

Ch.2.i. | Milk With Dinner

I am a Wisconsin boy and proud of it. I really do travel with a Green Bay Packers jersey just to wear it for a certain sixteen (hopefully more) Sundays every year, and I know this is a seemingly stupid use of precious space—but it barely feels like a choice. Wisconsin is a beautiful state filled with “salt-of-the-earth” people, humble and kind folks who drink glasses of milk with dinner. I loved growing up there.

It was full of soccer tournaments, summer camps, playing punk rock drums in suburban basements, and all the other things that fill childhood—first kisses, social stresses, being bullied, peer pressure, and shaping my identity as a new human in a huge world. I wouldn't exchange my childhood for anyone else's, except for one part.

My Mom passed away when I was ten, and, if I'm being totally honest, I'm still processing it. My Mom was sick in most of my childhood memories, battling through rounds of chemo and putting on both a wig and a smile for her two boys, although certainly in a great deal of pain and discomfort most of the time. I remember feeling embarrassed that my Mom was in a wig, and that sense of embarrassment still stings today. I wish I could apologize for that, but obviously I can't. I do talk to my Mom in my mind at times, and, when it feels like the universe winks at me, I thank my Mom, certain that she orchestrated that fateful encounter or delayed flight.

I remember attending my Mom's funeral feeling like I was watching a service for someone else in a movie, entirely detached from the reality of it in an attempt to be strong for my Dad who just lost the love of his life and the mother of his two boys. Lots of people from our suburban Milwaukee community came to the funeral along with most of my fifth-grade class.

Standing in the reception area after the ceremony, watching the scene from above and pretending it was all a work of fiction, David, one of the kids in my class, came over to me and asked in a straightforward, curious way, “Why are you not crying?” I just looked at him and said, “I don't know, I guess I don't want to,” and walked away holding back tears. I cried that night in my bed for hours, wondering if the nebulous ball of pain that swelled in my chest would ever dissipate, wondering why it hurt to swallow. I cried myself to sleep like a toddler with a temper tantrum and the next morning I decided, at the age of ten, that I would never judge anyone for how they processed something difficult or grieved a loss. I kept that along with two other foundational life

lessons that I trace back to my Mom's passing.

The first: that there is no god. I believe in energy, souls, karma, the possibility of reincarnation, and all types of hippie notions, but you can't convince a ten-year-old who lost his Mom that there is a divine creator who has a "plan for everyone." If so, why would the plan for my Mom—a beautiful person who committed her life to raising two boys and improving special education for troubled kids—end with an incurable and progressive disease that would take her away at age 43? You can't explain it—I still can't and neither can any religious person I've ever had this conversation with, outside of just repeating, "It's god's plan." Well then, fuck god. I can say that because I know nobody is listening and because it's been 25 years and I still feel the same way. This isn't some conclusion that felt right in the heat of the moment and faded, it just feels like the truth.

The second thing is that, with the absence of a higher power determining my fate or a "this leads to that" life-planning paradigm, I decided that I wouldn't live in fear. My Dad became increasingly worried about life, having the sole responsibility of getting two boys safely into adulthood on his shoulders. With a parent who worries incessantly, there are two potential reactions: adopt that same fear, or push back dramatically in the other direction. I decided to do my best to never worry—to let the chips fall where they may. My Mom played life safe and was taken, my Dad worried about everything as the last adult left in the room, and somewhere along the way I decided that, whatever happened, I would be fine with the result. I would do every drug, drive every two-wheeled toy, say yes to everything that scared me, and put myself in uncomfortable situations deliberately just to remind myself that I was still here—that I still get to enjoy this one chance at life.

I wonder if this desire to feel a wide range of emotions relates to why I put my wallet somewhere different every time I get home, just to panic and then find it on top of the fridge an hour later feeling simultaneously overjoyed and annoyed with myself.

Staying in Wisconsin, or in the United States, would have been the safe thing for me to do. But this equal and opposite reaction from my Mom's passing and Dad's subsequent worry shot me out into the world.

My Mom's illness affected me a great deal, but so did a lot of other aspects of growing up in Milwaukee. When someone asks where I'm from, I say, "The States," then, "Wisconsin," then, "Milwaukee," always in that order, watching the person's face morph from neutral to confused more

often than not. It's not the answer people are hoping for. I would love to just say "California" and have everyone be like, "Aw, that's cool."

I'm really good at describing Milwaukee in relation to Chicago, which is what 95% of the world needs to place Milwaukee on a map in their mind. But I hate the where-are-you-from question in general. I avoid asking it at all costs.

Here are some other things that I was and am.

If you're into Myers Briggs personality traits, I'm a pretty classic ENFP (Extrovert, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceiving), which probably helps explain why I think my travels and perspective on them are interesting enough to write down and hopefully interesting enough for you to read and enjoy. It's also why I've been a camp counselor and group leader for most of my adult life.

If you're astrologically inclined, a Mercury-is-in-retrograde type, I'm a Scorpio, which I don't want to admit is a good fit for me, which is exactly what a Scorpio *would* say (at least according to Sunny, one of my exes). I'm competitive, confident, passionate, opinionated, and I love sex. I know everyone likes sex, but I'm pretty sure I like it more than you. *I win.*

If you're looking at me in a photograph, I'm probably the guy wearing a stupid patterned shirt or tank top, no shoes, sticking his tongue out, eyes wide. Wherever I am, you can bet I'm never the stoic big guy just standing normally in the back row.

If you're doing trippy drugs, I'd like to be there. I have a great constitution when it comes to mind-altering substances, and I take pride in making sure everyone is on a good frequency. The only bad trip I've had in my life was during my senior year of college when I had to play drums during a jam session with five of my college professors and I was *out of my mind* on mushrooms. It was not my fault (read: it was sort of my fault) and still gives me sweaty palms and a clenched butthole when I think about it.

If we're at a house party, I'm the guy playing drinking games, DJing, or playing an acoustic guitar—sometimes rightly, sometimes very wrongly, assuming everyone loves average, live, acoustic covers. Sometimes I'm doing all three of those things I love at once. I've been described as both "extra" and—in a relationship—"like dating a Labrador puppy."

In high school, I set the single-season scoring record in soccer and won the superlative *most dreamed about*, together with my girlfriend at the time—let's call her Leslie. We were photographed together for the yearbook, and a thought bubble was transposed above each of our heads featuring the other in it.

That same winter, I tore my ACL during an indoor game, crushing my division one soccer dreams. Shortly after surgery, I crutched in on Leslie at our Senior Prom after-party hooking up

with her ex on a white leather couch in my Russian friend Boris' basement. She dumped me a few weeks before prom, so she wasn't necessarily cheating, but this still resulted in my first time puking from drinking.

During this time I also stressed daily about the acne on my face, back, and neck, and did side bends in the mirror every time I brushed my teeth because, as I discovered, I had a genetic propensity to be chubby. I used to fall asleep thinking about Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Golden Grahams, and the other sugary cereals signing their siren song from the kitchen cupboard, my mouth watering onto my pillow. Now I fall asleep thinking of freshly brewed coffee. We grow up and change, but more often in scope, scale, and taste than disposition.

Junior year I ballooned to 235 pounds (107 kilos for you non-pound folks) between soccer seasons due to a friend who got a job at Schlotzsky's Deli, a loosely run pizza and sandwich joint. All the Cinnamon Toast Crunch certainly didn't help my physique. I hung out with the punk rock crew. I had two ten-gauge bull-ring earrings, I sewed NOFX and Rancid patches onto my backpack and hoodies, and I played the shit out of a double bass pedal in a screamo hardcore band called *Will Denied*. We released one five-song EP called *Crossing the Rubicon*.

So yeah, high school was confusing, heartbreaking, full of throat-choking laughter, sleepless nights of anxiety, late nights with Conan O'Brien, followed by 6:40 a.m. alarms and a pressure to do better, to be better.

It was a mixed bag; a beautiful and formative one. I tried admirably to be cool, to fit in. I tricked everyone—my athletic ability being my biggest cover. In truth, back then none of us were cool or uncool, hip or bogus, gnarly or square—we were kids trying our best to keep it together.

During the first chapter of my professional life, when I worked with youth for almost ten years, one writing activity I would facilitate to help kids build their sense of self was called an "I am" poem. The only instruction is to simply begin every line of the poem with "I am."

I am a brother and a son.

I am from Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

I am a straight, white, middle-class man with all of the related privileges.

I am a traveler and constantly seeking the new.

I am extremely competitive and thankfully coordinated.

I am a "try hard" and a people pleaser.

I am "results-oriented" and restless with a new idea.

I am a musician who is good at most instruments and amazing at none.

I am an extrovert who craves connection and doesn't shy away from attention.

I am extremely present, and I value each hour of the day.

For many years now, I've either avoided the where-are-you-from question altogether and gone with another question ("What kitchen appliance would you be?"), or, if I am genuinely curious about someone's "background," which is what I think we want to know when we ask about their geographic origin, I'll ask, "Where are you from, and how did you get here?" It forces the connection of their oldest dot to the most current and gives that person the freedom to answer it with as much or as little context as they choose. This could lead to someone telling you their entire life story or simply responding, "On an airplane, dummy."

I came up with this accidental icebreaker one night with the help of two Dutch guys I had just met in front of my favorite bar in Cape Town called *House of Machines*. I asked them where they were from (I could place Europe but wasn't sure exactly where) and then, immediately after they said Holland, I followed up with, "And how did you end up here?" They traded off giving a circuitous, tandem explanation, which largely covered both of their life paths, and in that few minutes I got the actual answers to the questions we're all really trying to ask each other. Who are you? Why are you here? Give me some context on how we ended up sharing a moment together at this bar in Cape Town, *please*.

I hope that this gives you a better sense of who I am than the typical, "*Yeah, Milwaukee. Yeah, it's the city where That '70s Show takes place. Yeah, it's where Harley Davidsons are made too.*"