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Atticus

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Atticus

Peter Rosenberger

Dear Father,

I love you. I don't know if I have ever been in love, but I am thankful that I have been able to experience love in the relationships that I share with you, with my mother, and with my sister. I believe that because of these relationships I understand love. You, my mother, and my sister are so much part of me that I cannot understand a world where I would not be able to be with you. I understand what family is, and I understand what death is. But the three of you are immortal.

I say this because I need you to understand before I continue that nothing can undo the love that I have for you. And nothing can undo the foundation that you have helped lay for me. It's a foundation that has allowed me to become the person I am proud to be, and it is a foundation that I hold high above my head, higher than anything else. Your hand in my creation as an individual is the most beautiful gift that can be given. It's the gift that every parent strives to give his or her child.

I feel that love and gratitude with great intensity. There is another feeling that I feel toward you with a similar intensity. It is hard to define this feeling because it seems to be a patchwork collage. It is complex, but my inability to name it does not change the great intensity with which I feel it. Disappointment is not strong enough. Anger is certainly a part of it. I feel manipulated, and I feel abused.

For my own sake, I need to articulate this clearly and tangibly because although I know myself, and I know you know me, I need to make what seems so plain to me equally plain on paper, so that I can believe that it can be understood out of context. I need a bystander to be able to see what I see, so that I know these feelings don't exist in some warped place contained unjustly in only my mind.

One of the principle parts of the individual that I have become, an individual that you have allowed for, is the unadulterated loathing of ignorance in myself. As I have matured, I have gathered many strategies to deal with this part of who I am. The one strategy that I am most proud of is an ability to admit when I don't know something. Ignorance can't remain ignorance for long if I am aware of it. Even admitting that I don't know one thing or another is comforting to me because it acts as a sort of confrontation. I am not naïve enough to burden myself with the responsibility

of having to know everything. What I loathe above all else is not knowing that I don't know. That's what I can't get past.

Maybe you don't know this part of me. In fact, I am almost sure you don't. You are a sensitive, compassionate person. You can't fully understand that part of me. I believe that if you did understand it, you would not have done what you did.

This letter is the preface to a story that I have to tell. But the story is the end. I won't pick up writing to you after I'm done. I need it to be clear, given what I have just written, why this has been so painful for me.

*

It was late in the evening on a Saturday or maybe a Sunday. My mom, my dad, my sister, and I were having dinner together as a family. Dinner was wrapping up when my dad said:

"We have something we have been meaning to tell you guys." I was absentmindedly playing with a divot in the unforgivably ugly orange shag carpet that inhabits the upstairs of my house. His words made me stop and look up.

"We have been having some relationship troubles," my mom said.

The rest of the conversation was a blur. I remember sitting there for quite some time. And I remember them talking for that whole time. But I don't remember what was said, or even much about what I was thinking. There is a big bay window in the living room connected to my dining room. As I sat at the table, I mostly just looked out the window and into the yard where I had spent so many evenings playing catch with my dad and sister as my mom sat on the walkway. My mind wandered.

I remembered other nights sitting at that table. When I was younger, when my family's schedules lined up more often, we would all sit in our spots at the table and start dinner by going around and each saying a high point and a low point of our days. "Highs and lows" is what we called it. Everyone always started with the low to get that out of the way with before telling the high. My family talked about anything and everything, so we always knew what we were going to say, but it didn't matter. We talked about getting good grades, beating a hard level in a video game, finishing a great book, having a particularly good day in the classroom, hearing a funny story in the office, having especially good soccer practices, treating a patient's odd malady, being excited about an upcoming trip, picking which musical would soundtrack that specific week, and choosing what book to read next as a family. I don't remember the lows. We had no secrets and no concerns.

We would crawl into my parents' massive bed after dinner and listen to my mom read Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Charlie Bone, or one of the countless other book series we tackled as a family. We never went to

bed in the middle of a chapter. My dad would lie down with a smile on his face as my mother's words lulled him to sleep. My sister and I listened intently, wondering how he could possibly be falling asleep during the story.

One night, we all sat in the living room, as my mother finished the last pages of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. We were all wearing our coats, and my dad had the car keys in his hand. We were going to see the movie of *The Fellowship* that night, but we had to finish the book first. On the car ride, we made our guesses about the specifics of the movie. We wondered about characters' hair color and height, about how scary Saruman and the Uruk-hai would be, and about just how pointy Legolas's ears would be.

"We're thinking about maybe separating," one of my parents said, as I floated out of the memory.

"We aren't thinking divorce yet, but we need to figure something out," the other said.

I am intrigued by my odd recollection of that evening. As I picture it now, it's a weird, cartoonish happening. Like a bad animated short. I see my parents' words in big, white block letters floating into my left ear and falling out of my right ear haphazardly. The letters have to squeeze and condense so that the words can fit into my ear. But they only splatter like paint all over the floor as they fall through my head.

My sister became progressively more upset as the conversation continued. She unsuccessfully tried to swallow a sob before bursting into tears in the middle of something one of my parents was trying to say. She got up from the table crying and walked behind my chair through the kitchen and out of the house. I wonder if the fresh air of the cool evening gave her the relief she wanted.

The path my sister took out of the house that night was a path both of my parents would take in the next few years. First, my dad left to get an apartment in my hometown so that my mom didn't have to be around him as much. Then my mom left the house for good to move to the town where she worked.

I sometimes think, even just after that first night of hearing about it, that I knew my parents' relationship was doomed. It's the sort of thing that can't just break a little. I was so sure about the "alrightness" of my family that any impingement against my surety was catastrophically damaging. If I had already inferred that something wasn't going well with my parents, then maybe it would have been different. I thought I knew my parents so well, yet somehow I was entirely blind to the storm that was brewing on the horizon for so many years of my life.

After my sister fled, I retreated into my room and sat in silence for hours. My room is small, and at the time, I had a big, wooden futon chair under my lofted bed. The chair faced my favorite wall in my room. From

ceiling to floor, the wall was covered in black frames filled with pictures of some of my favorite things. There was the signed picture of Allen Iverson, my most prized possession. There was a picture of my family sitting on Coral Street in Long Beach Island, New Jersey. We went there every year and took that same picture on Sunday before we left. There was one of the Super Bowl champion New York Giants. There was one of the four of us standing in front of the White Tower at the Tower of London. There was a silly one of my sister and I standing on the beach. There was one from the World Cup game we saw in Gelsenkirchen, Germany. The U.S. lost by three to the Czech Republic. The pictures were ordered very neatly on the walls. They still are, in fact. The order of things on that wall gave me comfort that night. Each frame had its place. Like the things in my life. In the months and years that followed, as I learned more about what had led to the conversation my family had that evening, I learned that the perfect picture of my life that I saw in those frames was so far from what it seemed. I see it now like a wall of tilted Picassos with fragments intermingled, slowly sliding toward the floor.

I remember some individual moments, but I only remember how I was feeling during a few of those moments. My parents' separation and eventual divorce wasn't very different than most, I imagine. There were tears, and there was anger, and there was the overwhelming sadness that came with realizing that my family was no longer the unit that I had come to cherish. But those feelings could come from any child telling the story of parents divorcing. They are upsetting feelings, but they are feelings that I was guilty about having. I wasn't a child; my parents existed as individuals to me. What did it really matter that they no longer loved each other? I was fine. I had all I needed and bright things in my future.

The hard part was learning that the truth had been systematically kept from me for years, and that I had no idea. I took the things that came along in stride, but as I learned about what had been happening around me that wall of frames began to shake and crash. My father had been having an affair with an old friend. It had been happening for years before my mother found out. I still don't know how she learned of the affair. My father traveled a lot for work, but I wonder how many of those trips were little lies that I ate up obliviously. Before my mother found out, my father told his parents and some of his siblings. And then many months passed, maybe even years, before that evening when my sister and I first heard that they were "having troubles." It took even more months after that before I learned the truth about the affair and the other details.

I often think about family gatherings that I went to in those years when I didn't know the truth. I laughed and joked and played with my cousins and my parents, while my older family members watched with

their secret knowledge about the lie that would have turned my world upside down. How could they have looked on at the smiling faces of my sister and me without urging my father to stop letting this lie poison our lives? We weren't babies. We were teenagers. We could have been told the truth.

I don't like to think about those gatherings anymore. It makes me sick. I keep waiting for the director of those memories to get out of his director's chair, interrupt, and tell everyone to stop. I yearn for intervention in those memories. Why were those events allowed to happen? It seems so wrong. Ignorance revealed certainly isn't bliss.

And now I sit here trying to find a way to end a story that isn't over. I am still entrenched in it. I have made progress in my understanding of it, but it is still a living, breathing thing. In its swirling around me, it still holds power over me. It's the hardest thing in my life, and that means I have a very privileged life. I feel guilty when I think about the pain that it has caused me because I know it's nothing compared to what so many people my age have had to experience. Thankfully, it doesn't control me, and I have managed to latch firmly onto the things in my life that are tied down and surfaced. I hold on to the knowledge that I am a cosmically lucky human being for having the opportunities I've had and will have. I hold on to my friends, my passions, and to my mother and sister. I even hold on to my father. I am on the ground because I know I have to be. And because being on the ground feels right. But I still feel the swirling.