. I turned on the TV, and though I didn't know what kids his age watched, I found the Nickelodeon channel, which seemed to be fine with him. Sophia made him popcorn. He was still pretty upset but was soon lost in a show,

even though the content seemed a little young for him. Sophia and I went into the other room to talk. She was pretty concerned that it had come to this, but what choice did we have? We couldn't kick him out. It was freezing outside.

“He can't stay overnight,” she said.

“Well, obviously.” Truthfully, it wasn't so obvious to me. “His mom will call me back. I'm sure she just got stuck somewhere.”

We walked back into the living room, and Tyrese was asleep on the couch. We let him sleep and postponed our own dinner until he left. Sophia was not pleased by the intrusion, but more so, she thought it was odd that these kids would even come over and that I would let them in. When I was growing up, my house was like a train station; it would not be an unusual event if I came downstairs for breakfast to find a complete stranger in my house, most likely a friend of one of my brothers or sisters, but still, unrelated kids were always in my house. Since there were so many of us, my mom barely noticed. Sophia's family was much more private. She grew up in a farmhouse in rural Maine, with few neighbors. Sophia rarely even invited her friends over to her house.

Soon enough, Tyrese's mom called to apologize, thanked me (she seemed to know exactly who I was), and asked me to send Tyrese home. Sophia gently woke him and said his mom was home. He brushed the popcorn off his jacket, which, along with his backpack, he was still wearing, stood up, steeled his face, and walked out the backdoor without a thank you. Sophia and I ate dinner in silence in front of the TV. I promised that I would meet his mother, and that I would keep a greater distance between me and these kids. “Patrick, we don't even have any kids,” she said, “Why are you letting them come

over?” I didn’t have a great answer to that one, nor did I keep my promise. The kids kept coming, and we kept giving them candy.

One night the next summer, Sophia was gone for the weekend visiting her sister in New York, and I was home alone. I was grilling chicken on the back deck when Tyrese, who was now nine or ten, showed up. He asked me what I was making and whether he could watch me cook. Since I was halfway into a bottle of wine, I didn’t think this was a good idea, but I let him stay because I was bored and a little lonely. Then he started telling me how good the chicken smelled.

“Tyrese, do you want to have some?”

“If there’s enough,” he said with a big smile.

I got two plates and silverware and set the outside table for us. When we finished, Tyrese leaned back in his chair and said, “You know Patrick, we should do this more often.”

More of the houses were being sold at the market rate. On one side of us, a family of five rented the house from someone who bought it as an investment, and on the other side of us, another white couple moved in. Sophia and I were happy to finally have next-door neighbors and that people were actually buying; the price was significantly lower because of the 2007 housing market crash. The white couple was around our age and the woman was pregnant with their first. Their house was sold as a “white box,” which meant that the rooms were merely drywall; it needed all the appliances, including lighting, bathroom, and kitchen finishes. The man was handy so he was busy fixing up the house

on nights and weekends, though he worked in finance in the Loop during the week. He said it was an easy commute for him. The kids, of course, wandered into his backyard because he was a bit of a curiosity too, but it didn't go well. He shooed them off, so later that day, the kids picked my tomatoes and pelted the back of his house. Our neighbors told us the story and were really offended by it. I laughed it off and thought, well, yeah, that's what you get when kids don't like you. I was more upset about my lost tomatoes than the reception that my new neighbors got. I reassured them that the kids were great, but it might take a little time before they warm up to you. The next week my neighbor said he was putting up a fence and asked me if I wanted to put one up too and split the cost. I considered it and asked if he'd be willing to put up a perimeter fence but leave the space between our houses open. I asked this for a few reasons. First, the fence is on the southern border of our house, so it would block a lot of good afternoon sun for my tomato garden. Second, I thought that if we had kids, that our kids could play together in one large backyard. But really, I didn't want to put up a fence at all because of this Robert Frost poem, "Mending Wall." I would be walling Tyrese off.

I teach "Introduction to Poetry" at Prairie State College, and this poem is always on my syllabus. The point of the poem is that building up a wall between neighbors would be some sort of psychic capitulation toward being unneighborly. The first line of the poem is "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," which is about the inevitable disintegration of those New England rock walls that separate farms in the countryside. The rocks fall because the frozen ground swells in the winter, and the upper rocks fall down; thus, 'frost' is the thing/poet that doesn't love the wall. The two characters of the poem (the speaker and the neighbor) meet each spring to mend the fallen wall between

their two properties. They work all day picking up the rocks and putting them back up to keep the border between their farms intact. The speaker, probably Frost himself, questions why they would even need a wall since they both have tree farms. The neighbor simply responds: “Good fences make good neighbors.” But Frost is undaunted by the platitude. He asks, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out/ And to whom I was like to give offense” (another pun). The neighbor is unimpressed by the argument and simply repeats the truism.

My neighbor built the wall between us anyway, but the neighborhood kids still could get into our backyard because their wall only closed off one side of our yard. After the birth of their baby boy, he and his wife sold their rehabbed house and moved back home to St. Louis. They said that they wanted to be near their parents, but I guessed that they never felt at home in the neighborhood. They were sort of mystified at how well Sophia and I had integrated ourselves. We were just as much of an oddity in the neighborhood: the childless white couple living in a big house who were renting their basement bedroom to grad students.

When Sophia and I finally had a kid, we passed the smell-test for all of our neighbors. We had to get rid of our one remaining renter in the house, and he was happy to leave with a newborn in the house. All of a sudden, we were no longer that weird couple; we were raising a family together, and living in that house now made sense—we were going to fill it with kids. It was like everyone breathed a sigh of relief about us. The neighborhood kids would come over to see our daughter Olive (a name they thought was strange); they would sit down on the couch with us and take turns holding her.

And then I became famous in my neighborhood, mostly because I had this incredibly cute daughter with blonde curly hair who went everywhere with me. I would walk down the street with Olive in the stroller and kids (even the ones I didn't know) in the park would shout out, "What up, Patrick?!" I would wave hello and try to figure out if I knew them or not. They would run over and want to see the baby. Even the adults learned my name too, though I never met them, and said hello to me on the sidewalk. It was a great feeling. I was even eventually elected as the president of homeowners association for the entire development, about 600 units. I got write-in votes from residents that I didn't even know. The property manager said that she'd never even seen anyone get a write-in vote, and she manages dozens of buildings in Chicago.

Within the development, I was kind of caught between two worlds, the world of my next door neighbors, those who owned houses and bought them at market rate, and the families who lived in Section 8 housing, like Tyrese's and DeShawn's. Even though every family was black except for ours, there was a big chasm between owners and the CHA residents. The owners would refer to the kids as "my friends" in statements like, "I saw your friends blowing off fireworks in the park today. Can you talk to them about that?" I said that I would. At birthday parties in the park, some of the owners would rent a bounce house for the guests. Sophia and I were always invited to these parties, but the uninvited neighborhood kids would show up too. They would ask the owners if they could use the play structure. The owners would always ask the same question, "Well, where is your mom and dad? Can I speak to them first?" The kids were immediately defeated. Their parents were right around the corner in their apartment, but the kids knew that their parents would not come out to ask their neighbors permission for their kids to

use a bounce house at an expensive birthday party. So, the neighborhood kids looked at me. They wanted me to vouch for them, as though I could be their guardian for the day. I told them that I couldn't help them. Not only was my relationship with them informal and probably improper, but also I couldn't break with my fellow homeowners for the sake of these kids. I recognized this as a deep betrayal of my relationship with them, as I was choosing an adult bond over a bond of friendship, but I liked being invited to these parties. I was the only white guy there with my white daughter, who would be friends with all these kids as she grew up. I couldn't defy the rules of the host of the party while claiming that I would act as their guardian.

There were other things that started to make my relationship with the kids a bit of an annoyance. For one, Tyrese had granted himself open door privileges at our house, meaning he would walk into the house whenever the door was open, without knocking or saying hello. At first, we didn't correct this behavior because I thought it was funny that he would take this liberty. I frequently kept the front door open for fresh air, but Tyrese also liked to scare me by walking in quietly. He would play this same trick on me when I got home from work, hiding behind the side door of my garage, to jump out at me as I opened it. He laughed hysterically if I freaked out, and I always said, "You got me," when he did scare me. Sophia didn't think these surprises were amusing, so I asked him to knock before he came in.

Chyail also started to annoy Sophia, coming by the house almost every day for candy or a banana or a glass of water. Sophia would answer the door, and Chyail would blurt out, "Where the candy at?" So we had to give her a lesson in manners. Chyail was also a bit too aggressive with her desire to hold Olive, and Sophia would ask her to leave

as soon as Olive started crying. Even Tyrese would chastise Chyail for inappropriate comments about Sophia's nap schedule for the baby or how early we ate dinner or what we were feeding the baby or how skinny the baby was. Even though Chyail was then nine years old, she could get under anyone's skin. And Chyail came over at all hours of the day, as early as 7am and as late as 9pm. It got so bad that the neighborhood kids would interrupt us while we were watching a movie at night. After having put Olive down for the night, they would knock on our back door, pressing their faces into the glass to see if we were home. I made a rule about not coming over after 6pm, and we replaced the glass door with solid wood, so they couldn't see into our living room at night. Olive was one year old when we started the backyard fence conversation again.

Sophia was also annoyed at how much time I was spending with these kids in the neighborhood. One Saturday morning, Sophia needed me to go grocery shopping, but DeShawn came over and asked if I could change the tire on his mom's car. I looked at Sophia, and she said, "Just go do it and be back soon." So I changed the tire, but it took me an hour. I grabbed Olive to take her to Costco and give Sophia a little break. As I drove off, Tyrese stopped me and asked what I was doing. I told him, and he asked if they could go too. I said sure. He and DeShawn got into the car. When we walked in together, I flashed my Costco membership card, as I always do, but Tyrese and DeShawn were stopped at the door until I explained that they were with me. The doorman gave me a look, at which Tyrese started laughing. They had never been to Costco before and were overwhelmed by the size of it. They loved the free samples and couldn't believe how many different things they could try. I told them I would buy something for them, as long as it was under ten dollars, but neither of them took me up on the offer. Instead, they

wanted to go to The Sugar Shack, Tyrese's favorite ice cream place in Bridgeport.

Sophia, of course, was fuming when we finally got home.

The other thing I started doing that caused no end of annoyance for Sophia was that I started letting the kids ride her mountain bike. I had bought this bike for her as a replacement for her bike, which was stolen from her place of work. Sophia liked the stability of a mountain bike, and the kids liked the look of it. They did not like my 1970s Raleigh road bike. So they would come by my garage and ask to take her bike for ride around the block. I would let them do it, sometimes letting them take it for a few hours at a time. The bike became famous too, and all the kids, even the little kids wanted to take it for a spin while I was working in the garden or in the garage.

This was the summer of 2013, and Olive was two, so we wanted her to start playing in the backyard by herself, so we finally needed a fence to keep her in. The family on the other side moved out and a new neighbor Charles and his wife moved in. He asked me about building a fence around our properties and splitting the cost, and I agreed. But I was still thinking about the poem in the back of my mind.

Charles was an interesting guy. He played pro basketball over in Europe for 7 years, but now ran a real estate company fixing up old greystone houses on the south side and selling them. He and his wife lost a pregnancy the year before, and their relationship was strained because of it. I learned this after talking to him only a few times. He still seemed to be in bad shape because of it. He was always in the mood to talk, but I barely got a hello from her. She really didn't like the kids cutting through our backyard, and Charles scared them away more than once. He would tell me with some concern in his voice that there were all these kids sitting on my back deck, who said that they were

waiting for me to come home. I told him that I knew them, but he still thought it was strange that they were allowed to sit on my back deck when we weren't home. I reassured him that they were all good kids and wouldn't do anything. Even still, he wanted the fence right away.

Charles said his company could put the fence in at cost, and I could pay him directly with a check. He was only putting the second side of the fence as well as gates in the front and back. The deal seemed good compared to what my neighbors paid, so I wrote him a check and finally put an end to this question to the great relief of Sophia. The next day, his employees were in the backyard digging fence post ditches and setting the posts in concrete. I was in and out of the garage all day, doing yard work and watching their progress. I didn't know where Tyrese was that day, but I figured that he had ridden his bike to play basketball at Metcalf Park.

That night, Sophia and I did our regular routine, putting Olive to bed, having dinner in front of the TV, and Sophia went to bed without me. I sat downstairs watching TV and drinking wine, when I had the sudden realization that I forgot to close the side door to the garage. I ran outside and into the garage. The door was wide open, and Sophia's bike was missing. I was deflated to see it stolen so quickly, but I thought that there was a slight chance that one of the kids borrowed it. I locked the garage door and went to bed without saying anything to Sophia.

The next morning I woke up early and went outside. Dewon, DeShawn's 8 year old younger brother, came by to say hello. He was one of the kids who really liked the bike and frequently asked to ride it, so I asked him where Sophia's bike was. He looked at me with raised eyebrows, and said, "Sophia's bike is gone?" I told him that Sophia

doesn't know it's gone, and that I need to get it back before she finds out. He told me that he didn't know where it was but he'd find out. With Dewon, it was only a matter of time before the entire neighborhood knew, which was a good and bad thing for me.

An hour later, I saw a group of teenagers in the alley. I recognized these kids because they were always smoking weed in the alley, but I didn't know their names. I called out to them, and they looked at me nervously. I told them about Sophia's bike, and they didn't seem too interested in the problem. I offered them a reward to anyone who found the bike, no questions asked.

"How much?" one of them asked.

"We don't know where your bike is," said another.

"I know. It's just, I mean if you see it, it's that gray bike that the kids ride around the block," I tried to explain.

"Sorry to hear."

"It's worth it to me. 200 bucks," I said, which is probably what the thing was worth. Still, the cost would be worth it if I could get it back without Sophia knowing it was gone.

At that moment, Sophia walked into the garage to ask me something. I turned back into the garage and left the teenagers behind me.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing," I lied.

"I need you to watch Olive today. I have to go into work and run some errands."

"Sure," I said. "Hey, your bike was stolen last night."

“What?” She stared at me, and then looked toward the spot in the garage where she had hung it.

“Yeah, I left the side door open, and someone took it.”

“Patrick...”

“I know. I’m really sorry, but I think it was probably Tyrese or something. We’ll get it back.”

“I *told you* not to lend those kids my bike.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry. We’ll get it back, I promise.”

Thoroughly annoyed, Sophia turned around and walked back inside. The teenagers had been watching this scene. Their eyes were bloodshot, but they looked like they felt sorry for me. Our conversation must have been a buzzkill. They walked away, to the other side of the building, where they could continue to smoke in peace.

Soon enough, Dewon came back with Tyrese, DeShawn, Chyail, and about five other kids who all had now heard about the missing bike. Tyrese asked what happened, and I explained.

Tyrese started with a slight grin, “Well, Patrick, that kinda on you.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have left the door open.”

“Yeah, if you leave your door unlocked and wide open, that’s your fault,”

DeShawn said.

“Yes, of course, it was stupid and careless, but that doesn’t mean someone is permitted to take my bike.”

“I thought it was Sophia’s bike,” Dewon said.

“Yeah, Sophia’s bike, but it’s still our property.”

“I see that,” said Tyrese, “but at the same time, if you don’t lock up your property, it’s fair game.”

“No, it’s not fair game. This person came into my garage. There’s no question whether the bike belonged to me or not.”

“Sophia,” said Dewon. “It was Sophia’s bike.”

“Yeah, Sophia,” I said. “But it’s stealing. And stealing is always wrong.” I was trying to impart some life lesson to them, but they were shaking their heads because they needed to explain something else, something bigger to me. He was embarrassed for me because he was only 13 years old, and he understood the world better than I did.

“Yes, that’s true. You shouldn’t steal,” said Tyrese, with a smile on his face, “and stealing is wrong. But this person just took the bike. He didn’t break in or anything. You just left it out for him to take.”

I was frustrated about where this conversation was going, so I dropped it.

“Can you find the bike for me?” I asked.

Tyrese, again with a big smile of condescension and a hand on my back, “Don’t worry, Patrick. We’ll find your bike.”

“Sophia’s bike,” corrected Dewon.

I couldn’t tell if Tyrese already knew where it was, but I went back inside, confident that I would see the bike again.

Later that day, I took Olive to the playground and saw my neighbor Clarence. Clarence and Phyllena live in a house across the street. Clarence does something in technology and Phyllena stays home with the kids. Their daughter Chloe is 2 years older than Olive, but loves playing with her, so it’s a relief when we are at the park at the same

time because someone else can entertain her. Clarence also has a son from a previous marriage, Maximus, who often stays with them during the summer. I told Clarence about the stolen bike, and he looked at me.

“That’s crazy because Maximus’s bike was just stolen, right out of our garage.”

“Yeah, I left the side door open at night.”

“I left the main garage door up, probably for 15 minutes, and the guy came in, grabbed the bike and walked out with it. Broad daylight.”

“Well, I’ve got the neighborhood kids looking for it. They reassured me that they would find the bike.”

“I want to find the kid who stole mine because that just pisses me off.”

Clarence described the bike for me, and I told him that we might still get them back. I really didn’t want to spend money on a replacement bike. Sophia liked that bike in particular, so it would be hard to find one that she liked.

The next morning, the fence guy was back, putting up the wooden boards for the fence. Although I was still feeling a bit nostalgic for my open backyard, I was mostly relieved that it was going up. It was a beautiful wooden fence, 6 feet tall, enough for privacy, but if I got on my toes, I could still see over the top.

Tyrese and DeShawn came to the front door with the exciting news that they saw Sophia’s bike.

“Where was it?” I asked.

“Cousin Freddy was riding it,” Tyrese said.

“Who?”

“Cousin Freddy,” they said, annoyed that they had to repeat it. I had never heard the name.

“Where was it?”

“Right here. Around the park.”

“When?”

“Just a few minutes ago.”

“Is he still around?”

“No, he rode back home.”

“Does he live here?”

“No, he lives over on 43rd and Calumet.”

“Whose cousin is he?”

“Huh?”

“You called him Cousin Freddy. Is he your cousin?”

Tyrese looked at me confused. DeShawn explained, “No, that’s just what people call him.”

Tyrese said, “Oh yeah, I think he’s AJ’s cousin. People call him Little Freddy too, but I call him Cousin Freddy because he is really short.”

I knew AJ well. He lived in a Section 8 apartment around the corner from me, and was a lot older than Tyrese and DeShawn. He was a nice high school kid and would always talk to me on the street, even when his group of friends didn’t talk to me. I didn’t know his mom, but I had seen her before. I decided to walk over to his door with Olive. Her presence always seemed to soften interactions with the neighbors because she was

such a happy kid. That morning I had dressed her in floral overall shorts and red sandals, so she looked painfully cute.

Luckily, AJ's mom was outside of her door talking to a woman in a car who had pulled over to the side. They were talking about a job running the polling place at the Bee Branch Library for an upcoming primary election. I stopped near her and waited for her to finish the conversation. Olive held onto my leg and started swinging around it like a pole. AJ's mom gave the woman a big laugh about something else and said goodbye. She knew I was waiting to speak to her.

"Hi, what can I do for you?"

"I'm Patrick. I live over there." I motioned behind me, extended my hand, and she shook it.

"I know who you are. You got this little girl here."

"Yeah, this is Olive. Olive, can you say hello?" Olive said nothing. And AJ's mom didn't say anything to her.

"You're AJ's mom, right?"

"Yeah, I'm Beverly."

"Look, I'm sorry to finally introduce myself under these circumstances, but we had a bike stolen out of our garage and one of the kids in the neighborhood said that it might have been AJ's cousin Freddy."

"Yeah, maybe. I haven't seen him in a while, but I can ask him the next time he comes around."

"That would be great. I don't want to get the police involved or anything. It's just that it's my wife's bike and it was kinda my fault it was stolen. I left the side door open."

“Still, little Freddy shouldn’t have taken it.”

“We just want it back. I let the little kids in the neighborhood ride it around the park all the time, and Sophia really loves that bike.”

“I’ll send AJ over to your house if he can find it.”

“Thank you. It really means a lot to us.”

“You know, AJ is ranked second in class.”

“I didn’t know that but it doesn’t surprise me. He’s a great kid, always so nice to me and Sophia.”

“Yeah, but he’s a baseball player too, and he’s being recruited by colleges already. He’s only a sophomore.”

“Wow. I had no idea that he played baseball. That’s amazing.”

“Yeah, even pro scouts are looking at him. But he wants to go to college. I want him to go to college.”

“That’s great. It’s great that he has these possibilities. And his grades too.”

“Yeah, he gets all A’s.”

“He must if he’s second in his class. Anyway, please send AJ by when he gets a chance. He knows which house is mine.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get the bike back for you. I’ll make sure of that.”

Beverly was self-possessed enough to make me feel that the matter was settled.

The next day, when the fence was up, though the gates had not yet been installed, I saw AJ in the alleyway. He waved me over.

“Patrick, I’m sorry to hear about the bike.”

“Yeah, do you think it was Cousin Freddy?”

“Probably.”

“Can you talk to him? I would even pay for it. Just to get it back.”

“I’ll see him and talk to him. Yeah, that’s just what he do.”

“You mean, he does this a lot?”

“Yeah, that’s just kinda his job. He steals bikes and sells them.”

“How does he sell them?”

“I don’t know. He rides around, or sells them on the internet.”

“Hey, your mom told me about baseball. You know, I’m a college tennis coach.”

“Really? I didn’t know.”

“Seems like you’re getting a lot of attention from recruits.”

“Yeah. Kansas City Royals sent a guy to watch me play summer ball too.”

“That’s amazing.”

As this conversation was happening, I saw Clarence walking toward us from across the park. He’s a big guy: 6’2”, probably 250, with arms like Popeye. Normally, he’s not intimidating, because he’s such a dad, but he looked mad as he was walking over to us.

“Hey Clarence, this is AJ. He lives around the corner. He’s going to help us find our bikes.”

Clarence folded his arms over his stomach and cocked his back. “Does he know who stole them?”

AJ looked at me suspiciously.

“He might know who did it,” I said.

“Well, I want to know who stole them. I want to *see* the guy.”

I looked at Clarence, and then back at AJ. “No, AJ we just want the bikes back. We don’t want to make a big deal over this.”

“Does he know who stole them?”

“We think it might be this kid Freddy.”

AJ stayed silent, and Clarence looked at him intently. “I hate thieves, and this guy went into my garage and took something that belonged to me.” Clarence stood over both of us, but AJ didn’t look fazed at all. I hadn’t seen Clarence act this way; I didn’t think he was capable of it.

AJ reassured, “I’ll do my best to get the bikes back. And I’ll see Freddy soon enough.”

“If you see him, tell him I want to see him about this. Nobody should be coming into my garage.”

AJ looked at me again. “OK. OK. He said he’s going to help us,” I said and put my hand on Clarence’s shoulder and tried to lead him back across the park.

“I’m serious. I want to speak with him,” Clarence said back to AJ as we walked away.

“I’ll let him know,” AJ said dismissively as he turned back home.

Clarence and I started walking back across the park, and I explained the situation more fully, that I knew AJ and that I talked to his mom, who reassured me that they would get the bikes back. Clarence was still pretty amped up by the conversation; he couldn’t believe that Freddy and AJ were cousins and wanted to go straight over to AJ’s apartment. I convinced Clarence to just be patient and just let it play out like this. He was unconvinced that we would recover our bikes my way, but he let it pass.

Other people I talked to were surprised that I was doing it this way. My dad asked me why I wasn't just calling the cops if I knew that Cousin Freddy stole it, where he lived, and that friends that could point him out to the police. I tried to explain to my dad that the neighborhood didn't do things that way, but even as I was trying to explain it to my dad, I knew I sounded crazy to him, that I was beholden to some code of the neighborhood not to call the cops.

In the past, I had called the cops many times in our neighborhood. After school, some of the local high school kids would come to the park for pre-arranged fights or they would smoke weed in the kids' playground. In fact, all my neighbors called the cops. My next-door neighbor Anthony was a cop, and even he would call the cops if people were making noise in the park late at night. Davina, a woman who lived in a house a few doors down, was ex-cop who used to police this same beat, would call 911 if kids were dicing in the park. My other neighbors, the home owners, started a group text message chain for any illegal behavior; if one person saw something, we all had to call 911 because the police were more likely to respond if they received multiple calls. We agreed to this because if some illegal behavior was tolerated, the whole neighborhood would go down the tubes, as Stateway Gardens did previously. This was our paranoia.

The next day at round 10am, Tyrese and DeShawn banged on my door. They were at the front door this time because the fence was completed and the gates were installed, though there were no locks on the gates yet.

“Patrick! We have the bike!”

“Excellent. Where is it?”

“It’s right around the corner. Cousin Freddy has it. He said that he’d sell it to us for 60.”

“Just give us 60 dollars and we’ll bring it to you.”

“That’s great. Let me see if I have \$60.” I’m not sure why I said this because I knew I didn’t have any cash in my wallet or in the house. I let them in and walked to some of my stashes: my dresser, a junk drawer, and the secretary chest in the family room. No cash in any of them.

“I don’t have any money.”

They were both exasperated by this. Tyrese said, “Patrick, how do you not have any money?”

“I have money. I just really don’t carry around cash. I can go to the ATM.”

“No, he’ll see you. He’s right around the corner,” DeShawn said.

“And he said he’s going to leave soon,” Tyrese added anxiously.

“I can walk around the other side of the building. He won’t see me.”

They considered this for a moment. “Ok, but you have to go quickly.”

I put my shoes on and told them to wait here and watch Olive. I left out the backdoor, opened up the new gate, and walked around the far side of the building, trying to avoid looking at Cousin Freddy, who probably could see me when I crossed the street. I got to the ATM, but I wasn’t even sure if I had any money in my checking account. I tried and came up empty. I walked the long way back and told them I didn’t have any money in my account. Tyrese smacked his forehead with his palm, motioned around my living room, and said, “How do you not have any money?”

At this suggestion, I suddenly realized that I did have another account from which I could withdraw funds; I had an investment account with about 10 grand in cash that I could withdraw from an ATM. I told Tyrese that I had another account. He said that I could not go out again without making Freddy suspicious.

So I asked Tyrese if he could withdraw the funds for me. I gave him my card, and he said sure. I gave him my PIN and told him to only withdraw \$60, and bring it to Freddy right away. I asked him not to check the balance, just do a withdrawal. I would be mortified if he could see how much money I had, money that I'd even forgot about.

He and Deshawn left, and I sat in my living room and considered what I had just done: I had given two teenagers access to my largest bank account. I had put them at risk too. I was thinking of how many of my actual friends I would give my ATM card and PIN. Maybe two people. I was thinking that these kids must think that I'm nuts, asking them to watch my daughter and then giving them access to my bank account, all for a 60 dollar bicycle. Sophia would flip out if she were here, and it was her own bike that I was trying to get back. But it's hard for people to understand my relationship with Tyrese, how much time I had spent with him over the past 7 summers, how much time he spent working with me in my garden, how he tried fresh raspberries, cherry tomatoes, jalapeño peppers, basil, mint leaves, cilantro, chives, and thyme for the first time. Over this time, I played soccer with him, threw a football around, played wiffleball. I even took him to the tennis courts and hit around until I got bored because he was so bad at it. As I would grade papers in our Starbucks, he would come in and rescue me from my boredom. I took him to the IIT library, where he thought he wasn't allowed, and showed him a massive graphic novel collection that he could read all day, any day that he wanted to. I had fixed

his bike and refilled the air in his tires and basketball countless times. Tyrese wasn't just our neighbor; he was part of our family. And I was building a wall to keep him out.

Ten minutes later, he and DeShawn came back with my card but no bike. Cousin Freddy had left. They took out \$100, accidentally they said, and handed it over to me. They were upset that they missed their opportunity, but they were sure that he'd be back. They said that he probably got suspicious that they were taking so long. And they blamed me for that.

A few days later, when I finally saw Cousin Freddy for the first time, he was slowly riding my wife's bike in small circles next to the park in front of our house. Even from a distance, I could see it was her bike. He looked at me, and I looked back hard. He had a sucker in his mouth and would have been smiling at me if he didn't. His butt hung off the back of the seat, and I could see the top of his underwear. He rode the bike as though it were too small for him, but it was probably too big. At this point, I couldn't call the police or confront him about it. Only a week had passed, but it now belonged to him. And I couldn't blame him. I wasn't even mad anymore. I had the money to replace the bike. The whole thing was my fault anyway.

Weeks later, Tyrese came back and told me that Cousin Freddy had sold the bike but that Cousin Freddy was now in jail. I asked why, but Tyrese didn't know, probably stealing because, as AJ said, "that's what he do." I never talked to AJ's mom again about the bike. From then on, AJ and I just talked about baseball and his college search.

Clarence never got his son's bike back either. My gates had their deadbolts installed, and Olive was able to play in the backyard, with minimal supervision. I bought a brand new bike for Sophia for \$400, but she didn't ride it as much, told me that it wasn't the right fit.

Right around this same time, my neighbor Charles's wife left him. There were no signs that anything was wrong. He told me that she got a job in DC and wanted to move there. He told me that she didn't like living there and that she was used to living in their old house, a big Victorian. He said that his life was in Chicago. She was so beautiful, but no one in the neighborhood ever saw her again.

Chapter Three: A Completely Innocent Victim

Sophia and I were in a kind of rough patch, but we wanted to make a go at it. It was May of 2016, and we started planning date nights and making appointments to have sex. That aspect of our marriage had been dormant for most of the winter, maybe longer.

We justified this in various ways. We were both so busy with work, school, and kids. We had two little kids, ages 4 and 2; the older one was potty training and the other was chronically constipated, so we were up to our wrists in shit, which really kills the libido.

We'd been together for ten years, and married for almost seven, with an itch we were trying not to scratch. The sex appointments most often worked like this: we would put the kids in front of the TV for an Amazon Prime episode of Dora the Explorer, which was streaming for free that month. The girls were really into it. This show gave us 22 uninterrupted minutes for a conjugal rendezvous. We would hustle upstairs, close the door, take off our own clothes, get under the covers, and work on our marriage.

When we would hear Dora's closing song: "We did it! We did it! We did it! Lo hicimos! We did it! Hooray!," we knew that the girls would soon be climbing the stairs to find us and ask us for another episode. We'd put our clothes back on and return to our normal Saturday routine.

Gone were the days of nighttime sex (we were too exhausted or went to bed at different times), and gone were the days of morning sex (the kids got up before we did). If we planned a date night, and wanted to include sex in the date, we'd get the girls down to bed early, about 7pm, have sex, order take out, open a bottle of wine, and watch a

movie. If we actually got a babysitter and went out to dinner or a movie, sex was not on the agenda because we'd be too tired afterwards.

Still, it was springtime in Chicago, and the weather woke up these urges. The semester was over for me, and I had passed my preliminary exams for my PhD back in mid April. The day after I passed the exam, we found out that Sophia had lost her job. This came as a shock to me, but she said that she had a feeling it was coming. She had been writing grants for a lab manager position for a Chemistry professor at the U of C, which would make her job as his science editor unnecessary, or at least that's what she told me. She was having other problems too, and her boss started to notice that she was missing work.

We were also running out of money, which was both of our fault. Sophia was pretty sick with chronic Lyme disease, and the treatments and supplements were getting expensive. Because Lyme disease can cause psychiatric problems, she was in psychoanalysis four days a week. Thus, we had to get a nanny to do laundry and watch the two year old, while she was there, or another doctor's appointment, or writing her novel at a coffeeshop in the Loop, or when she occasionally went to work. For the most part, Sophia worked from home, so she could stay home with the youngest. Her job was part time and most of it was editing grants, papers, and correspondences for the Chem professor.

But I was also spending money like crazy. All winter, I was studying for my exams, so I was going out for lunch and dinner almost every night. I was buying Starbucks daily and new books to read on my Kindle. Or I would go out with friends to

bars and restaurants to blow off steam. When I was home, I would have nice wine and drink half a bottle every night, probably more.

Alcohol was becoming an issue for me. I was a respectable drunk, mostly wine, and occasionally beer, rarely liquor, as though that were temperance. The real issue was that Sophia had stopped drinking entirely as part of her Lyme protocol. This became a strain on us, one that was imperceptible at first. We would normally split a bottle when we opened one; now, there was a half full bottle, and it was easy for me to have a third glass, weekends or otherwise. For me, a third glass was a tipping point. I would fall asleep watching TV, and Sophia would have to wake me up to get me in bed. After a while, she just stopped waking me up and let me sleep on the couch until I woke up at midnight, with the lights and TV off, and I would crawl up to bed.

The next morning I would be slightly hungover was functional. When the morning came, the girls would wake and cry in their beds. I would leap out of bed and get them. It was my duty to change the younger one's diaper (I can do this in complete darkness if it happens in the middle of the night). I'd bring her downstairs and set her up with some toys while I got the older one. We had a different routine because she took a long time to wake up. When I got her out of bed, she liked to get in our bed for a few minutes before going downstairs. She always said, "Daddy, can I sleep with you?" Then I brought her into our bed. I lay her down, and she said, "Daddy! I want you to sleep with me!" So I laid down next to her, and she crawled on top of me with her arms and legs wrapped around me. This is when Sophia got out of bed and went downstairs to feed April who was probably unrolling the entire roll of toilet paper in the bathroom.

Sophia's new diet was another subtle divide between us. It was impossibly strict: no alcohol, no coffee or caffeine, no grains or gluten, no nuts, no eggs, no sugars, no dairy, no nightshade vegetables, no root vegetables and anything that she could eat had to be grass-fed, wild caught, organic, paleo, omega-3, or pro-biotic. She used to make homemade pizza on a pizza stone, but now she would laugh, "It's basically gluten, covered with nightshades, covered with dairy." I wanted her to get better, and with this diet I lost weight too. But I started to silently resent this change. How do you say to your wife that her disease is a buzzkill? The one thing that we loved equally, going out to dinner, was over.

Another strain on our marriage was my tennis coaching. In my seven years of coaching tennis at Prairie State College, I started a program from nothing to a top ten team in the nation. My teams won four straight conference titles and three regional titles, the first titles for any of the men's sports. I won four Coach of the Year awards for tennis and an overall Coach of the Year for all sports in the Skyway Conference. The problem was that I was stretched too thin. I was a fulltime professor, a fulltime PhD student, a fulltime father/husband, and a fulltime tennis coach. I never stopped working, but I loved it. People asked me how I did it all, and my joking response was, "I'm doing them all badly." Though I wasn't doing badly at the tennis at all. Because of the strain on my studies for my prelim exams and the strain on our family, I quit in February of 2016, right in the middle of the season. That team was the best I'd ever coached, but they needed more attention than I could give them. My assistant coach took over and led them to an eleventh place finish at the national tournament in Texas, our best finish ever. I was relieved to be done with the pressure but sad to walk away like that.

Sophia and I were working on our marriage, and we started having sex again. In the afternoon of Friday May 20th, we put the kids in front of the TV, went upstairs, had sex, and then I fell asleep. Sophia went back downstairs to check on the kids and to make lunch. A short time later, Sophia came back into the bedroom and woke me up. She told me that she heard gunshots outside. I said it was probably fireworks. She said, “No, Phyllena (our neighbor) heard them too. She just sent me a text.”

I told her that I would go outside and check it out. I put my clothes back on and walked outside in our back alleyway. When I got to the street, I could see red police tape, covering the whole block, a swat team van, a helicopter above, about three TV news vans, and around two-dozen police officers and detectives.

I asked a reporter what happened and she said, “A shooting, two victims. That’s all we know for now. It just happened.”

I stayed there for a while just watching the investigation. A police officer started laying down these red, v-shaped placards next to the shell casings. Most of the police activity was near the end of the street, right near the Starbucks on the corner of 35th and State Street. I was standing on 36th Place and State, a half block away, but I couldn’t see what the other officers were doing. I knew if the shell casings were on my corner, the shooter was standing right there. I also knew that our security cameras could have recorded the shooter.

Since I’m on the board of the Homeowners Association, I have access to these cameras, and I could rewind the footage and see what was happening in the last few minutes. I walked back home and opened the app on my phone and saw the live footage

of the investigation. I walked inside and told Sophia that there was a shooting and that two people had been hurt and taken to the hospital.

“Oh God.”

“There’s a huge investigation and news vans. I don’t know how they all got there so fast. It just happened a few minutes ago, right?” I asked.

“No, it was about twenty minutes ago. I can check my phone to see when Phyllena sent me that text.” She scrolled through her phone and said “3:55pm.”

I sat down on the couch with my phone. The girls were watching another episode of Dora, but the older one came over and tried to sit on my lap. I pushed her away and said, “Sorry, Dad’s working on something.” She moved back to her seat without taking her eyes off the screen.

There are 16 different high definition cameras in the neighborhood, with two different angles on that street alone because we have so many problems with one apartment there. I found the right camera angle, and pressed the Remote Playback button, which takes me back in time exactly 48 hours. I fast-forwarded until 3:50pm. I couldn’t see any activity. But then I noticed that the time stamp must have been wrong because I could see the police investigation had already started. I went back to the live view and could see that the camera’s clock was off by about ten minutes.

I tried it again, and I went back further in time. Sure enough, I saw a kid walking quickly down the street and then turning the corner north on State Street. A few seconds later, I could see another kid running down the middle of the street, stopping at the corner, taking aim, firing off a few shots in the first kid’s direction, and then running back in the same direction he came from.

“Sweetie,” I said, “umm, I think I just saw a video of the shooting. I can see the shooter clearly.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I have to go tell one of the cops out there.”

“Wait, do you really want to do that?”

“Of course. It’s a shooting. In our neighborhood.”

“Can’t you just tell them about the cameras?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I just don’t want you to get too involved in this.”

“Of course.” But I really didn’t understand what she was talking about. My mind was racing. I thought she might have just misunderstood me when I told her that I actually had a video recording of it. I walked out the back door and back down the alley.

I came to the corner to where the news van and the reporter were. By now, there was a pretty big crowd of onlookers from the neighborhood. I was behind the red police tape, and I started waving at the nearest uniformed police officer. He was talking to another cop and looked at me with a raised eyebrow. He slowly walked over to me and asked if I needed something.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m a member of the board of the development, and there are these cameras on the street.”

“Okay.”

“I mean, I have access to the cameras. On my phone. I can replay what happened. I think I saw the shooter on them.”

“Come with me,” he said and lifted the police tape. He walked me over to some of the detectives who were wearing ties and had badges on their belts. I explained to them about the cameras and pointed to where they were and where they were pointed. The cop who led me to them slinked back to his post on the corner, and all a sudden, five different detectives surrounded me. I opened the app and tried to find the shooting again. One of them took my phone and the rest crowded around it looking at the sequence of events.

“Where are the other cameras?” one asked me.

I looked around the street, and I could see the news cameraman recording me and some of my neighbors staring at me talking to the police. I finally understood what Sophia was warning me about. I felt exposed. I hadn’t thought about what I was doing by talking to the police. The detective walked away from me with my phone, back to the center of the investigation near the Starbucks. I told the detectives about the cameras and how to contact the management company we hired that controls the cameras and records the footage. Another detective found the office number of the company and called them, leaving a message.

The detective with my phone came back and returned it to me. He asked if I could get this video on a larger screen, maybe on my computer. I said that I could do that, but I doubted if I could. I’d never done that before, but I did have an old email in my inbox explaining how to download the app onto a computer. I had never done it before, but a few of the other association members had told me that they could access the video on their computers. Two detectives asked me if they could come to my house to see the footage on my computer. I said that it would be fine.

Sophia wouldn't be happy with this, detectives coming into our house, so I gave them my address and hustled back home to give her the heads up. Before we had a chance to discuss it, the front door bell rang and I went to answer it. They walked in, and Sophia greeted them and then brought the girls into the basement to play down there, giving me a serious look before leaving me with the police.

I went to my laptop to find that email while the officers sat down at my breakfast bar and played with my phone. I found the email but had to download some software before I could get access. I called another member of the board, the one who had taught me how to use the cameras, and left him a message about what was going on.

The detectives had figured out the camera and were able to see that the first victim was walking through the park across the street, when a car came around 36th Street, drove north on Federal, turned right on 36th Place, slowed down, and let the passenger out, who ran down the rest of the street, stopped at the corner, fired off several rounds, and ran back the same direction he came, but didn't get back into the car. Still, they couldn't figure out where he went after he ran off camera.

They got a call from someone, who also was looking at the camera footage and had figured out where the shooter went. It was in an apartment on the other side of the development. They gave me their cards and told me to call if anything else came up. As they were walking out, one of them told me that one victim was killed in the shooting, but she appeared to be a bystander and not the intended target. The target would be OK.

The detectives walked down our front stairs, and I could see a large group of police officers all walking down 36th Place. Our detectives joined the band of cops marching down the block.

I stood on the sidewalk. My neighbor, Davina, an ex-cop herself, stood on the sidewalk in front of her house too. We walked toward each other and met in front of Charles's house.

"You talking to the detectives too?" she asked.

"Yeah, they were looking at the footage on my phone."

"Me too. We found where the guy went. It was one of those apartments on Federal."

"In our neighborhood?"

"Yes, Patrick. Right over there." She pointed in the direction. "That's where they're going. But he's probably long gone by now."

"I can't believe it."

"You'd better start. It's been going on for too long now. And I'm sad to say this, but maybe they'll start paying attention to our complaints. It takes a shooting to get any attention from the police."

"You're talking about the guys hanging out in front of that apartment?" I motioned to the problematic apartment on 36th Place.

"I'm talking about all of it. And it's happening in broad daylight."

"Yeah," I said lamely. I couldn't tell if she was mad at me. "It's really bad. Did you hear that a woman died?"

"Oh yes, I heard, and the other guy was shot in the leg. He'll be fine. He was the guy they were shooting at."

Charles, my next-door neighbor, walked out of his front door and joined us. He told us that he was out in the alley and heard what happened. “It’s crazy. I’m getting worried about this stuff. I’m not sure if I want to live here anymore.” He looked sad.

“I know. And it’s just the start of summer. Imagine what’s coming when it gets warmer!” I joked.

Charles gave me a look. Davina did too. They decided to ignore the comment. I felt stupid, but we kept talking. Davina was convinced that they were going to get the guy because you could clearly see his face on one of the cameras.

After the conversation, I went inside to update Sophia about the situation.

She was understandably worried: “What if someone saw you talking to the police?”

“Jesus, Sophia, it’s not like *The Wire*. No one’s going to come after me.”

“I’m just saying that you might want to be a bit more discreet about these things. You don’t have to walk into the middle of it and give the cops your phone.”

“I have to assist in the investigation. Someone was killed. It could have been anyone. It could have been one of us,” I argued back, but I knew that I didn’t think about my safety or my family at all. And I knew that she was trying to tell me something.

“That’s what I’m concerned about too. This is serious, Patrick.”

The subtext was there; under all of our discord, Sophia wasn’t happy living in the neighborhood, and she wasn’t happy with me.

Olive, my oldest daughter, looked up at us and started crying. She could feel the tension, the fight coming. But it didn’t. I held back. I knew I was in the wrong.

The rift between us was bigger than I thought. It was about how we fit into this neighborhood. It was about our life goals: mine was to raise a family here and to help build the community, and hers was to exist in this house, raise our kids, write, read, and to have a career. In many ways, her plan was more ambitious than mine. She wanted to make something out her life, while I just wanted to be a part of something else.

That night, the shooting made the evening news. In one of the online clips on NBC, you can see the back of my head as I talked to the uniformed police and the detectives. I was pointing to one of the cameras. It's obviously me.

The woman killed was named Yvonne Nelson, a 49 year old, city 311 operator, who was walking out of the Starbucks after her Friday shift. She lived in Bronzeville and was stopping there on her way home from work. The police superintendent Eddie Johnson said that the intended target was a documented gang member and that Nelson was "a completely innocent victim." Johnson said, "When I saw her face yesterday, it occurred to me that I knew who she was. So we're going to work this case. Not that we don't work the other ones, but this one has a personal touch to it."

The shooting came after a press conference a block away at the Police Headquarters on 35th and Michigan where Johnson highlighted a mass arrest of more than 100 gang members. This explained how the news vans were on the scene so quickly.

The next day, all the local papers picked up the story. Then The New York Daily News and the UK Mirror picked it up. My brother in New York called me, and I had to tell him it happened less than a block away from our house. My mom found out and asked me when we were going to move back to Cleveland.

Newsweek did a short treatment on violence in Chicago and interviewed the intended target, James, a 19 year old who worked at the Jimmy John's sandwich shop next to the Starbucks. He admitted to being a gang member in his younger days, but that life was long past him. When I read the story, it occurred to me that I knew this guy, not by name, but I often frequented this sandwich shop. James noticed that I always ordered the same two sandwiches every time I came in. He suggested that I just get the larger version of the sandwich and get extra-meat on it and it would be a lot cheaper for the same sandwich. He'd been working there for three years, and the branch co-owner Diane Landry said in Sun-Times after the shooting, "He was a great guy. He never missed a shift, and he always picking up shifts for other people. We never had anyone coming into the store looking for him or anything, or any problems at all. He is just a nice guy." When asked if he had any gang ties, she said, "Maybe when he was 15 or something."

In the Newsweek article, he said that he was affiliated with the Gangster Disciples. "I did stuff in my past. I ain't no perfect child." The shooter, a 15 year old at the time of the murder, was a member of a rival gang named Murder Town. James said about his would-be-assassin, "He ain't know me. Somebody sent him off. A little kid trying to earn his stripes." But James isn't telling the entire story. James was a known problem in the neighborhood. The association had long suspected him of selling drugs while working at Jimmy Johns. He was often videotaped selling drugs in the parking lot behind the Jimmy Johns. The association had spoken to the owners of the Jimmy Johns and called the police about these suspicions. James had come up in more than one conversation during our meetings, but ultimately, we thought he was just selling weed.

A month after the shooting, U.S. Marshalls caught the shooter. He was taken out of a house on 96th and Wentworth. According to ABC 7 News: “Police say multiple surveillance cameras near the shooting scene and information from people in the community helped them identify the suspect early in the investigation but his family was uncooperative. ‘They indicated they were going to bring the individual in and surrender him, and they failed to keep that appointment,’ said Chicago Police Chief Eugene Roy. Instead police began surveillance on known associates and eventually located the suspect.” The suspect was on probation for other arrests, including one in 2014 of armed robbery with a BB gun. Although he was 15 at the time, he was charged as an adult.

But the story doesn’t end there. In February of 2017, CPD arrested 15 people in a major heroin operation. Investigators said that one landline was getting more than 1,000 calls a day and they were selling over 11 kilograms of heroin a month. The operation took place in a housing development right across the Dan Ryan Expressway from our development, Park Boulevard. According to DNA INFO: “Investigators tapped the phone line and estimated 193,000 phone calls were made in six months to that one land line in an apartment in Wentworth Gardens, the public housing complex between 37th Street and Pershing Road on Wentworth Avenue...Police said the investigation ramped up after a 16-year-old shot and killed 49-year-old Yvonne Nelson, a 311 dispatcher who was getting a cup of coffee on May 20 when she was caught in crossfire outside the Starbucks in the 3500 block of South State Street. Anthony Riccio, chief of the organized crime bureau, said police had gotten tips about the heroin problem in the area before Nelson was shot and were already setting up wiretaps and undercover operations. ‘The motive for that murder was the drug sales that were occurring in these locations over by

Wentworth Gardens,' Riccio said. 'The woman that was killed, was killed as a result of the fight over a drug spot.'"

I faced no repercussions in the neighborhood for cooperating with the police. Things are quieter in the neighborhood, but we still have problems with that apartment on 36th Place. The men stand outside of it, seemingly doing nothing, but just standing outside, waiting for something or for someone to come.

A year and half after Yvonne Nelson's death, in September of 2017, the same month that our divorce was finalized, I was tired of it and all the complaints the association were getting. I walked up to one of guys on the corner. He was a guy I had seen standing in front of the apartment so many times, and he was alone. He saw me coming and waved.

"Hey Patrick," he said casually.

"Hey." I said with some sternness. I was used to people knowing my name.

"I heard that you have a problem with all of us standing here."

"Well, yes." I said, surprised that he knew that.

"What's the matter? We ain't doing anything," he said.

"I'm upset at all the litter in front of this apartment." It was true that I was mad at this, but that wasn't the real reason I was mad.

"Oh, well, yeah, that's my bad," he said.

"It's every day. Beer cans and tequila bottles on the ground."

"Yeah. We be getting fucked up," he said with a big smile.

"Can you at least put the bottles in the trash?" I said, suddenly gaining confidence.

“Yeah, we’ll clean it up. I’m sorry.” He said. “I’m Maurice. You know my brother A.J.”

“A.J. is your brother?”

“Yeah.”

“I know your mom too. Beverly.”

“Yeah, I’m a Bishop. A.J. is my little brother.”

“He’s a great kid,” I said. “Can you take care of the trash though?”

“Yeah, but we ain’t doing anything out here, Patrick.”

“OK, I just don’t want to have the problems we had before...” I wasn’t sure if I could believe him. They were always there, outside in all kinds of weather. But I didn’t have any proof that they were doing anything. Cars would pull up. They would talk through the window for a while, and the cars would pull away.

I shook hands with Maurice. We said goodbye, and I walked away.

Chapter Four: Coaching Tennis

Prologue

In 2001, while in graduate school the first time around, I took a course called Writing as a Public Intellectual. It wasn't as pretentious as it sounds. The professor was cool, and for our term paper, he asked us to write about whatever we thought worthy of an intellectual discourse. I wasn't interested in writing anything like that, and I certainly had no ambition to become a public intellectual. At the time, I was in love with this woman. She told me that she signed up for the course, so I did too.

For my term paper, I chose the only topic that had satisfied the requirements of being 'intellectual' and 'a discourse,' while still being interesting to me: high school debate. I was the co-captain of the debate team while I was in high school and had been a debate coach at the high school where I worked. That was before I quit teaching to attend graduate school. I never played sports in high school, but I was good at arguing. It was like boxing without fists.

To make this paper seem like authentic journalism, I embedded myself in New Trier High School's debate team, a perennially winning school on the city's wealthy north shore. I went to Saturday morning debates, where I followed the team's progress. I also judged individual debates to make a few extra bucks. I interviewed students, debate alumni, and discussed that year's topics with the team (and their relevance to current politics). I spent a lot of time talking to the head coach. He taught history and was in his fifties, handsome and always immaculately dressed in a tailored suit. In my extensive conversations with him, he once admitted that he had become so obsessed with coaching

debate that it had cost him his first marriage. He said this somewhat plaintively, but there was no regret for the choices he made. At the time I remember thinking, “This guy is nuts. Who would throw away a marriage for a high school extracurricular activity?”

The paper was a lot fun to write, by no means great, but the professor gave me an A. I dated the woman from class for about a minute before she moved onto a different guy, a real intellectual getting his PhD in Comparative Lit at University of Chicago. After that, I never had any involvement in debate, high school or otherwise. But I never forgot that coach’s admission. It was one of those things that you specifically remember so that you never make that mistake yourself, like watching a co-worker get drunk at a company party.

The Inner Game of Tennis

I first started coaching college tennis as a joke. I took the job because I thought it would be funny to tell my friends that I was the head coach of college tennis team, expecting them to say back, “Shutthefuckup. Seriously? I didn’t even know you played tennis.” The truth was that I had played a lot of tennis in my youth, but at that point in my life, I hadn’t picked up a racquet in ten years. Plus, I never played team tennis, and I certainly hadn’t coached anything, except for debate. In high school, I tried out for the tennis team all four years, but I never made the cut. I simply wasn’t good enough.

And I wasn’t someone you’d consider naturally athletic or coordinated. By trade, I’m an English professor at a community college. In 2009, Prairie State College didn’t have a tennis team. My colleagues in the department were perplexed by my decision to coach. It was low paying and time intensive, and it wasn’t the kind of service to the

college that a tenured faculty member ought to be doing—it had nothing to do with my academic career and might be a huge distraction from my work as a professor.

The athletic director convinced me to do it. He wanted to revive the tennis team at the college and had heard that I played tennis from one of the IT staff members who coached soccer at the college. I had just recently started playing again after my ten-year hiatus from the sport. The AD saw me in the hall and casually asked me. I turned him down without a second thought. I wanted to focus on other aspects of my life: getting my PhD and starting a family. But he wouldn't take no for an answer. He went so far as to make a scheduled appointment with me during my office hours. He laid out his pitch: it offered a \$4000 stipend, the season only lasted for a month, and the main responsibilities were recruiting the right players and driving the bus. I thought, "Why not? It might be funny." I agreed to do it for one season.

This meeting occurred when I was in my early thirties, around 2007. Back in 1997, right after college, I was sick of tennis. I was tired of losing to players who were worse than I was. I knew how to play, but I would lose to hacks. If I were to win a match, it was always because the other player was even more of a colossal choker than I was, and still, the match was closer than it ought to have been. I liked playing, but I was burned out and emotionally detached from the sport.

In 2007, two years before we were married, my then girlfriend Sophia invited me to her family house off the coast of Maine for a few weeks in the summer. She asked me to bring my racquet because everyone on the island played tennis. She said that there was only one court, and the island hosted a summer tournament. I imagined these old yokels from rural Maine and how bad they might be. So I packed my racquet, which hadn't been

re-strung in a decade. The strings creaked like a nails on a chalkboard. I went out to play on this beautiful court surrounded by these towering pine trees and didn't win a single set for the entire vacation, singles or doubles, even with the best player on the court as my partner. On the flight home, I sulked like my teenage self.

When I got back, I immediately joined a USTA league and lost every match I played. I signed up for lessons at a local indoor club on the south side, where I lived. I learned that modern tennis technique had dramatically changed since the 1990's when I took lessons. Players were hitting off their back foot, instead of their front. They were following through across their body instead of high overhead. They were stepping through during their volleys, or even after the volleys, instead of stepping before the volley. The technique I was taught as a kid was canonical doctrine, and suddenly, it was all heresy. It took me a year to adjust my strokes, as well as find a new racquet and the right strings for my game. And even when hitting felt right during practice and lessons, I still couldn't win. I was still a choker. I could hit well enough with top players, but of course, I couldn't beat them. More frustrating than anything, I couldn't even beat players that were well below my level. These matches would give me fits until I was playing at their same novice level, imitating their bad form and errors on easy shots. My opponents had to console me after matches because I was so thoroughly defeated.

Then, after another defeat to another inferior opponent, he recommended a book for me, *The Inner Game of Tennis* by Timothy Gallwey. I bought it and read it three times over. I started applying the lessons in this book to my game, and it worked. The changes were instantaneous; everything on the court felt different. I stopped over-thinking; I stopped thinking entirely. I just had to practice and learn organically. The

premise is simple: tennis, like a lot of sports, requires a lot of thinking when you are first learning it, but after a while, over-thinking can harm performance. Baseball players call it *pressing*. Gallwey confronts, in an intuitive way, what's going on in your head when you are doing this and gives strategies to quiet your thoughts. Overthinking is especially problematic in tennis because you are all alone on the court, most often without a coach or a teammate. You are out there sometimes for hours at a time. You have to think about your technique, footwork, the score, and where on the court you are supposed to be. Eventually, this becomes instinctive, but the downtime between points lends itself to thinking and over-analysis. The lonely player broods.

Tennis legend Andre Agassi, in his autobiography *Open*, described tennis as a cross between boxing and chess, probably echoing David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Agassi's father and coach was a competitive boxer during his youth in Iran. Agassi's thought was that it was a sport of intense power and careful strategy. In some ways, it's a good analogy. It's *mono e mono*, and the object of the game is position yourself for a final knockout, either by exhausting your opponent or pummeling him until he goes down. The sports require nimble movement, mental endurance, and self-discipline. You may have to sacrifice a few rounds/pieces/games for the sake of the larger match. Your strategy is to goad your opponent into a mistake and you have to pounce before they have a chance to recover.

But the analogy also breaks down easily. Tennis is nowhere near as brutal as boxing. It's a contact sport for people who don't like physical contact. In basketball and football, you constantly have to push your opponent out of the way. The only physical contact in tennis is a handshake at the end of a match. Chess requires so much more

strategy; great players can think ten moves ahead. In tennis, you can't think more than two shots ahead, and even then, you don't know what your opponent is going to throw at you, which might foil any plan you had. If you attack the net, your opponent might pass you down the line, pass you crosscourt, hit the ball over your head, at your shoes, or straight at your face.

Tennis is more like playing hot potato than boxing. And it's more like checkers than chess. Checkers is about forcing your opponent to make one jump only to find that you have a double jump set up for your next move. In tennis, you hit a dropshot to bring your opponent to the net, only to lob the next ball over his head. It's more about whether you can make the shot; the strategy isn't very complicated.

At the club level, tennis is a game of 'not missing' more than it is 'making it.' This shapes players into peculiar kinds of competitors: the accurate bomber and his nemesis, the defensive perfectionist. The bomber wants to dictate the point by hitting unreturnable shots or forcing an error from his opponent. The perfectionist is comfortable hitting every ball back until his opponent gets impatient and hits the ball too hard. Players usually have to be a combination of both types, though it's obvious that the defensive player who never misses will win more frequently. Even at the professional level, two of the best current players, Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic, are better known for their defense than their shot making ability. On the club level, players like this can be especially maddening to play. But often, the madness is self-induced, as it was the case with me. I loved hitting big, heavy, clean winners. The rush of serotonin I felt after hitting a shot with perfect spin, placement, and power was enough to keep me going for

the next three points. But too often, I would lose those next three points because I was trying to replicate that shot, and missing.

The most frustrating thing about tennis is that you can objectively play better than your opponent and still lose the match. During the course of a match, you can win more points and still lose the match. Most matches are very close if you simply tally the points won and lost, even in matches that look lopsided. The marginal difference between winning and losing is miniscule. Sometimes, the score will indicate that you handily won the match, (eg. 6-3, 6-3), but you might have only won 53% of the points, despite winning 66% of the games. If you win 4 straight points, you win the game, but you don't get those points in the next game. You start over at 'love.'

The phenomenon of winning more points and losing the match is an example of something called the Simpson's paradox. It's a kink in statistics where a trend is discovered (like one tennis player winning more games in a tennis match) but then the statistical trend is flipped when the total values are combined (like the same player winning a fewer number of total points). And in tennis, this isn't a statistical anomaly; *The Atlantic* calculated that it happens in 4.5% of all professional matches. Roger Federer, arguably the best player in the history of tennis, holds the worst record in these types of matches (he's 4-24), meaning in these weird matches, where the winner of matches actually loses more points. *The Atlantic* argues this statistic actually further proves that he's the GOAT; that even in the matches he loses, he still plays better. Still, the value of each point is not equal, and any good player knows this. The player who wins the important points, always wins the match.

Unwritten Rules

Tennis drives me to madness. I can remember one match against my older sister Maggie when she was 16 and I was 12. We were playing at night under the lights in Clearwater, Florida, while we were on vacation visiting my grandparents. My whole family was playing at their country club on clay courts, my best surface. I remember that I was up and playing well. It would have been the first time I beat her, but I didn't. Her calm and steady play allowed her to climb back into the match and then win. Even though she was gracious during the match, when I realized it was over, she whooped and gloated. I lost my mind. I chased her all over the courts with my racquet as a weapon to be used against her. She could have probably beaten me up at that point in my life but was so shocked that she ran. And my family was shocked too. My mom finally stopped me, and I doubled over, sobbing. I was inconsolable because I was so close to winning. Maggie and I never played again.

It's not an uncommon occurrence in tennis, sobbing, not the attempted assault. And the tears come not as a watery eye or a single stream down your face. Players, even professionals, will weep with abandon, most often after a defeat. After a five set loss to Rafael Nadal at the 2009 Australian Open, Roger Federer couldn't control crying in his acceptance speech, saying, "God, it's killing me" while holding his runner-up trophy. This man is a multi-millionaire and widely considered the greatest player ever to play. In the 1993 Wimbledon Championship, Jana Novotna lost to Steffi Graf, despite winning the second set 6-1 and being up 4-1 in the final set. All of a sudden, her shots started to miss, and not by a little bit—they missed badly. The match is widely considered one of the biggest chokes in pro tennis. When she received the runner up trophy, the still sweaty

Novotna cried on the pristine white jacket of Katharine, the Duchess of Kent. Both Andre Agassi and Andy Roddick cried as they walked off the court after losses at the US Open, as they both knew that they would announce their retirement from pro tennis at the post-match press conference. During the 2017 French Open, the Argentine giant Juan Martin Del Potro crossed over to his opponent's side of the court after Spaniard Nicolas Almagro went down with a knee injury and had to retire from the match. Del Potro helped him off the court, hugged him, and even sat down with him on his bench as Almagro cried into his hands. Del Potro well understood that he wasn't crying from the physical pain.

Playing tennis can drive anyone crazy. Sure, in all sports, you can have lucky bounces, where the intent of the shot differs dramatically than its actual trajectory. Think of your basketball shot that you intended to go in as a swish, but it's so far off the mark that it hits the backboard and falls in. You get the basket, but only you know that it wasn't intentional. In tennis, if the ball hits the top of the net and bounces in, you are expected to apologize to your opponent for the lucky bounce. However, on the service, this shot is replayed, though no apology or replay takes place if it bounces out. Tennis can be such a lonely, cerebral sport that these events can make it feel like the gods are against you. Tennis players, like baseball players, are notoriously superstitious and ritualistic. But nothing drives you crazier than your own unforced errors. Professionals and club player alike throw tantrums on the court to the shock of onlookers. Some professional players will pick up one racquet after another just to smash them on the asphalt court. These racquets are expensive, custom made for the players, and carefully strung to the exact tension they need, usually the day of the match. Other players will direct their tirades against at a linesperson, the umpire, or even the fans.

But tennis has an answer to this problem. In addition to the official rulebook is The Code, a collection of guidelines that govern etiquette and behavior. During official competition, it's enforceable. Racquet abuse, ball abuse, bad language, taking too long between points to get ready or loud grunting are all subject to point penalties, which can escalate to being defaulted from the match. The official rulebook is about 30 pages long, and The Code is an additional 7 pages. The USTA (United States Tennis Association) publishes this rulebook every year with updates, as new problems inevitably present themselves or new technologies can affect play. In addition to these documents, the USTA includes another 200 pages of rules governing tournaments, high school and college play, each having their own peculiar rules. For example, in Division I tennis, a 'let' on a serve is considered in-play. So, if a player serves the ball on the top of the net cord, and the ball dribbles over, it's considered an ace. The change was made because too many players were calling phantom lets after a service ace. No other division in college or otherwise plays the game this way. It's the baseball equivalent of calling a third strike on a foul ball, like in Little League.

There are so many unwritten etiquette rules too. Unlike most other sports, the crowd is supposed to be completely silent during play. If your opponent hits an excellent shot, you are expected to clap with one hand on the strings of your racquet. Apologies are expected when you hit the netcord for a winner, but no apology is required for hitting your opponent with the ball; that's an occupational hazard. Neither the player nor the audience should celebrate when an opposing player double faults, or if someone hits a lucky shank off the racquet frame.

Tennis has always held an air of superiority when it comes to etiquette, with its all-white outfits, silent fans, and concluding handshakes (both the opponent and the umpire). Trash talking is verboten. Disputes look ugly. Microaggressions are frowned upon. But these things happen all the time. Players do all sorts of subtle things to get into your head. A player might make a line call unnecessarily loud or call out the score too emphatically. Players might hit a ball back to an opponent just out of their reach, or simply leave the balls on their side of the court during a changeover, instead of handing them directly as you pass each other. None of these things are illegal or specifically stated in *Friend at Court*, but players know they are doing them and know that they are gamesmanship.

Losing

The sport might seem miserable, and it is, but tennis can be addictive, especially when you start to get good. My addiction began in the summer when I was ten, which is considered too late to start playing if you want to be competitive. Every morning, my mom would drive me and my younger brothers and sister to swim team practice at our country club. She would leave us there for the day, which was fine by us. After practice, we'd get a hot dog and French fries at the pool concession stand. We'd go to our lockers and grab our white tennis clothes, shoes, and racquet and walk across the parking lot to play on the Har-Tru clay courts. Our cousins belonged to the club too and would play with us. One of my cousins, Kevin, beat me every time we played. It drove me nuts because I was a year older and tennis wasn't even his best sport. I started taking private lessons, going to weekly clinics, and even spending a few weeks at tennis-specific

summer camps. Years went by, and I still couldn't beat him. He wasn't very good, technically speaking. He had awful form and never practiced, but he could win. I delved deeper and deeper into the sport, and still, I could never beat him. One year, during the annual Age 14 and Under Boys' Tennis Tournament at our club, I was up on him 5-3, and he beat me 7-5. I'm three decades removed from this, but this memory still makes me cringe. Kevin and I no longer play, but I've played with his three daughters, who are all quite good.

Growing up, I had other mental blocks to winning matches. I could never beat my dad, even in high school when my speed and strength increased and his Multiple Sclerosis started to slow him down. He could hit his shots, even if he couldn't get to all of my dropshots. He would glare at me from the other side of the net, seeming to think I had delivered him a cheap shot because I was well aware that he could no longer run like that. Whether it was gamesmanship or not on his part, it always worked. My game would fall apart because I would try to deliver the ball to him, so I could beat him straight up. I would start hitting harder, and the ball would float past the baseline. He would start collecting little points, and before I knew what I was doing, the match was over.

He was always good to me afterward, encouraging me and giving me advice. He always made room in his busy schedule to play tennis with me. During the winter, we played every Tuesday at 5pm. After each loss, he said the same thing: "You need to stop taking so many lessons and start playing matches against players at your level." At the time, I refused to take the advice. I just wanted to perfect my form and knowledge of the game. Today, his advice is the thing I say to my own players; wisdom is wasted on the old.

My brother Bill was a big help to me as well. He was six years older than I was and a much better player, though no more passionate than I was. He played two years of high school tennis; he made varsity in the only two years he tried out (he played hockey before that). He was a tennis instructor at summer camp at Oberlin College, where I was one of his campers. He went on to play college tennis at Santa Clara University. I could never beat him either, even when he stopped playing. Any chance he got, he worked with me on my goal to make my high school team.

After trying out for the team three years in a row and always getting cut, I finally took my dad's advice and called every player I knew for a match. I lost most of them, but I started to understand what my dad was saying; it was about mental toughness, playing your best when the point really mattered. My dad used to say that when the score was 30-15 or 15-30, the point was really important, though it might not seem like it. Depending on who won that point, the score would either even it up at 30-30 or go to 40-15/15-40, giving a player two opportunities to close out the game. But most people don't think that 30-15 is an important point because the game is not on the line. He went on to say that all points played in the Ad court (Love-15, 15-30, Love-40, 30-40, or Ad-Out) were the more important points, so I started to practice my serve on that side a lot more than the Deuce side, which was the opposite of what I had been doing. And it made a difference. I would still sometimes choke, but at least I was aware of how I was choking, and then I started to choke less.

Earlier in this essay, I said that I never played on an organized team, and that's mostly true but technically false. I finally made my high school team in the spring of my senior year. By that point, I was a much better player; my form was good, and I won

matches in those tryouts, though not enough to play varsity. So the coach gave me a pity spot on the JV team. After all why would a coach put a senior on a squad that's used for developing the younger players? At the end of tryouts, the coach even gave a speech about it to the players who had been cut. He asked those players who were cut to keep working on their game and to never give up on their goals, like I never did. But this coach was also one of my private coaches, and he liked me personally. I played doubles that year, with the freshmen, and this was my only, very short-lived experience on an athletic team.

When I went to college at Villanova University, my friend Frank and I decided to try out for the team, even though it's a Division I team in the Big East. I was cut after the first day. My friend Frank made it until the last cut. During college summers, I worked at a different country club as a tennis court attendant. I watered, swept, and lined the clay courts. I restocked towels and water, ran the pro shop, and occasionally hit with members. The members liked me more than the other workers because I cleaned the bathrooms. The pay was minimum wage, but I loved this job. I got to flirt with the cute girls at the club, and after work, my co-workers and I would sneak out to the golf course and drink the leftover beer from the men's league. Eventually, I stopped working at the courts and started waiting tables in the main dining room because the pay was better and there were more girls there, both members and other servers. I held an odd status at this country club because I was sometimes an employee and sometimes a guest because my best friend belonged to this club, which was how I got the job in the first place. I knew him and most of his friends from the club, which always made my bosses uneasy about mistreating me while I was working. It was the best job I ever had.

After two summers of working there, I took a construction job and started drinking every day after work with the other laborers. At 3:30, they would send me to the liquor store to buy beer for the whole crew. I was only twenty, but wearing a union t-shirt, construction boots and a hard hat, I looked old enough to buy alcohol. After that summer, I got a job in my dad's law firm as a page changer, and I started hitting the happy hour bars in downtown Cleveland after work with my other friends. So I stopped playing tennis entirely.

But that wasn't the real reason I stopped playing. The real reason was a girl. Her name was Chrissy, and I knew her from the Honors program in college. I liked her and we started flirting after class. She was tall and thin, athletic and funny. She was Irish but had these beautiful dark features: tan skin and dark brown hair and eyes. She claimed to be black Irish, descendants of the survivors of the failed Spanish Armada on the west coast of Ireland. One afternoon, Chrissy and I were talking after class, and she said that she played tennis. I asked her if she'd like to play me sometime, as a date. She agreed, and one night we met out under the lights of the courts behind my dorm. I could tell from the warm-up that she was good; she hit the ball correctly and could generate some real pace with her long swing. I was a lot stronger and had a really big serve. But there's an ethic to playing someone who's not as strong as you. If you hit too hard, especially on the serve, it's considered bad form. If the player is significantly older, younger, weaker, or disabled, you need to play to their level to make the game more enjoyable. I had a really tough time playing down to anyone, as it would mess with my game, which was all about hitting harder than my opponent. Plus, I liked her. To win by blasting her off the court would be unattractive, but to lose would be an embarrassment. Of course, I lost, though it

wasn't for a lack of effort. I started serving slowly enough, but when I lost my first service game, I turned on the full heat. She would still get the ball back and then outlast me in the point. After the match, I tried to play off my humiliation, but it wasn't as though I was a casual player; tennis was my only sport. Chrissy and I remained friends, but we never went on another date. And that's why I gave up tennis for ten years.

Excess Tennis

In 2007, I took up tennis again to salve a different psychic pain. As I wrote earlier, Sophia invited me to her family's summerhouse on Great Cranberry Island off Bar Harbor. The island sponsored a tennis tournament every August called Wimbleberry. There's only about 100 houses on the island and a single tennis court. I laughed at the idea of playing old man hackers in their all whites with wooden racquets and dead white balls. I was in good shape and thought I would pick up my former game quickly enough because we would spend two weeks there. There was no TV and no internet, and cell phone reception was spotty, so what else would I do? I was happy to get away from those things anyway. But it turned out that my tennis game was in shambles. The old man hackers beat me easily. It was humiliating because I looked like I knew how to swing a racquet, but I simply couldn't keep the ball in. My hands and feet were blistered, and my back and legs were aching, and I was relieved for the vacation to end.

The humiliation led to a rebirth of my tennis game. The best thing I did was join an indoor tennis club on the south side called XS Tennis, a predominantly black club with a men's league that offered both tennis clinics and competitive league play. After my first practice, the other guys could see that I could play, so they put me in the lineup, but then

they learned that I couldn't win, so they kept moving me down until I started to win. By the end of the season, I was playing fourth doubles (the last spot on the team), and my partner and I started winning.

The culture at XS was wildly different than the country clubs I where I learned to play. Braggadocio was common, though always a bit tongue in cheek. Guys didn't blush after they screamed "Motherfucker!" after missing an easy shot. Trash talking took place, in no subtle ways against your opponent. One time during court ladder play (where the winners move up the top courts and the losers move down), I heard one teammate say to another, "I'm going to put you down in the Rosa Parks court." It was more blatant against your doubles partner—there was no positive encouragement, just overt blame. "Look, just get the ball in," my partner said to me, exasperated after I'd missed three consecutive shots, "I'm doing my part over here, but you keep fucking up." Or sometimes, the players would over-strategize telling me: "Kick the serve outside on the first serve and then on the second, serve it into the body, and I'm going to poach on the second, so you need to switch sides with me." Of course, I dumped the next two serves into the net.

But after matches and practice, we'd eat pizza and drink beer, and everyone was easy going. I felt a bit out of place, but everyone else seemed comfortable with me. We'd laugh about the matches, recounting incredible shots or long points. We'd argue about a winning strategy or who missed an easy shot. Sometimes, a pro would talk about a technical aspect of our play, something about footwork or not hitting volleys in front of our bodies. But mostly, we'd talk about our jobs, our wives and families, or anything interesting that wasn't tennis. Everyone was intense on the court but friendly after the match. And I started to look forward to Tuesday night practice and Sunday afternoon

matches. I was getting better too, and more addicted to playing. I even started asking people at Prairie State if they played tennis, and that's how word reached the Athletic Director.

Coaching Community College

In 2009, Bob Fairbanks, the Athletic Director at Prairie State College, pitched the idea of me becoming the head coach of a newly resurrected tennis program. I told him that I'd never played team tennis and that I'd never coached anything in my life. I told him that I wanted to go back to graduate school and get a PhD. I told him I wanted to write more and do more committee work in my department. But I was scared by the responsibility. I lacked the ability to win myself, so how could I teach others to do it? I remembered the old adage: Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.

The AD pestered me for weeks to try it for a year. I finally relented, but only for the sake of the joke. I refused the stipend because I didn't want to feel obligated to do a good job. I put some posters up around campus and found four guys to play, one of them named Andres, who had never played the sport before. He was just a kid from my English 101 class who volunteered to play for the team after I mentioned it in class. As we walked onto the court for the first time, he asked me how many bounces the ball could take before you had to hit it. One bounce: that's where the team started.

The three other guys knew how to play and keep score, but they were hopelessly uncoordinated and out of shape. Andres didn't know any of the rules and he was better than they were. Two of them required XXL jerseys. The other one quit the team after a

week, so I only had three players, which wasn't enough to field a team. The AD cancelled the season, and I felt relieved. It would have been an embarrassment.

The AD retired the next year but wanted to make sure I was still committed to restart the program. He gave me a full coaching stipend, a few full-tuition scholarships, a budget for equipment, and some court time during the winter. I liked the idea of not paying for court time because I would get a chance to play indoors for free. I talked it over with Sophia, and she said it would be good for me to get some exercise after school. So I put up signs once more, and to my surprise, I got some really good players that year. Looking back, I now realize that this was during the Great Recession, and a lot of students, who normally would have been attending four-year colleges, were now going to community college. Their parents' college savings funds were decimated by the economic downturn. Enrollment at community colleges boomed during this period.

Recruiting tennis players from local high schools turned out to be a lot harder than I thought, even with scholarships. Prairie State is a predominately black school, and it's located in a poor school district. Many of our feeder high schools don't even have tennis teams. The few schools that did have teams were either the high achieving public school (located in the wealthier Homewood-Flossmoor suburbs) or they were players from the local Catholic school. These players and their parents usually have their sights set on a more reputable four-year college and they typically have the means to afford it. Their grades are usually good, and they might not have any interest in playing college tennis because of the demands on their class schedule, or a desire to spend their weekends having normal college fun. So, I was looking for a very niche recruit: a good player who was rich enough to learn tennis but too poor to afford a four-year school, or one who has

such awful grades and test scores that he can't get into a four-year school. The player has to have a sincere desire to play college tennis, though the schedule might not be as demanding as other programs and would also be satisfied with a deficient quality of facilities and sports related amenities, like equipment and courts. They also must want to attend a community college and the lack of prestige that comes with that choice, while living at home while their friends live in dormitories far away from their parents.

Tennis Whites

My problem was that tennis is mostly a rich kid's sport. In northern climates, you have to afford indoor court time as well as the equipment, like shoes, racquets, new strings (good players break them frequently), and balls (which go 'dead' after a few uses). In its most simple form, tennis doesn't have to cost a lot because in the summer, tennis courts are mostly free for public use, unlike golf courses, which can charge expensive greens fees even on public courses. If you have a pair of shoes, a can of balls, and a racquet, you can play every day in the summer for free. All you need to find is one other person who plays. If you want to play real soccer, basketball, hockey, football, and especially baseball, you need a full squad. Other than private coaching, which most players deem to be necessary, tennis doesn't have to be expensive. Many professional players, like Arthur Ashe, Jimmy Connors, Andre Agassi, Serena and Venus Williams, and Maria Sharapova all came from modest backgrounds. Other players, like Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic, have flourished despite childhood traumas. Murray was a surviving student during a mass school shooting in Scotland, and Djokovic was living in Belgrade during the NATO bombing in the 1990s.

The other problem I had is that tennis is predominately white, and my college is predominately black. The color line in tennis has always been an embarrassment to the sport. Since tennis became an international competitive sport in 1887, most tennis clubs were restricted, thus barring blacks from the sanctioned minor tournaments, where players receive points to allow them to compete in the major tournaments. Althea Gibson broke the color line in tennis in 1950 (three years after Jackie Robinson entered the major leagues) when she was finally granted an invitation to the US Nationals, the tournament that would become the US Open. She went on to win the 1956 French Open and then 10 more Grand Slam titles. On the men's side, Pancho Gonzalez, a US born son of Mexican immigrants, won the US Nationals in 1948 and 1949. He was able to gain entry into the tournament by playing exclusively west coast tournaments. He still holds the record for holding the number one ranking for 8 consecutive years. But no other player stands out for thoroughly destroying the color line more than Arthur Ashe.

Ashe grew up in Richmond Virginia, where he was prevented from playing against whites because of the strict southern segregation of the 1950s. In 1960, he was selected to the US Davis Cup, which he helped win four times. He won the US Open in 1968, then captured 4 other Grand Slam titles, but no one was more memorable than his Wimbledon win in 1975 over the brash American Jimmy Connors. In violation of Wimbledon's strict dress code of all white, Ashe wore a navy blue warmup, his Davis Cup jacket with the letters "USA" worn over his heart. The jacket was a taunt to Connors who had refused to play Davis Cup, an event played for national pride, not prize money; during Davis Cup season, Connors played hokey exhibition matches for a big purse. Connors was number one in the world and heavily favored to win. He had bested Ashe in

their previous four meetings. Their personalities clashed as much as their games did. Ashe was bookish, gracious, and a spokesman for the sport, at one point leading a players' boycott against the major tournaments for fair pay. Connors acted crude on the court and claimed to have never read books and had no plans to ever read one. He was one of the scab players who entered tournaments during the strike. Connors berated opposing players, umpires, and fans. He had no friends in the locker room. Connors was a powerful counterpuncher, while Ashe was an aggressive serve and volley player. But Ashe's previous strategies hadn't worked, so he decided to change tactics against Connors that day by using spins, slices, and dinks to take him out of his rhythm. Ashe beat him in four sets. In victory, he raised his fist into the air, a black power salute.

The career and premature death of Ashe became an entrée for future black players. One of my favorite players of all-time, the flashy Frenchman Yannick Noah (father of the NBA's Joakim Noah) won the 1983 French Open, the first from his home country in 37 years, the last one to win it too. Noah exuded more joy for tennis than anyone else in his era. In one of his most memorable clips, Noah leapt into the stands to attempt to return an overhead smash. He was unsuccessful, but on his walk back to the court, he asked a fan for his champagne coupe and took a huge swig to the delight of the crowd.

The Williams sisters, who learned to play in Compton, had a much harder time winning over fans initially. In 2001, fans jeered them with racist taunts in California's biggest tournament, Indian Wells. But their success on tour and their punishing style of play won the hearts of the tennis world. Serena's 39 Grand Slam titles (compared to Venus's 23), clearly secures her place as the most dominate tennis player of all time. Like

Ashe, they have been advocates for fair pay and were instrumental in getting equal pay for women at the major tournaments. Their wild success created a ripple effect in the black tennis community, especially on the south side of Chicago. Black players like Donald Young and Taylor Townsend are among the best American players today, and they came out of the black tennis clubs of the south side, one being XS Tennis, where I recruit my players and where I play on the weekend. Sloane Stephens, the winner of the 2017 US Open, was coached by Kamau Murray, the owner and director of tennis at XS; these two have shown that the black players and coaches now dominate American tennis.

Although tennis is also widely considered a sexist sport, it's the only professional sport that grants equal pay for men and women at all grand slam events, while the earnings gap for professional women's basketball and golf is enormous. Tennis is also the only sport where men and women play together (in mixed doubles) at every major tournament. It's also the only sport that has featured many "Battle of the Sexes" matches between men and women. The most famous match was played in the Houston Astrodome in 1973 that 90 million people worldwide watched on TV. Bobby Riggs, a former number one player and self-proclaimed 'chauvinist pig,' played Billie Jean King, who had won Wimbledon that year. The match was a visual spectacular, with cheerleaders, a marching band, and chariots carrying both players onto the court. With the pressure of widespread gambling as well as being a reluctant torchbearer for the women's movement, King won all three sets and took away the winner-take-all prize of \$100,000.

My First Season

Even though I didn't know how difficult our college competition would be, I was confident that the team I had assembled would be respectable, perhaps even one of the better ones in our conference. I figured that our community college wasn't very different than other ones. My confidence took a setback when our number two player, Garrett, sustained a knee injury during a preseason scrimmage. The injury turned out to be an ACL tear, and he was out for the year. This meant that the other players had to move up one spot, my #3 player had to become my #2, etc. It also meant that we would have to keep my #6 open, which would cause two defaults for every match (6th singles and 3rd doubles). So we would start every match down 2-0 in a best of nine matches tie. Thus, for the remaining seven matches, we would need to win at least five of them to win the match. And my now #5 player was Andres, the novice player, the only holdover from the previous year. We were crushed in the first match 8-1, the lone victory coming from my #2 player, Luke, who won a very close three set match. Even though the team's confidence was shaken, I was exhilarated by Luke's win because it was a shock to the other team. His opponent was excellent but Luke was unrelenting. Overall, for me and everyone else, it was reality check. I had to prepare them for a long, losing season.

We lost the next two matches by similar scores. After our third loss, I had to drive the bus back two hours to the college. Including the driving, the match took up 7 hours of my day and theirs. Some of the players were pissed, but Luke, again the only winner, was joking around, and a few of them laughed. And out of nowhere, I started yelling at them, all of them. I said that we should all be unhappy because we lost as a team. I told them we were going to start holding daily practices and daily conditioning. I said that if one player wins and the rest of the team loses, then everyone loses. I was still driving and

looking back through the rearview mirror at their wide-eyed expressions. Up until that point, I had been pretty chill about the whole thing; after all, it was a big joke. I wanted an enjoyable experience, but all I was doing was driving them to certain defeat. If I was going to do something, I was going to do it well.

We won our fourth match against Elgin Community College, a college about three times the size of Prairie State and a perennial contender. The coach, who was a professor like me, had been doing it for 20 years and had won several conference and regional titles. Going into the match, he was looking way past us. He was more than friendly and even gave me some pointers on coaching in our league. I thought he was a pretty cool guy until he could see that the match was going to be close. Then he started lecturing me about little things my players were doing, like swearing and foot faults. We were down 3-4 with two more matches to play: 1st and 2nd doubles, and we were winning both matches. One of his players made a bad call, and my players started arguing. The coach said to me with a smile, “Look, there’s nothing we can do about that. We can’t interfere with the calls during a match. All they are allowed to do is ask if they are sure about the call.”

My 2nd doubles won that match anyway and then my 1st doubles team was at match point and were about to win. It was the deciding match of the day. The opposing player hit his first serve into the net. The second serve was hit slowly with a lot of spin. It looked like it would sail long but at the last minute dipped down right on the line. My player, Carlos, who wasn’t returning the serve but watching the line, called the ball out and stopped it before it got to the returner, his partner, Luke. No one cheered. He quickly walked up to the net to shake hands; the opposing team looked upset but didn’t say a

word. The coach looked at me with disgust; we shook hands. I didn't know what to say to Carlos. He walked over to me and whispered, "Coach, just shut up. Let's go. Let's get out of here." I couldn't even celebrate my first win because it ended on such a bad note.

When we were safely on the bus, my players started the celebration. That season we won only two more matches against the weakest teams in the region, both by the same score: 5-4. In the conference, we finished in 7th place out of 8 teams. We overachieved in the regional tournament coming in 5th place out of 11 teams, and we even had our first conference and regional champion, Luke. We took a picture after the tournament, and I was smiling bigger than he was.

The Art of War

The story of my coaching career is really the story of my individual players. The number of moments is too great for this piece, though I haven't coached many players, not nearly as many students as I've taught. My addiction to coaching stemmed from the intensity of the relationships between coach and players. When I taught high school, I had close relationships with many students. Since I started teaching college, I only see my students about 30 times. I learn their names and get to know their writing, but I don't know much about them. When you teach K-12, you see your students 180 times. You get to know how your students smell. You know their good moods and bad. You know their parents, their siblings, and who their friends are. You know their favorite outfits and can spot good and bad hair days. With coaching, it's the same thing. You definitely know how they smell because when you hug them, they are usually dripping with sweat, win or

lose. I not only know their girlfriends but also when they are fighting. You know their political bent and, in some cases, what kind of pornography they watch.

You learn these things naturally, on long bus rides, overnight trips, meals together, or talking after practice. I had especially deep access to their lives because I was a professor at their college, so I knew their instructors and how they were doing in class. If I wanted to check on their progress, I could simply drop by their instructor's office for an update. Sometimes, their instructors would come by to tell me that they missed class that day or that they were not turning in their work. Their counselors were a bit more guarded with me about what they could reveal with FERPA rules. The players were always surprised by my access into their academic life, but since I was their coach, I had permission to check on their grades, especially since it affected their eligibility or their scholarships.

My other way of learning things about them was through Facebook. I always friended players during the recruiting process, which was legal at the NJCAA level. I too had to be extra careful about what I posted and how I came across to them, so it didn't feel creepy that a middle-aged man was contacting high school players through Facebook. For my profile pic, I chose a picture of Sophia and me right after our wedding; we were smiling and holding hands, her in a wedding gown and black sunglasses and me in a simple black suit and a white tie. My players should have worried more about what they posted too. One time, a player posted that he was skipping his last class of the day to go downtown. I found his schedule and ran down the hall to find him walking out. I grabbed him and walked him back to class. "Coach," he said, "how did you know?"

During recruiting, I had to sell the school to the player and his parents. I had to give tours and answer questions, so I had to learn the basic stats of the school and all the different programs we offered, especially the path to transferring to a four year school, which was my main pitch to parents and players. I wanted them to see the decision to attend PSC and play for my team to be as much of an academic choice as an athletic one. It wasn't bullshit either. I really did want all my players to go onto a four-year school and perhaps play tennis at their next college. None of these players had a shot at the professional level. And I knew that an Associate's degree would probably not provide the same access to quality jobs as a Bachelor's degree. The problem I started to see was that it was unlikely that anyone, especially an athlete with a demanding schedule, could earn enough credits to graduate in two years, especially if the student had to take developmental classes or didn't know exactly what they would major in. A common practice within all athletic departments was to pad schedules with easy, unnecessary, or conveniently scheduled classes that didn't work toward a degree or transfer. Other coaches did this in order to protect their eligibility, especially in the first semester. I, on the other hand, had intervene to make sure they had a rigorous class schedule. I begged professors to let my players into their already-full classes, and then watched them like a hawk as the semester went on.

Practice was no different. I would push them hard and make sure that every aspect of practice included the pressure to win the point, so that they weren't just casually hitting. My theory of practice was to try to replicate the stress of a match, so they could get used to the nerves of the important points during competition. But I always tried to build their confidence during match play because critique during performance always

seemed to bring players down more. Most importantly, I wanted my players to see themselves not only as athletes but multidimensional people. I asked them to journal about their lives, to keep a note card in their tennis bag with a list of their other positive qualities to look at during matches (on different note cards, I would write strategy messages for their matches, the first note was always: STAY POSITIVE).

I micromanaged every single aspect of the tennis team because I couldn't trust anyone else. Instead of asking the athletic department to do it, I personally shopped for the right uniforms, so the shirts wouldn't be too baggy on the shoulders and that the shorts were baggy enough (a style requirement for the players, but also a practical concern that the shorts were large enough to hold two balls in one pocket). I personally took the uniforms to the silk screener to make sure the school's name was represented with the right font and size on each shirt. On match days, I made sure that the courts were swept clean, the nets were at the proper height with the singles sticks in the right place, and that the balls we used were the same balls that we practiced with and their numbers corresponded with the court number (Wilson 1 balls for court 1, Wilson 2 balls for court 2, etc.). I carried a huge tennis bag with me at all times, filled with team supplies: energy bars, Gatorade powder, books about coaching and the rules, Advil, replacement grips, water bottles, sunscreen, and a big first aid kit.

I tried to micromanage their bodies too. I took yoga classes so I could lead them in stretching before and after practice. I questioned them about their diet and made sure they had proper meals before matches, a little protein and complex carbohydrates. If I saw them on Facebook messenger late at night, I would text them and tell them to go bed. I could see if they were gaining or losing weight. On the long bus rides to matches, I

could tell who was nervous by how much they were farting. Their bodies became an extension of my own.

One illuminating aspect of my coaching career was dealing with my college. As a professor, I had access to the academic realm of the college, but I was oblivious to most everything else that went on at a community college. I really didn't know much about the way the college operated until I started coaching because I now had a student's view of the college labyrinth. Community college students have to take an entrance exam to receive their placement. Then they meet with an academic counselor to choose their schedule. I learned how they registered, found financial aid, accessed their online account, opened their email address, and paid the bill in the business office. All of these places had lines out the door, so I had to be friendly with all the staff in order to be able to cut.

I had to meet all the academic counselors, even though athletics had their own person. I needed to get to know the transfer counselor, the international counselor, the disabilities counselor for students with an IEP during high school, and the head of counseling if one of my players got into more serious trouble. Then I had to learn everything about registration and financial aid. If I didn't have an athletic scholarship to give, I needed to find money elsewhere, like Pell Grants or private scholarships. Even though community college was significantly cheaper than any other college, my players still had dramatic financial obstacles to overcome. One player, who was on full scholarship, didn't have enough money for a cell phone, so he had to hang out with another player at all times in case I needed to contact him for something, like a change in

the practice time or location. He didn't have a car either, so he needed daily rides to school and our indoor courts.

I needed to meet with the Vice President of Operations to make formal bids for expensive purchases, most significantly the resurfacing of our courts, which cost more than 100 grand, a project that I successfully lobbied for over the course of six years. I had to meet with the President and the Board of Directors to announce our various successful seasons. I needed to get to know the people who worked in facilities for work on the outdoor courts, like putting up the nets, the windscreens, or cleaning up the fallen leaves. I needed to know the campus safety department because they needed to let me in various buildings at odd hours. I had to meet with the marketing department for permission to run a Prairie State Tennis Facebook page. I would ask my players to participate in the school's cancer walk fundraiser and the trash cleanup effort on main road in front of the college, as part of the school's Adopt A Highway program.

I started donating a portion of my paycheck to the school's endowment because they could be helpful in getting my players money for their books. Eventually, the Foundation was instrumental in getting the tennis courts resurfaced. I also was able to secure big donations from several of my uncles to support our team, to buy a ball machine and racquet stringer, which both cost over a grand. I got to know the people who work in the student work-study department because they could get my players jobs on campus. Most of my players were black or Latino, so I enrolled them in student support groups called Project Exito and Man-Up to offer more social and academic support on campus. I had one player who was a Veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, so I got to know the people in Veteran Services. I met reporters from the school newspaper to make

sure they covered the success of the tennis team. I created a close bond with the physical education department because I wanted my players to take extra PE classes to force them to lift weights or learn yoga. I even built an on-campus tennis court in the gym to give them free court time during the winter.

But the most important on campus relationships I forged was through the athletic department. As a professor, the athletic department was always a mystery, and the athletes were typically the worst students in my classes. If they were to get into academic trouble, I would have to fill out a progress report on them, and then someone would come to their defense, most often their coach or the AD, sometimes even my dean, pleading with me that the student would lose his scholarship if he failed the class. The student-athletes acted entitled concerning their status as an athlete, that somehow the school would be hurt if they missed a game or were held out the lineup during the season. This notion was absurd because they were playing sports at a mediocre community college. It's not like they were playing primetime football at a Division I university. Our students don't generate revenue for the school; in fact most sports at most school are a massive drain of funds. Our basketball team doesn't even charge admission for the games, when even high schools typically charge five dollars for a ticket. Our sports rarely get any coverage in local newspapers while high schools dominate the local sports section. Regardless, community colleges waste huge amounts of school funds on sports for the sake of raising their profile. Administrators believe it offers legitimacy to their status as a college if they offer sports; it's something that sets them apart from the for-profit two-year colleges, like Devry.

The courtesy the administration at Prairie State never extended to me was starting a women's tennis team. Every year, I asked my AD for funds for a team, and every year, the administration turned me down. This was especially surprising to me because the athletic director, the president of the college, and the chairperson of the Board of Trustees were all women. I was also really concerned that the school might be in violation of Title IX. Worse still, we had women at the college who frequently approached me, asking why the college didn't have a women's team. I made appeals to the board of trustees during monthly board meetings, and I was always promised that we could find the money to start one. I would start recruiting and soon after, I would be told that we couldn't do it this year. Even though it was terribly unfair, I was always relieved not to have to do it. It would double my workload and I wasn't sure it would be a great idea if I started spending my time with 18 year old women while Sophia was taking care of our two kids. I knew I could build a winning team though. One year, I found a female player on campus who was better than most of my men. Rahshell was a transfer student from the University of Toledo and played for their team. She dropped out of that school and came to PSC when she got pregnant. She had her baby and started to practice with the team. Her dad came by and pulled her from the team. He didn't want her playing tennis, especially for the men's team, when he was home watching her baby.

Once I became a coach, I gained some appreciation of the rigors of practice and match schedules, though my attitude toward the players was unchanged—the school was doing them a favor by allowing them to play a sport, not vice versa. In addition, I learned that the athletic department had a ridiculous budget. I was never given an amount to manage my own budget, but no funding request I made was ever turned down. The AD

might complain about expenses or threaten that I might not get what I asked for, but the threat was always empty. In the English department, the Dean of Arts and Science often chastised us for our consumption of paper or the modest stipends we received for grading placement essays. The expenses for sports were significant too (uniforms, meal money, equipment, referees, gas for the busses, indoor court time, occasional flights and hotel time, and then the coaches' salaries), but no one questioned these expenses. The salaries were relatively small, a \$4000 stipend for new coaches and \$1000 for an assistant coach. This was typical for most community colleges, and we would often joke that it came out to be about a dollar an hour wage. I could justify it because I was making a good salary as a professor; most other coaches had another full-time gig or they were retired. Still, considering the hours we spent at practice or matches, the time spent organizing team logistics, the time dealing with individual player problems, or recruiting for the next year, it was not nearly enough money to make it worth your while. Coaches coach because they love it.

During the season, I talked to my AD in person or on the phone everyday (I had four of them over the seven years of coaching). I relied on the sports information director to write articles, keep stats, take photos, and promote the team. The athletic counselor would create and monitor the players' class schedules. Most importantly, the administrative assistant in the department was someone I talked to or emailed several times every day; she coordinated the complex details of our team. These people became my closest friends on campus. In the English department, I would say hello to colleagues in the hallway, but I didn't have to work with them in any meaningful way. It got to the point that when the school sponsored a faculty and staff luncheon, I sat with the athletic

department, and not the English department. My colleagues in the department started to see me more as a jock than an academic, but I didn't care. I loved coaching too much.

The love for this job was incongruous though. Coaching accounted for 10% of salary and 90% of my time. But teaching doesn't provide the same adrenaline rush as coaching. None of my students scream or jump up and down when they ace a midterm; none of them openly cry when they get an F. Coaching also provided clear and measurable outcome in wins and losses; success in teaching is always more hazy. I had been teaching for so long that the nerves that come from standing in front of a class were gone. Being on the court offered a rush because I knew my presence could affect the match, and I was coaching six matches simultaneously. One time before a match I was suffering from stabbing lower back pain, and as soon as the match started, the pain vanished. We were getting killed in the match, and there wasn't much I could do to help the players, even though I was coaching my heart out. After the match ended, exactly as the last point was lost, I turned to walk off the court, and my lower back pain came surging back.

My monomania started affecting other aspects of my life. The joke was no longer a joke. I studied everything I could about coaching and tennis. I read more books, watched YouTube videos, took private tennis lessons, changed my diet, lifted weights and did yoga with my players, researched high school rosters for possible recruits, and stalked these kids on Facebook. I talked about it all the time: professional tennis, my own matches, and moments from practice or matches. My friends started to think of me as a bore, and Sophia started to worry. She said I would walk around the house, reciting the names of players, checking off their names for possible lineups. She would catch me

texting with players while we were eating dinner or watching TV. I would obsess over the other teams' rosters. I remembered that the last chapter from Sun Tzu's book *The Art of War* was about the use of spies as being the most crucial aspect of war. So I even went to a rival team's practice to scout the players. I would also ask my own assistant coach to spy on our players to find out what they were up to during their free time. I would ask for scouting reports from friendly coaches during matches. I would wake up early in the morning and research the opposing players online and do it as the last thing before bed. Unbelievably, Sophia supported my efforts; she said that if I was this passionate about something, I should keep doing it.

So I kept doing it: daily practices, preseason matches against four-year schools, and conditioning. Then we started winning. In my fourth year of coaching, we were undefeated on the JUCO level. We won the Skyway Conference title (the first time a men's team had won one for the college) and the Region 4 tournament, earning out first trip the National Tournament. I won the Coach of the Year award among all coaches in all sports in the Skyway Conference.

School Spirit

In the spring of 2013, I took the team to Plano, Texas for Nationals to compete against two-year colleges from all over the country and international players from all over the world. I knew we had no chance, but the players would relish the experience to play in this tournament. A few of my players had never been on a plane before. Traveling to Texas, staying in a hotel, and meeting players from South America, Europe, and Africa was inconceivable to them. In addition to going to Dallas, I took the players to my

uncle's ranch south of Fort Worth. He lives on a working ranch and has 1200 acres of land with 100 head of grass-fed cattle. It's the kind of place that you might see on a postcard of Texas, with barbed wire fences and short hills covered with blue bonnets and Cedar trees. He has a tennis court and a pool so we stayed there a few days before the tournament to acclimate to the hot and dry Texas air, a big change from the rainy Chicago spring weather. We played tennis in the morning and afternoon, then go for a canoe ride on the Brazos River. At night, we'd have a real Texas BBQ, my uncle smoking the brisket for 24 hours which would be served with white bread and baked beans, pickles, white onions, corn on the cob and iced tea. The players would go to bed stuffed with food and wake up to the chirping of Texas songbirds. During our nature walks, they'd see snakes, wild boars, turkey vultures, and hummingbirds. After the weekend, we drove up to Dallas and checked into a dingy hotel. At the tournament, the other teams blew us off the court, but no one cared. On the flight home, I was already planning for the next year by recruiting international players.

Winning was why I loved it. Coaching tennis was a zero sum game with winners and losers, and I was finally on the winning side. The rivalries I held were not with the other players but rather with other coaches, as they were the only constant at the school. I had no interest in beating the other students at other schools because those young men could just as easily be at my school as my rival's school. With few exceptions, I hated all the other coaches. They were usually jocks or were very good at tennis at one point in their lives. During matches, we were all just advocating for our players (who we've all grown close to), but we never scolded our own players for breaking the rules that our rival players broke. Everyone seemed to look at the infractions of other players and

excused the bad behavior of their own players (after all, we knew and understood our own guys). Disputes about code violations, like swearing, between coaches were frequent, but tennis disputes seemed more frequent because, typically, we didn't have a referee at matches. But I took it to a new level: I would get involved with disputes with opposing schools' athletic directors. I one time held a team practice at an opposing school's courts, as we were playing a tournament there and I wanted my players to familiarize themselves with their courts. The school's rookie coach allowed us to do it, but the school's AD called my AD to complain. My AD simply forwarded the call to me, since she knew that she wouldn't be able to talk sense into me. The rival athletic director questioned the ethics of coming to another team's athletic facilities and holding my own team practice there. I told him that there was nothing wrong with doing that, and even if there was, what could he do about it? My own athletic director had year-to-year contract, while I was tenured, so there wasn't much my AD could do to me. And even if they tried to rein me in, I could back channel to a VP or even the president of the college to get what I wanted. The truth was the president and administration were thrilled about my commitment to the coaching and that I was delivering a winning team.

The success of the team pulled at my own heart. I started to develop actual institutional pride. At most community colleges, school spirit is a bit forced, if it exists at all. Four year schools typically have vast alumni networks and rabid student fans, but junior colleges have very few alumni donations; most donations are from local businesses, who are looking for employment partnerships, where vocational programs can train their future employees at no expense to the businesses. Students rarely attend games or wear school clothing, unless it's given away for free or sold to the student as

part of their financial aid money, which must be spent at the school's bookstore. Prior to coaching, I only possessed embarrassment about my college, but as soon as I started cheering for my team and my players, my tribal inclinations took over. I wore Prairie State College t-shirts and my head coach jacket everywhere. I bought green or purple sweaters to fly school colors while I was teaching. I even bought a green and purple tie to wear at the yearly sports' banquet. One time, in a department meeting, one of my colleagues started talking about the teaching practices at another local community college, a rival of mine. I even surprised myself when I blurted out, "Man, fuck Moraine Valley." When another professor asked me, with a puzzled look on her face, "Why?" All I could say, "You know, tennis rival."

But students at community college can't be blamed for their lack of school spirit; really, with the state of higher education as it is, why should any student worry about institutional love of a school, which increasingly sees them not as students but as customers. But a student's tenure at a community college is especially short, and few have vibrant campuses or dormitory housing to create lasting friendships. Most of my students, if they have an hour and half in between classes would rather drive home for a short time than spend that time on campus. Community colleges are often severely underfunded and carry with them a feeling of inadequacy, next to their four-year counterparts. Professors are often over-committed, and too many inexperienced adjuncts are teaching classes. Community colleges have an identity crisis; they are either considered a way station to a four-year school or a vocational school, whose buildings and instructors exist simply to provide practical training for a specific skill. No one is expected to show school spirit if they are taking SAT prep classes at Kaplan.

One of the challenges I had as a coach was to instill school spirit in my players, so that they played with each other as true team with a formalized bond, not just a loose connection of players, who lived in some proximity. Because tennis is primarily an individual sport, where players on a team are competing among each other for the top spot, or sometimes a chance to play in the lineup, practices themselves actively led to the erosion of team unity. My players battled everyday with each other and argued about their position in the lineup. But as soon as that first match rolled around, where they were wearing the same uniforms, and suddenly they were competing against players they had never seen before, the team unity came out. Still, I wanted to instill something deeper, a genuine love for their school that was giving them (and me) an opportunity to do this. They were often earning a scholarship (though I collected a larger stipend as well as very large salary for my position at the school), the students felt no real love for the school. I felt the love because I had been there for 10 years, and it was my source of living—I should love it. To them, I argued, that a college was the last bastion of true mentoring, an institution that aimed to achieve higher education and not profit. They would have the rest of their lives to work for corporate America. In college, they could work for themselves.

Still, my position as a professor/coach led to problems too. It put me in an almost constant state of conflicting interests. This scenario happens frequently on the high school level, but the stakes are a bit higher for college because the students are offered scholarships and their eligibility is determined by the NJCAA, not by internal school rules. I came into conflict quite frequently, not only by having my players in my classes, but by having other athletes take my class. I never had a reputation for being the hardest

grader, but as a professor, I am strict about attendance, participation, and completion of all assignments. If one of the athletes were to fall behind in my classes, I would call them out immediately, personally and to their coach. I'm proud to say that I held my own players to the highest standards; I even failed my second best player in my Introduction to Poetry class to the detriment of his eligibility. It was easier to have players in my classes because I could track their progress. I could get a feel for their academic deficiencies so I could help them better navigate their other classes. For example, I recruited one player who had been home schooled for his entire life, and he was completely unprepared for the rigors a formal classroom. On the first day of class, I asked him to sit in the front row. As I passed out the syllabus, I gave him a stack of papers to pass to the students behind him. He took one syllabus and put the others in his backpack. The student behind him tapped him on the back and looked at him like, 'what the hell?' My player was starting at first grade as far as classroom protocol went.

The experience of coaching has been mostly the experience of dealing with individual players. The intensity of these relationships was what I mostly craved in my life. These players became my most trusted friends. They were obligated to me in ways other friends were not. For example, one late February night, I stayed at school late. An ice storm hit Chicago, and I knew it was going to be a long drive home, and perhaps a dangerous one. I called Sophia and told her. She told me to stay in the south suburbs that night, perhaps at a colleague's house. I thought about it, but Sophia was a few months pregnant, and I wanted to sleep next to her. It was stupid that I was coming home so late to begin with. As soon as I walked through the icy parking lot, I knew it was a bad idea. I cautiously drove home on the highway, as though my car were on train tracks with evenly

spaced cars slowly and steadily treading forward. The driver in front of me lost control of her car, and started sliding perpendicular to the direction of traffic. I slammed on my brakes too and started sliding in the same direction. I softly sideswiped her car, with no damage done. But our cars were pinned against each other and we were perpendicular to the median divider and oncoming traffic, so we were stuck and couldn't move. The traffic started slowly moving around us, while we waited for an emergency vehicle. But we didn't wait long. An oncoming minivan saw an open lane and took off in my direction. He saw me too late and hit the same patch of ice I had. To my right, I saw the bright headlights getting bigger, and the van t-boned me and spun me and my car in a half circle so when I came to my senses, I could see all the traffic's headlights pointing in my direction. The impact knocked the wind out of me, and my right rib cage ached from the sudden jolt sideways. I was in shock, but I was mostly fine. It felt like a football injury, when you're running with the ball and someone blindsides you and your body flies through the air like a floppy stuffed animal.

My car was totaled. The driver who hit me was fine; his minivan was wrecked in the front. The only person who went to the hospital was the woman who I sideswiped, which I couldn't understand because my car barely tapped her, but then it plowed into her again as the other guy shoved me into her, though I absorbed most of the impact. The passenger's side of my car looked like a can of beer crushed in the middle; the trunk was twisted open too. I had two cases of chocolate milk packed in there, which I used as recovery drinks after practice, so there was a river of chocolate milk running down the highway.

I was standing there on the shoulder without a car when a police officer asked me if there was anyone I could call to pick me up. Sophia was three months pregnant and was probably in bed already. Plus, she didn't have a car. My friends were way up on the north side. So I called one of my players. He picked up on the first ring. I told him to get in his car and pick me up. I gave him the intersection, and he was there in ten minutes. He drove me home to the city, even though it was the middle of the night and there was an ice storm outside. It was then that I realized that these guys were the best friends I had. They would do anything for me, and I would probably do anything for them.

I came home way late and tried to slide into bed without Sophia noticing. But she rolled over right away.

“You're home,” she said.

“Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm so late,” I said.

“Why so late?”

“I need to say that I'm totally fine, but I was in a little car accident tonight. The car is wrecked. Ray drove me home. But I'm fine.”

Sophia just started sobbing. I rolled into her and said, “I'm OK. We're both OK. The baby is OK too.” But she just cried and said, “I told you not to drive home.”

Winning

In March of 2013, we received our first national ranking, 24th out of the 25 teams who received a ranking. By the end of the season, we reached 18th in the country. Some of these teams had been battling against each other for generations, and we were a brand new team on the national circuit. The other big-time coaches started to notice me during

our second consecutive appearance at the national tournament, even though we weren't winning any big matches. At the end of the season, the Intercollegiate Tennis Association asked me to be ranking chair for my region, which included Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Kansas, and Mississippi. I helped determine the national team rankings as well as individual rankings for singles and doubles teams from all over the country. Thus, I had to study and compare match results all year, and not just from my conference, but from all over the country. I saw how coaches did it too: they carried a huge number of players on their roster and they stacked those rosters with international players. On the top teams, only one or two players came from the local area. These community colleges had no qualms about ignoring the players from their district, the taxpayers who were funding these colleges. And for what? The glory of a fifth place finish in a community college tennis league? Well, that was exactly the glory I wanted.

When I looked back at my journals from these years, a bizarre pattern emerged. Of course, I was obsessively journaling about tennis: my players, their struggles, my future recruits, the opposing teams and players, upcoming matches and weather. There's some stuff about my PhD program at UIC and a few mentions of my classes at Prairie State, though I usually journal at school in class while my students are doing the same thing. But there's almost nothing about Sophia and the girls in there. In the spring of 2014, Sophia was pregnant with our second daughter and Olive was only 2 years old, so a lot of interesting things were going on at home. But I barely mention these things. That's not even the weirdest part to me. Every single journal entry begins with my weight. I had been trying to lose weight and had been tracking it daily. It was the first thing I wrote

down in my daily entry. And the pattern was clear: I was losing about a pound a week for an entire semester.

That spring was an incredible time for me and my family. I had always called the month of April ‘hell month’ for me and the players because that’s when the season was most busy and my classes were preparing final papers, projects, and exams. The players were working on that too, all while they had three matches a week. I was in a good pattern myself. Every morning, I would get up at five am, answer emails from students, get Olive out of bed and dress her, take her to pre-school, drive to the gym, workout for thirty minutes, teach classes, hold office hours, go to practice or a match, drive home, get Olive in the tub, read stories and sing songs, go downstairs and have dinner and wine with Sophia, watch a show, and go to bed at 10pm. I wasn’t doing much writing for my PhD, mostly on the weekends, but I figured that I would catch up with that in the summer. That April was particularly stressful for me because the team was in a tight race for the conference and regional titles. Sophia was also nine months pregnant. Her doctor scheduled her induction date for the first day of the regional tournament day.

Then my grandmother died. Her entire life was spent taking care of everyone around her, even people who weren’t in her realm of responsibility. She was always kind and generous toward me. When I was in college and not getting along with my parents, I could always retreat to her house for her understanding ear. She crack open a beer for me, and she’d pour herself a Crown Royal on ice. We’d just talk. But she had been dying for years. Her mental health and physical vigor during her younger years kept her on her deathbed for a decade after doctors had told us that it would end. Her funeral was scheduled on the second day of the tournament.

I caught a break when the doctors rescheduled Sophia's induction for the Monday after the tournament, but I still needed to make a decision to go home to Cleveland or coach at the tournament. My assistant coach, another faculty member at Prairie State, wasn't entirely familiar with the rules of college tennis. I couldn't trust him, and even if I could, I wouldn't let go. I told myself that my grandmother would want me to coach, and of course, to be there with my pregnant wife who could go at any minute.

But I knew that Sophia wouldn't go into labor. In fact, we were more worried that she would carry the baby into May; we had already chosen the name April, named after national poetry month. I told my mother that I wasn't coming home. She said that I shouldn't coach either, if Sophia was that close to labor. But I wouldn't consider the possibility. I had a cell phone, and I could always make it to the hospital quickly enough from the suburbs.

The tournament started on Friday. I told the referees that I needed my cell phone in my pocket during play because my wife was nine months pregnant, and they granted me an exception. Of course, I used this exception for nefarious purposes. If I was on a far away court, and I needed an update on the progress of the other matches, someone off court could text me with scores. It turned out that I was needed in a few matches, but we won the tournament easily enough. My grandmother's funeral was a beautiful day and all of my other brothers and sisters were there, as were all my aunts, uncles, and cousins. She was a mother of 14, a grandmother to 70 and a great grandmother to about 60. Three days later, Sophia was induced and our daughter April came into the world.

We went back to Texas for the national tournament and I was much better prepared for what it would be like. The team tournament was organized around points

which heavily weighted a first round win, so a lucky first round was the equivalent of winning the entire backdraw (the lesser tournament for all the first round losers). Thus, I had to make sure the players were prepared and well-rested on the first night. I confiscated their phones and sat in the hallway of the hotel until I was sure that they were asleep. There was a Hooters across the street from the hotel and a lot of the players (and coaches) would go over there for drinks and a second dinner. In the morning, I banged on their doors until one of them answered. I turned on the lights and breathed in the disgusting mix of body odor, flatulence, and Axe body spray. I was already dressed and ready with match notes on their opponents whose recruiting videos I found online.

The team slowly came downstairs for the breakfast of grits, Texas toast, biscuits, and sausage gravy. I talked about the top teams and top seeds, who got lucky with an easier matchup and who was unlucky enough to have to play a seeded player in the first round. We'd drive to the Collin Community College in Plano; the school had 12 courts, a few with stadium seating. Because there were around 40 teams represented there, both Division 1 and 3 teams, a lot matches had to played at the neighboring high schools. But the college was where everyone congregated and watches the main matches. The crowd was almost entirely men, with an occasional girlfriend in attendance who was subject to constant ogling. The young men would wander the grounds, watching matches or warming up. The phenotypes of these players are so recognizable to me: a sunken chest and a slight hunch, wide calves and overdeveloped quads, and a dominant arm, noticeably bigger than their other. Their moisture wicking t-shirts always fit tightly on their angular shoulders and skinny torsos. Their shoes are flat on the bottom, unlike the

curvature of a running shoe, and their socks are typically pulled high over their ankles. When I scout players, I look at their legs; the thicker they are, the better.

The tournament went well, but our final ranking was 17, barely better than the previous year. Because my players were all sophomores, I would lose all of them the next year, even though only two were walking at graduation. The others would either drop out of college and get trade jobs or they would transfer to a different college, hoping to make the team at a four-year college. I had to replace my entire team, and I decided to do as the other winning teams were doing: create a team entirely made up of international players.

I was so obsessed that I started to expect excellence from everyone at Prairie State, including my students, the administration, and the staff. I became a tougher instructor (I always had a reputation for being a softie) and started to hold my students to higher standards of behavior and attitude, things that I didn't care much about prior to coaching. I did my job as a professor, but now, if I saw a student struggling to get through class, I intervened. I pulled them outside of the classroom and tore into them. After I had broken their defenses down, I built their confidence back up and pushed them back into the classroom. And it started to work. I had more students successfully complete the class, and retention of students is a big deal at my underperforming community college. People were mystified with me, both student and my fellow professors. As my interpersonal problems started increasing, my problems teaching and coaching decreased. This is what drives people to become authoritarian; life gets easier, less complex. Nurse Ratchet had built a tight little system, with little room for reasonable leniency, and I admired her system. No detail escaped my attention. I expected the college groundskeeper to pay close attention to the courts, making sure that the courts

were clean and the windscreens were attached to the fence. I needed help from all the counselors to make sure all of my players were fully registered in the right classes. I made demands on everyone who worked there for the sake of tennis team, and I could get away with it because I was a tenured professor, a good one too, and I was having some success, but my attention to detail was causing problems at home.

The main problem was that I was constantly in touch with my players. Sophia would get mad if I were texting with them, but sometimes things came up. My players were paranoid about not keeping me informed of things going on because I made it clear that I wanted to know about any problems in advance. I always said that I could do something about the problems that I know about. The problem was that I would put their problems ahead of my own, and even ahead of my own family. One time, the night before the regional tournament, Sophia called me and told me that our one-year-old daughter was sick and that she was really worried I told her that my second singles player, Osiris, was sick and had to be admitted to the hospital. His mom and sister were at the hospital, and I was heading there with Gatorade and Clif bars to get some electrolytes back into him. Somehow, Sophia understood this. I loved Osiris like a son; he was someone I had mentored, academically and personally for two years. I was legitimately worried about him, but in all honesty, I was worried that he wouldn't be able to play the next day because it was too late to replace him in the lineup. Of course, he was too sick to play the next day and he missed the tournament, which caused us to finish in second place, which broke our three-year streak of winning the tournament, but it was still impressive, to come in second place out of ten teams when we were missing our second

best player, like a basketball team player only playing with four guys on the court and still beating most of the teams.

I always went way above and beyond the call of duty with these players. Sometimes, I bought them lunch on match days if they hadn't eaten anything that day. Often, I would loan them money. I always checked their progress in their classes and edited their essays. I talked through their personal problems during my office hours. One time, I was giving a ride to a player to practice and was lecturing him about something or another. He said, "You know, I'm not looking for a father." The comment surprised me. I said back, "I'm not trying to be your father at all. Your father is someone who is going to be there for you for your whole life. I'll be in your life for two years; I'm your coach. Take my advice or leave it. I have kids of my own." Still, he was right. I was trying to be his father. The psychic toll of the job was exhausting me. I became increasingly impatient with them in any way that I perceived as a shortcoming or lackadaisical effort. They were only college kids, freshmen and sophomores, but I expected them to act like soldiers, taking orders from me and dutifully fulfilling them without attitude or question. This success led me to become dictatorial. Sometimes it was good thing. During one match, one of my players was losing badly, and he made a questionable call. His opponent started berating him for the call and then made a racist comment about my guy. He was furious but said later that the only thing that prevented him from crossing over to the other side of the net and beating up the kid was the thought of me getting in his face and screaming at him for doing that. Never have I been more proud of my coaching influence.

Everyone was now enjoying the success of the program. Our administration loved that we were winning. I stood in front of the board trophies newspaper articles about our

trip to the national tournament in Texas. Initially, I didn't understand why the administration was making such a big deal about this. After all, the happenings in our classrooms were far more praiseworthy than anything that the tennis team could do. But community colleges are starved for good press, our college especially. When we are in the news, it's an article about a scandal, like nepotism or the misuse of college funds or a pending strike. For years, I had been asking the college to resurface the tennis courts, and they always claimed that didn't have enough money for it. As soon as our team had three consecutive trips to Nationals, they decided to finally do it, though it cost \$120,000. If the English department asked for this money for any endeavor, we would have been laughed out of the room. After I had my new courts, I decided to go big-time on international recruiting.

Going International

The fall of 2014 I took a trip to Mexico City to watch a tennis tournament. The trip was an all-expense paid trip by one of these companies that seeks to place international students in U.S. colleges. The hotel, meals, and transportation were all free. But I had to pay for the flight, which was about \$400. It would be an opportunity to meet players from all over Central and South America for this big tournament at a prestigious tennis club built on a mountain side overlooking the city. I bought a ticket and left Sophia and the girls for the weekend, Halloween weekend. Fortunately, her sister came to town to help her out. I took a day off of work and flew down on Thursday afternoon. There were four other coaches from all over the country, and they were all as obsessed as I was. We quickly realized that we were competing with each other for the best players, and

started making pitches about the benefits of our colleges, even before we saw any of them play. When the tournament started, we moved from court taking notes on each player and their style of play, both strengths and weaknesses. The tournament rolled on and the winners started separating themselves, the clutch players from the merely talented. I knew I was only interested in the winners because I didn't have enough time during the two years of my program to develop their talent into a winning player. I needed ready-made guys who could win without my help. There was one excellent player with a huge serve, but he foot-faulted on every serve. I knew that I wouldn't have enough time to correct that bad habit. On the last night of the tournament, one other coaches and I went out to get monumentally drunk on Dia de Muertos. I was so hungover the next day that I couldn't even talk to any of the championship players. I got a lot of email addresses though, and I started communicating with them, which lead me to get my number one player, Daniel.

The decision to recruit players internationally was fraught with ethical dilemmas though. The first being that community colleges were created as public institutions to serve their communities, and offering full tuition scholarships to international tennis players is problematic. The very idea of offering sports at a community college is questionable. These were underfunded schools that were offering expensive athletic programs to a small minority of students who were often apathetic about their classes, and the athletic department was granting them full-tuition waivers. The athletic programs do very little for the general student body or the community at large. So giving this money to international athletes didn't make much sense to me, but why would I make that argument? Internationals were making my job easy, both in recruiting and coaching.

These sports really didn't do much as far raising the profile of the school, though administrators disagreed. The administration loved the idea of international students mixing with our local ones. They put these students on marketing brochures and hung their sports action photos on the boardroom and hallways.

The other problems with internationals were logistical. Where would they live? How would they afford rent? Where would they eat? How would they acculturate themselves at a provincial suburban school? How would they transition from their educational system to ours? Many of these internationals were poor, relative to the average American college kid who decides to study abroad. Obviously, they couldn't stay at home like the other community college students. For the first three years, I found houses where they could inexpensively rent a room from some empty nester. By my fourth year of recruiting internationally, I had so many recruits that I had to find an entire house where they could all live in. I was even close to buying a house myself for them to rent, but that would violate recruiting rules. Because of the real estate downturn, houses in Chicago Heights were being sold on auction for a quarter of their price. Even though we had the money in savings, Sophia had thought I had lost my mind. So I asked my uncles to buy one (four bedroom houses were going for 40 grand, which they could easily afford); the sale fell through at the last minute, and I was forced to start over. Fortunately, I found a house right off campus that rented to six players from five different continents: South Africa, the Bahamas, Chile, Spain, and India.

The rental house was perfect. It was right across the street from campus, near the tennis courts, large enough for six guys, had two bathrooms, and a garage for all of our equipment. I bought a bunch of furniture: beds, dressers, desks, tables, chairs, couches,

and a bunch of kitchen appliances and dishware. I paid for this myself, but I told Sophia that I was going to make them pay me back for everything. I knew that they wouldn't be able to pay me though. I even paid for the first month of rent and the security deposit, which they did pay back. But the problems with the house started right away. Then they started having parties there, which was strictly forbidden by the terms of the lease and the team rules. Plus, they were all 17 or 18 years old with F1 Visas, with scholarships to lose. But they didn't care enough to stop. The landlord threatened to evict them, and I asked neighbors and campus security to keep an eye on the house. But nothing worked. They kept smoking weed and drinking, and the house was getting a reputation as a party house. I had been so lucky with the previous international students in the past that I didn't anticipate this problem, but I shouldn't have been surprised. College kids like to party.

My tennis team wasn't always like this. I had a different conception of what the team could be like: model students, serious competitors, stewards to the college, and good people. For the first three years, my internationals were just this. They were straight A students and active on campus. They were dutiful on the court, and grateful to me personally. I asked them not to wear their tennis clothes or bring their racquets to class, so that the professors would see them as students and not athletes. Other professors would stop me in the hall to tell me how wonderful these players were.

But my players came and went every two years, so I would have to reinvent my team every two years. This feature of community colleges is one of my central complaints. At a four-year college, you can have your seniors teach your freshmen the culture of your program, and thus it constantly replicates itself. But I had to teach my system constantly, and as soon as the sophomores figured it out, they graduated and

moved on. I had the same problem when I ran the schools literary magazine; I ended up doing all the work to publish it. When I was on the lit magazine for my own four-year university, the students did everything and the faculty advisor simply signed off on the final product.

My Last Season

In the fall of 2015, I had assembled an unbeatable team, at least at the junior college level in our region. What I was really gunning for was a shot at the National title. It was September, and I had to get them through an easy but long season to May. I scheduled a lot of fall matches against four-year schools, teams that would normally crush us. Every year, I had to beg these coaches to play us because we were so much worse than they were. I always agreed to travel to their school because they usually had better courts and a better team. This year, I knew I had a better team and better courts, so I asked them to visit us. A few teams agreed, mostly on the promise that they could free recruit my players after they finished at Prairie State. We played three teams that fall, all teams that we had never beaten before, despite playing them every year, sometimes twice a year. We handily won all three matches. One of the matches was close, but the other two were blowouts. My players were feeling confident and I was surprised—they were better than I thought they would be. And they were all freshmen. We were shaky in a few spots, but it wasn't anything I couldn't correct. On court coaching was easy because they could make any adjustments during the match and pull out a win. But after these wins, something was wrong for me. It felt like I was playing with ringers. It wasn't fun anymore.

The real challenge with this team came with the off-court management. They were chronically late for practice. During practice, they openly questioned my structure and complained that I wasn't doing enough drills with them. A few of them weren't going to their classes. Early in the semester, a few of their professors already started to complain to me that the players were causing distractions in their office. In the house, they argued over ownership of the furniture and who was supposed to clean the kitchen. Roommates argued over how late they could play music or who was taking too long in the shower. And they were taking these arguments to my office, and I tried to solve them. I made job charts and set practical rules for cohabitation. I held interventions between my players and their professors. I changed up my practice schedule, despite my strong feelings about what they needed to work on. Nothing was working.

I lost one player in the first month of the fall season. I suspended him after a few outbursts during practice. He wanted to transfer schools, and I gave him a transfer waiver. The rest of the team was relieved. A few weeks after his last practice, his girlfriend came running to the courts told me that he couldn't breathe. I dropped my racquet, and drove to the house. I called 911 and went to the hospital with him. He turned out to be OK. Later, I learned he was doing cocaine in the house.

After he left school, the house parties continued. I would come by on Monday and see the garbage cans filled with beer and liquor bottles. The overflowing cans would sit there for weeks because they consistently missed trash pick-up day. Raccoons would get in them, and I would come by and clean it up with a snow shovel, just to remove the mess before from the school saw it.

The parties caused another massive concern, sexual harassment and coercion. One of female students approached me after class and told me that she had been dating one of my players and that he had made sexual demands of her and when she said refused, he kicked her out of the house. I was horrified. I called a team meeting and went through an hour-long seminar on rape and consent. At first, the players were upset with me because I was getting too deeply into their personal lives, but I didn't care. Too many athletes see themselves entitled to sex, and I needed to address this problem immediately and thoroughly. I would like to believe that this was the first and last time this issue came up, but the rumors persisted after I stopped coaching this team.

Concurrent to all my problems with coaching and this team, my personal life was also spiraling out of control. At this point, Sophia and I had two girls, ages 1 and 3. Sophia had been diagnosed with Lyme Disease and was on a strict regimen of vitamin supplements, treatments, and dietary regulation. In addition, Sophia decided to enter psychoanalysis 4 days a week. These protocols obviously put a strain on our relationship. I was paranoid that she was talking about me in therapy, but she reassured me that she was mostly talking about her upbringing and her relationship with her estranged father. The other protocols were costing us a lot of money, but we had enough in savings to get by. We hired nannies to take care of our one year old while Sophia went to her daily appointments. We had cleaning ladies to do housework and laundry. I did all the shopping and took the girls on outings on weekend, just to relieve the strain on her double duty of working from home and being a stay-at-home mom. Her condition slowly improved.

Simultaneously to all this, I was in the midst of my comprehensive exams for my PhD. I had to create a list of 100 books and read them. I had to take two written exams (15 pages each) on surprise questions about the lists over the course of a single weekend. In addition, I had to write a 40 page research essay, which included more books from the original list of the 100 books. My plan was to take the exam in October, so that I would be relatively free during the spring season.

My daily plan was to teach in the mornings and to study, read, and write in the afternoons and evenings. I would let my assistant coach run practice. But my schedule quickly derailed with the complications from the team. And then my assistant coach resigned because he got a new job. My student assistant coach turned out to be just as a big of problem as my players, so I had to stay for afternoon practices. In the evenings, I would give the girls a bath, dress them in their pajamas, sing them songs, and kiss them goodnight. I would go downstairs, kiss Sophia goodbye and go to the library. I would come home long after she had gone to bed. The kitchen would be clean. She would leave me a bottle of wine, a corkscrew, a single glass, and a piece of chocolate. I would watch a show and go upstairs. In the bathroom, she would put toothpaste on my toothbrush.

The academic year started out with so much promise. We got a new athletic director because the previous director had a baby and moved to Minneapolis with her husband. The new guy was a former Chicago Bear, a pro-bowler. Prairie State didn't have a football team, but the hire caused a big media splash in the south suburbs. The Tribune did a story on the hire as a personal turnaround for him. Even ESPN came to campus to film him a 30 for 30 episode; they filmed us signing a new player to the tennis team, though the moment didn't make the final cut. He helped me secure the house

because the landlord was a big fan of his. Faculty and staff were intrigued by the hire, though some were skeptical of his experience. I was, however, ecstatic because his presence could bring high profile recruits. A lot of the top tennis recruits from Europe are considering a professional career, and to have a former pro athlete in the department could finally give legitimacy to our no-name school.

However, we got into our first dispute in the first week. Before school started, I asked maintenance to put the windscreens up around the courts; they usually do this in the spring, but since the courts were repainted in the summer, no one played on them until the fall. Anyway, the maintenance crew put them up on the outside of the fence. I saw the mistake and asked the head of facilities to correct it. Well, he didn't want to bother with a request from the tennis coach, so he said that he'd do it right in the spring. I wasn't having that, so I asked my athletic director to make sure the screens were taken down and reinstalled correctly. Two days later, some of the windscreens fell down after a storm, and the director of facilities told the athletic director that I cut them down. He, of course, took this accusation to me, and I was infuriated. I denied it and blamed the faulty job as well as the summer storm. But the suspicion persisted. I begged security to examine the parking lot footage, though they couldn't be persuaded to do anything about it. The matter went to Human Resources, and the director of facilities was required to write a letter of apology to me. But the controversy lingered between the new AD and me. I felt like he wasn't prepared for the complexity of the job, and he thought I was psychotic.

I started having problems with players from the first day of practice. A few of them were late, and so the players who were there were warming up from the baseline. I

was waiting patiently for the stragglers, wondering if I was going to let it slide as a first day mistake or come down hard on them, putting the fear of God in them. Then Manny, a transfer from another community college, asked me, “Coach, what are we doing today? Just hitting down the middle?” The comment smelled disrespectful to me, but I wasn’t prepared for it. I just blamed his teammates, who were the ones holding up practice. I should have shut him down at that moment, and that was my first mistake. My second was not chastising the latecomers; I was already rattled.

Manny stated questioned my drills and practice schedule. He started acting out, swearing and throwing his racquet during bad play. I gently corrected him, trying to get him to control his behavior before I had to discipline. It continued and I kicked him out of practice. Manny left without argument, as though this had happened to him before. I called his old coach, and he chuckled at the report: “That’s Jose, all right. I think he was spoiled as a kid, not a lot of discipline at home. But he’s a good kid at heart, and really competitive.” I took it as a sign of hope, but Manny’s behavior was becoming a distraction for the rest of the team and he was setting a bad example. I talked with him during my office hours and he poured out his frustrations with the house and his teammates, about the mess in the kitchen and the bathroom. I thought it was a good talk, and the next day, I went over to the house to have a team meeting about the common areas and cleaning up after themselves. I was definitely stern with them, in a high-school-teacher “don’t-smile-until-Christmas” kind of way. They were annoyed with my intrusion into their life, but they recognized that was probably good for them, to start the year off getting into good habits. I wasn’t trying to be friends with them; I was trying to be their coach.

Manny didn't get better though. One day as we were practicing, he looked over to my assistant coach, a former player who had run out of eligibility but was still pursuing his associate's degree. Osiris was sitting against the fence watching a match. Manny stopped hitting and motioned to him, "Coach, what's he doing?"

I was prepared for his disrespect this time: "Fuck do you care?" I said in my toughest Chicago voice.

"He's just sitting there. He's not doing anything," Manny said.

"He's watching practice, not that it's any of your concern," I said more formally.

"But shouldn't he be standing up and giving pointers or something?"

"I think you should worry about your own game. Let me handle the coaching. What he's doing is none of your concern."

Manny shrugged and went back to hitting. Osiris walked over to me and asked me what Manny was saying. I told him it was nothing. But I decided it was time to teach Manny a lesson, a tennis lesson. I told everyone that we were going to work on a doubles tactic. I asked Osiris to be my partner at the net and I would serve. I asked Manny to try to return my serve and put my number one player as his net player. Manny's team had a lot more talent than mine, but Osiris had done this drill for two years and knew how to play this point. We lined up in I-formation. I was serving to Manny in the ad court. I sent a slow but spinning serve right at his body. Manny's return was weak and Osiris put the ball away. I did it again. Same result. Manny started trying to thread the return down the line, but his shot faded wide over and over. He was getting embarrassed. I stopped the drill and asked the other players why Manny wasn't getting the ball back. They gave a variety of answers: his lack of footwork, he was flustered by the new formation, he was

fading his shot because he wasn't accounting for wide angle serve. All of these answers might have been correct. But the truth was that Manny had a hard time returning a body serve, and I knew that; I had seen it about a dozen times in practice, but I hadn't yet told him. He was humiliated, and after that day, we weren't on the same page. He wouldn't take correction and had outbursts. I kicked him out of practice, then out of the match lineup, and then off the team. We knew that the team wasn't big enough for both of us.

I let him keep his scholarship and granted him a release from his letter of intent to pursue other teams for the spring season. I thought this move would let the other players know that I wasn't kidding around. Manny stopped going to his classes and spent all day in bed in the basement of the tennis house with his girlfriend, who had come from Texas to stay with him. One day during practice, his girlfriend rushed over to practice and said to me, "Coach, there's something wrong with Manny. His stomach hurts and he can't stand up." I was in the middle of a match, and dropped my racquet in the middle of the court and ran to my car with the girlfriend. We drove two blocks away to the tennis house.

Manny was doubled over in pain on the steps going down into the basement. I asked him what the pain was like, and he said that he it was sharp and cramping. I asked him if he was on any drugs if he had taken any drugs in the last few days. He adamantly denied it. He was holding his right side and I thought it was appendicitis and called 911. The ambulance came, and his girlfriend and I followed in my car.

We sat in the waiting area in the emergency room. I listened to Manny's girlfriend make panicked calls in Spanish to Manny's parents. I felt the guilt wash over me. Sure, this kid was an asshole, but he was still a kid. And I had taken away tennis from him and

his spot on a team. He had dropped out of college because of me. I had felt this power before as a professor, but the point of my high standard was community college tennis. This kid, who was probably being cut open on an operating table, was a thousand miles away from home, and I was the adult responsible for bringing him here. And I did it because he was good at hitting a fuzzy yellow ball. The whole thing suddenly seemed pointless.

A nurse came out and explained to his girlfriend that the doctor thought it was appendicitis and that she may have saved his life. They were going to do an x-ray first. Tears rolled down her face. I didn't console her; I just sat there. But the doctors determined that it wasn't anything serious, probably just bad indigestion and heartburn, maybe a temporary blockage. He was released that evening, but I had already left by that point. Manny stayed in school for the rest of the semester, though he stopped going to class. He transferred to a Division III school in January. He finished at Prairie State with straight C's.

The other players, somehow, were doing worse in school than Manny. I had to start checking to see if they were in class everyday by walking by their classrooms and peeking in; more often than not, when they made to class on time, they were in the back row and looking at their phone. One of my players failed a class for plagiarizing his final project. I had to meet with him and his professor, a close friend of mine who caught it and actually felt bad about having to fail him. The player, in order to maintain his eligibility, had to take a winter intercession course during Christmas break. He signed up with an accredited online university and had to pay for it. Even then, he almost failed that class.

In the fall semester of 2015, my reading and writing for my graduate studies didn't go well either, and I had to delay my exams to the spring of 2016. I knew how difficult it would be for me to finish all of my reading while in the middle of our season. But I thought I could do it because the exam was scheduled for mid-March and matches didn't start until the end of March. Of course, I would have to complete the oral defense in April. I made a reading schedule and spent every day and night over my winter break reading and writing my research paper. When school started in January, I was optimistic that I could do both.

I tried other activities with the team to cultivate bonding. I took them paint-balling one day, so they could have a little American-style fun, as well as have a chance to shoot their coach in the face. It was a beautiful fall day, and in the end, no one got injured. I treated them all to Culvers and we sat around the table laughing and recounting the battles. The whole day probably set me back \$400.

Nothing improved when they came back from break. First, one of my assistant coaches (whose was being paid and a tennis professional) quit right before Christmas. I had to find his replacement right away because I needed help from an adult while I studied for exams. I interviewed four people and offered the job to all four of them. Thankfully, one of them accepted the position; her only job would be to run practice at the indoor club where we practice before the snow melted off the courts. Then, on their way back to school from overseas, two players got stuck at O'Hare late at night, and I had to drive out there and drive back them back to their house. I did this despite Sophia's frustration in doing so. The players even bristled back to me that I was mad at them for something that wasn't even their fault. Because we had to practice at our indoor club, we

needed to carpool to the courts. We had two cars, which would have been plenty of room, but the players all tried to pile into the SUV everyday because that driver left after the last class of the day. So typically, the entire was late to practice each day, on court time that the school was paying for. When they got to practice, they continued swearing and slamming their racquets against the net or the backstop. Since they were playing at a private club, the school started to get complaints about their behavior. But I wasn't going to practice anymore. After class, I would drive straight to the library and start reading until it was time to tuck the girls in bed.

In late January, I found out one of the players, a guy named Justyn, had traveled to Turkey for a semi-pro tournament, which would forfeit his eligibility. This realization happened gradually over the course of a few weeks and was ultimately the source of my demise as a coach. First, I got another report of drugs in the house, and the landlord was threatening eviction again. I got wind that Justyn was the one buying the drugs. I suspended him from practice. Justyn was frustrated because he wasn't practicing, and he felt that he really found his game at home in the Bahamas. Now, he claimed, that he was going to lose it again. We held a long heart-to-heart during my office hours. He poured out his soul, all the things that he was unhappy about. His love life, his teammates, his homesickness, and the problems with his dad back home in the Bahamas. I sat back with my legs crossed and listened to all, with a smug sense of superiority. But truthfully, I had been there before. Being 18, physically not a boy anymore but definitely not a man, by any measurement, Justyn occupied a limbo of identity. You're six feet two, with a man's frame but your face is riddled with pimples. All you want to do is meet girls and date

them, but you don't know how to talk to them. So you turn your energies to some other activity to sublimate your frustrations, like hitting tennis balls.

I had known this kid since he was 14 years old. He had come to Prairie State when I was recruiting his older brother. Justyn was a little kid then, but he played with the college kids during an informal practice. When his much older doubles partner missed two easy shots in a row, Justyn yelled at him. He was fearless, the opposite of his soft-spoken brother. His brother played for PSC for a year, won a lot of matches for the team, though he didn't win his bracket for the regional tournament. Despite my best efforts to keep him, he transferred to a four-year college after that first year. I was sad to see him go, but I was thrilled that his brother decided to play for us because he had that killer instinct.

His leadership was a winner on court, but he himself proved difficult to manage. He was one of those players who agrees with you to your face, and then turns around and does the opposite. That day in my office, we were getting somewhere; I really thought things were improving. I had him in my English 101 class the previous semester, and he was a stellar student, but I didn't know about all the personal struggles he was having. In this meeting (and I'm not making this up), he told me that I was the smartest person that he had ever known. I was touched and flattered, which was maybe his point, but I wasn't budging on his suspension. I had to keep him out of the lineup until I cleared his eligibility and that I had some reassurance that the drug use and the parties would stop. Just then, after an hour and half of talking, he stood up and started shouting at me:

“You can't do that! I'll go to the athletic director about this or the dean or the president, if I have to. I don't give a fuck.”

“Justyn, calm down. You are out of line.”

“No! I’m calm. You’re the one who’s out of line. You want my respect. But you’ve gotta give respect to get respect. See?”

“Justyn, I’m your coach. You have to show me respect. And you can’t shout at me in my office.”

“You’re not my coach. I’m off the team, remember? And you don’t even coach. When do you even go to practice? You don’t even know how to coach!”

At this point I was worried that other professors would start to hear his shouting, but it was late enough that they were all gone for the day. I didn’t want the embarrassment of a scene with a tennis player. “Justyn, you need to leave my office.” I stood up and put my hand on the side of his arm. He wacked my hand away with his elbow. “Man, don’t touch me! I’m leaving.”

He left, and I peeked out of the hall to see if anyone was listening. No one was there, and all the office doors were closed with the lights off. I slumped back down in my chair and looked out the window. It faces west, so I get to see the sunset every night. But I missed it; it was mostly dark with just a few flecks of red in the clouds.

Justyn was right. I didn’t respect him. At that moment, I didn’t feel any respect toward my players, or my students, or my colleagues, or my friends, or my family, or even my wife. I was entirely consumed in my own pursuit of winning. They were beneath me. I didn’t think enough about any of them to respect them. I felt like they were merely a supporting cast in a play about my life. They weren’t as interesting as I was and they weren’t winning like I was winning.

I didn't even like coaching tennis; winning wasn't fun anymore. I wanted to enjoy my life. I wanted to play tennis myself. I wanted to get back into shape. I wanted to get my PhD. I wanted to spend more time with my kids. I wanted to get a babysitter and go on double dates with my wife. I wanted watch sports on TV and read more books. I wanted to get involved in local politics. I wanted to do so many things that had nothing to do with coaching tennis. But I had made a commitment to coach. I had dragged these kids to this school, some of them from halfway across the globe, to get a college degree and play tennis. I felt that massive responsibility. But I was stretched too thin, and I was no longer doing a good job.

On the drive home, I got call from Justyn's mom in the Bahamas. She was upset and threaten to withdraw Justyn from school. I said that was fine with me, that maybe it would be best for him. She was surprised that I would part ways with my second best player. Then she accused me of bullying him. My eyes rolled at that, just the latest reflexive accusation made so this kid can get what he wants. I told her about the parties and the drug use, despite my ethics that it since Justyn was a legal adult, it was none of her concern. I told her that the tournament in Turkey might jeopardize his college eligibility. I told her that Justyn was having a lot personal problems that were causing his change in attitude. I argued that I wasn't the cause of his problems; he was. I argued that this is all normal stress for college students, that it's hard for someone to be so far away from home with the pressure of school and sports. I argued that Justyn can still fix this if he promises to stop his disrespectful behavior and stops using drugs and gathers all the information to show that he didn't pay for his trip to Turkey or any expenses while he was there, which would have been virtually impossible. His mother, who I had known

well for four years, remained unconvinced. She said that she wanted to talk to my athletic director, and I said that was a good idea.

My working relationship with the athletic director was at an all-time low. I asked him for help, to talk to these players to reinforce my rules and standards, but he didn't want to do that. He said, "If they are not listening to you, they're not going to listen to me." But they would listen to him, and if we had a united front, they might start marching in step with the rest of the athletes. The athletic director had another problem: two long time coaches had quit under him already, the soccer coach and the volleyball coach. He told even admitted that in his first year of being the director, he only had one winning team, the tennis team. He finally promised that he would talk to the players, and he did, but he waited through the weekend to get back to me about what came of the meeting.

On Monday, he called me and told me that the players leveled some serious accusations against me but wouldn't tell me what the accusations were because the Dean of Students was investigating them. My stomach dropped. I knew that I hadn't done anything wrong, but they could say anything they wanted, if their stories were the same. After class, I drove to the library at UIC to study for my exams. As I was desperately trying to understand an especially long and difficult theoretical essay, I got a text message from one of the players who didn't have a ride to practice. Exasperated, I told him that to walk there, even though it was a three miles away and in the middle of February. He kept texting me. I told to call the assistant coach and see if he could pick him up. But then he started outlining the problems with the daily rides to practice, something about not enough room for everyone in the car, which I wasn't aware of. I told

him that I wanted to have a team meeting the next day to clear the air of all the problems we were having as a team.

The next day after class, I called the team into an empty classroom to hash everything out. Apparently, the entire team was piling into one SUV every day to class, and the driver was asking them for a few bucks to help him pay for gas. The other players refused. I asked them why wouldn't do it, and they said that the school should pay for it. I told them that there was no way the school was going to give me cash for rides to practice. I asked them what the harm was, considering they were spending money on liquor and weed. One of the players, the one suffering from the most economic hardship, let out a guttural scream "No!" I suggested that he could do some other favor for the driving, like stringing his racquet for him. He refused again. That's when I said that I was done. I told them that I quit and the season was over. I walked out of the classroom, went back to my office, and waited for them to figure it out on their own.

A few hours later, my assistant coach, Osiris, who stayed in the meeting with them, reported back to me. He told me that they were angry and scared. He tried to reason with them. He told them that he knew that coach was being hard on them, but that coach was always there for them, willing to help them out with anything they need, money, tutoring, editing, advice. They agreed, but they had made their decision to take it up with the Athletic Director, to tell him that I had quit and that I had cancelled the season. which came as a shock to him.

The situation between me and Long became so dysfunctional that we had to call a meeting about the team with the president of the college and the Vice President of Student Affairs. We met in the president's office. I got there early to sit down with her

and poison the waters before Long got there. I talked to her and told her about the personal stuff going on in my life. I told her about Sophia's Lyme Disease. I told her about my difficulties in studying for my prelim exams. I said that my teaching was going well, but that these players were out of control. They were like no other group I've dealt with and that I wasn't getting any support. She looked so concerned and sympathetic.

Long came in and looked wide-eyed that we had started without him. I laid out my concerns about the players and their behavior. He looked genuinely shocked at my revelations and claimed to have only known a few of these stories. He wasn't wrong. I had kept the extent of the problem from him for no other reason than I didn't want him to know. I thought I could handle it myself until I knew I couldn't. He took issue with me quitting so impulsively and that I cancelled the season. I could understand that, but he didn't understand that it was all a bluff. It's an old teacher's move: tell the students that they can't go on the field trip unless they finish all their homework.

Terri Winfree, the president of the college, is a hopeless optimist, so she asked us how we can salvage this situation, whether there's any hope of getting me back coaching the team. I was waiting for this moment. It was exactly what I was counting on. I said yes, there's a way to undo all this. Terri looked so relieved. I laid out the plan: let the students know that the season would be cancelled unless they stopped all the bad behavior: the drugs, the alcohol, the parties, the tardiness, the bad behavior in their classes. They would need to chip in for rides that their fellow students were giving them. Long hesitated. He said that I quit and that we needed to find a new coach. I said that we could do that but we should try this first. He was hesitant, but agreed to try it. He asked for a meeting with the players. I thought that it could work.

He and the VP of student affairs decided to meet with the players that night. I sent a text to them to meet in one of the classrooms. They all came, except with the two players that might have my back. They met for a half an hour. It was decided that I was out and that they would find a replacement.

I drove home feeling betrayed but relieved. I was done with it. I had quit and there was no going back. It wasn't fun anymore, and it certainly wasn't funny. On the way home, one of the players, my number one singles player wrote a final text message to me saying "You're a joke" with a smiley face emoji, crying with laughter. I wanted to unload on him, unleash every hateful thing I could say to him and the other players, revealing every truth I knew about him and his life playing tennis and attending this college. How it was all a waste of time and a dead end. Hatred and anger and all the nasty emotions in the world filled my heart and overflowed. I wrote about five messages to him and deleted them all before I sent him nothing, no response. No words could capture that moment. I sat in the car in front of my house and pounded the steering wheel until my hand hurt.

I walked in the front door and greeted Sophia with a kiss in the kitchen. Her mom was visiting us, helping the girls. They were finished with dinner and about to go upstairs for a bath. Sophia was cleaning the floor.

"What happened today?" she asked, knowing that today was the day.

"I quit the team," I said, deadpan.

Her mom gasped. Sophia looked at me, and her eyes exploded.

"Really? You're really done?" she said, incredulous.

"I'm done. I'm not going back. I can't do it."

"Oh that's great, Patrick" her mom offered.

Sophia and I hugged right there in the middle of the kitchen. We didn't stop hugging for a long time, maybe twenty seconds. She didn't rub my back or anything, just held onto me. She said nothing. She just kept hugging me, hard. But it wasn't a consoling hug. It was one of those hugs that if you let go, you'd lose them forever.

Chapter Five: The Sophia Poems

The Cliffhanger Dilemma

Let's say you are holding two loved ones over the edge of a cliff, one on each arm. If you had to drop one in order to save the other one, which person do you save? Mom or Dad? Brother or sister? Spouse or kid? Kid 1 or kid 2? Do you drop both because the choice is too equal? People try to say that they would use their super-strength adrenaline to pull both up. That's a cop-out. You have to choose. For me, the answer is easy: Mom, my brother Dan, and spouse. I have an answer to the kid question, but I'm not going to write it down. Though, if the situation arises, I know what I'm doing.

It's my "spouse" answer that gets most people. Most people choose the kid over the spouse. When we were married, my wife didn't hesitate to answer "kid." She had good reason too. I've already lived my life, and it's been great, truly. I've loved and lost. I've danced at Prom. I debated in the high school state championship tournament. College was like a four-year sleepover with my best friends. I've read books that have transformed me, and I've written poems about the darkest ventricles of my heart. I've seen the Grateful Dead in concert. I've taken all kinds of drugs. I've had beautiful one-night stands. I've eaten meals at three star Michelin restaurants. I've kissed the Blarney Stone, drank wine on The Spanish Steps, rode gondolas in Venice, had a Turkish massage in Istanbul, prayed at the Western Wall, climbed to the top of Masada at dawn, floated in the Dead Sea, beheld the Great Pyramids of Giza, drank mojitos at Hemingway's La Bodeguita Del Medio in Havana, hiked a volcano Nicaragua, stood on the floating islands of the Uros on Lake Titicaca, visited Machu Pichu, boated down the

Amazon River, flown over the Nazca Lines, took the Philosopher's Walk in Kyoto, and descended into the pit of the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an. I dreamed of being a college professor then became one. I've taught thousands of students. I got married. I had kids. I've won championships as a college tennis coach. I've had drinks with famous writers and actors. I made one woman laugh so hard that she fell on the floor, and I made one woman cry so hard that her eyes swelled shut. I've had my heart broken too. I've been rejected. I've been dumped. I've been cheated on, and I've cheated. I've lost precious keepsakes. I've almost died. I've said things that I can never take back. I've hurt people. I've lost friends. I've buried loved ones. If my wife dropped me down the side of the cliff to let my body smash and slowly decompose among the rocks and surf below, I would understand why; my daughters have done none of that shit.

My answer was the odd one. When we were married, I would have definitely chosen Sophia over either of my kids. Here was my rationale: she was young, and we could always make more babies. At that time, she did most of the work in raising our children. She set up the doctors' appointments and administered their medicine. She cooked, cleaned, and did the laundry. She bathed them and set out their pajamas. I loved her too, more than I loved myself. Plus, I wouldn't be able to raise two girls by myself, especially as a grieving widower and the one who caused her death. What did I know about how to care for and braid my daughters' long hair? What did I know about getting your first period or what to do about cramps? If a boy breaks their heart or harasses them, I'm more likely to enact revenge upon him than I am to console her. At that point, I wasn't ready to be a single dad. I would have dropped the little girls. I'm sorry, Olive and April, but I would have chosen your mom.

First Thanksgiving

The first November after Sophia left me, she got the girls for Thanksgiving. She said, "I'll give you Christmas. I know how much that means to you." Because of the way the parenting time calendar was, she would have the girls for ten consecutive days. At that point, it would be the longest time I would go without seeing them, except for the two weeks after the incident. And it was their first holiday without their dad.

A week before the holiday, I sent Sophia a message asking her if I could FaceTime with them on Thanksgiving. I would be with my brothers and sisters and their families at my parents' house, as a single person for the first time in ten years. She never responded. So I sent another request, and then another, and then finally another on Thanksgiving Day. She read the messages but never responded.

That night, I was lying in my old high school bedroom, the smallest one with only one bed. My friend Megan sent me a text message with a photo from Facebook. It was of my daughters sitting at Sophia's family table. They were seated next to Jared, and Sophia was next to him with her hand on his forearm.

Megan asked me in the text, "Is this the dude?"

Advice I

Everyone was giving us the same advice: you have to let your anger go. They said, "You can't keep bringing up the past. You have to figure out a way to move forward." Our co-parent counselor said it. The child representative said it. Even in arbitration, the mediator said it. She was a former judge in family law. She even wrote a

book about it called *The Good Karma Divorce* and gave us each a copy. I found the charge for the book on our bill. I read a few chapters before arbitration to prepare. The gist was this: you have to get to the point where you start to feel empathy for your former partner, even when they act cruelly toward you. You need to reframe those actions to think: “Wow, imagine what kind of pain she’s in to do something like that to me.” The child representative agreed and told us to kill each other with kindness.

My college roommate Eric is a therapist in Waco. I told him that Sophia was in psychotherapy, going four days a week while we were still together. He was surprised that type of counseling even existed. He thought it was only for rich people in Manhattan. He said the problem with psychoanalysis is that it tries to fix the past and you can’t fix the past. In his practice, he tries to find out what triggers people so they can better respond. He asked me to start noticing the things that cue my stress and advised, “Instead of reaching for a drink, you should go for a walk.” But when you have two little girls sleeping upstairs, you can’t go for a walk. Once I’m done bathing them, putting them in their pajamas, reading stories, brushing their teeth, singing them songs, and giving them hugs, I need a drink.

The mediator stressed that we have to put our differences aside for the sake of the girls. We have to look back at our marriage and appreciate the good moments that we had together. He said, “If you aren’t ready to do that yet, just look at the two beautiful daughters you have.” They made us pull up photos of the girls on our phones and pass them around so all the lawyers could see too. I even looked at the photos on Sophia’s phone and was tempted to see what else was on there.

Everyone says this to me: your daughters are beautiful. They are, objectively speaking. But I cringe when I hear it, and not because we should be emphasizing their other, non-physical qualities. I cringe because they look exactly like their mother, and she knows it. It's a point of pride for her. I know they are beautiful; I don't need anyone else telling me that.

The mediator said it: your daughters are beautiful, and you got two beautiful girls from this marriage. I'm supposed to think of this as a blessing, that if I had to do it all over again, I would because of Olive and April. But the truth is I wouldn't. If I had a time machine, I would go back in time and prevent myself from marrying Sophia. I'm sorry, Olive and April, but if I could redo it, you would not exist. I would have some other kids, and they would not be you.

Glasses

After Thanksgiving, the lawyers called a meeting to set some rules for making calls and interacting with each other during the divorce. We had all the lawyers there (all of them charging an hourly rate): my lawyer, his associate lawyer, her lawyer, her associate lawyer, and the child guardian. I had about a thousand things to say to Sophia. But I had forgotten everything I wanted to say because she was wearing glasses.

I wasn't sure what was going on with her because I hadn't seen her for months, so I really didn't know if she had some medical condition that suddenly required glasses. The meeting went on, and she asked me for more parenting time with the girls. I said no.

At the end of the meeting, I asked her if her glasses were prescription ones. She said, "I really don't feel like talking to you," and left with her lawyers.

My lawyer stayed behind with me and tried to explain what the next steps in the divorce would be. I couldn't concentrate on anything he was saying. I asked him, "What was up with those glasses? Her vision was always perfect."

"Listen, man," he said, "she's on her journey now. Your best bet is to try to not think about it."

But I couldn't stop thinking about it. I called my mom and my sisters and my friends and told them all about the glasses. No one else thought it was a big deal. But I couldn't sleep because I was thinking about those glasses.

Greta

Greta is my best friend Scott's daughter. She has an abiding love for me. When she was two years old, I was pushing her in one of those baby swings at the park across the street from her house. She was smiling and laughing at me. Sophia wanted to join in our fun and came up from behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist. Greta, suddenly mad, pointed a finger and yelled, "That's my Patrick!"

She was born the same month that Sophia and I started dating, in the fall of 2007. So I measured our relationship by how old Greta was. She was almost two when we got engaged. Greta was with Scott and me when I picked out an engagement ring at a jewelry store in New York. She was three when we got married and was a flower girl in our wedding. She was four when Sophia got pregnant with Olive. When Greta heard the news, she was inconsolable. Her mother Christine made us come over to reassure Greta that we would still love her even with a new baby. Her mom was laughing about how hard Greta was taking the news. But Greta knew something that no one else was willing

to admit, that Sophia and I would see a lot less of her once we had a child of our own. Greta was almost ten when Sophia left me. She's eleven as I write this.

Proposal

One of my go-to password recovery questions for my secure accounts is "What is the city where you were engaged?" The answer is New York. I bought the ring with Scott and Greta while Sophia spent the afternoon shopping with Scott's wife, Christine. Greta was two and caused a scene in the fancy jewelry store on Fifth Avenue. She was running around and putting her messy hands on all the shiny glass cases, all while these happy couples were drinking champagne and looking at rings together. Neither Scott nor I could do anything to calm her down, so all three of us were put in the manager's office. That day, Greta probably convinced a few of those couples to remain childless.

The whole evening was planned out. I had invited her friends and mine and got twenty tickets to see my brother star as Candide at the Met, opposite to Richard Kind. Her mom came too and brought her new boyfriend. As our friends arrived at my parents' place in Chelsea, I made up some poor excuse to leave with Sophia to walk down the street to the Hudson River. As we got to a small park at the water's edge, I got down on one knee and opened the box to reveal the ring. It was .75 carat, way more than I could afford. I put it on my credit card. I started breathing short. Even though I had rehearsed a few proposals, I stumbled through it like this: "Sophia, will you do me the honor of being... or by taking my hand in... would you make me the happiest man by... will you marry me?" She let out a sharp cry. I waited for an answer. With tears in her eyes, she took the box but didn't touch the ring. I was still on my knee. "So the answer is yes?" I

asked, truly not sure if I had sealed the deal. She nodded and said ‘yes,’ softly, and I stood up. She put the ring on. We hugged, and then we kissed.

She was too emotional to return to the party right away, which was already going on, my friends and her friends, all drinking champagne that Scott bought. We walked around Chelsea Piers and came to the driving range on 18th Street. We walked to end of the pier, where all the golfers were smashing balls straight at us, but they all fell harmlessly into the protective netting. We just stood there admiring the ring. “It’s so bright,” she said and moved it back and forth the underside of her finger with her thumb.

“The jeweler told me that you have to clean it regularly, and they gave me a polishing cloth,” I said.

Marriage/ Divorce/ Remarriage

Sophia and I dated for four months before we had sex for the first time. We dated for a year before we moved into together. We lived together for six months before I proposed. We were engaged for a year and half before we married. We waited a year before we started trying to conceive. We had Olive two years after our wedding. We had April two and a half years later. Sophia left me when April was two and a half.

She met Jared on July 27th of 2016. She had sex with him two weeks later on August 15th, our seventh wedding anniversary. She moved in with him on August 22nd.

We were divorced on September 5th, 2017, Olive’s sixth birthday. She married Jared two days later. She posted it on Facebook. I didn’t see it because she had blocked me. My niece told me about it.

Bedtime Stories

A month after Sophia left me, I was reading bedtime stories to Olive. She had just turned five. I was probably reading *The Berenstain Bears*, her favorite books, though I found them to be insipid. The father is always a hapless goof, and the moral of the story is always explained through some pithy speech from Mama. In the middle of the story, Olive stopped me and said, “Daddy, you were not being very nice to my mommy.”

“Who told you that?” I asked.

“My mommy did.”

“I was always nice to your mom,” I lied.

“No you weren’t. You threw my mommy down the stairs.”

“No, I did not,” I said firmly this time.

“Yes, you did.”

“No, I never did that. That’s not nice. And you should never do something like that.”

“Yes you did. You threw her down the stairs.”

“Olive, I didn’t do that. I would never do that. Let’s just finish this story and sing songs.”

“Ok, Daddy.”

I finished the story, sang five songs to her because she was five years old, and walked downstairs. I went out the backdoor and went into the garage. I closed the door behind me and started screaming. I wanted to smash everything I owned.

Tyrese and Chyail

Sophia told all of our neighbors that I threw her down the stairs. She even told the little kids. She told Tyrese, age 15, and his niece, Chyail, 11. She even told Dewon, who was only 8. That summer, I'd spent a lot of time with Dewon gardening in my backyard, since Tyrese was too old to work with me anymore.

Tyrese wouldn't talk to me when I moved back in. He walked right past me in the park and didn't even turn his head to look at me. I had know him since he was five and loved this kid like a son.

Chyail came over to the house and wanted to know about Sophia. She sat down with me in the living room. I've known her since she was two, so this was not unusual.

"So, when's Sophia coming back?"

"She's not coming back. She's in Bridgeport now, across the highway."

"I like Bridgeport."

"It's nice," I said.

"So, she ain't gonna live here no more?"

"Nope. She has a boyfriend now."

"I knew it! Oh, I knew it!" she said, proud of herself. Chyail must have been talking to her mother and grandmother about this situation.

"She said that you threw her down the stairs."

"She told you that?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I need to tell you that it's not true."

“Yeah, that’s what she told me and Tyrese.”

“It’s not true. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“I’d like to talk to Tyrese about this sometime.”

“Ok, Patrick, I’ll tell him that you wanna talk.” Just like that, she got up and left.

Potty Training

During arbitration, Sophia’s lawyer asked me if I was hitting the girls. Sophia chimed in about some story about April putting her hand out while she was sitting on the toilet. Sophia asked her why she was extending her hand. Olive explained that dad sometimes hits April’s hand. Sophia said that she didn’t know if it was true or not. I reassured that it wasn’t true. I said she probably just needed a hand getting off the toilet because she was too small. I asked why she was bringing this question up in arbitration. If I thought *she* were hitting the girls, I’d probably broach the issue with her immediately. I wondered if she was trying to undermine Olive’s credibility because she had reported to the child therapist a lot of damning things about Sophia’s parenting choices, like the fact that Jared was staying overnight with the girls during Sophia’s parenting time. Her lawyer made me agree that there would be no corporal punishment. The truth is that I have slapped April’s hand before. This girl is fearless and would run onto the Dan Ryan Expressway if I didn’t. But I never hit her while she was on the toilet. What kind of potty training is that?

Pick up/Drop off List

Sophia asked me if she could keep the girls for Wednesday November 9th, 2016 because her mom was visiting from Maine, though it was on my regular parenting time. I told her no because it was my birthday. Sophia kept the girls home anyway, though she didn't tell me she was doing that. It was the day after the election of Donald J. Trump.

I went to pick the girls up after school, but they weren't there. I was frantic. I called my lawyer. He said he'd take care of it. He sent an email to her lawyer, threatening to call the police if the kids weren't brought to school within the hour. Sophia was at work downtown and left immediately. I knew this because she was still parking her car across the street, despite the fact that she was still pursuing an order of protection against me. I saw her get into her car. I was jumping rope in front of my house, a nervous habit I started during the divorce. I saw her texting for a few minutes as I worked up a sweat. She didn't see me. She just sat there in the driver's seat. She finished her texts and turned on her car. She started to turn down my street, then she saw me, and turned her car quickly in a different direction.

I finished jumping rope and put jeans on. I gave her some time to drop the girls off. I got into my car and drove back to school. She was still there, dropping them off. I saw her. It was the first time I stood next to her in two months. April was in her arms and practically lept from her arms to mine.

I got them in my car, and we started to drive SkyZone, for my birthday celebration. On the drive there, Olive said, "I don't like it when Jared does pick up and drop off."

"What? Jared doesn't do drop off and pick up," I said.

"Yes he does," she said.

“Olive, are you telling me a story?”

“No, I don’t like it when Jared does drop off and pick up.”

I decided to call the school to verify this. The school principal called me back said that Sophia had indeed added Jared as a drop off and pick up list. I asked the principal how was this possible that she could add him without my knowledge. She said either parent is allowed to add anyone to the pick up/drop off list. I said that I should have been informed. She said that she had assumed that Sophia had told me. I said that she knew that we were going through a divorce and that I need to be informed of these changes. She said that the school would inform me of these changes in the future. I said ok. I hung up the phone. I got out of the car with the girls still inside. I was standing in the parking lot of SkyZone, and I just started screaming. People gawked at me. I didn’t care. I just screamed.

“Joy”

One Friday night, I took the girls to Zoo Lights at the Lincoln Park Zoo on the north side. I picked them up after school when it was already dark. It was three weeks before Christmas and lightly snowing. I packed all the things I might need: food, water bottles, an extra diaper, and each a change of clothes in case one of them had an accident. I had never been to Zoo Lights before. I had heard it was a great thing for kids: outdoor light displays, Christmas music, hot chocolate, and zoo animals. The problem was that it was outside, and Olive and April were 5 and 2.

Despite my aching heart, I was determined to do it. I had taken them to things like this dozens of times by myself, like pumpkin or apple picking, swimming or sledding.

The girls were tired though, and they started crying in my car on our way there, thirty minutes of this. I played kids' songs. I bribed them with candy. Nothing worked. I gripped the steering wheel hard and crawled through the packed Friday Chicago traffic. I parked the car and had to pay \$20, which I could no longer afford. Admission was free.

I got them out of the car, and April was still crying. She ripped off her hat and coat then dropped down to the frozen asphalt, crying and rolling around.

I can't do this, I thought. I can't do this. I can't do this. I started hyperventilating, tears stinging my eyes in the cold. No one was helping me. No one else was in the parking lot. There was one man at the entrance watching us.

"Fuck it," I said. "We're going home." I put them back in their car seats. Then, they started howling. Not a protest cry, really howling, like I just cancelled Christmas.

"I wanna go to Zoo Lights! Daddy, you said we were going to Zoo Lights! Daddy! Daddy!" I got in the car, fastened my seat belt, turned it on, and put it into reverse. "We'll be good! She'll put my coat on," Olive said. But this was not an empty threat. I really just wanted to go home, but they begged me.

I parked again and got them out of the car. I put their coats, hats, and mittens back on. They were wiping their tears away. "Carry me." I picked up April. "Carry me too." I picked up Olive in my other arm. Cradling them like trophies, I walked past the man standing at the entrance. He didn't say anything. But how could he not be impressed with the way I flipped that scene?

Even with hot chocolate, they were cold, so we spent most of the time at the indoor exhibits, watching the sea lions through the aquarium glass. They darted through the water, reached the end, rolled over, and darted back in the opposite direction. After

that, we found this indoor climbing maze for kids. I let them in even though April was probably too small. They went in and didn't want to come out. It was already way past their bedtime, but I didn't care. I let them climb all over it. When it reached the point of absurdity, Olive came out, but April was in the heart of the maze, and it was too small for me to pull her out. She refused to budge, so I had to employ some other moms and their kids to coax April out of there. Everyone clapped when she made it out.

For our last stop, we went to the gift shop, even though I knew I wasn't going to buy anything. They gave us these complimentary 3-D glasses. You had to look at the tiny Christmas lights to see a superimposed image. Each one was different; some had Santa Clauses or snowmen or candy canes. I put mine on. On the corona around every light on the display tree was the word "JOY."

It's a Wonderful Life

Every year right before Christmas, the Music Box Theater plays *It's a Wonderful Life*. It's such a popular event with parents and kids that the theater has to play back-to-back sold-out matinees. As an opening act, a person plays the old organ on the left side of the stage and leads the audience in carols. Then Santa comes on stage, and the kids go nuts. It's actually really cute.

My friend Scott organized the outing the year Sophia left. I didn't have the kids that weekend, so he bought a ticket for me, and I went with him and his kids. They fought over who got to sit next to me. I sat next to James, Scott's only son. He wrapped his little arms around my arm as the movie started.

I started crying during the first scene. I had to get up during the movie and go to the bathroom several times to clean my face and calm my breathing. Finally, I just left half way through the movie and sat in the entrance where a bunch of mothers were with their fussy babies and toddlers.

Scott came out a few minutes later and said let's go home. He said that Christine would bring the kids home after the movie. We walked back to his house. It was still light out and snowing but surprisingly warm. He put his arm around me as we shuffled through the snow and the Christmas shoppers on Southport. My breathing heaved over and over, until I couldn't hold back. Pedestrians stared as we walked against them.

Natural Consequences

During the fall semester right after Sophia left me, I had to take a leave of absence from my graduate school program. But I kept teaching at Prairie State because I had to do something. I was teaching a creative non-fiction course there, and I told my students that I was going through a divorce. I didn't know how else to teach them under the circumstances.

One of my students was an older man named Bill. He was a retired teacher and was writing a memoir about his deceased son, his only child, who died while he was away at college about twenty years ago. It occurred to me that I was the same age as his son would have been if he were still alive.

In his memoir, Bill was writing about his son's upbringing. Bill kept writing this refrain 'natural consequences' about the little punishments for the bad behavior of his son; it was part of their parenting philosophy: natural consequences.

His son died when he slipped off the icy roof of his dormitory, where he and his friends would hang out and smoke cigarettes. In our workshop, I suggested the title Natural Consequences for the piece.

“No,” he said, “I thought about that, but that title implies that his death was a natural consequence.”

Tyrese

Eventually, Tyrese came over to talk to me. He sat on a couch across from me. He looked out the window to his right; his view was of the plastic siding on the house next door.

He was 15 years old.

I told him that Sophia left me. I told him that she had a boyfriend. I told him that I didn't do what she says I did.

He said, “OK.” He paused. He continued to stare out the window. I wanted him to look me in the eye. “Patrick,” he said, “she said that you threw her down the stairs.”

“I know. Tyrese, I was arrested. I went to jail. We had a trial, everything.”

“It's just that you can't do something like that. To Sophia, to your wife.”

“I know, but I didn't do it. There's a lot more to the story. But I need you to believe me about that one thing.”

“Ok Patrick.” He glanced at me.

“I mean, we had a trial about this, and I was innocent. She lied about everything.”

He stood up. “We're cool.” He shook my hand weakly.

After that day, he stopped coming by. He was getting too old to visit with me anyway.

The Mom and Dad Video

Both before and after our separation, our daughter Olive liked to watch this video that we played at our rehearsal dinner. My mom made the video, which wasn't exactly a video but more like a slideshow of photos of our separate childhoods and then photos of our dating life together. The video was set to the Beach Boys' song "God Only Knows," one of our songs. It starts with the conceit, "I may not always love you." Supposedly, this was the first pop song to ever mention God in the lyrics.

Olive loved the photos of us as kids, and after school, she would say, "I want to watch the mom and dad video. After the separation, she seemed to be surprised by the photos of us together.

One time after the movie, Olive said, "I miss my mom."

I said, "I miss her too."

Puppet Shows

After Thanksgiving, the lawyers made us do nightly FaceTime calls. The girls hated it; it interrupted their playtime and got boring. Asking a five and two year old "How was your day?" isn't interesting. "Fine," they parroted back every night.

So I got a puppet. He was a wolf. I would talk to the girls for a few seconds, and then Wally the Wolf (I named him) would come into the frame. April shrieked in fear, and Olive laughed. After awhile, they spoke only to Wally. Then I got more puppets: a

hedgehog and a sock puppet. I would prop my phone up on the kitchen counter and make the puppets converse, and fight, and kiss. It was hard for me to keep their voices distinct. The girls didn't want to hang up, and neither did I.

Juggling

I would always know how bad I was doing by how clean the floors were. If the girls slipped on them while wearing their socks, I was thoroughly depressed. If the floor collected dust bunnies and had Cheerios all over the place, I was doing OK.

I cleaned the floors because I didn't have anything better to do at night. I didn't keep alcohol in the house anymore because it was too dangerous. I was tired of watching TV because everytime I turned on Netflix, I could see which shows Sophia was watching with Jared.

So I taught myself to juggle. We always have tennis balls lying around the house. I just started trying to do it but would drop all of them after three throws. Then I watched YouTube videos and practiced my technique. It took a week before I got good.

One night, when Sophia called me for our nightly FaceTime, I showed the girls my new skill. I propped my phone up at an angle that would show me standing in the kitchen, with the overhead light as a halo over me. I could see their faces beaming up at me from the phone. I started doing it, and I could hear Olive say, "Wow." Then I dropped all the balls and they laughed hysterically. So I started doing it intentionally. I would juggle for ten seconds, singing that circus music song, and then drop them all over the kitchen, continuing to move my hands as though I were still juggling.

Order of Protection

Even after the trial concluded, Sophia pursued an order of protection against me. Still, every morning, she parked her car across the street from my house. I asked her why she was doing that, and she didn't respond. Eventually, she explained: "reasons for my choice of parking spot include zone permissions, convenience to the green line, and safety." The judge never granted the order.

Doll Houses

Every night before bed, Olive and April play with a dollhouse in their room. I was never sure why Sophia didn't take this with her when she moved out. They played with it for months and would always perform the same action: putting the babies to bed in their cribs. I paid little attention to the house itself until one morning when I was picking up all the pieces to the house: chairs, beds, cribs, etc. I found that there were only three people in the house: a pink baby, a blue baby, and a dad. I don't know what happened to the mom.

During the Christmas season, my mom gave the girls a toy Crèche set, with a little Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. Olive would place these figurines into creative arrangements, sometimes with Jesus in his crib on top of the manger where the angel usually goes. One day I looked at my phone and found pictures of her latest arrangement. It was Jesus in the middle, Joseph on one side, and Mary on the other, but Mary was turned toward one of the shepherds, who was also in the manger. Olive had taken 105 photos of it.

The Sophia Poems

During my first year of graduate school, I took a poetry writing course. I like writing poetry and I teach poetry, both literature and creative writing poetry at my college. But I got into graduate school, a program for writers, on the strength of my fiction writing. I wanted to take this course to test my chops in a way that I hadn't since undergrad, 15 years prior.

I loved it too. I started finding inspiration for my poems everywhere. If I had an idea, I would take out my phone and start recording lines. My poems were about my teaching, Sophia, my daughter Olive, who was a year old at that time. I liked writing these poems so much that I even considered to changing my focus to poetry. I asked my advisor about this possibility. She talked to my poetry instructor, who said that I must be a very good fiction writer.

For my final portfolio, I put together a collection of 10 poems that I called *The Sophia Poems*:

Three-Legged Race

That's what you called it, our first date,
going on a run together
I laughed at the idea of our legs bound together.

I think about this when I am away from you—
on a jog by myself,
or driving home on a rainy November night.

Sometimes I think of it when I see a woman
with no ring on,
and she looks back at me,

Or when you put *tampons* on my grocery list
(I know your brand)
and at the mall, when I sling your red purse over my shoulder.

I think of it when I buy a plane ticket
to see your mother,

and carry your luggage as well as my own.

Or when I am sick or depressed or exhausted,
and you bring me a blanket,
make me homemade pizza and do the dishes afterward.

I think about it when I have to work late,
when every one else is gone,
and we write another mortgage cheque.

And in my careless moments, ordering a round of drinks,
though I should go home
and split a bottle of wine with you.

Still, with arms around each other's shoulders,
syncing into a rhythm,
we hop forward, our eyes both looking ahead.

I see the two-legged ones over there,
smiling when we stumble;
they don't know what fun we're having.

Growing Old Together

You used to say to me, "I want to grow old together." I always got confused by the romance of this sentiment because I don't want to grow old, with you or anyone else.

Analogies

My friend Alex said to me, "It's like you got into a car accident. You were driving along, and everything was fine. And then bam, you get hit and you're spun around. You try to think if you ran a light or the other guy did. At first, you don't know whose fault it is, and you start to doubt yourself. Were you speeding and not paying attention? Or did that person just blindside you?" It felt that way, getting blindsided.

But that analogy is not exactly right. For me, the whole experience was kind of like going to the doctor for a checkup because you know something's not right with you. Then the doctor tells you that you have some disease and there is no cure. The disease is

fatal too, and it could be years suffering. And then people in your own family suddenly tell you that the disease is entirely your fault and you caused it with the choices you made. To you, that explanation doesn't feel right, but they are convinced and they stop speaking to you. You think of your kids and how they are going to cope with your death. But your closest friends and family members either say that they are shocked or that they're not surprised at all, that they could sense something was wrong with you. Then they start saying that the disease is probably a good thing and that you are better off with it, that the next life will be better. They say these things despite all your pain.

"I'm dying," you tell them. "For God's sake, please help me."

Advice II

People told me don't not to use my lawyer as my therapist. So I didn't, except for this one time. We were on the phone discussing a letter that I wanted to send to Sophia, with all of the things that I wanted to say to her, things that were at the heart of our disputes and then some stuff that was just ancient history. But my lawyer cut all of it out, about 90% of the letter.

"It's not going to do any good. It's not going to help," he explained.

"But I'm trying to explain why we keep fighting, why we are spending all this money on lawyers."

"I agree with all the things you are saying, but you are getting divorced regardless. What's the point in explaining that you're right? Let's just get this thing done with."

“I’m trying to do that! She’s writing these long letters to me, and you’re telling me that I can’t respond to them?”

“You have to stop getting involved with her rants.”

“But the things she’s saying about me—she’s calling me abusive and controlling. I just want to defend myself.”

“Look, I don’t like talking about these things because I’m not supposed to talk about my ex wife at all, but a lot of the things that are happening to you are strangely parallel to my own divorce. The odd behavior, the affair.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I don’t give her anything. I write as little as possible to her.”

“But what if you can’t do that? What if your story has to come out?”

“You can’t let it. Who cares what she thinks anyway?”

“I do. She’s saying all these horrible things about me. I think I’m entitled to a response.”

“Let me ask you another question: Do you think she’s crazy?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then why do you care what a crazy person thinks? If a homeless man on the street says something insulting to you, does it keep you up at night? Do you feel a need to respond to him?”

“No.”

“Then stop engaging with her rants. It shouldn’t bother you.”

This advice made a lot of sense to me, and for a while, it helped me. I started sleeping better. Then April developed a rash, and Sophia refused to let me take her to a

dermatologist. We started arguing about that, and both of us got into these rants again. The problem with his advice is that a homeless man doesn't come to your house to take your kids and care for them.

Couples Therapy

The summer before Sophia left me, things were bad between us, so we decided to attend couples therapy. I looked for recommendations and found a therapist who specialized in Gottman therapy. She said that she would videotape our session so we could watch it again to review our body language and certain phrases that denote the four horsemen of the apocalypse, in the parlance of Gottman, which are predictors of divorce. The four horsemen are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. The basic idea is that you're always going to have arguments, but how you communicate about them is a greater predictor of a successful marriage. We were guilty of all four.

Anyway, I found someone and made an appointment on August 15th, our wedding anniversary. I emailed Sophia of our appointment, accompanied with the phrase “wamp, wamp” after the date.

I looked forward to it. On my commute to summer school, I started recording my issues in our marriage. I had a litany, although I felt like they were ordinary problems that married people had, especially considering how busy we were with two kids, my summer school classes, and Sophia's precarious job situation, which was monthly contract work. I felt that we weren't spending enough time together as a family. I would take the girls all day and she would never come along. I constantly had to make excuses for her.

But the therapist cancelled the appointment because she was not feeling well that day. I was really frustrated. That night, Sophia came home from work, and we discussed what we would do for the evening, whether or not we could still get a babysitter. We hadn't settled the issue, when I admitted that I was still upset about her leaving the open Tylenol bottle in the girls' bathroom.

"Fine," she said, "Why don't I just leave?"

"If you can't be here right now, I understand," I said, echoing some of the Gottman psychology about being 'too flooded' to calmly discuss the matter.

Sophia made arrangements to go over to her friend's place, but I later found out that she went to Jared's place.

When we finally made it to couples counseling, she was no longer wearing her ring and wanted to tell me that the marriage was over in front of mental health professional. In therapy, she accused me of mansplaining things and gaslighting her. I had never heard her say these things about me before; I didn't even know what gaslighting was. The complaints seemed like typical marital complaints that any partner might have. When I tried to say something, the therapist stopped me. So I sat back and waited patiently for her to finish.

Then it was my turn, and I let loose about everything that was going on with Sophia. I talked about sex, and she exclaimed: "We haven't had sex in four months!"

"We had sex last week. You were screaming at me to fuck you harder."

"Oh great, now the therapist thinks I'm a slut."

The therapist interrupted, "I don't think you're a slut. I mean, what's your husband."

Sophia was silent.

“Are you having an affair?” I asked.

“No,” she said and stopped for a beat.

“What was that hesitancy?” I asked.

“Patrick, I’m not having an affair. There’s no one else.”

“Are you having an affair?” I asked again, to elicit the same reaction.

“I think she’s already answered that question,” the therapist said.

Therapy

The night after the incident, I met my mom at a hotel in the Loop. She had come back to Chicago. She was in her bathrobe and ordered room service for me. My friend Scott met us there in the room too. They had my day outlined. I couldn’t go back home or have any contact with Sophia. I would need to meet with my lawyer, who was going to set me up with a criminal attorney. I would need to pay another friend, another lawyer, who bailed me out. I would need to go shopping for some clothes, and I would need to meet with a therapist. Obviously, I wasn’t going back to teaching at Prairie State for the rest of the week.

My mom went with me to all these appointments. I cried in the conference room when I told my lawyer about the incident. He remained calm about everything, but I could tell he was worried.

Then we went to a therapist’s office. I had never seen a therapist before, but I was desperate to talk to someone. My mom took me there, and she talked to the therapist as I filled out the necessary insurance forms. I walked in and had to decide to sit in the

armchair or the couch. I chose the couch. I looked out the window, and the office had the most amazing view of Millennium Park and the Bean. It was September and all the trees in Grant Park were still green except for one, which had turned reddish brown. For the rest of the year and into the next, I looked out the window for all of my sessions, watching the leaves turn colors, fall off, lay bare the branches, and finally bud and blossom again in the spring.

But on that day, my first day, I sat on the couch. I didn't know where to begin. I felt hot and my feet were burning, so I asked her, "Can I take my shoes off in here?"

"Sure," she said. I took them off and looked out of the window.

"My marriage is over, and I just got out of jail."

Emergency Motion for Parenting Time

After the incident, I moved into my friends' house. They had moved to London, and I was staying there alone. I wasn't allowed to come home or have any contact with Sophia. She wouldn't let me see the girls either, not even for Olive's 5th birthday. I bought her roller skates, and my mom delivered them to our house.

Under police escort, I was allowed to enter my house and gather some things, like toiletries, clothes, and my Lexipro, a prescribed anti-depressant, which I had procured from a new doctor a few weeks prior. I had to get my suit for my upcoming trial. I grabbed my blue tie as well. I grabbed some clothes for the girls too because I was about to pick them up after school. My lawyer had twice applied for an emergency motion for parenting time, the second one being successful. Both times, we had subpoenaed Sophia to court; she never showed up to either one. The first time the motion was rejected

because the judge didn't think we gave Sophia enough time to respond. The second time, the judge was flabbergasted that she didn't show up and granted the motion for me to see my kids.

I remember waiting in the courtroom with my lawyer. I sat in the pew and listened to the other family law cases. The judge admonished one man, saying "Cook County has 3,000 pending divorces. Why should I sit up here and wait for you to get your act together?" I sat next to my lawyer while he was buried in his phone. When he came up for air, I asked about my upcoming trial. He explained what the next steps were. I asked him if this was the worst divorce he's ever seen. He laughed at me. "I know it feels bad, but you're not even close. You're not even the worst one I have now."

The girls were overjoyed to see me again. Olive's hair was tangled and unwashed. I felt like I had failed them. It was my fault that I hadn't seen them in three weeks. I got them in my car and drove to Walgreens to pick up some shampoo for Olive and diapers and wipes for April. I couldn't even speak to them. We walked up and down the aisles looking for anything else I might need. April, who was two years old, started grabbing bottles of vitamins and supplements and putting them into my basket.

I put the basket down on the ground and started recording her with my phone. She grabbed arm loads of medicines: cold and flu syrup; Vitamins B-12, D, and K; Cool Mint Centrum Vitamins; Pre-natal vitamins; Alive! Hair, Skin, and Nails Softgels; Osteo Bi-Flex Triple Strength for Joint Health; and Ultra CoQ10. I didn't have the patience to put it all back, so I just took the items I needed from basket and left the remnants of her shopping spree for someone else to sort through and re-shelf.

Homecoming

When Sophia moved out, I was allowed to move back into the house. She wasn't paying the mortgage or contributing her salary to our bills. She opened a new checking account. So I was paying all the bills, including our credit cards, which had charges for dinners at restaurants with her boyfriend.

Our house cleaners finished their monthly cleaning a week before I came home, but it was trashed again by the time I arrived. The girls were with me when I came back after being gone from my home for almost three weeks.

The downstairs toilet was backed up with shit. It was her shit, or the shit of her boyfriend. I managed to unclog the toilet, but then the ejector pump in the basement overflowed. I put the girls in front of the TV for a movie. I put on shorts and a t-shirt and then opened up the cover to the sump basin. I manually flushed it out several times before it started flushing automatically. Still, the shit and toilet paper had backed up onto the floor, so I was literally ankle deep in Sophia's shit, and maybe the shit of her boyfriend. After buckets and buckets of water, all the shit was cleared off the floor. Then I mixed water and bleach and scrubbed the concrete floor with a hand brush. I rinsed it again. I put the cover back on the sump basin.

I stripped naked and got into the shower. I washed the bleach off my hands and feet and the dried remnants of her shit off of my ankles. I toweled off and put clothes back on. I went upstairs to see the girls smiling at my reemergence. The movie had just ended. My fingertips were wrinkled and my hands still smelled like bleach.

The Day Leading up to the Incident

That morning, Sophia came over to feed the girls breakfast and take them to school. That semester, I was teaching 8am classes, so that I could free up time for writing my dissertation. We had agreed that on Tuesdays and Thursdays, she would come over to the house to take them to school and that she would be responsible for picking them up on those days as well.

She still wouldn't tell me where she was staying, other than it was a friend's place. I still had no idea why she wanted a divorce. She had said that she had outgrown me. She said that she misled me, sold me a wrong bill of goods.

She came over at 6:30am. I was already showered and dressed, much earlier than I needed to be. My backpack was ready to grab and go. We talked for a few minutes about me calling her lawyer and doing a collaborative divorce. I said I would do it. She got up to use the bathroom. Her phone was lying on the kitchen counter. I grabbed it and walked out the front door.

My heart was pounding. I got on the highway and started driving toward school. It was raining. I couldn't wait to read what was on her phone, so I exited at 43rd Street and pulled over on Wabash Ave.

I took out her phone, and read all her text messages to a contact named Gravity Well. Some mocked me. Some were sexual in nature. Some were inside jokes I didn't understand. I took photos of all of them and sent them to myself.

For the rest of the day, I drove around the south side in a near state of panic. In a moment of calm, I sent Sophia an email apologizing that I had her phone. I told her that I would pick up the girls that day and that she could come over after work to pick up her

phone. She emailed Jared and told him to not answer any calls from her because I had her phone. I got to read that email too.

Text Message to Jared

One of the text messages read, “I married a man who believes himself a writer but doesn’t write, so when I do, that threatens him, and (pretty unawaredly) he takes it out on me.”

It’s true that I was sometimes resentful when Sophia would make time for her own writing. We’d be visiting my parents, and I would be getting the girls up, feeding them, dressing them, cleaning their messes up, and trying to get us out the door for church or a holiday party. Sophia would be sitting at my childhood dining room table, drinking coffee and writing her novel on her laptop. My mom would look at me, with an expression that said: “What’s going on with her?”

I was resentful. I needed to write my dissertation. The progress in my graduate school wasn’t going well, and my academic standing dropped from excellent to satisfactory. Sophia was unemployed and using babysitters to go to therapy and spend time writing at a coffee shop. I was doing everything else: shopping, taking the girls to and from school, playing with them after school and on the weekends, and putting them to bed. Goddamn right I was resentful. But threatened? Not a chance. I was a tenured professor of English and a student in a highly competitive PhD program.

But she was right about one thing: I wasn’t writing.

Honeymoon

We never went on a honeymoon. I felt bad about this, but we were just too busy after the wedding. Then we ran out of time and had Olive. We did travel and to a lot of different places but always to visit our families or friends, never just the two of us. We tried to go to Hawaii for Christmas one year, but it fell through. Another time, I bought Sophia a plane ticket to join me in Japan when I was in Asia for a professor-exchange program. She didn't go because she was pregnant with Olive. She thought it would be too much time in a plane. I was sad but understood.

Before we were married, we did take one trip by ourselves. It was to her family's summer home near Bar Harbor, Maine. They had this cute house on an island off the coast. It was May and still very cold. We were feeling adventurous, so we packed a picnic and got her family's kayak out of storage. We launched it from the dock and decided to paddle to a neighboring island. Paddling on the ocean was exhausting. We found an osprey nest on a navigational buoy. We got too close and it started swooping down on us. We started laughing so hard we couldn't paddle.

We made it to the shore of an island called Little Cranberry Island. I got out of the kayak and collapsed on the gravelly shore, heaving for breath. She laughed and took a picture of me. It looked like I had washed ashore because my feet were still in the surf. We laid out a blanket right there, ate our picnic, and split a bottle of wine.

We paddled back and made it home. I was still wet and the temperature suddenly plummeted. When we got home, I stripped off my wet clothes and put on long underwear. Sophia lit a fire in this old-fashioned wood-burning stove attached to the fireplace. I sat on the couch in front of it under blankets and shivered. The house got

downright toasty, but I was still cold. She got under the blankets with me and put her hand on my leg.

“Your skin is cold. How can you still be cold?” she said. We huddled under the blankets and watched the fire until our bodies warmed and then we went to bed.

The Abuse Manifesto

In preparation for the trial and the divorce settlement, Sophia had prepared a document that detailed the history and extent of my abuse of her. It was nine pages long; none of it was physical abuse though:

“Overview of general behavior with the past 2-4 years worsened since Patrick enrolled in PhD program and performed poorly in coursework.

-Patrick’s failure at work/school lead to feelings of insecurity fuel a rage he turned on Sophia, who he began to and continues to try to control, humiliate, and belittle with an emphasis on gaslighting (making her appear and feel crazy).

-These actions paint a picture of his rage, which comes from his own sense of insecurity and failure to thrive in his PhD program.

[I will] draw a line from his own reaction to his stupidity to 2011.”

Obviously, there’s a lot more in this document. The abuse manifesto goes all the way back to the first month we dated, November of 2006. Some of it is true. Some parts I can explain. Some of it sounds like emotional abuse. Some of it sounds like typical marital disputes. Some of it is factually incorrect. Much of coincides with her diagnosis of chronic Lyme disease.

None of it admits to her own fault in the breakdown of our relationship, specifically her affair or her own detached behavior. Do abuse victims abandon their children? Do they have affairs with perfect strangers?

An Email From My Father-In-Law

Sophia was estranged from her father for years. She cut off all contact from him shortly after we were married. I wasn't exactly in love with the guy, so I didn't much care. The decision to cut him out was all Sophia's; I was relieved that I didn't have anything to do with it. I wasn't even around when she got into the big fight with him.

The story was something like this: Sophia was in Maine visiting her mom, while I was still in Chicago. Dad was living in New Hampshire because they were divorced, and he wanted Sophia to visit him. Sophia got sick and couldn't drive to New Hampshire to visit him. He got really mad and said some awful things over the phone. And that was it for Sophia; she never wanted to see him again.

A week later he reached out to us asking for a reconciliation. Sophia refused to answer, but I felt sorry for him. I wrote him an email explaining why she was so mad at him. In this email, I detailed some of the claims that Sophia leveled at him, including abuse of her mother, none of which I had heard of before, but I was willing to believe Sophia, as her complaints about her father were well-catalogued by then. He hit me back with the nastiest reply ever, disavowing me as his son-in-law. Sophia just said, "I told you so." After that, we never saw him again. He never even met our kids.

But every once in a while, we would get another email from him, often gushing with a sad sort of benevolence. Sophia always asked me not to respond, so I never did,

even though I pitied him. The only thing he ever valued was his family, and his kids wouldn't even speak to him. He wasn't even invited to Sophia's sister's wedding.

But months after the separation and the trial, he sent me this email:

Subject: my email from two years ago.....and a few thoughts today

Dear Patrick:

I send wishes for a happy father's day to you. It occurs to me that after my own father, you are the next in line for such sincere appreciation and respect. As the father of my only grandchildren, you stand in a universe unto yourself. Please send my affection and warmest regards to your wife and daughters.

With loving-kindness, David Adam Soros

While I know very little about the demise of your marriage to my daughter, I do know this: you fooled everyone in our family except me. You were a prick before you married my daughter and you turned into even more of a prick as time passed. My scorn for you is unbridled and rivaled only by my pity for your behavior as an adult. Insulting Sophia's mother was the final straw in this despicable drama created by your own hands and sociopath mind.

Your comments about money for your wedding; where your brother-in-laws and sister-in-law attended schools; your thinly-veiled arrogance to understand the world beyond yourself: it was always just below the surface of your insecure and pretentious, fractured Judeo-Christian ethos.

I have attached a photo of you I found online. You should consider attaching it to the

mirror you use most often. In it you will see your true self, a man who does not understand consequences not only for himself but for his children. DAF

Attached was my mugshot.

Blue Tie

For my pretrial, I wore a royal blue tie. Sophia was there to press charges against me. She didn't look at me, so I don't know if she saw it. I wore it for my trial too. When she had to identify me in the courtroom, she said I was wearing a navy blue suit and a light blue shirt. When the prosecuting attorney asked for more detail, she said I was wearing a blue tie.

The tie was a gift she gave me for Christmas at her mom's house, before we had kids. It was kind of an odd gift for me because I never really wore them, except for weddings, and I already had too many. I was really excited to get it though. I was wearing my pajamas, and I put it on anyway. For Christmas dinner, I put on a nice white shirt and wore my blue tie, even though we weren't going to church.

Condoms and Lube

When Sophia left, she packed my condoms and lube. They were in a drawer in the nightstand next to my side of the bed, the left side if you're looking at it, the right side if you're sleeping. She never used oral contraceptives, so when we had sex, we always had that thin layer of latex between us, except when we were trying to conceive. She took all

the liquor too. She took my mom's slow cooker. She took a queen bed for herself, a futon, and a twin for Olive, but she didn't take a crib for April, and we had an extra one.

The Summer of Cocktails

One summer, Sophia and I decided to make a new cocktail every week. We got an old recipe book out and started experimenting. I went to a liquor store and bought all these weird bottles: Campari, Curacao, Chambord, Crème de Cacao. We started with the basic: margaritas, daiquiris, mojitos, pina coladas and then moved onto weirder ones: the dark and stormy, the old fashioned, the sidecar, the grasshopper.

These nights, Sophia would put Olive to bed at 6pm, and I would mix the cocktails. Then we'd sit on the back deck of our patio and drink them with our baby monitor playing soft static. We invited friends and neighbors over for our summer of cocktails. Sophia would brag that Olive was already asleep and would most likely sleep through the night. We would drink until we were too drunk to make dinner.

That summer, Sophia got pregnant with our second daughter. She wasn't a mistake. We just wanted to have a fun summer before Sophia had to stop drinking again. We found out that our due date was in April, and we started tossing names back and forth. I don't remember it like this, but I was the one who suggested her name, April.

All winter long, I collected lines of poetry that had the word "April" in them, like "To what purpose, April, do you return again? Beauty is not enough." I collected 20 pages of excerpts of different poems. I put it all together in this little booklet for her, probably for a future birthday present.

The Incident

I can't write about this yet. It's too soon. I'm too close to it. I'm sorry.

Scarlet Begonias

In the late spring when Sophia and I were still together and basically happy, I planted a full garden in our backyard: tomatoes, jalapeño peppers, squash, broccoli, eggplant, basil, parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme. In our flower boxes on the back patio, I planted scarlet begonias because I liked the Grateful Dead song, and I was tired of the Japanese beetles killing the magnolias. In the summer, the two of us sat on the deck having a drink, and I said, "What beautiful flowers we have here."

After she left that summer, the garden became overgrown with weeds. The vegetables didn't get enough water and never fully matured. The broccoli bloomed, and then, before I had a chance to harvest the stalks, they shriveled to nothing except tiny yellow flowers. In the fall, I ripped everything out, raked it all up, and threw everything in the composter. The harvest was negligible.

I forgot about the scarlet begonias in the flower boxes, but as it got colder, I marveled how they survived, even thrived. I never once watered them. In October, we had a few overnight freezes that killed off every other flower in Chicago, but the begonias still held their red buds and shiny leaves. It was the middle of November before they died, and in what seemed to me, spectacular fashion.

I was talking to my divorce lawyer on the phone, looking out the back window at the cold, dark afternoon. I blurted out, "Oh my God, the begonias are finally dead. They were fine yesterday, and now they're totally dead."

The Story of the Day I Was Born

Every night before bed, Olive asks me: “Daddy, will you tell me the story of the day I was born?” I always say yes. We have memorized every word:

You were still sleeping in your mommy’s tummy. And that day, I was coaching a tennis match in Rensselaer, Indiana, which is really far away. So I drove all the way there and then I drove all the way back. I came home, and your mom said, “Sweetie, I think there’s something going on down there.” And she pointed to her stomach.

I said, “Sweetie, you’re not going to have the baby tonight. You’re not due yet.”

So we sat down and started watching a movie, “Courage Under Fire.” And we ate a lot of spicy tacos. I had a glass of wine, and then I had another glass of wine. Then we went upstairs to bed.

Then your mom started having contractions. And she was saying, “Uhhh, my belly!” So I got out my phone and started timing the contractions. That’s when we knew you wanted to come out and meet us. So your mom called the doctor, and she said that we needed to go to the hospital. So I got up and packed our bags, and I got your mom downstairs, and I got her off the couch and into the car. I drove really, really fast to the hospital, even though it was raining.

I left the car at the valet, and we went into the waiting room. That’s where your mom’s water broke. Then we got into Triage, and we had to wait there for a little bit. Then we went upstairs into the labor and delivery room.

Your mom was in a lot of pain, and the nurse came in and asked her if she wanted an epidural. I said, “No she doesn’t want one.” But the nurse looked at your mom and

said, “You don’t have to be in this much pain.” So your mom nodded and said OK, and I had to leave. I went downstairs and got a cup of coffee. Then I went back upstairs. I saw your mom smiling, and she said, “Sweetie, we’re going to have a *baby!*” We sat in the room for a while, and then when your mom was ready to push, I called for the doctor.

She pushed for twenty minutes, and you came out. I cut the umbilical cord. Then you started crying, but it was a soft crying, like you were under water. They cleaned you up and weighed you and wrapped you in a blanket. Then they gave you to your mom and you latched onto your mom right away and started nursing. The nurse said you were showing off.

Debts

Before I was married, I was not good with money. Typically, I spent what I made, which wasn’t much. Then something big comes up, a trip or car repairs or Christmas or a bar tab or a new wardrobe, I would just put it on my credit card. I only had one. But the debt stacked up little by little, and before I knew it, I had \$8000 of credit card debt at an 18% interest rate. I told no one.

One summer while I was a full-time professor, I took a job waiting tables at a French restaurant in Hyde Park to help pay off the debt. I would sign my entire paycheck over to the credit card bill and used my teaching paycheck to pay my other bills. The job had another unintended effect: since I was working nights and weekends, I was spending a lot less money because I wasn’t going out with my friends.

When I would see my friends, they got a big kick out of my stories from the restaurant job. One time when I was catering a big party, an older drunk man gave me a firm hug goodbye, then kissed me on the neck. Another time, I was tending bar at another

party and a professor from my school came up and ordered a drink; she was embarrassed for me. I would tell them about the countless times I would get yelled at by the head chef about screwing up orders or not memorizing the daily specials. My friends laughed their asses off because they all had professional jobs by now and these stories reminded them of their own shitty jobs that they had in their twenties. I was like them in the sense that I had a professional job and was in my thirties, but now I had to go back to this life because of my debt. After four months of waiting tables, I was out of debt and could quit.

The school year was starting up again, and the job was no longer fun. I wasn't a very good waiter, and the head chef started screaming at me every single night. When I took showers, I started screaming back at her, as though we were having an argument right there, me naked and wet and she standing in the shower. I knew then that I needed to quit.

My debt always lingered on my card, never reaching the level it once was, but it was always around. I justified it in various ways. I was paying off a mortgage and contributing to a retirement account. I was young, and I liked to travel. When could I live this irresponsibly again? When I met Sophia, I knew I couldn't marry someone with secret debt, so I took control of my spending (which is difficult while you're first dating) and three months before we got married, I was completely debt free. And during our marriage, we never had a credit card bill that we didn't pay off fully, even with a new house, two kids, private schools, and Sophia's Lyme disease treatment.

When the divorce happened, I blew through our substantial savings in three months. I had a criminal attorney, a divorce attorney, a half share of the child guardian,

an expensive mediator, and out of pocket therapist for Olive. Over the year, this amounted to over sixty thousand dollars. My yearly pre-tax salary was 75 grand.

But I was spending stupidly too, on alcohol and dining out. I was impulse buying at the grocery store, anything for a quick rush of serotonin. Sometimes it was justified, like buying a new toaster because Sophia took ours with her, but I didn't need the same one we had, a wedding gift. I had my old model in the garage. I wanted the new model because I wanted to erase any indication that she had left. So I replaced all the things she took, exactly as they were, no cheap imitations. I didn't have any choice but to go into debt, 40 thousand dollars' worth of credit card debt. I maxed out all three credit cards I had and could no longer pay my lawyer. Plus, I had to buy Sophia out of the house, even though I bought it before we were married and she didn't contribute to the down payment, which was another 45 grand plus another 50 grand from my retirement account. I had to ask my parents for the money.

I met with my dad in his office on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, a year after Sophia took the girls and her boyfriend to her brother's house. I was prepared with an agenda and my budget, a detailed list of my credit card debts and their interest rates. I explained my plans for selling the house.

He wanted to see all of my credit card purchases and the trips I had taken in the last year. He gawked at me when I told him the interest rate. He called my budget bullshit. He questioned the neighborhood where we were living and said it wasn't suitable for the girls. He even questioned my commitment to my graduate school studies. But in the end, he wrote a big check to me. At age 43, it was humiliating.

Sleeping in the Same Bed

When we were still married, Sophia and I slept in the same bed, for the most part. With her Lyme disease, she had trouble falling asleep, so she would sometimes go to the basement guest bedroom to sleep. Sometimes, she said I was snoring or that the temperature was too hot upstairs or that there was too much noise outside.

Our sex life suffered a bit too, but I wasn't alarmed by this change. We had two kids and busy careers. Plus, Sophia was sick and having night sweats. She told me that sex felt alien to her. Show me another married couple with these issues and who are content with their sex life. I didn't mind it too much.

Sophia didn't want the girls sleeping in the same bed as us. This was part of our effort to sleep train them. When they were infants and Sophia was still breastfeeding, they slept in a co-sleeper bassinet adjacent to our bed. Sophia would breastfeed them, and then plop them in the co-sleeper. Every morning, I would carry the co-sleeper downstairs for daytime naps, and every night, I would carry it back upstairs.

When they were able to get through the whole night without being fed, at about six months, they slept in their own room. There were exceptions to the rule though, especially with the younger one. She was a night owl, so occasionally Sophia would feed her in the middle of the night and then sleep in the basement for the rest of the night. After a feeding, April would be wide-awake. I would lie on my side, next to her with my head propped up by my arm, like a reclining model posing for a picture. My head would be hovering over her as I was nodding off to sleep. She would keep me awake with these little baby punches to my nose, which was just in her reach. She would punch, and my

eyes would open causing a little giggle from her. These were my most tender memories of April as a baby, just her tiny body hugged into my armpit in our gigantic bed.

As they grew up, we didn't allow them to get in our bed anymore, even if they were sick or had a bad dream. If they did have a bad dream, they would wake and call for "daddy" in the middle of the night.

Olive was a slow riser, so most mornings I would usually pick her up out of bed and carry her to our bed for a few more minutes of sleep before she had to get ready for school. I would set her down and climb in next to her. She would climb on top of me and lay her head on my bare chest. I would remain perfectly still and watch her little body rise and fall with my breathing. When it was time to go downstairs, I would turn and set her down on the bed next to me. She would open her eyes and look at me and say, "Dad, your breath is yucky. You need to brush your teeth."

The first time Olive and I slept in the same bed was in the hospital the morning after she was born. Sophia was sleeping in the recovery room, and Olive woke up in the middle of the night. She had just eaten, so she wasn't hungry. I picked up her in her tightly swaddled blanket and put her on the inside of my bed, her back to the window and my body at the edge of the bed. I stared at her as she fell back asleep, snug against my body. I fell asleep too. But then the sun came up over Lake Michigan (our hospital had a view of this). Olive opened her little eyes, and I reached for my digital camera. Without getting out of bed, I was able to take this photo: Olive lying down in bed, her eyes turned toward me, towering gothic buildings in the background, and then sunrays breaking out over the water with the sky blue and pink everywhere else.

The night Sophia left for good, I slept in the same bed as Olive because I was too scared to sleep alone. In our marriage settlement agreement, Sophia insisted on a provision that forbade kids sleeping in same bed as a parent.

Dance Party

Sophia and I always had a set bedtime for the girls. Actually, it was more of Sophia's thing than mine. At the time she left me, it was 7pm for April, who was still 2 and about 7:15pm for Olive, who was five. I admit that it was early, especially since they had to be up at 7am. But they were good sleepers, and they would mostly sleep through the night just fine.

Sophia was strict about sleep training even when they were tiny. After a few nights of crying in their crib in their own room, they slept through the night. Sophia was adamant about it too. In the early days, when Olive was still a baby, if I were to come home even a minute late, Sophia would forbid me to go into the room, even to look at her. She said I would wake her up, or if she were already awake, I would rile her up again, when we ought to be winding down for the night.

I would sometimes complain about not being able to say goodnight, but it got me home from work earlier. However, I loved that Sophia and I got to eat dinner together and even watch a few shows or sometimes an entire movie before we went to bed. I loved that they slept through the night. I loved that they slept in their own bed all night. I had heard so many stories from my friends about their kids not being able to sleep through the night and going to work the next morning exhausted. I had heard stories of a family bed and the end of your sex life. None of that happened to us. The joke I would tell, bragging

about how well my kids sleep, “Sometimes when we are watching TV, I forget that we have kids.”

But when Sophia left, I questioned every rule we had: no throwing tennis balls in the house, no fast food, no sleeping in mom and dad’s bed, and a strict bedtime. I could make my own rules.

One night, I put April down first in her crib, and then went to Olive’s room to read stories. I kissed her goodnight and turned out the lights. I went downstairs and started to clean the already gleaming floors. I could hear her talking to herself in bed, so I went upstairs and stood in the dark doorway.

“Olive, do you want to have a dance party?”

“Yes, daddy” she said with a smile in her voice and bounded out of bed.

We went into the basement, so we wouldn’t wake up April. I put on an old CD in my college boom box and turned it up loud. Olive put socks on because she liked to slide on the wooden floors. We played song after song, and I spun her and twisted her and slid her across the floor, under my legs, and flipped her backwards. She couldn’t stop laughing. Her eyes were smiling so much I couldn’t see them anymore through my own tears.

That Summer

The summer before Sophia left, we were having problems, and our lives shifted dramatically. In the spring, she had lost her job at the University of Chicago. Her job was ideal because she could work from home most days. It paid her as a part-time employee but gave her full-time benefits, which covered the girls’ healthcare as well. In the spring,

Human Resources discovered that she had made some personal purchases on a university credit card and sent the items to her mother in Maine. There was a lengthy investigation. She explained that her computer must have auto-filled in the university credit card information to the website. We paid back the \$240 dollars, and she was cleared of any wrongdoing. However, her position of seven years was eliminated the next month, and she received a nice severance package along with another month of healthcare coverage. This job was especially convenient for us because Sophia could still work while watching our April, our two year old, who wasn't in school yet.

But even when Sophia was working at home, I needed to do a lot more work at home and we needed help too. Her health was an especially big concern. The previous year, she had contracted Lyme disease. Initially, it caused a series of psychological and physical problems for her. She had shooting pains and odd sensations in her limbs, tingling and burning sensations in her veins. She also complained of a mental fog that frustrates many Lyme patients. At first, a doctor thought the problems were psychosomatic and recommended that she see a therapist. The doctor thought it might be post-partum or anxiety from our stressful lives. Sophia agreed to see a therapist, but knew that her problems were greater than just anxiety. Sophia saw a therapist for a few months and said that she wanted to pursue psychoanalysis. Her therapy went from one day a week to seeing a psychoanalyst three or four days a week. We hired a part-time nanny to clean, do laundry, and watch April while Sophia went to her daily appointments, which also included a massage therapist, chiropractic treatments, an acupuncturist, aromatherapy, and holistic medicines, all to reduce her pain. We also hired a house cleaning service to do a monthly deep clean. Finally, Sophia found a functional medicine

doctor in Lincoln Park who diagnosed the Lyme disease and started other treatments, including a severely restricted diet and a regiment of expensive herbal and essential oil treatments.

In the summer, we needed to make up the money because by then we had almost burned through our savings account. We had lost her income and her healthcare (as well as the girls' healthcare) and our out of pocket expenses were increasing. Plus, April was going to start attending a private Montessori school in the summer, which would relieve Sophia from being at home with her but it would more than double our tuition expenses because now we would have two children in private school. That summer, I decided to teach three summer school classes to make up the lost expenses, even though this would keep me from helping out with the girls and the house.

Even though I was teaching day and night classes all summer, my life was getting a better and our domestic roles had switched. I had quit coaching tennis, which had massively freed up my time. I had successfully passed my preliminary exams for my PhD, which also relieved me of a time burden. Now, all I had to do was finish a creative dissertation, which I could write on my days off from teaching in the fall. I had made some progress on my novel, and I thought I could finish it in a year. Even though I was teaching from 9am until 10pm at night most days in the summer, I was able to spend the weekends with the girls, taking them to play tennis in the park or summer parties, all of the things Sophia said she was too sick or tired to go to.

I found myself making this excuse for Sophia all the time. And it was the truth. She didn't like doing these things when she was healthy, but she was especially

exhausted by the social obligations of my summer social calendar. She's an introvert by nature, while I'm an off-the-charts extrovert. I was gaining weight and not exercising.

I remember my friend Megan telling me, "Patrick, you can't keep doing all the events with the girls. You need time for yourself and your work."

"Megan," I said, "she's sick. She can't do this stuff, and I actually love doing it."

But that summer, weird stuff started happening with her. Sophia started leaving bowel movements in the toilet. At first, I just flushed them and went on with my day, but it started happening daily. The other odd thing I noticed was that Sophia would frequently leave menstrual blood on the toilet seat. I'm squeamish about blood in general, but I didn't address the issue with her until it happened for the third month in a row. After talking to her about it, it still happened, even in our guest bathroom.

Sophia was also becoming increasingly scatterbrained. She was misplacing her items or putting kitchen utensils or pantry items in the wrong place. She was becoming careless about her hygiene and appearance. Her makeup would be put on unevenly or in excess of her normal application. One Saturday, I was doing the dishes and under a large pile of dishes in the sink, I found nine dirty, wet rags. I scrubbed everything, but the kitchen still smelled bad. I opened the oven and found dirty pots and pans stored there. I sent her a text message about it and she replied back that she would give me a blowjob for each rag that she left in the sink. I was dumbstruck. Our sex life had been erratic that summer, but I certainly wasn't getting any blowjobs.

There were other signs that she was having some psychological problems. She started expressing an inflated sense of herself. She would explain what she was writing in her novel, the layering of her narrative, was genius. She told me that she was basically

writing a Henry James novel. She used the word genius to describe a lot of the breakthroughs she had, but the things she said, to my ear, seemed very ordinary: a narrator who was undergoing psychoanalysis and working on a novel. “It’s brilliant,” she would say, wide-eyed. I was a little scared when she would say, but I was always encouraging. She hung a corkboard in our bedroom and pinned post-it notes all over it with characters and themes and scenes on it and then pull pieces of yarn between them. She would leave her journals all over the place, and her writing was incomprehensible. I found this piece of her writing on my own computer:

Few times for psychoanalysis to be psychoanalysis few times exist for us to suspend our allow other forms to summarize our on which to base our theoretical hermeneutical conclusions. I am speaking here of the use of enormous potential of fiction and its enormous potential in the application of our psychoanalysis. I would like to introduce the concept of carrying through Ordinarily considered carrying connotation of an overstepping or malevolent effects in the symtolic order. what I have seen.

Her journal and her writing would read like this for pages, like a mind on fire, a stream of consciousness that doesn’t bother to be understood by anyone but the writer. I can’t fault the state of her journaling but the shear length of it, the fact that it never finds any grounding, no sense to a larger project, or connection to her life with me.

Sophia was getting political in conversation, but her insights didn’t exactly apply to the world. One time, she discussed her habit of running at night in our neighborhood: “I’m basically flaunting my white privilege by running.”

“How?” I sincerely was interested in this question.

“By being able to run at night without fearing anything. That no one is going to do anything to me.”

“Umm, that’s not white privilege. That’s just a normal activity, going for a run at night. If we lived in a white neighborhood, do you think that running at night would a political action?”

“But we don’t live in a white neighborhood.”

“We live in a safe neighborhood. You think it’s safe enough to run at night, so you run at night, like if we lived in suburbs or the country. It’s fine to run at night here. I’m not crazy about you doing it because it’s dark, but if it helps you sleep, then you should do it.”

I knew that she wasn’t doing well, and my best guess was that her chronic Lyme disease was having an effect on her mind. I started finding other people with Lyme and asking them what they did for treatment. I researched alternative treatments, and everything pointed to Ozone treatment, where a doctor will inject O₃ straight into your bloodstream. It supposedly clears all bad cells, like viruses and bacteria, from your body. It seemed a little too good to be true, but what could we lose? I found a doctor that did it in Tampa and asked Sophia if she wanted to try it. She thought it would be too much money, and since we were running out of money, this was a concern. I asked my parents if they would be willing to pay for it, and after a lot of hesitation, they agreed. I started making arrangements, but Sophia refused to do it. She said that it was her body, and I was intruding her medical decisions.

She was spending a lot of time away from home. She started getting babysitters so she could go to this coffee shop in the Loop. I would see \$5 latte charges from this place,

which wasn't a big deal, except that caffeine was forbidden on the Lyme disease protocol that her doctor set up. Alcohol was forbidden too, but she started drinking again with her friends, never with me though. She started smoking weed too, which is medicinal and legal for Lyme symptoms. But Sophia never got a medical marijuana license. One time, I was driving her car with the girls in the backseat and I opened the glove compartment and a big bag of weed fell out. I asked her why she was driving the girls around with a bag of weed in the car. She said that she got it in the mail and accidentally left it in her car. She said she knew how dangerous that was and promised to be more careful. A week later, April got into her stash, which was in her purse, and threw weed all over the house. Another time, I came home early from teaching and found a babysitter watching April, when Sophia told me that she'd be home all day with April. I asked the babysitter when Sophia had asked her. She said that she got the call the day before. When I asked Sophia about it, she said it was an appointment that came up today. She was also going on these long runs, one of which lasted for almost three hours. When I asked her about it, she said that she ran too far, then bonked, and then had to walk home. I'm not sure why, but I believed her.

She finally got a job working as the managing editor of a pet magazine. The salary was great, double what she made at the university, but it had no healthcare. I had a few other misgivings about the job. It was a startup magazine, so the job might not last very long. The other concern was that it was a print magazine with no online presence. The magazine would be subscription based. The owner had a vision though. He was the owner of a chain of pet supply stores. He would offer the magazine for free for the first month in the stores, and then his customers and the advertising would keep the magazine

afloat. Sophia was extraordinarily proud of this job, and we were determined to make it work. I would put her and the girls on my insurance, and April would start school fulltime. I was excited to get out of the money hole we were in, but Sophia was skeptical of my excitement. “I think you’re going to have a hard time when I start making more money than you,” she said. I told her that I thought it was great that she was going to make almost as much money as I was making. She was so proud of herself that I didn’t have the heart to tell I wasn’t jealous in the least. I was relieved. After all, I had been the primary breadwinner for the last ten years. Plus, my job gave me three day weekends and 20 weeks of paid vacation. I wasn’t jealous of anyone’s job.

The final thing happened on our seventh anniversary, August 15th. Olive had a fever, so I recommended that we give her a dosage of liquid Tylenol to help her sleep. Sophia gave her the medicine and put her to bed. The next morning, after the girls got up and went to school, I discovered that the big bottle of cherry flavored liquid Tylenol was left in the girls’ bathroom, on the sink and open. I took a picture of it and sent it to Sophia. I wrote, “This is dangerous. If you aren’t more careful, our kids are going to get hurt.” She wrote back that I was right and sent me a frowny face emoji. That night she came home and we discussed what to do for our anniversary. I told her that I was still mad about the Tylenol, and she said, “Why don’t I just leave?”

The Night She Left for Good

On Saturday August 20th, I took the girls to a museum on the northside in the morning; it was a playdate with a friend of mine and her two girls. It was a rainy morning

but the sun came out in the afternoon when we came home. I found Sophia lying in our bed and texting. She was dressed, but her jeans were unbuckled. I told her that I didn't say anything about our problems to our friend. I said that I think we can work on our issues in therapy. She said that she didn't think it was possible. I was surprised because I had never heard her talk like that.

The girls were watching TV, and Sophia encouraged me to take a break from them and play tennis. I was worried that they were going to spend the rest of the day in front of the TV, so I asked her if she would take them to the park across the street. She reluctantly agreed. I biked to the courts, but even though the courts were dry, none of the regulars were there that day. I biked home and didn't see Sophia or the kids at the park. I went around the corner and saw Sophia walking with April.

"Where's Olive?" I asked.

"She's at the park."

"No, she's not."

"I left her there a few minutes ago," she said, unconcerned.

"Why would you leave her there? I don't know any of those kids there."

"April wanted to walk this way," she said.

I looked at her with wild eyes. "She's not there! Where is our daughter?"

"I don't know. I wanted to stay with April."

"Then you drag Olive with you!"

I biked around the block looking for her. I went into the garage and then into the house. Olive was in the kitchen, drinking out of a cup.

"Olive, we were looking for you."

“I went home, daddy. I wanted a drink of water.”

“Did you cross the street by yourself?”

“Yes.”

“You know you’re not supposed to do that.”

“I know, daddy.”

I walked out the front door to see Sophia standing in the middle of the park with April, calling out Olive’s name. I wanted to let her keep doing it, to let the panic set in. But I didn’t. I called out that Olive was in the kitchen.

“Oh, great. What happened to your tennis?”

“No one was there. It’s ok. I don’t want to play anyway. I’m going to stay home with the girls.”

“Ok,” she said. “Well, if you’re going to do that, do you mind if I go do some work on the magazine.”

“Do what ever you have to do.”

I put the girls in the back of my bike carrier and took them to the park. Sophia left quickly. We went to the park and I pushed them on the swings. I felt empty. I was nervous that I wouldn’t be able to leave the girls alone with Sophia anymore. I took them home and fed them. I got them in the tub when I got this text message at 7:38pm:

“I’m going to stay at Harold Washington library late to get this done.”

“It closed at 5pm. Where are you really?”

Chapter Six: Arrested

I got in my car and started driving to the north side while my phone charged. As soon as it had battery power, a call from Scott came through. I answered.

“Hello?” I said, mocking calmness.

“Where are you?” he said, panicked.

“In my car, driving to your place.”

“Don’t go to my house. I’m at the jail right now, waiting for you to get out.”

“Well, I’m out.”

“Yeah, how did you get your car? Wait, never mind.”

“I needed to get it, to charge my phone, so I could talk to *you* right now.”

“Okay, just stop.”

“I’m just explaining. I’m driving on the highway right now.”

“Will you just stop talking?” he said.

I didn’t say anything to him.

“Just shut up and listen to me, ok?” He said, and paused.

I stayed silent and listened hard into the phone. I could tell how angry he was.

“Don’t go to my house. Go to the Loop. Drive to the Virgin Hotel. Your mom is there. I can’t remember what room. Just ask at the front desk. Call your parents. Tell them that you’re ok. Tell them that you’re ok.”

“Ok. Virgin Hotel. Call my parents. Got it.”

“Hey, will you just shut up and listen to me? Will you?”

I swear to God I didn’t say anything back to this. He was about to explode.

“Just fucking listen! Ok?” he said, near tears himself.

I didn't say OK back. I didn't say anything back.

“Okay??” he asked again.

“Okay,” I said calmly.

“Go there right now.”

“I'm going there right now.”

“I'm leaving the jail, and I'll see you there in 20 minutes.” He hung up without warning.

I was in the back of a police truck, a paddy wagon, fitting for my name and nationality. My hands were cuffed behind my back, and I was damp with sweat, though it wasn't very hot outside. My breathing and pulse were calm, but it was stuffy in there, which was why I was so wet, though I wasn't sure about this because I wasn't in my right mind.

My brow was furrowed hard. The sweat from my hairline dripped down my forehead. I wanted to wipe it off, but I couldn't because the handcuffs were behind my back. No one else was in the truck with me. It was probably 9pm, but I didn't think to check the time when I was arrested.

The truck slowly turned off my street. The ride was bumpy and seemed to take forever, though I knew we were going about 20 blocks down State Street to 51st and Wentworth where the Second District police station was. I know where this is because I was the president of our homeowners' association for our housing development, Park

Boulevard on 35th and State, so I've had to call this station a few times over the years, though I'd never been there before.

The police truck jolted to a stop. The engine shut off. I expected that the driver would come around to the back door and let me out, but he didn't. No one came to back door. I heard some talking outside, but I couldn't make out the conversation. It faded away. They left me in the back of the truck. I wondered if they forgot about me. I wasn't sure if there was enough air. By now, I was sweating all over, under my armpits, stomach, underwear, and my feet. I thought I might die in the back of this truck, that this was the last few hours of my life, a fitting end to it all.

Eventually, the voices come back. For a few moments, I thought that maybe the police were having second thoughts about arresting me, and that they'd bring me back home. At this point, the girls were probably sleeping in their beds, and Sophia would sleep there, even though she'd been gone for two weeks. She'd have to sleep there. No question about it. She'd sleep in our bed, and the girls would wake up and see her in the morning. I wondered if Jared would come over and sleep in our bed too. If the police were to drop the charges, I'd go back to the house. I would have to see her again, but she'd have to leave.

I tried to wipe the sweat off my forehead with my shoulders, but I could only reach my temples. I tried to slow my breathing to conserve oxygen. My eyes were bugged, and lips pursed. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was too dry.

I hadn't eaten anything that day, but I wasn't hungry. For the last two weeks, I had stopped eating and stopped drinking alcohol too. I felt thin, which wasn't bad. Depression proved to be a good way to shed my extra weight. I had started a new

medication a week prior, and my new doctor asked me not to drink, so I stopped. It was easy. All the alcohol in the world couldn't do anything to extinguish the fire in my head. I didn't even bother to try it because I was sure that it wouldn't work. The medication didn't do much either, but it made me feel foggy and confused. In the back of the truck, I was confused for sure, but not foggy at all. Everything was in sharp focus.

Finally, the voices were right outside my door. They laughed at something but didn't open the door. I was dying to get out and tried to take a deep breath. The air burned my throat; it was too thin or too thick. The back of the truck smelled like stale urine, like the smell of an elevator at an L station, which I sometimes use when I take the girls on the train with their stroller. You can hold your breath on those elevators, but in the back of the paddy wagon, I just had to breathe it all in.

After another ten minutes, the door opened, and a wave of fresh air hit me. It cooled the sweat on my forehead. Hunched over, I walked to the back door, with my hands behind my back, and inhaled deeply through my nose. When I stepped outside, I could feel that how cool the air was. The sweat on my chest and my armpits turned cold.

Wordlessly, an officer led me to the back entrance of the police station, and we walked down a long, thin, inclined hall up to the jail. I was led into a small block-shaped room with a metal bench. The officer removed one cuff, sat me down, re-cuffed my left arm to the bench, and left me by myself. The concrete walls were painted yellow, but faded, chipped, and dirty. I was relieved to be alone in the room. For a minute, I fantasized that this wasn't really happening, that maybe I was in some alternate universe, and it wasn't happening in other places, that I went down the wrong wormhole, and in all the other universes, I was doing just fine.

I waited for a long time in that room. I thought that I could argue my way out of this, when a different officer showed up. I just needed to concentrate and figure out what to say. They hadn't really heard my side, or maybe they just didn't understand it.

A supervisor walked in with a clipboard. He was an older, plump man, with white hair and a big red nose. He looked like my dad, so I told him that this was a big mistake. He asked me what my name was and why I was arrested. I explained my case, and he looked disappointed in me, also like my dad.

He looked at me in the eyes, deeply, and said, "There's no bail for that charge, at least not yet. You'll spend the night here and hopefully, if the judge is in tomorrow, you can make your case then. He'll set bail, and then you'll probably be released the next day."

"Can the charges be dropped?" I asked.

"Not at this point," he said and sighed. "You'll have to go downtown tomorrow and be arraigned."

I fidgeted with my cuff because it was tight and on the wrong side of my body such that my left arm had to cross over in front of me.

He said, "Let me loosen that." He stands up, walks over, unlocks my cuff, and then re-cuffs me to the left side of the bench. He told me not to worry.

Another officer came in and uncuffed me from the bench, then recuffed my hands behind my back. He led me to the hallway where I crossed another handcuffed man being led by different officer in the opposite direction. The man looked at me with surprise and stopped walking. He looked back toward his officer and said, "What? I thought you only

arrested black people here.” The officer and the arrested man laughed at the joke together, and they walked past us.

My officer led me to an office, with big desks and old, bulky computers. The woman who arrested me was sitting there at a desk. The sides of her head were shaved and the top of her hair was in a tight ponytail. She was wearing an engagement ring, but had no wedding band. Her nametag said Cortez, and she had been really nice to me during the arrest, even trying to help me out. She was strong and pretty and had a good smile. When she was arresting me, she told me several times that I was being recorded with a body camera and that anything I said could be used against me in court. With her eyes, she told me to stop talking, but I was trying to get out my side of the story. I wanted her to believe me, but by that time, she had already made up her mind that she was going to arrest me.

She sat at the desk and asked me questions, basic stuff about where I lived, my birthday, and what my occupation was. I told her that I was a professor, and she kind of simultaneously frowned and lifted her eyebrows by the answer. Other officers were coming in and out of the room and exchanging small talk with her. They also looked at me in curiosity and asked why I was arrested. None of them seemed surprised by the answer. They talked about their shifts and overtime pay. Officer Cortez told them that she’s going to Turks and Caicos for her honeymoon. They asked about the wedding planning and she complained that she was doing everything, and that he hasn’t lifted a finger.

I couldn’t tell what time it was, but I was afraid to ask. My legs and back started to ache from sitting so much. With one hand cuffed to the metal bench, I stood up and

tried to touch my toes. I held the pose for about ten seconds. I lowered down into a squat to stretch my quads. At her desk, she looked at and recorded my possessions: my keys, my wallet, my phone, and a tiny jewelry bag with a gold coin in it.

She took the coin out of the bag, and said, "It's heavy. What is it?"

"It's a Krugerrand. It was a gift from my parents." That day, I had it in my pocket because I was looking for a different hiding spot for it. I was afraid that Sophia would take it. I hadn't found a new spot and still had it in my pocket.

"It looks so new, but it's from 1976. Is it real?"

"Yep." I didn't want to tell her how expensive it is.

"It's cool," she said and put it back in the jewelry pouch. She took all of the items placed them in a clear plastic bag and sealed it.

"So, how does this work?" I asked.

"You haven't been arrested before, right?"

"Never," I said, which wasn't exactly true. I was arrested in college for underage drinking. I was put in the back of a police wagon but they let me go without taking me to jail.

"You'll sleep here tonight. Tomorrow morning, a bus will take you to the courthouse on West Harrison," she said. "I'm really not sure what happens after that." She cocked her head to the side and yelled into an adjacent office: "Is the judge in on Wednesdays?" He yelled back yes. She looked back at me "That's good news. You can get bonded out tomorrow. You might not even need to pay anything if it's an I-bond."

"What's an I-bond?" I asked.

“That’s when they release you on your own recognizance. Basically, you don’t have to pay anything. No one has to post money for you.”

“What’s the chance I get one of those?”

“You don’t have any other offences on your record, so there’s a good chance you get one,” she explained.

The other officer walked into the room to ask about our conversation: “What’s the question?”

“It’s about an I-bond,” Cortez answered.

“Yeah, you want to get an I-bond for sure,” the other officer said lamely.

“Ok, but how do I get one?”

“The judge decides that. It’s based on the severity of the crime and whether you’re a flight risk,” the officer explained.

“You’ll be fine,” Cortez reassured me. “He’s a professor and he hasn’t any priors.”

“A professor? What do you teach?” the other officer asked.

“English,” I said. I imagined that they didn’t see a lot of professors, so I must have been a bit of curiosity.

“You should definitely get one,” the officer said and sat down on the corner of Cortez’s desk.

“You can take certain things to the court, but you shouldn’t take your wallet to that jail because things get lost there.” Cortez said, holding up my plastic bag. “It’s better that you take just my necessary items, like your belt, your ID, and your keys.”

“Will I need my wallet?” I asked.

“You might,” Cortez said, “but probably not. You should leave the expensive things like your phone, your wallet, and that coin here at the jail. Those things will be safer here.”

“OK,” I said. She sealed those items in one bag and the other items for the courthouse tomorrow.

Cortez brought me down another hall to the jail cells and where I would have my mugshot.

Another officer took it from there. He wasn't as nice. He lined me up for a photo. For a few seconds, I thought about what I wanted to look like during this photo. I had seen so many mugshots and studied their expressions for something like guilt, remorse, innocence, intoxication, happiness, anger, fear, or confusion. I tried to look like some cross between fear and anger.

I asked him if my mugshot would be posted in the Chicago Sun Times. He said, “You know, you are the third person to ask me that question this week. I honestly don't know how they choose those photos.”

He led me through a short swinging door to the phone where I would make my call. He said I had five minutes and asked for the number. I only knew two numbers by heart, Sophia's cell number and my parents' home phone number in Cleveland. I gave the officer that number. He dialed the number on an old push button phone.

My mom answered. She sounded tired, but not asleep.

“Hi mom,” I said quietly. I didn't want the officer to hear my conversation, but it was impossible to hide my voice.

“Hi, are you ok? Where are you?”

“I’m in jail. I’m going to be here overnight.” I said. She knew this was a possibility based on the last conversation I had with her, only a few hours ago.

“Oh God. I can’t believe it,” she said with a deep sadness in her voice.

“Yeah. Neither can I.”

“Are you okay? Are you safe?”

“Yeah,” I said, slightly annoyed at what her questioned implied, but inwardly, I too was concerned about the jail cell I was about to enter.

“Do you want me to come to Chicago?”

“No, please don’t come,” I said. I desperately wanted her to come but was filled with shame.

“I’ll get a flight and come tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to come. Please don’t come,” I said lamely.

“Are you going to be all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

The police officer interrupted me to say that was time was up.

I could imagine my mom lying next to my dad in their bed. She was wearing her long nightgown. He was wearing his white t-shirt and white briefs. By now, she was sitting up in bed, and dad had put his book down and was listening to her side of the conversation. I said goodbye to her and hung up. She would press the end-call button on the phone and place it on her lap. With her back turned to him, she’d explain the situation to my dad. She’d probably go to the computer in his office and look at flights. She would not sleep that night.

I was led down a short hall with jail cells. I saw other people locked up in the other cells. A few of them were in there with someone else. I was put in the last one, thankfully, by myself. The officer slid the iron door shut with a loud metallic clank, exactly how it sounds on TV and the movies.

In the cell, there was a metal cot and toilet with no toilet seat. I sat down and then immediately stood back up. I paced back and forth and sat down again. I laid down and then got back up and paced in a circle. My legs ached, and I tried to stretch, hamstrings and my quads, then I spread my legs apart and stretch my groin muscles. I sat back down and lay down. I looked up and heard the guy in the cell next to mine hacking a deep, phlegmatic cough. The only thought in my mind was that I wanted to be dead.

I started counting down from 100 by threes: 97, 94, 91, 88, 85, 82, etc. This was a trick I used to distract myself while I was playing tennis, to keep my prefrontal cortex occupied so I would stop thinking and just play. That night, it didn't help me calm me to sleep though. I thought my life was over. I would never see the girls again. I would lose my job. I would never be able to move back into my house. I'd be alone for the rest of my life. I wanted to end it now.

I didn't sleep that night. I continually lay down, got up, paced, talked to myself, and laid down again. Early in the morning, probably at around 5am, about ten other prisoners and I were taken out of our individual cells and put into one larger cell. An officer handed us a bologna and ketchup sandwich. The other guys were happy to have one, and it seemed to me that they knew that this was part of the drill. I was hungry but refused to take the sandwich. I couldn't stomach bologna ever since I was a kid.

We all sat in that cell waiting. Some guys got up and talked to no one in particular, and then conversation seemed to start up casually and easily. A few of them were mad but most everyone was resigned to the situation. They looked at me because everyone else was black, but no one said anything to me or asked why I was there. Eventually, we were handcuffed into pairs and led out of the cell and back into the police wagon. I was cuffed to a younger kid, probably about twenty-years old, who looked as scared as I was, though I thought I was hiding it a lot better than he was. He was muttering to himself, saying, "This ain't happening. I can't believe this is happening."

It was long drive to downtown Chicago in the Wednesday morning commute. The truck moved slowly through the streets. I can remember these police wagons causing me distress as a driver, not wanting to pass them because they said "POLICE" on the side of them, but also knowing that they were not traffic police.

When we unloaded, there were other wagons unloading prisoners from all over the city. The scene felt chaotic with exasperated police barking orders to their different groups of prisoners, some in casual clothes like me, and some others wearing the standard issue gray uniforms of long-term inmates, awaiting trial or another hearing.

When we got inside, I was separated from my handcuff partner and corralled into a packed cell with an electronic sliding glass door. These guys were more vocal and it wasn't long before that I figured that all these guys were in for the same reason: domestic violence. There was only one other white guy in there. His nose was cut and the bruise on his eye was fresh and yellow. He looked and talked like he was well-educated. He was vocal with the other prisoners, about his girl had punched him, and that all he did was push her off of him and she called the police on him. He told this story several times. A

lot of the other guys talked to him, sharing their own stories. There were about 25 of us in this room. Most of us were arrested the previous night.

We were then moved to another small room, which had a solid door and only one tiny window at the front of the room. The window was thick and damaged with scratches; in the center was a small round grated hole, through which you could communicate. Through the window, I could see a small woman in a black suit with short, curly black hair. Her voice boomed through the window, telling all of us to be quiet and to carefully listen to her instructions. She explained that she was our public defender and that if we had our own lawyer, we'd be given a chance to talk to that lawyer, assuming that our private attorney was available to confer with us this morning. We would each have a few minutes with her to discuss our cases and what our plea would be for our arraignment. She called all of us one by one where we discussed our case. She discussed the strategy openly, and I listened to each story. One young skinny guy, probably about 17 years old, maintained his innocence too, saying that he only hit his girlfriend with the back of his hand. She said to him, "Unfortunately, that's illegal in Illinois." He looked genuinely surprised.

I was one of the last to go, and she listened to my story patiently. She said, "I've seen this a thousand times. She had given up custody of her kids and now she was looking to gain advantage in the divorce, so she set you up and had you arrested. They do this all the time. And since she pushed you first, you were just defending yourself. Unfortunately for you, you fell into the trap. I'll recommend to the judge that you're released on an I-bond. We'll see if your ex-wife will continue to press charges. Next." This was the first time I heard anyone refer to her as my ex-wife.

We were put into another cell, and then moved through the labyrinth of the Domestic Violence Courthouse of Chicago. We were uncuffed and moved single file through thin hallways, up dark staircases, and into these tiny cells with five or six people. The skinny kid sat next to me and explained to me that he only hit his bitch with the back of his hand. He showed me how he did it. I was disgusted but nodded wordlessly.

When it was my turn, I was led through a dank hallway into a well-lit and perfectly finished courtroom. The light hurt my eyes for a moment, and I couldn't believe how nicely the room was decorated, considering the hell that was behind those doors I had just walked out. I stood in front of the judge and saw my lawyer standing there too. They had just finished the last case, where the skinny kid was going to be held on a \$50,000 bond. He started to cry as he was walking out.

The prosecuting attorney shuffled her papers and started going through the accusations against me, at which point I cringed and was about to say something back, when my lawyer held a finger up at me to tell me to stay silent. I went straight-faced. My lawyer then went through my side of the story and asked for an I-bond. She said that I was a teacher and not a flight risk. The judge hesitated for a minute, and then granted me bond at \$1000. My lawyer said that I only had to pay \$100 to get out. The entire hearing took less than five minutes.

I was led back downstairs into the original glass door cells. When I got downstairs with my bond papers, I was given a chance to bond myself out, but since I didn't have my wallet, I couldn't do it. I was put into a different cell with all the other prisoners who couldn't get an I-bond. One of the prisoners in our cell loudly yelled to all of us, "Look at all those guys who got I-bonds. Do you notice anything about that group that's different

than our group?” As he looked at our cell, his eyes naturally went to me. “Except for that guy.” There were about twenty of us in that cell; I was the only one who wasn’t black. The five guys who were in the I-bond cell were all white. The prisoner went over to me and said, “Hey man, you’re one of us now.” He laughed and slapped my hand. For the first time in weeks, I smiled.

After that, another officer walked in with bologna sandwiches and plastic cans of fruit punch with peel-off foil tops. I took two sandwiches and ate them quickly. They formed a dry ball of meat and white bread in my mouth, which were hard to swallow. The fruit punch was syrupy-sweet and washed the food down easily.

We were handcuffed to a partner again, this time, right hand to right hand, so I had to walk with my partner with my arm in front of him. He was annoyed by this arrangement but didn’t do anything to help the situation. He made me fully extend my arm in front of his body, so he wouldn’t have exert any effort to have our arms meet halfway. If this was a prison test of dominance, I had failed already.

We boarded one of those former Blue Bird school busses, now outfitted as a Sheriff of Cook County with mesh fencing over the windows. Inside, there’s a locked partition in the middle of the bus to separate the prisoners who are new and those who are already wearing the uniforms. We drove out of the courthouse and started driving west of the city. I looked out the window and could see University Hall on UIC’s campus. From the top of building, I counted down the floors to see if I could tell which one was the 20th floor, where I would have class next week.

We made our way to Little Village, to the infamous jail on 26th and California. In my many years of Chicago, I’ve heard horror stories about this place: people say that the

conditions are so bad that the inmates can't wait to be convicted and sent to a state prison. We passed the two towering walls lined with curled barbed wire and the gates closed behind us. It was early afternoon, and I wasn't sure if anyone knew where I was.

Processing seemed interminable. We were fingerprinted and photographed again. They wrote our prison number on our right arms in black permanent marker. My voice was scanned. I was placed on a moving sidewalk and given a full body scan. I had blood drawn and was given a chest X-Ray. I met with a psychologist, who asked me if I had any suicidal thoughts; I lied and said no. I was offered a free AIDS test, but I declined. I stripped off my clothes, except my underwear, and put on the prison garb, a two-piece made of a gray durable canvas cloth. The shirt had the size printed (mine was an 'L') over the heart. On the back, D.O.C. was printed in block letters. The pants were a baggy with a tie drawstring. But the process was anything but efficient. Each new station required a new waiting cell, which the guards called "the bullpen." Every time we stopped, I prayed that I would be called out of the room and released. I still hadn't talked to a single other inmate.

The other inmates had no problem talking to each other. Sometimes, one would stand up and make an impromptu speech about the injustice of it all. I was still moving through the incarceration process with all the other domestic violence offenders, so the speeches were about that and then the racism of the system. Most of these speeches were met with a lot of affirmation by the other inmates. In fact, there was a lot camaraderie between the prisoners. When we were in the bullpen, it was a lot like waiting at the DMV, uncomfortable benches and one shitty TV playing a daytime talk show. It was unimaginable that I might be assaulted or raped, a silly notion from movies and TV. I

only saw one fight break out, which was nothing more than shouting between two guys, one of whom was obviously mentally ill. He shouted at his instigator: “Well, I’m fifty years old and I’m a virgin!” to the laughter of everyone.

The only violent scene I saw was directed at the door of the bullpen. I saw one guy who weighed about 400 pounds. He was sitting by himself and seemed like a gentle giant because he said nothing to anyone, just sat there and looked at the TV. Another guy got up to give another sermon, but this one was directed at all of us. He yelled, “We have to do something about the system once when we get out. Once we get out of here, we’re can’t forget what happened to us and how we were treated.” He received a round of affirming shouts. Then he said, “We have to come the realization that our bitches don’t love us anymore. If they did, how could they do this to us?” This was the moment when everyone lost their mind. I sat there in complete agreement; of course, Sophia didn’t love me anymore, no question about it. But everyone else couldn’t handle this news. They shouted him down. A young kid curled up and said, “Don’t say that!” The gentle giant stood up, walked to the door, and started kicking it with his heel as hard as he could. Three cops walked in and cuffed him and led him out. I never saw him again.

The treatment outside the bullpen was bad. Cops screamed every order to you, all of them different and sometimes hard to understand. Sometimes they wanted you to stand with your right shoulder to the wall, sometimes you had to have your back to the wall. Sometimes you had to walk in tight formation, other times you had to spread out. Every time an order came, you had to comply immediately, and then you had to wait for another ten minutes before you had to walk to the next thing. If you had a question, the cop would insult and scream at you. They were always so tense and you could tell how miserable

they were, like they wanted to be a cop, but they did something awful on the job and were demoted to prison guard. One of the bullpens had bulletproof glass that was speckled with four bullet holes, which never broke the glass, but the glass around those point was shattered like a spider web.

At around 6pm, we finally got to make our phone call. There was a giant room with about ten push button phones, and not all of them worked. There were about 80 inmates in line for the phone. I was at the end of my line. One kid tried to make his call but couldn't get a dial tone and was told that his one call was over. He became despondent and begged for another call. The other inmates tried to help place the call, but his code no longer worked. Defeated, he slunk away from the phone, but got back at the end of the line.

Finally, it was my turn to make the call. My fingers were shaking as I dialed my best friend's number. I wasn't sure if I still remembered it, but I wasn't going to call my parents again. I couldn't get a dial tone either, and I tried to make the call three times to no avail. The door opened and an officer yelled out five names. Mine was one of them. We were told to follow him. We went out, and other prisoners went up to the officer to see if their name was on that list too. He said the five names again, and he assured them there was no mistake about the names. We walked out of the phone pen, and the officer told us that someone posted bail for us.

I was so relieved, but this saga was nowhere near over. They gave back our clothes, but we moved from bullpen to bullpen and had to clear about another dozen checkpoints, all while being still being screamed at by the guards, no different than before. At one of the check points, I noticed that my birthday was wrong, the digits were

switched. I told one of the guards. He said, “Do you want us to fix it? You can go back to the bullpen and it should only take a few hours to fix it. Or, when they ask you for your birthday, you tell them that this is your birthday. Got it?”

“Yes sir.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said.

“Can you tell me who bailed me out?”

“Yes.” He gave me the name, but I didn’t recognize it. I wasn’t going to argue that point though.

They gave me a bus pass, and I went through the final gate. The final officer stopped me and asked my birthday. I gave him the mistakenly assigned one. He asked me why I was arrested. I told him, but it wasn’t the charge that he thought I should answer. I was so excited to be outside again that I wasn’t sure what I said to him, but he laughed at the answer and said, “Good enough.”

I walked out expecting to see someone I knew, but I didn’t see anyone. I walked to the corner and grabbed the first bus that came by. I couldn’t believe that I only had to wait a few minutes for it. I got on and put my bus pass in the slot. The driver looked at the number written on my arm and then looked at me.

When I left the jail, I was only given some instructions, and that was to stay away from Sophia, not to contact her and not to return home. But that’s precisely where I was headed. I didn’t want to see her or talk to her, but I had to get home, though I was repeatedly forbidden to do this.

I had no choice though. I needed my car to get to Scott’s house. A single bus pass couldn’t take me to the jail and then back up to the north side. Eventually, I would need

my car to drive to school. I needed to get my cell phone from jail, and I needed to charge it in my car to let people know where I was. I didn't have my wallet either. I took the bus to the Blue Line, then to the Red Line, and then took that to the 35th Street Station. I knew where all the cameras were in the development, so I walked around the entire development, and went down the alley, where there was only one camera, and it would see me from the back, though I knew I would be identifiable from behind too.

I walked to the back gate of my house and slowly crept to the door of my detached garage. For a second, I looked at the back window of the house. The lights were on but the blinds were closed. I keyed into the garage door and silently closed the door behind me. I got into the car, turned it on, opened up the main garage door, backed out, and quickly drove away. Sophia's car wasn't parked there, so I knew she wouldn't notice my missing car, at least for a few days. I could always claim that Scott got it for me.

I drove back to the police station where I got my phone, my Krugerrand, and my wallet. If I had this with me, even just my debit card, I could have been out of jail by 10am. It was 10pm when I got everything back.

After the frantic call from Scott, I called my dad. He was at home in Cleveland. He sounded relieved and calm. He told me where Mom was. He gave me the room number. He said that he would call her as soon as he hung up, which he did quickly.

I parked in the hotel garage and took the elevator to her room. I knocked on her door. She opened it an inch and looked out at me into the hallway. She opened the door

fully, and we looked at each other. She was in her nightgown. I was wearing the same outfit from Tuesday morning, when I abruptly left with Sophia's phone.

“Oh, Patrick,” she said. She stood aside and let me walk in. She let the door go and it swung behind me and closed with a loud clank. She hugged me fully. With my arms around her, I could feel her hunched back, the stress in her shoulders, and a heaving in her chest. She was crying, and it was for me. No tears came to my own eyes. I felt nothing, emptiness, blackness.

Chapter Seven: The Scientific Method

“The distinction between the past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” –Albert Einstein, written on his deathbed.

This is my typical schedule: I wake up at 5am and go downstairs in my bathrobe and grade essays before the girls get up at 7am. I make coffee, check email, read the news, and usually get in an hour and a half of grading essays. Sometimes that’s all I need to finish a batch of papers.

I grade papers at the dining room table, a beautiful antique made of white oak, quarter sawn wood. It belonged to my great-great-grandmother. It’s a four-top, a perfect square, with five reeded legs (one in the center) all standing on tarnished metal wheels. It has these little Victorian flourishes carved into the sides. The surface is scratched and chipped, with the varnish worn off in spots. It’s thick and heavy because the extension leaves are built-in and lay under the surface. When you fully extend the table, it seats eight. It was probably build at the end of the 19th century.

Generations of my family have dined around this table. They sat there, looking vaguely like me, said a prayer, then cut into their overcooked meats, potatoes, and vegetables. They drank beer or wine, maybe whiskey, maybe nothing more than water or milk. They talked, argued, gossiped, laughed, criticized and gave each other the silent treatment. They made toasts and plans and pronouncements.

Nowadays, we rarely eat at it; like a lot of families, we take our meals in front of the TV. The table now functions as my office. It collects mail, books, confiscated toys,

pens, crayons, construction paper, even discarded clothes. It's an open-air junk drawer. My laptop sits on it too, plugged into the wall. It's a good table for grading because it's high and the papers lay near my eyes. I sit alone and grade essays as the sky outside turns from black to purple to pink to white. When I hear the girls waking up, I go upstairs and peel them out of bed.

But on the day of the incident, I suspended my normal routine. I couldn't sleep anyway; I was just lying in bed thinking. My mind would race over little clues, like a scientist obsessing over some seemingly irrelevant detail, waiting for a major breakthrough. I thought I could think my way out of this mess. If I just put the clues together, I would come to some obvious conclusion about why we were getting divorced.

The deductive reasoning was clear about the facts: Sophia was no longer sleeping at home and she said that she wanted a divorce. She had left me with the girls. She said she was staying with a friend. She was moving her stuff out, little by little. She said that she wasn't having an affair. If the premises were all correct, she wanted a divorce for the reasons she stated: she had outgrown me, she had sold me a wrong bill of goods, she felt that I was gaslighting her, mansplaining things. This is what she said in our only couple's counseling session, when she said that she wanted the divorce. If the premises are valid, then the conclusion has to be correct too. I would lie in bed, stare at the ceiling, and mutter the facts to myself. I would point and gesticulate into the air, as if I were doing quick calculations. I'd get up and pace the room, then lie back down.

The inductive reasoning nagged at me: she was lying about big and little things. When she told me that she was going to stay home with the girls, she got a babysitter. When I came home to find the babysitter, I asked Sophia and she explained that a last

minute meeting at work came up. When I asked the babysitter about it, she said that Sophia asked her the day prior. Another time, I came home one day when Sophia was with the girls, the house smelled like weed. I asked her if she was smoking weed, and she denied it. I asked where her stash was and she said that she got rid of it a few days ago. I said that I saw the stash in her usual spot this morning. A few other times, she was going on evening runs for three hours at a time, explaining that she ran too far and then bonked and had to walk home. She was constantly texting someone on her phone. When I asked, she said it was her cousin, which didn't seem right. I could see little "tells" on her lies: a slight pause, a glance to the side, a response that seems more like a sidestepping of the question than a direct answer. On top of all these signs while we were together, she wouldn't tell me where she was staying. When you live with someone for ten years, inductive reasoning tells you more than the facts do. But I wanted to believe the facts.

The scientific method tells you what to do. I learned it in fourth grade. I had to state the problem, gather information, form a hypothesis, collect data, interpret that data, and finally, draw a conclusion. The problem was I didn't know why Sophia wanted a divorce. I had her rationale, but it didn't seem like enough reason and it didn't seem correct. My hypothesis was that she was having an affair. Now, I needed more data.

So that morning, I showered and dressed first. I went downstairs and made coffee. I took a stack of papers out and pretended to grade them, though I'm not sure for whose benefit. My bag sat next to me, ready for a quick exit. Sophia was coming over that morning to take the girls to school. Since I had an 8am class on Tuesdays, that was our agreement, made months ago, long before there was even an inkling of the divorce. I

usually took the girls to school in the morning and would sometimes pick them up after school. But this morning, I was waiting for Sophia, and I was going to solve this puzzle.

Sophia keyed into our house early, about 6am. The girls were still sleeping. She looked disheveled. We talked normally. She said that she was happy that we had a good conversation the previous day. I agreed. I again pretended to go back to my grading. She made different coffee for herself and poured a cup. She took out her laptop and started working. She got up to use the bathroom. I stood up, stuffed my papers into my bag, walked over to the counter, picked up her phone, and walked out the front door, where my car was parked in front, ready to go. I got on the highway and started driving to school. But only a few minutes into my long commute, I exited on 43rd street and parked my car on Wabash. I saw an email on my phone from Sophia asking me if I took her phone. I responded that I didn't have it. I took out her phone and entered her passcode. I collected data. I interpreted data. I drew a conclusion.

It was lightly raining on my car, and the windshield wipers intermittently swished the specks of rain away. My car was parked behind a long line of other parked cars. The lights were on because I was driving in the rain. There was almost no traffic on the street. A man walked out of his house, said something to a woman standing at the door in her bathrobe and walked to his car. As he open his car door, he looked quizzically at me. I'm not sure how I looked to him. I called the college and told the operator at the information center that I wasn't coming in that day and had to cancel all of my classes.

I started driving again, but I didn't know where I was going. I called Scott. I called my parents. No one picked up, probably because it was so early. I wasn't paying attention and went through a stop sign. The car that had the right-of-way blared his horn

at me. I knew that I was in the wrong and gave him a little wave that said, “my bad.” I drove around the south side for an hour or so: Bronzeville, Bridgeport, McKinley Park, Pilsen, Chinatown, Oakland, Kenwood, Hyde Park. I saw an email from her phone that told Jared that I had taken her phone and that he shouldn’t pick up any call from her. Jared wrote back, “Got it. I’m sorry to hear that.” Later, she emailed to him, “I miss texting you all day.”

I found myself on the University of Chicago’s campus, where Sophia and I met. We had our engagement photos taken there. By that time, the rain had cleared up. I started walking around campus looking at the wet, gray buildings. It was the last day of August, and the ivy was still green and lush. The term didn’t start for a few more weeks, so campus was mostly empty. The gothic buildings of the quad surrounded me on every side, and I felt comforted, even hugged by their presence. I was suddenly tired and wanted to lie down and fall asleep on the grass right there. Instead, I walked to the Regenstein Library and went to my spot on the fourth floor where I had read books and written on my laptop for the last 16 years.

I looked at her phone to collect more data. She entered his contact name as Gravity Well. After only two weeks of knowing him, she wrote a text message to Gravity Well: “You just feel inevitable to me.” At that time, I didn’t know what a gravity well was, and I had no reason to believe that Sophia knew either. Astrophysics wasn’t her thing. My educated guess was that it must have been an inside joke between them, a nickname created by a conversation, though I don’t know how gravity wells come up in the first month of an affair.

A gravity well is a conceptual model of gravitation fields that surround bodies in space. It's depicted more like a quicksand hole or a whirlpool than a traditional, cylindrical well. The more mass that the body has, the larger the well is. Thus, larger stars have larger gravity wells and can hold other celestial bodies in orbit. Our sun is large enough to keep all the planets, asteroids, and comets in its gravity well. And planets have their own gravity wells too, which hold moons and satellites in orbit. Binary stars have mutual gravity wells that keep them inescapably orbiting each other. When one binary star starts to die, the other can explode, leaving nothing behind. About a third of all stars in the universe are binary stars. A black hole is the leftover gravity well of a massive star that has died and collapsed onto itself; the gravity well is so strong that nothing, not even light, can escape it. This seems like the worst way for a star to die, a cosmic catastrophe.

A gravity well warps and curves space-time. It distorts light. The larger the object, the greater the distortion. Imagine you have a rubber mattress, and you place a bowling ball in the middle of it. That's what a gravity well might look like. Now, try rolling a tennis ball from one side of the mattress to the other. As the tennis ball passes the deep part of the mattress, it changes course and curves around the bowling ball as it passes by. That's how light operates in space, it curves around these celestial bodies.

Another crazy thing about gravity wells is that even have their own type of geometry, a type of non-Euclidian geometry called Lobachevskian geometry. Because of gravity, Euclid was dead wrong about how geometry actually works, even though every city in America has an avenue named after him and no one knows who Nikolai Lobachevsky is. In his geometry, the sum of all angles in a triangle is always fewer than

180 degrees, which only works on the surface of a hyperbolic plane. On the other hand, in Riemannian geometry, the sum of all angles is always greater than 180 degrees, which works on the surface of a sphere. Think of the geometry of the globe: draw one line from the top of the North Pole to the Equator, then draw a line across the Equator, and draw a third line back up to the North Pole. You now have a triangle with two angles that are both 90 degrees. Thus, the third angle gives you a triangle with more than 180 degrees in it. So for every triangle you doodle on a piece of paper, there is a microscopic curvature to the earth's gravitational pull that makes that triangle conform to Riemann's version, not Euclid's. In Lobachevskian's version, its gravitational pull works in the opposite way, it's the geometry of space within a gravity well. Think of the shape of a saddle: draw a line from the horn down the seat and back up to the cantle. Then draw two line lines down to the stirrup. The triangle has fewer than 180 degrees. This same curvature happens in space when a beam of light passes a celestial body; everything curves inward. On paper, Euclidean geometry looks right, but in reality, it's complete horseshit.

An understanding of this geometry is important when considering Sophia's affair. Jared is bigger than I am. He's heavier and has a greater mass. He's stronger too. He has a larger gravity well than mine. Sophia passed by him, and her path in life would have to curve toward him. She had no choice; it's a law of physics. Just as the apple fell on Newton's head, she was inexorably pulled toward him. He has her in his orbit now, or maybe they are binary stars, spinning endlessly around each other. I'm just a star who has collapsed on himself; I'm now a black hole.

The other data I collected was more practical: his address (which was given to her on one of her late night runs), his roommate (who was where she told her family that she was staying), where they met (at a coffee shop), when they met (four weeks ago), her pet names (white feather and sekret roommate), sexual practices (frequent). I took photos of all messages and emailed them to myself. In a fit of anger, I sent some of the messages to her mom and sister, who had told me that they knew nothing about Sophia moving out. I wanted validation of the truth, but I heard nothing back from them.

I went outside and called Scott again. We talked. He told me how sorry he was. I said, "Thanks." He suggested a lawyer for me. I called and made an appointment. I said it was urgent. He was able to fit me in that day. I drove downtown and found a parking spot outside. I sat in the conference room and told him the situation. My mind was frantic, moving from detail to detail with no apparent organization. I was really animated too, entertaining actually, like I was explaining these things as anomalies, things that shouldn't happen but did. He took notes. He asked me financial questions. I told him what I had. I told him about the girls and how they were staying with me. I told him about the phone. He reassured me that I didn't do anything illegal but that I need to give the phone back. I told him that I needed to pick up the girls from school right away and make sure that they are safe from her. I didn't trust her to take care of them anymore. He told me to stop.

"Look, you have to remain calm and in control here. You can't do anything to escalate this situation. Yes, you should pick up your kids from school and make sure they are ok, but you have to take care of yourself first. You know how flight attendants say that that parents have to put their oxygen masks first, before they put it on their kids?"

That's what you need to do," he said, looking at me wide-eyed. "You have to take care of yourself first, so you're able to take care of them."

I stopped. My mind came to a dead halt. I felt very small because that's exactly the same speech I say to my community college students when they are overwhelmed by school and family obligations. I say it when they come to me with these outside problems from their personal lives, taking care of a sick parent, driving a younger sibling to school, helping a girlfriend out of bad situation. I say this with concern in my voice, same as my lawyer said it to me in that first meeting. But I never realized how condescending it sounded, as if I didn't know any better. Sure, it's counterintuitive to put your own oxygen mask on when an airplane loses cabin pressure; your instinct is to help your kids first and then help yourself. But after dozens of flights, I know what to do, just as I know how to fasten my seatbelt, though they never fail to explain that too. I felt like a child in that conference room, a little kid swiveling back and forth in a big office chair.

I asked if I should change the locks on my house. He said no. I was in a good position in the divorce because she had left the house and had essentially abandoned her kids. He asked me to email her and to say that I had taken her phone because it was identical to my phone and that I would give it back to her after work. I paid him for the meeting and he gave me a contract for the divorce, which required a \$7500 retainer.

I did as he said and asked Sophia if she wanted me to pick the girls up from school. Tuesday was her day to do that. She said that would be great because her work today was slowed down because she didn't have her phone.

I picked the girls up, and they were both in a great mood. The day had cooled off, and the after-school playground was packed. I watched the girls run around with all the

other kids; they were laughing and moving in random patterns. I sat there watching the kids in quantum chaos. One child went down the slide and stopped at the bottom. The next child slid down too and pushed the child at rest off the slide with his extended legs. He fell on his butt.

Newton's first law of motion: every object persists in a state of rest unless it is compelled to change that state by the action of an external force. Newton's second law is an equation ($F=ma$) that shows exactly how the velocity of an object changes when acted upon by an external force. His third law, most famously, states that for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction.

I saw Olive standing in the middle of everything, looking off into space. A little boy, slightly smaller than herself, blindsided her in the back, knocking her down on her hands and knees. She didn't seem hurt at first, but when the boy laughed at her fall, she looked up at him and started crying. She took a deep breath and started sobbing, an equal and opposite reaction. I walked over, picked her off the ground, put my arms around her waist as she put hers around my neck. I sat back down on the bench, and she sat on my lap, still crying on my shoulder. April came over to see what was the matter. I told them that it was time to go home.

That evening, I turned off the TV and asked the girls to come to dining room table for dinner. Olive put up a big stink about it, screaming, “I don’t *want to*. I want to eat dinner here.”

“I don’t care if you want to or not,” I said back. “We’re having dinner at the table.”

April sat in a booster seat and smiled at me, while I led Olive by the shoulders to her chair. I baked chicken nuggets for them and squirted out a mound of ketchup on their plates. I tried to eat a salad I made but had no appetite. Sophia’s chair was empty. They didn’t ask where she was, and I was happy not to have to answer the question.

I noticed that I had placed the baking pan directly on the wooden table, not on the trivet. I picked the tray up and saw a lightly burned image of a perfect square in the middle of the table. I brought it back into the kitchen and got a wet rag to rub it out. It didn’t fade at all. It depressed me to look at mark, but I couldn’t take my eye off of it. This reminder of my careless mistake would be there forever, for subsequent generations to see as another imperfection in the surface of the table. Maybe some future woodworker would see it and sand it away, then apply new coats of varnish over it. But some part of that burnt wood would still be there, some tiny imperfection, like a water stain or the scratch of an exposed wood screw. Deep under the surface, there’s always some remainder of the damage done, no matter how many times you paint over it.

The clock said 5pm, and Sophia was usually back by 5:30 or 5:45. I let them watch another cartoon, and then got them upstairs. At 6:30pm, they were out of the tub, and there was still no Sophia. We read stories in bed and at 7:20, I could hear Sophia keying into the house. I left the girls in bed, turned off the lights, and raced down the

stairs. I locked the door knob too, so it took her a minute more to get in the house. I was at door the when she walked in. The screen door closed behind her, and the front door was open.

“Here’s your phone. I know all about the affair.”

“Well, our marriage has been over for a long time,” she said.

In Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, time is not a constant entity, which is difficult for us to grasp because time is always experienced in the present moment, what we see as the “now,” me writing these words on my laptop computer and then you reading them on paper. Obviously, those events occur at different times, but they are both our “now.” A star explodes in a supernova, and the light from the explosion might not reach our eyes for millions of year. A common sense notion of time would tell us that the explosion simply took the light a really long time to travel through space.

Sophia and I were having problems for sure, but for a long time? No way. And how long is a long time? A month? A year? Were the problems there for a decade, the entire duration of our relationship? Before we moved in together? Before marriage? Before kids? Before I started coaching? Before I entered graduate school? When did they start? What was the moment that our marriage ended? Had it really been over long enough that it was now ethically acceptable that we have other lovers?

We can claim that all things are relative: what is big to you, might be small to me. Likewise, what is a long time for you might be a short time for me. For example, if I keep writing this digression, you might get impatient and tell me it’s taking too long for me to

get to the point. Or if you're waiting for a bus in the cold and rain, an hour can seem like an eternity. However, if you're at a party with all your best friends in the world, an hour slips by in an instant. But that's self-evident, and that's not Einstein's theory.

His theory about time is just the opposite. The faster you move through space, the slower you move through time. If you're sitting still in space, you are moving through time at the maximum speed. Let's say your twin goes a speed-of-light journey through space. She is 33 years old when she says goodbye and leaves earth. By the clock in her spaceship, she travels for ten years. She comes home, and she's 43 years old; she looks 43 too. When she comes back, you would be long dead, and your children would be dead too because it would be 220 years later. This is not time travel; it's time dilation.

Countless experiments have proven Einstein right.

This phenomenon can be illustrated by thinking of me dribbling a basketball to a steady beat. Let's say that the dribbling of the ball represents the ticking of a clock, each bounce represent one second of time. It takes one second for the ball travel six feet, three feet down and three feet up. You are watching the bouncing ball go up and down and counting out the seconds. Now, put me on the back of a fast moving truck. Standing on the side of the road, you watch me zoom by. From your frame of reference, the ball is no longer simply moving up and down; it's moving in diagonal paths because I'm moving. From my frame of reference, I'm still dribbling three feet down and three feet up. But if you were to measure the actual movement of the ball, it would be traveling farther than six feet because the diagonal path is longer than the straight up and down path. Thus, one second for you is shorter than it is for me. Time passes more slowly when you move faster. It's the opposite of what everyone tells you.

When Sophia said to me that our marriage was over a long time ago, she might have been correct. She may have been sitting at home while I was on a speed of light journey through life. I was teaching, coaching tennis, studying for my PhD, writing a novel, working in my neighborhood, and driving our daughters for various activities. She was sitting still at home, working on her computer, watching the kids, and time was moving by faster for her. Time, like sound and light and truth, is relative.

It didn't feel like a long time to me, not at all. That summer, when everything in my universe was ripped apart, we were trying to make it work. We got babysitters and went to dinners and saw movies. We went to the gym and worked out together. We were having sex again, good sex. We agreed to do couples counseling. But things were going wrong. She met Jared in late July and moved in with him in late-August, right after our seventh wedding anniversary.

“Get out, right now!” I screamed at her.

She put her bag down.

“You have your phone, now get out!” I said louder.

“I need to give you my paycheck.”

“Fine, but then you go. Go back to him.”

“I want to say goodnight to the girls.”

“You can't see them. They're in bed already.”

“I want to see them and say goodnight.”

For most families, this isn't an unreasonable request, to go in their bedroom and say goodnight to the kids. But Sophia had a strict rule about us not going back into their rooms after they were bed. I can remember dozens of times when I would get home from work only a few minutes late, and Sophia would be closing the girls' door behind her. I would ask her if I could go in there, and she always said no, whether they were asleep or not. So it was now my turn to apply her own rule with the same stringency as she applied it to me. But she wouldn't take no for an answer.

I called her a slut. I called her a whore. I would have called her anything to make it sting. I wanted her to feel this pain. I screamed these insults at her over and over. I said them loud enough for the girls upstairs to hear, not that they would have understood the words. I said it in a fit a rage.

In the front room of the house, I blocked her path to the stairs. If she moved right, I moved left. If she moved left, I moved right. I didn't touch her. Like a basketball player, I just stayed in front of her. It was a narrow hallway, so she couldn't get by me. She pushed me in the chest. I didn't move much. I told her not to push me. She pushed me again. I told her not to push me. She did it again. We locked arms, hands to elbows and pushed each other in the front room. She's 5'9" and 145 pounds, but I'm bigger and stronger. She was wearing high heels, another new thing for her. We struggled for a moment, but I was able to move her to the front door. She screamed at me to let her go. I screamed back for her to get out. I let her go. Her back pushed open the screen door. She tried to get back in, but I blocked the doorway. The screen door was fully open. She stepped backwards down two stairs, wobbled on her heels, and fell down the rest of the stairs, four more. It seemed to happen gracefully, like in slow motion. I could tell she

wasn't hurt because she got back up immediately. I closed the screen door and the front door and locked it.

Then I saw three boxes of her stuff, already packed. I opened the front door and saw her standing at the bottom of the stairs. I threw the boxes, one by one, down the stairs at her feet. She was on the phone with her mom crying. I called her mom a slut too.

I went upstairs to see the girls. They were both wide awake in bed. I reassured them that everything was ok, and they needed to go asleep. I closed the door behind me.

I went back downstairs, and saw that Sophia was sitting on the stairs to the house. She was still crying on the phone. I asked her what she was still doing here. I told her to leave.

Gravitational waves are ripples in spacetime. They are generated by massive cosmic events, like a supernova or the creation of a blackhole. The waves emanate out into space, like when you drop a rock into the middle of a pond. They travel out at the speed of light endlessly, but fade over time and space. A hundred years ago, Einstein predicted these in his theory of general relativity, but they were not detected until the LIGO experiments in 2017. One site in Louisiana and the other in Washington state detected the same cosmic event at a fractional different moment in time, showing that the waves physically traveled through space. The event was kilonova, when a neutron star and a blackhole fuse together. This one happened 130 million light years away.

Gravitaional waves travel at the speed of light, so this collision happened 130 million

years ago, during the Cretaceous period, the last period before the mass extinction of the dinosaurs. The waves reached us on October 16th, 2017.

An hour later, it was completely dark outside. Three police cars were outside all with their lights on. I could see two of them talking to Sophia. I wondered why they were there. She was standing and didn't seem hurt. I called my parents and told them what happened. I couldn't hide the fear in my voice. I wondered aloud to them why I didn't just let her in the house to see the kids. My mom told me it was the stress, that I wasn't sleeping, that I was on a new anti-depressant and it was messing with the way I was thinking. I told her that the doorbell rang, and that it was probably the police at the door. I hung up the phone. And opened the door. A female police officer asked me what my name was and whether I had any weapons. I told her that I didn't have any. She told me that Sophia claims that I threw her down the stairs. She said that I was going to be arrested. I quickly tried to close the door, but she rushed the door and I could see three other police officers rush up the stairs. I stopped resisting and let them inside. I was handcuffed and placed on my couch. I tried to explain that I didn't throw her down the stairs, but the officers said that she was recording everything I was saying. She gave me a look to stop talking. So I stopped. She told me that she didn't think I was bad person, but she had to arrest me. She said, "Your wife even said that you're a good dad." She led me outside, past Sophia, and into the back of a paddy wagon. Then we drove away.

When you take motion into account, a common sense notion of time can be thrown out the window. In Einstein's theory, the past, present, and future are all equally real, and all three exist simultaneously. Just as space is all out there, so is time. It's all happening, just in different "now" moments across the vast reaches of space. Einstein theorized that a person could travel forward in time, like the twin who returned to earth 220 years later. But Einstein knew that a person couldn't travel back in time. As far as time travel goes, traveling back is the only useful thing we could do, to fix the mistakes of our past. Future time travel is just tourism for the people of the past, to see what subsequent generations have done, how everything turned out in the end. It's doubtful that a man from the past would be of any use for a future world. He might be outraged or impressed with what happened, but what could he tell future humanity that they wouldn't already know?

Though, on second thought, perhaps the more-recent memory of a time past is worth reconsidering. Perhaps another frame of reference might be able to tell future humanity some other part of history, a different truth that was forgotten, another point of view that should be reconsidered, something that never made it through the passage of time. If I had a time machine, I'd be interested to see how it all turned out.

Epilogue

Distance

Raymond Carver wrote a short story called “Distance.” It takes place in Milan, which is an odd setting for Carver. A father and his adult daughter are spending Christmas there, and they are having a drink. The daughter asks her father for a story from her childhood, when he was still married to her mother. The father is reluctant to tell it, saying that it was a long time ago, but she persists.

He tells a story about a fight they had when she was still a baby. The details aren’t important. The story of the fight actually ends on a rather sweet and funny moment of love and forgiveness between them. The girl then asks what happened to that love. The father replies, “Things change. I don’t know how they do. But they do without your realizing it or wanting them to.”

I think about this story a lot, and then what it’s going to be like for Olive and April when are older, when they ask me or Sophia about what happened to us. By that point, they won’t wonder why we got a divorce; they’ll be more likely to wonder how we managed to stay together for as long as we did. But I don’t doubt that they will love us both. And I don’t doubt they will have heard some stories. They will have overheard things from their cousins or aunts and uncles, on both sides of their family. Chances are, they won’t want to know any of it. I never wanted to know about my own parents’ marriage, which seemed very happy from the outside. But if they ever ask me for a story, I’ll tell them about the day I bought the house.

The Day I Bought the House

In the summer and fall of 2007, your mom and I were training for the Chicago Marathon. It was something we did together, go for runs along the lake. I know it might not seem romantic, but it was. That was our first real date, going for a run together. Really. We both like to run, and I was trying to get in shape, so your mom helped me. We ran at the same pace, although your mom was slightly faster and had better endurance. I had a long stride, so I could keep up with her on training runs, and she'd hold back a bit so we could stay together.

I had a few friends who wanted to run the marathon that year, and they lived out of town. I told them not to book a hotel because my house would be ready to move in by August, and there'd be enough room for everyone. The marathon wasn't until October 7th, so your mom and I thought we'd have enough time to get the place ready for guests.

They bought a bib and booked their flights. Then a few more people, friends of my friends, wanted to run it too. I extended the invitation to them too, about ten people in total. The problem was that the house wasn't ready by August, and the closing date kept getting pushed back. The construction crew stopped working on all the other houses, and focused all their efforts on my house. I made calls to ask the builders if they could start working overtime to get it finished by early September. They said it didn't look good.

I was also having trouble getting approved for the loan. I couldn't put your mom's name on the loan because we weren't married yet, which is a whole different story that I'll tell you some other time. The interest rate was high because the amount of money I was borrowing was well beyond what I could afford in the monthly payments. And this was when the banks were still giving everyone loans!

I was stressed out and started skipping practice runs. To deal with the stress, I was eating the same amount as I ate during training, but now I wasn't burning those calories. I started putting on weight.

The other issue we had was that the rented sublease that your mom and I had was ending on October 1st, so we had to move out then. I was worried that we'd be homeless for a month before the house was ready. And I had promised a bunch of people a place to stay for the marathon.

Your mom was amazingly calm during all this. She ate right, did her practice runs, and started a new job at the University of Chicago.

The day of the closing, I went to school in the morning to teach my classes, and one of my students pointed out to me that I was wearing two different types of shoes.

After class, I went to the house, and I met the foreman at the door. He took me through the final walkthrough. The construction crew was still going through the house making last minute fixes. I asked the foreman if I could have a bed delivered that day, and he laughed and said, "I don't know. How is your credit?"

I lied and said it was good.

I went downtown to the title office where I was going to meet my real estate lawyer Bob. Bob and I go to White Sox games together, and he agreed to represent me for parking privileges at my new place. When I got there, and he looked at the numbers one last time and saw that my bank account was \$5000 short for the closing. He knew that I had to close on this day and was visibly sweating when he told me the news. The seller agreed to let us call the bank again and ask for another \$5000 added to the loan. It was almost 4pm on a Friday evening, and the bank in New York was about to close for

the day. The seller started looking at his weekly planner to see if he had any openings next week. I said, "I can't close next week. The movers are coming tomorrow."

Bob reached the bank and they agreed to add the last \$5000 to the loan and they would fax the new terms of the loan over to the office. I signed the forms and got the keys. I got a six-pack of beer and a pizza, and picked up your mom from work. We drove to our new home.

She took a picture of me standing next to my car in front of the new house. We were the first people to move into the entire development. Everything in the neighborhood was so new that in the photo, my car is pointed in the wrong direction of our one-way street because we didn't yet know which direction the traffic would move; there were no signs yet.

I wanted to be old fashioned about it, so I opened the front door and carried your mother up the steps and across the threshold. We walked through the house and admired the austere beauty of it.

We went upstairs and I saw the new bed in the master bedroom. It still had the plastic on it. I ripped it off and laid down on it. Your mother laid down next to me. She told me that she had two pot brownies saved for the occasion, so we ate them. Then we cracked open two beers and started eating the pizza. We looked out the window. The park was so green and vibrant. In the distance, the Metra Rock Island Line rolled by and I commented that it looked like the trolley Mr. Roger's Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Beyond the train tracks were the lights of Comiskey Park for the last home series of the season. We sat there for hours just looking out the window and laughing. At the end of the game the Friday night fireworks started, and we freaked out.

A week later, our friends joined us for the marathon. This was the 2007 marathon, when temperatures reached the 90s, and organizers canceled it midrace because too many people were passing out. Your uncle Scott passed out and had to go into the medical tent. A guy died that year. I didn't finish the race because I was too hot. Actually, the story is kinda funny. I got to Mile 21, and I was passing by our house, so I just walked home. Your mom finished it though, with a really good time. That's how amazing she was.

Appendix A

Re: Permission to use my published piece in my dissertation

3 messages

Leslie Gonzalez <leslie.gonzalez.u2@gmail.com>

Tue, Mar 27, 2018 at 5:21 PM

To: Patrick Reichard <pmreichard@gmail.com>

Hi Patrick,

I got a hold of my editor and she gave me the thumbs up. As a platform that does not own primary rights to your work, you may use your piece in your dissertation. If the piece were to be published in a different magazine or other form of media, we would have our publication noted as: "The Sophia Poems" was first published on The Coachella Review. I hope this help you, Patrick. Good luck with your dissertation!

Best,
Leslie Gonzalez

Patrick Reichard

Professor of English
Prairie State College

Work:
202 S. Halsted St.
Chicago Heights, IL 60411
708-709-3596
preichard@prairiestate.edu

Home:
3551 South Dearborn St.
Chicago, IL 60609
773-415-4334
pmreichard@gmail.com

WORK EXPERIENCE

Prairie State College - Chicago Heights, IL - May 2002 - present

Tenured Professor of English

- Specializing in writing courses, including creative writing, diverse literature, college-level and developmental composition
- Steering Committee Member for Federal Title III Grant
- Curriculum Coordinator for Title III Development
- Chair of the Curriculum Committee
- Chair of Tenure Committee of two other English professors
- Chair and served on hiring committees for three English Professors, the Dean of Library, Director of Athletics and the Reading Coordinator
- Co-taught several Learning Communities with English, Reading, and Political Science faculty members
- Sponsoring intercollegiate writing contests and our perennially winning writing program within the Skyway Conference
- Co-advisor for the literary/art magazine Exposure
- Awarded a two-week Professor Exchange with Xi'an International University in China
- Presented at NISOD conference in Austin, TX in May 2010
- Head Coach of the Men's Tennis Team (National Qualifier 2011, 2013-2016)

University of Chicago - Chicago, IL - Summer 2003 - 2016

Graham School of General Studies Instructor

- Teaching Fiction Writing to pre-college students during summer sessions

Marian Catholic High School - Chicago Heights, IL - August 1998 - June 2001

Faculty member in the English Department

- Taught English for three years to ninth graders (World Literature and Grammar) and twelfth graders (British Literature) in an ethnically diverse high school that was named Outstanding High School in Chicago by U.S. News & World Report (1/18/99)
- Served as Head Coach of the Lincoln-Douglas Debate Team and Co-Coach of the Forensics Team, specializing in original oratory and extemporaneous speaking for three years, coaching several students to the regional finals and two students to the national finals
- Helped lead twenty students on two summer service trips to rural Tennessee
- Helped lead forty students on a spiritual retreat
- Co-coached boys junior varsity tennis team

Saint Ignatius High School - Cleveland, OH - August 1997 - June 1998*Alumni Volunteer*

- Volunteered for a year of service to high school alma mater located in the inner city of Cleveland
- Worked as a substitute teacher, campus minister, debate coach for a 1200-student, all-boys Jesuit preparatory school
- Worked in a children's after-school educational and recreational program in a racially diverse, lower-income neighborhood

EDUCATION

University of Illinois at Chicago- Chicago, IL – May 2018*PhD in English*

- Doctoral Program in English with a focus on Creative Writing: Fiction, with courses in Advanced Fiction Workshop, Advanced Poetry Workshop, the Masters Proseminar, the PhD Proseminar, Theoretical Sites, Seminar in Contemporary Studies, and British Literature, Language and Literacy

The University of Chicago - Chicago, IL - June 2002*Master of Arts Program in Humanities*

- Won the Catherine Ham Memorial Award for Outstanding Overall Contribution
- Nominated for the Best Creative Thesis Award for Original fiction thesis entitled *The Gospel According to Me*
- Took courses in English literature, creative writing, feature writing, and community college teaching

DePaul University - Chicago IL - Fall 1999*School of Education*

- Took course called *The Teaching of Writing* for professional development

Villanova University - Villanova, PA - May 1997*Bachelor of Arts in English**Minor in Religious Studies**Honors Program Sequence in Liberal Arts*

- Editing staff member and contributor to every issue of Villanova's *Polis: The Honors Literary Magazine*

COLLEGE COURSES TAUGHT

Composition I & II	Introduction to Fiction
Developmental English	Introduction to Poetry
Developmental Reading	American Literature II
Creative Writing: Fiction	British Literature I and II
Creative Writing: Non-Fiction	Western World Literature I and II
Creative Writing: Poetry	Tennis

RELEVANT COURSES TAKEN

- “Teaching in the Community College” taught by Oakton professor Bill Taylor
- “Chicago” taught by University of Chicago professor Janice Knight
- “Writing as a Public Intellectual” taught by film critic Hank Sartin
- “Fiction Writing” taught by novelist Achy Obejas
- “Creative Writing” taught by award-winning Chicago writer Megan Stielstra
- “Man Against God in Literature” taught by award-winning novelist Chaim Potok

COMMUNITY SERVICE & ACTIVITIES

- Active parishioner/fundraiser for The St. James Church Food Pantry, *Fall 2007- present*
- Coordinator for the Homeless Food Run, a University of Chicago student group that distributes bag lunches to the homeless, *Spring 2003 – Spring 07*
- Worked as a “big brother” for children at The House of the Good Shepherd, a Chicago shelter for abused families, *Summer 2001*
- Liturgical and Eucharistic Minister in weekly services for the Villanova Chapel, *1994-1997*
- Athlete escort for Special Olympics competitors, *Fall 1995, 1996*

LANGUAGE

- Spanish competency

PUBLICATIONS

- *The Sophia Poems*, a nonfiction excerpt, in *The Coachella Review* *Spring 2018*
- “Homecoming” a poem in *Contrary Magazine* *Summer 2007*

REFERENCES

- **Achy Obejas**, Writer/ Professor at Mills College 773-220-6565
- **Bayo Ojikutu**, Writer/ Professor at The University of Chicago 312-343-6076
- **Cris Mazza**, Writer/ Professor at University of Illinois at Chicago cmazza@uic.edu