

When Childhood Ends

As per usual, I am the first one in the room. I select a chair that faces a window, because three hours is a long time to be sitting in one spot—the professor doesn't do stretch breaks—and sometimes I need a place to rest my gaze. The class is "History of Childhood," which can only really be taught at a university like mine, having no mandated requirements and also a pet turkey. It's a small weekly seminar—the "1976V" in the course title scared off all the lower classmen, save for a freshman who didn't know what the numbers meant. By the second week, this week, it's even smaller.

If Professor Jeremy Mumford, a fifty-something man with the hair of a twenty-year-old, is dispirited by the student turnout, he doesn't show it. Instead, there is a giddy smile on his face as he takes a seat in the corner of the room, vibrating with the rare excitement that other people might be as interested in his monomaniac fixation as he is. I am a person who makes quick judgments about others. This helps me as a writer but less so as a human. I immediately classify him as the nerdy, comfortable sort of academic: if he was on a collector's card, he would be melting into a plush red armchair stroking a Maine Coon, a mountain range of books behind him.

I had almost dropped the class. Having spent the previous semester abroad in Paris, the smart choice would have been to maintain my rapidly-deteriorating French in "Dés/Accords Franco-Américains." For the week of "shopping period" I dithered between which one to take. But one last skim of the finalized syllabi confirmed where I was already leaning. Would I rather read about *les révolutions* for the fiftieth time in my academic career, or child witches in 17th-century Spain?

Professor Mumford gives his opening spiel, a condensed summary of the syllabus and what was discussed the first week. This is his first time teaching the course, so we are warned of forecasted turbulence. The assignments are to be largely personal and reflective: dissecting a selected memory from our childhood through a series of prompts. As someone who grew up on the Freudian side of the internet, this is my dream course, and I feel flush with something that at the edges is pride—to be a part of this school, to be intellectually curious—and at the center is still pleasant but less defined, too in motion to identify.

The feeling only expands as we shift to the meat of today’s discussion: infanticide in classical antiquity. Consensus is, and will continue to be, childhood pretty sucky until the ’80s. Everyone is highly aware this is the week where the dynamics in the room are established, and speaks carefully, knowing first impressions are harder to erase than Sharpie. You get two classes to cement yourself as a speaker, a contrarian, or a doodler. “History of Childhood” has the fun ratio of 2:5:1. Months later, on the night when everything changed, the freshman told us, seated in various contortions of limb on the floor of our professor’s basement, that we were all “such distinct characters.” While I’ve made some amendments to her descriptions of us, they are as diminutive as they are astute:

Meredith: The pink-haired feminist.

Yuki: The art student who works her fidget toy overtime.

John: The guy you worry might be a republican until he concludes, “but that’s just for argument’s sake.”

Steven: Actually a republican.

Anna and Callie: Are taking the class because they want to work with children someday, which they don't let you forget.

Tina: Probably grew up on a farm.

David: Really did grow up on a farm.

Amber and Mia: The fashionistas who, while for the most part trace the verbal ping-pong of class discussions with their lined eyes in silence, periodically make a punchy contribution.

Lila: I wouldn't be surprised if she also grew up on a farm.

Faith: The freshman.

Me: The English major taking pen-and-paper notes.

And, of course, there is Professor Mumford. Habitually five minutes late to class and fond of rhetorical questions, it turns out the history of childhood is his secondary niche interest, after the invasion of the central Andean highlands by the Spanish in 1535. He lets a different student lead the three hour discussion each week—today, it's Callie—until he has a better idea. Bored of our circular pronouncements that infanticide was pretty bad, but also difficult to assign people of the past modern moral judgments, Professor Mumford thanks Callie for her excellent leadership and passes out an article.

“Does everyone have the right to a child?” Professor Mumford asks, after the quickest readers in the room have made it to the third paragraph. According to the headline, a Greenlandic woman in Denmark has had her baby taken away from her after failing “parenting competence” tests.

John is the first to step into that minefield. “Yes. It should never be the government's place to step in and take someone's child from them. That's crossing a line.”

“But what about in cases of abuse?” Meredith says, in the flat, controlled way that signals someone is way smarter than you. “Obviously, the Greenlandic woman was not abusing her child. But there are a lot of children born into families that can’t adequately care for them, or who might even deliberately harm them.”

“Yeah, isn’t that what CPS is for?” I pride myself as one of the speakers. “It’s already the government’s job to intervene when a child is at risk. Some parents really are just unfit to be parents.”

John has his mouth half-open for when he’s allowed to say something again, but he gracefully lets a few more people refute him. Faith and Tina hop on the bandwagon. Meredith takes a moment to remind everyone that the foster care system is also messed up and can be an equally abusive alternative.

“Okay, okay,” Professor Mumford interrupts. “You all make a very clear case that if a child is being abused the government has a right to step in. But what I’m more interested in, or at least, what I was hoping we could get into, is whether or not some people shouldn’t be allowed to procreate at all. That is, before they are even convicted of putting a child in harm’s way, can the government say, ‘No, you can’t have a child. You’re too poor, or you carry a gene for this debilitating disease.’”

There is a long silence. Room 212 in Alumnae Hall is one of those eerily quiet ones that doesn’t even have a radiator to hum background chords. At this point, Callie, the discussion leader, accepts that her ship has been commandeered, and she closes her laptop.

“The second we start dictating who can and can’t have babies, it veers into eugenics territory,” John finally proclaims.

The discussion veers sharply into incest territory.

At dinner when I tell my friends about the class, and about that feeling I only know the edges of, they give me a funny look. The kind that tries to redeem itself with admiration, but is overpowered by amusement. I repeat our questions about the validity of incest babies and they give the boring, evasive reply that incest is bad. “But is it the government’s place to force them to abort that child?” I try again. I’m met with shrugs and nervous laughter. As a last ditch attempt I broaden the question to encompass all babies predetermined to live with terrible diseases and disabilities. In Room 212, I had tested saying yes: why sentence a child to a life of suffering? Outside of the theoretical bubble of the classroom, I want to figure out if this is what I really think, or if it just made for a fun argument. But my friends won’t play along. In an effort to surround myself with people who think differently than I do, believing that if I am always being whisked by new ideas and experiences, I won’t solidify, I often find myself not misunderstood but unable to be understood.

It took me a very long time to find my footing at this school. My university is one that cares so deeply about the appearance of diversity that if the latin *diversitas* didn’t mean separate, it would be on the seal of arms, and yet for the first few months it felt like I was having the same conversation over and over again with the same people, and contributing the same three pre-programmed responses. I adored my classes. They were the only spaces where it felt like people wanted to mark themselves as different, if only to be noticed by the professor. But the second we were back in the dining hall or sitting in the dorm lounge, it was like I had taken my glasses off: everyone became blurry at the same time I became unrecognizable to them.

I am taking “History of Childhood” my junior fall. Enough time has passed that by sheer probabilistic exposure, I have made a few friends with whom I share the important things in common. But I still see academics as the most enriching part of my college life. For me, learning

is as much a feeling as it is a verb. While I can't say I'm all that experienced, it is a strange and pleasurable sort of high.

By the third week, Meredith has dyed her hair back to black—internship application season, she rationalizes—and carries a tin of chocolate-chili cookies for the class. The discussion leader is also expected to bring a themed snack for their topic, per the syllabus, and the cookies are a fitting contribution to Aztec week. As described in the Florentine Codex, Aztecs parents punished their children by holding them over burning chiles, letting the smoke scratch their eyes, and occasionally sacrificed them, but only for the greater common good. There was a whole lot else they did that we read about prior to the discussion, but it is this detail, the chile smoke, that we keep circling back to. Professor Mumford, who seems to be making a habit of capriciously connecting course readings to modern childrearing practices, pivots the discussion to spanking.

“Obviously, the practice of spanking has become disfavoured in recent years, and more and more parents are seeing violence as an absolute no-go. But are we to say that holding children over burning chiles is all that different from spanking, in that it is physically quite uncomfortable for the child?”

When no one volunteers to take a stab, Professor Mumford answers his own question. His pauses are always long enough to indicate that he was indeed hoping for the class to respond, and yet, there is something about the tone of his voice, the way it doesn't inflect at the end of a question, but flatlines, that makes his self-answering entirely non-awkward, like he was merely picking up where he left off. “Well, what if I were to say they're not that different? That we are just as cruel to our children as we were thousands of years ago. That Mayan head shaping is not so different a practice from the head molding helmets parents use on their babies today, or even from braces.”

Meredith raises her hand. She is the only one in the class who does so, and therefore only gets to speak when someone interjects the oral melee with, “I think Meredith has something to say.”

“But molding helmets and braces are medical procedures—they’re for the physical benefit of the child,” is what Meredith has to say. “The Mayans shaping their children’s heads were for purely cosmetic reasons. It was the beauty standard.”

“I don’t know. I think parents still force plenty of cosmetic choices onto their babies,” Faith says, looking up from the collage of spirals and ambiguous polygons perimetering her notes. “My parents pierced my ears when I was really little but I don’t see that as some big violation. My mom would always pull my nose, too, to try and make it look smaller.”

Amber contributes that her parents also pierced her ears when she was little. Right now, she’s wearing simple but elegant white studs.

I rack my brain for childhood memories of beautifying cruelty to share with the class. My mother used to “suggest” outfits for me to wear to school, laying blue linen and corduroy on top of my duvet each morning, and while at the time I thought this infringement abuse, it just seems loving in retrospect. Before I can come up with something both vulnerable and appropriate, Professor Mumford redirects us back to the topic of punishment. “But there is something so visceral about the scarring of children that the Aztecs did, no? Cutting their hips and shoulders. We don’t exactly take knives to our babies and disfigure them, anymore, do we?”

“Well, there is circumcision,” says David, whose kippah blends so seamlessly with his black hair I hadn’t noticed it until now.

Professor Mumford nods in “yeah, that’s fair” acknowledgement. “Well, then that only proves my point. We look at the Aztecs and label them mutilators, when there are still modern

cultures that obey similar customs. Perhaps the history of childhood is a more constant one than we might expect—that while there are all sorts of cultural and economic factors that vary across time and space, it has never been a particularly sunny period of one’s life. Are there any universals that we might be able to extract from the experience of childhood, though? Say, that children everywhere have always liked to play, or that they are expected to contribute to the household in some capacity?”

It is the question pulsing at the nucleus of this course. Over the following weeks we will travel the globe, examining the childhoods of Ancient China and 18th century France, reading defenses of child labor and theories of adolescence. We will spend the first twenty minutes of discussion rephrasing some version of, “Weren’t these people crazy??,” and as the minute hand ticks south, realize not so much has changed. That the Samoan daughters tasked to raise their siblings at the age of six are not all that different from Anna and me, who were free babysitters for our brothers the moment we had the bicep strength to hold them. The Aztecs may have scarred their children, but we give ours unfiltered internet access. Child rape becomes the one practice we unanimously deem barbaric, but all the other “childs”—child labor, child rights, child marriage—we cannot come to a consensus on. In Room 212, we try on arguments like “children should be able to vote” and “maybe education isn’t a good thing for everyone” as if they are strange hats. While at first the feathers and ribbons seem so not our style, the longer we stare at the mirror, the more confident we become. You can say anything in this room, so long as you tack “maybe” onto it. John and Steven certainly do. Maybe children should work. Maybe hebephilia isn’t as bad as pedophilia. Maybe childhood ends at nine, or at twenty-five.

We poke holes in every social boundary we have grown up with and watch them deflate. For entertainment. Leave the room, and they puff right back up again like the tube men outside

car dealerships. When I catch a glimpse of Meredith or Faith around campus, crossing the quad or reading on a bench, we pretend to not see each other. Faith's backpack is black and spiky, and if I stare at it too long, the spikes will fly off of it like porcupine quills into my eyes. Which is why I look away as fast as possible. It is not right that we should know of one another in the real world, after what we have said in 212. To know a person's childhood is to have stumbled in on them changing, naked: you can never unsee it. And all of us have shared the parts of our childhood so deep and buried, you have to watch us brush off the dirt before sharing with the class.

I realize, around week six, it takes a certain kind of upbringing to be attracted to a class like the History of Childhood. My peers are graduates of the Waldorf school and Chinese buxiban and the Kibbutz, survivors of crazy mothers and double-digit sibling tallies. Steven is the son of a mechanic, which is why he believes work is a better educator than school. Callie has grown up sewing, and still makes her own clothes for herself and her family. Anna is paid to deal with preschoolers and has an anecdote ready for every twist in conversation. John is the oldest of nine. I know nothing about these people beyond the parts of their life colored by children—being them, knowing them, working with them. And yet they are some of the most mature people I have ever met. Carved with convictions about the world yet still able to look at it through someone else's prescription. I came to this school to meet people like this, bizarre combinations of adjectives and histories, people whose personalities could have been determined by a slot machine.

And who am I? There are about six years of my childhood that are interesting, when my mother was single and poor and we lived among trees with firework heads. But the rest of it is a formula—bookworm child plus, well, other children. The futures of “gifted kids” are always

described as vast, and yet the only path cleared out for them is a pipeline. I did my work and kept my gaze fixed to the ladder rung in front of me. To squeeze trauma from my story would destroy it; lemonade cannot be turned back into lemons. For my “memory,” the one we are to pull apart and stitch back together in at-home assignments, I have gone with the night of my brother’s birth, significant but dull. A craggy mountain of a memory: so many people live with one just like it behind them. For all the English teachers at whose feet I have laid my crippling anxieties and pale secrets, I cannot seem to do the same with Professor Mumford. It is not because I care what he thinks about me, but because I want what he thinks about me to be determined by who I am now, and not who I was. If such a thing is possible for a history professor.

The desks and chairs are arranged differently each week in Room 212. The class before us is Medieval Drama, which might explain why. Usually, some sort of quadrilateral is formed, though the side lengths and angles vary. At this point in the semester, week eight, the sun can’t reach the window anymore, and is gone by the end of class. The even rows of fluorescents compensate. We take to the hard-backed chairs, the seating arrangement wordlessly decided that fateful second week of class.

When Professor Mumford walks in, a few minutes past his usual five minutes past, he has a dog in tow and his hair is wind-ruffled. He mumbles an apology, the audible details from which lead me to conclude the dog usually resides in his office, but this is not possible today, and sits next to Lila. The dog, still on her leash, wanders beneath the table from one open palm to another, licking skin. Lila moves to the opposite corner of the room—she is allergic to dogs, and her eyes have already puffed red like a robin’s chest. Phoebe, the dog, still manages to find her, and looks insulted when Lila does not offer her hand.

Today's discussion on the children's liberation movement of the '70s is led by Anna. She summarizes the diverse array of opinions presented in our discussion posts—we are to respond to two of six possible questions before each class—based on this week's reading, a “kids lib” manifesto by John Holt. His central argument is that children should have all the same rights adults inherit, no questions asked. This class is the most divided we've ever been. Most of us hover somewhere around the beliefs that “Freud silly” and “abuse bad,” but whether children should vote? Whether they should be subjected to unmollified legal punishment? Whether they should work, and participate freely in the economy? Every socially conditioned bone in my body yells no! Of course not! My main takeaway from *Escape From Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children* had been that Holt was a nutcase who would have benefitted from spending more time with people his own age. But my peers are far more sympathetic than I had expected.

“Children have always worked,” says Steven, who must have gotten his vocal chords polished recently, because he is suddenly eager to show them off. “Up until like, fifty years ago, most children were helping out around the farm. It's not like they can't handle it. School is a waste of children's time. Why should they be sitting around eight hours a day learning equations they'll never use again in their life, when that time could be spent developing hard skills?”

Half the class speaks at once. John happens to be the loudest. “Because school has always been about learning more than equations. It's about developing social skills and communication, problem solving. Yes, a lot of the old models were about instilling obedience into children to prepare them for factory life, and I'm not saying the current education system is flawless. But as classrooms become more about experiential learning and soft skills, they're the places that children should be in.”

“I don’t know. I’d rather have hard skills than soft ones,” says Steven. “You know what makes you money? Having a trade. A craft. Being able to make things, to... to... to weld.”

To *weld*? I search his face for anything that might betray his seriousness—a flicker of smile, a raised eyebrow—and finish empty-handed. He means every word.

Yuki shares that at her school in China, they also taught her how to weld. After Professor Mumford satisfies his curiosity about that anecdote, it’s back to Steven.

“I just can’t remember a single useful thing I ever learned in school.” Arms folded, he’s leaning so far back in his chair I worry his (backwards) baseball cap might fall off. “And in the real world, there are repercussions. There are also social rules children have to learn. You have to act a certain way at work. You can’t just go around saying you want to kill people, or you’ll get fired.”

I am angry. I’d like to say it’s an emotion I don’t experience very often, but I can at least truthfully conclude it’s not one that I feel frequently in the classroom. *Why are you here?* I think. *If learning is so useless, why are you here?* It’s like invisible flames are eating the edge of my vision. I interrupt him: “You can’t go around saying you want to kill people at school, either! The whole entire point is that children at school have the freedom to make mistakes—that the punishment they receive doesn’t actually have any impact on their wellbeing. You can get suspended or get a bad grade, but that’s the worst it gets. If you’re a kid making income that your family depends on, you make a mistake, and you get fired!”

Steven is quiet, and is looking vaguely to the right of my head, a bored expression on his face. Phoebe (the dog) whines. Like every girl, she seeks out the one person who can’t give her what she wants, running over to Lila for comfort.

Meredith says something that I think agrees with my point, though it's hard to tell when she peppers in phrases like "you also have to consider" and "this neglects the fact that." I breathe. The class moves on, but my heart rate doesn't fully return to normal, and the fabric under my armpits is cold.

When the clock ticks 5:30, everyone lets out a sigh of relief. "Well," says Professor Mumford. "I think that was the most... invigorated discussion we've had so far!"

Later that night, my heart still hasn't settled. I've debriefed the discussion with three of my friends, all of whom agree with me, which for some reason, is disappointing. While stretching before bed, I replay the scene again. I realize, staring at the swan-shaped stain on the ceiling and legs twisted in Supta Matsyendrasana, that it is not his arguments that bother me. Work might be more valuable than our current school system, sure. But to say learning is invaluable in the very classroom that taught me what it means to learn—to have been part of the same discussions, and to leave them unmarked—is to suggest that I am the only one who has been changed by this class. That maybe the others don't spend their dinners telling their friends about chile smoke and the consent laws in Colonial Bengal. *Why are you here?* I had thought, but the question was meant for me.

I say I am here because I love to learn. Because I get to experience that feeling you get when you finish a good book and look up at the room in front of you again, finding it colored a little differently, every day. That feeling, which language fails, and which metaphors can only attempt—the clearing of a stuffy nostril, rounding over the summit of a hill, the brightness raised on a phone screen—is the only thing keeping me at this school. I don't care much for the parties, food, and loneliness. But if he doesn't feel it, *what keeps him here?* If I am alone not only during lunchtime at the dining hall, but in this feeling, what's keeping me here, too?

November clumps together—something sticky coats the edges of each day’s page. I use Mondays as the high tide around which to structure the passage of time. Each week has a heading: “The Invention of Adolescence.” “The Ariès Thesis.” “Generation Z.” It is perpetually midterm season at my school, and my friends become busy with exams for classes that have much more legit-sounding names than mine. Temperatures plummet with the sun, mid-afternoon. Lights are strung on trees that still have the more stubborn leaves on them. If I am not arguing with someone, I feel lonely.

I keep a list in my notes app of “Unanswerable Questions,” which is sandwiched between “Date Ideas” (unused) and my perfected recipe for chocolate chip cookies. This semester, the list has nearly doubled. Every Monday I add: Is childhood a social construct? Can memory be trusted? When does childhood end? This last one, I used to answer poetically. Childhood ends when you realize fireworks aren’t flat, they’re spherical. Childhood ends when you feel guilty about free time. In Room 212, we have determined there is no definite biological answer: girls receive their periods at different ages across the world, and that study that said your brain stops developing at 25 just stopped collecting data then. There are cultures that never subscribed to a concept of adolescence; if you could stand on two feet, you could walk to the market and knock on watermelons. So we are left with philosophy. Childhood ends when you stop being protected. Childhood ends when your parents say it does.

The end of the semester is a train entering the station: headlights slowly growing far, far away, until you blink, and metal and wind are speeding by you. As an English major, I skate by easy. There are a couple papers to write for other classes, one of them being a personal reflection on a social media detox, another about *Bridget Jones’s Diary* for my comedy class. It is only at a school like mine that the professor is able to decide on a whim to cancel the final exam, and

instead host one last discussion—on play—at his home, where we will be treated to a dinner of Indian takeout afterward. Professor Mumford’s house is exactly what a professor’s home should be: yellow paneling, a maze of hallways and staircases, mismatched carpets, skylines of esoteric books along the perimeter of every room. His three daughters—three, twelve, and something in between—greet us with varying degrees of shyness. Phoebe the dog is here, too. The basement room is crowded with a circle of loveseats, bean bags, and wooden chairs I suspect were dragged from the dining room. We take our seats. Hesitant—trying to map our usual arrangement onto unfamiliar territory.

David, who joined the class late and missed his opportunity to sign up for a week, is the assigned discussion leader. He has a binder thick with the printed readings. *Dedicated*, I think. When I remember it is Sabbath, I have the same thought but in a different font. Tina and I are sharing a wide armchair, and while I am normally touch-averse, it doesn’t bother me.

“I thought we could start by playing a game,” David says. No one is surprised, but we get excited all the same.

The game is called Up Nelson. It involves a coin that is passed between members of a team under the table. When the leader of the opposing team yells “Up Nelson,” everyone raises their fist, and at “Down Nelson” we bring them down onto the table, palms flat. The goal is to hide the sound of the coin hitting hard surface. The opposing team has three chances to guess which hand conceals the coin.

It takes about three rounds of questioning for everyone to understand the rules. The professor’s eldest daughter joins us in the first round, and when “Down Nelson” is called, the coin flies from her hand across the table. We laugh, prompted. She leans back into the couch and hides her face in her hands. The red peeks out from behind them anyway. I have forgotten what it

is like to be twelve in a room full of older strangers, to be hormonally primed to mistake laughing with for laughing at. For a moment, I am a mind reader: *I want to disappear*. A few seconds later and she does, running up the stairs, the layers of tulle in her skirt bobbing behind her. Professor Mumford makes a half an attempt to call her back. It doesn't work.

We play a few more rounds of the game. Everyone is happy to stall the "real" discussion for as long as possible. When at last we are redirected to consider excess energy theory and potlatches, our words are stunted. There are long pauses between each contribution, and we cushion our disagreements with more pleasantries than usual. Outside of Room 212, in a space so visibly lived in, steeped in warm reality, we do not know how to behave around one another. The boundaries are hazy and fluctuating, like a plucked guitar string. We have only ever known each other Mondays from 3:00 to 5:30 and this is a Saturday at 2:00.

Phoebe, who has been loitering on the stairs, strolls into the room and makes herself cozy on the bean bag next to Lila. Everyone has forgotten she is allergic, until ten minutes later when she meekly asks for medicine. Once the dog is evicted from the room and half a dozen apologies are proffered, Professor Mumford's wife starts heating apple cider over the stove. Every so often, the three-year-old will come in, stepping over the mess of legs like hop-scotch to reach the other side of the room where her toys are, and Professor Mumford will ask her what she thinks about the meaning of play, or what imagination feels like, and she says each time, "I don't know," leaving the room with a procured doll. The domesticity of the scene is so dense it suffocates. I find myself struggling to get a word in, even when the conversation is already spaced out like a summer sky.

But I am happy. I am so fond of these people, I think, and I feel. It takes ten thousand hours to master a skill, but only thirty or so to love someone. I look at Callie in her signature

white dress and marvel, knowing that it is handmade. As people finish their hot cider, the mugs accumulate on the low wooden table between us. Each one is decorated with a miscellany of characters, curlicues, and handle shapes. I look at them because if I look up at my classmate's faces, I might start crying.

"I feel like we need to come up with a definition of play, first, before we continue," Professor Mumford says, even though we are already knee-deep into the conversation. "What *is* play?"

The seven-year-old, who has been using our professor as a jungle gym for the past few minutes, takes that one. "Play is anything that you are not forced to do." There is much nodding at her wisdom, and no one succeeds topping her.

I am slated to attend a concert in Boston that evening, and will have approximately thirty-two minutes to enjoy the Indian takeout before making my departure for the Amtrak station. I am also a planner who uses a disproportionate amount of mental energy to be anxious about time, which is why I am covertly checking my phone every twenty minutes, keeping an eye on the clock. Which is why I am the first to see the following message:

Urgent: There's an active shooter near Barus & Holley Engineering. Lock doors, silence phones and stay stay hidden until further notice. Remember: RUN, if you are in the affected location, evacuate safely if you can; HIDE, if evacuation is not possible, take cover; FIGHT, as a last resort, take action to protect yourself. Stay tuned for further safety information.

Anna gets it too. "Guys," she says. "There's an active shooter on campus right now."

My professor's basement is not one of those quiet rooms, like Room 212. It has a radiator's hum and an old clock's heartbeat. But it is more silent than our usual classroom has ever been.

Everyone is on their phones, typing without making a sound. Typing "Are you safe?" and "Please respond" and "Before you see the news, don't worry mom, I'm okay."

In Room 160 of Barus and Holley, a half-hour walk away, a review session for an economics final exam is wrapping up. Twenty students are hiding behind the desk at the front of the class, typing without making a sound. Typing "I love you" and "If I don't make it, I love you." Mukhammad Aziz Umurzokov and Ella Cook are still in the middle aisle of the classroom. When the police knock on the door, telling everyone to raise their hands, they are the only two students that don't follow orders.

But we don't know any of this yet. We only have the police live audio feed, and Sidechat, our university's student-only social media platform. John has one earbud in and is the only one listening to the audio feed. Every few seconds he parrots the important bits. At some point he says the words "two dead on arrival," but doesn't know if they are to be trusted through the warp of the static. Voices on the internet are crying one, six, twenty victims. Phoebe is still adamant on befriending Lila. The three-year-old has a balloon, and is trying to keep it from touching the floor. Childhood ends when you learn how to read the room. After a few minutes of this Professor Mumford politely asks her to stop, since everyone is quite anxious right now, dear.

"Well, take a few more minutes to check-in with everyone," he tells the rest of us, before, too cheerfully: "And then we can eat!"

Half an hour passes. Every distant relative and friend of friend is informed that we are alive and safe. John is still translating the radio. I refresh Sidechat until the motion feels foreign

to my fingers, starving for any new information. I am also starving for food. We all are, and slowly trickle into the kitchen, loading ornate plates with samosas and paneer. David's treat of choice for his week is M&M brownies, which he is still eager for everyone to try.

We eat our food. The silence comes in waves. There are stretches where everyone either has their nose inches from their phone or is staring into some fixed point in space. In between them, we laugh. There is no social script we are familiar with to follow here. So we crack jokes and play games. Guess the celebrity. We pick someone in the room, and describe them with responses to bizarre questions. Meredith does not play. We will get to the thick of conversation only for our phones to collectively go off again: *Alert #3. Alert #6.* Time passes like lava. Faith assigns us all an archetype. At 8 p.m., it's looking like the lockdown isn't going to be lifted anytime soon.

At 8 p.m., students are still barricading in the basement of the sciences library. A group of them are playing Among Us, while others are still using their laptops to study. None of them have eaten. Photos of blue-red streets flood Sidechat. Chairs are flipped to block doors. Students sit against the walls of the dining hall kitchens, nearby coffee shops, their dorm closets, Trader Joe's. *Alert #8: Continue to shelter in place. The shooter is still at large.*

Professor Mumford announces there are two air mattresses, several available couches, and a handful of sleeping bags. He explains to the confused seven-year-old, "It's not safe on campus right now. We don't want anyone going back yet."

"But where will everyone learn?" She asks.

On Meredith's laptop we tune into the first press conference. The camera lingers on flashing police cars for a few minutes, until a reporter enters the frame. It is confirmed: two dead, at least eight wounded. They say they have a video of the gunman. It takes an hour for them to

figure out how to play it, and the reporters stall to pass the time: *How horrific. Two dead. How terrible. Eight wounded. Just imagine—*

They play clips of students being ushered into safe zones. Meredith scoffs. “They’re showing where the students are going! The shooter could be watching this. How is that safe?”

I add to my list of Unanswerable Questions: Should information be accessible to everyone? All the questions above it seem trivial now.

Half of us stay the night. Some have cars and live off-campus, and drive home. The rest are ushered to a neighboring professor’s house, since there are not enough mattresses/sleeping bags/couches for everyone here. I remain at Professor Mumford’s house, along with Faith, Callie, Meredith, and two of Faith’s friends who joined us, nearby when the shooting was announced. At 10 p.m., Professor Mumford and his wife retire to their room for the night. We raid their pantry for bagels and cheese. Faith suggests we watch a Christmas movie. A woman is too poor to afford snowboarding camp for her daughter, so she agrees to work as the resort’s Santa Claus to get a discount. After half an hour, I call it a night, and am given the twelve-year-old daughter’s room.

Somehow, I sleep. It takes a few hours to get there. Every twenty minutes or so, the walls are swept with red and white, though I cannot hear sirens. I think about how I am going to be telling this story for the rest of my life, that fifteen years from now, I’ll be at some dinner party or work gala, and someone will ask me where I went to school, and, forgetting themselves, they will ask if I was there during... this. I think about what I have learned this semester. In Ancient China, the dowries of daughters were so high, mothers asked their midwives to kill them after birth. In Zugarramurdi, 1609, children claimed they were taken by the devil’s servants to *akelarre*, or the witch’s sabbath, where they ate black food and danced. Useless. All of it,

useless. Every debate and discussion I once felt so animated by, useless. *What am I doing?* Is all I can think. *Why am I here?* I spend my days learning—consuming—but do nothing with this knowledge but write papers and show off to my friends. The knowledge I have is not the kind that saves lives. I am an almanac of party tricks. In the same way hearing a gross story makes you lose your appetite for food, a school shooting kills your appetite for school.

Two of my classmates are dead. The last thing they knew was fear, and they will never learn anything more.

I am woken up by Meredith at 7 a.m. sharp. “They found him,” she says. “They’re going to drive us back now.” I pack my things, which only involves returning my water bottle to my backpack, and go upstairs. It has snowed. The window frames a scene straight from a painting: fences and trees outlined in a thin layer of white, a milky sky behind them. I feel the confused awe you always feel after the first snow, because feelings are like spices, and you can taste awe in the same dish with guilt and grief. It has snowed, too late, too late to catch footprints.

Professor Mumford’s wife drives me to my dorm. I am to pack as quickly as I can. Faith, Callie, and I all live in New York, and Faith’s parents have graciously offered to drive all of us home. From the third floor common area I can see a good chunk of campus, brushed over with snow. In one of the fields, a couple is walking their dog. I am shaking as I complete the walk to my room, even though the shooter has been caught (he has not, we will soon be alerted, they were wrong). The girl in the room next to me is cry-shouting in Mandarin.

And this is where I stopped. Writing, that is. Everything you have read up until now was written in the week following December 13th, a date stamped so firmly in my mind I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get out the ink. I knew I had the story, and I wanted the details frozen while

they were fresh, like produce at the grocery store, before memory's heat and time's passage started to rot them. I had the story, but I didn't know what I wanted to say about it. Honestly, I still don't. But having returned to campus nearly a month ago now, watching routine slowly stitch together normalcy like a suture, it felt like the right time to pick up where I left off.

Perhaps there is some well-fitting conclusion to draw about childhood ending when your school gets shot up, or the meaninglessness of these niche, dusty corners of academia: knowing the exact tortilla rations the Aztecs fed their children doesn't help you when you're trying to figure out how to barricade a door with a few short stools, and it doesn't help you track down the man in the black mask and it doesn't help you prosecute him, and you can't use any of this knowledge when you're on stage, behind a podium, pleading with the world to stop letting so many dangerous people have access to guns. I have wondered, though, if anything I learned last semester has helped me better understand the nature of human cruelty. That the universality children experience is that we have always been mean to them, and that this produces our mean, bitter adults. But that is a pessimistic and one-sided thought, and I don't really believe it. It takes so much generosity and selflessness to raise a child, and it would be so easy if we could divide the world into good and bad, count off teams like a recess game. I am hesitant, now, about making sweeping claims about humanity and childhood, thoughts derived from a dramatic impulse after tragedy to straighten the world into neat rows of stories and lessons. But if I had to summarize every humanities class I've ever taken, it is that nothing is ever any one thing.

Two people died on December 13th and the lives of their family and friends were shredded. As a student journalist at *The Brown Daily Herald* reporting on the aftermath of the event, I have spoken to many of them as they try, piece by piece, to tape everything back together again, but it is never going to look quite the same. At the same time I have seen an

incredible demonstration of resilience in the weeks that have followed December 13th. I don't want to turn this story into a moral, a thesis, and so all I will let myself do is all any writer is really able to do: describe what I see.

Each day I walk past enough flowers to populate a meadow arrayed before Barus and Holley, and saw them dug out from four feet of snow when the first storm came. I've read the letters, the poems, admired the drawings, the paintings, the snow sculptures on the main green made in tribute. I've interviewed businesses, restaurants, faculty, alumni that opened their doors to students who needed a place to go. I've been surprised by their unreserved warmth: I used to think the residents of Providence harbored a quiet resentment toward the university, perched above the city on this hill, looking down on them. But posters with big red hearts on them have been put up in the window displays of nearly every restaurant and store I pass. I've walked in on students crying in bathroom stalls and I've been startled by bursts of laughter from tables next to me in the dining halls. Only in classrooms do I feel like my usual self. No one talks about what happened there, not even my professors. When the snow fell again I watched the figures sled and fall and duck behind benches no longer identifiable as such, evading snowballs. At yesterday's memorial service everyone was given a white rose at the end, which many chose to leave before the Van Winkle Gates. I cried at the memorial and left my rose and two hours later was clinking glasses with my friend who just took the LSAT.

It would be an incorrect observation to say that everything has returned to normal, or to describe what has happened to this community with some chipper verb like "bounced back" or even a more solemn one like "recovered." It would be incorrect to begin this next sentence with "but." So much is the same. Barring the memorials, campus looks unchanged. The dining halls follow their usual menu rotation, though Andrews has swapped Pho Fridays for a dry noodle bar.

My dorm smelled just as I left it and for once, the hook that makes a biweekly departure from my wall decided to stay adhered over the break. My fellow students continue to leave communal bathrooms in hazardous states, and organize walkouts from class to protest ICE.

It is the little things that are different. Small reminders that accumulate like paper cuts, mild and annoying inconveniences. Fumbling for your ID to swipe into the Student Center, which never used to close its doors. Classes being hard-capped due to a lack of classroom space—nine rooms in Barus and Holley are unusable. Professors ending emails with links to “important resources.” The first week back there were a dozen tables scattered across campus handing out free munchkins and coffee, while the waitlist for counseling services ticks higher and higher. Greeting the trio of security guards posted outside my dorm with a hearty “Good morning!” as they play Clash of Clans. Scrolling through the list of lecture events and reading the word “after” over and over again. The thing about paper cuts is sometimes they surprise you with how sharply they can sting. This semester I joined a secret society, and when they came banging at my door at 2 a.m. to initiate me, I froze in my bed. It took six rounds of knocking until I was able to move out from under the covers. I had thought it was another shooter. There are moments when I am walking to class and realize I have tensed up my whole body, like when you think someone is about to punch you, bracing for the sudden memory of what you’ve forgotten to hit you square in the jaw.

I am telling a story that doesn’t have an ending yet, even as fall semester has passed and the next has begun. When I walk into Room 212, it is for Japanese 200 and not History of Childhood. I sit in a seat that faces away from the window. I give you this detail because I don’t know how to end this, and my impulse is always to end circuitously with a nod to the opening.

But this isn't a circular story, and I'm not the same person now as I was at the beginning. I've learned something.