

readers' notes

ON BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

When I turned sixteen, my mother offered me the opportunity to smoke a pipe, just as her mother had offered her brothers—my uncles—when each turned the same age. After a short while, both uncles gave it up.

Since girls weren't supposed to smoke pipes, Mom didn't get that chance. Instead, she became a lifelong cigarette smoker.

Twenty years later, I confided to my wife that I had the feeling my daughter really didn't like kissing me goodnight when I would tuck her in her bed at night. I quit smoking the day she came home from school with a button that said, "SMOKING STINKS."

JOEL GREENWALD, VOORHEES, NJ

Today, we are running 108 kilometers.

Orange juice on my chin, I make my way to the starting area. I'm wearing a running skirt despite the early chill because the forecast calls for heat. My running backpack is on, strategically loaded up with Tailwind (an electrolyte drink), a peanut butter sandwich, and a couple of energy gels. I am wearing compression socks because my feet and lower legs will start to swell through the day. A ballcap rests on my head with sunglasses perched on the rim for

when the sun really hits. I put on my "race hair" by ritually threading a thick braid through the back hole of the hat.

And now, we must wait. We are standing in that narrow band of minutes before the starting horn. The body is ready because the mind is ready. Chins are lowered. Endorphins are already filing into position like soldiers. I feel an expanding burst of enthusiasm building at the back of my throat. Restraint is part of the game. *Stay controlled*, I tell myself. *Very soon you will be able to let go. Wait for it. Wait for it.*

I love beginnings and entrances. Thresholds, clear windows, open doors, and road crossings. Stepping through, witnessing movement and progress. Imagining upcoming yelps of pleasure or challenge. Imagining what's next. Holding out a hand to be pulled. Holding of here-we-go breath. Holding of space with the thud of an increasing heartbeat. Filled to the brim, I am so, so close. Three, two, one. *Go!*

**LAURA MANUEL, EDMONTON,
ALBERTA, CANADA**

Beginning and ending without a lead singer (for seven years), Lightning Nation auditioned *ad nauseam*, saying *No* to

everyone who didn't holler as good as Ian Gillan. The guitar player, Hugh, did the singing ("temporarily," supposedly), but he simply didn't sound good. That didn't stop me from muscling Peter's bulky bass speakers to his weekly practices.

From the window of a tall building in the Los Angeles warehouse district, the downtown city skyscrapers in view—where there was no such thing as too loud—I often savored the dynamism of the big city lights and the thundering '70s-style hard rock even though they played in the '80s. I yearned to be a poet, so I offered to write lyrics for Lightning Nation, but Peter said, "Since the Beatles wrote their own songs, we must keep to that standard, too."

So I kept carrying gear like a good roadie. I drove from San Bernardino to Hollywood—about seventy miles—on Tuesday and stayed until I had to be back to work on Thursday. A security guard, I had to keep my hair short which made me feel inferior to my friends who all had long head-banger hair. Yet it felt great to be backstage with the band when they performed live, drinking contraband beer (purchased cheaper elsewhere), not the expensive stuff that everyone else at the nightclub had to buy—yes, I was special, for I was a

friend of the band, had my name on the coveted list to get in for free.

DANA STAMPS II., RIVERSIDE, CA

After I won a high school election, my mom bragged to her sisters around the Scrabble board. But what did she say that summer when I met Trouble? He drove a '63 Pontiac Tempest, midnight blue with ivory leather seats. He taught me to "powder puff" in ladies' races when I wasn't fellating in that creamy interior. I smoked a joint, got sloe-gin drunk, was suspended from college, and married Trouble. At Scrabble, Mom's lips tightened. But who knew I'd scrap Trouble, ditch risk, and eventually librarian? Now I play Scrabble and have let trouble settle down to lowercase.

MARY KAY FEATHER, SEATTLE, WA

I come upon a spread of driftwood, giving the beachside an air of wreckage and ruins. I delicately recall how Emma, my sand-colored terrier of fourteen years, patiently and meticulously used to absorb the full three-dimensions of each piece. Today, I see the arduous cycles of life, death, and rebirth: first, the driftwood was a seedling, then an actual tree. Then, it was severed from the tree, and it

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washed through lakes, or rivers, drifting into the sea. Now here it sits, smoothed by the tide and wind, bleached by salt and sun, giving it a new form.

As I sea haunt alone, I imagine Emma's paw prints newly pressed on the wet sand, knowing that no wave will erase her existence.

**CLARA OROPEZA,
SANTA BARBARA, CA**

I stand in the living room. Rain over glass.

I walk through the empty house. Sand settles in the floor. A closet with his Mariners jacket. The "box," Pop's old office—inside, a portrait of C.S. Lewis smoking a cigar; paperbacks, shock-wave physics books. Nana's table of unlit candles. White walls lined in memory.

Let a word be a home full of candlelight. A lamp at the end of the hall.

I come to the front door. Papa carved it when this house was his. A wood-hewn ship at sail, below it, each wave a curl, and I am called back to words of Boethius around the lip of a shell:

To see thee is the end and the beginning.

Thou carriest me and thou goest before.

Thou art the journey and the journey's end.

This is the house my parents will move into come April. Let it be filled again with yellow candlelight, a flickering table she once set with care and bread.

I open the door.

Moon half full, alabaster jar shattered and streaming with nard. I can do nothing but walk to the water's edge and lean down, take the water in my open hands, let it fall over my arms, press it into my forehead, over cheeks and eyes closed.

Brush of sound against rock, a voice in blue. Jesus was always entering and exiting, walking through water and through doors, to the boat and the table. He had no place to lay his head, but He knew what had no beginning, no end.

The home in me that was empty will be filled.

Thou art the journey and the journey's end.

Thou carriest me and thou goest before.
To see thee is the end and the beginning.

HANNAH HINSCH, SEATTLE, WA

Three years ago, my husband suddenly collapsed and died. That ending was the sign of a new beginning for a woman who was a mother, a grandmother, and a college graduate who had never

lived alone. Never. When my youngest daughter offered to come live with me, I looked around my two-bedroom condo and said, “No, thank you for offering, but I have to learn how to be a single adult all on my own.”

When COVID-19 arrived, I decided I could never tolerate solitary confinement. A neighbor felt the same and we became intermittently immersed in each other’s “safety-bubble.”

It was wonderful to be touched again. To not only text or email or call but to talk in real life to someone who laughed and snuggled and then went home. To hear things I hadn’t heard before and to say things I hadn’t shared before.

When vaccinations arrived, I got mine and he got his. So did his wife and his daughter.

I was able to spend time with my children and grandchildren, to drive across the state to visit my aunt and an uncle, to spend the night with a high school bestie and her husband. My single life was not quite normal but it was opening.

Then the Delta variant began its surge and my neighbor wanted to renew our friendship.

An ending had opened up my world to a new beginning. Now, this new beginning seems to be something I need to end. For his sake and for mine.

NAME WITHHELD

On my thirty-second birthday, I was given a copy of *War and Peace*. My sooty fingerprints still cover the first pages, remnants of a former life. Slogging through the first chapter, I sat on the wool rug in front of the woodstove as snow fell silently outside. Part of me was going to die that night. “A beginning for an end?” the book would ask.

Four winters prior, my mom had grown ill. Naive to what it means to become a caregiver to a parent in your twenties, my husband and I decided, chivalrously, that it was our job to save her. He flew three thousand miles, rented a car, and drove her and her cat back to our home to live with us. In four years, my mother would be glowing with health. But me? I would be a shell of my former self. A body of flesh emptied of life—a beginning for an end.

There in front of the fire on my thirty-second birthday, Prince Andrei rode past the old barren oak and saw it as a symbol of his own life. He declared “that it was not for him to begin anything fresh.”

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I nodded in recognition. On his return trip, Andrei looked for the old oak only to find “a tent of sappy dark green.”

“No, life is not over at thirty-one,” he said to himself. “Nor at thirty-two,” I choked out between sobs on the floor in front of the fire.

**JEN CRATSENBERG,
SOUTH KINGSTOWN, RI**

My first son, fifth child, was born six years ago this Saturday, October 2nd. He came ten days early, as autumn began, the day after I chaperoned a field trip to a farm. He was born in a blowup pool in our living room in the early evening while a friend took our daughters to eat Chipotle. We named him after my husband’s father, though the name, Stephen, didn’t feel right for a baby. He died seventy-five days later on a sunny winter afternoon, December 16th, while napping in my bedroom, just after the sugar maple outside our window lost all its red leaves.

In January, I decided that I wanted, *needed*, another child, another baby. Some people, my oldest daughter and husband included, thought I might be replacing Stephen or inviting more great loss, but I couldn’t quiet the longing. I learned on May 1st that I was pregnant

and, a few weeks later, that it would be another boy. I spent fall, the anniversary of Stephen’s life, in my third trimester, terrified that the baby might stop kicking or breathing inside me and reliving the year before, each of those seventy-five days.

I felt like Mary that December, anticipating something looming and possibly terrible. True, named after another relative, came on December 30th, also born in the living room.

He is four now, at preschool, as I write. He asks us to tell him about Stephen. He tells me he would like his own tree if he dies. He experienced his first death this weekend: a chick, his favorite of the brood, a yellow one who let him hold it, killed by our dog chasing it. We buried the bird by the front porch, True laying the soft, downy body in a small hole in the earth.

ERICA JENKS HENRY, OAK PARK, IL

This July, I moved out of my parents’ house for the second time in my adult life.

The world’s tangle of coronavirus and a bout of deep depression had sequestered me home from my dorm in Manhattan to the quiet streets of residential Chicago where, following my parents’ recent divorce, my mom lived alone in what used to be our family

home. I had been locked in intermittent skirmishes with depression since primary school, but this episode was drastic, brought on by a handful of factors, all future-oriented in the way things are when you near the end of college.

It was on my mind often then: Where an ending stops and a beginning starts. How to draw a map so you'd know which one you stand in the midst of, and how to tame them so they might arise at your command. In those ten months at home, I felt smothered by a final punctuation mark, stuck, hellishly, in an ending of epic proportions—a breakdown of the life I had built for myself. What was beginning, I feared, was a permanent regression, an empty shadow of adulthood slipping out of my grasp.

As the weeks passed, I took up therapy and Prozac and writing. I finished my first short story and started another. I learned that beginnings were everywhere, not only where I wanted them to be—but there, too. I felt that things would never be the same, and I decided, much later, that maybe it wasn't a bad thing.

This July, I packed my life into cardboard boxes and signed a lease on an apartment in New York. This is how life goes on, I learned, beautiful

and terrifying; an ending arrives, a beginning follows. So it changes. So it goes.

BLUE MERRICK, NEW YORK, NY

He said "Yes." Or he would have if he could have. My husband only had strength enough to nod once under his oxygen mask.

"You are dying, Joe. They're going to stop the pain. No surgery, like you said. You're dying now. Do you understand?"

Nod.

"Is it okay, Joe?"

Nod.

Tears pour down my face. The nurse beside me weeps, monitoring his vitals. Adding more morphine to his IV.

"I love you, Joe."

Small nod.

They move us from the ER to a private room.

I stroke his face.

Soon the pain, and he, are gone.

Silently, I nod.

CYNTHIA TRENSHAW, FREELAND, WA

Each little community had a disparaging single descriptive verb, signifying that we saw each as the other: "touristy," "trashy," "hicks," "druggies." In reality, many of us had not even ventured into

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the surrounding areas that made up our county by the time we were eighteen years old, but growing up, the sense of separation was astounding. Except in 1996, when a girl went missing from the university—that's when we all came together to claim her.

The male suspect was a local, the victim from another part of the state. Yet in all these years, “we” sided with her, not once implying the benefit of doubt to him. The disappearance loomed over us in the months before we split up for college, and the adults talked about “could never happen” and “in this town.” My classmates left or stayed, others left and then later came back for good, spending millions of dollars for homes in neighborhoods we couldn't wait to flee.

The trial of the suspect, arrested after twenty-five years, is about to start. When we plug in and follow the story, to see if justice will finally come to the past, our watching and waiting will be the only way to make things right.

We're sorry, we'll hope the trial says for us. *We're so, so sorry*.

LIZ LYDIC, LOS ANGELES, CA

When you're seventeen, you can't expect the person you'll be at twenty-two. You start college without the words to express

just what's wrong, without the words that help you understand just what happened to you. You start college unaware of the way it will end: triumphant, sad, guarded against pure hope, resilient in the face of your own self harm. You move into your first dorm room without any idea of what's to come, imagining the next four years filled with immediate lifelong friends and unadulterated joy, the pride that comes with hard work recognized and the exhaustion that comes with the pride.

You're proud when it's over, and sometimes for the work you've done, but you're leaving as a different person. You can't even comprehend the changes that are taking place because you're still trying to catch up to the changes of last year; it will take months in your new city for you to ever internalize that you are no longer a student, that you will have to find new ways to label yourself in this sprawling world laid out before you, both immensely limited and intensely limitless.

It's over. It's just starting. You know now is the time to find yourself, if college was not, but you've got no idea where to begin.

MIRANDA SCHNOOR, RICHMOND, VA

I wanted to draw a picture of horses to put in his casket. Uncle Scott loved his horses,

Spike and Rusty. I was six. “One shouldn’t put scratch paper in a casket,” I was told.

Uncle Scott was the first person I heard exclaim *horseshit*. The punchiest thing ever uttered in my young life. I remember him bouncing me on his knee, singing, “Hidey-didey, Christ Almighty, who the hell am I?”

Death, like contentment, is a mysterious operator—a trickster, a cruel joker—with an odd sense of proportionality and equity. My father, for decades a heavy smoker and toxic drinker, survived to eighty-four. Double the years allotted to Uncle Scott. Cancer, one of death’s most loyal foot soldiers, claimed the love of my life in her prime. She was the cleanest-living person I’ll ever know.

I have wondered what I would have wanted to sketch to put in my father’s casket, to be with him for eternity. Uncle Scott would have been fine with my stick-figure equines buried with him all these decades. *Hidey-didey*, I can hear him sing, a smile all over his face.

This notion of a dark, empty void in death is so much horseshit. At least for those left behind.

WILLIAM BURTCH, COLUMBUS, OH

I am holding him in the hospital. He is in my arms. Finally. I can’t stop looking at him, drinking in his every detail. He

is both a slice of my soul and a complete stranger. *Have we met before?* I want to ask.

I am holding him in my writing chair. It has become the nursing chair. No writing happens here anymore. I have stopped journaling, stopped putting thoughts in order. There is no order in my life. I don’t have the energy to write. If I did, I’m afraid of what I would say. I will be holding this child for the rest of my life, I think. His existence has swallowed me up. A panic rises in my belly as I realize there is someone else I forgot to be.

I am holding him while Jeremy pushes a stroller filled with groceries. I thought parenthood was something we could simply add to our lives, like a new car. As if Jeremy held out a wooden spoon and asked me to taste our lives as they were, one hand cupped underneath to catch the drip. *Mmmm*, I said, *Needs more spice*. And so, we added a baby.

I am holding him at my parents’ house and I realize I will not be holding this child forever. He will crawl out of my arms and I will spend the rest of my life remembering what it was like to hold the weight of his newness. Years from now, he will curl into my lap for

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the last time. And then my lap will be empty. I will hold the air around him, maybe even hug him, if he lets me. And his body will feel familiar. Like the roundness of an apple. Yet, not mine to hold anymore.

JAZMINE ALUMA, LOS ANGELES, CA

My childhood began at the Francis William Bird Park, named after the son of a local industrialist who died unexpectedly in 1918. Bird Park is a compact green oasis tucked inside a densely populated suburban neighborhood. As a kid, I walked along the park's terra-cotta pathways to the elementary school, also named after the Bird family. Roaming free among its mowed slopes and fields and shaded woods, Bird Park became my treasured boyhood playground. It ended when I was ten years old and my family moved several towns away.

Over a half century later, I am back at Bird Park, this time with my wife and our fifteen-month-old grandson in his stroller. The ending called "career" has given way to a delightful new beginning. Will our grandson be too young to retain any memories of his times at

Bird Park? Of the geese congregating at the silted-in water hole that used to be the park's swimming pool, or waving at the dogs on leashes, or the rush of the swing, or pushing or riding in the donated toy cars? Some beginnings and endings are like that; nothing conscious remains, but their hidden effect endures.

RICHARD LEHAN, PLAINVILLE, MA

"It's three miles there and back" was always the answer when someone asked how far it was to the pier. Mom and I never walked it for distance but for joy.

Every night after dinner, whenever we were at Mom's beach house, it was a rule that we had to walk to the pier and back to get dessert—usually my sister's homemade peach crisp with Carolina peaches and double topping so no one fought over it.

We didn't rush. We took our time looking at all the sandcastles and creatures along the way, made with love during hours of play, soon to be washed away by the tide. "Careful" came the warning just in time for us to duck under the fishing lines as the sun started its decadent decent. Mom stopped to

pet all the passing dogs. During these walks, there was always lots of chatting, singing, hand-holding with Mom, an ebbing and flowing pace, always laughter and usually dancing.

Our final walk was different. We each walked alone, lost in our own thoughts

and memories. When we reached the pier, we held each other and cried. We knew she was where she would want to be—a part of her favorite three miles in all the world. A part of the beach, the castles, and the sea.

LAURA THOMA, GUILFORD, CT