I Prefer the Praying Mantis

“You are an aperture through which the universe is looking at and exploring itself.”

— Alan Watts

2004 & onward

My mother and I have come here to bend spoons. We're sitting in a circle with thirteen other women on the floor of Reverend B. Anne Gehman's tiny pink Victorian in the Spiritualist village of Lily Dale, New York. It's the Reverend's Friday night spoon bending party.

"Tonight, you are capable," Reverend Anne says in a robust Virginia accent, opening up the night.

She pats her loud red hair, makes a place for herself in the circle on her floral printed rug, and begins telling us about her past jobs—locating oil in Texas fields for big companies, helping the FBI and police departments around the country find missing women and children.

In the Texas oil fields, Reverend Anne made a lot of money. She didn't need any machines to find all that oil, just the energy of her hands and the power of Spirit. She would stretch her arms out, fingers extended, and eyes closed, welcoming the earth until eventually the oil spurt up and slicked her palms.

The pentagon once asked her to bring down a plane with her mind. It was Vietnam and she was 35. Though she declined the assignment, she's confident she could have succeeded at taking down the plane. But she never would use Spirit that way. That's when she moved to Florida, where she took up real estate.

Reverend Anne pauses and rests her hands in her lap.

"You are capable. I share these stories not to brag, but rather to indicate what a human is capable of, what mysterious abilities live inside us—if we just learn how to tap into them."

The circle nods and hums in agreement.

“In order to bend metal in your hands like this—in order to do many things in life, actually—you must go inward and locate your child. Believe in it as a child would. Believe in it as you should. That child is still in you.”

I nod along too, despite my skepticism over everything Reverend Anne has to say.

She places a shoe box in the middle of the circle, opens the lid, and takes out some spoons—examples of what we are capable of. The mouths of them flattened, handles contorted. We pass them around, quietly expressing our awe, handling them as though they might break.

There’s a photographer, Shannon, spending her summer in Lily Dale and documenting the Modern Spiritualist movement. Shannon announces to the circle her intention to take photographs of the session and if we care to give her our addresses, she promises to send us pictures of whatever we might bend.

Reverend Anne reaches behind her and picks up another shoebox, dumps a pile of unbent spoons in the middle of the circle.

“Pick up the piece that speaks to you. Hold the spoon tightly and take command. Go inward to locate the light. Go inward to locate Spirit.” Reverend Anne’s words are near whisper. She leans back, closes her eyes.

“Focus and believe and the spoon will naturally follow your lead.”

My mother, sitting opposite me in the circle, is the last to take a spoon. She lets the utensil get lost in the folds of her purple denim dress for a few moments before picking it back up and placing it in her palm. Her chin sits back in her neck and her eyes narrow, as she looks down at the spoon. She doesn’t hold it with the command that Reverend Anne instructs us to hold it with and I anticipate an unbearable embarrassment—an uneasiness wrapping its way around us both.

“Close your eyes and feel the spoon. See it bending in your head. See a ball of white light. And see that light moving from your arms to the spoon.”

Reverend Anne instructs us to chant.

“Say it softly with focus. Bend, bend, bend.”

I don’t choose a spoon that speaks to me. I take the first one that my hand touches. But I do close my eyes and I do chant and so maybe that’s enough to explain the tingle in my fingers and the heat of the metal. I can’t say I find the ball of white light and the child, but I do gently work the handle of that spoon back and forth until it begins to soften and curl downward, twisting into a tight screw.

Reverend Anne shrieks, breaking the chants. We open our eyes to see her dangling a crooked spoon between two fingers and the circle breaks into applause. Reverend Anne wrinkles up her face, shrieks again. Then the whole circle shrieks.

My mother’s spoon arches slightly to the right. She smiles at nothing and nobody, just a point on the floor. Her face softens, a little less pressed into itself.

Reverend Anne settles back into place and begins talking about energy. We have warmed the spoon with energy from our body and this has allowed the metal to soften, she explains. I appreciate the anchoring of the occasion with a nod to science.

Then she loops it back to Spiritualism. “Everything in the world is made up of energy. Energy vibrating at various frequencies. While the spoon might be more solid than we are, we are capable of softening it. And while the Spirit world is less solid than we are, we can raise the frequency of our vibrations to feel them and communicate. It is all the same energy. We are all connected.”

The circle applauds again.

x

This year of the spoon bending party at Reverend Anne's house in Lily Dale, New York is the year my mother begins to do new things. She's found the Light Center Spiritual Church, advertised in the *Penny Saver*. This is the year she begins to meditate on an old velvet pillow in a corner of her spare bedroom, the year she's decided to read auras, the year my father thinks he will lose his wife after nearly 30 years, due to what he considers to be toxic distractions, imposed by her newfound passions.

My mother and I don't spend much time together, even though we only live 20 minutes apart. But my mother hasn't really spent time with anyone before this year, not that I can remember, so our not spending time together isn't extraordinary.

This is also the year she forgets my 29th birthday, which I believe to be the reason she's invited me to join her and the rest of the Light Center Spiritualist Church congregation on their long-weekend retreat to Lily Dale.

x

Years later, I know the exact date of the spoon bending party, and details like what my mother was wearing, so much of what Reverend Anne said to us, the name of the photographer who took the picture of our bent spoons and mailed them out months later, because it lives as notes in computer files I reopen in 2020. I kept a journal at Lily Dale and transcribed it into Word docs in a folder that continued living on a thumb drive that eventually got dumped into the cloud.

I will always understand that the invitation to participate in an excursion with my mother's church, even if it was intended to be a way of making up for a missed birthday, represented the stretched ends of what she was capable of. In 2004, as a means of processing it, I journaled about this deviating period of time spent with my mother. What I find years later in those notes is a project started and stopped, lugged through the years from one virtual spot to another—much as I

have lugged myself. So, while I have always believed the files of notes are valuable enough to keep, they've remained little more than a clutter of unpolished, unrealized ideas.

It was the spoon bending party at Reverend Ann's house that was the germ for the writing I never completed. The event that made me want to explore my own discomfort when my mother showed so little confidence with holding a spoon, sitting in that circle with thirteen others. It's there that I realized I had no idea who she was. That I'd never known her. It's the unpolished idea I was unequipped to do anything with. My mother invited me to do something for the first time in my life. It remains the closest she really has ever come to extending herself to me. A brief window. A bloom of time where she let me in, with little advance notice, with little explanation.

I might never be equipped to make sense of it, but I'll keep moving it around, I'll keep opening it.

x

Walking back to the Maplewood Hotel that night in 2004, chattier than usual—the spoon bending having rustled something in her—my mother begins discussing the time I'd told her a ghost had visited me. Something from when I was eight that I haven't thought of in years.

"Remind me how the story goes," I say.

"You rolled over in your bunk bed and saw the fuzzy shape of a dark-haired woman in a red dress. Then she dissolved, right there."

"I guess it could have been a dream, or maybe even you?"

"Well, children see spirits more than adults do."

"And why do you think that is?" I ask.

She laughs. “The dead are trying to get back to us and to get back they need open channels. And children are open. Life hasn’t caught up to them yet.”

1848 & onward

American Spiritualism begins when two young sisters named Kate and Maggie Fox hear a rapping coming from the walls of their family home in Hydesville, New York. Theory is, it's the spirit of a murdered peddler, Charles B. Rosna, rumored to be buried under the foundation of the house. Very quickly, the Fox Sisters learn to determine the patterns of the raps, equating them to the letters of the alphabet—a precursor to the Ouija board. Neighbors visit daily to witness the Fox Sisters decode the words of Charles the murdered peddler. And eventually, other spirits begin to visit the house. Spirits of dead neighbors come back to rap and thump out messages for their living loved ones. And this attracts even more visitors to the Fox house, in search of raps and thumps that might be addressed to them. And then even more come, and even more come, from further and further away.

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The National Spiritualist Association's official website defines Spiritualism as "the Science, Philosophy, and Religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit World." A Medium is described as "one whose organism is sensitive to vibrations from the spirit world and through whose instrumentality, intelligences in that world are able to convey messages and produce the phenomena of Spiritualism."

At the crux of Spiritualism are messages from the dead—messages we can receive if we are open and sensitive enough to receive them. Anyone and everyone has this ability inside of them, as long as they put in the work to learn how. And so, a Spiritualist is more than a churchgoer. They are a student, learning to cultivate their sensitivity to vibrations, sharpening their abilities to practice mediumship.

But it's not just that. The website lists a whole slew of phenomenon that first took root during the mid-1800s, when modern American Spiritualism came to be: "Prophecy, Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, Gift of Tongues, Laying on of Hands, Healing, Visions, Trance, Apports,

Levitation, Raps, Automatic and Independent Writings and Paintings, Voice, Materialization, Photography, Psychometry and any other manifestation proving the continuity of life as demonstrated through the Physical and Spiritual senses and faculties of man."

The website's FAQ says that yes, a Spiritualist can believe in Jesus and follow the Bible but "Spiritualism is not a branch of Christianity or other major religion. Spiritualism has been recognized by the US Congress as a separate and distinct religion."

So, it's a bit about Jesus, but it's a lot about Spirits—of which there are three defined types:

Type 1: "Those who are so bound to earth conditions that they will try to come in contact and communicate with it through any avenue they find available."

Type 2: "Those who are naturally attracted to us by the ties of relationship and the laws of love."

Type 3: "Those advanced and developed Spirits who return from the higher spheres of life in the Spirit world, filled with a Holy Love for Humanity, for the purpose of guiding and leading mankind into higher knowledge and further light."

Also important to the Spiritualist Church's definition of Spirit:

"There is no indication of a spirit that was not at one time a living human."

"There is no such thing as an evil spirit, only poor, ignorant, and unenlightened souls who have also lived on the earth plane. They are, however, no worse than mankind has sent them into the Spirit World, and they are still our Brothers and Sisters."

2004

What my mother teaches me.

1. *Psychic* is the wrong word— the worst word for describing the work of a Spiritualist. People who communicate with the dead are *mediums*.

2. We all have the ability to be *mediums* not *psychics*.

2020

The pandemic is here and with it, all the raw nerves. All the unpacked ugliness. And while this won't be a cancer story (and it won't really be a pandemic story either—not really), this is when my father, my mother's husband of 46 years, finally dies after a long, long dying (September 19, 2020, downstairs in the 'man cave' on a hospice bed, an old western rambling over the oxygen hiss).

This story gets born out of many darknesses. Many attempts to unroot, realign, in a brighter space. Something has to grow upward and out of it.

x

I sift through the words in the Word doc files.

Spoon bending party. I am the imposter.

My mother's discomfort is uncomfortable. I anticipated an unbearable embarrassment—an uneasiness wrapping its way around us both, the way she pressed into herself.

Could this be part of a larger grand scheme to get over on people, to convince people of something they want to believe in? An overwhelming institution of charlatans to betray the vulnerable, the lonely, the people still searching for hope, for themselves?

I suppress a defensive smirk, not wanting to expose myself as the non-believer I am.

But in place of that smirk, how do I carry myself?

x

I haven't taken up too many pandemic hobbies but one of my distractions from the many kinds of grieving is reading physics books. I fail to understand them for the most part, the content too dense, the words mostly impenetrable. But I like how small it makes me feel. I don't mind how unsurmountable the sentences are. It reminds me of wandering museums—glass cases of ancient objects, oxidizing pendants, coins, mummies, artifacts looming. My irrelevance in these spaces is a comfortable blanket.

And this is the year I start writing again, following the birth of W. I'm finally moving past the whiplash that comes with new parenting, just past the phase of grappling with the losses that mothering brings and arriving at that place where what got cast off, what remains of it at least, can be picked up and dusted off. That repossession of first, body, and then language and customs. I don't write in a ferocious way, but it's something. I'm doing it despite that pile of griefs and the crushing task of parenting a toddler and the act is a shining blip.

The pandemic is appointing me a stay-at-home mother. One of those privileged mothers who choose to cut back their salary hours at a decent job for the sake of health and safety. W's preschool has shuttered, in the middle of his language explosion, in the middle of pottie training. I'm privileged that there's a partner to rely on (he's just gotten tenure, so it'll be me instead of him). I'm privileged that there's a little more time—that weirdly unhinged time that comes with such a year—to write, to read physics books, to relish my smallness, to look flatly at the air in the room.

x

You are capable.

Bend bend bend.

Go inward and locate the light.

Write. Get over it.

Bend bend bend.

What's sticking of the physics books. Not much other than: we are just particles and light. I've always liked that thing about us being stars.

1879 & onward

The village of Spiritualists, where my mother's church, like Spiritualist churches across America, will take an annual pilgrimage, is incorporated as Cassadaga Lake Free Association. Eventually it will be known as Lily Dale. Originally Seneca land, deep in a virgin forest of hemlocks, along Cassadaga Lake, white settlers claim it as a haven for free thinkers, when America is raw from the Civil War, from cholera, from mothers and babies dying in childbirth.

The formal narrative says that Spiritualism makes sense for the time. There is death but there are scientific advancements, too, like the invention of the telegram, shrinking the world and making everything quicker. Both life and death escalate—leaving so much to explore and to lose.

Lily Dale is the hub of it all. Those three types of spirits, all the Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, and Gift of Tongues. A hamlet of slate-writing mediums and materializing mediums and trumpet mediums. But also, a last stop before Canada on the underground railroad. A regular spot for Susan B. Anthony, who, while not a convert herself, establishes herself as an ally of Spiritualists who help fund the suffragist movement. Mae West spends time at Lily Dale, too. And Buddhists. But mostly it's a village of mediums. Mediums delivering messages from the dead through slim silver trumpets, mediums writing messages in chalk on slates or on the street itself, mediums delivering inspirational messages at the inspirational stump—the remnants of a massive fallen pine—to those who come from all over to receive the words of their dead. They come for messages, but also for the *Laying on of Hands, Healing, Visions, Trance*, any number of balms to help mend the wounds of grief.

In the earliest days of the seasonal camp, admission to the grounds is 10 cents, and 75 cents per day for a room in the Maplewood Hotel. An advert for Lily Dale from 1881 says "Come bring tents, enjoy nature and learn immortality.*"*

Lily Dale's official newsletter, *The Banner of Light*, describes the place as being full of "magnificent cottages and emerald foliage."

x

And they will continue to come through the decades. By 2019 the daily fee will stand at $15—with about 22,000 visitors annually. The inspirational stump will still be there. And plenty of photos of Anthony and West. In 2021, Wikipedia will say there are 272 registered mediums of the National Spiritualism Association of Churches with residences at Lily Dale. To be registered means passing rigorous tests to prove one's abilities for the Lily Dale Board, just as it has since the 1800s. In 21st century Lily Dale there will be a gift store that sells crystals and dream catchers, a museum, and café. On Sundays, as was always the case, the admission fee will be waived for church services that take place around the inspirational stump. On Sunday the messages of the dead have always come for free.

1891

An August 29th article in the *Banner of Light* describes Susan B. Anthony's appearance at Lily Dale on Women's Day.

Saturday, August 15th was one of the most glorious days known in the history of Cassadaga. Cottages all over the grounds were embowered in evergreens and flowers and star-spangled banners floated from verandahs and balconies like bevies of bright – winged happy birds and the golden emblems of wisdom, and the oncoming golden era when women as well as man shall place her hand upon the helm of state were twined about the pillars and festooned overarching windows balconies and doorways.

It was estimated that from 5,000 - 6,000 were present. A banner in gold and blue bearing the device "LILY DALE GREETINGS TO POLITICAL EQUALITY."

The song "Wyoming" dedicated to honor Susan B. Anthony, was sung by the large and excellent choir upon the platform. Miss Anthony was introduced and spoke relative to her work.

2004

The Spiritualist who looks me up and down and says I have a wonderful and rich journey ahead. What does she see? Where can I go to see what she sees?

1975 & onward

I’m born. It’s been barely a year since my mother and father met. My mother, a woman hardly into her twenties, no longer has a profession.

My parents met on an Army base in Hawaii, shortly after serving in Vietnam. My mother worked as a typist and my dad a spy. She quits to stay at home with me, and then has my sister six years later. My father stays in the Army for 20 years. And the family ping-pongs between Massachusetts and Germany, making a career for her difficult even if she wants it. I’ll be in high school when she gets her first of a string of minimum wage jobs, working at a dry cleaner. As an adult, after having my own child, I’ll learn it was my father’s decision for her to leave the army, because he didn't want my sister and I “raised by others.” I don’t know if she ever felt the same about the decision to stay home. I’ve never asked because I’m not sure I want to know.

x

The mother at home with the child. It’s such a tired idea. My mother has been that in title only, her body present and mind absent. I don’t consider until much later in life that maybe she just wasn’t built for the exhaustion of the job. That maybe if she’d lived more of her own life, held a title beyond mother of small children or wife, she might have been more present in the time that she was there.

2017

I’m pregnant and discovering certain traits of my mother in myself (as I will, increasingly so, reluctantly so, as the years roll on and accumulate). Much of it shows up in the shape of my face in the morning mirror. I’m aging into something reminiscent of her. But no matter all that, where we fork apart is where we acquire a good part of what defines us as adults—motherhood. My pregnancy is a well measured and premeditated choice. In lead up there were vitamins, period tracking apps and avocados. Expensively co-paid scans of my uterus inspected for any barriers to conception, which led to the detection of a cyst that got swiftly cleared away. I’m 40 and just now deciding I am finally a responsible enough person to parent. I’d given myself until 41 to make it happen. If it did, it did. And if it hadn’t, I told myself I’d plot a long trip to Morocco.

No matter how much of my mother I may see in the mirror, I promise myself that we’ll never have parenting styles in common.

1980s

My mother doesn't learn to drive a car until I'm in elementary school. My mother dusts the house with a rage in her silent face and haste in her hands. My mother locks herself in the bathroom on Christmas mornings. These are things I don't understand but they're the fabric of how I experience her.

x

We are under no obligation to understand our parents. We are offspring. We have sprung off. But, if we're lucky, time can dull some of those sharp-edged resentments that bat around in younger versions of us. And with the dullness comes an ability to not take it all so personally.

1986

My mother is laying on a bed in a German guesthouse, reading a romance novel, shaking her foot. My father has just been reassigned to Germany, some sort of intelligence operative, doing things he isn't allowed to talk about.

This is our second time moving to Germany and I want the adventure of living in a foreign country, but due to some administrative hiccup, we've arrived without access to the usual runty box of a house on a military base. For weeks we've been living in a single room in a guest house in downtown Stuttgart. While my father goes to work, my mother, sister and I stay in the room—my mother on the bed reading romance novels, tapping her foot. Me, sitting in the window, staring at a neighboring balcony, some clothes pinned to a clothesline.

My mother, a whole undisclosed universe, always stays on that bed until my father returns in the evenings and takes us downstairs to the bar for a meal. I resent her more than ever before. I resent her shaking foot.

My mother's often shaking her foot on the periphery of a scene, most often at social events. And I hate it. Toes pointed in perfect metered rhythm, a sour look on her face. I'm jealous of those with calm-limbed mothers, their easy expressions, their fluid words.

2020

I've been thinking about that guesthouse in Germany, and it occurred to me that maybe she had been told to keep us there in that room, that perhaps she too wanted something different. Regardless, I'm coming to understand these days that she's no different from any of us. She is, as much as any of us, composed of parts to resent as well as revere.

x

The pandemic tells us to stay apart, especially stay away from a cancer patient. I can't do anything beyond call my parents on the phone. Rarely does my mother call me. One day she does, though, and there is a low rumbling in her voice. It's anger. My father has just been taken away in an ambulance again. Something's happened with his catheter, and he's pissed and shit all over the floor. This is how I learn he has a catheter. This is how I learn how heavy the weight of responsibility is for my mother and how angry it's leaving her. My mother must tend to the catheter, and she'll only tell me now because this is how broken she has become. Broken enough to let things explode from the cracks.

I offer a simple, useless, "I'm sorry."

And I am sorry. I'm sorry she's out there on her own, at every step of his ugly steep decline, doing the hard work with no reward and no other hands-on deck. I'm sorry it took this for her to be comfortable showing me her rage. I'm sorry she has to do it alone. I'm sorry I'll never know just how wounded she'll be left.

2022

It's easy to mother poorly, I know this now. Every hour presents a new way to mother wrong. At lunch with a friend, we discuss the topic because we are preoccupied with the traumas we've accumulated from our mothers. Among the things we have in common is that we've both recently decided in our middle years that our mothers are responsible for all our little built-up traumas.

My friend likes to talk about how he'll never be a father and has always known he'd never be a father, but only recently came to realize, after two years of therapy, that it's because he never wants to love anything that much. He's this way because his mother traumatized him, and because she was traumatized, too.

Our mothers have different brands of bad mothering but the maladaptation we've acquired consist of similar lexicons. We're hard to reach people, and this synchs us up in a mutually dodgy way. We're a tribe of two who accept the disconnect between us. A tribe that needs space apart but will always be there for each other when we surface, should we need to surface.

Over cups of crab soup my friend agrees it's easy to mother poorly and father poorly, too, but he adds, confidently, it's also easy to parent well. He thinks the bar is naturally low. I don't know if I agree, because just four days before this conversation, I stood in my laundry room and unleashed on my three-year-old a scream dragged up from a dark well I didn't know was there. A terrible animal failure-mother scream.

Growing up, my mother never screamed but she did lock herself in the bathroom. She did dash across rooms to flee through front doors sobbing. She was more a shrinking and feral animal than one full of primal rage.

There is something on mom-twitter where women are expressing how they don't like mothering. The pandemic has drawn this out of us, like a puncture on a tight surface, the hot air finally flying out. I won't go that far, though. I understand it, but it's not me. I don't like the idea of

throwing my hands up and saying I dislike the job. Because I do like the job, even if it seems impossible to do well. Kind of like writing. Kind of like anything that has you waking up every morning with your heart violently batting around in your throat.

Above all else, it wouldn't have benefited me if my mother had proclaimed to the world in a viral way that she didn't like being a mother. It just would have made this steep climb all the steeper.

x

You are capable.

Bend bend bend.

Go inward and locate the light.

1852 & onward & backward

A flying bird-man-creature, who will come to be known as Mothman, is said to be responsible for the collapsing of the Ohio River's Silver Bridge, killing 46. My mother has never opened up much about what it was like growing up in Nelsonville, Ohio, but she has always shared stories like Mothman—otherworldly tales of the Ohio River Valley, where she lived until age 18. The Valley is a world bolstered by the legends of beasts. Cryptids who roam the foothills of the Appalachians. Orange eyed, hairy, frog faced. The region is home to the Southeastern Ohio Society for Bigfoot Investigation, dedicated to unlocking the mystery of the ape-man, who my grandfather—my mother's father—always claimed lived in a cave deep in the woods behind his property. According to him, the ape-man routinely howled in the night. The Society traces the region's first Bigfoot sighting back to 1869 when a father and his daughter, traveling in their carriage, are attacked by a hairy "wild man" who eventually is scared away when the daughter throws a rock at its head.

I think my mother's favorite southern Ohio story is Mothman, but I like the one about Jonathan Koons—a 19th century fiddle playing farmer, who builds a seance cabin on his land, atop Mt. Nebo, per the specs that the spirits advise him to follow: 12 x 14 feet, three windows, one door and a 7-foot ceiling. Once the cabin is complete, the spirits leave a note on a table with a list of all the instruments they will need to fill the cabin for the seances to be successful. A former Presbyterian, Koons moves to Athens County, Ohio from Pennsylvania in 1835 on a spiritualist quest. The cabin will not survive but the internet will make clear that 21st Century locals boast it as being the most haunted place on earth.

And then there are stories about faith healers, herb doctors, those who pull water up from the ground with a forked stick. My mother's people dragged potent 19th century traditions across the Atlantic and down into the Valley. I've often heard about my great grandfather, my grandmother's father, who was a faith healer. The most repeated anecdote involves him cupping his hands around my uncle's two-year-old face, curing his earache and fever in an instant.

In a family of people who do not vocally revere each other, my great grandfather is the outlier—the one individual my mother has never shied away from celebrating. Shortly after he died, my mother says she believes he came back to visit. She felt a hand on her shoulder, while standing in the kitchen. This, she relays to me in Lily Dale, is how she knows the dead are not so far away—how she knows they stick around to comfort us.

1971 & onward

My mother is the only one of five children to move away. It will take many years but eventually I'll come to see this as remarkable. She graduates high school and decides she'd rather be in Vietnam than Nelsonville—a town, where, if you don't work the mines you likely work in the shoe factory and when the mines shut down you will work the strip mines and when the shoe factory closes up you will work at the Walmart.

She tells me she had two choices in front of her. Either stay in Nelsonville and work at the shoe factory or move to Colorado and work in a can factory, where her uncle had recently taken a job. What's funny is how, when she tells this story, she doesn't underscore the fact that she chose a completely different third option.

That she'd prefer being an army clerk in a war zone to any other option should have alerted me that our family trips to Ohio might have been more complicated for her than she let on. In my adult life, those family trips long over, she's only returned twice—once to bury her mother and once to bury a sister-in-law.

"Why do you think you were the only one to leave?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. "It's just boring there."

And maybe that's all it ever has been. Maybe she just craved more, like any 18-year-old would. But I've always assumed something festers just under the surface.

2002

I've just found a picture of my parents in the bottom of a drawer at their house and I'm going to take it to keep in my apartment. On the back is written *1974 Oahu*. In the picture they're wearing similarly patterned floral shirts. They sit on a yellow bean bag chair on a brown shag carpet, hold beer cans and cigarettes, or maybe joints. My mother's hair is longer and blonder than I have ever known it to be and her teeth are crooked, not yet having worn braces. Based on the year, I know they've just met and that I'm just months away from being conceived.

I'm going to keep this picture as recognition of the happy couple they were. And as a reminder of how swiftly such happiness can disappear.

I never met the woman in this picture—the woman that married too soon, got pregnant too quickly after falling in love, quit being young too early.