Sunshine Scattered

I was raised on sink sermons. Balmy afternoons, sitting on barstools with my sister Sammi and listening to my mother spill the secrets of life. My mom has this proclivity towards sitting on the kitchen counter with her feet in the sink, her eyes gazing through the window towards Mount Olympus. She claims that the sink is the optimal place to feel the sun’s purifying powers. To my mom, Sara, the sun is a cure all to any problem. Growing up, anytime she came into my bedroom she would immediately walk to my window and open the blinds, wondering aloud why I would deprive myself of sunlight. Looking back, it feels fitting that these sunlit talks in the kitchen, prescribed vitamin D (no matter the physical aliment), and sunbathing by the pool cultivated the relationship we share.

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“The sun is one of about 200 billion stars (or perhaps more) just in the Milky Way galaxy alone” (Heather Doyle).

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“It happened again today at the store,” Mom says, placing a grocery bag on the island.

“What happened?” Sammi asks.

“Some lady standing behind me in the line started telling me all about herself. I learned that her husband was living a double-life. One here, the other in Saint George. They just got a divorce.”

Somehow Sammi and I are not surprised. Our mom is the sun—at least to us. It is more than her passion for growing beautiful hanging baskets, her occasionally fiery temper, or even her eternally (and somehow natural) sun-kissed skin. My mom is radiant. She is someone with whom you easefully slip into a conversation. She emanates a warmth that leaves people gravitating towards her at church parties, events, and even grocery stores.

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I read somewhere that planets are challenging to find because they only shine through the light that they reflect from the star they orbit. Most anything intriguing about me I got from my mother. My talents were nurtured through her persistence and praise. I remember stubbornly sitting in the back seat of mom’s silver ford explorer parked in front of the Tanner Dance building. At age seven, I begged my mother to enroll me in dance, but now that I was actually there I felt unsure. None of my other siblings had danced, but being the ever-supportive and determined mother she was, she was going to get me into the studio.

“You go out there and you beat them. You will be the best one, you hear? Now go and dance your heart out,” she said, grabbing me and scooping me out of the car.

I nodded my head with solemn fervor.

My mother gave me so much confidence that when I inevitably fell at times, the shock, and resulting fear of failure became debilitating. While my mother never asked for perfection, it is something I yearn to give her. I want her to see me as bright and shiny as I perceive her. At times this desire to please becomes jealous and unproductive. It is frustrating to see her effortlessly address obstacles, or carry an unapologetic authenticity, while I stumble repeatedly over the same insecurities.

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I never understood how Icarus allowed himself to be so careless. How could he have deceived himself into believing that his makeshift wings could allow him to transcend all of Greece? Surely, he must have noticed the wax melting, the feathers clumping, and the blisters forming on his skin. Why continue an obviously futile ascent?

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At times, the close relationship between the three of us is to our detriment. Like any relationship, it cannot remain stagnant. Inevitably someone feels ostracized or takes offense. Periodically Sara and Sammi get along better and I feel resentment. I think I’ve noticed my mother jealously watch Sammi and me on occasion. My sister and I have grown so accustomed to our mom as our friend, that any type of parental rebuke feels like a betrayal. When my mom confronts me with criticism, her words burn.

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Like any loyal group of best friends, it can often be more entertaining recounting anecdotes about my day than actually experiencing them. Although the dance had only ended thirty minutes prior, I yearned for the companionship of people who understood me. When I was with my peers I often felt awkward and out-of-place. Acquaintances and friends saw me as I really was, while my family overlooked my flaws and saw my potential. I took copious mental notes of the best dressed and most poorly behaved in the terribly decorated high school gym. By ten thirty I figured I had gathered enough information to call it quits. I felt adequately prepared to see my mom’s blue striped pajama bottoms, and my sister’s baggy running shorts.

“You want me to take you home?” My date repeated quizzically.

“Yeah, Noah. I’m sorry, I’m just am not feeling very well.” I did my best to look sick. The poor actor that I was resulted in a comically lacking performance. He looked at me, most likely seeing right through my bluff.

I don’t even think he bothered to drive me home from homecoming. I think his friend chauffeured me.

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\*Undiagnosed chronic illness: proof that there are problems even the sun cannot fix.

The sickness had started gradually. It went by unnoticed until it had wrapped its cold fingers around Sammi’s bowels and rendered them useless. It went by, somehow unrecognized until the consequences of fighting the pain every day had etched its way into her eyes, cheeks, and crevices of her ribs. It was this hollowness that was most difficult to reconcile. That a person so beautiful, whose soul was expansive, would have an illness try to destroy it, by reducing her to hollow spaces stretched over bones. It was something that people pretended was temporary. I pretended it was temporary.

But the reality is that temporary has no timeline.

What I hate most about the illness is how it has the ability to change her perception of herself. She always has this certain effulgence that seems to follow her everywhere, though she seems completely unaware. It was perhaps, this lack of consciousness that makes her so charismatic. This effortless glow that emanated from not having to ruminate about being good but being inherently angelic. It was not until Sammi got sick that I realized how much she resembles my mother. People tell me I look most like my mom— but Sammi is her soul’s spitting image.

42% of Americans are vitamin D insufficient. This vitamin helps the body absorb calcium and phosphate which in turn leads to better bone health. It can be ingested in your diet, but your skin produces it while it is in the sunlight.

My sister is vitamin D insufficient, and hypokalemic (potassium deficient), amongst other things as a result of her illness. But my sister does not have stomach ulcers, anorexia nervosa, gastroparesis, Crohn’s disease, Adenocarcinoma (stomach cancer), gastritis, or MALS syndrome. We are approaching six years of unexplainable, at times, paralyzing pain. In the course of these years there have been multiple visits to the ICU, many perplexed doctors, and roughly 2,600,000 minutes of debilitating stomach pain that no one can alleviate or begin to comprehend.

My understanding of pain is like a bruise. It’s superficial, there one day and completely gone the next. In many ways, I think that is where my frustration lies with her illness. I desire to apprehend her experience, to alleviate some of the loneliness that accompanies her illness that eludes any diagnoses. Because I am starting to see that even empathy can be restricted by lack of experience.

At times I wonder why my mother tells me to sit outside when I have a cold. I suppose she wants me to feel the warmth of the sun and let it comfort my soul.

(unfinished)