

Mouthfuls of Metal

My name is Raven, named for “The Raven” by Poe on account of my mom’s immersion in her gothic phase. But that doesn’t help you much, does it? It may help if names had denotations not just connotations. Then my name would tell you all about me. With just my name, you could take the place of my grandma in her ginger-colored 1960s brick abode in Waco, Texas: she watched me walk under our kitchen table when I was two and still has coffee at that table every morning. Or, choose the vantage point of my grandpa, a man who sat me upon his knee to read me passages from the Bible that I was too young to understand—I just liked the words. I liked the way ‘Abraham’ sounded abrupt initially but softened towards the end and you could say it all in one breath like a sigh of relief. Ah, now you know something, don’t you? But it’s not because of anecdotal evidence about me. For, I cannot begin to tell you about my life and the beliefs I’ve adopted until I tell you about the people I esteem above all those I have ever known. I cannot speak of myself in a way in which you’ll understand until you understand where I came from—until you know those who built me—and know them as deeply as I do. Maybe then you’ll know me as I do. We cannot understand our present in absence of analysis of the past.

My grandfather was born what’s called a ‘blue baby.’ He unlike, his twin brother, had experienced an umbilical cord that wound about his neck, tethering him to his mother in more ways than one. The part of his brain responsible for reasoning was damaged at birth, and he never did satisfactorily in school. His father, Lester, was a solemn ex-Amish man who had his own scars from his upbringing like we all do. But that didn’t stop him from imprinting scars onto my grandfather.

Lester would roar at him to pick his own switch from the trees, beating and insulting him. And maybe those words stung more than the harsh whip of the wood: “Why can’t you be like your brother—or your sisters? Anyone other than who you are?”

His mom never stopped the abuse but seemed kinder than his father. Once, in their barn, she delicately informed my grandfather he would never be more than “a dumb farm boy”. I don’t think she meant it maliciously—she was just giving her son the only guidance she knew to give: her version of the truth, her prediction of a realistic future: **one smothered by Youngstown, Ohio’s drenched air and fenced in by towering pines whose needles prodded you back in if you tried to leave.**

Lester was killed in an accident at work when his son was sixteen. Whether my papa viewed this twisted tragedy as a blessing, I wouldn’t know. I wouldn’t blame him—would you? Probably not, but people, when all is said and done, seem more than their partial malpractices. Can we judge someone from one wicked deed or are they the sum of all the actions they’ve completed thus far? Or, are people more than their actions?

Perhaps, my papa looked upon the event as an opportunity. Lester had never properly cared for my papa’s teeth. My papa had all but four of them pulled early on. For a man that wasn’t technically qualified to make a forward-thinking decision, he seemed to have no trouble deciding to uproot his past.

Going forward in his life and looking back on my own, my papa was the kindest person I have ever known. He never said a hurtful word about anyone except **President Obama, or ‘the nation’s mistake’ as he so often grumbled.** In Waco, Texas, where I’m from, there is a knife and taxidermy shop called Jernigan’s. My papa wanted nothing more than a knife from Jernigan’s—he thought the shop the epitome of craftsmanship. However, having suffered his own work-

related injury that gifted him a lifelong reliance on pension, he could never afford any of the coveted merchandise.

But that didn't stop him from looking. One day, we went to Jernigan's. My papa perused the yellowing glass cases, running his thumb along long silver blades and showing me how they glinted in the shop's fluorescent lights. After less than an hour, my papa stopped dreaming. He thanked the elderly shop owner for his time and said he'd have to come back. My papa smiled his shy denture smile and blushed from his dimples to his temples as he turned to leave.

The man behind the counter erupted, his jowls shaking with his words: "Get your sorry ass out of my store! You didn't even buy anything! Don't come back."

I, in my six years upon the earth, had never known more fury. Tears streaming down my own reddened face, I yelled back: "Don't you dare talk to him that way! He's always liked this store, but you're just mean."

And with that, we walked silently to the car. We never did go back to Jernigan's. It wasn't due to the old guy's demand or monetary matters, but why fund cruelty?

My papa much enjoyed the simple things in life. A midnight snack connoisseur, he would often wake up with a peanut butter sandwich plastered to his back. On Sundays, he made pot roast in his crockpot and, even though I never much cared for roast beef and potatoes, I still ate a bowlful of salt-and-pepper seasoned roast every Sunday.

The one extravagant decision my papa made was moving to Florida to get to know a son he'd never really known. When I visited him two years before his passing, he took me to A1A, a strip of land by the ocean where the concrete kisses the sunset. **We took goofy pictures there; it was always difficult to convince my grandpa to turn his innate apathy into a smile.** My papa favored two aspects about West Palm Beach, Florida: watching the palm trees sway in the wind

and seeing the airplanes take off by the water. Simple pleasures. At least on the surface. For, whether he wished he was on passenger on those planes or shared in the joy of others arriving home, I'll never know.

But one thing I do know is that not all is what it seems. As lighthearted as my papa's life was, it had dark patches. For a selfless man, he once entertained a very selfish thought. My grandparents had just placed my mother in a children's home. Dwelling on their shortcomings as parents, my grandma proposed a solution: murder-suicide. My papa, as I'm sure you now know, hadn't the capacity to take any life, so it was decided that my grandma would shoot him and then herself.

Here lies the privilege in being a reader. You are more aware of someone's life than they are. As I write to you, you can correctly surmise that my grandma and grandpa didn't follow through with their plan. Luckily, you get to live someone's life for them through the eyes of someone else and get to speculate about their thoughts, their beliefs. You get, simultaneously, the mystery and the results: the story of stories.

Yet, how can we be sure of their truth? I first heard this secret before the two-year mark of my papa's passing. The secret and the day of its reveal danced as old friends: a stifling sentence slipped like silk against last June's humid chest. A persona briefly summed up and drastically changed by words from my grandmother's mouth, my papa could neither confirm or deny the tale. While living, he never mentioned this dark moment to anyone. And, how could he? For a man who had never been unkind to anyone, would you believe him if he had said he'd once been unkind to himself?

You may be aghast at how such a pairing even evolved: a man of soft flannel, dimples, and peppermints coupled with a lady seemingly so unfeeling as to take multiple lives and leave her only child an orphan. How could suede meet sandpaper? And you'd be right to wonder. But, let me explain: sometimes people become a product of their past.

My grandma's childhood was a mouthful of metal and old skin invading fresh flesh. Her tyrannical father threatened to kill them regularly and forced her and her siblings to watch as he beat their mother to near-fatality.

Fast-forward fifteen years later and my grandma works tending African violets, helping her mom, a registered nurse who cares for an elderly wealthy man, Mr. Sandburn.

Mr. Sandburn had only two loves he held higher than his nurse: Schulenberg steaks and his fortune. Now, he didn't earn his fortune in the typical American way of business or entrepreneurship but a way that is, unfortunately, just one method of those who possess an unreasonably large sum of money: immorality.

Immediately following the Great Depression, Mr. Sandburn wandered around to the newly widowed women, offering them a small sum for their land. The women, desperate to provide for their children, took the offer and, thus, Mr. Sandburn accumulated a vast amount of land for next to nothing. To further profit, he leased out the land to cattle farmers and turned the uneaten cattle food into hay.

Despite his method of securing his income, he wanted to leave its entirety to his cherished nurse. His family hadn't visited him or cared for him in his old age. So why would he offer them his money after his passing? But, as we know, people expect what isn't theirs to take.

His family made a game of terrifying my grandparents and their young daughter, my mother. Once, when their car was having some trouble, my grandparents visited a mechanic in

Bay City. The mechanic returned, shocked, and posed a question no one ever wants to hear: “Do you know anyone who would hurt you?”

One option blared in their minds. Mr. Sandburn’s children had installed a bomb underneath the car. Any more movement on the car’s part would activate the bomb, killing its occupants and leaving the fortune bare to its rightful heirs.

So, my grandma did all she could think to do: drop my mom, now eight years old, off in safety, a children’s home set on sprawling land with five red brick mansions circling the chapel and a river running through its downhill acres. Why do I speak of this scenery with familiarity and comfort? Well, this is where my story begins.

I was fifteen, on the lower end of ninety pounds, and was in that stage of teenage misunderstanding where one thinks the only ones who don’t understand are literally everyone else.

I had fought with my grandma for the last time; **I was exhausted of hearing of my shortcomings, getting words thrown at me like swords, and balancing the delicate tasks of cowering in corners and walking on eggshells. I’d put up our Christmas tree. Its heirloom ornaments danced with the glowing lights like the crystal prisms you hang in sunlit windows. My grandma even let me have my big present that Christmas Eve: a makeup palette filled with all of the essential powders and concoctions to ensure a pretty face. I was pleasantly surprised, but hesitant to define this Christmas as a good Christmas. It wasn’t over yet. The next morning validated my doubts. Waking up, I’d opened my new palette and perused its contents. That morning, you may have mistaken me for a Christmas tree: glittery eyeshadow met ruby cheeks**

and even redder lips. My grandma's footsteps marched towards my door where they ended in silence.

"You are so ungrateful!" She said, her flared nostrils marking the beginning of yet another battle. She snatched the palette from me, saying she was taking it back to the store. I was stunned. Was it because I'd dared to specify that I had wanted it? Was it because I'd already used it? Bringing the latter to her attention proved of no avail. "And take down the Christmas tree," she snarled. Her face was red and trembling. "We're not having Christmas."

I ran to my doorway, my sharp steps a fuel for the wooden floor's creaks. "No!" I yelled. My own fury was ignited. "I worked hard on that tree." As she turned towards me, I realized my flame was mismatched against her inferno. No words were necessary. Her nostrils flared, but her ruby face was a contrast against her glacial, onyx eyes. That coldness was the only thing that chilled this Hell. I silently pulled down the Christmas tree. Nothing lively could survive this purgatory.

Christmas had ended before it begun, but I spent the next two weeks of my Christmas break with my papa. Now that school was starting again, my grandma called to tell me she was planning to come and bring me back home.

So, I did what any overdramatic (but very reasonable teenager) would do. I called the cops. My grandma lived about five blocks from my grandpa's apartment. Less than a minute for the decision, and only a couple more for the phone call. I locked the bathroom door. Seconds passed quickly, and their weight almost drowned me. I was terrified of the phone call but more terrified of the alternative. Breath rapid and shallow, I dialed my secreted flip phone with numb fingers. The worn, blue smiley-face sticker on its front seemed out of place amongst the anxious air. I'd bothered to look up the non-emergency number for the Waco Police Department, but my

trembling fingers wished I'd stuck to the three simple digits 9-1-1. A woman answered the phone. Throat dry and tongue slick, I explained the situation, saying I'd appreciate police officers there for support.

Ten minutes later, a police officer in my bedroom provided a solution: live in the local children's home. In an instant, I consented. A long night, some borrowed clothes, and a cop car ride later, I arrived.

All my belongings stacked in the back of a suburban, I looked at the red brick houses towering above me. They all looked exactly the same—how would I ever find my house after walking around?

My caseworker laughed and explained that each house had a name. Ours was called 'Mamie,' after the woman who donated for its construction. Dorothy lied behind Mamie, and Prothro and Bridwell hugged either side of my new home. "Mamie has palm trees." She informed me of a detail I hadn't yet taken in. Palm trees. For some reason they felt like home. She showed me each room and introduced me to where I'd sleep for the night: a sprawling room with two twin beds, dark green carpet, and a few pictures tacked to the white walls.

I was told later I looked like a deer in the headlights for the first week. My caseworker reassured me, "It's like one big slumber party here. Soon, you'll be friends with everybody in the house."

I couldn't respond. I just nodded, overwhelmed and tired.

Since I didn't want yet another long night, I needed a shower. Immediately. I realize I didn't have any towels and decided I'd dry off with the hand towel hanging from the metal bar attached to the white and green tiled wall. I glanced at my body in the mirror, the harsh lighting accenting each vertebrae of my spine, my prominent hip bones. All my bones jutted out like they

were begging for attention. The hand towel would do; it wasn't like there was much to dry anyway.

Just two weeks without my grandma's influence or unwanted opinions filled me with a calming peace; at last I could focus. I produced original songs and records with a friend I made at the home and joined their Praise Team.

The chapel stood on a hill in the middle of campus. Its green carpets, stained glass depictions of Biblical figures, and stage soon became my happy place. Shy and with a song in my heart, I first sang for Pastor Ahmad, a children's home pastor and Christian rapper. Later on, before a housemate and I sang *Amazing Grace* at Carols and Candles, the campus' Christmas celebration, Pastor Ahmad said that he never would have expected my voice to come from someone so quiet: "It's like you have an angel harbored in your throat." With growing confidence and a growing faith, I sang at church almost every Sunday. Words to my favorite worship song reigned true: "You say that I am free/ How can it be?" Accustomed to a childhood of darkness and fear, how was it that I had found peace and home here? Through Grace, religion was no longer used to condemn but to uplift and inspire.

Fueled with my new religion and life, I wrote enough poems to fill a book. I lost all of my writing later on, but that's alright—who would give up an opportunity to rewrite the past?

I graduated high school in three and a half years total. I'd brought myself here. When my mom hadn't been present and put substances over a substantial relationship with her daughter, my grandma had done her best to raise me. But I'd done the rest myself.

And I continued to make my own decisions. I told a boy I'd known for two months I loved him and promised to move in with him when I turned eighteen.

A fairy tale, right? Well, Sheldon didn't play the part of Prince Charming for long. The fingertips that once caressed me made long, winding bruises where he'd grip my arms in our arguments. My first collection of bruises originated six months after we proposed our love for each other.

He called me names, and I was soon more likely to answer to those names than my own. He'd had a favorite childhood cousin who's passed away from cancer. In memory of this cousin, he'd made two sets of dog tags—one he placed in the grave and one he wore ceaselessly. Since he loved me, it was only right that I wore those dog tags he said. Until it wasn't. In the middle of our first winter, we stopped at a gas station, our roommate Tyler taking up space in the back of Sheldon's suburban. In response to something I'd said, Sheldon erupted. "You piece of shit! You don't deserve to wear Taylor's shit around your fucking neck. Take off the engagement ring—take it off!" I cried big, blubbing tears that I had held in for so long. Later, I calmly told Sheldon that it was okay for him to say such things to me, but I wished he wouldn't do it in front of other people.

This sense of self-neglect pervaded. It was almost as if I welcomed the isolation he created for me. He was the only one who cared about me, after all. My name felt foreign—I was either 'baby' or 'piece of shit,' and the designation depended on the second. Soon, other people felt foreign to me too. I'd forgotten there was a world beyond the one I was caged within.

Three seems to be my magic number. I lived in the children's home for three years, and it took me three subsequent years to realize my worth and leave him. My papa died three days before a procedure that would have saved his life. Perhaps it was after his death that I circled my nails around Sheldon's dashboard and said, "You didn't let me talk to him and now he's dead. He's dead. I can never talk to him again. Ever. How do you feel about that?" We had been

together about two-and-a-half years now and were sitting in a Walmart parking lot before shopping for groceries. I'd expected a long conversation and felt grateful we only had that grocery trip planned for the night.

He responded. "At least you got to talk to him sometimes." That was it. The kindest soul I'd ever known disgraced and disregarded by one of the cruelest. I wish I could say this is that turning point where I walked out and never came back. But I'd be lying. It took over a year past that conversation in the car. Over a year of more wasted time. Over a year of lied "I-love-you's," silent speeches that spoke more than we ever could, and promises to change—but even the most blissful future couldn't erase the past. The bruises were gone, but my body was damaged where the purple marks once lied. Now, hindsight proves that no time is wasted—setbacks only launch you farther into the future. Even curses are a lesson if you let them be.

Two months before I left Sheldon and almost two years prior to the present, I decided to find the world I'd lost and go and finish college. Pay homage to my papa and take classes by the sea in Corpus Christi. Maybe I'd like the way the concrete held the sunset here, too, and maybe palm trees would still feel like home. I would learn to write better, so I could better tell all these stories that lead to craft my own. Learn to write the big things smaller and the small things bigger. Isn't that life—finding lessons in the details? I guess that's one thing Sheldon taught me: sometimes dull patches litter the bright, but even darkness gleans light:

I was 17, impatiently aching for the day I could finally move in with this newfound romance. We ate strawberries in those brief moments straddled by the darkness. The laughter streamed from our bellies and engulfed our sides as the deep red juice ran its course down our

bodies. Sheldon would hold one for me to taste, and I'd gingerly bite off the tip before offering the rest to him. He'd grab my hips, and I'd giggle as he dripped the strawberry seeds towards more daring locales. I squealed at the sudden chill.

He wrapped both arms around me, protecting me. He ran his nose tauntingly from my hips to my neck. His embrace was flames and he was my fire. I barely had time to revel in his hug as he quickly tipped me so far back off the bed that I was gripping the dresser for support.

"Trust me," he breathed. And I did. He silenced my weak protests and tipped me all the way back, his arms forming both my castle and my cage. That's when he'd lift me back up and croon that I was okay, he had me the entire time, and he'd never do anything to hurt me, honest.

The strawberries had actually appeared because he'd hurt my feelings, but I figured those mean words were simply a temporary breach of character. I loved them—the berries. Not just for their sweet taste, as some were bruised and tasted a little darker than their tart, bright red counterparts.

I didn't mind the dull patches because that's how we are, too: a bright, explosive, passionate red with some softer, darker places mixed in. We were those berries. They were us. More than that, those berries were life. Sometimes what we're not expecting takes up the most space in our limited memory.

I'm talented at existing in the past, replaying "what if's" and "could-have-been's." The present is rougher to compose, and the future sometimes sounds disharmonious to the ear. But, isn't right now just assimilated memories—how can we know who we are if we can't make sense of where we've been? Sometimes, we learn who we are when people tell us.

“You’re my favorite,” Shaun laughs as I slide across his kitchen floor in my socks. Sometimes I think my smile shines brighter than the bottled light hanging from the ceiling. At least it does when I’m with him.

“You’re my favorite, too.” I stretch up to meet his lips. He has a foot and half on me and grips my waist to pull me to him.

“I meant to say you’re my second favorite. Right behind myself, of course.” He grins, his broad and perfect teeth glinting in the light. I am endeared by his cocky sense of humor.

“Oh, shut up,” I blush and take a swig of my hard blackberry lemonade, and run my tongue across my gritty teeth.

In him, I’ve found the one person I can’t put down on paper. A person who is more than nouns and adjectives that describe him: intelligent, stimulating, the best friend of a brain surgeon. Shaun is an atheist that says he doesn’t believe in much but tells me he believes in us. His arms form my castle and cocoon, and he traces my body like he’s found religion. My papa’s ashes hang in a silver ichthys around my neck, and he’s never argued against it. This night, laced with alcohol, may prove one of his favorites: he likes drinking a little too much, but the alcohol frees words from his mind and songs from his lips, so I’ll take it. He sleeps late and buys me flowers and holds me like he’s trying to permanently weld our bodies together. And I have to tell you I don’t think I’d mind.

Earlier this year, before I bought my first and after I decided to move to Corpus Christi, Shaun offered to take me home if I ever got tired of waiting for my mom to pick me up from the electronics store where we worked. I thanked him but didn’t think of it again until later.

From my vantage point in our deserted electronics store, I couldn’t help overhearing him tell the security guard about his cat house. A cat house?

“Cats are the best thing ever,” I said as I walked towards him. He showed me a picture and said he had five cats, and he’d built them a house, so they would have warmth in the winter. I think I fell in love with him right then.

Fast forward. I’m in Corpus writing the big things smaller, and he’s 342 miles away. Even as I write about other people, I miss him. I miss the shock of his humor, the hand that crosses my whole waist. I miss the spicy florals that float through, following his body. I miss his clear blue eyes that beckon like a doorway to an oasis. His snores don’t wake me anymore after all this time, but I’d give this all up to sleep next to them. If I’m the White Sea, he is my Nile.

And I know we’re not supposed to define ourselves by other people. But, aren’t we all just a sum of others? It’s by realizing things we miss that we learn qualities we esteem, and it’s missing in general that tells us what we previously considered important may not be. We are all simply a sum of those who have hurt us, those who have moved us, and those who have helped us. We place pieces of others in missing pieces of ourselves. Mouthfuls of metal forge bodies of steel.