

“Familial Geometry”
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I sleep with my legs bent, curled up by my stomach. Preferably surrounded by pillows, leaning up against the wall alongside my mattress. Sometimes I wake up all spread out, limbs taking up as much surface area as possible, because I'm sixteen and don't share a bed with anyone who'd be physically impaired by such extravagance. But usually I lay curled like an infant, still unused to being in a world so full of vast, cold, empty space to stretch out in and fill.

I haven't talked with my dad in five years, or had much to do with him since I was about three years old. But in a photograph of him and me from 1993, the year I was born, I'm sitting curled in his lap, and we are two "V" shapes that fit together perfectly. I've probably outgrown his lap by now, but I've not outgrown the sense of comfort that comes with that shape and position. Leaning, back to the wall with my legs stretched out, absorbing some of that space ahead; nothing can sneak up behind me, and all I see is what's before me. In the photograph, I'm not curled up on his chest; I'm sitting back in my now-usual stance, eye-to-eye with the man who was integral in my making, as we examine each other, two "V"s of the same shape, just different in scale.

I do not think he and I now are the same shape at all, or could ever successfully configure ourselves to fit again.

All of us start off as an oval in our mother's womb, a shape which we tend to cling to and struggle to maintain (as I do in my sleep) throughout our lives. We cry to be held close to our parents' chests, swaddled in blankets, smothered with warmth. In time, we increasingly grow to be more complex, like most things in nature, until we are teenagers with so many protrusions and sharply pointed angles that we barely fit with the people whom we face every day, much less the would-be stranger from a 1993 photograph. With age comes a gradual return to our simplistic origins. People pair off with one another, seeking compatibility, warmth, and someone to lie next to.

Mom and Dad were a pair. She was a bartender and he was an alcoholic. There was compatibility on good days, but ultimately no conformity in their shape. They traveled together; she worked at restaurants and he worked on construction crews. They lived in the desert while Mom was pregnant with me, hosting extravagant dinner parties by night, living day-to-day in a place where killer bees and wild boars wandered in and out of the bar mom worked at with the frequency of regulars.

I was born in Portland, Maine, home of boats rather than the boars and the bees in Arizona. They brought me to a house across the bridge by Willard Beach that Mom had recently acquired --her "lucky-number-seven" real estate deal, as she calls it. Looking at Mom, a culinary arts major who delved into real estate in her mid-twenties, it's important to note a key element of the restaurant business: it's fast cash. You work a few haul-ass nights a week and make the same money most folks make in two. Real estate, when done properly, is no different. You're buying something plain and raw, a fixer-upper with some redeeming qualities, candy-coating it, then

selling it for more. So it's not immensely surprising that she went that route. Mom's good at pushing circles into squares.

In the photograph, the fence surrounding the backyard is new. The fresh pressure-treated wood hasn't yet receded to the dull gray of two years in Maine weather. Dad's jeans are covered in paint. He may have just finished working; building the fence or painting some part of the house. My job last summer was working for Mom full-time: scraping, caulking, sanding, painting. My paint-stained clothes look like my father's.

Today's heated debates with Mom encompass a wide variety of topics, recurring like wrestling maneuvers in WWE, depending on the scenario each round. Boys, my attitude, and the future are popular contenders. Afterward, she always says that she wishes I was still two, because I didn't argue then. Lately, a popular bout goes something like this: Mom says that I should be working for her more, giving her the amount of time I put into sports and school. I say that when she was my age she got to do all of these things and didn't have to work as much as me. She rebuts with the fact that I don't have a father and we don't have two incomes supporting us, to which I reply that my not having a father isn't my fault, or something I should have to make sacrifices for in my life. It's not my fault that she's not married, that she's independent and so I have to fill the void of a man working around the house and helping pay the bills.

This is what I say and think in response to her demands, but in reality I know that it's not a matter of what I say or think is fair. It's a matter of what is and what has to be, and how we struggle to twist and turn into the shapes and figures --the people we have to be to get by. So I clean the house with her when renters are coming in, give tours when there's an open house, and in the summers I'm full-time, renovating, sweating, swearing at the reality of the unfairness of life in a typical, melodramatic teenage fashion.

I tried reconnecting with Dad in 5th grade, under the impression that people change like they do in Disney movies, with AA meetings and the sudden reemergence of their blue-eyed girl. I remembered that he was a good cook and smelled like cigarettes, and that his whiskers prickled my face when he gave me a kiss in the morning before he shaved. But these impressions were like thinking back to my other earliest memories, where with most of them I'm unsure as to whether they're really mine or just bits and pieces borrowed from home videos. A ten year old when I saw him again, my personality was developing from parts of those who surrounded me, from bits of television shows and phrases from my favorite books. While mom sued for sole-custody and the court sorted out visitation rights, I was reacquainted with this intriguing man who was so full of wit, and a dark sort of sarcasm that flowed beneath it like the cold spots of a Maine lake in the summertime. He was still a great cook, and his whiskers prickled my face. He was also still an alcoholic, so our correspondence was brief. I haven't seen him since.

He and I look alike, face-to-face. I have Mom's hair and skin, but I have his grin, his facial structure. I often wonder how much of me is his doing aside from my nature, when he only partook in nurturing me the first few years of my life. I know I have to stay away from liquor, odds against me as they are, but the other ways in which he's made me who I am remain hidden. Ways in which he's affected me even in his absence, or the effect of his absence in and of itself.

Considering the circumstances, I know I'm better off having grown up without an alcoholic father, but the impact of the lack of a father as a whole is a lingering curiosity.

If I were waking up from a doze in the photograph, as it appears I might have been, I wonder what my first impressions were. When I looked into my father's eyes, I am sure I saw comfort therein, and not \$30,000 in back child support or the red rings of a sleepless alcoholic. I felt his warmth and his shape, not the sticky adulteration of paint and sweat drying on my skin in mid-July. I saw his presence then, not the void. When I first wake up every morning, I do not think these thoughts. I think that when I wake up, I'm very much the same person I've always been. It's in the moments, hours, and days after waking that I am so altered from the infant in the photograph, who knew conformity, compatibility, and warmth. It's in these expanses of time after waking that I realize I'm a daughter without a father, with a mother who has too much to handle, and that I'm a daughter with many responsibilities as a result. It's in this time after waking that I have to uncurl my legs from my chest and stretch out into the world to fill the empty spaces that are gaping.