

The Life Couch

It always surrounds a couch. Someone else's couch. Narrow and long. With a little wear on it. A little "sauce," as though it was taken from one of my graduate student's homes. Or someone from the Ivy League, probably, I would say. When guests visited. Penn. Yale. Princeton. Wherever. They are worn and lived on and don't inhabit a fleck of newness. And if there is an indentation on the right side by the corner pillow, amazing.

I bought my latest one online on one of those vintage-sounding websites that has the word "warehouse" in the title. They specialized in refurbishing rich peoples second-hand goods – and they actually did great work with the couch. Though I did find a long light brown hair under one of the cushions, which was either left by the previous owner or my ex-girlfriend's unintentional attempt to trigger my memory of her, and how great she was in bed, and how horny I was at that moment of time when inspecting said couch. Maybe that. So much, in fact, I craved for a distraction by way of physical intimacy. I

grabbed my phone off the kitchen counter, scrolled through my contacts to find her, and put my thumb on her name, until the contacts screen shrunk into what seemed like a contact vacuum, replaced by a new screen spreading to each corner, with her name on top, right under “calling...” and I immediately realized I was calling her, so I put my thumb on “end call” and exhaled. She was great in bed but she was a lousy person with occasional b.o., which is a difficult bridge to cross for me when it comes to experienced sexual nature.

The memory left me unsettled, so I got rid of the couch. I searched online and found another, which would take five to seven business days to land.

The couch arrived on a Thursday and I didn't sit on it until Sunday. Work certainly got in the way, but there was also this respect for who previously owned the couch. Bizarre, I know. Even though I paid money for it someone previously paid much more for the couch. I couldn't just let it become mine overnight. Like any new item it needs to be respected and tested until the time is right to relax on it. And so, on Sunday, I sat and read the Sunday *New York Times*, and during certain moments I stood up to look at the couch and see what I may have looked like while sitting there reading the paper. And you would've done the same thing too, or maybe currently are, wherever these words find you.

My self-esteem gets lower on the weekends and the last thing I want to do is leave the house, and my new old couch, but that's what I did one recent Sunday afternoon. I walked out into the gray snowflake flurries of late March and thought of seeing a movie. But there was nothing good at the theater around the corner from me. Bitch. So I went to the card store since my new hobby was updating my contacts by retrieving their home

addresses and sending them funny cards when they least expect it. If it was their birthday If they hadn't been in the hospital a while I'd pick up a "Feel Better Soon." If it was approaching their anniversary, I'd send a "Sorry for your loss." If it was a "Thinking of You" I'd just leave it blank inside, totally confusing them as to whether I forgot to write something, or I was in fact thinking of them and in a very abnormal and uncomfortable way.

Sometimes the card will be inverted. I'll bend it inside-out and tape the ends together, so they're seeing an entire blank card, and I'll write a new card on the front and back and have that be the actual card, which is silly, since I would never need to buy a card to create something original like that, but it's always a late realization, and I want people to like me, but I also hate conformity, so I buy the card so they can see I cared for something inside of them enough to reach out, but I didn't like the terms someone else applied to creating that card.

I have lots of downtime with my low self-esteem. And I also don't care for confrontation. Sending cards seems to help bridge the gap of not seeking company and showing those in my life I am thinking of them on a more special or heightened frequency.

When I was younger, I had better self-esteem.

When I was younger, I...

When I was younger.

When I was—

When I was younger, and skinnier, I had a young sibling who died. Does that sound weird?

When I was skinnier, an older sibling died. A sister.

When I was a sibling, another died.

It doesn't weigh different between the variances. The worst part about it is how bad my memory can be. I don't remember much of the time we spent. I remember the lake, the sun, grilling out, running, twigs and bramble, listening to the radio, quietly playing, our parents instructing us to be quiet, her crying, her so quiet I don't know what to say or do, then her screaming, then someone picking her up and taking her out of the room, then quiet again, so I could play a record on my little record player, and listen to John Cougar Mellencamp.

When skinny, I was younger, and a sibling had me for a brother, and I wasn't much to talk about, and they died.

We talked about the passing once at dinner. I had a bowl of steamed carrots in my hand. Nothing had been mentioned for weeks. I recall holding the bowl up as my parents started speaking about her. My mother did most of the talking. My dad just sat with his arms rested on his lap and his head down, sort of like when he would pray before dinner. Maybe he was still praying then. Maybe he was tired and no one was paying much attention. Maybe we were all tired of not talking about it but thinking of it every day. My sister was gone but still everywhere around us. We still had her photos on the wall and her room remained intact, only her door remained shut. I had gotten so sick about her talking about getting her drivers license I wanted to find the inventor of the automobile and curse him out for his ingenuity. The world kept moving and every time we left the house people confronted us. Imagine leaving an all-consuming thought as you close a door in your private world of thoughts, only to have the thought re-enter your next

dimension, and you can't avoid the paralysis it constructs, since the thought is a question you will never have an answer to, and the question looms over everything, and the answer, as you will find out later in life, is life itself, only the complexity in understanding what that truly means will never be justified.

Some say praying is no different than gambling.

"You're probably experiencing lots of different feelings," said mom. She reached out with her left hand but didn't touch me, her knuckles writhing on the table. "How are the kids at school treating you?"

The carrots were extremely bright in the most orange way. I was pretty fucked up. This was the beginning of a phase where I felt compelled to do, on average, a pill a day. Usually downers. Quaaludes were easy to get and something of a turn-on. I knew a kid whose mom took Codeine all the time, and he could get us each a pill almost every other day. I'd pop it at lunch. I took it with food because I was scared I'd get nauseous in class and throw up on my textbooks. We'd smoke weed instead of eating anything on our break. After school, we'd stop by my friend Jordy's house and put chloral hydrate under our noses. Just small doses every thirty minutes or so. Two hours of mild hallucinations would pass. Jordy called it "Having tea with Mrs. Pleasant," named after a Kinks song. We were in our early teenage years. We'd listen to the Kinks after school and read comic books or fantasy-based fiction and walk around the backyard with makeshift swords, battle-axes and shields. Our backyards were my favorite place to live and imagine before the sun went down. From the hours of four in the afternoon to six or so, that was arguably my favorite time to live in the ether of youth. We'd actually play.

We'd be in our own play; writing the parts, creating and becoming characters, working stories into our living reality.

I would take a pill right after we finished playing in the backyard and before we sat down for dinner. They'd usually kick in after someone said grace and I quietly mumbled "thank you" to mom, and then something transcendent would begin to happen, as I caught myself staring at the edges of rye bread, wondering how they got there, and who put the rye inside, and whether they could remove the rye if someone was allergic to rye, and that I could do that, if I wanted; I could build a machine capable of removing the rye from rye bread if people were anti-rye, and I smile and think of how beautiful a thought that was, the kitchen lights getting brighter, like when sunlight begins peeking through clouds against an unusually thick gray day, and you can feel the wind making it happen, and I want to stand up and go to the couch in the living room and bury my head in the pillows, or head to my room and sit in the middle on the floor and see which wall wants to start closing in first, but then I would have to speak, and I can't speak or else my parents will think I'm on drugs, so I'm stuck, fuck, bitch, I'm alone, I'm still trying to pretend but my imagination is disjointed, which is where the bright orange carrots I held in my hands come into play, levitating as I hold them before me, transfixed by their glory, their wealth, their ability to wield so much more color than anything else in our house. In the most non-violent way, I want to take the malleable carrots and smear them on my mother's lips so she can feel like she said she did in the late 1960s, and I want to grab two uncooked carrots and give them as a gift to my dad so he can play drums again (but not exactly like Keith Moon, since he's now dead), and then take the other carrots left over, and bury them, deep enough I can let my imagination turn them into a beanstalk

which grows high enough to climb and retrieve my sister, if she truly is in heaven, and the leftovers I will hold as nourishment for my long journey, and when the night grows dark on my climb I will use the carrots for their magical light, the orange brightness or bright orangeness something to carry me higher while it protects me from the darkness, the darkness set against the orangeness, my eyes orange, my skin orange, my hair a black-orange dye with ears like a wild, unruly tiger.

“Where’s your necklace?” my mom asks. And I think she says “neck mace,” but I can’t be sure. I think I half-smile, staring between my parents at the heirloom wine cabinet on the other side of the dinner table, behind where my sister used to sit. Mom’s got carrot lipstick and my left armpit itches so bad but I can’t scratch it, because my right arm will fall off.

I eat everything on my plate except the carrots, which I fold in my napkin and smile at both parents with my eyes closed, mashed potatoes in my teeth, some fantasy of paradise continuing through me as I aim to head to the basement or my bedroom and continue my imagination, but without the help of any friends or parents or dead siblings. I just can’t speak, so please, dear parents, please do not ask me to answer your questions right now, as I am sinking, not able to hold the line for any length of time as the boat moves out to sea; I am a mortgage in foreclosure and no one’s looking to buy a house so far outside of town.

“Where are you going with the carrots?” dad asks.

I stand there, silently, holding the napkin in my hand, the carrots buried inside, as though realizing it for the first time, and I think in my head I can get away with not convincing them I’m on drugs if I act surprised enough in this part of the play to show

them I'm just as surprised as they are, and we can all laugh about it together, but I can't feel any muscles in my face, so I'm not really sure when I'm smiling.

"S'I'm goin' to the hospitalis," I say. "Teww see Diane."

No one says a word, and I freeze, and wait for someone to fold me into their arms so I can breathe into their chest as I did when younger, and safer, but nothing happens; no sounds arrive; and it's as though I'm back on the couch, watching television with the sound off, so I take the carrots folded in the napkin and pretend it's a remote control, and lift it up, and turn my parents off.

Which brings us back to my new second-hand couch! Itself a carpet of magical proportions. Founded in the mid-80s, I presume. Built in Persia. Shipped by boat. Slow rider. Checked in at/around Charleston, Boston or New York. My guess is New York. My mind likes this.

I'm an adult now, and I'm training for the Memory Olympics, I like to tell friends and co-workers. Which really is only a self-test maintain memory function while imbibing alcohol. The pills were my teenage phase until I decided alcohol would suffice for my forced memory lapses. People play trivia in sports bars and there's a game on top of the actual game they're actively playing. The mind subverts itself under alcohol's blanket. It attempts to hustle up and catch the way cognitive dynamic wants to push forward, whereas alcohol's influences blur the momentum.

I'm not an expert on this but I feel adequately educated. Every time I drink I get swept by the combative reflexes or lapses in reflex after my second drink, typically a glass of wine. Two glasses of wine make me question if I locked my apartment door.

Three glasses of wine and I can't definitively remember the lyrics to Chet Baker's "I Fall In Love Too Easily" or quote Hemingway (sad, since he embodies the very realm of simplicity). A full bottle of wine and I'm smiling like a cat, my eyes narrowed, the world more tolerable; short and semi-attractive women are full-blown Amazonian goddesses; I'm craving a cigarette somewhere inside my fifty-eighth sip, with music applying a looseness and interest in dancing, with emotions beginning to roll inside of me like my tongue twirling in and around my teeth, and more emotions rolling over my previous emotions, the identity of these emotions submerged by a need to speak to a nun from my childhood, a nun with dreadlocks and a penchant for reggae music and a wildly unique and embraceable philosophy of God. Sister Angela. Sister Angela gives me support when I need it most by simply listening to me, her tender and weary eyes elevate when I speak, somehow understanding my situation better than others, her hands folded over her gray wool skirt as she pushes up her bifocals. She offers me M & M's and sits on an upholstered chair as I sit on a couch and talk about my thoughts and actions, why I lash out at the other kids on the playground, why I talk back in the classroom, why I do not like to speak about my family or my sister or even me, really. All these things weigh heavy on my young mind, but the contrast of someone who sits in silence with me in a quiet room, when every time I go outside there is loudness, and every time I go home my parents look right through me, this is where I long to be; Sister Angela calm and easy as I collapse in a heap on her magical couch of meditation, the world busting loose like a haywire lawn sprinkler.

“Sit right ‘ere and don’ let any-ting bother dem thoughts inside of you, then,” said Sister Angela. “Dem thoughts is private far you and dem thoughts be shared to fine de inner peace. Close your eyes, breathe in and out, and find all the peace you need.”

She’d let me sit on the couch in her office for as long as I liked while she worked at her desk, writing letters to other parishes or poorer places in Africa and other parts of the world she said needed our thoughts and prayers. Sometimes she would get up and leave for a while. Sometimes other nuns or adults would come in and pay no attention to me while I sat on the couch, eyes closed, thinking of my sister, thinking of my parents, thinking of the people in the world I had never met and might possibly never meet but who needed my help, feeling better after a short while but not capable of “achieving the best way to help” or translating my thoughts to anyone, because honestly sometimes I didn’t think of anyone at all. I thought of myself and tuned into only the small sounds of Sister Angela’s office, her movements, her pencil writing against the paper, her arm shifting on the desk, her body weight shifting in the old oak chair, the adults shuffling their feet as they walked by, the sound of my breathing going in and out, the reasons why I felt compelled to come there so often so very far away.

The couch became my sanctuary, the one place I could perch and not have to reveal anything at all, to force any conversation, and retain balance while the world screamed outside, and there was nothing I could do about it, since every time life attacked me I felt like running away.

Ever since I have been an adult I have searched for a similar-looking couch to restore the process of inverted thought, everything outside reflected back in and absorbed by me through contemplative grace.

Ever since my sister died, I could not believe in God, but I believed in Sister Angela.

When I stopped using the couch and found drugs as my meditative reflex from dealing with confrontation, I lost touch with many people who only wanted to care for me for some time. This was entirely my fault, as a newfound cynicism began percolating inside me once the convent moved Sister Angela away. I had no sister, no Sister, and not much in the way of friends. My parents did what they could. I watched a lot of TV and went on walks. I couldn't go on bike rides because I would crash too often, just letting my hands go of the handlebars once I reached a certain momentum. Most of my homework arrived on time but when I'd have bad days here and there I explained to them I needed a little more time to think on the project and they'd always extend a deadline.

And yet I somehow found a way to get through it. I channeled the memory of those I'd lost and the non-communicative trauma through objects such as bubble gum, reggae music, trying to meet blonde-haired girls around my age and hope they introduce themselves as "Diane" so I could feel a small comfort in a part of her getting a chance to grow up, and couches. I've often considered moving on and letting Diane and Sister Angela stay where they were when we last saw one another, to forever be their respective ages and faces and life energies, but they left me before I could say something important to them, before I could try and help them, before they could meet each other and realize how we could all be friends. We could all sit and hang out on the couch and talk about life.

Couches have been with me so long I feel they are part of my immediate family. If I could take them on trips across the country I would do so. The open casketness offers

a healthy reminder we are all going to die, but not quite yet. That's why naps are so much fun. You close your eyes, drift off, and sometimes it's so short but so heavy a nap you spring awake, as though, ah!, you feel you have been buried, or about to be buried, and the world returns to form. We can begin anew. We don't have to worry about dying.

But my sister did. She died curled up in the corner of our couch when nobody was looking.

I tell everyone I have very little to no memory of my older sister, but to be honest there are a few concrete details of my youth burned into my memory. One is we are at the lake, near the textured tan brown sand, our feet weighed down by every sinking step. The adults grill meats and corn on the cob and toss green grapes in each others mouths as kids we don't know play tetherball hard enough to fistfight. My sister and I stop playing and watch the aggressiveness of strangers our age and no one says, "Look away," and I hear the smaller one, the one who looks like me, screaming as his brother's giant fist hits him in the face, and my sister grabs me as we turn away, and no adults try to stop them because they are Native American kids, as we are, but we are not on "the rez." For some reason, I was mad at my sister for not running to them and trying to help me, even though I was standing right next to her, as I felt I resembled the young boy. But I can still see the boy's face – my face – getting slammed with a mallet for a fist, the thwack sound of knuckles to youthful skin jarring enough I never seek to play tetherball with anyone bigger than me.

Another memory is being in the backyard and acting like animals. My sister was a giraffe and I was a boring little dog. We stayed in character an entire golden afternoon.

She tiptoed around the yard, through the wild weeds and hollyhock biennials, bisecting the rows of vegetables in mom's faux garden.

"I'm a giraffe and I'm a giraffe," she said.

"Woof! Ruff!"

"Go stand over there and we'll have a game of chicken!"

"Grrrrr....."

"You're not a mean dog, are you?"

"I'm a beagle," I say. "I think."

"Where's your leash?" asks the giraffe.

"I'm in the yard," I say, standing on my knees.

"Dogs can't put their paws on their hips like that."

I put my paws back on the dry ground. The giraffe bounces around on the other side of the yard, her pigtail ears flopping in the wind.

"You look like you're galloping on a horse," I say.

"That'd be great," says the giraffe. "Giraffes and horses are best friends."

"What's a dog's best friend?" I ask.

"You don't know?"

I shake my head. I bark. I rub my paw over my snout and watch the ground come alive, imagining my ears are bigger so much bigger than their small human existence, flapping in the air. Wind takes the grass in multiple directions. A cool breeze arrives even though we're under the sun. I can smell blueberry pie or muffins baking nearby. I can smell rain coming; the maple leaking out of the trees; my giraffe sister's strawberry bubble gum as she chews forty feet away.

“Man is a dog’s best friend duh,” says the giraffe.

“Bwhy donnow,” I say in a Scooby Doo voice.

“You’re a silly dog. Okay, I’m going to run at you, and you’re going to run at me, and the first person who jumps out of the way is a chicken.”

The giraffe runs at me and I run toward her, the earth rumbling beneath us. Just when we are about to collide the giraffe shrieks and jumps out of the way, flailing her arms, giggling and smiling wide before immediately turning serious; ominous. The giraffe goes quiet and slowly trudges to a corner, sad and inward.

I move around on my paws in a victory of sorts but realize she’s upset about something.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say. “Look. I’ll dig us out and we can escape underneath the fence. We can go anywhere!” And I do. I start digging so fast and so effectively we could escape in an hour or two. But she’s still sad. Still frowning and nearly crying.

“What’s wrong?” I say.

“I can’t leave.”

“Why not?”

“I’m a giraffe. I won’t fit,” she says, quietly sobbing.

The last imperfect yet fully realized memory I have of my sister surrounds our house, the quietness, the angles where our parents exited and allowed us to be so very adult-like in the confines. It was the first time I saw my sister really sick, and she was on the couch, curled up in covers and shivering, her face ghost-like and pale, and it was clear she was much more sick than what my mom figured it could be, since “she’s probably

got the flu” seemed like as good as answer as any, but we all neglected the seriousness of her condition, and with my parents gone I felt powerless and infantile in her wake, and I walked out of the room as the giraffe lay dying, terrified of my limitations, and her encroaching death was very much my own, channeled by the look in her eyes as she quietly pleaded to save her, yet I could not reach the understanding.

My parents and I no longer speak about the days we went to the park or the lake and grilled out, embracing the sun, the quiet angles of our lives sheltered by our visors and sunglasses and limited conversations. We still meet for dinner when I am back home but I often take them out to a nice place. Any excuse to get out of the house is welcome. I don't sleep in my old bedroom as I'll usually grab a couple hours sleep in the guest bedroom. Mom kept my room as it was when I was eighteen, before I left home, which still seems odd, stunted.

Dad and I will take an occasional walk downtown and around the small park and school located near them, and he'll bring up some recent realization the local irrigation system is in trouble if they continue to practice their methods, but nothing will be done about this resulting in communication with community council or representatives. My dad likes to fix things without telling anyone else. Dad is very handy with silent fixes, Mom likes to grab a wet rag or towel and scrub or wash away the grime until the original pattern is more clean than ever before, and I keep buying couches, often looking at new options late at night even after recently acquiring one, perfectly content switching them out to try improving the comfort of memory, and somewhere outside of our vantage point, we all know there are giraffes running in the wild, no fences or zoos or awareness of lifespans containing them.

