What Now Pops?

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Thesis Abstract:

This project is an introspective narrative focusing on the neurosis and anxiety that is often experienced by undergrads approaching graduation. “What Now Pops?” is an insight into the mind of an archetypal Generation Y student who faces a competitive job market and an unsure future. With no clear path in sight the narrator attempts to bridge the relationship gap between he and his father. He does so with the hope that in analyzing the problems his “Pops” faced as a young man he might be better suited to tackle his own.
Table of Contents

Part One  4
Part Two  10
Part Three  19
Part Four  24
Part Five  38
Part Six  43
Part Seven  45
Photographs  48
I’m having my quarter life crisis three years ahead of schedule, twenty-two and broken down like a lame horse. The questions are typical: “Who am I?” “Where am I headed?” etc., etc., etc. I’ve always been a worrisome person, so this isn’t new to me. There hasn’t been a moment of the day where there wasn’t a situation being played out, an anxiety being ridden, or a pessimistic prophecy weighing down my mind. I’ve felt it in the turn of my stomach, the tightening of my chest, and the combustion of my brain.

College is almost over. Now what? What the fuck am I going to do? I haven’t a clue. I had grand visions for myself as a boy. I wanted to be a brilliant novelist, or a Rolling Stone columnist, or a musician. Each day of my short life provided cause for me to put away these foolish notions. They are foolish aren’t they? Well I couldn’t give a damn if you think so or not because it’s true. A middle class kid from Cheshire Connecticut doesn’t get to Hollywood, or Broadway, or D.C. What about James Van Der Beek you ask? What about Ron Pelillo (the guy who played Horsach on “Welcome Back, Kotter”), Brad Ausmus, Brian Leetch, or U.S. Senator Chris Murphy? They’re not me. They had passion, belief, desire for change; that stuff they write about in self-help books. The way I see it you don’t have a chance out there if you don’t have money, exploitable intelligence/athleticism, networks, optimism, or faith in the “American Dream,” things I’ve never possessed.
I’m exhausted with being easily dismissed for my misanthropic notions, like perpetually sixteen with a copy of “Catcher in the Rye” glued to my hands. It’s in this land of milk and honey where no one can stand to hear the buzzing of an angry bee in their ear. They fear the sting. I temper the bitterness on my tongue. I’m sick of candy apple coating, the belief in the right to happiness, and the pervasive lust for it. You’re wrong about your relevance. If every person on earth perished in an instant the world would flourish in our absence. If every insect were to suffer the same fate the earth would die with them. Regardless of whether we all go in an instant or one at a time there is one primal truth, the only certainty amongst the infinite questions: we will all die. No one wants to talk about it. Everyone wants to wear a smile and brush it under the rug.

“Everywhere we breathe is the smell of plastic. To be a patriot is to be peppy. The citizen is felicitous” (Wilson, 19).

It’s these thoughts and stresses that strand me on a rock of inactive rumination. I know that some day the lights will go out, yet I have no fear of it. This should allow me to fully embrace my life in all of its finiteness! I should do as I see fit without reservation for the judgment of others, or the fear of poverty. Why is it that I can’t? Whose permission am I waiting for? What interstice am chained to and for what reason?

I’m a professional writing major who can't write. I can't write a damn word anymore. Nothing I put down impresses me the way it once did. I'm
uninspired. I haven't learned enough about this craft to be worthy of a degree in it. Everything I think and dream is now trapped inside my head without a key to turn it loose. It either withers and dies or dribbles from my lips onto ears that cannot compute.

I used to write everything down when I was young. I did it without shame. I embraced my emotive lyrics to life, my angsty complaints and my cynical, brazenly offensive, commentary. That was when I was lonely and angry, when I thought my life was as bad as it could get. I never let anyone read what precious words I placed into my notebooks. I even wrote in the school paper under an anonymous moniker. I would let my voice through in assigned essays when the topics were interesting, and my teachers would praise me at times, but I (with a disregard for homework) was never more than "wasted potential." Senior year I thought a break had come. I took Creative Writing with Ms. Yamamoto. The clouds had parted. I thought that I might finally find the Robin Williams to my Dead Poet's Society. Woefully, Yamamoto turned out to be another pedantic professor. She was obsessed with fucking Haiku. She falsely predicated herself on creativity; the respect for all that is different, wild, deranged, immoral, beautiful, ugly, spontaneous, and unrefined, cutting it down with the strokes of her red pen. My writing has always been egocentric, I admit, but it has never lacked perspective, or voice. She said I needed more "variety." I wrote her a poem the next day about how variety is a supermarket. Even all the cookie
packages have different labels. She gave me a “C.” I never sought tutelage in college from any of my professors. I never buddied up. I had a feeling they would all be another Ms. Yamamoto.

My report cards in grade school consistently stated, “Does not take criticism well.” To this day I don’t do well with criticism of my writing. My Thesis workshop terrifies me. I look around and see some of the celebrity student writers: those kids who have aimed the development of their character toward being the next Hemingway, or Salinger. I'm scared of hearing them put me down. It’s torturous to feel as though I'm worth shit and then hear it from someone whom I know is worth as little, yet I am jealous of them. I'm envious of their passion.

I'm a vulnerable person at this stage in my life, back at the finish line of a five-year race that I'm so weary to cross. I don't know what's next in store, not sure if I'm ready. I once had the power to show people exactly what I saw or felt with a pen, but now I feel only the numbness of futility like so many of my generation.

I’ve decided to apply to the Peace Corps, but the motivation is more selfish than altruistic. It's just something I can do for two years that will keep me out of trouble and make me look appealing to friends and family as well as future employers. I want to help people, but I also want to see the world. What I want most, however, is to open my proverbial third eye. I've done the drugs and they
failed to do it. I wound up more “enlightened,” yet in other ways confused. What I want is to shoot an elephant like Orwell, or grow beans like Thoreau. Nearly a year ago, when I first expressed an interest in applying to my family, my Aunt Valerie was supportive. “Just don’t do it to run away,” she said.

“I won’t,” I replied dismissively, but all I could think about was “why not?” Regardless of why I go, or to where, even if I don’t get accepted to the corps, I need to shake the shackles from my ankles. The anchor of a boat drags behind it, preventing flow with the current. With this in mind I’ve decided that I need to look in that same direction. I need to turn backward to the past, attempt to find what it is that my anchor is stuck on, determine why I can’t reel it in and continue my voyage. Carl Jung would say that this worry over direction and worth and purpose comes at a most appropriate time, for people owe their “entire usefulness and reason for existence to neurosis.”

This dilemma isn’t something that any conversation with a friend could cure, or even alleviate. It stems from fundamental aspects of my character, deep-seated ones, seemingly immovable. The task of finding rectitude and comfort amidst the tense struggle between antimonies is left to the mind and to the soul. Old friends know who I was, but not truly who I am now. New friends may know this current me, but they don’t know how I came to be him. They don’t know where I want to go, even less than I do. They’re weathermen with broken instruments.
There’s no coincidence that my name is Gray. Well it’s a coincidence that I should be born at all I guess, but I’ve never denied myself the indulgence in believing that my surname is symbolic. It puts me in the middle, between black and white, known and unknown, real and surreal, right and wrong, sane and insane. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, so I sat down. I’ve never felt as though I was truly a part of anything, any circle of friends, or intimate relationship. I could never commit myself. This has been a point of criticism, but should it be? Don’t the Buddhists profess life along a “Middle Way?” I’m not saying that the Buddhists are right and maybe I’m wrong…this is exactly the back and forth that never ends. It won’t be in the black or the white that I find relief, it’ll be in the ashen muck of the middle. Advice is played out and worthless. It’s either dogmatic, or dribbling with empty optimism. The time has come for fact and analysis. What I need to know now is whether this feeling, this circumstance, is unprecedented. Is it new to the Grays, or am I a new shade? I’ve made it a mission of mine to learn more about my father in his youth, about my enigmatic Uncle Jack, and about my grandfather. I could never have anticipated my status at this point in time. This is something they can’t teach you in school. In talking with my dad I hope to find some relief. I need to know that I’m okay. I need to know that I’m not alone. I want to know what is behind our family name to be sure I’m not failing it.
Since I was a boy I knew that I would have a particular conversation with my father, one regarding his past. He once offered me a single clue, but then left me in the dark for several more years. What I eventually discovered changed my life.

When I was twelve, I accidentally shot a girl from my neighborhood in the head with a BB gun. From my second story window I attempted to make an accurate shot from a hundred or so feet away. I must’ve pumped the thing ten extra times to increase its accuracy, but it was still just a Wal-Mart BB gun. I fired and missed. The shot intended for a mailbox (in hopes of frightening the girl) instead made its mark in her temple where the pellet lodged beneath her skin. My mother told me, “in hindsight I should have taken it out with tweezers,” but it wasn’t her place to decide what was best for someone else’s child. She walked the girl down the block to her house while I ran up to my room and crawled into a fifteen by eighteen inch cabinet under my bed. I cried for fear of what my father would do to me. I’d been hit before, but then again I’d never done something quite as delinquent as this. The cabinet became warm from my hot gasping breaths and then I fell asleep.

I awoke to no beatings. Not a finger was placed on me. I heard my dad walking up the stairs. Being in that cabinet was like being in the body of a guitar; each footfall resonated a foreboding chord all around me. The door of my
bedroom opened. “Get out.” I crawled out of the cupboard like a worm and stood up to meet what, until that year, had been my only judge and jury. He made no move. In the place of enraged physicality was a disdainful scorn in my dad’s eyes. That was the first time I experienced real guilt. I would have rather been beaten.

The girl’s mother had taken her to the hospital, where an accident report was filed. The next day I had four Cheshire cops in my living room; four bored Cheshire pigs, with little else to do than come “assist” in the arrest of a crazed juvenile. I was put in the back of a police cruiser that reeked of vomit and driven to booking while my father followed close behind. They probably would have put cuffs on me if only they’d had a pair that was small enough. A rude pig named Detective Fountain took mug shots of me, had me finger printed, and then handed me an order to appear in court.

Two weeks later I was sitting with my father in the waiting room of the Waterbury Juvenile Court. He hadn’t spoken to me in days, about three. He was reading the paper. I was reading Holes by Louis Sachar (I would have rather had the funny pages but I hadn't the courage to ask for them). I read that book cover to cover during the four hours that we spent there. I kept my eyes in the text save for the moments I would sneak a glance at my father to see if I could glean any emotion from his expressions. He had barely looked at me since the incident. I tried to ascertain how deeply upset with me he was. Could he be so livid that he
couldn’t look into my eyes for more than half a second, or was he just trying to impress upon me the severity of the situation? Usually his fury of disappointment would detonate a “lecture bomb” at volumes I never new existed. Often the angrier my father would get, the harder it was for me to curb my laughter, or relax my grin. It would incite the phrase, “Wipe that smile off your face before I do it for you!” It’s something I can’t help, I laughed in the face of consequence and severity. It’s just an innate defense mechanism, born from the cynicism which courses through my Gray veins.

There was a moment during that time in the waiting room, as I watched kids my own age being led in and out of the courtroom in orange jumpsuits and handcuffs, that my father put down his newspaper with a rustle into his lap. I remember being startled by the noise, and looking up from my book. My father was shaking his head from side to side. I could see his nostrils flaring. He exhaled sharply and said, “I hoped I would never have to be here again.” He paused, with eyes forward, and then returned to reading. His words were soaked in disappointment; each one so heavy that they dropped into my stomach like an anvil into a kiddie pool. I mustered up the courage to ask, “What do you mean?” Then he looked at me for the first time for more than half a second in three days and said, “Someday, when you’re 21 and we have that first legal drink together, I’ll tell you all about it.” I thought, “that’s a whole lifetime away for me.” It was the biggest tease. I’d been hooked, reeled in, and then thrown right back.
It wasn't the first time that I'd gotten in trouble. I’d always found myself in little tiffs with neighborhood kids, gotten caught swearing, been punished for beating up my brother, for stealing from the grocery store, and for playing pranks in school. I was as much a mischievous character as I am today. For days, all I’d wanted to know was what was going on inside my father’s head, behind all of gray hairs I’d given him. I wondered, “Where was my father's threshold for forgiveness?” Was this the straw that would break the camel's back? I couldn't ask him any supplementary questions. I couldn't ask, “What does that mean.” I couldn't fight with him. I was just happy that he'd spoken to me in a tone other than a commanding one. It was the first tincture of compassion that I'd felt since the accident. It felt as though it was the first time in years.

The incident had cost my family five thousand dollars in legal fees and hours of my father's time from work. We must have gone to that court 10 times or more, through the metal detectors and pat downs, to sit next to the broken families and misguided kids. That wasn't a concern of mine anymore. I didn't care what happened to me at that point. It didn't matter to me that I had to see a probation officer or do community service. All I could think about were those words my father said to me, “I never thought I would have to be here again.” I thought about what that could mean. The Waterbury court? Juvenile court? Did my father do something as feckless as I had? Did someone else? Maybe he was referring to something his brother Jack had done. He was a reckless youth. But
why would *that* have made him so upset? That wouldn't have fettered my dad's mind so much that he would feel compelled to say something the way he did. No, it must have been him. My mind still raced, but I couldn't ask him to elaborate. By the time he began speaking to me again I was just glad the ordeal was over.

I didn't have to wait until I was twenty-one to hear some version of the story that I should have heard from my father. I was eighteen years old. I’d started hanging out with my cousin Sean, Jack's son. Sean was in his senior year of college at Southern Connecticut State when I was about sixteen or seventeen. He and I had begun to speak more often after I'd reached an age where he was less likely to get in trouble for getting *me* into trouble. The feeling of disparity in years lessens with age. His grandparents on his mother's side (whom Jack divorced when I was young) had a house on the shore in Westbrook. He invited me to the parties he would throw at the beach house; big “rippers” that would last until the sun came up over the ocean. I was a celebrity, “the cousin,” “the kid.”

Sean's friends were happy to use me in order to get drunken girls to give me a pity flash. They would say, “Hey! Show the kid yo' titties!” so they could get an eyeful themselves. I would bring my bong and some pot, get high and swim naked, belly up in the frigid water, watching the clouds move around the stars. They were some of the most exciting times of my life and the formative years of my relationship with my cousin.
Technically I wasn't allowed to attend Sean's parties. My parents never approved of me going anywhere alcohol was involved. Sean tried to persuade my dad to no avail. It was a simple, political decision for my father. I would resort to the usual deceptions: I would tell the rents that I would be staying at a friend's house for the night, then I’d drive to Westbrook and partake in the debauchery. It was important to me to spend time with my cousin. For the years while he was away at school I'd seen him so infrequently. By sixteen I had seen enough of the world, smoked and drank what it had to offer, that Sean felt I was experienced enough to hang. He knew I needed a sense kinship that I wasn’t getting elsewhere.

My brother Patrick is eighteen months older than me, but a bit younger in respect to level of maturity. He once said, “Matt, you've always been my older brother.” It's a saddening thought. The two of us are fire and water. He went with the flow of my dad’s rules and restrictions, allowing himself to remain sheltered, while I was burning the shelter down around me. He battled with ADD and never made many friends in school. There were often times when I would look across the cafeteria during lunch period to see him sitting alone. I would call him over to come sit with my friends, but I couldn’t always protect him from criticism. Usually I was the one doing the taunting. I was a mean bastard to him and I regret it every day. I think I lashed out at him because I felt like I’d been gypped into having a socially inept “younger” brother, or because I liked to act
toward him the way kids in school did to me in order to displace my aggression.

Fuck, I don’t know. I’m not a psychiatrist. There’s still a lot of time for us to become the brothers we should have been all along.

Sean however was someone I could relate to a little more. He was there to coach me about women and sex when my conservative father was tight lipped about the issue. He was athletic and laid back like me. We quickly became best friends. One summer Sean and his friends Mike and Hue were going to a Tom Petty concert in Hartford and they’d invited me to come along. After the concert we stopped at the Goldroc Diner in West Hartford to eat. We were all tired from the boozing, smoking, and cheering. I don't know how the tale of my dad’s past came about in conversation. I was likely bitching about his hypocrisy that night. By then I’d learned that my dad was a pot smoker. The first pot I’d ever seen came from his pant’s pocket. It had fallen out on the floor when I went to get the shears from his work belt. Soon afterward I broke into his locked cabinet in the basement and discovered a bong, porn on VHS, a shotgun, and a glock (which may or may not have had the serial number filed from it). Sean was “high on life,” energized by the concert and loose lipped from booze. He decided to tell me the truth, as he knew it, about what my father had meant by what he’d said in the courtroom so long ago.

His father and mine were robbing warehouses in New Haven with a crew of other guys. One of the guys in the operation narced on our dads, which got
them arrested. The cops were desperate to bust my uncle whose rap sheet was criminally impressive. Jack made a bargain that would set my father free in exchange for jail time. He was sentenced to three years. That was it, briefer than I expected. It flew from Sean’s mouth like a bullet aimed at my youth and blissful ignorance.

I remember feeling invigorated, as though a great weight had been lifted off me. I finally knew about that big secret. A part of me always knew, I think. There were clues. Hints had been dropped since I was that boy in court. One night my father had found out that I’d gone to one of Sean's parties at the beach. He'd called my friend’s house, the one I'd given as a red herring in order to escape down to Westbrook. The next call he made was to the beach house. My Aunt Louise (Sean’s mother and Jack’s ex-wife) had picked up the phone. She handed it over to me mouthing the words, “Good luck.” I put the receiver to my ear. “I'll see you in the morning,” he said, “hope it was a good time...'click.'” I handed the phone back to my aunt. She looked irritated. “I don't know why your father gets so upset,” she said, “he was quite the hellion back in his day!” Louise is not someone whose parental advice I would swallow without a grain of salt, but I could see her point. However at the time I couldn’t tell what she meant by “hellion.” After hearing what Sean had told me I felt validated. The trouble I'd made for myself was nothing compared to what Pops had gotten involved in. The guilt I'd felt was washed away. I was baptized in a greasy diner.
Resentment followed. How could he never have told me? How could he have been so strict, so callous? How could he have been such a fucking hypocrite all these years: taking my “dope” when he caught me smoking in the house, and smothering me with guilt after every minor offense? I felt betrayed. My dorky dad, who loves Star Trek, sports a wax-curled mustache, listens to Prairie Home Companion, and plays Dungeons and Dragons, was a convicted Larson! The worst feeling, the one I wasn't prepared for, was the feeling of loss. In one moment I'd lost the father I'd known and had replaced him with a ghost. What else didn't I know about this man? Maybe he was a recovered addict, or a wife beater! I just couldn't know. Why couldn't he have just embraced his past? He could have used it to impart upon me the wisdom he'd acquired from his experiences. That's what makes us who we are. Our unique perspectives form a lens through which we interpret reality. It’s crafted by our own unique human experience. That’s what life means to me. I'd been denied my real father. He was a preacher, an actor playing the role of a father, never allowing me a peek through his lens. I don't know what he was so afraid of me seeing. I can't help but think that whatever shame he felt for his past mistakes, had manifested into an obsession with control. In result he couldn't trust me to walk my own path.
I had little room for options after high school. I was a depressed, uninspired, angsty, rebellious, cynical, distrusting, teen without direction. I spent most of my time reading Rolling Stone (I have a lifetime subscription) and other music publications. Then I would sit on my computer and implement my pirating skills to amass a large and diverse music collection. Music is my personal passion. I read about it, cultivate it, thrive on it and live by it, however I’ve never played an instrument for more than a minute. When I was twelve my mother bought me a drum pad and signed me up for lessons to curb my frequent rhythmic banging on anything I was near. I eventually got a kit of my own and, in hindsight, became pretty skilled at it. My abilities were not, however, safe from my defeatist attitude. I would be anxious every week before my lesson knowing that my teacher would know I hadn't practiced enough. I would get down on myself. After about a year of it I quit, chalking up another regret on the wall of lost opportunities.

I come from a conservative home on the north end of Cheshire Connecticut. My dad was the archetypal sponsor for the American middle class notion of, “go to school, go to college, get a job with good benefits, and live happily ever after.” With that always in the back of my mind it was hard to believe in my dream of being a music journalist. I wanted to work for Rolling Stone. My dad would sooner endorse dreams of being a movie star. He never
condemned my aspirations out rightly, but it was implied. He derided anything that didn't fit the formula, the only one he knew to work. His eyes would roll, a fleer would form, and words of cynicism would roll off his tongue. I don't know if this was motivated by a repressed fear of his children being let down, or from his own experience of having his dream of becoming a nurse being defeated. Either way his realism has shaped me and burdened me. It's the “what's the point?” disease.

When it came time for me to register for college the decision came easy. It was a pragmatic one, unencumbered by aspiration. I knew that I wouldn't get any financial help from my parents if I didn't go to a state school, that I wanted to get away from home, and that I should make use of my talent for writing. It was the only skill I possessed that could translate into an academic and professional career. I chose Western Connecticut State. It was far enough away from Cheshire, had a reputable English program, and a student run radio station. Sold.

As soon as he was out of the nest this little birdie drank his face off. I could finally experiment with alcohol the way so many of my high school peers had; the way my father wouldn't allow. He hated alcohol. If I were to come home high off pot it didn't bother him. I would sit down next to him on the couch (where he was usually watching Star Trek re-runs and scanning the Hartford Courant) then he would, eyes still on his newspaper, speak the kind of words every stoner relishes to hear: “Mom made a cake.” I would leap from my seat and
come back with a half-pound slice and a glass of milk and try not to choke as I giggled my way through Romulan phaser-fights and Holodeck debacles. On the flip side, if I were to stumble in with booze on the breath the gates of hell would open and burning sulfur would spew from Pop’s mouth and singe my ears. The “Gray bellow” is a trait the men of my family possess. We're soft spoken by nature, but when provoked, or enraged the bellow emerges from deep in our bellies. Mine hasn't yet fully matured, but Jack's and my father's are aged to perfection and finely tuned. Few things scare me more.

I brought a handle of Jack Daniels to my dorm room the first day. Within a few weeks it was gone. In a few more weeks my eyes had turned yellow with jaundice. I was young, reckless, and foolish, remorselessly playing out an escapade. On one particular night of boozing Bryan (my roommate at the time) and I were relating to one another about our fathers. We were boozing and bonding. Our repressed emotions were stirred and loosened by drink. I recall becoming very intoxicated. What I don't remember was the phone call I'd made to my dad that night. The following morning I was startled awake by my cell-phone ringing. I gripped my head, which I was sure someone had driven a railroad spike through, and picked up the call. It was Sean.

“Hello?” I said.

“You stupid fuck,” he replied. “I told you never, ever to tell your father what I told you.” According to Sean I had cried on the phone to my dad, like
some kind of melodramatic juvenile breakdown. I'd asked him why he never told me about the robbery, or about Jack's trip to the penn. I'd asked him how he could do that to his son. I can't remember what he'd said in return. I really wish I could.

Pops had been caught off guard. He called Jack to discover if he'd been the loose-lipped betrayer of his confidence. Jack, in turn, called Sean and offered him a heaping plate of the bellow. Sean hates the bellow. His trust in me was wounded for a while, but time proved to heal it. I never betrayed it again. My dad now knew that I knew. I felt a bit awkward and ashamed around him (mostly for having cried, which I never do). He never brought up that night in conversation and neither did I. Not much changed between us as a result. If anything it helped him come to terms with the fact that I was going to drink without worry of his opinion of it. In 2006, when I was still just a freshman, he came to pick me up from school the morning after St. Patty's Day. The night prior I had binged myself on green beer at the Polish American club on Ives street. I didn't wake up until Pops had already arrived. I threw together a knapsack of things for the weekend, pounded as much water as possible, and chased it with a handful of Advil. On the ride home I asked him how work was going, knowing that he could talk for an hour about one job, or one manhole he'd been in that week, so that I wouldn’t have to. His talking, paired with the inertia of the moving car, stirred up some serious nausea. “Dad? I'm listening, but can
you pull over real quick?” I was unable to hold the gastric juices and green food coloring any longer. I opened the door, took two paces away from my Dad's Subaru, and vomited what looked like pureed broccoli all over the I-84 shoulder. I wiped my mouth, took a swig of water, and got back in the car. “What were you saying?” I said. Pops went right back into his tale of subterranean gas leaks and raccoons playing trapeze on power lines (needless to say they wind up fried) without hint of a bellow brewing.

That was Dad and I: The Teenage Years. I resented him and viewed him as a paradoxical enigma. There was a shift when I reached my twenties. Resentment turned into reverence. What was an enigma became a simple formula. My perspective changed its angle from a child looking up to a man looking straight ahead.
I was in my apartment making fish sticks one night at 1:00 AM. I’d been crash studying for a test on the following day, unable to sleep after drinking two and a half cups of coffee. On the fridge was a picture of my parents. In it they're standing on a pier with a cruise ship they were vacationing on behind them. My father is wearing a baseball cap, a white polo shirt, and khaki pants that sit high up on his belly (like what was considered the “waist” in the 1940's before the sexual revolution caused the belt line to drop; where my grandma always tries to pull mine up to). My mother, who is a good deal shorter than my dad, is smiling and hugging her husband while pressing her head against his chest. Pop's cheeks are pushed up high on his face, much like his pants are on his waist, and underlined by his mustache, which connects to his sideburns. With any more volume in his chops he could be Union General Ambrose Everett Burnside. Looking at that photograph, with the sizzling of fish sticks cooking behind me, I fully realized my love for the pair. In that moment I remembered what principles my life is predicated on: the conservatism of my dad and the liberal values of my mother both originate from an insurmountable and selfless love.

Whatever they did, despite any misstep in parenting I could try and fault them for, it was to the best of their ability. I think that’s anything a competent parent can do. My mother loved me as hard as she could and told me all I needed to know to level out the Catholic, conservative, political press conference style
dictations of Pops while he taught me the benefit of a hard day’s labor tempered by a “life sucks and then you die” philosophy. When I was fourteen I asked him for some money. “Get a job,” he said.

“I’m fourteen,” I replied.

“So? Find a paper route.”

“Zach has the only one there is,” it was hard to believe he was serious. He’d decided right then and there to repeal my allowance.

“You’re smart, I’m sure you’ll come up with something.” Soon after I was working under the table as a dishwasher at a deli down the street. I’ve worked hard to have money in my pocket ever since, never being without a job for more than a month. I have my own apartment, my own car, and pay for them with time and sweat. I’ve performed adequately as a student, despite their lack of interest in it. I stay in touch with my family. I’m a self-sufficient man, dependent on no one, answering to no one, especially not my father.

When I go home to my parents’ house I go to a place I never knew while growing up. I’m a guest in a house. Like a guest I have no desire to stay long. My mom is an overworked nurse and a depressed woman. My absence has taken a great toll on her. I was very close with her as opposed to my dad since he was often guarded and incommunicative (plus I could swear around her, a bad habit I picked up working in kitchens). I brought a bottle of wine to dinner once and my
mother was impressed by it: “You brought wiiine?” she said with a tone of “awww, how cute!” “It's like you're going to dinner at someone's house.”

“I am,” I said, “I'm having dinner at your house.” With that statement she was saddened. She tried to hide it. “No,” she can't accept that the nest is less one bird, “This is your house too.” That can be hard to swallow when your bedroom is now home to an unused treadmill, the clothes that won't fit in your mother's closest, and all three of the cats whose hair you can’t stand being on your bed.

My dad’s a Cable repairman for AT&T. The working class hero seems optimistic and even stoic. He's a good actor like his son. For years he has done his best to head a family and maintain a home, all the while prioritizing time spent in front of the TV, regardless of what chores, cleaning, or repairs need be done. For two months a can of paint from a typically unfinished project sat on the porch, marking neglect with rust. Though his attitude seems positive I know that there's worry and pain he hides for my sake. I wonder if that side of him, which I remember seeing more often as a child, is merely masked by his happiness to see me. One night, when I was about twenty, the old man was doing bills on the dining room table. I was standing just off the doorway in the kitchen. I watched him as he rubbed his forehead, something he did often when signing away his money, but something was different about this occasion. He rubbed and rubbed. He even did a “double-hander,” wiping up and down his face with both hands before bowing his head, moving them along his hairline to his neck where he
rubbed some more. I stepped up to him, grabbed his shoulder, and asked what was wrong. He was a bit startled at first, unaware that I had been witness to his moment of vulnerability. His eyes were red and glossy.

“I don't get it,” he said, “I just don't get it.” I knew then that the gloss was from welling tears. “I've done everything the way you're supposed to, but it just never adds up. I thought I was doing everything right.”

Up until then I had never seen my dad so broken down. I don't remember more than a single tear coming from his eyes when his own father died. As a kid I recall asking my parents at dinner, “Are we poor?” or “Are we in debt?” Pops would answer with something along the lines of “We're fine Matt,” or, “No, we're not poor. Now finish your beans.” That moment in the dining room was the first time that I'd seen the man behind the father. It made me ill with grief for him, yet proud that he would show me his wound so that I might heal it. That moment inspired me to be financially independent. I didn't want to burden his pockets a day more than I had to.

I've lived a little. I've gone to school, had relationships, done some drugs, gone to enough concerts to have trouble recalling them all, traveled the east coast, seen the west, been in a car for twenty hours, picked up hitchhikers, partied, been arrested (as an adult), worked third shift, stolen, been stolen from, beaten, been beat, been chased by the cops, gotten away from the cops, had a radio show, met famous people, been hospitalized for e-coli poisoning, lost my mind, found it, lost
it again, then realized I never needed it to begin with. I treasure all of these experiences and will never allow myself to regret them. They've taught me more than any book or teacher ever will. They've made me what I am and shaped the way I see the world. Should I ever have kids, though at the moment I'm hoping I won't, I would never deny them the knowledge of what I've seen. I'd tell them all of it when each tale is appropriate to tell and try to teach them the lessons I've learned. I wouldn't want them to repeat my mistakes. My dad didn't feel this way. He felt as though it wasn't important. Lessons, to him, ought to come from school and from church. I can't sympathize with this way of thinking. The best lessons come from the wisdom of others. I may never have smoked pot if I knew my dad had. As a teen I wanted to be anything _but_ him. I may have kept my laces straight and double knotted if I’d known. Then again…the more I think on it…maybe I wouldn’t have?

Eventually, after I'd learned of his past, I set aside the desire to know more. I didn't need to know. What did it matter? He’s my father. He is someone I admire and respect, despite obvious flaws. Each of his mistakes is a reason to love him. Each one makes him more akin to me. However, after having lived a little and grown into my boots a bit, the idea of confronting my father about “the night in question” crossed my mind again. I wanted to hear it from him. It meant something more to me than just the satisfaction of a curiosity for my father's sins. I hoped it would be leverage to pry the anchor free.
I left class one afternoon with a lot of mixed feelings and a busy brain. All I could think to do was head to work and pick up my paycheck. I didn’t want to be around anyone but was afraid to be left with my own thoughts. I tried to keep my focus on external things like the man pushing the shopping cart full of cans past Pippa's, or remembering to look for a Halloween costume at Party Depot as I passed it on South St.

La Zingara, an upscale Italian restaurant in Bethel, was quiet save for the usual banter of my coworkers before the dinner shift. Nicole was laughing at something Kate had said, and Roberto was going over that evening’s specials with the new guy Eric. I decided to sit at the bar and have something to eat. I laid out my notebook on the bar and worked over some ideas for a solid outline to my thesis. I ordered Makers with just a splash of water and a little ice and the sautéed calamari with smoked tomato broth and truffle oil.

I left two Makers later with a decent outline, but it was only the second of many more versions to come. I was confident but I kept hearing my professor’s voice in my head, “You need to uh... Do what you can because it's getting close now.” He was subtly referring to me speaking with my father. By that time I’d only a few rants written. My classmate Jake had fifty pages finished already and likely more to come. No surprise to me I was the furthest off schedule and even further off track. I pulled over into a parking lot to think. I ran my week's schedule through my head. It was Thursday. I would be working through the
weekend, be in class Monday and Wednesday night, and Tuesday night I had a
date with Suzy. Fuck. There wasn’t any better time. The bourbon had made me
loose and impulsive. Though I didn’t feel prepared for it I picked up the phone
and called him. A part of me hoped that he would be playing poker with his
friends, or working late, but he wasn’t. My dad sounded happy to hear from me,
and happy to know that I’d be coming home for dinner.

I have an intimate relationship with the stretch of I-84 between Cheshire
and Danbury. I’ve traveled it more times than I care to count; it can claim a
quarter of the 100,000 miles I’ve put on my odometer. That bit of highway has
provided me with both solace and grief. I’ve driven it while screaming, and while
near to tears. I blew out the speakers in my Nissan while passing through
Middlebury. Other times I’ve gone the entire distance with only the crackle of
my cigarette to be heard with each drag. Four years ago I relished heading east,
now I can’t wait to be westbound again.

I was filled with curiosity and a vexing feeling in my gut. I couldn’t really
surmise how it was all going to come about. I pictured my dad and I at Sam The
Clam’s, sitting at the bar splitting a plate of whole-bellies with extra tartar sauce.
I’d never had more than a drink or two at dinner with him before. Would the
night end with us angry at each other, or would we walk out of there like
newfound friends? My mind raced faster than the wheels beneath me. I sucked
cigarettes down like they were what my lungs were meant to breathe, and pushed
the stereo to its limit. The blown speaker rattled like the tail of an angry diamondback.

My mom was in her PJs when I walked in. She likes to get into her “jammies” as soon as possible. She and Jake, my Jack Russell Terrier, were sitting on the couch watching TV. Jake was my fourteenth birthday present. I’d wanted a dog since I was seven, but Dad resisted. “You can have a dog when you’re fourteen,” he’d said. That was literally a lifetime away for a seven year old. He’d settled on the fact that I wouldn’t take care of it and that the responsibilities of dog ownership would fall into the lap of he and my mother. In retrospect I can’t say that wouldn’t be the case. What first-grader wants to wake up every morning at six to walk his dog in the New England Winter?

Nevertheless, I held him to that promise. I loved that dog like a brother; “We was like peas and carrots,” as Forrest Gump would say. Without him I probably wouldn’t have made it through my teens. I left Jake to the supervision of my parents when I went to college. I offered him up to be adopted by two budding empty nesters. They spoiled my dog, turning him into a fat, disobedient, territorial son of a bitch. He’ll rarely let me walk him anymore. We get as far as the street before he plants his paws firmly on the ground, causing me to strain the leash. My own dog would rather sit there with the scruff of his neck pulled up and wrinkled into an accordion than to walk with me around the block. Then I
walk him back into the house, hand the leash to my dad, and watch them leave, not to return for another hour.

Pops came through the door only ten minutes after I had. He seemed to be in good spirits, but he was hungry. When I was younger sometimes he would come home from work, open the door, lean in and shout up the stairs to us, “Let’s goooo! Get in the caaaaar!” then he’d immediately hop back into his red Subaru station wagon. There was no need for explanation. My mother, brother, and I all knew that particular bellow meant we were headed for Young Young’s, the Chinese buffet up the street, because hunger had overcome Dad’s patience for food to be ordered and cooked.

I offered him a free dinner at Spartan’s: an Italian American restaurant (run by Greeks) that my parents had claimed as their usual spot at the behest of every self-help book for life after kids. Pops chose a corner booth in the back, away from all of the other patrons. He knew what was coming. Jack must have hinted at it (I’d spoken with him several times over the phone before getting the courage to confront my dad). I’d only described to him the concept of my thesis, that it was about Jack and, in some ways, my family, but somehow he must have known. I was nervous and excited and eager and scared and twisted up into a knot I hoped would soon be unraveled. Dad looked like Dad. He was calm, like the world was his oyster. He ordered a Michelob Ultra. I opened the discussion plainly. “Tell me about the events surrounding your arrest and Jack’s
imprisonment.” I’d had a page full of questions, but I found that I had little need for them. After the horse was spurred he ran until there was no road left to run.

Pops took a sip of his beer and began the story.

In 1976 my father was living with his brother Jack in Cheshire, where I would later grow up and attend school. Jack had “found” the house in the woods off a dirt road. It was covered by trees and infiltrated by thick vines and weeds. Most of the windows were broken; there wasn’t any indoor plumbing save for cold water from the kitchen tap, and there was no heat (eventually Jack would install wood stoves). The pair determined who the landlord was and moved in, making an arrangement to deduct the cost of any repairs they made from the rent. At the time Pops was working at Bozzuto’s food and grocery distribution in Cheshire driving a forklift. Jack however was cut from a different cloth. He didn’t care for work at all. He was the type to find alternate means of income, less than legal ones. Jack was a thief.

What I didn’t ask my father, or have to ask my uncle, was how much he looked up to his brother. Dad came from a sheltered, intensely strict, and religious home. Jack had not. He had been made a ward of the state when he was about thirteen years old as a result of his deviant and rebellious behavior. When my dad left home (a product of the “eighteen and out” philosophy) he made an effort to reestablish a relationship with his elder brother. In turn Jack admittedly “roped” him into certain aspects of the life he was leading. Being one of the few
people that he could trust my father became accomplice to most of Jack’s robberies, though Jack most often “tried to keep him out of harm’s way” by posting him as a lookout armed with a walkie-talkie.

Jack would rob anything he could. He would steal televisions, appliances, and liquor “enough to fill up a whole room.” On one occasion he walked into Yale’s Alumni Hall and took all the food he could carry just to feed his hungry hippie friends outside. In fact, he probably cost Yale quite a lot of money over the years. He related to me another story about how he had walked into several buildings on campus, rolled up thousands of dollars worth of Persian rugs from off their floors and then walked back out of the front door with them. Ever seen a robber on TV distract a guard dog with a raw rib eye? He’s done it. Jack was born with the compulsion to take whatever he wants. I grew up hearing about how he and my father would go fishing at a fish hatchery near Thalberg School in Southington. The duo would run around town all day causing whatever havoc and mischief they chose to. On the way home they would swing by the hatchery with a net, scoop out a bunch of fish, and tell my grandma they’d been fishing all day. She would ask, “why do they always have so many eggs?” to which the brothers would reply with a shrug of their shoulders.

Some time in ‘76 a friend of Jack’s by the name of Owen Charles, “Charlie,” moved into their house. He had never been involved in any of the Gray Gang’s heists before, but had been privy to the information surrounding
them. He was a trusted friend of my uncle’s. On one particular night Jack felt as though he trusted Charlie enough to have him lend a hand in a job. Both my uncle and my father, to this day, can’t recall why they let Charlie tag along. I think this is due to a mechanism that most of us possess which I like to call “selective memory,” or “ignorance shielding.” They subconsciously forced themselves to forget the reasoning behind their decision, one that would cause them great misfortune.

The target was a sporting goods store in Hamden. Jack was to play the role of the thief while my father and Charlie acted as lookouts (Jack had hit similar stores before and had even stolen an underwater scooter used by scuba divers from one of them). While my uncle was inside something happened that they hadn’t anticipated. Just like in the movies the three of them began to hear sirens approaching. Jack had tripped a silent alarm. He yelled for everyone to run and the gang split up. The crew was caught by surprise. Most places at the time hadn’t even any cameras, let alone magnetic alarms.

“I don’t remember all the details,” my dad said. I ordered another round from the waitress. He was shielding again. How can you not remember all the details of one of the most pivotal moments in your life? I know he did a lot of drugs in his day, but seriously? I reiterated to him what his brother had told me about that evening and he endorsed it. According to Jack he had fled the scene in the van and eventually picked up my father while Charlie, who had split off in
another direction, was likely picked up by the *cops* beforehand. He had been attempting to hitchhike on Route 10. The police apprehended him on suspicion likely due to a combination of his proximity to the break-in and his skin color: black. It was the seventies. I can’t dismiss the possibility of racism being involved.

Owen Charles was looking for deliverance so he squealed like a piggy. He told the boys in blue everything they wanted to know about my father, my uncle, and the whole operation in hopes of getting off scot-free. In that statement he gave them the address of the house in Cheshire. Meanwhile the Gray Gang is heading home in the van. The two were pulled over (probably for the same reasons, but the second being their long hair and beards as opposed to the color of their skin) and when their address was determined they were busted and thrown in the Whaley Avenue lockup. Neither my father nor Jack ever heard from Owen Charles again.

The good ‘ol days of rooms filled with booze and Persian rugs were over. The cops raided and repossessed everything from the Cheshire house. My dad’s girlfriend at the time hired the only attorney she knew: a fat *real estate* lawyer that no one in the courtroom respected. Even a well-respected attorney probably couldn’t have helped my uncle. He had a reputation in Hamden. It was where he had grown up. When Nonni put him out he’d gone to High Meadows, a school for troubled and/or abandoned boys. It was there that he lived until he was
eighteen, after which time he stepped out to make the world his playground, starting with Hamden and New Haven. He’d been in front of this prosecuting attorney before. This time leniency wasn’t on the menu. Even as kids Jack would take the rap for his younger brother when he’d gotten into trouble. Nonni had a preferred disciplinary weapon of choice, a one by one inch piece of wood, with which my uncle had an intimate relationship. He’d often taken a beating in my dad’s stead. On this occasion it was no different. Jack agreed to serve three years in prison so that his little brother could go home. Pops got accelerated rehab; Jack got prison beatings.

My uncle has spent time living in our basement twice while I still lived with my parents. My dad has kept Virgin Mobile’s stock afloat with the amount of pre-paid cell phones he’s sent him. I’m sure he could’ve paid for a year of my tuition with the loans he’s given Jack. I remember my mother complain about him when he had been dwelling in our cellar the second time around. “Jesus, I don’t know why your father keeps throwing money at him when it’s all probably going toward pot or something anyway.” It all makes perfect sense now. While Jack suffered three years of incarceration (the lockup, to medium security, to minimum, then to a halfway house) my father was given another chance to clean up his act, which he did…for the most part.
I knew neither of my granddads. Sometimes I theorize that this was a great injustice to the development of my character. If they’re looking down, if that’s what ghosts do, how would I look to them? Am I the grandson they’d hoped I would be? The man?

My father’s dad died first. He was my Poppi. All I can recall of him are his arthritic hands. His knuckles were like golf balls attached to his leathered fingers. They protruded plainly while he would grasp a pen to play tic-tac-toe with me. When he counted his worn digits the total always came to eleven, every time. I never understood. I knew he was wrong, it was impossible, but I was seven and I believed him.

I remember his warm voice: it’s rasp and grain, burnt from smoke and the airborne byproducts of the forge he’d labored in. I remember his eyes, like my father’s. I remember his funeral. I remember asking my dad why he wasn’t crying. Everyone else was crying. “Just because it doesn’t show, doesn’t mean it isn’t there,” he’d told me.

John Patrick Gray was a first generation Irish American. He married my grandmother, Vita Cardaci, a first generation Sicilian American on June 12th, 1946. She was a secretary. He was a veteran of the Army Air Core and a factory
worker. He’d been dishonorably discharged from the war for having killed some of “The Queen’s Ravens” with his gun in the ball turret of a B-17 bomber.

The newlyweds worked together as nurses’ aides at the Fairfield Hills Asylum for a year to save money for a home in Connecticut. They moved into a little post-war neighborhood in Southington. The Gray family was the smallest on the block with only four children (Michael Machowski, my dad’s childhood friend, was one of twelve). John Patrick Jr., Jack, was the first-born, followed by Michael Joseph (my father), Anne Marie, and Alice. The dynamic was typical of the Baby Boomer era: my grandmother stayed at home to take care of the children while Poppi worked.

My grandpa never finished high school. He’d toiled hard for his bread every day of his life. He was as a machinist at the Pratt and Whitney plant in Cheshire when my father was a young boy. The job was stable. It paid well, fed his family, and would provide a worthy pension. In 1960 a man with whom Poppi worked was injured on the job. He would be out of work for a substantial amount of time, a duration that threatened the well being of his family. Upon learning of the man’s condition my grandpa took a hat and went around the plant floor soliciting spare change as charity for his friend and coworker. This was against union policy, but, if he was anything like his grandson, he did what he thought was right despite the rules. He damned the rules for his fellow man and in doing so The Man fired him. Poppi was out of a job.
To make ends meet he scrambled for work. Jobs came and went. At one point he was working three at a time. Nonni stayed home and fulfilled the role of homemaker and disciplinarian. I can’t imagine her being much of a homemaker however. Her children who don’t scorn her, my father and Annie, say that the poor circulation in her legs often afflicted her, causing her to rely on delegating chores to her children. From the opinions I’ve gathered from Jack and Alice, and from my mother, she was self-absorbed and lazy. Nonni ran her family the way she had observed it should be as a child of a single father, except she didn’t ever have to leave the house like he did. She was the taskmaster with a stick, devoid of tolerance for backtalk or misbehavior. Poppi was the temperance to her tempest, but he was rarely home save for Sunday. After mass and lunch he would nap in his favorite chair, maybe have a beer or two. He liked to take the coffee left over from the morning and drink it on ice in the evening (an innovator before his time). That’s really all I know about him.

We try to remember our loved ones favorably, don’t we? We’re told to retain the good and forget the bad. I don’t understand the practice. In forgetting the mistakes, the misgivings, the flaws, and the fuckups, we forget that person altogether. Just as we need melancholy to know joy we need to know one’s faults to determine their strengths. Every biography worth publishing requires a chapter on the achievements of that person in the face of handicap or tragedy. Man’s first
step on the moon means shit if you don’t first consider that we were once apes
with sticks.

In the early 1980’s John Patrick Junior was driving with his father’s
brother Marty. My great-uncle told him about the time Poppi had gone to jail.
He’d committed petty theft and been sentenced to a year’s incarceration. To this
day my own dad doesn’t know that. I won’t tell him. He had his secrets and now
I have mine.

A few months before his death in 1994 Jack brought his ailing father to
lunch at Grace’s Diner on Route 322. The two sat down and ordered sandwiches.
Junior and Senior bantered back and forth for a while. Jack was, for one of the
few times in his life, self-conscious about what he was saying. He was speaking
to a dying man. Poppis eyes darted back and forth a few times to a red headed
woman sitting across the restaurant.

“Do you see that woman there?” he said to his son.

“Yeah.”

“I had an affair with her for years.” The old man picked up his coffee and
sipped at it, glanced at her, and then out the window, squinting as the sun touched
his eyes.

Jack didn’t know what to say, but he knew what his father had meant to.
He wasn’t saying this to shock his son. He wasn’t looking for praise for having
bagged a trophy the way a young man would. This man was at the end of a hard
life lived. He’d worked himself into an early grave. He’d killed. He’d seen the worst and, hopefully, the best that his small patch of the earth had to offer. He had nothing to prove to anyone. Jack looked at his dad and gave a shrug of approving nonchalance.

“Good for you Dad,” he said earnestly. The booth they sat in was one of confession. Poppi wanted to know that, in spite of his actions, he was still a good man. Nothing is more indicative of that fact than the approval of a son, or of a father. Jack told his brother about what had transpired that afternoon, but was met with frustrated denial. My dad actively practices “forgetting the bad.” As a strict Catholic he may not like to think of his father as an adulterer, but even Jesus knows that none of us may cast the first stone.
I thought that this endeavor of self-actualization by way of uncovering family history would spur a radical change in me. I thought that I would walk out of the diner where I interviewed my dad with a new sense of reality and a change in gait. I thought it would make me a man, help me put away the misanthropy. Maybe it would have been more dramatic if I were younger, if I hadn’t made as many mistakes and had as many misfortunes under my belt. After confronting my father, and cross-examining my uncle, and stirring the settled past, I haven’t changed. I’m still scared and unsure, worn and ready to quit. What’s comforting is the knowledge that I share this feeling with most everyone. Even if they aren’t having this crisis now they will at some point. If it’s not about career and family it will be about religion and death, or marriage and kids.

Everyone experiences the same life, just a different version. This anxiety I feel is a symptom of the human condition. I’ll never be “cured” of it, but I will find distraction from it for a while before I’m haunted again. To be rid of this would be to forfeit that which makes me akin, not only to my family, but to the human race. Maybe someday I’ll learn how to funnel these thoughts onto a medium in some way better than what I’ve struggled to transcribe here. I’ve struggled. Through the ashen muck I’ve surfaced to breath fresh air. I am not my father, or my uncle, or my grandfather, but I’m not much different. We make choices, some good, some bad, but we live with them. We’re not evil. We’re not
bad people. We’re fallible fools. A smart man knows that he knows not a damn thing. Like Lennon said, “There ‘aint no guru who can see through your eyes.” No amount of scholarship or meditation is going to save us from this beautiful, miserable human condition. I can’t get it out of my head, the, “What now?” It’ll be there when I breathe my last breath, “What’s next?”

As for now I know that whatever choice I make it will be the right one… because it won’t be the wrong one. My dad made a choice that night to rob a store. If he hadn’t then he wouldn’t have set foot on another path. He wouldn’t have decided to go to nursing school and work those night shifts as an orderly to pay tuition. He wouldn’t have whistled at that cute redheaded nurse every day for a week. He wouldn’t have married her. They wouldn’t have had kids…
I’ve been making excuses. The one I’ve used to rationalize the lack of direction I’m experiencing is a lack of passion. “Passion,” as I’ve conceptualized it is a dedication to an art, or cause, or a specific line of work. The passionate writer writes without worry of criticism and with a love for his craft. He might have every issue of The New Yorker on DVD-ROM, a library of books read, avarice for the written word. A politician’s passion is for change, progress, and likely power too. A DJ spins records with desire to change the mood of his listeners, to awaken their knowledge of new music, and to further the careers of deserving musicians. I still believe in this idea of passion, but have read something recently that has given me pause and built up what was once a defeatist, dogmatic crutch into a stage on which to preach my gospel:

“Love is nothing but Joy with the accompanying idea of an external cause” (Ethics, part III, proposition 13, scholium)... Spinoza was convinced that every individual has an essential nature that it strives, throughout its existence, to realize and to sustain. In other words, he believed that there is in each individual an underlying innate impetus to become, and to remain, what that individual most essentially is. When Spinoza wrote of “that passion
by which the [individual] passes to a greater perfection,” he was referring to an externally caused (hence a “passion”—i.e., a change in the individual that does not come about by his own action, but rather a change with respect to which he is passive) augmentation of the individual’s capacities for surviving and for developing in fulfillment of his essential nature. Whenever the capacities of an individual for attaining these goals are increased, the increase in the individual’s power to attain them is accompanied by a sense of enhanced vitality.

-Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth*

Frankfurt is referring to the Portuguese-Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza. This idea, as I have come away from it, verifies my concept of passion: a drive to fulfill and maintain an individual’s essential identity. However, it also describes passion as a change that occurs passively. For all the time I’ve spent claiming there was an absence of passion in me I remained within foolish belief. You can’t look for passion. It needs to find you. It’s like catching a virus that rapidly multiplies until, before you have a chance to fight back, it has absorbed you completely. I may not have yet found passion in my life nonetheless I have been passionate for life. As for a sense of direction there is little need for that. As
long as I’m above ground I’m ahead of the curve. Everyone moves in the same direction: forward.

That’s why I want to go to the Peace Corps. I’ve dried up all of the resources, all of the places that might have given me a starting point for greater things. This well has dried up. I’m looking to better myself. There is no way for me to do that unless I take a step back to see what needs improvement.

My dad eventually ran out of ways to punish me as a boy. One summer he sent me to a convent in Meriden to volunteer (I think that was after I’d accidentally set fire to my bedroom carpet). I may have perceived it as punishment at first, but I soon realized that it was a gift. I went back on my own accord over the years to work with the Franciscans there. The work, the sweat on my brow, was a gift for them and a lesson in selflessness for me. I worried when making my decision to apply to the Corps that it was a selfish choice. It’s advantageous in developing career opportunity, in satisfying my thirst for travel, and it’s a form of escape from a staid home. However, like the time and sweat I gave for those nuns on their farm my presence will ultimately help more people in more ways than I can imagine, regardless of the motive. In the end I’ll have widened my lens a bit more. Through it I’ll see a proud father. I’m hoping he’ll see an even prouder son.
My Father’s Family
Poppi and Jack
His Son