

I like to think my father is like Othello.

On Valentines Day one year when I was a kiddo, my dad had to work. When he came home for lunch, my mother had given him an ultimatum, he either go back to work and lose his house, his wife, and his daughter, or he stay.

My dad chose to go to work.

So my mom called the police.

And they got into a fight.

And for the next six months my father was living with his mother, paying \$80 a week to his bail bondsman, and another \$80 to his ex-girlfriend who was his probation officer.

It's dark outside, but not super dark, just the yellow haze of a regular night with all the streetlights lining Dubuque and I'm walking from my house on Johnson to

When my father calls he always says "Hey baby gurl! I was just think bout-cha" and there is never a time when I call that my father has not been just thinkin about me, just braggin' about me, just wonderin' what I was up tah, and sometimes on the right kind of night my dad likes to answer with "Its Bernice Jenkins, what churches yast belongst tah?"

But tonight, while it's dark outside, but not super dark, and the yellow haze of the street lights along Dubuque reflect the swarm of gnats, it's none of these answers. It's just,

"Hey..."

And it's a slow hey, like his usual hey, but I'm on edge and he doesn't sound like his voicemails

"On the road again...I swear to God I am on the road again, I'm thinkin of you every inch of the waaay, ohhh no I'm on the road again! Gimme a call when you

get dis message, it's yerr dad!" (The last part is in his 'Bernice Jenkins' voice, old scraggly, church lady from the south voice.)

"Hey dad... Where ya at?"

"I'm at home."

And I know this is a lie, or at least it must be, because the only reason I'm calling is because my brother tweeted, "well my dad just said "good luck" and walked out the door." And I got scared and called my stepsister, because my brother's phone was dead, and my stepmom Judy was talking about getting into a fight and I know my dad's fight's and I know what he does and I'm...

"Yah?"

"Yeah..."

"Heard you weren't."

"Well. I'm at home. But I'm at you know, the new house, gonna stay here for awhile."

The new house is a house my stepmother bought before she was married to her first husband. For the sixth time in the past three years my family is moving again, to this house, because the mortgage is paid and the taxes are low.

"You gunna be there long?"

"I don't really know."

And my brother is texting me from my stepsisters phone asking what's going on and I don't know what to tell him because I know that one time on Valentine's day, when my mother was still alive, our dad walked out to go back to work instead of staying with us and my mother put him in jail within the hour and he didn't stay with us for six months, but this is before my brother is born and he doesn't know, and I still don't know, how exactly they got back together after that and still later, the 12 other nights in jail and 4 sessions of rehab programs, how they still weren't divorced.

"Am I bad father?"

And the conversation doesn't exactly start like this, but it's the only thing that's important.

"You know, my father. I see him all the time, right? He's been gone damn near 18 years, and I see him. I see him down the street and sometimes, I see him when I look in the mirror and I'm trying really hard. I didn't want to be him you know? I never hit yall. I never hit yall."

And he didn't. My father never laid a hand on us, instead he screamed me into a corner until I fell down crying and begging him not to come closer. Instead he screamed me into the bottom of my closet where I tried to hide under piles and piles of clothes, with the house phone in my hand wondering if I could call 9-1-1, if this was something I could run away from. Instead he screamed at me to scream back at him, to "GROW A FUCKING SPINE, LINDSAY, WHEN A MAN FUCKING YELLS AT YOU, YELL BACK, ARE YOU JUST GOING TO FUCKING TAKE THIS? ARE YOU FUCKING STUPID? FIGHT BACK. FIGHT BACK YOU STUPID SHIT!"

(Later I told him, that because of that moment I was going to get "Take arms against a sea of troubles" tattooed on my chest in his handwriting because he was the only one to teach me to fight back. He cried.)

"Naw, dad, naw you didn't. And hey dad, hey remember, take arms against a sea of troubles ya know? We been through it, ya know?"

This is the summer that I won't go home.

This is the summer that I found an internship in Iowa, this is the summer that two months before this phone call, my father came to visit me because I'd won a scholarship for diversity and leadership in Journalism.

Two months before, I took my father around the entire campus. I pointed out the couches I'd slept on, the friends houses I had partied out, the building that held the class I most loved, the building that held the class I most despised. I showed him the streets I walked on and the expensive apartment I was living in, which was fully furnished, and came with everything I could want, and plenty of food, and my father was so impressed because he hadn't lived in such a nice place since he was 16 and moved out, right before he met my mother and everything went sour.

Two months before, my stepmother had spent the money that was necessary to get my dad back home, and I had over \$2000 saved up to buy a new engine for my car and take care of summer rent, on top of the \$3000 I had gotten from the Gazette Foundation and the \$560 check that I would get after the semester ended and for once in my life I was doing so well, I was doing so well and it didn't matter.

In the elevator after the scholarship dinner, my father got angry.

"They're fucking idiots man, they're just fucking stupid!"

And I kept my mouth shut because that's what you do when dad gets mad, that is the survival skill I learned— except it didn't work.

"But like, dad! Look! Look what I did, okay? I got \$3000 for working so hard dad. Look at this! Dad..." and there were tears in my eyes, because, of fucking course I can't have this, I can't have this moment because I know at home my brother is starving and there isn't money for gas and they're leaving their last apartment without paying the end of the month's lease to go on to another apartment because the money just keeps running out.

...and he turned to me with tears in the corners of his eyes and he said,

"I know, baby, I know. You did good. You did real good."

On the day that he was leaving, he turned to me and said, "I could move up here, ya know? I aint got ties to Texas, maybe I shouldn't have got married, just drag everything up here and move. Land of opportunity. Worked for you!"

I laughed.

I moved to Iowa to get away from him.

The porch steps on Dubuque are cold and damp from the constant storming and my phone is hot against my face and my father is quiet.

"...Hey, you read the bible don't you? Don't you read the bible every night?"

"Yeah."

I don't believe in God.

"Don't you believe in Jesus? You know?"

I tell him I do, but only because I don't want to tell him the complications of that sentence. I tell him I do, because I remember that he needs this. I tell him I do, because maybe, if I did, he would be saved.

837 miles away, I hear him choking on his tears, and I know what his face looks like.

"We'll make it... *We will make it.* You gotta have *faith* that we will make it."

This is how we hang up the phone, both choking out sobs and wondering *how much longer*.

I used to live at this house on 402 Candlelight Ave. It's two stories, with light blue shutters, and the garage is where my mother died.

Your mom...well. She overdosed on over a hundred pills.

Your mom did it on accident. She didn't mean to. She hadn't eaten either, when they did the autopsy, they ruled it as an accident.

Every time I think about it, I think about her, and I think about my father, and I think about screaming, because the people on the street only know me by my eyes and hair and the sound of my mother crying.

That's the house where Othello lived.

My father is dark skinned. When he takes off his shoes he has a tan line that makes it look like his feet are from a different person, except I know they're his because of his toes. Having worn cowboy boots everyday of his life, he has bunions on both of his feet. My dad has Kramer hair too, the guy off Jerry Seinfeld, he has his hair. A large widows peak and all the black and gray peppered hair floats upward into a weird short fro. It makes his face look longer. And when my dad smiles, he smiles without teeth and with his head pulled back, almost like he's

a cartoon character. Everyday, when he goes to work, he wears blue jeans and boots with a big belt buckle and a white collared t-shirt tucked in. On his days off, he wears the Hawkeye shirts I bought him, and thank god, because he use to only have hawaiian print button downs. —This is what he looks like now, I don't remember what he looked like at 402 Avenue.

Once, when he was on probation and had a restraining order to stay a good mile or so away from my mother at all times, he broke it all to build me a little house on stilts for my birthday. He put it together while my mother was out at work or out at her boyfriends or out getting high, but he put it together and damn near finished before she came home.

It had a scary tall ladder you had to climb, but there was a little porch so you could dangle your legs off the edge and look at the pool, and inside it there was a little bar and a real window and he had laid down carpet too. So I just had to show my mom, and I ran outside to grab her from the driveway when she got home, I grabbed her screaming with happiness, and I pulled her inside the treehouse where my dad was too and I didn't understand why they wouldn't talk to each other, or hug each other, and I even remember trying to force them, before my mom quietly climbed back down, called the police, and had my dad arrested.

Sometime after this, my father is driving a car when he hears a voice say, *You need to change. You need to change for your little girl.* And he turns around, even though he's suppose to be driving to New Mexico for some important job, and he comes home and for a year or so everything is okay until my brother is born and my mom develops postpartum depression and my dad just *fucking can't deal with your shit, Sharla. Get the fuck up, we've got bills.*

I would hide in my room while my dad would make holes in the doors and walls that were the shape of my mother's body.

When she dies, my grandmother has my dad investigated for some-degree-murder due to negligence. The police have the evidence. My grandmother sees my face, and my little brother who isn't more than 4 years old, and she drops the case.

Three days after my mom passes away, my dad gets a text message from her phone even though it's been dead for much longer than she has and it says,

I have arrived...Where are you?

When I would call my father, we'd say everything that we needed to in under a minute. Then it was five. Then it was ten. And now it's 30 minutes to an hour. And now he texts me, which is my favorite because I can save them much longer than I can save the sound of his voice.

It's that irony that haunts me.

Three years before this I sat in the living room of our two bedroom apartment (made three because my brother slept in the walk in closet) while my dad screamed at me. One month later, I moved out.

Behind him is a leather bound black book with gold impact lettering. It sits with dust, next to a series of unfortunately unhelpful, self-help books. Underneath it is a few photos, a collage of two girls, happy, smiling, holding hands, and an enlarged photo of a little baby boy holding a donut.

But it's the leather bound black book with gold impact lettering that stands out.

"The Great American Dream."

And this is what I focused on. The Curve of the 'D' the tilt of the 'A', the swooping arcs of the 'G'. That's all that needed attention, anyway. I wondered how long it'd been sitting up there. On this shelf that my mother had picked out years before, when our annual income was in the hundred thousands.

I think I jumped when he said “dream.” He said it loud, proud, as if it meant something to me. As if him screaming it with little beads of spit highlighted by the sun that was creeping in through the blinds would suddenly mean he would have lived one.

I didn’t look at his face. I looked at his shirt, the white collared one he’d been wearing for days.

I looked down at my shirt.

I’d been wearing it for years.

I think there was a tear in my eye but it would have been because I didn’t blink. If I’d blink, I’d die.

There is no more bread, there is no more money to go on for another week, you can’t fuckin drive to school, don’t fucking ask for it, don’t fuckin’ ask for anything, you gotta live without. Ain’t no fucking money in the bank, we can’t even fucking stay here and all y’all do is ask for MORE AND MORE AND MORE!

Are you listening? Are you fucking listening?!

Two weeks after this, we’re moving out, my dad is loading up his truck and he says “You can’t come with us you know. It’s too small, where we’re goin’.”

And I take this to mean that he doesn’t want me, that he doesn’t love me, and that I’m too much of a burden on him instead of what it really means which is that I’d be better off with out him.

But now, now I tell him,

“Dad, you used to be damn shitty. You used to be so shitty, dad. But, you have to know, that you’re much better now, and you’re getting better.”

“I raised you, didn’t I? I got my whole damn family telling me how I couldn’t fucking do it, but look at you. You’re in college, you did it. You did it. And you’re more like me than I thought, you’re ambitious and you’re strong, and I’m very very proud of you.”

In my room he tells me more about his life with my mom. He tells me they were separated for two years, that I stayed in the house and they rotated in and out.

This is the summer that I call my father every day except for the weekends. I call him everyday as I walk from work to my car and drive home. For 45 minutes I tell him about my office work and he tells me about the family.

When we stepped into my room, I show him the corner of my desk dedicated to my mother.

"Remember this? I messed it up." In the bottom right corner of a matted print, is a scribbled out misspelling of my name and then a big "I miss you!" in gold glitter pen. In every other corner is a neatly scrawled paragraph of memory.