

Friday Night

Songs of toads and crickets fill the thick air as we walk eerily through the woods. Papa is leading the way with three dogs strapped to his arm, and they stop and sniff the sides of the path every so often, catching the scent of some smaller creature. The sandy dirt is soft in between our toes, and it reminds me of the beach in the morning before the sun bakes the temperature into the ground. We walk with no flashlights in hand; the moon is out tonight, and it lights the entire pasture before us. Fireflies light up the woods ever so often like shooting stars. Shadows of immobilized cars tower above us as we pass, and we clutch plastic bags to our chests as the leftovers from dinner weigh into our wrists. We are silent as we walk; the melody of the Florida woods saying everything for us.

We walk six acres back to our house. Sometimes we ask to hold one leash of the several dogs that stay permanently glued to his side, but tonight we are burdened with carrying our collection of toys and cold pizza from a night out on the town. The two-story, faded white house beams like a castle between the hanging Spanish moss, lights glowing. The door open with the screen door closed. Tonight, the weather is perfect for walking home. Barefoot, arms aching, and eyelids heavy, we stumble into the house and say farewell to Papa. He waves his signature hand; the one missing three fingers, and turns to walk home.

My mom greets us at the door, and takes the bags from our sore arms. "Did you have a good night?" She asks as she unpacked the stuffed bags on the kitchen counter. A carton of farm fresh eggs, a container of raspberries, a newspaper with an article circled for her to read, and of course, the weekly funnies for me to take upstairs.

"Yeah," we replied sleepily. It was almost always past 11:00. "We had a great night."

Weekends with Papa were a staple in both my own and my siblings' childhood. We grew up teetering back and forth on the line of poverty, although completely oblivious. That's one of the good things about southern families; they put the children first.

We were sheltered from the real-life possibilities of our downfall, and the fact that we were always ushered to the school cafeteria's free lunch during the summer was exciting rather than embarrassing. Thrifting clothes and toys and furniture turned into Saturday family time instead of something to be ashamed of. Weekends with Papa, however, turned what probably would've been boring weekend activities, into a plethora of fun.

Friday night we would be picked up at 4 pm on the dot, with Papa in hand. Driven in whichever car he had decided to buy off of craigslist and fix. I would watch the road whip by in a flash, and hold my hands over my eyes as we drove over the terrifyingly huge bridge that led into the Island. The rich people's neighborhood.

Our first stop was always The Jumpies. An enormous storage facility turned into an inflatable paradise. Inflatable castles, slides, and obstacle courses were some of the many. We knew the owners by name; they expected us each Friday night. Sometimes the inflatable castles would change from week to week, and a few stayed stable in their places. Reliably expected, we could play different games on each one. A giant slide that burned the back of your thighs when you went down and collapsed in the billowing bottom. A boxing ring with heavy foam sticks we could barely lift over our waists to hit each other with. A jungle scene where we would run and throw ourselves over the cushiony cylinder spikes. Arcade games littered the walls, although we knew better than to waste the 2 dollars in quarters we were given on frivolous games that would return us nothing.

"Those games are a waste of time," Papa would tell us as the shiny coins fell into our palms, the glittering fortune sparkling in our eyes. "Spend it on something that you will enjoy doing, not enjoy having."

So, those marvelous coins were spent practicing our air hockey skills. The whirring of the air that circulated against our outstretched palms, nudging the line between fair play and cheating. Papa would destroy us in every game, and our fingers would tremble as he would rock the blue puck down the stark white and red board, praying that our fingers would survive the battle.

Once we were exhausted from jumping and acquiring rug burns from the sticky slides, we would leave with stomachs rumbling and the rest of the night posing as centuries ahead of us. We would sit in the car, marveling at the random temporary tattoo we obtained from the quarter machine on our way out while Papa placed our pizza order through the phone at The Loop.

“Can I get a name for the order?” The person over the phone would ask each time. His response was automatic, replicated each time with precision.

“Graham. Like the cracker.”

After picking up our small cheese pizza, with gluten-free crusts from The Loop, we drove down to heaven on Earth for poor children. A free playground. Central Park was across the street from the island's huge water tower, and you could see this skyscraper when driving over the bridge. We would tumble through the darkened castle, calousing our hands on the monkey bars, sneakers squeaking against the neon plastic slides as we climbed up in a futile act of rebellion.

“Time to take a break!” He would call to us, and we reluctantly trotted over to the soft wooded picnic tables to take exactly three bites before we rushed off to the swings to see how far we could jump from the reins of the cold metal.

Our next stop was the walk downtown to Island Time, (the word island presumably was the greatest marketing tool ever for tourists), our favorite frozen yogurt store. The machines were self-serve, which lit up our spirits as though we were being given a million dollars. How many flavors are socially acceptable to mix together before what you have created turns into something unidentifiable? For me, the number was five. Combined with whatever toppings we desired, the end product was a mound of frozen dessert that a normal person wouldn't touch with a six-foot pole. But for me, it was the highest delicacy made available for an eight-year-old. Papa would not get any dessert, as his diet consisted, and still does, of green beans. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, somewhere on his plate you will find green beans. He never ate any sugar, in fruit or in anything, and that included our frozen toxic substance.

We would walk down the streets of downtown, stopping ever so often to look in the lit-up store windows that had been closed for hours. One store front window consisted of nothing but Betty Boop memorabilia, and we would pick out which one we would like to have in our homes. That store now has a collection of watercolor boat paintings. Interesting, but not as cool as Betty Boop lamps, wall clocks, and bottle cap openers.

The trees of the streets were almost always wrapped in colored string lights, so the path down to the dock was illuminated beautifully. There is a real iron anchor that sits in front of the dock, from a storage ship that sank around there several years ago. This anchor was now used as a display for the good people of the Island, but more importantly, as a jungle gym for little kids. We were allowed only five minutes to play on the display that couldn't move from a tractor

before we were unwillingly pulled off the top, me from my display as the mermaid that sterned the front of a pirate ship.

The dock was illuminated only by small green lights that showed where your feet were. We would discuss the boats that stay stationed on the dock, and stare stunned at the size and eventually, the expense of said boats.

“Which one would you live on?” Papa would ask.

“None,” I would reply disdainfully. “I would never live on a boat. I would get too seasick, and I would hate to be alone.”

“Not if you got used to it.” He would say back.

Maybe this was true. Maybe I could’ve gotten used to the rocking of the boat on the waves that could tip any boat over easily. Maybe I would’ve gotten used to the view of the ocean every day. To this day, I have never gotten on a boat, and I do not plan to. However, I have used this logic of getting used to it, every day of my life.

“What if I can’t do it?” I would say, or think, or feel. Then I would get used to it. I would have to.

Our last stop of the magical Friday nights was Papa’s house. Hidden in the back of a 4-acre property, the towering house made of railroad cars stood blatantly against the shadows of oak trees that surrounded us. He had built this house with his own two hands, and it still to this day, is my favorite house I’ve ever seen. Three boxcars stacked upon one another, with a giant room built in between, the house has character and uniqueness that is uncreatable. The koi fish pond outside that was repurposed out of an inground milk storage from when we had the dairy farm. The grapefruit tree on the right side of the house, next to the above-ground pool that back then was able to be used, is now a home for snakes and other swamp creatures. The tree house with a homemade zipline that Papa had built for us. The porch up to the house with a row boat tied to the ceiling had acquired more cobwebs than thought imaginable and was used as a nest for bluebirds every spring.

Upstairs, we had a movie library full of the most obscure movie titles. Three chairs sat on the upper level, and only one reclined. My sibling and I would take turns on the reclining chair, and argue every week about whose turn it was. Agree on a movie, we decided, so that the arguing would be lesser, although it really never was. Eating leftovers in the dark with a random movie chosen out of the hundred that lay dormant on the back shelf, with a fan that wobbled

above us, is something that I could never forget. That feeling of utter freedom, with the only responsibility being that of carrying the leftovers home that night. Childhood is such a special feeling, that really is only described as innocence.

“Time to go home.” Papa would come to get us from where he promptly fell asleep in his chair downstairs, hands folded over his chest, computer screen still glowing from where he was buying his next craigslist car. He would package up the leftovers and more farmer’s market food in the kitchen, making two plastic bags of equal weight for us to carry.

“Don’t we need flashlights?” We would ask. The dark seemed to stretch on forever from the safety of the dimmed porch light.

“No,” He would chuckle and buckle the dogs into harnesses. “There’s a moon out tonight. That’s all we need.”

And it really was.