

5-2019

Living the All-American Dream

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LIVING THE ALL-AMERICAN DREAM

University Honors Program Creative Project

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Submitted by

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December 2018

Dr. John T. Price

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
HONORS THESIS/PROJECT/CREATIVE ACTIVITY ABSTRACT

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UNIVERSITY: YES
STATE: YES
PROGRAM SIZE: 450+
THESIS: REQUIRED
THESIS ISSUED: HONORS

ABSTRACT:

This creative compilation includes a critical book review, assessed through an autobiographical lens with narrative commentary; a personal essay set in early childhood; and a second personal essay from the young adulthood perspective. The critical book review is influenced by creative non-fiction pedagogy, personal experiences, and texts assigned in English 4820: Autobiography. The objective is to recognize writing moves within the memoir genre and apply them to the subsequent two personal essays, which are sections of a potential full-length piece. Much of the preliminary work for this composition has been an ongoing process of reading, learning, and applying techniques from published and unpublished creative nonfiction, some of which began before the conceptualization of this project.

Keywords: America, adoption, learn, and why

I. Critical Book Review

Reading Witness as an Insider:

Discovering Purpose in Anne Heffron's *You Don't Look Adopted*

The first question authors consider before publishing a piece is “who cares?” While fiction and nonfiction writers alike aim to intrigue readers from all walks of life with their books or written publications, writers know that there must be a target audience. Earlier this year, Anne Heffron published her memoir, *You Don't Look Adopted*, which serves as a meditation on her life, specifically the pain and sense of abandonment sometimes associated with the adoptive condition. Admittedly, I have read at least fifty memoirs, none of which encompass the point of view of an adoptee, but I have wanted to change this for several years. Oddly enough, when I introduce myself I commonly lead with, “Hi, I’m Emma Franklin, and I was adopted when I was three years old from China.” My apprehension to pick up a book by an adopted author stems from a fear that no one shares my perspective, which I know is absurd since there are thousands of children adopted each year in the United States alone.

Motivated by my strong inclination to introduce myself to new people as a Chinese adoptee who was raised in western Nebraska, I finally resolved to pick up a book by another person who could relate to my position. After receiving numerous suggestions, I selected Heffron's *You Don't Look Adopted* because I cannot count on one hand how many times I have heard, “you don't seem adopted.” I read the description, and the author summed up feelings I have never verbally articulated but have always felt. Early in the book the author admits, “children born to their parents were created while adoptees were chosen, and the problem there is that in order to be chosen we first had to be *unchosen*” (Heffron 14). This evocative confession alone is the reason I cherry-picked Anne Heffron to take my adoption memoir virginity.

The Amazon description of *You Don't Look Adopted* describes Heffron navigating the world as an individual who is simultaneously more wanted *and* unwanted than other people. As the author captures and expands on this uneasy liminal space between the wanted and unwanted condition, she succeeds in attracting other readers who can commiserate with this borderline identity. Considering audience and returning to the big “who cares” question, Anne Heffron gently nudges readers who have similar backgrounds to open her memoir. The book also appeals to prospective parents who are contemplating adoption. While the urge to seek guidance in psychology books and parenting manuals are prominent, prospective parents will also find value in reading an adult adoptee’s reflection on the great loss and subsequent gains experienced throughout childhood and adulthood.

Other books I considered for my first adoption memoir include *The Language of Blood*, by Jane Trenka, which is about a Korean adoptee’s battle with insecurity, trials and tribulations, and going back to her homeland; *Not My White Savior: A Memoir in Poems*, by Julayne Lee, who also adopted from Korea, writes about the struggles of constantly being told she was saved from a worse life; and *Adoption Reunions: A Book for Adoptees, Birth Parents and Adoptive Families*, by Michelle McColm, which is about working with other adoptees and their birth parent who are interested in reuniting. Though Trenka and Lee’s book would have related more closely to my own international adoption story, I opted for Heffron’s story that did not have the cultural barrier component because I wanted to focus on the feelings associated with adoption alone without the complicated nuances of a different a culture, language, and homeland. I think, however, my next adoption memoir will involve international adoption.

You Don't Look Adopted begins by shedding light on problems Anne Heffron has had in her life with various relationships involving romantic partners, family members, colleagues, her

daughter, school associates, and most importantly, herself. The middle of the book works to diagnose the root of these relationship problems, which she determines is a product of never confronting the feelings of loss and abandonment from her adoption. Heffron discovers that the most effective way to address her emotional pain is through writing. She notes the main reason she has hesitated to write about adoption is in part because “my mom had taught me to love writing, she also, unintentionally, taught me to fear it” (Heffron 64). Her mother induced a fear to write in her by revealing when she went to Nigeria in the Peace Corp and wrote to someone back home about “primitive living conditions” in Nigeria, a group of Nigerians found her card and angrily sent her back to the United States. This gave Heffron the impression that being honest in writing accompanies negative consequences. Towards the end of the book, Anne reconciles her fears of writing about events and feelings that may be painful to acknowledge after attending a writers’ retreat and dedicating time to her writing. Finally, she reaches out to other people who have adoption stories and finds peace in talking about adoption. She admits she still has questions, concerns, and fears related to adoption, but at least she is on a path to addressing her feelings.

Whereas *You Don’t Look Adopted* is not a New York Times Bestseller and is not receiving the literary attention of a David Sedaris memoir, effective creative nonfiction moves are rife throughout the book, in addition to provocative themes and topics that engage readers. Heffron employs a relatively thematic narrative approach, but the structure of the memoir is similar to a collage essay, an essay that “can take the form of numbered sections, or it can be subtitles that guide the reader along” (Miller and Paola 112). Heffron uses subtitles to situate individual, small sections that are about a page long; the book is not divided by traditional chapters. The frequent subtitles with specific transitions make the book read more like a poem or

a long essay. Some of the sections work particularly well together; a section titled, “Listen” explores Heffron teaching writing at the community college level, but the next section called, “Perfect Storm” is a continuation of her teaching experiences that concentrate on her losing her temper with a rowdy student, whom she throws a pen at and results in her termination, or “perfect storm.” Thematically, the memoir would make sense with less subtitles throughout the book and more traditionally paced chapters, but I began to appreciate the subtitles on every page because they allow me to foreshadow specific variations in mood or occasion. For example, “Perfect Storm” implies the following situation may beget doom—in this case the loss of job—and it creates a natural suspense while signifying an alteration in the author’s life.

Naturally, the “Listen” and “Perfect Storm” subtitles flow smoothly together, almost lyrically if the reader only reads the subtitles and ignores the narrative amidst the frequent headings. However, several of the subtitles function as erratic and awkward transition points. Perhaps Heffron utilizes new section titles to transition from one vastly different idea to the next to avoid confusing the audience, but I think some of the passage shifts would benefit from a more fluid evolution from one idea to the next. In a particularly sudden section subtitled, “The Lady Will Have the Fish,” Heffron considers the lack of fulfillment she feels from her parents, a gap that cannot be assuaged by the most caring and dedicated adoptive parents, but then the next subtitle, “Shaken or Stirred” examines how the author has been an inadequate sister to one of her brothers. Though both sections talk about family members not living up to Heffron’s perceived standards, readers are left wondering why she needs and wants more from her adoptive parents. My first reaction is that the author herself may not know why she has the sensation of “fierce disappointment . . . about being adopted” (Heffron 91). I particularly want the author to expand on this feeling of disappointment with her adoptive parents because I have always felt

completely fulfilled, even overwhelmingly so. My interest does not come from a place of judgement, rather a place of wonder since we share the loss of biological parents.

The questions that arise most frequently for me when reading *You Don't Look Adopted* are based on content more than organization and style. Conversely, when I read other creative nonfiction works, the author's life and mine seldom have substantial intersecting events and or themes, which permits me to evaluate texts differently. I commonly look for writer intent, character development, and symbolic devices including metaphor, hyperbole, and use of dialogue. With *You Don't Look Adopted*, however, I find myself gravitating towards similarities and differences between the author's adoption experience and my own. Heffron's insight on adopted children simultaneously occupying the chosen and unchosen identity reminds me of the way I feel when I am driving on the interstate with a vehicle in front of me traveling slightly slower, and another car in the left lane traveling faster who is about to pass me. I am the car in between two vehicles, leaving me unsure how to react. Here, I must conduct a quick cost benefit analysis to determine whether slowing down behind the car in front of me or speeding up to pass the car in front of me will be the most efficient and safe option. This driving position renders me more indecisive than deciding what book to read next. As I negotiate the intermediate space between speeding up or slowing down, I remember Heffron's state of mind when deciding whether adopted children are among the most wanted or most unwanted individuals.

In addition to emphasizing thoughts I commonly grapple with, the author sheds light on notions that have never crossed my mind. I think many of the differences originate from the fact that my mom was transparent about the adoption process, never leaving any of my questions unanswered. I, too, would have numerous questions if my family approached adoption as a topic that exists but should not be directly discussed. Anne reflects, "Our parents couldn't ask for any

of us specifically. We still come out into the world as individuals, a kind of genetic crap shoot” (Heffron 15), reminding us adoptees that even though we have been coined as “chosen” by our adoptive parents, we are not chosen specifically; the adoption agency often does the true “selecting.” At first, I found this particular takeaway pessimistic, but I also think much of the adopted child worldview relies on the parents and children communicating openly and addressing any uncertainties to prevent compartmentalized emotions escaping to the recesses of our subconscious.

The genetic crap shoot comment takes me back to a conversation I had with a roommate a couple years ago, where she creatively hypothesized, “Emma, since your history is a black hole, you could have been an incestuous rape baby born in the bathroom of Taco Bell!” While I had to laugh at Robin’s callous, yet imaginative scenario, I had to remind her that China most likely did not have any Taco Bells in 1996. Though I have never thought of adopted children explicitly in terms of a genetic crap shoot, I realize that my roommate and Anne Heffron both picked up on that relationship before I did. This is another instance where my experience differs from the author. While Heffron has been haunted by the idea of being the product of a random crap shoot, I always found the fate rather charming because my mom had no idea what she would get, but that did not dissuade her from pursuing adoption. For my mother, parenthood and helping a child took priority over the chance of an unfavorable outcome.

Creative nonfiction can be an especially difficult genre to critique because memoirs are not usually plot driven stories that can be assessed by a linear model, distinguished by the stereotypical series of events: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. *You Don’t Look Adopted* is predominantly arranged by themes, like family relationships, problems, and aspirations. The themes are best identified through the author’s reflective voice.

Heffron does illustrate her ideas through events, stories, and interactions with others, similar to tradition stories. But since she, the memoirist, is the central focus of the book, we cannot expect her life to conform to a predetermined template delineating how stories should unfold. Instead we can look at the way she expresses her problems throughout the book. I think Heffron could convey her feelings of confusion and loss more artfully through detailed experience and dialogue; yet, she relies heavily on briefly telling readers about an experience then moving into the greater impact the event left on her through reflection. For example, Heffron writes about teaching writing at a community college and getting fired, and she connects her job loss to her daughter's rejection to a specific college. Instead of allowing the details from both events that the audience has read suggest certain consequences, she immediately explains the connection and similarity between getting fired and her daughter's rejection by her dream college.

As I believe the author has a right, maybe even an obligation to help readers understand why something matters, too much guidance leaves no work for the reader. Finding the balance between telling the audience too much and leaving the audience with too many possible interpretations is a difficult dance to master. Heffron would significantly increase the potential for reader analysis and interpretation in her writing if she discovers the sweet spot between critical reflection and showing. With creative nonfiction, more telling can be more effective in some cases, but as the telling or reflection increases, the author may want to balance it with more instances of showing than Anne Heffron does in *You Don't Look Adopted*.

Similar to any memoir, the stories included in this book primarily expose the author's experiences and perspectives, but the recollections inevitably cast other characters and events in a way that broach moral criticisms. In several instances, Heffron explicitly considers how her adoptive mother—who has passed away—would feel about her memoir as she repeatedly

divulges emotions of loss, grief, and lack of fulfillment as an adopted person. To complicate the moral dilemma, the author's confessions do not stem from anger or vengeance, rather a place of confusion and genuine interest. In a surprisingly raw reflection the author contends, "They [the adoptive parents] want to believe that you can take a child into your home and love away the past. And maybe you can. But I didn't see it happen in my family" (Heffron 53). I can see why this admission would be incredibly painful for Heffron's mother to stomach, especially if she thought she did everything possible to treat her daughter with love and acceptance. When I first read this passage, I felt the urge to criticize the author's opinion, but my education with personal nonfiction reminded me when reading books where authors share deeply controversial insights that can damage other people, it is not our place as readers to condemn the writer. It requires tremendous courage to disclose thoughts that leave the writer emotionally naked. The excerpt from page 53 demonstrates years of struggle, pain, and unresolved questions, and at the end of the day, it does not matter what Anne Heffron's mom, dad, siblings, friends, or critics think because it is her story.

Moral ambiguities in publishing can arise with any type of book, as books of all genres are placed on banned book lists. However, memoirists such as Anne Heffron, must confront ethical publishing questions most frequently because most memories and experiences involve more people than just the writer. Prior to taking a creative non-fiction class, I believed every party involved should influence whether the story is told. After learning about the publishing process through the lens of the memoirist in several autobiography classes, I now realize the only way to honor everyone's voice and freedom of expression requires us readers, or jurors, to hear every case with no preconceived judgments. We must also bear in mind that one person's recollections may contradict another person's witness testimony, which is why every author

deserves his or her opportunity on the stand. Patricia Hampl brilliantly stresses in *I Could Tell You Stories*, “The privacy of individual experience is not a right . . . but something greater—it is an inevitability that returns no matter what invasion seems to overtake it” (Hampl 223). Hampl, also a memoirist, often confronts the challenge of appeasing people she writes about while concurrently trying to maintain the integrity of memory. She reminds us that while it is important to negotiate the boundary between offending others and exercising self-expression, ultimately it is not up to others to decide when a memory is legitimate or worth sharing. If we fail to acknowledge uncomfortable truths, we will lose them forever to the abyss of untold memories, and Anne Heffron’s individual outlook on her adoption story is no different.

The final aspect of *You Don’t Look Adopted* that should be addressed is the stark contrast between Heffron’s attitude on adoption from page 1 to page 159. The first half of the book underscores her negative feelings associated with adoption. Whereas in the second half of the book, the writer exudes a sense of liberation. When I previously described this memoir as a meditation on Heffron’s struggles with adoption, I meant it literally. As the narrative progresses, the author becomes more comfortable discovering deeply personal matters. I see the most apparent shift from the pessimism to reserved optimism when Anne Heffron leaves a writer’s retreat and embarks on a personal voyage to uncover her repressed adoption-related emotions. She then instigates interviews with other people who were adopted or have adopted children, comparing their insights with her own. I hesitate to say she finally has her “aha” moment because I think such revelations are cliché attempts to make all stories fall under the elementary five stage story paradigm, peaking with a climatic event or idea. Heffron confidently declares, “adoption used to be a handicap, something that kept me quiet, it was now a springboard to my life. I had owned its importance and its impact and now I felt free” (152). To be free means she

can talk about her adoption; she can now think about it without feeling guilty that she is betraying her adoptive parents. I have an intimate grasp of this sense of freedom, a liberation that is “now a springboard to my life,” as my entire world has been circumscribed by my identity as an adopted Chinese American girl from western Nebraska.

Above all, through *You Don't Look Adopted*, Anne Heffron chronicles major experiences that have shaped her worldview thus far poetically through her use of short passages, nestled under subtitles that preface each new section or idea. With a clear audience in mind, she appeals to readers who have or will encounter adoption. As Heffron does not focus her lens beyond how adoption has impacted her perspective, the book would most likely not be suited to an outsider, or someone who is not at the very least, interested in how adoption can affect a person psychologically and physically. But for me, this book reminded me that it is perfectly reasonable and expected to have questions and mixed feelings about being adopted. I have always been comfortable talking about my adoption, but I have never been able to read about it for fear of what the author might disclose. While Anne Heffron has found her purpose and her preferred form of expression through writing, I have finally begun to navigate the adoptive condition with others who can commiserate alongside me, as I read and consider other adoptees' personal journey and relationship to their own story. As open as I am about my adoption story, strangely enough I have always discussed the adoption process as if it is a complete mystery, pretending my birth parents and birth land is a black hole. I have been treating adoption as an outsider when I am in fact, an insider.

III. Chapter from Early Life

Leaning Faith

Spring 2005

“... And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen,” we all finish in unison. I excitedly nudge Grandma and ask her if she noticed that I was louder than anyone else because I clearly know the Lord’s Prayer better than the other hundred people among us. Grandma kindly quiets me down and assures me that she is always proud of me. I am not convinced she understands how impressive I truly am. I can memorize any passage or piece of information quicker than any one of my fellow second graders.

The kaleidoscope of blue, red, and yellow sparkling from the morning sun in the church’s stained-glass window catches my attention. It looks impossible to put glass that high up in a building, I think. I am struck by the beauty and resplendent stained-glass at the top corner of our church sanctuary. I hope someone can explain to me how they got the stained-glass window that high without breaking it. As we shuffle out of the pews, I look to Grandma to answer my questions about the window, but she has made it into the sea of our local Methodist congregation before I can open my mouth. Just once it wouldn’t hurt us to leave church without talking to every single person in Wallace, Nebraska.

I spot Fred Stevens and his family on my way out of the church. He is wearing his usual: light blue overalls with a dark green shirt underneath. I think overalls would make it hard to use the toilet, but maybe Fred doesn’t have to go to the bathroom very often. I really hope he doesn’t talk to me because he only talks to me in this really soft, slow voice with his head tilted to my left. I can’t waste time because I need to keep looking for Grandma. I wave quickly at Fred and

shove through the crowd before he can ask me what I have been up to in school, but before I can make it out of the church, I stumble into Lydia, my mom's cousin. I love Lydia. She always smells so sweet, and she wears the prettiest necklaces to church. Lydia changes the gemstone in her necklace every week, considering it's never the same color, or she has many of the same necklaces, only in different colors. Today I touch her heart shaped necklace with a red stone in it, as I wish I owned a necklace this pretty. She asks where my grandma is, and I tell her I'm not sure, but I am on a mission to find her. We hug, and I finally make it outside of the church.

I first met my mom in the lobby of a Chinese hotel. She was 55. I was three, and she was there to adopt me—her first and only child. Admittedly, I can't remember the details of my first transcontinental plane ride to my new home country, but I remember the food, particularly the tastes and textures, I was eating on my first flight to America. Unable to communicate in English, I would point to the drink and snack cart strolling by, and my mom would ask the flight attendant for another package of nuts or any food available that I was willing to eat. Whenever my mom thought I would burst into another unexplainable fit of tears, I was rewarded with more salted peanuts and orange juice. I finished my fourth cup of orange juice, and this is about the time Mom caught on to my creative communication network. Finally, she covered me in a plaid, fleece blanket, where I would stay tightly wrapped until our descent into the land of the free.

Not only did my mom brave taking a young toddler to the opposite side of the world, when I was almost five years old she brought me to a stark grassland many consider “fly-over territory.” We relocated to the Village of Wallace—nestled in the southwest corner of Lincoln County, population 360—precisely to be closer to family because my mom wanted our family's

help, as she took care of my grandmother. Mom and I lived in a suburb of Seattle, Washington for my first year in the United States before my mother's filial duty to her mother summoned us 1500 miles southeast of Seattle. Mom, Grandma, and I found a newly built three-bedroom duplex (which would be my home for the next eleven years) on the far east side of Wallace facing a pasture of cows that occasionally herd toward the edge of the fence facing us. When the cows approached the edge of the fence, I would moo as loudly as I could at the cows, but they usually outlasted me in our stare off and moo off. Mom told me that I was not to be in arm's length of the cows, unfortunately.

My uncle explained that our area is covered in beautiful green fields of corn and soybeans that stretch miles across the state of Nebraska. But I only saw patches of ugly, brown plants and dirt with the occasional green sprinkled throughout the sandhills. However, living breathing life has not been lacking out here, because Wallace, Nebraska has championed more cows per square foot than people for as long as my mom could remember. My mom promised me this place would quickly *really feel like home*, especially after I began kindergarten. I still didn't understand this new place or country. I would stare around in wonder, and little by little, before I knew it my, finger had already made its way to my nose.

My mom's head snapped around instantly towards me, and she slapped this soft white square in front of my face and pointed to the square, then pointed to my nose and repeated, "pick your nose." This was weird. I looked at her, and I did as I was told. I stuffed this fuzzy, white object up my nose. This white square cloth appeared silly; I could not understand why I needed to use it. Getting the chunks out of my nose was never more challenging because I then had to figure out how this white square fit into the nose cleaning equation. I figured it would help; otherwise, Mom would not have given it to me. Eventually, I realized Mom and Grandma

wanted me to ask for one of these “pick your noses” when I had dried or running pieces of goo stuck in my nose. I realized it must be the nice thing to do instead of waiting for them to offer me one.

As a quick learner, I was happy to have conquered this mysterious system. The next time I felt something blocking my nose, I confidently asked, “Can you give me a ‘pick your nose,’ Mom?” She exploded with laughter and told me it was a “Kleenex.”

In that moment I knew *Mom betrayed me*. She had lied to me for six months because every time she offered me one, she immediately said, “pick your nose.” Why would she call it a “pick your nose” for months, then when I called it exactly what she had been calling it switch the name? This “Kleenex/Pick Your Nose” problem was just plain mean and confusing. Mom said I was a quick learner since I figured out basic English after only six months in America, but I wasn’t so sure anymore, as she and Grandma seemed to know something about the “pick your nose” business that I did not yet understand.

Each day my mom and Grandma insisted I learn something new. Over one lace, then the other, and pull, that’s all there is to it, my mom described quickly. She magically made two strings into a bow. The strings looked perfect, almost like the floppy ears of our Cocker Spaniel mix, Jazzy. I thought this was too hard for me, but she would not give up. “I’ll never be able to tie my shoes,” I cried. Even if I do, they certainly would never look like Jazzy’s ears. I did not need shoes anyway. I mean, my feet were strong. I went outside almost every day without them. But, the problem with my mom was that she never gave up. If she was convinced tying my shoe was important, she made sure it was important to everyone in the house. Mom assured me I would tie the best bows in my kindergarten class before I knew it. She seemed to be sure of what

she was saying. Fed up, I tugged the laces out of the shoes and threw them across the living room.

My grandma heard us from the other room. “Judy, give her a break. I know she will get it eventually.” My grandma waved her hand over, gesturing me to sit on her lap. I excitedly leapt onto Grandma’s lap in her big, tan recliner since the shoe tying was finally finished for the day. She grabbed a book, pointed to a picture and challenged, “What do you think this is, Emma?”

“An airplane?” I guessed. She smiled, and I knew I was right, plus I was undoubtedly learning. After we went through a few more pictures, Grandma shut the book and chirped, “a little a day goes a long way.” She pronounced me the smartest five-year-old she ever met, but she claimed I wouldn’t remember what I learned if I tried to remember too much in one day. I giggled. Maybe learning wasn’t so bad. Since Grandma was old, and I was the smartest five-year-old she had met, I knew I was a genius.

An entire decade would pass before I realized I was far from the genius Grandma led me to believe I was. I often find myself in situations today where I am not even half as sure about the world as I was when I was a child. I occasionally yearn for the credulous view of the world I once held as a naïve child because options appear to be clear-cut and simple from the lens of a toddler who only knows one way. But, once alternative options and abstractions are introduced, there is never one clear answer again. What seems to be a simple decision such as deciding where to eat actually accompanies a host of considerations: how much I want to spend, the amount of time cooking requires, and whether I want quality tasting food. This difficult calculus requires weighing the advantages against the disadvantages and considering opportunity costs.

In spite of many uncertainties I now have as a young adult about decision-making, young, confident me believed I had full command of American behavior. “Pick your nose” meant

cleaning out my nose with a finger (not accepted by Mom and Grandma), but “Kleenex” was the white cloth I was supposed to use to clean out my nose (accepted by Mom and Grandma). I really didn’t see much of a difference between the two, except I got yelled at when I used my finger because my fingers were too *dirty*.

Mom and Grandma tried to teach me things without directly teaching me. For the first few years in the United States when I went to the bathroom, I would face the wall and squat over the toilet with both my feet planted on the bowl. I slowly recognized I was not doing it right, though. I always saw people’s legs dangling from the bowl or resting on the dirty tiles of the Walmart bathroom, as if they were sitting on the bowl. I asked Mom why she sat on the toilet and did not stand. She did not really answer me. I thought to myself: *maybe adults would break the seat if they stood, like I did, because they are so much bigger than me.*

I later overheard my mom telling my grandma, “It’s okay if Emma squats over the bowl; it’s probably cleaner anyway.”

I then wondered if that meant I should sit? I wanted so desperately to be like everyone else here in America: my mom, my grandma, my classmates, and my neighbors. If sitting on the toilet is what I had to do, then I would. What I found most disturbing, though, was if sitting was what everyone did, why didn’t Mom and Grandma tell me I was supposed to sit as well? I later learned my way of going to the bathroom was not the “American” way, but Mom revealed it was correct in some countries, so she never stopped me. How sneaky of my mom and my grandma. I concluded I had to start paying more attention to what my mother said because I was onto her misleading ways.

My unrelenting search to know, understand, and act in the American way continued fiercely throughout my childhood. The path gradually evolved from learning the American way

to embarking on a new quest for any and all information I could access, sucking every “why” out of the adults in my life. Once the first three letter word (why) escaped my mouth, people who knew me fled before they could fall victim to my spitfire round of questions.

I watch as our purple Pontiac Bonneville pulls up to the church. “Mom!” I yell, as I hop in the back seat, leaving room for Grandma when she finally get out of the church. Yawning, she asks me how the service went, and I tell her it was fine, except Grandma is still inside talking to every single member of the church, so we might have to come back in an hour to get Grandma. I usually stick around and talk with Grandma and the town’s people because her friends always ask about my classes and wonder how I am doing. It is my duty to make sure our town friends have answers, unlike me; I never get the answers I am looking for because people try to keep secrets from the young. I’m “not ready” to learn certain truths, but I know I can handle them, because I am the smartest second grader in all of Wallace! (Most of the truths that I longed to know I would discover over the years, including who Santa and the Tooth Fairy are, where babies come from, and why young people cannot drive cars. On the other hand, some truths I am still working to uncover such as why some people or groups convincingly claim to care about other people but behave in purely self-promotion ways.)

Today, I just want to go home and eat because I missed breakfast. My mom is staying in the parked car that is now turned off, which means we are going to have to wait in the car for Grandma. I start to wonder why my mom does not go to church with us since all my friends’ moms go with them. My mom looks like she has barely gotten out of bed. Maybe she doesn’t go to church because she also thinks Grandma is annoying after church, talking to the whole town

and making us wait to eat. I think I will stay home with Mom next week. I know I shouldn't ask her too many questions because she just woke up, and she hates questions "early in the morning."

After counting all the people leaving church, chewing off every fingernail to the skin, and braiding my hair, I decide, at last, I do not care if Mom is not in the mood for questions. I begin, "Mom, why do you hate church?" Her eyebrows shoot up instantly, and she tells me to stop putting words in her mouth. And then, I remind her she still has never gone with Grandma and me to church.

"Do you believe in God, Mom?" I press. She acts like she doesn't hear me. I ask again. She raises her voice: "Not now, Emma!" I tell her it is okay if she doesn't believe in God because I think some of the Bible stories are a little silly. No wonder Mom stays home on Sundays. She probably wonders about how the wild events in the Bible happened too. The worst part is no one will tell me how they know God is real.

I will still love my mom if she does not believe in God the way everyone else in Wallace believes. This is when I realize God could be like Santa. My mom still thinks I believe in Santa, but my classmate, Ryan, told me he's just our parents. Maybe people only want us to believe in God to make us happy, the way parents want us to believe in Santa to make us happy. If that is the case, I must keep going to church because Ryan says his mom got mad when he confronted her about Santa. I can only imagine how mad Grandma would be if I ask her about God. (It would be only five short years before I, too, stopped attending church. I'm not sure if it is because my life got busier, or if I no longer had a reason to go once my grandmother died, especially since I continue to question God's existence.)

My mom once described her remarkable life journey to me in the most nonchalant voice. It went something like this: she grew up in Wallace, Nebraska raised by respectable Methodist Republicans who owned a small farm operation and wanted their daughter (my mom) to become a teacher. After two years at Nebraska Wesleyan, my mom knew teaching would never be *her* vocation, only her mother's dream for her. She then moved to Chicago, where she landed a job with Northwest airlines (now Delta airlines) in reservations; Northwest airlines would be her life's career, and it would include travels, experiences, and friends from every walk of life that would later influence her interest in international adoption. My mom fell so in love with the introduction to Chinese culture that she gained from several Chinese coworkers, she elected to adopt me against all odds. Everyone told her she was too old when she finally saved the money in her early fifties, but she persisted. Throughout her life, my mom relocated to various Northwest airline hubs in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle. But in the end, when my grandma needed her most, she gathered her belongings and her new daughter to return to the place it all began, Wallace.

As everyone trickles out of the church, I can make out the pink, blue, and purple flowers on Grandma's t-shirt. "She's finally here," I announce to Mom. At last, I can go home, eat, and play with my new Pekingese puppy, Cleo. Right as we are about to pull out of the church parking lot, my Grandma opens the door, steps out of the car, and goes back inside to get the church program brochure. I have had enough; I launch out of the car before my mom notices a second car door closing. I start marching down the street towards our little duplex on Bismarck Street, only twelve blocks from church.

After two blocks, I recognize the uneven growl of our purple Pontiac Bonneville's engine. Before I can make it any farther down the street, our purple Pontiac sweeps up next to me, blocking off my path, and I reluctantly plop back in the car. I continue to groan about how church cannot be a three-hour activity, especially when I have not eaten breakfast. "Why doesn't anyone care that I am hungry?" I roar. Mom settles me down, and after the longest ten blocks across Wallace, we make it back to the familiar grey duplex that is patiently awaiting my return.

With a mouthful of scrambled eggs, I ask my grandma how she knows God is real. My grandma reminds me that everything I need to know is in the Bible. "Emma, you know it's not nice to talk with your mouth open and full of food," she adds.

My questions should not be stopped by eating, I grumble to myself. If I try to do all the things my grandma thinks are "nice," I will never make my point. "But, Grandma," I continue, "how do you know that what the Bible says about God is real?"

I remember her very next word better than I remember her voice.

"Faith," she replies. I look at her speechless, as my brain spins 100 miles a minute trying to come up with a question that would give me a better answer. At last, I come up with, "Why?" Needless to say, Grandma says she has had enough, and she is going to take her afternoon nap. Grandma and Mom can only take so much of the weekly household inquisition led by their favorite eight-year-old.

Faith is a concept I still have trouble understanding, but there are several things I know for certain: my grandma operated on faith; people cannot usually articulate the reasons behind their faith, as it is more of a feeling than a concrete idea; and you *never ever* question a person's faith. Through my many "why and how" sessions with my mom and my grandma, I finally understood that Grandma did not like being asked about the root of her faith, and Mom did not

like being asked about her faith, or *lack of* faith. But more importantly, they both expected me to respect other people's privacy regarding personal, intimate matters; and religion was undoubtedly one of those matters.

To this day, my mom has never explicitly admitted to being "atheist." While I have had my suspicions since I bombarded her in the car outside the church, I now understand why she never answered me. I would have indubitably spread her atheism around my second-grade classroom and to judgmental townsfolk who had no business knowing my mom's relationship with or without God. Though my mom nor I possess a deep faith in a higher power, we have faith in ideas that transcend the individual person. We have faith in education, in humanity, and most of all, in the American dream. My mom sought a more fulfilling life through parenthood in pursuing international adoption at the age of 55, and ultimately, she sought a better life for a little Chinese girl who otherwise may have never see anything beyond sweatshops and rice fields. My mom may not have faith in an omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent deity, but she has faith in me, her American dream.

While I looked different than everyone in Wallace with my straight black hair, golden bronze skin tone, and shorter than average stature, I never felt as ostracized as my mom appeared when picking my grandma and me up from church. No matter how uncomfortable retrieving us from church may have been for her, she never refused. Looking back, I see how gracefully my mom confronted our town's controlling gaze and perception of the nonreligious. My mom may have been raised in Wallace and since returned, but she was always more of an outsider than me, the one who physically looked different. As a young outspoken liberal minority, I felt welcome and fully accepted by the same town my mom refused to make eye contact with on Sundays. By description alone, I would be the person who doesn't fit into the Wallace paradigm, but

sometimes something greater than appearance distinguishes our sense of belonging. Although my mom may never occupy the Wallace insider identity, she has been able to give me the greatest gift: my all-American immigration story.

IV. Chapter from Early Adulthood

Let's Eat

Fall 2016

With a pool of sweat clinging to the back of my Democrat blue t-shirt, I charge through the doors of my Maverick Village suite, eagerly hoping Robin is not passed out sleeping. Sleeping is healthy, and often under enjoyed by busy American college students, but Robin spends frightening amounts of time sleeping, to the point nights become two to three days of hibernation. When I don't see Robin lying across our living room couch, I regain a sense of optimism that today is the day she finally decided to attend Spanish class *twice* in one week. She usually makes it to the Monday class, but is too burnt out to make it to the Wednesday section. On the way to my room, the faint decrescendo of her iPhone's default alarm clock jingles in the background, informing me she skipped class, again. After quickly changing my clothes, I storm towards her door and pound rapidly until a seemingly unrecognizable young woman with matted hair, droopy glasses, and sweat pants greets me. "Hey girl, how was canvassing for Brad Ashford today?"

"Robin! You promised you would attend your Wednesday section of Spanish. Your alarm has probably been going off for the last three hours!" Although Robin is allowed flexible attendance through the university disability services for her clinical depression, I still believe that she can and will eventually make it to her classes more than once a week.

She sighs, "Emma, you know I don't ever make it to the Wednesday class. I try every week. My alarm goes off every nine minutes, but I'm just too tired. I wish you would just be happy I made it on Monday."

For the past year being friends, Robin and I have been demonstrating our appreciation for one another through a predictable, yet cathartic set of weekly arguments. These reoccurring arguments unravel with the same set of precision as my Excel planner spreadsheet, delineating my work and class schedule down to the minute.

“You should pencil in the thirty-minute lectures you give me every Wednesday and Thursday about my poor attendance and mental health problems,” Robin jokes.

As Dave Ramsey (a personal finance coach) explains in reference to financial relationships, there is a nerd and a free spirit in every couple. Robin is my free spirit, and I am her nerd. I can't speak for Robin, but for me, reminding her to attend class and to get dressed each day gives me a sense of friendly purpose. After several months, my reminders, passionate arguments, and yelling have become less about getting Robin to attend class, but more about our unwritten roommate agreement that states I shall constantly remind her that I care for her through my incessant bitchiness, and she will tenderly receive my suggestions with a laugh and swallow of her evening Diet Dr. Pepper.

Our other two suitemates think we should agree to disagree about Robin's attendance and the dorm chores she fails to contribute to, but I can't seem to let go. This is when Googling “how to let go of little things” leads me down a gloomy self-diagnosis rabbit hole, suggesting that the infamous Sigmund Freud would conclude I have repressed emotions of my own that I must confront, and it is I who should be talking to the counselor weekly, not Robin. My fugacious attempt to figure out why I keep dwelling on small problems, like Robin not taking out the trash on her rotation or her infrequent attendance to class abruptly ends when Google indicates that I might be the one who needs help.

My mom says when I am stressed out, I tend to project my stress onto others, which is unlikely because I think her central premise is wrong: I am not stressed out. I have never missed a day of work without two weeks' notice, and in the past fourteen years attending school, I have never turned in an assignment late. "Mom, you don't understand. It's Robin's turn to take out the trash, and I can pretty much play Tetris with the trash heap it's so high," She explains to me that since the most intimate relationship with depression I've experienced is through my friends and psychology textbooks, I ought to be more understanding. Exasperated, I hang up and elect to reconcile my last argument with Robin in the way she and I know best, food.

Whereas romantic couples can have makeup sex, Robin and I have makeup dinner dates or roommate meals together, where we ignore the fact that just hours earlier I was loudly complaining about the full trash can and my dirty dishes in the sink that she did not rinse (Robin and I share the same dishes to optimize space in the cupboards). As loudly as I can, I gather my orange Rachel Ray pot and pan set and pull out the pasta, tomato sauce, and the ground sausage Robin's parents gave us for the semester (each year her parents buy a pig at an auction in western Nebraska that they have slaughtered into pork chops, bacon, and ground sausage; this year's pig is "Timmy"). What's more astonishing than my obnoxious attempt to lure Robin out of her room for my famous dorm cooked spaghetti is that we have managed to get by for months with only three noise complaints from the neighboring dorm suites. Through the cacophony of pots, kitchen utensils, and my heavy feet, Robin appears at last.

"What the hell are you doing out here? I'm trying to sleep," she grumbles.

"I'm making spaghetti with Timmy the pig, the one your parents gave us!" I sing. "Come on, you love spaghetti. Get out here!"

Robin has no choice but to acquiesce to my invitation because she knows better than anyone that I'm willing to raise hot hell until I get my way. She sits on the couch in a sleepy daze, a look strikingly similar to the one she gets when I delve too deep into one of my environmental rants about different grades of plastic and the dangers of polyethylene terephthalate on the body, especially when exposed to heat.

To justify my insufferable kitchen noises, I remind Robin that she probably wouldn't hear me if I was too quiet because she has genetic bilateral hearing loss, and she has yet to take her father up on his offer to buy her hearing aids. Robin's apprehension to get hearing aids is one of her most defining characteristics; she believes her partial hearing loss is the one trait that makes her special, since she comes from a decent upper middle-class family with two loving parents who can support a weekly cleaning service and a sporty Ford Mustang in North Platte, Nebraska. (During conversations regarding Robin's weekly cleaning service or gifts from her parents, I often felt she was not worthy of her depression. I could not understand how someone who appeared to have everything on the surface could hurt so much on the inside. Months later, I would finally understand depression isn't about how many trials a person has or has not endured.)

Robin has explained to me on several occasions that if she does get hearing aids, other students will treat her differently. Her physical disability will then define her, and she already feels suffocated by her depression. She rationalizes that she has no reason to get hearing aids considering she reads lips so well that I did not recognize her hearing loss until one day in the car when she was in the front and I was in the back seat. But most of all, hearing would prevent her from her favorite pastime: sleeping. I think, however, that Robin may be afraid if she does get hearing aids, the noises and comments reality dishes her way would be better off unheard.

Because with hearing aids, she would have to acknowledge every meeting or date with her school advisors, sorority sisters, and doctors. Robin could no longer excuse a missed meeting with “I must have heard the time and date wrong.” Most importantly, she would hear the world’s unforgiving and constant demand for her to be anywhere other than bed.

Once the water comes to a boil and I neatly place the thin spaghetti into the bubbling pot, I sit next to Robin. “Do you ever notice that the way you pound on my door is similar to the way we met?” she asks. I snicker immediately, and I am imagining the day we met, just a little over a year ago. My first college class at UNO had not yet commenced, but Durango days were in full swing. I met this girl, Zana, at one of the housing events, and she invited me to her dorm, where we were to hang out before the first soccer game. When we arrived at Zana’s suite, sitting there in the worn, velvety tan chair, property of University Village, was Robin staring at me with an icy resting bitch face.

“Who are you, and why are you here?” demanded Robin.

“Uhm, I’m here with your roommate, and we were going to watch the soccer game. You should come,” I replied, doing what my respectable mother taught me to do in any uncomfortable situation: be inclusive. To my surprise, she happily joined us, and before I knew it, we learned that we were both freshman undergraduate students at the University of Nebraska Omaha. We grew up forty miles apart, she in North Platte, Nebraska in the seat of Lincoln county and me in Wallace, Nebraska located twenty miles west and another twenty miles south of North Platte. In the rural distance paradigm, we might as well have been from Omaha and Bellevue we were so close. We later commiserated over a North Platte girl who had drowned the past summer, a girl who attended Robin’s high school and a girl I went to a party with once. Before long, we knew the universe conspired for us to be best college friends.

Beyond our mutual understanding of western Nebraska life, Robin provides a quality that I have not found in any other friend, a quality that complements my frequent crass comments. She, too, dishes out the truth with little to no regard for consequences, sometimes even more severely than I do. She can tell me that I need to shut up because no one cares about whatever topic I have passionately committed to discussing for a given month, and I can tell her to get her lazy butt off the couch. The quick developing relationship Robin and I have had accompanies several interesting realities including the fact that my best college memories are with Robin, but so are some of my most painful college memories including our more serious fights that extend beyond our daily banter.

Coming out of my trance, I realize I should probably stir the spaghetti noodles. “I hope you like soggy, unevenly cooked noodles,” I snort. Now that we are laughing together, I know that Robin and I are back to our normal feedback loop, where the weekend will offer Robin a chance to recharge, sleep, and prepare for the upcoming week. Meanwhile I will canvass for Brad Ashford’s reelection campaign to the House of Representatives in Nebraska’s second congressional district, finish homework, socialize in the evenings, and thoroughly clean the apartment suite on Sunday. As I mentally plan for the upcoming weekend and corroborate these plans with my physical planner, Robin declares that I should skip my internship obligations for the campaign on Saturday and lounge around the dorm with her.

“I feel like you are trying to get over your ex with all these activities. You might actually feel better if you sit down, think about the breakup, and chill out with me,” Robin offers.

I dread this conversation more each time she brings it up because I have always dealt with unpleasant situations by treating them like they never happened. I defend myself bitterly, “No, I’m just trying to be a productive member of society, and I need to fulfill my school and

internship requirements.” (It would be weeks before I realized Robin may know more about grief and healthy coping mechanisms than I did. I assumed that she, the emotional loose cannon of the relationship, and I, the voice of reason did not need to take advice from a person who has suffered chronic depression since middle school. I later learned her perspective and insight are exactly what I needed and should have delighted in receiving.)

I could not exactly skip canvassing this weekend even if I wanted to take a day for myself. It is the beginning of Get Out the Vote (GOTV) week, where we must work vigorously each day until the election to make sure voters know where they should be on election day and have a plan to get to the polls, granted we the volunteers and interns of the campaign may shoulder that responsibility. Robin did inspire me, though. “You know you could come canvassing with me this weekend,” I shout with a big smile on my face. “I will buy you Scooter’s coffee, and you will get a chance to see what door knocking is like instead of just making fun of me!”

She looks absolutely unimpressed, but I can tell she is considering it because she hasn’t said *no, you’re crazy* yet. I have three days of persuasion before the Saturday launch of GOTV to convince her to join me. Saturday I will be hitting the Bennington area, an area I think Robin will feel safe enough to walk around because it is pretty developed and quiet compared to the campus we inhabit every day. I would be remiss to not warn Robin about the extensive walking aspect of canvassing. I am, however, slightly worried if I reveal the amount of walking we will be doing for several hours on Saturday she may back out of this adventure; it’s not uncommon to walk eight miles or more on a good day of political canvassing. I may have to up the ante with more than Scooter’s coffee, but I decide I will ignore the walking problem until Saturday because I’m thrilled that I did not receive a hard rejection.

“Are you ready, Robin?” I bellow at the top of my lungs. It’s 9:00, Saturday morning, and I intend to be at the campaign office by 10:00. Miraculously, we make it to Scooter’s and to the office by 10:00, where I proudly show off Robin to my field manager, Frank. He has been hounding me for the last couple months to gather more volunteers, despite my repeated explanations that my college age friends have no desire to spend their free time promoting local political candidates. Frank works on a campaign; he should understand that only thirty percent of the voting-eligible population cares about their elected officials or believes that their vote matters.

At last we gather the campaign literature, pledge cards, and pens to commence Robin’s first political canvassing adventure. After reaching the third house with no one home, Robin complains, “If no one answers the door, this really can’t be productive.” I explain the ratio of people who answer their door to the ones who don’t, and she starts laughing hysterically at the campaign flyers we are carrying. She points to the line underscoring Brad Ashford’s willingness to work across isles and his commitment to bipartisanship and tells me our Democrat official is basically running on the idea of *being the most Republican Democrat* in Congress.

“In Nebraska, that’s the only way for a Democrat to get elected, unfortunately,” I concede.

I don’t think I give my friend enough credit, as she is far more astute than I realize. She points out campaign tendencies and features I’ve been taking for granted for three months. After convincing several people to sign pledge cards to vote for our candidate, Robin notes that our Ashford campaign fosters political engagement for a concentrated political milieu, and we are primarily reaching the people who are *already* involved in civic participation and who already accept our candidate, specifically Nebraska Democrats.

After a day of discussing political outreach strategies, getting lost in a particular labyrinth style neighborhood, and spending time with Robin, I decide to push my luck: “Maybe the next campaign you can join early and provide marketing suggestions, since you seemed to notice many campaign pitfalls.”

Robin shakes her head, “Oh God no, I only did it this time for you because I knew you’d whine for days if I didn’t.”

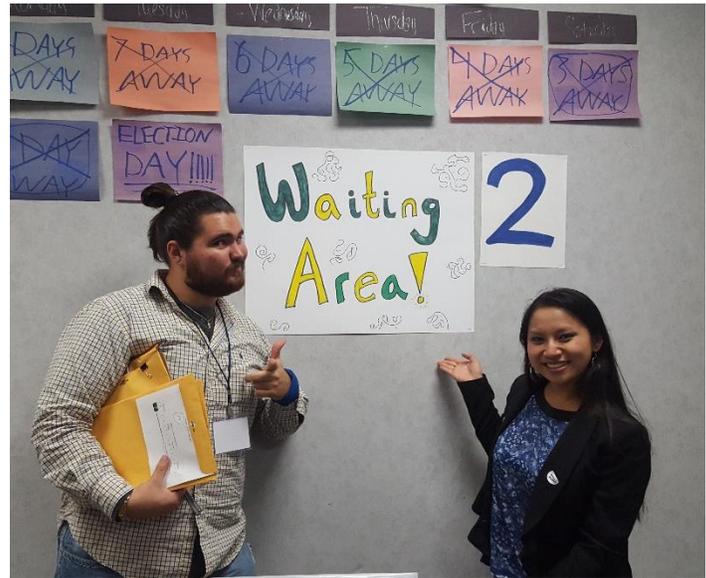
I know my luck has run out, and I will have to wait a while before I ask for any more day-long favors. I don’t think Robin realizes how much walking around knocking on strangers’ doors, sweating through long sleeve shirts, and forgoing a peaceful day in front of the television means to me. I also neglect to tell Robin how important her friendship and simple presence is to me, especially since I have been experiencing more emotional turbulence than normal. I need a friend more than ever now, and she has been here for me through it all, understanding how sad I am about breaking up with my first boyfriend, but knowing enough about me to not press too deeply regarding how I feel about it. This is why our relationship works perfectly. Robin never verbally thanks me for doing her dishes or cooking for her, but she is there when it matters most. And in return, I too, appreciate all she does for me in silence and continue to help her through my actions. Sometimes I desperately want to tell her these things, but some forms of thank you are much easier than verbal ones.

So, I dig out my orange fleece jacket and haul our Tetris pile of trash out to the dumpster (it is still Robin’s turn), and when I return Robin nods with a knowing smirk on her face. We face each other with mutual understanding and appreciation for one another, and I propose: “Let me take you to Cheddar’s Scratch Kitchen, lazy butt.”

V. Appendix



The only picture China sent my mom of me before the adoption (probably 1 year old)



Frank, my field organizer, and me on election night 2016



Mom's first tattoo in 2017 (73 years old here)



My mom and me at the hotel where we met (November 1999)

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