

Noah Joseph Kim

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NARS Capstone

Professor Dana Johnson

**Stitching**

Four years ago, if you asked me what my dad did, I’d say he was a doctor.

He moved the stethoscope methodically, listening to the murmurs of lungs and hearts; clicked the otoscope light and asked about any trouble hearing; flashed the ophthalmoscope from one eye to another, instructing the patient to focus on his attached earlobe. In classic doctor decorum, my dad wrote illegible but precise prescriptions, charts, notes to keep people healthy. A fiercely proud man—and rightfully so—he disliked the designation of “general physician,” and instead opted for his official title: internal medicine specialist. Partly upon their shared preference toward this distinction, first generation immigrants and former classmates AndrewChin Whae Kim and Samuel Idarraga founded Allegiance Internal Medicine Specialists.

It seems only fitting that AIMS was settled on such foundational ground. Wauwatosa is a compact, quaint city—just a ten-minute stint on highway 94, eastbound from downtown Milwaukee. Its walkable side-streets that meander through woods and along the Menomonee River play grounds to the Medical College of Wisconsin. It was the only medical school that ventured to put their faith in a diligent University of San Francisco graduate.

The first two years of medical school (M1 and M2) are notorious for being achingly bone-dry. Imagine your average college lecture-hall—big, impersonal and boring—but instead of a few hours just once or twice a week, these lectures go on *all day. Every day*. You could start one sunny morning by learning about maple syrup urine disease—named after the sweet odor of infants’ urine prior to diagnosis and during acute stages of the illness. You might end that same day discussing acute intermittent porphyria—a disease where patients lack an enzyme called “porphobilinogen deaminase,” which inhibits their ability to produce hemoglobin. This results in frequent abdominal pain, loss of sensation distally (i.e., in hands and feet), psychological disturbances, and urine the color of port wine. To take the edge off of such cheery lessons, you then retire to your apartment to have a glass of *real* red wine.

In short, medical school is a pain and its students display varying levels of masochism: the diagnoses, parasites, and disorders have outlandish, ugly names; the days are like a drag from a cigarette—long and eye-reddening; and the nights aren’t much better. So when I learned that Andrew’s first attempt at flirting with Laurie Ann Grunske was to steal her beloved collection of colored pens at the end of M2, I could hardly blame him for stooping to a level of immaturity reserved for fourth graders.

Laurie had an obscure history of dating four-letter names: her first kiss and co-swimming instructor Scot, an early college spring fling named Stan, and the Doobie-Brothers diggin’, endearingly directionless Doug. Drew—or Andy, depending on whom you asked—was intent that his name would be the fourth and final four letters she’d ever call hers. Until that point, Laurie had lived a quintessentially quaint Midwestern life. The eldest child of Marianne Hulda and Herman Franklin Grunske, Laurie was the poster-child for obedience and diligence. She and her younger sister, Dianna (DD for short), grew up in suburban Waukesha, WI with an in-ground pool in the backyard and a Ping-Pong table in the garage. Before doing their homework, they played with the family Bichon Frises, Mercedes and Benz, named after their parents’ dream cars. Laurie’s one nickname in the 1978 Waukesha South High School Yearbook was short and sweet: Laur. Her perfectly tight, toe-headed perm stood in for her personality: bright, shiny and never so much as a hair out of place.

When it came time for college, Laurie attended her parents’ alma mater, Marquette University, as a member of the dental hygiene program. She never drank, always color coordinated her notes, and went home every weekend to do her laundry. After graduation, she worked for two years as a hygienist before deciding that her talents would be better suited for a career in medicine—which is how she found herself sitting two rows ahead of Drew, looking frantically for her colored pens—the IV drip that kept her sane and alive throughout all of her schooling.

When she apprehended the culprit, she discovered that the man was not a complete stranger; she remembered seeing his face, sticking out from the usual crowd in her aerobics class.

A few weeks earlier, Laurie was warming up for class. She pulled her left ankle in a light quad stretch and shouted over the music, “OK, class! Before we get started, let’s give a warm welcome to the newcomers tonight, Drew and Attila!”

Drew and Attila were roommates, and Attila had dared Drew to give aerobics a shot. Partly because of the dare, and partly because Drew thought the aerobics instructor was cute, he agreed. Now that he was the center of attention, Drew was beginning to regret it. Sans nylon, the two men stuck out like sore thumbs, but with nylon, they’d never be able to rebuild their reputation. Nonetheless, they wave to the strange bodies in tights around them. Drew, visibly less comfortable than his roommate, began to blush just in time for Laurie to catch a glimpse of his flushed cheeks as she hit the stereo to get class started.

Her words were punctuated by the 3/4 time of the music. “To warm up, we’ll go side to side, side to side! . . . Five, six, seven eight—and pump those arms, pump those arms! . . . Three more times, three, two, one and reach! Reach! Reach! Reach! Reach, now back to center!”

“This a piece of cake,” Drew scoffed at Attila.

“You just wait. Give it a chance!” Attila grinned back.

Never one to be distracted by a man, Laurie maintained composure throughout the remainder of the hour, leading the class through a series of more strenuous side-steps, punches, lunges, presses, reaches and cha-cha-chas. After concluding the cool down, she stepped deftly over to Attila and Drew, both drenched thoroughly in their own sweat.

“So what did you think?” she asked with a light sigh, shooting a quick smile at the two.

Winded, Attila defers to Drew, who wheezed, “OK. I take it back—this class was pretty neat. A much better workout than I had anticipated!”

It was the image of his exhausted smile through gritted teeth that would turn Laurie’s anger to amusement when she caught sight of her pens peppered across his desk. With the initial courting under way, Drew was just biding his time to make a real move. That move came on the last Monday in May. Their final unit of M2—pathology—had come and gone with the usual side-effects of loss of sleep, blurred vision, over-caffeination, mood swings and occasional nausea. Among those who “enjoyed having fun and letting loose,” it was tradition to go out dancing—to celebrate recovering from the plague of information that befell them each unit.

Park Ave. was the hip joint. Though it later became a steakhouse owned by Brett Favre and stands now as a Homewood Suites Hotel, it was never so tacky or forsaken on the worst night of its heyday. For Drew, getting down on Park Ave.’s disco-lit dance floor to new-wave legends like the Talking Heads was especially reminiscent of his nights at I-Beam in Haight-Ashbury. Tonight, as he and Attila swayed their hips and snapped their fingers with friends, someone caught his eye. He couldn’t believe it—there was Laurie, out on the floor and surrounded by her fellow nerds, Mary Geiger and Tessa Wagner. Immediately, he tamed his moves down to a simple side-step, allowing him to cool off and wait for the perfect song to ask for a dance.

But before long, he noticed Laurie head back to her table and sit down. He panicked. The night wasn’t getting any younger, so to his chagrin, he approached her at the start of a trendy 80s synth-pop song and asked, “Would you like to dance with me?”

It was Laurie’s turn to panic; she had come here with Mary and Tessa, and neither of them had been asked to dance. (According to her peers, Mary was a little too West-Allis-ish to be all that endearing.) Laurie didn’t love the song either. She hardly knew Drew, but her friends gave her the go-ahead and she tepidly stepped back onto the floor.

As he led her to the center of the hall, he could feel the thick gold ring resting on the fourth finger of her right hand. His heart sank as he realized that Laurie’s ring finger was already banded in marriage, or at least in engagement. Ever a gentleman, Drew made sure there was nothing intimate about the way they danced, nothing implicated in the synchronization of two strangers’ bodies. But instead of being an innocent moment shared between new friends, it was shockingly awkward. Should he try to have a conversation over the music? Should she make eye contact with someone she’d only ever spoken to twice?

As the song drew to a close, Drew broke his silence, “Hey, so I know you’re taken, but I think you’re a pretty neat person! Do you have a sister?” In the world’s darkest of ironies, it’s worth mentioning that Drew and Dianna are currently sworn enemies. Her unwelcoming attitude and not-so-subtle racism towards him drove a permanent wedge between her and Laurie. But tonight was Drew’s lucky night—the night he learned that Americans wear wedding rings on their left hands, that Laurie’s ring was simply a gift from her father, and that she was recently single.

For all the lessons Laurie taught him that night, Drew would introduce her to a whole new world of things, not the least of which were Indian food, generally any genre of food that wasn’t boiled, and the important distinction between “keg” parties and “cake” parties. Inevitably, her world was turned upside down when her search for cake turned into the reddening realization that she was attending her first kegger. Drew would also be the first to present her with her newborn children, Mary Elizabeth *Tae Un* in 1995, and Noah Joseph *Tae Il* two years later. The four settled in a modest home flanked by raspberry bushes, boxwood shrubs and oak trees, just down the block from where Drew and Laurie first met in the neighborhood they now tenderly remember as ‘Tosa.

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Four years ago, if you asked me where my dad came from, I’d say South Korea.

Born in 1962 and raised in Seoul, Chin Whae spent nights on the floor of a one-bedroom apartment, nestled next to his two younger sisters—Un Whae and In Whae—and parents—Sa Sook Hong and Jae Ho Kim. Chin Whae brushed his teeth with two fingers and a dash of table salt, dined on goat’s milk and fruit for dessert on special occasions, returned home promptly from primary school to cook dinner for his sisters. On weekends, he was dragged to church, and sometimes traveled by train to the Buddhist temples in the mountains, where he would cling to his grandmother’s back and long for a taste of the delicate flesh of freshly steamed vegetables.

When Chin Whae was 13, his mother was able to secure passage into the United States through a close friend. The Kim family called upon their baptismal names for new American identities. Chin Whae became Andrew *Chin Hoe*; his sisters Un Whae and In Whae became Ann *Un Hoe* and Agnes *In Hoe*; his mother Sa Sook became Elizabeth *Sa Sook*; and his father Jae Ho became Joseph *Chae Ho*. (As if to insist on immediate assimilation, the immigration officers asked Sa Sook and Jae Ho to translate their family’s Korean names into English. Unbeknownst to them, they would incorrectly record the phonetic spellings of Whae as *Hoe,* and Jae as *Chae* on their official papers, thus incising and re-stitching familial identity for the first time.)

Andrew came of age at Bellflower High in Southern California, where he first dreamt in English, punched a pudgy boy in the nose for mocking Ann’s accented English, and played varsity soccer. He worked a few fast food jobs on the side to help pay the bills, and excelled academically. With relative ease, Andrew rose to graduate as a well-liked, if slightly misunderstood, valedictorian. Few people knew of his aspirations to become a doctor, so most people just assumed he was just one of the brighter jocks. His senior yearbook was saturated with a smattering of wistful “Oh, Andy!’s” and the occasional racist, but oddly venerable jab at his eyes and proclivity for math.

Andy only applied to two colleges. When Stanford rejected him, he happily committed to the University of San Francisco, packed one suitcase, and headed north. His university days as a first generation student were not as breezy as high school; his classes at USF were a new challenge. He spent most of his time as a resident assistant studying in his room and occasionally writing people up for throwing chairs out of windows. Andy made the most of the free meal plan that came with being an RA, so much so that he can’t even bare looking at a slice of pecan pie now. (He gags at the memory of his go-to dining hall dessert.) After both he and his roommate, Attila Kasza received their singular acceptances to medical school, they packed their bags and road-tripped to their new home: the great state of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin is just niche enough to make an intriguing home-state. At the University of Southern California, I’ve found a flurry of people from Chicago and its suburbs, not to mention a strange number of Cavs’ fans from Cleveland. But over the last four years, I can count the number of people I’ve met from Wisconsin on two hands; for a school of 45,000 students, that’s no small feat. For this reason, I’ve been privileged to carry a strange amount of prestige. As a biracial Midwesterner with a tattoo and an earing, a passion for hip-hop culture and simultaneous nostalgia for all things country, I was hired to represent USC as a Tour Guide. My original intent in applying for the job was to ease the minds of college applicants, to show them what was possible with higher education; I could never have expected to be shown such a large piece of my dad’s story in a young man from South LA.

It’s a Saturday in March, 2019. Not just any Saturday though—it’s March 23, the Saturday that USC acceptances and denials are sent electronically through each first-year applicant’s student portal. I know this from the time I’ve spent in the Undergraduate Admission Center; we’re privy to the admission timeline mostly because it means that we’ll receive a battery of calls both from weeping students and from screaming parents. And in case it’s not clear, some are happy tears and exclamations of joy—others are mostly accompanied by expletives.

In a rare act of wise crisis management [read: crisis prevention], USC mails out their physical acceptance letters on a Thursday this year. This ensures that the majority of students will—either through the arrival of their letter or the update on their online portal—learn of their admission decision at least one whole day before USC can be contacted. It gives denied students [read: parents] a chance to reconsider hurling verbal death threats at the college students who staff our office. It also gives accepted students [read: parents] a chance to reconsider aggressively prodding those same college students for cushier financial aid packages.

In both cases, the college students at the end of the other line are helpless. And that is exactly how my high school mentee, Rivaldo, feels when he learns that was not admitted to the school of his dreams.

Rivaldo Moran-Salguero is 18 years old. He’s lanky, and trudges almost giraffe-like around South Central LA. His hands are either buried in his pockets, curled securely around the straps of his backpack, or flashing in the SoCal sun to dap up his soccer teammates on the way to class. I first came to know Rivaldo as Space Jam—his USC Troy Camp name. Space Jam was one of 200 third through fifth graders from South LA to attend a week-long camp in the summer of 2009. Eight years later, he had the opportunity to return to camp as one of ten Junior Counselors—high school students who aid college age counselors like myself in connecting with students from drastically different backgrounds.

Raised in the suburbs of Wisconsin, I couldn’t come close to the relationships Space Jam was able to form with the younger students. But it made complete sense: he could be the success story every young boy from his neighborhood dreamed of. You’d never know it by his square glasses, his clean fade, or his mousey beginnings of a beard, but Rivaldo is no stranger to penning his own narrative. He’s a talented journalist—a passionate one, too. He’s got the kind of passion that pushed him to apply to a USC Annenberg Summer Program even though he knew he couldn’t afford it; he’s talented enough to go on to earn one of two scholarships granted by Dean Willow Bay herself.

When Rivaldo found himself drowning in a sea of wealthy students from private schools around the nation, he did not lose his sense of belonging. As they walked along Melrose in Hollywood’s trendiest area, one of his summer program companions pulled out her phone. She advertised to her Snapchat followers, “Out and about in Compton! Hope I don’t get shot!” Still, Rivaldo did not lose sight of himself. First, he hurt silently from the ignorant misconceptions that his peers threw around as jokes. Then, he resolved to one day claim this city as his own, and to show them how misguided they’ve been all along. He’s got *that* kind of passion—not the kind that throws hate right back in their faces, not the kind that withers away at the constant attacks on his home, but the kind that compartmentalizes the struggle and works through it doggedly, quietly.

He told me this story, and it sounded like a modern-day version of my dad’s immigrant story. Rivaldo told me how badly he’s wanted to attend USC since he was a boy, listening to the fireworks booming over the Coliseum and hoping to catch a glimpse of sparkles from his bedroom window. So along with a team of nearly ten other counselors, I tried to help him. We had the distinct pleasure of helping to coax his most vulnerable moments onto blank pages. Through a combination of Instagram DM’s, Google Docs chats, texts, and emails, we weighed the Common Application Essay Prompts. After much deliberation, Rivaldo settled on number five: discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

The essay he writes stitches together the 2018 MLB National League Championship Series with the progression of his Abuelita’s illness. A die-hard LA Dodgers fan, Rivaldo superimposes their victories with his Abuelita’s surges in strength, their losses with the deterioration of her lungs and heart. But just when the Dodgers manage to clinch the series with a game seven win, Rivaldo’s Abuelita goes into cardiac arrest and passes away. I read on stunned as he recounts his process of grieving, welcoming vulnerability, and choosing empathy over apathy. As I trace over the stitches that Rivaldo has used to bind and heal his life, I come face-to-face with the resilience I have come to know in my dad. When life sent my dad on a seemingly random road-trip to the Midwest, he followed without hesitation. When life threw Rivaldo the sharpest curveball high and outside, he refused to strikeout.

So when his second home and second family denies him, Rivaldo picks up the loose ends of his threads and commits to UCLA. He readjusts his dream, refocuses his vision. He prepares to venture down an unknown path, knowing all the while that he will forge ahead to the same final destination. And as I do my best to guide him, I can’t help but think of his hyphenated identity, his two younger sisters, his working parents, his varsity soccer jersey, the nicknames scrawled on the inside cover of his yearbook, his courage, his stitches.

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Four years ago, if you asked me why my dad worked so hard, I’d say it was for his family.

Among the tenets of Korean culture is the unquestioned deference to one’s elders; though my dad defied a cultural norm in marrying my mother, his sense of responsibility to his family remained. Immediately after paying back his loans for medical school, he began paying his parents’ bills. He paid for their condo, for their car, and for their travel. Drew paid for his father’s extensive multiple myeloma treatment, for his hospice and for his funeral. Drew still owns the small condo where his mom lives, and continues to pay for renovations, medications and phones. It didn’t seem that unusual to me when he was generous enough to host my friend David for dinner on most weeknights—my mom never complained either. But when David seemed to get a little too comfortable, my dad served me a scathing reminder.

“He will *never* be family.”

Dawud Rafique Gramling was the only son of Ferdousi Jamir and Charles Gramling. He came to my middle school as an eighth grader named David, joined my Junior Knights football team as Dave, and became known by the rowdiest group of eighth grade boys as D-Gram. A year younger, I was intimidated by his loud, clunky Osiris high-tops, his cookie-monster blue pants, and his cocky faux-hawk hairstyle. In addition to being intimidated by him, I also hated him, mostly for the same reasons. His general indifference toward order of any kind rubbed my square disposition the wrong way.

But many of my first impressions would be shattered two years later, when we shared the pitch as members of the varsity soccer team. On March 13, 2013, David started a Facebook messenger conversation with, “what uppppp lil bro.” At 10:08 on a Wednesday night, I was confused about where this might lead, but I—always the procrastinator—followed him down a rabbit hole filled with questions about school, religion, love, and life. With this as the new foundation of our friendship, we built an air-tight brotherhood.

Over the course of a year, I would learn about the divorce of his parents when he was 11, the sudden loss of his mother to pancreatic cancer, and the splintering of his relationship with his father. David would spend most weeknights doing homework at my house after practice, eating dinner with my parents and me, and shoving ice down my back to keep me awake while studying. Across from me at our wooden dinner table, David would also learn of the fractured relationship between my mother and Dianna, the terminal illnesses of both my grandfathers, and my emotionally-fraught high school romances. After three years, David was just as much family to me as my sister who had already left for college.

“He will *never* be family.”

These shouted words were the faint whisper of danger before a war. I spit back insults without restraint, lose track of time, of place.

My dad’s eyebrows start to rise, not in disbelief, but in anger. His open eyes reveal the stark contrast between white glass and black pupils. They are streaked with red, bloodshot in a way that indicates a surrender to stress, fatigue, alcohol or in this case, a toxic cocktail of all three. Mouth agape and mid-shout, my voice loses its will to rise higher. I hesitate only for a breath’s time before pushing in my chair and retreating to my room. Walking upstairs, my head is stiff, aching with hurt under the weight of his words. My eyes stop moving as my mind slips back into safety, trying to think, always thinking for a way out. . . and when I finish pacing, I sit on the edge of my bed and think some more. *My dad and I will never see eye to eye on anything*, I think. *He knows, too*.

Even in this moment, I love my dad. I remind myself, *he is a supportive and devoted role model who defines the American dream of self-determination*. But the driving force that took him from young immigrant to successful doctor has morphed. Like a cancer, it’s grown uncontrollably into a carbon-steel fist that now dominates all conversations, strikes flint to ignite all arguments, squeezes its blinding and deafening rule on his mind.

Here, I remember our last spring break trip to the Dominican Republic.

We had driven to the outskirts of Punta Cana for a quiet dinner, but one of the waiters had delivered the wrong entree. I watched, sickened and pained while my dad reprimanded him. The bashful boy of no more than 13 years grew red, and I lost my patience with my dad’s tone. As soon as we were alone, my words flew like needles at his bloodshot eyes, “He’s fucking 13 years old, dad—you can’t FUCKING treat people like that.”

Slamming his fist on the table, he fires back, “I AM KING. I AM THE BOSS. It’s not what he means that matters, it’s how I perceive it.” I was so caught off-guard by this utter power-trip that I didn’t speak to him for two days.

Sitting there on the edge of my bed remembering, I know it would be naïve to think “the king” and I could ever reach some mutual understanding after what happened tonight. Though I do consider myself a staunch idealist, I temper this with as much reality as I can handle. Surprisingly, this recognition of familial fissure snaking its way through the fights that defined our relationship does not induce sadness. Instead, I feel the cold tingle of anesthesia, the hollow cry of nausea.

The nausea grows while I ponder the point of fighting an unwinnable battle, but the emptiness is filled before I can form a coherent question. I remember that some things are just not meant to happen; Andrew *Chin Hoe* can never just be Chin Whae again, Laur and DD will never play another round of Ping-Pong in the garage, and Rivaldo won’t be Space Jam to any more Troy Campers. My dad and I will never cease fighting long enough to be re-cast, re-set in the tender embrace of a young boy clinging to his *Appa* after a night of fitful sleep. I inherited his stubborn qualities, but our mentalities are black and white, rooted firmly in contrast.

Four years ago, if you asked me anything about my dad, I’d respond with a selection of easily digestible morsels of his story that highlighted our differences. Because up until four years ago, my understanding of him was fractured, broken by a cultural, generational gap and piercing words that drew blood. Where he said, “I AM KING,” I wielded my words not in defense, but in a direct attack of his status as an immigrant, as a non-native English speaker. “You KNOW I can beat you in an argument, now. You’re AFRAID of your own son, so you cower behind empty statements of self-importance and pride, EMPTY punishments and threats. But at the end of the day, you know I’ll WIN every single time.”

Four years of college, of learning diverse cultural narratives, of meeting friends from all over the world, and of mentoring South LA students like Rivaldo changed the world as I knew it.

Where I once would tell you my dad is just a doctor, now I can tell you he’s a dreamer in English, a pen thief. He’s a resident assistant, a hard aerobics workout, a long pathology unit, and an internal medicine specialist. He’s starting a business, becoming a mentor, and loving his family.

Where I once would tell you my dad is just from Seoul, South Korea, now I can tell you he’s from salty fingers and goat’s milk, punching a fat kid in the nose and working part-time jobs. He’s from Bellflower High, USF, and MCW. He’s from the dancehalls of Haight-Ashbury and Park Ave., from the meandering streets of Wauwatosa. He’s from an underfunded public school, a hard-working family, and a relentless dream.

Where I once would tell my dad is just doing it for his family, now I can tell you he’s doing it for David and the memory of his mother, for the waiter in Punta Cana, for the son that always wants to argue with him. He’s doing it for the Andy’s, the Riv’s, the Laur’s in the yearbooks that people always counted out. He’s doing it for his parents, his sisters, his children, his wife. He’s doing it for himself.

I’ve learned all this through dinner-table conversations about first-dates and last names, discussions over Scotch about familial similarities, phone calls about of medical school, short texts about phonetic spellings and dog breeds, DM’s about being vulnerable and empathetic, Facebook messages about my relationship with David. The more I learn, the more the hollow cry of nausea abates.

What has kept me fighting—what staves away the sadness, fills the hollow, returns feeling to my limbs—is my family’s dedication to keep weaving together our wounds. We are always in search of a perfect technicolor stitch, where the fluid, intertwined whole is sourced from the combination of its distinct parts. The greatest of doctors know well that their work, however delicate, practiced, and nimble, will never be able to save a life already lost, right a wrong the world has already committed. As a writer, I’ve turned to the narrative of my family’s history, my own existence, and the friendships I share to find a way to make sense of it all. But even if I can, what writer would ever say they were able to properly express raw, distilled emotion in words? The important part is that they keep trying; the important part is that *we* keep trying, because maybe one day I’ll find all the disparate pieces of what my dad does, where he came from and for whom he works; maybe one day, he’ll understand though I might not always know what he does, where he came from and for whom he works, I love him not in spite of this, but all the more for it; maybe one day instead of shouting, we will look and listen to each other as equals, and we will come close to seeing each other. Until then, we’ll keep stitching.

**Letters Home**

June 4th, 2018

Dear Noah,

I’m thinking about you this morning as you get ready to start your Free Mantle experience. Know that Dad and I are over the top proud of you and are so excited for you to learn and grow in a non-academic setting.

They are lucky to have you not just because you are a charismatic young adult, but you have many incredible talents to share with their group. It’s gonna be great!

Have a wonderful first week. We had a terrific visit with you! Can’t wait to celebrate your 21st!

Lots of Love,

Mom & Dad

*Dear Mom,*

*It’s actually spelled Fremantle. It almost feels like you’re more excited than I am for this internship—I know it’ll be a great learning experience even if it sucks, because then I’ll at least know I don’t want to pursue corporate entertainment PR.*

*Not super nervous about tomorrow, but I hope the other interns are chill. Planning on wearing my navy shirt with white polka dots that Zacky got me for my 18th birthday. It still fits! Olive pants and walnut dress shoes should round everything out.*

*Glad I could come home this past week—that torrential downpour mid-hike was a definite highlight.*

*Talk to you soon,*

*Noah*

July 6th, 2018

Hi Noah,

We always love talking to you and catching up. This summer is passing quickly and it seems you are packing all the fun you can in between your work and internship.

Keep living your dreams! Have a terrific week & a fun visit with Como & gang!

Lots of Love,

Mom & Dad

P.S. I forget – did you like Sheri more than Demi? She’s drawn more dramatically! <3

*Mom,*

*It was actually Demi that I liked more than Sheri. My drawing of Sheri might be more dramatic, but I always thought Demi had more of a simplistic, elegant charm to her . . . the way her eyes twinkled when she brought me the Band-Aid after I fell from the tire-swing in kindergarten . . . Anyways.*

*I have to pack in the fun, mostly because I’m drained every day after work. My assignments are getting less and less interesting at Fremantle, and it’s so damn hot out when I give tours. I wish I could be at the beach more often.*

*Stoked to see Como and Comzee. I haven’t seen Abby in what—four years? Since Harabojee died? She’s probably so mature now—I hope she’s not too precocious.*

*Talk soon,*

*Noah*

August 13th, 2018

Happy 21st Birthday to our favorite son ~

It seemed like this day would never come more for you than for me! You can finally enjoy all the social spots in LA with your friends! We are so proud of the incredible young man and scholar that you are ~ may you continue to thrive, explore and live your dreams!

Here’s to you, Noah, as we celebrate the beginning of your 21st AMAZING YEAR!

Lots of Love,

Mom

P.S. Even back then, you had a drink in a red solo cup! Your tastes are quite refined now so your barware will be leaded crystal, not plastic! <3

Dear Noah,

Happy 21st Birthday!

I hope you continue to grow in Love, Wisdom, Knowledge, Compassion and Self-awareness you have already ascertained, but more as we strive to do every day. I’m so proud of you for who you are. Let’s celebrate you together!

Love,

Your Dad

*Mom,*

*First of all, I just have to say that I wish I could see Abby more. I know y’all don’t really jive with Uncle Mitch, and I don’t either, but I’ve always wanted to be closer to Abby. Ari was an only child, but she had Mary Liz and I to see every few months. Abby doesn’t have anyone—it kinda feels like Comzee and Uncle Mitch are suffocating her. I know that it’s partly Dad’s decision not to go down to Atlanta, too, but I just had to let that out.*

*I’m not entirely sure what friends of mine you think will hit any ~ social spots ~ with me in LA—you know none of them drink! Thank you, though. The mixing beaker and shaker have already been used! Now I can properly dilute my cocktails.*

*Looking forward to making you one soon.*

*Dad,*

*Unsure why you capitalized the first letters of those words but I can get on board with that. Thanks for humbling me—you’re always there to make sure I don’t get complacent. Can’t wait to share a drink and a long conversation.*

*Love you both,*

*Noah*

August 22nd, 2018

Hi Noah!

I’ve so been waiting to send this your way! Hope all is starting out smoothly for your senior year. Keep enjoying your awesome friends and being on top of your game!

Lots of Love,

Mom

*Mom,*

*I’m diggin’ the alcohol puns and recipes! You think the measurements on the front of that card actually work?*

*Senior year has been a trip, so far. I’ve hardly done any work. I’m just trying to keep up with meeting new people and staying in touch with old friends. Not doing a very good job of it, but hopefully I find my rhythm shortly.*

*I’m thinking of asking Dad to borrow Mary Liz’s car to drive up for the Weekender. Put in a good word for me if you can?*

*Love,*

*Noah*

September 5th, 2018

Hi Noah!

Welcome back after what I hope was an awesome visit to San Fran. I can only imagine how much fun you had exploring and enjoying your wonderful friends. Have a terrific week at work, school & play as we all get closer to your visit. The powder room is being gutted today and having your arrival as a deadline will make this craziness here go more quickly. With all of the rain the past few weeks the foliage should be perfect in a month. Honestly, it will be so cool to have you all here!

Much Love & Hugs,

Mom (Dad too, of course)

*Mom,*

*You’d instantly regret letting me borrow Mary Liz’s car if you knew the trouble we hit on the way back down. I’ll be sharing this with you when we talk later, but five hours into the six-hour drive, the engine died. Two tow-trucks, five hours, one $80 Uber XL from Ventura to USC, and one $5,000 engine later, everything is right again.*

*All that aside, San Francisco was incredible. Eli’s apartment housed all three of us with plenty of room to spare. Chubby Noodle is now one of my favorite restaurants ever. It’s a bit loud and spicy for your palate, but I’m sure we could find some things for you to eat. Dad would LOVE it.*

*I also wanted to say this: I know that it took a lot for you guys to let me drive that car up there, and I appreciate both your faith in me, and your recognition that these experiences are what color my college experience. Though I still secretly believe that both you and Dad will always consider medicine a higher, more sought after, more prestigious calling, I’m grateful for the efforts you make to validate my life.*

*I can’t wait to show Mark, Annie, Megan, Cyrus, and Dre the place where I grew up. I’ve been looking forward to this since last year, when we started planning it. I still don’t know how I got them to say yes to flying back to Wisconsin for a weekend!*

*Love,*

*Noah Joe*

*P.S. I noticed you’re not a fan of the Oxford Comma? To each their own ☺*

October is coming!

Hi Noah,

How’s your week? I’m happy to start planning for your arrival this week! Good food & drinks will be abundant! Keep up your hard work ~ can’t wait to hear more in person about your classes. See you soon!

Lots of Love,

Mom

*Mom,*

*This week has been rough. I already know I’m not going to get enough sleep the days leading up to coming home. I think I’m getting sick too—I hope it’s nothing too bad.*

*I’ve had a Dulce breakfast burrito every day for the last week—it’s my one meal a day. If I can make it to 11:30 a.m. without eating, the hunger usually passes until 3 p.m. I’ve been running around helping conduct interviews for the Admission Center, meeting new recruits in Troy Camp, hanging out with old friends.*

*I can never seem to prioritize my life in a way that makes sense. If I get desperate, I’ll ask you to help me color-code my calendar.*

*See you so soon,*

*Noah Joe*

October 16, 2018

Hi Noah!

Dad and I had such a wonderful time with you and your close friends ~ even more fun than we imagined ☺. We very much appreciate the importance of relationships and the energy that it takes to have them grow and mature. We are so very happy for you and proud of how you live ~ you truly celebrate the human spirit!

Have a terrific week and keep enjoying your work, school and friends!

Lots of Love,

Mom & Dad

*Mom,*

*Dad waved as our Greyhound bus turned the corner onto the highway and I had to blink back tears. The utter juxtaposition of taking my closest college friends home for the first time, while recognizing that our goodbyes are getting more and more absolute threw me. Dad didn’t stop waving until he disappeared from my sight line, and I was reminded of something Como had said a few years ago: that I had two mothers—that Dad’s efforts to be present, conscientious, caring and over-protective were more motherly than fatherly. I’m not entirely sure I agree with the distinction, but his waving made me crumble with gratitude.*

*After our fight about David, Dad’s willingness to play host to friends that have become my USC family was overwhelming; his toast to them and the integral role they play in my life as a writer and romantic will never be forgotten. Later, after driving Cyrus to the airport at 4 a.m. with me, I asked him about it. He remarked, embarrassed, that he had intended for it to be much more eloquent. He wanted to identify each of the ways in which my friends make me whole. I laughed and told him not to worry about it, but I have a feeling he’ll dwell on that moment for a while.*

*Your food was stunning, as evidenced by your lack of leftovers. Mark and Cyrus are voracious eaters, but only if they’re diggin’ what’s being put down, and boy were they diggin’ it. Thank you for offering to cook a meal for all of us—I’m so glad Nana, Ari and David could be there to spend time with us, too.*

*I love reading the creative words you choose to describe me; though I might have once discarded them as a poor attempt at fishing for a correct answer, I’m confident that you’re doing the best you can to speak my language. Whether or not it always translates, I can feel, see and touch the intention with every letter you send me.*

*Can’t wait for Thanksgiving and Christmas. If you’re looking for gifts, socks and underwear are always a great go-to.*

*Love,*

*Noah Joe*

January 5th, 2019

Dear Noah,

We so enjoyed having a “full house” the past several weeks. There’s nothing better than sharing time together as you and Mary Liz experience your young adulthood years.

Your time at USC has passed so fast. It seems cliché to say “make the most” out of your last semester; I truly think you have made the most out of every day of your time there already. We understand what a crazy busy semester you have and how hard you will be working in all you do. You continue to amaze us in countless ways and make us so very proud to be your parents.

Fight on with your passion for honesty, humanity and empathy! Do fit in healthy sleep, exercise and regular eating ~ “Yes, Mom!”

Hope your 1st week back went well. Enjoy the sunshine ☺

Lots of Love,

Mom & Dad

*Mom,*

*The responses that you write into your letters on my behalf always make me laugh—you’ve really found a way to capture the annoyance and disrespect with which I brush you off. Though that sounds sarcastic, I hope you know I’d like to sincerely apologize for over-scrutinizing your words.*

*I spoke about it with Dad one night—and he’s right. For some reason, I am always trying to pick apart what you say. I’d like to think more about that and get back to you on why, but until then I hope you accept my apology.*

*Being home for the holidays is another treat that I hope I’ll be afforded post-grad. Conversations of where you will move after you retire are becoming more and more serious; accordingly, I am becoming increasingly more anxious about losing the place I did 18 years of growing. Wherever you do end up, I hope you’ll always find a small place in Wisconsin to call home.*

*Love,*

*Noah Joe*

January 16, 2019

Hello Noah!

Kinda crazy how now I send you drinking humor cards ~ 21 yr. & a senior @ USC and refined alcohol tastes! Guest we could have predicted this with your advanced taste buds way back in grade school! Hope your week is AWESOME ~ like you!

Lots of Love,

Mom & Dad

*Mom,*

*Just as you think it’s wild to be sending your son cards with drinking humor, I think it’s wild that I’m thinking just as much about where* you’ll *end up in the next four years as I’m thinking about where* I’ll *end up after my graduation.*

*I’ve found some more friends to drink with—they’ve been loving all the cocktails I’ve been able to make them. I’ve recently been obsessed with French 75s, which are even better when you swap out the gin for Cognac. I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but I’m thinking I might as well apply to get my bartender’s license this summer; I love it too much not to do it more often, plus I hear the tips can be great.*

*Don’t let that be a reflection of my academic performance—classes are fine and I’m doing well. Just a little boring, that’s all.*

*Love,*

*Noah Joe*

February 5th, 2019

Dear Noah,

We are here to support and guide you through this mountain climb to your summit. Believe in yourself and know that these Ah-Ha times are part of the journey of strength and resilience in adulthood. Can’t wait to share more fun times with you!

Happy Early V-Day!

Our Love & Pride,

Mom & Dad

*Mom,*

*I’ve never been good at saying no to people, but declining the paid position and ending my internship was one of the best decisions I could have made. I remember feeling instantly lighter skateboarding down my street. I wouldn’t wish two capstones on anyone, but I’m looking forward to pouring more into the project that actually matters to me.*

*See you soon,*

*Noah Joe*

February 21st, 2019

Dear Noah,

Dad and I just want to again THANK YOU for spending such a wonderful time with us. We totally enjoyed meeting & hanging out with your awesome friends. They are all very special individuals and we can see how/why you have developed beautiful friendships.

We understand how busy your daily schedule is and appreciate all that you are doing for others as well as for yourself in these USC years. We couldn’t ever be happier for you or more proud of you!

Fight on, bud ☺!

We Love You,

Mom & Dad

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I’m pretty sure you’re the ones to thank for being such gracious hosts to my friends. It’s easy to get everyone together when they all want to see you just as badly as I do. I realized that last Friday was the first time I’ve ever actually gone bowling with either of you; Mrs. Darlene would always take Mary Liz and I over the summer, but I can’t remember ever bowling with you. I mostly just remember Skateland, falling on my knees after every stride, and crying a lot.*

*Your support and acknowledgement of the relationships I’ve cultivated at USC are the clearest indications that you not only listen, but are also trying your best to communicate that. I’m stoked to have you here again for graduation so we can all catch up and go out.*

*Love,*

*Noah Joe*

April 3rd, 2019

Dear Noah,

We are so happy that you were able to return home and celebrate Micah’s life. Your empathy and nurturing manner are what make you extra special to everyone in your circle. The high value you place on tending to your relationships is incredible and makes us very proud of you and happy for you. Your heart and soul is a beautiful treasure.

Keep up your energy here in the homestretch as you keep your academic and social commitments both going in high gear. Take a Salt & Straw break when you can!

We are looking forward to your graduation fun ~ Have a terrific week!

Lots of Love & Hugs,

Mom & Dad

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*Thank you for bringing me home. It’s strange; I began college by returning home for Dakarai’s funeral within one month of my arrival here, and now as I look forward to the future, I’m again called back home by the death of Micah. At first I questioned my motivation for flying home, but after talking with Megan, I knew the world wouldn’t feel right if I wasn’t there.*

*As expected, I thoroughly enjoyed my time with you and David. Leave it to y’all to make me at ease during one of the most stressful weeks of my life.*

*See you soon,*

*Noah Joe*

April 16th, 2019

Hi Noah,

This card immediately caught me eye and made me smile thinking of the many travels you have already had in your college years. You are ready to launch and embark on more journeys. This is your time to pen your name in the hearts of unknown people, places and time. You will continue to make the world a better place <3

Our Love,

Mom & Dad

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*Last week at the Admission Center Senior SCend off, I told the story of an afternoon this past fall. As part of my shift, I was assigned to usher guests to Taper Hall for their presentation before the tour, and just before my shift ended, a mother and her two kids appeared. She told me she had a reservation under her name; her six-year-old daughter needed to attend a college tour for a school project. I checked them in, and noticed the younger brother playing with a Hot Wheels car—I asked him if I could hold it. As I showed them to the door, he handed me his toy without hesitation. I zoomed it around the air for a while before returning it gingerly to his small palm.*

*We walked together down Trousdale Parkway, the main thoroughfare of USC, and before I could ask where they were visiting from, the little boy asks, “What does that say on your arm?” He points his Hot Wheels at the tattoo on my right bicep, a combination of Korean and Chinese characters that delineate my ancestry.*

*I thought for a moment, and said, “It’s there to remind me of my grandfather and grandmother. Without them, I wouldn’t be here!”*

*Without missing a beat, he inquires, “Are they still alive?”*

*I level with him, “My grandma is, but my grandpa died a few years ago.”*

*“So he’s up in heaven?”*

*“Yes, sir!”*

*“Yeah, my grandma is up there, too.” His mom clutches her heart and smiles at me.*

*“Hey, you wanna wave to them together?”*

*“Yeaahh.” We turn our faces upwards and give the sky a generous wave.*

*By this time, we had reached Taper Hall; as I opened the door and showed them inside, I told the boy this is where I would be leaving them. The mother thanked me, the daughter gave me a wave, and the boy flashed his Hot Wheels one more time as a goodbye.*

*In telling this story, I hoped to reflect on three lessons I had learned: 1) to remember where you come from; 2) to treat every interaction as a chance to grow; and 3) that sometimes the best surprises come in small packages.*

*Over the last four years and more, you have supported my every endeavor as I strove for independence, self-expression, and self-creation. You have pushed me to the threshold of your histories, urging me to step into the new, even when I thought you were trying to make me fit your old mold for life. But no matter what words were spoken, your written letters have always reminded me that my home is with you. You’ve ensured that I will never forget where I came from, because you’ve left a paper trail of our relationship leading all the way back to 19000 Blue Ridge Court.*

*Though at first college was not my forte, you’ve ensured that I live every moment to the fullest; you say that I do that on my own, but you created an environment conducive to doing so. I’ve likened the stability I receive from my friends here as a revolving door of friendship. I’ve only been able to explore the diverse pockets of USC because I know that I’ll have their arms to return to at night. A parent’s love is the ultimate revolving door of life. Thank you for always keeping yours moving so I never spend too much time caught in the past—so that I spend more time trying to satisfy my hunger for knowledge.*

*As much as I love letters, I’ve always felt like I needed more space. I overthink and underact, I dream of the grandiose and achieve the average. So when I sit down to write a thank you, I end up wasting a page talking about what gratitude is. To cut to the chase: your letters are the best small packages. Over the last four years, you’ve managed to weave a tapestry of your love with the one language I’ve told you that I speak—the written word—and it’s dawning on me now that I never made any effort to respond with any of my own letters home. Please accept this collection of musings from my last year in college, my best year in college. Because it’s the year that I finally figured out that you’ve always been fighting for me, rather than against me, that I first want to pen my name in the hearts of my family before those of strangers, and that I want to make the world a better place simply because you’re in it.*

*So a toast, to you and all your letters; may they always lead me home.*

*Cheers,*

*Noah Joseph Kim*

**Critical Component**

I began my first capstone proposal by stating, “I remember goat’s milk.” This remembrance—not of tasting, smelling or obtaining goat’s milk, but rather of *hearing* about it—cast food as the central underpinning of my family’s history and relationship. Having analyzed both music and fashion as conduits for cultural and identity-based storytelling, I thought it fitting to unpack my family’s love of crafting and consuming food for my capstone project. Over the break, I returned to Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*, a novel I had read two years ago during an Asian American Literature course. Set in 1930’s Paris, her work of historical fiction follows a Vietnamese cook named Bình who finds himself working as Gertrude Stein’s and Alice B. Toklas’s personal chef.

I initially set out to identify the subtle ways in which Bình’s narration introduces food imagery as an essential textual theme. I was greeted almost immediately by his simile on page one that described photographers who “swarmed to the entrance of 27 rue de Fleurus like honeybees” in order to take pictures of Stein and Toklas (Truong 1). Too subtle to be significant? Perhaps, but the granular detail of *honey*bees marks a departure, however definite, from a typical swarm of flies, bees or any other group of winged insects. Bình then recounts Stein’s and Toklas’s fame within the Parisian art community: “Many had arrived hoping for a permanent place around my Mesdames’ tea table, but I always knew that after the third pot they would have to leave . . . A delicious bit of irony, I had always thought” (Truong 2). Here, Bình equates friendship with a seat at not just any table, but a *tea* table. He then creates his own form of “clock time,” as Abbott described in the *Cambridge* *Introduction to Narrative*, by assigning the number of tea pots consumed to a distinct passage of time.

Bình mentions a “crop of admirers,” a dog with “sausage-casing skin,” and his ability to “taste” the absence of his Mesdames (Truong 2, 3, 5). He likens French words that he learned so quickly that he couldn’t remember *not* knowing them to “seeds of a sour fruit that someone else ate and then ungraciously stuffed its remains into my mouth” (Truong 12). Already by page 12, Truong has provided readers with a detailed sketch of Bình’s character. He’s fiercely possessive of his Mesdames’, which manifests in his delight over their visitors’ limited tea time, his envious denunciation of one of their beloved dogs, and his self-proclaimed, unparalleled proclivity for detecting their presence. Additionally, he appears to harbor resentment for various limitations that were unceremoniously placed upon him without his knowledge. More notably, with reference to my initial proposal, Truong has placed food at the center of Bình’s tea table. As shown by his metaphors and similes, food allows him to make sense of the world. Food is both Bình’s very source of livelihood and his life’s organizing principle; food gives order to the chaos that reigns his world.

Though food might be Bình’s, and possibly even Truong’s “ordered mixture,” I am afraid that it cannot be mine. As it turns out, I was more correct than I imagined when I admitted that “writing about food scares me.” I just wasn’t sure *why* it scared me. But with the thought-provoking guidance of Abbott’s *Cambridge* *Introduction to Narrative*, I now recognize that food is notmy life’s, nor my family’s organizing principle. Thus, writing about it in such a way to posit otherwise runs the risk of being painfully contrived. Instead, *medicine* is my family’s safeguard against entropy. It’s almost embarrassing how long it took me to arrive at this conclusion. It’s been staring me in the face for the last six years of my existence, starting from when my sister declared a neuroscience major and I first fell in love with a piece of literature, which happened to be “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” My family’s quest for a complete biological and chemical understanding of the human body is what provides their lives with meaning, and is what allows them to make sense of the world. *Stitching* was initially an attempt to understand my pursuit of writing as an equivalent method of manipulating human time and to contextualize it within my family’s background. (It seems apparent now that my family has two distinct methods of creating higher quality human time for those around us.)

Thus, I started this project trying to bridge my familial gap between science and literature by suggesting that we share a common fear of mortality. We defend ourselves by pursuing mastery over human time—in delaying the inevitable decay of the human body, in penning narratives that can stretch or condense lifetimes into vast eternities or mere moments. Drawing inspiration from Paul Kalanithi’s memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*, from Atul Gawande’s long-form *New Yorker* article “Letting Go” (and others), and from family tea table conversations, I hoped to write a series of three short stories to capture my individual relationships with my mother, father, and sister that asked readers to identify their own *ordered mixtures*.

I wanted to juggle the concepts of an “ordered mixture,” the distinction between “clock time” and “human time,” and mastery of time as I discussed the ways in which both doctors and authors order life to help create higher quality human time, and in doing so, dupe themselves into thinking they’ve achieved some mastery of time. But with the influence of Edward P. Jones, I ran away with the idea of a non-linear timeline—I got so wrapped up in my own perceived mastery of time that I didn’t allow my parents to display the way had mastered various aspects of human time.

Little did I know that what started as three short stories would also morph very quickly into two unique chapters of memoir; as my friend Cyrus so deftly pointed out during my presentation, the genre of my project was already quite fluid. In the excerpts I had chosen, the narrative would have been better classified as memoir, though I reserved the creative write to embellish each scene with as many fictional elements as I liked. But I found that I felt wrong, felt inauthentic when I threw in details for the sake of clarity and intrigue. So, inspired by my peer Sarah Berry’s “A Requiem for my Father,” I continued to interview my parents extensively in person, over the phone, and through texts. I dug up old letters, replayed the memories I had left in the dark corners of my mind to burn, called upon sentiments I had tried to bury for the last four years.

Particular to my relationship with my dad was my discovery and understanding of his story through the relationships I had made both in high school and college. There was no doubt that I would recount his story of becoming in America, of studying medicine, falling in love, and striving for success. But as I thought more about his history, I felt an inexplicable tug towards the life of Rivaldo; after word-vomiting much of that section, I sat with it a while. I knew it belonged, but I didn’t know why. The general connections were clear; both my dad and Rivaldo are bilingual immigrants who grew up in urban environments, attended underfunded schools and wanted more than what they had. Both applied to institutions of higher education and were not accepted to their top choice. Both were—or in Rivaldo’s case, are—tasked with financing that education. It just took a little longer for me to realize that Rivaldo’s life helped contextualize my dad’s resilience and courage.

David has been a part of our family conversations for eight years now; in fact, I pulled inspiration from a different college essay I had written about David to spruce up the section I had pulled from my Common Application essay about my dad. It seemed natural that he would become the catalyst for coming to terms with my dad’s definition of family. So often, David seemed to push the boundaries of that definition, so I thought our friendship would be a useful lens through which to view my dad. It was important that even as I concluded this piece, I left verbs in their nonfinite gerunds—to indicate that even though I’ve come to various conclusions, I’ve tried to maintain space for those conclusions to change as time passes, as nicknames change, as our histories are written and revised.

*Letters Home* had been in the back of my mind since realizing this year that my mom had never failed to send me a letter once every two weeks, for all of college. As a dedicated supporter of the epistolary novel, I hoped to recreate the open, reflective dialogue often contained within letters. The concept of emotional distillation also played a large part in the way I wrote letters; with less space, words need to count. Admittedly, typing letters is a cheap way to pre-measure space, but I still found it difficult to remain in the confines of a few hundred words. Nonetheless, I used *Letters Home* to reveal my transition from antagonistic to appreciative, to thank my mother for making me a map back home.

Because I felt such raw emotion toward the memoir-style projects regarding my parents, I ultimately decided to refrain from including the section about my sister; though I’d never pretend that our shared existence isn’t already its own separate story, I know that we have much more growing to do beyond the confines of academia. That being said, I know this project will always be an “-ing” for me, because nicknames change, identities shift, and love grows to accommodate those who are important. And without a doubt, I can say that my family is far from finished stitching our pieces together.