

CLAUDIA,

DAD,

AND ME

ANDREW TRAN

Claudia told me once, “Some kids were born in the slums, and some kids were born in a mansion.”

“We were born in the middle of our family room as Bird’s sax undulated from a clean vinyl on an old record player, Dad—a Norwegian Poet—standing tall and proud in the background, recording the moment of time on a Super 8, and Mom screaming for Siddhartha Gautama between contractions. And as Mom—a beautiful Vietnamese woman—had taken in the fresh air from an open window, she mumbled passages from Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, as though they were from the *Book of Genesis*.”

“Cool story sis,” I said to her, as I broke into a sarcastic smile. I always knew she was talking about her own birth, and not mine (I had asked her questions about my birth, but she’d never give me a straight answer, or she’d change the subject).

She scowled and pinched me on the earlobes. Not a hard pinch, just some sibling shit.

Claudia loved to talk about her birth as if she were some God. She was eighteen and she told me once that she believed she could walk on water like Chance from *Being There*. I was fourteen and didn’t have a fucking clue what she was talking about.

When we were youngsters, Claudia and I used to spend hours analyzing *Ecclesiastes*, but eventually we just stopped caring about how much Salinger and Hemingway revered the text as if it were fresh water from the springs in the Alps.

Because we didn’t believe in the bible anymore; not even *Ecclesiastes*.

When I would die, my body would stay underneath the soil and the dirt, and that was all there was to it. I hated being morbid, but Mom had died from a brain aneurysm when Claudia and I were 12 and 8. So it was hard to believe in anything, or anyone anymore.

The funeral was small and her close artist friends came, and Mom and Dad’s brothers and sisters attended as well. At the time, I didn’t know what to say, how to act, how to feel.

I just remember squeezing Claudia’s hand, until she told me, “Jack, you’re hurting my fingers.” And then I looked down at my black dress shoes and let go of her hand. And as I let go, a worm inched over my laces.

I glanced back up and focused on Dad who was reading a eulogy in the form of an elegy for Mom: "...dearest Chi, you were and are the kindest of souls/to Sal's Paradise you venture off to, on a boat pulled by Cassidy's many friends/you are there/you are here..."

As Dad continued to read, I looked back down at my shoes and thought to myself: *What if I just step on this worm right now? It's really distracting me from hearing Dad read his poem about Mom.* And the worm must have seen me glaring at it, because it crawled off of my shoe and burrowed into the soil. And I realized in that moment, that even insects were scared of death too.

During the summertime, the year before Mom passed away, Dad, Claudia and I would walk in the backyard barefoot. I would feel the grass prickle against my toes, as Claudia would do cartwheels, and Dad would read his favorite verses from *Leaves of Grass* and quote Whitman for the sheer hell of it.

Nowadays, Dad sat alone on a crummy sofa in the master bedroom and watched DVDS of *Planet Earth*—which was cool, but I wished he would read Whitman like he used to. And Claudia always had her door shut and locked, but I would hear her loud and smooth voice, booming like the speakers playing from an EDM concert.

As for me, I spent time by myself in my room—a junkie-solitude. I didn't really need much from anybody. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to go outside and breathe in the fresh air, but I also got distracted easily by Facebook and Instagram. I did like listening to music though.

A week before she passed away, Mom had given me a pair of grey cans and a click-wheel iPod, saying that she wanted me to have these possessions, so that I could listen to music that influenced her when she was younger. The cans were oversized and vintage, while the iPod came with one-giant playlist that read: *The DeeJay in Cloud City*. At first I thought it was an odd name, but when Mom passed away and departed from this earth, the playlist evoked a resonance with my spirit. It had everything. Seriously everything. From Radiohead's *Airbag* to Tribe's *Check The Rhyme* to The Beatles *Norwegian Wood*—the playlist was a way for me to connect with her. Even if she wasn't here anymore.

Whenever I would sit in my room, press play, and crank the volume up on

my iPod, the grief I felt for Mom always seemed to lessen in its severity. Cans on, eyes closed, I would listen to the kick of a drum, the plucking of a guitar string, the gentle pressing of a piano key. Regular sounds, maybe they were just regular sounds to any other listener's ears, useless noise to catch, grab a hold of, and discard until the next track came on the playlist—but these sounds, no matter how regular they may seem, meant something to me. When I heard these sounds, they were souvenirs of time that connected me back to mom and reminded me warmly of her. Reminding me that even though she wasn't here in this life, I could feel this vibrant and organic connection with her, through music.

Last Friday, around 1 a.m. while Dad was away with his work colleagues, Claudia came home late, carrying a small wooden box. Earlier, she had texted me saying she was out with friends and she would be back later. I was in my room and I peeked out the doorway. The lamplight shined through the hall. Claudia had her smartphone pressed to her ear and she kept clearing her throat a lot, and coughed lightly. She put the wooden box in her purse, walked up to her room, and closed the door. Locked it. I didn't want to appear inquisitive and ask her what was in the box, so I just kept to myself and listened to another song.

She and I were still close, but we mostly communicated via text, which was all fine and shit, except it seemed rather weird when our rooms were basically just 12 feet away from each other. I blew it off and told myself I would just send her a text later, and see how her night went.

I turned off the light in the hallway.

An hour later, I was still on top of the stairwell, right next to my room, listening to Mos Def's *Umi Says* and Pink Floyd's *Time* on the bright screen of my iPod when the front door opened.

I took my cans off.

The front door slammed so hard that the single picture of Mom and Dad fell off of the nail. The glass shattered against the marble. I stood up straight and backed up, so that I was behind my doorway. I knew I was being a wuss. It was most likely Dad coming in late from hanging out with his work colleagues. I didn't want to get in trouble for staying up until 2 a.m.

But cigarette smoke wafted in the air.

Dad didn't smoke cigarettes, always said it would give us lung cancer and kill us. He was a human who advocated for the outdoors. He loved the fresh mountain smell and hiking, always wanted Claudia and I to be climbing trees, or swimming in lakes. He didn't want us to have short and meaningless lives. Free and pure was what he wanted for us.

Again, the cigarette smoke was strong and thick in the house.

I stuck my head out.

The nightlight in the foyer was bright enough to make out a hunched-back figure.

It stumbled around the foyer for a good minute, before plopping down on the bottom of the stairwell. Then, the figure started swaying back and forth, scratching its arms, which were shaking, shaking, and shaking. It cleared its throat and muttered under its breath, "...mescaline, shrooms, way, way too much ganja, DMT, LSD... why did she and I do so much, so frequently... it was the times right? it was the times..."

I was nervous and afraid, but as the figure grew quiet, I remembered what Dad had told me once, "*Never be afraid of the unknown.*" With Dad's mantra in mind, I reached forward with a shuddering hand and tapped the light-switch on.

Bright light from the small overhead lamp bathed the foyer.

The figure twisted around his head.

It was Dad.

But instead of a salmon complexion, his face was deathly pale; his blue eyes shined now with a blotchy red, and runniness and snot leaked from his hooked nose. "Hey kiddo, go back to bed. Okay? Just had something in my eye. Nothing to worry about. Probably a bug," he said, running his fingers through his greasy hair.

I nodded and looked at the floor. "Oh, I gotcha. I don't mind bugs either. But, um... you sure you don't need like a glass of water or something?"

I smelled the heaviness of alcohol on his clothes. I wanted to understand him, wanted to feel what he felt, wanted to siphon the alcohol from his blood and replace it with something pure and immaculate.

Dad shook his head and coughed violently into his shoulder. He blew his nose into his tear stained shirtsleeve and said, "Water. Yeah, water sounds nice kiddo. But hey, don't worry about it, you don't have to get me a glass. You just head off to bed now. And I'll see you up there, okay?"

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked, knowing he wasn’t.

“Yeah I’m sure,” Dad said, as he bent his head down, something that was all too familiar.

“Okay.”

“Great. See you in five minutes,” Dad said, as he struggled to get off of the bottom of the stairwell.

But he didn’t come upstairs that night to talk to me. Early the next morning, I found him passed out in the middle of the foyer, his cheek flat against the marble, his eyes shut.

I rushed down the stairwell and with great care, I tried to pick him up from the floor. But Dad wouldn’t budge, he just laid there like a sack of meat.

“Jack! Dad!”

I curved my head around.

Claudia was dressed in flannel pajamas and bunny slippers, her face looking worried and anxious.

“He’s okay. Hey look at me Claudia, he’s okay,” I said, even though I knew he wasn’t okay at all. Bending my legs to generate enough power, I lassoed my arms under his pits to try to pick my old man up.

Claudia took off her slippers and hurried downstairs. “Here, let me help you,” she said, grabbing his left arm with her small hands.

“Preciate it. Over here?” I said, pointing towards the couch in the living room.

“That’s good,” she said, as she yanked up on his arm.

“Teamwork?” I asked.

“Damn right.”

We used both of our power and strength. By joining forces, we managed to carry Dad over to the couch. We heaved his upper frame to the soft and springy cushions. And then we placed his legs on top of a pillow.

I took off his shoes and dusted them with the front of my clean shirt.

Claudia opened up the closet in the foyer. She took out a dustpan and broom, and then cleaned the shards of glass spread across the marble. With a delicate touch, she picked up the frame and placed it against the sofa. She picked up the picture of Mom and Dad, and gave it to me. Then, Claudia went to the kitchen. She came back with a damp cloth, a small

bucket half-filled with water, and a glass of water.

“Good thinking, he’s probably thirsty,” I said. Sis was always thoughtful.

Claudia rolled her eyes, took the glass, and splashed water into Dad’s face.

Dad woke up startled and bewildered. “What the hell is going on here?” he asked, his voice booming, the water dripping down his chin.

“Nothing, we’re just trying to help you,” I said, muttering under my breath. I didn’t understand why he was upset at us. Or maybe he wasn’t mad at us, just the circumstances.

Claudia wagged her finger in Dad’s face, raised her voice, and said, “Look Dad, Jack found you passed out in the foyer. And he was trying to get you back up. You smell like cigarettes. You smell like alcohol. And you’re the one getting pissed at us?”

“Claudia, I’m your father. Don’t talk to me in that tone. You understand?” he said.

Claudia shook her head. “I’m so tired of your bullshit. It’s always the same shit with you dad.”

Dad got up slowly and fell back again on the cushions. “Motherfu—,” he said, pressing his coarse hand against his forehead. He was sweating profusely, as he closed his eyes.

“Dad, just chill out. Claudia, can I have the...thank you,” I said, as she handed me the cloth that was damp and warm. I pulled over a chair from the table in the dining room, sat down, and began to dab Dad’s forehead. I did this once, twice, three times.

Claudia put her hand to her mouth and bit down on her index finger.

“Breathe,” I said, looking at Claudia.

“Trying to,” she said, as she took in a short breath.

Dad groaned and rubbed his cheek covered with grime and dirt.

Claudia placed the bucket at my feet.

I took in a deep breath too. Because I knew I had to keep all of us from falling into the deep and dark well that was unhappiness.

I wrung the water out of the blemished cloth and into the bucket. And as the light trickled through the casement window in the dining room, I dipped the cloth into the bucket, feeling the warm water soak through the coarseness of my own hand. Then, I soaked the cloth with water and pulled my hand out of the bucket. I leaned in closer to Dad and I dabbed the grime and dirt off of his cheek.

“I miss her,” Dad said in a voice that was quiet and imperceptible.

“I do too,” I said, doing my best not to break down. I washed the cloth into the bucket, pulled it out, and wiped the dried crust off of his eyes.

Claudia choked back tears, her face weary-looking. “Jack and I love you Dad, you know that right?” she said. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Dad cracked his eyes open and chuckling quietly he said, “This situation. It’s so ridiculous. You two shouldn’t be taking care of me. It should be the other way around.” Blinking back tears, he sat up straight this time, with no help at all. Dad placed one slender hand on my shoulder and one on Claudia’s, grasping us so tightly that red marks began to emerge on our skin.

And then, he inhaled. And then, he exhaled. And then, he said, “You guys know I don’t drink.” His breath still reeked of beer. “And you guys know I don’t smoke cigarettes.” His breath still reeked of cigarettes. “Point is...” He sighed out loud and stamped his foot on the ground. “. . .after your Mom passed away, it’s been tough. But often I forget that it’s been tough not only on me, but on you two as well. To put it simply I wish she was still alive. Your mom was an incredible woman and the love she had for all of us can’t be replicated. It just can’t,” he said.

Claudia and I nodded in silence.

Dad paused for a moment, took his hand off my shoulder and raised it, and buried his face into his bicep, he coughed in it so loudly that it seemed, as if vomit would spew over his knuckles. And when Dad lifted his head up, he looked disoriented and fatigued, and he began to sway from one side to the other, like one of those blow-up figurines at a car dealership, caught in the wind.

“Hey. Dad it’s me, Jack. I got you, just lean back,” I said, placing a pillow behind his lower back.

Wiping his dirty hand on his pants leg, Dad, shook his head and said, “I’m fine son.” He drummed his fingers on his knees and fidgeted in his seat, so much that a pack of cigarettes fell out of his pocket, tumbling onto the floor like a grenade.

Dad’s Adam’s apple shot up, as he looked down at the floor. Then he glanced at me, his arm stretching towards the pack, fingers dancing in the air. “Really, I’m fine,” he said, his nails scratching the loose end of a cigarette.

“Are you?” Claudia asked, as she advanced forward and drove her heel down on the pack. Bits of tobacco spread across the floor.

Dad, recoiling his fingers, jerked his hand up and away, and then reeled back to the safety of the couch. He said, “You’re just like your mother. You got a strong heart...” chuckling to himself “...and an even stronger personality. Good lord, I’m a...I’m a screw-up.”

Claudia didn’t say anything. She stood there for a good minute, glaring at Dad. It was like she could see right through him, his words, and his character.

And after she looked him square in the eyes and examined his damaged soul, she scooped up the cigarettes and crushed them in the palm of her hand.

Dad gritted his teeth and said, “Okay, I probably deserved that.”

“It’s for your own good,” Claudia said.

“She’s right,” I said. “And we’re not leaving until we know you’re okay.”

But I really wanted to leave the room.

Leave the room, run out the door, escape the cul-de-sac, and listen to the songs on my iPod. Tribe. The Beatles. Radiohead. Anything from Mom’s playlist, really. I touched my cans and thought about Mom and suddenly the cans felt heavy, as if I were wearing a horseshoe around my neck.

But then, I looked back at Dad and thought that maybe Mom’s music would help him get back to his old self. His gentle and kind self. So, I dipped my hand into my pocket and searched for my iPod. I traced the contours of something rectangular, but it was worn and light. I fished it out and held it in my trembling hands: it was the photograph of my parents.

Around her neck, Mom wore grey, vintage cans—the same ones she’d given me. She also had on her favorite burgundy cardigan, a white blouse, and glasses that were colored mahogany like her eyes. She was standing next to Dad, holding his hand with tenderness, her smile big as a slice of watermelon.

And Dad looked...he looked healthy—combed hair, shaved face, and a pink color to his cheeks. The two of them seemed happy and this made me happy.

After gazing at the photograph, I realized we all needed to be strong, not

just Claudia, not just Dad, and not just me, but all of us. Mom would have wanted that. I walked over to Dad, sat on the couch beside him, and then passed him the photograph. “Dad, here take a look at this. Please you got to see this,” I said.

Dad looked at me and took the photograph in his hands. He held it in his grasp for so long it was like the edges were thick with adhesives. His lips opened, then shut.

“Did you say something Dad?” I asked.

“She had good taste in music,” he said, smiling.

I took my cans off of my neck and lifting them up, I put them over Dad’s ears.

Dad closed his eyes. And I pressed play on my iPod.

A few hours later, Claudia and I watched her favorite movie *Adaptation*. As Nicholas Cage played two different people, both writers, Dad cooked us turkey sausage links and egg whites. He also made us organic Strawberry smoothies, the Trader Joe’s bag tucked under his arm like a wrinkled copy of *The Washington Post*.

His copy of *Leaves of Grass* laid on the countertop, like a smooth stone. He picked it up, leafed through the pages, and cleared his throat.

Dad said in a smooth and gentle voice, “. . . I ponder’d in silence, Returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long. . .”

When we finished eating our breakfast, Claudia invited me upstairs to her huge bedroom that had a dry-erase board—always blank—hanging from the pristine, white door. We went inside and she locked the door shut.

She pulled up a soft-backed chair for me, as she sat down in a leather recliner that had perforations and burn marks under the cushion.

I looked around her room.

She had posters of Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and George Harrison, and of Siddhartha Gautama.

A gorgeous blue and white tie-dye blanket patterned with spirals on each corner was spread over her bed; her night stand full of beauty products and a stack of novels with titles like *Catch-22* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*; and a *Cowboy Bebop* episode was playing on her laptop. Worn and ripped pages from *Ecclesiastes* sat under her mousepad.

There was also a turntable sitting on her desk. Records were sitting in crates like Dad's poetry books.

I placed my cans around my neck.

Snug in her chair, Claudia glided across the hardwood floor. She stuck her arm under her bed, reaching deep, until she took in a short breath and smiled. Then she pulled her arm back, her hand trembling, her fingers clutching onto the small wooden box.

It was the same one I had made for her while in Cub Scouts.

"That's—"

"Yup."

"Shit."

"Yup."

I hugged her.

"Every guy I've ever known has never made me anything lil bro. I almost died when you gave this to me. It means everything to me. Nothing's more important than family, even when your family is crumbling apart. We need to stick together, or else we'll collapse. Don't you ever forget that," she said in a mellow and pleasant voice.

She closed her laptop and put the wooden box on top of it. She motioned to me with her eyes towards the ceiling fan.

I nodded. I stood up from my chair, moved to the right-hand side of the wall and flipped the fan switch. The wooden blades of the fan spun and spun, as if it were a carousel being blown by a giant.

Claudia went over to her closet, opened it, and removed a fresh and white bath towel from the stack of fresh and white bath towels in her laundry basket.

She stood up and walked over to the doorway.

The light seeped through the crack beneath the doorway and highlighted the dust on the floor. Claudia jammed the towel in the crack. Immediately, the light stopped leaking through.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked.

"Sshh," Claudia, said, as she put her finger to her lips.

“All right . . .” I said, as the sun began to shine through the cracks of the blinds. I shielded my eyes with my forearm.

Claudia didn’t mind though. She put on her black Wayfarers. And then she went up to the blinds and raised them up half-mast, as though her room were a stoic sailboat. The room was filled with half-light and half-shadows.

Claudia went over to her desk and flipped through the records. She selected one—an unmarked sleeve—pulled the vinyl out, and placed it on the turntable. She pressed the power button and placed the needle along one of the grooves. Then, she pressed another button.

The needle dropped slowly. And it positioned itself along the groove. A familiar tune played, something Mom would have listened to, but I couldn’t describe the sound, and I couldn’t tell if it were an artist or a band.

Then there was a butterfly fluttering behind the window. It just stayed there for moment. It could have gone inside the room, but it didn’t. And then later it flew away.

The needle scratched.

I felt the stickiness of my cans against my neck.

The window was open and the fresh air was percolating through.

The wooden box was sitting on top of the laptop.

The insects were buzzing.

And the music was playing.

I closed my eyes

And listened.