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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

A PROLOGUE TO THE DOCUMENTARY *FINDING HOME*

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ABSTRACT

In what way does the place we call home define us? Originally, that question served as the solid bedrock to which the foundation of my senior thesis rested. Simple, I thought. Straight forward, I assured myself. However, as I immersed myself in the project, my confidence in the simplicity of this thesis began to wane. I quickly came to realize the implications surrounding the question were so much more mysterious, shrouded in their ambiguity, complicated by reality. For example: What happens if a person loses their home, or if it's taken from them—in what ways does that distort their sense of identity? Or, what if they choose to give it up willingly and move somewhere else in search of a better life, only later to realize they want it back—do their native communities accept them as they once were, as one of them? Whether we're proud of that pleasant place, or embarrassed by the indelible mark it left on us, the place we call home plays a formative role in shaping who we are as humans. This thesis investigates the stories of three people (Ishban, Ben, and Rachael) and the city (Scranton) which united them in their search of a place to call home. One wished to worship without worrying. Another, to work for something worth more than a paycheck. And the last wanted nothing more than to wander for a while. In the end, they each came to their unique and profound conclusion on the nature of home and what it means to their identity.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It was a Saturday, though I didn't know it at the time—lost as I was in the middle of my final week of winter break, a happy glazed look of indifference constantly plastered upon my face. Thomas answered the door that day—cousin, next-door neighbor, childhood confidant and constant companion—years go by, though he and I will always remember each other in this romanticized sort of way.

We grew up together on the 1200 block of East Gibson Street in the East side of Scranton, Pennsylvania. You may have heard of it. The city, that is. NBC's "The Office"—a deadpan sitcom documenting the banalities of a white collar office job—depicts it as the dreary, semi-industrialized city it is. Once upon a time, though, men, women and children flocked to the booming business mecca. It used to be a sure fired bet for immigrants who found New York City to be overcrowded and unpromising to minorities. Hard work for fair wages—the elusive American Dream could be had by anyone in Scranton, so long as they were willing to work for it. The city's future beamed as brightly as its iron furnaces, for it was set to be the energy capital of the world, given the abundance of clean burning anthracite coal hidden beneath and between its rolling valleys. More anthracite coal was unearthed from the Lackawanna area than dirt from the Panama Canal. A telling detail: in a way, the city feels hollowed out today. As if the ground beneath its residents' feet could give at any moment. Traces of an archaic opulence stand formidably against the gray clouds which dominant the area's skies: City Hall, The Radisson

Hotel, The Scranton Times Tribune—all gorgeous, elaborate buildings, reminders of what the city used to be.

Anyways, Thomas opened the heavy mahogany door to the front of his house—an odd experience for us both—our side entrances (always open, light, made of thin metal) were the revolving doors for the Adcroft/Maier households. Growing up we shared a well-trodden path through a break in the bushes between our backyards. Sugar, eggs, extra virgin olive oil, and memories from the first 15 years or so of our lives were what we carried back and forth between the brush of our two homes.

I let in the wind on that day, some sunlight, and a slinking cat through the gap between my feet. “Ah, there he is!” Thomas said. I hesitated for a moment, wondering whether he spoke to the cat or me. It had been awhile since I had seen him last and we were always prone to awkward encounters, especially after prolonged periods of time away at school. A moment goes by. Probably the cat, I finally decide, and so I begin first to the teenager with hair almost long as mine (which is quite long these days): “Marty looks good, Tommy. He’s almost as shaggy you and I.”

“Yeah, I should really get it cut, right?” he says nonchalantly while running his fingers through the back his hair. The family cat slips between his legs. “How you been? It’s been awhile, man.”

“Oh, busy drifting through break, you know. The normal stuff, same as always. And the hair looks good to my eyes.”

After a moment of shifting my feet on the wooden threshold to his house I begin again, “I just thought I’d come by and see what’s up. Before I head back to state, you know.”

“Well I’m glad you did. How’s Joe, Cece, Bobby, Ryan.... Ermhh. I’m forgetting someone aren’t I?”

“Sa—“

“Sara. God, I always forget she has two kids now... *Weird.*”

“I’m a *godfather* to Ryan’s kid.”

“That’s appalling.” The beginning of a smirk crawls from cheek to cheek across his face. “You can hardly take care of yourself, dude.”

I pretend at being hurt, though he’s closer to the right of it than Ryan or his lovely wife would like to believe, “You know what, on that note, I may just leave.”

“Well then, till next time.” Typical Thomas, he called my bluff.

“Funny guy. It’s cold out here.” I replied with a snap. “Close the door and I’ll break it down.”

“You should have just walked in the side one anyways, it’s always open.” He smiles the toothy one I remember from forever ago and lets me in along with another gust of wind, apologizing for not doing so immediately.

Before I have time to realize, though, my lanky cousin had popped into the kitchen where he shouted something about throwing together the infamous “Adcroft Air Sandwich”—two slabs of white bread, nothing but air in between. My poor mother, with six wild kids running around the house, it was a chore in and of itself to keep bread in the cabinets, never mind deli meats.

The old house hadn’t changed much. The motes of dust dancing by the windowsill in the far corner next to the grand piano—they were the same; the pencil markings scrawled into the pantry wall, showcasing the inches we’d sprouted from summer to fall, to winter then spring—they were the same, too. Where they put their couch, the flat screen over the fireplace, a

collection of Thoreau's essays, were all new to my eyes, though. And that immediately handsome Pakistani teenager was new, too. Ishban.

I had expected to encounter another cousin of mine, an intelligent looking shaggy and bespectacled farmer, sitting behind a chessboard, in a well cushioned armchair. But instead, behind that chessboard (an entirely ridiculous Simpsons branded one at that—the same one I learned on from my childhood), sat a mystery with a white smile.

With one tan hand on a glass of iced tea, and with the other covering his chin, lost in thought, Ishban allowed his eyes to wander away from Marge Simpson—the queen on the board who sat a laughable 3 inches above a soft, round Homer, her king, with her afro-styled electric blue hair. He glanced towards me and intoned casually in unrelenting, typical chatty American fashion: “Oh, I didn't know Thomas was having company today! Name's Ishban, how do you do, friend? Tom will be back in just a moment. Take a seat. It's your move. I mean his. Yours if you want.” *Alright then*, I thought to myself, feeling a bit like Homer next to a formidable Marge.

To my utter bewilderment, his voice sounded completely comfortable, as if it had found a place (here?), or a person (me?), he was at ease with—as if he had found a home away from home, so to speak. Naturally, I felt a bit confused: I was neither his friend (though I'd gladly return friendly banter to pass the time), nor had I ever seen him in this place *I* so often visited. Note well: this was supposed to be *my* home away from home, not his. But here I was, entering from the front door, shaking hands with a stranger.

His English only added to the mystery. Though well practiced and verbose, it came in rhythmic spurts, like someone who suffers from a subtle stutter. He didn't stutter, though. Not even remotely. His sentences, not his words, thumped along like an irregular heartbeat. Simply

put, I could tell English was his second language (later I would discover it was actually his third), and that he prided himself on his ability to speak it. More to the point, and I promise I'm getting at one here, whether it was the nostalgia of seeing that Simpsons branded chessboard, or perhaps the friendly way he offered me a conversation with a loquacious beat to his sentences, it all had an undeniably charming affect on me. And so, struck as I was by the dark eyed teenager lounging amiably behind a chessboard, I fell into a conversation with him like the way a summer storm in Scranton, Pennsylvania begins: slowly at first, and then all at once, for the rest of the afternoon.

Though the ice in our drinks had melted long before our conversation had ended, his story had solidified an inquisitive spark of something inside me. It was the type of story that, after one hears it for the first time, necessitates a retelling by the listener so as to validate its truthfulness, like the way a child retells a harmless secret just to make sure the words sound as true coming from their own mouth.

Now, around that time, I had been working on a project—a small documentary which had been changing as often as the weather forecast. “A lost ship at sea,” is what my brother had called it after watching it for the first time. I, its hapless captain, was sailing mindlessly without a destination, or a compass for that matter.

Up until then, I had interviewed three people: an artist who moved from Scranton to Brooklyn, and back again—a fascinating person by all means, with a talent rivaled only by the size of his heart; a curator from the Scranton Anthracite Heritage Museum who wielded an encyclopedic amount of information about the history of immigration to the city of Scranton; and Rachael, my writerly cousin who moved from Scranton to California on what can only be described as a whim. All told, I had three compelling stories, one unfinished documentary, and

only a half a semblance of an idea with what to do with them. An underlying seam tied the fabric of their disparate stories together, though, I was sure of it. Or, at least sometimes I was sure of it.

The idea of moving away from home, of being an immigrant, the courage it takes to be a lost person in a land not your own, and the desperation one feels the day before leaving home, these were the types of things which grabbed my attention. I asked Rachael questions like, “What did your home look like the last day you saw it?” and, “did you ever look back?” To Benjamin, I prodded with questions like, “when did you know you had to leave?” And to the museum curator I listened intently as he emphasized Scranton’s proclivity for housing immigrants over the last century. Whether or not Ishban’s story would jive with the ebb and flow of my project didn’t matter much at this point; I figured why not one more. Besides, his was a damn good story after all.

And so, hours later, after he had beaten me in chess more times than I care to admit, I asked Ishban, who by this time I *had* become a person he was at ease with, if he would be interested in telling me his story one more time, but this time in front of a camera. He agreed without hesitation. “Mine is a story people should hear,” he said. “It is a story of hope.”

I raised my glass of watered down iced tea, “to finding hope in a new home,” I added. Later that night I conducted the interview with him in my bedroom. What he told me shook a certain part of me that I know to be my core. His story still hasn’t left me. Though, in all honesty, perhaps a part of me offered it a home.

The words to faithfully describe his experience still escape me to this day. Mine lack a certain honesty, when compared to his. So instead, below I’ve transcribed portions of the interview which I think best attest to his unwavering courage. The following has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Chapter 2

Ishban's Interview

Me: So, can you tell me a little bit about Pakistan? What was it like growing up there?

Ishban: Well, it depends on in what sense you mean that. Usually, when I think of Pakistan, I think of heat. Intense heat. It wasn't like this (referring to Scranton) there, I'd never seen snow until I came to the United States in 2011. As far as my daily routine went, it went something like this: 7 o'clock get up, get ready for school and everything, go to my lessons, come home, and maybe spend time with some friends. On a normal, peaceful day, it was surprisingly nice. I had a big, big nice house. We were well off. My mom and dad were both employed.

Me: What'd your parents do for a living, if you don't mind me asking?

Ishban: Oh, not at all. My dad was a music teacher. And my mom worked in the offices at the school I studied at, one of the finest schools in the whole country: Beaken House. I was studying there with a full ride because she worked there. That stuff was nice. That part of life was nice.

Me: What do you mean that part of life? Was there another part that wasn't nice?

Ishban: I can't even picture myself ten years from now in Pakistan. I'd probably be dead. That's the part that wasn't nice. Probably shot, or kidnapped, or something. Violence, lots of violence. Too much. It seemed like every day there was a bomb blast anywhere in Pakistan. Killing of Christians. Killing of women and children. Too much.

Me: I'm wondering—and be honest with me here, Ishban, you won't hurt my feelings—what do Pakistani people think of Americans and America in general?

Ishban: Oh, jeeze. Okay, well. Let me start off by saying this: I was born in a Christian family. So basically, I've always been a minority. When I lived in Pakistan, because of my faith, I was a minority, and, because I'm Pakistani and living in the United States, I'm a minority. And so,

over there, it was *bad* for us Christians. It was bad for us because they associated Christians with the United States. Obviously, because of all the wartime operations the United States conducted in the Middle East, in Muslim countries, Muslims learned to hate Americans and everything about them. I can't even explain how they feel. You don't even have to say anything to them about it. It's just understood: they're evil. You just know how they feel about America.

Me: And so would you say that was your biggest motivation to move to America. The pursuit of religious freedom?

Ishban: Yes. And no. We weren't safe there if we wanted to continue to practice our religion, and that's important to us. Also, a better life couldn't be had there. There exists a ceiling for those who aren't rich or well positioned in Pakistan.

Me: How do you mean?

Ishban: Well, if I were still over there, if I weren't dead, I'd probably be sitting at home doing nothing because the education is too expensive. And it's *all* about the money. For example, I've never heard of someone getting a scholarship over there. Over here, you're more than a mark on a piece of paper. They recognize how brilliant you *can* be. Not how well you did on your math exam from 3 years ago.

Me: Well, you see, I think that ties directly into what I'm trying to prove with this documentary in a way. That the American Dream is still alive, even in a city like Scranton. That people of any creed, of any nationality, can come to America and call it home, and pursue whatever it is that makes them happy.

Ishban: Especially in a city like Scranton... It's funny you brought that up because today I was driving with my dad—my dad wants to open up a small business here in Scranton—and he says

to me, “this is the land of opportunity, Ishban. You can do whatever you want, you can do anything, *anything*. But.”

Me: But? There’s always a but! But what?

Ishban: Oh, what’s the word, I can’t find the right word... Boundaries. There are boundaries for us. Barriers for us.

Me: Can you explain them to me?

Ishban: First of all, there is a language barrier for us. Second, we don’t know anybody.

Networking is a word I just learned. It’s a great word. We can’t do it. It involves a system or a community of interconnected people. We don’t have that. And finally, we lack sources to get us on our feet. But language is most important. Learning English is hard, speaking English is even harder.

Me: Do you feel like you're stereotyped because of that?

Ishban: Hmm... Ahhh. I don’t know.

Me: You’re allowed to say yes, Ishban. Trust me. I won’t mind.

Ishban: Yeah. Sometimes. It’s not fun. But I can feel it.

Me: Last question. Fair warning, it’s a loaded question.

Ishban: A loaded question?

Me: It doesn't have an easy answer, if any answer at all... Do you feel like you know yourself better or worse because you’ve been forced from the place you called home? Forced to call a new place home.

Ishban: Yes, I think I do. I have something to compare or differentiate my old life with because of this new life in Scranton. People ask me all the time, “Do you like it better here?” And I never know what to say. I can’t fully answer them. You have to experience it for yourself. I’m

comparing my old life to this one, but my old life is only a memory. And as the years go by, it gets harder and harder to trust a memory.

Me: I lied. One more question. What did your home look like the last time you saw it?

Ishban: It looked empty. But it still felt like home.

Chapter 3

Coming and Going--Rachael

Her plane touched down on the damp tarmac just before the break of day on Christmas Eve. Her head, and the thoughts which swirled about inside it, however, still floated comfortably in and around the cloudy photographs she'd been staring at for the past three hours.

The art of passing time had always come naturally to her. She'd quiet her mind, loosen the constraints it normally imposed upon her, and drift from one blissful thought to the next, completely content with the idea of being suspended in something of her own creation. It comforted her most of the time, yet it also frightened her, too. She practiced in all sorts of places: like airports today, a taxi cab just yesterday, and on a stroll through the park sometime last week. But mostly, though, she did this when coming and going places, and most especially when flying home. She took pride in this, in her ability to drift neither here nor there, but to that place just in between, and stay there, for as long as possible.

Earlier that night, in the small hours of the morning, she sipped softly on her tepid tea while leafing through an album of photographs from her childhood. Tan, stringy legged teenagers with sand lodged in between their toes and popsicles dripping from their hands smiled back at her as foamy waves crashed against the shoreline in the distance. "What a lovely picture," the woman to her left whispered just before falling asleep. She reminded the girl of her nana who'd passed away a little over 3 years ago. The woman smelt like peppermint and church,

drank her coffee black, and said, “oh dear,” in a sweet, forgivable way when she spilt some of warm coffee on the girl’s white blouse.

“It is lovely, isn’t it,” she agreed after a while. She thanked the woman for the gracious compliment, with her eyes still focused intently on the waves in the distance. She offered the woman her untouched crumpet that came with her tea, as a token of reassurance that she truly didn’t mind the brown stain on her blouse; then, after noticing her nana look-a-like had drifted off, she ran her finger along a crease imbedded in the middle of the picture.

She thought back to her first week in California: homesick, unemployed, suddenly terrified by the thought of staying there forever. Later that day she had attempted to press the crinkled photograph back to its original state of being with a hot iron. For so long, she took comfort in the thought that a picture could transport her back in time, to exactly where she wanted to be. Without such an aide, her memory of that day devolved into such a delicate thing. A mind, her imagination, after all, made memories malleable, fragile pieces of herself, not easily mended once torn apart. To her dismay the scalding metal and steam faded the edges of the photograph, and blurred the sharp angles of her arms and legs. She sat cross-legged in contemplation the rest of that night, photograph in hand, wondering about the day it was taken, and how it surely diverged from her dimly lit memory of that sunny morning on the beach. She missed home. But mostly she missed knowing how to remember it.

* * *

She shut the door to her cab gently, wandered her way up toward a splintered mahogany door, rapped three times with her knuckles, and waited. In her other hand, she carried with her a small, underwhelming leather bound album. The paper inside it looked as fragile as her. Waves

of warm fog had seeped silently through the pores of this morning as the sun took its place in the sky, ready to burn away the beginning of the day. They crashed soundlessly around her scuffed loafers as she fingered her way through the worn yellow parchment of the ancient looking album in her hands, pausing to look deeply into a blurred, washed out image, entirely oblivious to the sound of the footsteps coming from the other side of the door. The wooden portal to 1224 East Gibson Street swung open wide.

“You’re home!” the voice of her father boomed with excitement. He wrapped his burly arms around her small shoulders.

“I’m home,” she replied with a bit of a happy struggle.

“Come on in. What have you got there? Not more work I hope. It’s Christmas Eve for Christ’s sake, Rach. Everyone’s in the kitchen, even your cousins. We were just talking about that summer at the beach at nana’s house. I’ll grab your bags.”

She passed through the hallway quietly, then made her way through the living room, running the tips of her fingers gently over the furniture as if to reintroduce herself to the comfortable objects of her childhood. She heard the familiar voices of friends and family leaking through the crack of an open door, “I’m telling you,” the voice of her Uncle Bobby carried well in a room crowded with voices, “nana’s favorite color was green, and her favorite child was me. The rest, well, that’s up for debate, but I remember that much for sure!”

She hears this. Pauses for a moment. Runs her finger up and down the crease of a picture, then pushes the door open enthusiastically with a smile, and a full bodied wave, “Now Uncle, Bobby, Uncle Bobby. I think I speak for everyone here when I say this: you’ve always had the

most vivid imagination of all nana's children, but I think we can all agree her favorite color was blue. And that there was a reason Uncle Dooley and Uncle Shaun were almost always photographed wearing it."

Chapter 4

There and Back Again--Ben

Back in November of last year, on the wet and windy morning I met with Ben to conduct my interview with him, I warned him of my amateur status as a filmmaker. “Ben,” I began in a matter-of-fact way over the phone, “I’ll be awkward in my questioning, you’ve been warned.”

“I’m sure I’ll be clumsy in my responses,” he replied casually with a tired yawn.

“The lighting,” I added, “it won’t be ideal. It’ll probably be shining in your face.”

“Fantastic! Never did like the spotlight all that much.”

“And we’ll be shooting all day, just to let you know.”

“Well, luckily I’ve only got an hour,” he laughed.

“Great! Glad we had this talk. I’m on my way...stuck in traffic, but I’ll get there when I get there.”

“I’m still in bed, so I’ll see you when I see you.” *Click*. End of conversation. As per usual, a dialogue bereft of seriousness, overflowing with sarcasm.

You see, Ben and I had always gotten along extraordinarily well ever since we were kids. Our mutual adoration of all things ironic and sarcastic had served us well throughout our childhood, in good times and in bad. For example: shortly after his parents divorced, we formed a band named The Dirty Hobos. During the tumultuous time, the idea of running away from home struck us, and him in particular, as a brilliant solution to the problems which adulthood imposed upon us, and in particular him. For obvious reasons, we both stayed put in our

respective homes. Nevertheless, when it came time to perform, we'd groove up onto the stage, garbed in ripped jeans, ratty tee-shirts, and plastered on fake beards. For a glorious half an hour or so, the stage became a home away from home for us. An escape. He'd banged on the drums, I'd strum the guitar, our brothers provided the vocals, and his dad played the keyboard. I was twelve. He was fourteen. And even at that young age I distinctly remember being aware of how humor and a sense of the ironic could be a coat of armor, a protective barrier which lightened the weight of those things too heavy for our small shoulders. But, "there is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt." Erma Bombeck, the great American newspaper humorist and writer said that. Months later, looking back on the day of that interview, those words never seemed truer.

The interview began in much the way we expected it to: him and I mostly ragging on each other, yet slowly and surely getting usable material for my documentary. His art studio, bursting at the seams with colorful and provocative paintings, provided the perfect backdrop for what I thought would be an opportunity to highlight his abilities as a local artist in a city with a growing indie downtown art scene. Scranton, shockingly, was beginning to attract talented young people once again.

In truth, though, at that time I was far from realizing what I truly wanted the focal points of my project to be. Moreover, I decided to role with what felt genuine and hope for a few moments of magic. Maybe gently dismantle a few barriers while I was at it. Little did I know they'd fall so easily. The following is a small excerpt from our interview which never made it to the film for editing purposes.

Ben: I remember the night I called from New York. The phone rang three times, then Jordan, my brother, picked up. I'm coming home, I told him immediately. I remember the words hitting the bottom of my empty stomach with a deafening thud. They sank through my gut, down my legs like piss, then seeped into my shoes. I felt like I was drowning. But I wasn't drowning in an ocean or something like that. It was a puddle. Just a puddle of self doubt. Puddles can be deceiving, though, because it felt like quicksand. I remember for the first time in a week I looked at my reflection in the graffiti laced window pane of the booth. It scared the shit out me. Pale. Frail. Kind of glowing against the shadows the street lamp cast around me. I was scared. In a way, I had run away from home, and I wanted it back. It was as simple as that.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Ishban didn't have a choice—being a Christian in Pakistan is a dangerous thing. Scranton became a beacon of hope for him and his family, a place of refuge; Ben came back—from an early age, he felt a gravitational pull begging him to try his hand as an artist in the city of New York. But sometimes gravity can make everything too heavy. The city of Scranton, commonly referred to as The Electric City, reminded him how much light there remained in the world. And Rachael left for good—the way Hollywood actresses hop in beat down Volkswagens with nothing but ambition and optimism. Rachael saw the sun set on the horizon and drove without looking back, until she saw the Pacific Ocean. A part of Scranton hasn't left her, though. Family and friends keep her coming back again and again only to realize that this, too, is still her home.

So, why jumble together their stories when they have nothing in common. Or, very little in common that is. I asked myself that question countless times. Eventually I came to this conclusion: each person's story told on its own does a profound disservice to itself and the others, for it is only when comparing and juxtaposing their unique journeys that a unifying theme becomes obvious. What they discovered about themselves goes hand and hand with what they lost. As Rachael once put it to me during one of our interviews, “there's comfort in our memories of home because they allow us to do the impossible: freeze time, exactly where we want to be.” That notion frightened them at times. It also delighted them, too. Mostly, though, it confounded them, and especially me. And so, I made a documentary. My hope, being the visual learner that I am, was to succeed in film where I had failed in writing. That being said, this

serves merely as a snapshot of their stories, as a way to introduce you to them before viewing my documentary. Like Ben, Rachael, and Ishban's stories, when separated from one another, the film and this written piece make little sense, and mean even less. Combined, though, they add up to something greater than their parts.

ACADEMIC VITA

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Education

Pennsylvania State University -- University Park, PA
BA in English, Concentration in Creative Writing— 2011-2015
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Professional Experience

Tribal Media— University Park, PA
Content Strategist, Lead Blogger, December 2014—Present
Worked hand and hand with clients to project their image through carefully crafted 400-600 word posts.
Responsible for the methodologies and processes related to the analysis, creation, maintenance, governance and measurement of content.
Helped brands effectively and efficiently manipulate content to connect with their customers, and integrate it across all channels of media.

Honors and Awards

Awarded Outstanding Student in the Humanities—2013

Publications and Papers

Contributed to the Penn State Worthington Campus Literary Magazine

Research Interests

I am interested in the place where the Liberal Arts intersect with Technology and Design and how the seamless integration of those three categories create a new, more immersive type of media.

