Nobody’s Home

I was seventeen years old when I learned I had a son. Though never mentioned aloud, the revelation lay in the way he looked at me.

It is a dismal, autumnal eve on 1218 Carmel Drive, one of those nights where the sun calls it quits much before the world is ready to let it go. I hold in my hand the empty space of where three corona bottles once filled, whose fragmented skeletons now scatter the poolside cement. What a pool. What a yard. This house, my god, is it immaculate. Horrifyingly so. The house of 1218 is the result of one American dream fulfilled and an obligatory 60 hour work week to be perpetuated. Boasting itself as yet another suburban fixer-upper gone right, my son is its Leonardo Di Vinci.

But back to my hands, which yearn for another bottle to break as much as my son yearns for the liquid inside it. It was but two minutes ago that I was alone in my room, attempting to distract myself with statistics homework. In vain. Like a lion calculatedly stalking its prey, I obsessively ruminate over the sounds coming from the living room, dissecting each to tell me what my son, my prey, is doing. ‘Tis all quiet but for the murmur of the 6 o’clock news, a drone of incessancy I know can’t hold my son for long. But there he sits, like a good ole boy should, attempting to distract himself with the incessancy. In vain. Five minutes into the drone, I detect the sloppy slaps of two overly worn slippers slurring against the ground, parrots mimicking their owner’s voice. I wait, hungry for the time to pounce. Now is not the time.
The painful, slow creak of the garage door cries through the house which, up until this point, has never cried so unwillingly. It does not want to be opened and lets its stubborn resistance known as it echoes throughout the house. My son ignores its pleas. Now is not the time.

Motionless, my pencil and I sit commiserating in our denial, convincing ourselves son is not doing what we suspect. An attempted return to statistics homework gravitates to contemplating the probability of my son grabbing another beer.

“Chhhk.”

The carbonated pressure pop of another unnecessary beer can answers my question. And, like a dog salivating upon hearing the faint ding of a bell, the beer can is my conditioned stimuli, and I respond Pavlovian-ly.

It is time.

But what little significance time has when one is drunk. My son, inebriated by the toxins found in the bottles I have now gotten ahold of, and myself, plastered by the anger found joyriding my bloodstream, are allies in our belligerence.

A reaction from him is all I want.

So, with goal in mind, hole in heart, anger in blood, I perform a scene of all scenes.

Brain and body severed now, I watch myself outside myself, ruthlessly smashing bottles duetted with an uninterrupted, swift chain of profanities. Good god where do these words come from? Mentally inept from controlling their fiery exit, they leave my mouth faster than I can give them permission to do so.
I just want a reaction.

After one year of practicing the calm/cool/collected “I feel blank when you do blank” statements, ineffectively so, I am testing out new tactics here; shock tactics. By causing a vicious, savagely overcome ruckus such as this, perhaps my son will learn the probability that his continuous drinking caused this. An answer we both know is 1:1.

When all is said and smashed I dig deep into my son’s eyes, begging with them to show me something other than numbness. After such a brilliantly passionate performance, I search expectantly for one standing-ovation of a reaction. I am applauded instead by an all too familiar drunken stupor. The one that tells me the lights are on but nobody’s home. The one that feels nothing for, and yet takes everything away from, its viewer. It is the one that tells me, upon seeing its infant-like vacancy, that at the age of seventeen, I have a son. A 60 year old man-of-a-son, whom two minutes prior I called my father.

John Middle-Nameless Mackenzie was born September 30th of 1955 to a family of seven, a household so poor they couldn’t afford him a middle name, he jokes. Born in Borehamwood, England, or “B-wood” as the cockneys fancy calling it, my father embodied everything it meant to be an “east-ender” in the sixties; he practically came out of the womb fag in mouth, was exceptionally good at the ole “footie”, and had had his first pint by the age of 13. I know not much about his life as a young adult, a time frame he never seems to wants describe much deeper than driving around in a Ford MG and going to discos often. But the raised-eyebrowed rhetorical, “So Mr. Mackenzie
finally settled down?” I am asked every time I visit England gives me the shuddering image about who my father was pre-marriage, an Austin Powers sweet-talkin-lady’s-man-heart-breaker.

Driven like his Ford MG, dad rode out his young adulthood fast and hard in the small town of B-Wood. At the age of 24, the glitzy David Bowie-themed disco nights that carried him well into the mornings and his unabashed single-hood were no longer enough for my father. Dad wanted more. His definition of what “more” meant was defined one evening while watching a traveling program. That night’s episode, California; a place of copious palm trees and forever tanned bodies.

The seed was planted.
To California he would go, escaping the perpetual grey that was England. Once the magic of native trees and brown skin wore off, he would up and leave for Australia, another place where his skin could drink golden rays once more. But Dad, whose famous adage has always been “work hard play hard”, knew that for his dream to become a sustainable reality, he would have to obtain a skill, something that would make him “worthy” and a “viable asset”. It was this belief of work deeming one worthy that I would later criticize and argue incredulously with him about. But with me being no more than unmanifested stardust, dad stuck to his belief system, and earned himself a two year apprenticeship as an electrician. Then away he left for sunnier days.

He wandered the coast of Southern California, living a simple vagabond life of odd electrician gigs, with free time paid towards his newfound love, golf. Pained by a minor
twinge of homesickness and unimpressed by the Californian bar scene, Dad frequented instead the California pubs. The majority of them, in general, are accurately reminiscent of those in the UK. They nail the dismal lighting perfectly, where one does not know, nor lacks the need to know, what time it is. Dart boards scatter the walls of where chalk boards offering tonight’s special hang, which is always some rendition of sausage, egg, & chips, or Yorkshire puds. With indoor “smoking permitted” signs posted and the heavy smell of scotch stained carpet, these pubs gave dad a sense of home.

Situated but one hundred steps from the Santa Monica pier, Ye Old Kings Head was one of these endearingly cozy pubs, and it was here one summer night in 1980 that he met what he would soon call his wife, my mother. Dad, never the romantic sort, dropped the equal parts vulgar, equal parts charming, “I could imagine our feet pressed together” line, and my mother, both taken aback and taken in by his brashly British ballsiness, gave him her number. The beginnings of them dating ended the era of dad’s single-hood. Dad’s plans of living in Australia would end the day he proposed to her. Their life together would begin first as two peas living in the pod of a nondescript apartment in the San Fernando Valley, then moving into the suburbs of Simi Valley where they grew a family.

Dad, who had grown up as the youngest male in an English household of seven, was described by his family as “The Golden Child.” Though he’d never admit it, he was the favourite of the family, showered with all things praise, love, and adoration. They say that love begets love, and dad, having grown up in a cocoon of such, had a calling to be a husband, father, and overall family man inside him. Creating a family of three girls and
one boy, a family man Dad became. I was born the youngest of all three, thereby garnering me the similar nickname, “Sunshine Child.”

I can say whole heartedly, diagphramatically, without blinking an eye that I had one exceptional childhood. And it was because Dad gave it all to make it so. Modeling after his parents, who had always found ways to scrounge up their meager post-WWII pay checks to provide for an annual family vacation, my father did the same. Working two jobs from 6am to 10pm, Dad would be gone before my siblings and I woke up, and not return till it was past our bedtime. From the outside, it may have looked like dad was never around. But what weekly presence dad lacked was compensated for generously on the weekends.

I witness this evidence in the abundance of home videos my mother shot. Contained in these videos are the typical scenes one expects of old home videos-with cavity-ridden neighborhood tots shrieking and skipping about. There’s the familiar panning of adults at the scene, whom, sitting patio side drinking shandies, watch their kids play about, wondering where the time has gone since they were full of energy and wonder. But what stands out about these home video tropes is the now permanently tanned, 6’2, kid, billowing above all the other kids, holding center stage. Enduring snot-faced midgets and their mutinous tackles, every “do this, do this!” they scream he happily complies to. Taking on roles of “The Monster”, “Jaws”, or “Michael Angelo, the teenage mutant ninja turtle”, as long as it equaled grabbing our tummies while squirming to the ground in a fit of laughter, dad would do it. And so growing up, in place
of where a father figure might stand, a big, goofy kid took its place. A big, goofy kid who did a song and a dance for me and my neighborhood compadres.

When I was 20 years old, I found an old photo album. It was the piny green kind that smelt old. The spine crack that gave when I opened it told me it had been years since its last opening. Scrawled with the title “Blair’s Last Year”, it was an account of exactly that. Blair Elizabeth Mackenzie, my eldest sister whom I never met, died of neuroblastoma cancer when she was but four. And though I grew up hearing stories about her, I had not understood what it meant to endure as futile a battle as cancer until I flipped through the pages of this album. From January 1st, 1990 to the 7th of October, I witness the horrific documentation of a seemingly healthy, overly talkative, round face girl lose her hair, her roundness, and everything it meant to be a four year old girl. Cancer robbed her of her vivacity and her once healable scraped knees, but left her with a beautiful bald face and chocolate brown eyes everyone fell for. It was the most tragically detailed photo album. After my tears had stained the plastic covering of nearly every photo, I closed the book, only to have my tears clean the album’s cover of its dust.

“Blair’s Last Year”.
What disturbed me wasn’t the title so much, but how the title was written, in the soft, surrendering cursive that was my mother’s. A feat in human resiliency, this album was my parents way of immortalizing their first-born, first-lost, mortal daughter. They became the remnants of her. People were surprised that Dad & my mother didn’t call it quits on their marriage, as the probability of divorce after loss of a child is so high that it
could be added to my statistics homework. But they didn’t, they endured, and while my mom takes every moment to share the story of Blair Elizabeth with everyone, Dad does not. He remains silent on the subject of Blair, seemingly unscathed on the surface. But I theorize that Blair’s death left him with such a gaping, festering wound of a heart, that perhaps to carry on living dad had to cement his heart up so that it’s original, raw foundation might never be reached.

The week of my 22nd birthday, I was experiencing what I deemed depression. Leaving it all out on the table, I presented my family with a quarter life crisis breakdown. One day, as my mother and sister held on to me while big gulpy, breathy cries entailed, dad came up to me, with a quick pat on the back and an even quicker, “Brookey, don’t be sad. You’re my happy girl”. And then he left, not wanting to be involved in the sadness, probably to putt outside or perhaps to grab a can of Bud.

His happy girl.

The realization of the roles of our relationship hit me. The happy girl who is never sad, angry, stressed, never anything other than being happy. That is how he views me, and only wants to view me. Dad calls me often, and I find myself cramped up with lock jaw, gritting my teeth at the frustrating small talk we predictably have. I want to know what Dad truly feels, that perhaps he’s angry about losing his job, that perhaps he feels empty after losing Blair. To know my father outside of “gorgeous day isn’t it?”, is all I want.

I learned to bite this frustration back when glass shards littered the yard and I realized nobody was home in the alcohol-numbed eyes of John Mackenzie.
But my ignorantly beautiful, optimistic Dad deliberately chooses a life of pure happiness. Because to be otherwise would mean to show the burn victim from 1990, the one with third degree scars from surviving the worst of hells. And it seems to makes life easier on him when I put on rose-stained glasses with him so that he may avoid this hell. So to him, I am his happy girl. And he, my happy boy.

*Perhaps he will never know I am his mother.*