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Non-Fiction Essay #1 — On Arizona

I have only been to Arizona once, but I hate it.

Arizona has not scorned me in any way, the one time I was there it was actually quite a nice place. The weather was warm, the sun was a sort of blinding white light rather than a yellow glow, and there are a lot more places to eat than here in Alaska.

Growing up, Arizona was what I imagined Mars to look like. There would be red clay and red dust everywhere. The only places of civilization were the cities I knew by name: Phoenix, Lake Havasu and Flagstaff. Everywhere in between would be flat, barren land that only inhabited cacti and vultures who flew around in the sky, waiting for whatever stupid thing that decided to try and walk the desert.

I know a great-uncle—Mom’s uncle—who has a house near Lake Havasu because he is rich. Even though the house is so large and we are family, no one is every invited to the house. Dad makes jokes that it isn’t even my great-uncle’s house, that he stays with a friend when he goes to Arizona and he and his wife take pictures in front of the house, posting on Facebook that it is their’s. My grandma laughs at these jokes, but even as my great-uncle’s sister, she cannot confirm that it is his house. She is also in the same group of people not invited.

The only two people I have ever dated also now live in Arizona. It’s kind of a George Strait “All My Exes Live in Texas,” kind of thing, except in Arizona. Part of me likes to say, “Oh, I never really understood the allure of Arizona. I think I could go my whole life without going there.” But I know it’s because I don’t want to run in with those narcissists—because every ex becomes a narcissist when you break up.

I was fifteen when Mom first had her accident. She had been walking and slipped on the ice, landing on her back against the concrete. She was in pain, obviously, but in the first x-rays they could not see how bad the injury was. It wouldn’t be for almost a year that a doctor finally saw that the injury was much more serious than someone who still ached from a fall. Two of her vertebrae were rubbing against each other, grinding themselves down in competition to be the dominant one. When she had fallen, there had been what they call a “vertebral compression fracture,” meaning that the cartilage-made cushion between her vertebrae had been broken down due to the injury and now was non-existent. The two vertebrae rubbing together were also pinching and rolling over nerves in her back, causing the extreme pain that would cause her to cry most nights.

Mom had back surgery the following March. She would have metal rods put into her back, along with an electrical device that would work to redirect the misfired nerve impulses. After the surgery, everything felt fine. But three weeks later, the machine stopped working and the pain returned to where it was, and the rods in her back were becoming uncomfortable with every movement. She would have two more surgeries and both would have the same results—time wasted, pain increasing. They began to give her pain medication, there were supposed to make her feel fine. Until they wouldn’t.

On the second surgery Mom had, she almost died. It was my nineteenth birthday. This one would be more invasive. I had an exam that day that I would fail. The surgery happened during that hour and a half I was locked in that room, trying my best to figure out the correct formulas and calculations I should use.

Mom and Dad flew out of state for this surgery. My twin brother decided to throw us a “birthday party.” It was fun. I would later feel guilty when my dad sat my brothers and me down to tell us what had happened.

“Your mother doesn’t want you to know,” Dad had said, “but she almost died during her surgery. Her body didn’t respond well to the amount of medicine they used to put her out, but they didn’t realize until too late. Her lungs started to stop working”

I imagined the operation room. Mom lies on her stomach, her lower back opened up, and she stops breathing. How are they supposed to help her? They can’t just flip her onto her back to get her breathing again. Dad never told us how they fixed the problem. He seems too scared to.

That surgery didn’t take as well. The machine they put in her back was a sort of prototype and it misfired the nerve impulses she was having. She sometimes wouldn’t be able to move her right leg, or have trouble moving her left hand’s fingers to do meticulous work. She was in pain. But in the mean time, the pills would help.

I didn’t fully realize until Mom tried to kill herself in March that she was an addict. It was like a joke you remember as a kid, but you didn’t get the punchline then; but this punchline isn’t funny.

The third surgery she would have didn’t take either. Mom, in understandable frustration and confusion, became severely depressed. She would come home from work at five o’clock and immediately take her pain and sleep medication. She would then fight through the sleep medication, living life in a mindless state. I became to know Mom for two years only in this form. She became angry. She said terrible things and never remembered anything anyone told her or what she said. Dad and I knew there was a problem, we just didn’t know what to do. Every question about medication became a battle that would last for hours and it became easier to just ignore it. We were stupid for doing that.

She was prescribed a new medicine. She had been stacking her pain meds—one wasn’t enough to calm the pain, so two would help until two was too little and then three and then four. One of the side-effects, Dad would later read from a Google search, was suicidal thoughts or tendencies.

When she had tried to kill herself, Dad and I were thankfully home. I like to think that she did it then because she knew we would stop her, that we loved her. But sometimes I wonder if she didn’t care that we would be there to find her dead body or if she was in such a state of blindness from all the medication that she didn’t know we were home.

Dad and I felt guilty as we took her to the hospital. We only wanted them to do something to make her feel better. The doctor’s recommended she go into a two-week treatment to detox. Mom said she wanted to go. She said she hated us and didn’t want to see us. I’m still not sure if she meant it or not.

Dad and I are flying to Arizona to pick Mom up from a two-month program. She went into two more two-week programs after her first in March. In these two-week programs, they would detox her, and send her out, but there was never any outside help. It was like putting a band-aid on a severed arm. Dad and I tried our best to moderate what Mom was taking but her doctor refused to talk to us, saying, “L— deserves every right to have her privacy.”

I don’t sleep the whole overnight flight to Arizona. It’s finals week. I’m writing a research paper on the plane. But I know I wouldn’t sleep anyways. I haven’t eaten in the last two days; I’m too nervous. Dad asked me to come with him, saying he was nervous to go alone. I agreed to come. I regretted it the minute the plane wheels hit the warm runway.

We get our rental car and begin the two hour drive from Phoenix to the treatment center Mom is in. I’ve avoided all topics of conversation concerning Mom for the last two months, even the name of the center. When I look it up on Google, the homepage has a list of celebrities who have been treated there. The list includes Tiger Woods and Selena Gomez.

When we arrive, I can’t get out of the car. The sinking feeling in my stomach has gone all the way down to my feet. I have a panic attack. Dad calms me down. I look at the large center. It’s built like a resort. All the different buildings have stone facades and large glass windows. There are signs everywhere that read: **No cell phones or cameras please!** I wonder if this has to do with the celebrity roster.

Dad and I walk into an office. There are nurses walking around and they tell us that Mom will be out shortly. They smile at me as if I should be happy. I am terrified. The door opens and there stands Mom.

The last time I had seen Mom it had been in October when she had last tried to kill herself. She had somehow been prescribed the same medication that was responsible for the first time she tried to harm herself. It was her doctor again, the secretive one; a drug dealer with a medical license. Dad reads the doctor’s name from the bottle. It is the only time I’ve ever heard him call someone a bitch.

I had found Mom unconscious on the couch when I heard my dog. I thought she had been sitting by the door, whimpering. But she sat by the couch, nuzzling Mom’s hand. I thought she was dead. I shook her as hard as I could and when she finally woke up there was a fury in her eyes. I had disrupted something. She began to scream at me. She didn’t know where she was. She punched me with the hand her stone engagement ring is on. For the next week, before going to classes, Dad and I would try to use Mom’s makeup to cover up the dark mark it left beneath my eye.

Dad woke up, hearing the noise. He’s much bigger than Mom and was able to get her into his truck. They sped off to the hospital. It was two in the morning.

Mom was kept at the hospital for two days while Dad and I made calls to different treatment centers. Dad found the one in Arizona and she was accepted. Did you know you have to apply to treatment centers? Almost as if you are applying for college or a job? Mom would only come home for an hour to pack up her bags and leave. She didn’t say good-bye to me.

In October, Mom’s face had been swollen and bloated—I’m assuming from the pain medication—and her cheeks were a deep red, almost purple. Now, in December, in Arizona, her cheeks are their normal rosy complexion. She walks out the door and hugs me. She begins to cry. Even though we are so close, I feel distant. I put one arm around her, staring at the empty doorway behind her. She lets go of me and hugs and kisses Dad. We walk to her room and grab her bag. I don’t remember what the room looks like.

Before we go to the airport for our flight back to Alaska, Mom wants to take us to where they had done a ceremonial burning one night during her treatment. She guides Dad, as he drives, deeper and deeper into the desert until we are only surrounded by shoots of tall yellow grass and dozens of types of cacti. It’s windy. We get out of the car and begin to walk for about a quarter mile until we reach a fire pit made of large stones. I realize part of the large circle is missing about three or four stones, big enough for one person to walk into. Mom says you’re supposed to write down something or bring something you want to burn. When you are ready, you walk the circumference and then walk into the fire ring. You’re faced with fire. The fire is supposed to represent temptation. You could fall into it, or you can conquer it to make it do your bidding. You throw what you want into the fire, releasing it, and walk away. Mom says she won’t tell us what she burnt. We are OK with that. Mom and Dad turn around and walk back to the rental car. I stay back for a second and look into the ring. What would I burn?