Annie Delmedico

Class of 2019

“My Stranger”

Creative Nonfiction
My Stranger

I look at him and he is a stranger. I’ve never seen him like this, not at any of the concerts we’ve been to together. His eyes are closed tightly. He’s swaying side to side, clumsy, unrestrained. His open hands stretch toward the jazz band on stage. He’s trying to sing along, but he doesn’t know any of the words. He looks older. The crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes look deeper. His thick, wiry eyebrows look whiter. There’s an energy around him. It feels like electricity crackling yellow and hot in the darkness of the theatre. It pulses in time with the music. I can hear his heart, too, beating on rhythm with the upright bass.

When the band plays a song about a man who shows up on his ex-lover’s doorstep and begs for her forgiveness, I see him start to cry. Tiny crystal teardrops get stuck in his long, thick, downward-slan ting eyelashes. They shine white in the stage lights. His eyes have always reminded me of a horse’s eyes—dark, unreadable.

My father has always loved music. I remember looking through a pile of CDs in the cracked leather backseat of the car, hunting for his precious Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson discs among my mother’s Madonna and Prince albums. At seven, I was trying to keep up with him as he wandered from stage to stage at bluegrass festivals. The sound of a mandolin always seemed to set something in him on fire. Those nights, we danced barefoot at honky-tonks in old barns with air that smelled like dust and pine trees. I used to sit at his feet as he played his banjo on our living room couch. I can still remember every song he plucked out. They sounded like bright silver strings. They made the air shimmer. They filled up our whole house.

When he left my mother and moved into a townhouse three neighborhoods away, the silver string songs stopped. The townhouse was in a small development. All the buildings were
brown and all the tenants were very old. The woman who lived in the unit attached to ours, Miss Sue, had seven cats. There was a sticker on her front door with a smiling cartoon cat and the words, “In case of a fire, please save my cats!” Every time I was sent over for flour or sugar, I wondered if cats trapped inside a fire would be smiling.

My sister and I moved back and forth between our parents’ houses, spending a week at each one. On the way to my dad’s every other Sunday, I wondered which father would be there. Some weeks, he spent days behind his bedroom door, alone. I learned quickly not to bother him with a knock. Those weeks, silence hung over the whole townhouse like a thick, cold fog. It seeped into the walls and carpet and made all my clothes feel damp.

Other weeks, anger came quickly, suddenly, like a flash flood bursting through a narrow sandstone canyon. Once, I forgot a pair of sneakers at my mom’s house and wanted to go get them for school the next day. When I asked, he put down the book about dreams he was reading and looked up at me. I remember the way his eyes flashed dark bronze in the heavy afternoon sun when he said, “Do you think I have time to do that right now? And do you think I really want to drive you to my ex-wife’s house?” His calm, crystal-clear cruelty always made me feel lifetimes older than ten.

I could never keep up. He was a moon that waxed and waned overnight, a man with endless moods. One day, he was locked inside his bedroom. The next, he was picking me up from school with the windows down, George Strait on the stereo, asking, “Scrabble?”

Scrabble: our most precious family heirloom. My father taught me as his mother, Baba, taught him. I knew Baba as a fierce, toothless old woman who was always pressing lint-covered
coins and misshapen candy from the bottom of her purse into my hands. Whenever my father and I play Scrabble, even now when I visit home from university, I can feel her in the room, sitting on the armrest of his chair, smoking a cigarette, whispering impossibly obscure, 50-point words into his ears.

My father has always described Baba as a resourceful woman. A mother of four, she worked long hours as a taxi driver, bus driver, and, at one point, casino card dealer. The three men she married and left during my father’s childhood were all violent drunks. When I used to ask him about these men, he would say, simply, “Baba did what she wanted to do.”

He told me once that when they were living in Mississippi, he and his younger brother used to ride their secondhand bikes into the swampland. They rode on natural gas pipes that were wrapped in thick layers of protective concrete. These pipes zigzagged for miles through murky, green mud and thick tangles of weeds.

On one of these rides, they came to a spot on the pipeline where the concrete coating had worn away and left the hot iron pipe exposed. My father, the older brother, tried to jump the exposed patch on his bike. His tire slipped when he landed. He reached for something to stop his fall and grabbed onto the pipe, burning his palm and fingers. They blistered almost immediately. The pain, he said, was like burning hot Pop Rocks candy popping just under his skin. There was nothing to do but ride all the way back home, my father steering with one hand, holding his burned palm at the mercy of the salty swamp air. When he got home, his stepfather smashed his precious bike into pieces and smacked him across the mouth for being so clumsy. After dinner that night, Baba beat him in Scrabble, like always.
On our first Christmas Eve in the townhouse, I found a shoebox under his bed. Inside, there was a thick, red clay mask. It had two huge eyes and a mouth frozen open in a scream. Dozens of wooden nails stuck out from the clay, sharp ends facing out. I asked him where he got it.

“I made it,” he said, “a few months after you were born.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I felt like I was dying on the inside.” He looked over my shoulder at the mask. “If I had stayed married to your mother, I’m not sure I would still be here.”

Later that night, we sat on the living room floor, my dad, my sister, and me. The townhouse was too small for a real Christmas tree, so he had bought a huge piece of canvas and convinced the paint store down the street to let him have leftover paint samples. We had laid the canvas out in our front room and painted a tree, complete with ornaments and a star and, at my dad’s doing, a bunch of yellow-eyed crows perched in the branches. That night, we hung it up on the wall by the fireplace and admired it. We drank hot chocolate out of chipped mugs, the kind from the packets with the tiny marshmallows, and let James Brown’s Christmas album play three times in a row, all the way through.

When we moved in with his new wife after three years in the townhouse, he went back to graduate school and became a psychologist. He stopped talking about my childhood, about our lives before my stepmother. Soon after, when I started high school, he became obsessed with alchemy. He ordered 15th-century alchemical manuscripts from obscure websites. They were all bound in red and gold and had pages that smelled like dust and glue. Some of them were in Latin. He didn’t know Latin, but he pored over them anyway and started repeating phrases he
found in them. He drew me sketches of alchemical symbols on napkins and scraps of newspaper. They were things like stars and ram skulls and crescent moons. He slipped them into my coat pockets. Sometimes, he left them on my desk or under my car keys.

One Sunday, standing in our kitchen, I asked him if he was into alchemy for real.

“What do you mean, for real?” he asked.

“Like turning stuff into gold and elixirs,” I said.

“No, not at all,” he said. “It’s the principles. Like solve et coagula.”

*Solve et coagula*. His most recent Latin mantra. “What does that actually mean?”

“It means dissolve and coagulate. It’s the process of falling apart and then coming back together.”

“I see,” I said.

“The mind cannot tolerate peace for long. Eventually, everything will break down. Even if everything is perfect. The mind will pick it apart.”

I thought about all the trips back and forth between my mother’s and father’s houses. They have always gone the same way.

My sister and I pack our things into two bags. We say goodbye. We leave home. We come apart. We drive twelve minutes in silence, like two meteors hurtling through space. We arrive at the other house. We say hello. We come home. We come back together again.

Everything hurts. Even my bones. Even after years of doing this.

“And that’s okay,” he adds, smiling across the kitchen island at me. “It’s okay for things to fall apart.”

Did he inherit this, too, from Baba? This selfishness. This ability to defeat someone so completely, before they’ve even drawn their letters.
That evening, at the dinner table with my stepmother, he couldn’t remember fainting at my sister’s birth. My sister and I exchanged a look across the table, a flash of momentary mourning for a story we both know by heart. Later that night, I couldn’t sleep. All I could think about was dinner, about my father’s old furniture from the townhouse collecting dust in storage, about all the empty spaces on our bookshelves where his boyhood photo albums were not. I got out of bed and slipped downstairs to his study. On the bottom shelf of the bookcase by the window, I found what I was looking for: the red clay mask, still stuffed into its old shoebox. I took it out and held it in my lap, this relic; the last remaining artifact of that dark, incomprehensible man I knew in the townhouse; that man staring up at our painted Christmas tree in wonder; that man who had raced home to me on his bike despite his burns and home was a place, a real place, a place that lasted longer than a week at a time.

Back to the theatre. My father is submerged in the music, in the clapping and stomping. He’s submerged in everything. Gone is my many-moods man. Gone is my boy on a bike. Gone is my alchemist. He looks like he fits, fully, finally, if only for a moment. I feel something inside me coagulating, dissolving, coming together, falling apart. The singer on stage is hunched over the microphone, singing about pardoning the people you love.