VINCE GRANATA

Why I Get Lost

When I was eight years old, my mom invented a game called "getting lost." She was worried, she later told me, that I was starting to feel less loved. At four and a half I'd drawn a chalk mural to welcome my new triplet siblings, but Mom feared that I'd grown to feel lost in their shuffle.

We sat together in her minivan the first time we played the game. "Okay, Vince," she said. "Tell me where to turn."

I pointed left and she swung out of the driveway. At the end of our street she paused to adjust her glasses.

"How about now?" she asked. I pointed right, and after a handful of turns, I had no idea where we were. She noticed that I was struggling to find landmarks.

"Looks like we're lost," she said. "Think you can get us back home?" With her hands on top of the wheel, she shrugged her shoulders. She must have known where we were, but sitting alone with her, I believed that she needed my help.

"Tell me where to turn," she said, and I pointed and laughed while I tried to guide us home.

We played the game every night we could get away. We played it so often that eventually we had to drive deep into neighboring towns before I lost my bearings.

Back then, I couldn't have imagined her dying. At eight, sitting in the car with her, I didn't believe that she could die. I couldn't believe it just as I couldn't believe she was lying when she said she didn't know where we were.

Even now, twenty years after we first got lost, it's almost impossible for me to imagine the moment of her death. Knowing how she died, knowing too much about how she died, leaves me far more disoriented than when I was eight and we played our game. Even though I was lost when we played, I was lost with her.

I was twenty-seven when my brother killed my mom. I wasn't there when Tim killed her, in the house we grew up in. After he did it, he

called the police and started walking down the street. They found him, bloodied and carrying a Bible, at the bottom of the hill we raced our bikes down as kids.

Earlier that summer, Mom had chaperoned Tim's descent into psychosis. She stood alone, mostly, after a litany of doctors and institutions failed to treat him. She remained, a sentinel guarding against his mounting madness.

Afterward, I found the notes she left him, stacked in a neat pile on his desk. They say, "Stay strong, Tim," "I know you're hurting," and "I believe in you." The last note, faceup on top of the pile, says, "I love you"—in the same curved handwriting she used to mark my name on the tags of my childhood jackets.

When Tim killed her, I was teaching in a small village in the Dominican Republic. All three of my little siblings were home that summer. Chris and Lizzie had just graduated from college and had moved home to find jobs. Tim had just been cast out of a psychiatric hospital, and festered in isolation, growing almost entirely nocturnal.

When Tim killed Mom, I had just finished reading a Spanish version of "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" with Yamilet, a precocious seven-year-old girl. I'd been in the Dominican Republic for three weeks, working with a program run by one of my best friends, a friend I'd known since we squabbled over foursquare games on our elementary school blacktop.

That summer, my Spanish was passable. In the afternoons I taught basic grammar, working through the secondhand children's books in the Learning Center. I spent most mornings leading camp games in a dirt field the community called *El Play*. We would set up obstacle courses with cones and jump ropes, kick soccer balls until dirt covered our shins, run egg-in-spoon races, and teach the kids foursquare.

Mom was dead for two hours before I knew. She lay, bleeding on the floor of the family room where she read *The Chronicles of Narnia* aloud to me as a child. She lay there while I stumbled through Spanish syntax with Yamilet, tripping on accent marks and verb tenses.

Mom must have seen him before she died; Tim must have been the last image, her youngest son, bloodied before her, while her oldest son read children's books an entire world away.

While we read, Yamilet and I drank water from little baggies to combat the heat. The water we gave the kids came in small sealed bags called *fundas*. To open the *fundas*, we used our teeth, gnawing at the corners of the plastic.

My phone was off and wedged into a sweaty pocket while we read. It had remained off for most of the last three weeks. Jon, my friend in charge of the program, approached our table just as Yamilet and I finished the story.

"It's your dad," he said, passing me his clunky Motorola.

"*Momentito*," I said to Yamilet. She was still looking at the book, running her hands over its last illustration, a child moving a Technicolor mountain.

Jon's old phone was slippery in my hand. When I brought it to my ear, there was too much noise in the Learning Center to hear anything. I said "Dad?" twice before I got to the sliding door.

Outside, I was immediately sun-seared, so I turned toward a shaded alley. Some of the younger children were gathered by the Learning Center, and as I moved past them, the ones who knew my name called out "Bince! Bince!" The 'B' sound was easier for the young ones to enunciate. Only when I ducked into the alley did I hear my dad say "Vince?"

Sweat slid from my shoulders, running from my chest down my ribs. I felt the slick wetness on my back as I leaned against the metal wall outside the Learning Center. Behind its thin metal, children were still reading stories about dogs and parents and kites. Over the muffled noises of the children, my dad said my name one more time.

We had a code phrase in my family, a phrase we used at the beginning of every conversation to diffuse anxiety. The person initiating the conversation would say "everything is fine," so the person receiving the call knew we weren't in crisis. It was a shortcut for us to tell each other to deescalate, to put the launch codes back in locked boxes.

This phrase had begun to lose its meaning. We molded it to fit our new definitions of normal; we started saying "everything is fine, but…" For example, everything is fine, but Tim just got pulled over for running a stop sign while passing a school bus. Everything is fine, but Tim isn't going to finish the semester. Everything is fine, but Tim is being discharged from the hospital earlier than we thought.

I tucked my head under the overhanging roof in the alley. Sheltered from the playful noises around the corner, I could hear my father breathing into the phone. I preempted him, "Is everything fine?"

With four syllables he reshaped the world. "No. Tim killed Mom."

The yellow stucco of the neighboring house melted and dissolved before my eyes.

"Vince?" Dad said; I scraped my back against the metal, falling to the gravel.

I didn't hear my father. It took a few seconds for me to realize that the call had been dropped.

When I saw Juancito standing over me, the phone was still at my ear. Juancito was in his teens and helped us organize games with the kids. Just that morning he had helped gather spoons for egg-and-spoon relays.

I formed a sentence. With Spanish, I needed a moment to hear the words in my head. I constructed the sentence in Spanish before it was ever a fully formed English thought. I looked at the components, mother, *madre*, died, *murió*.

"*Mi madre murió*."

I knew how much *murió* didn't say.

The shaking started as a single hiccup in my throat. Then I was shivering, pulling my drenched shirt collar to my mouth. Jon joined Juancito, each holding an arm as we moved toward the Learning Center. I stopped them at the door and retched down my leg.

Juancito ordered the kids outside. I couldn't see them file by; Jon blocked me, a crumpled heap next to my vomit.

In the Learning Center Juancito handed me a *funda*. I bit and tore and forgot to breathe. I tried to squeeze water onto my sticky leg, but most of it wound up in my lap. I held the empty *funda*, its soggy plastic carcass dripping in my hand. Juancito opened another one and squirted at the dirt and vomit caked to my shin.

Jon handed me his phone, and I heard my father's voice, along with my other siblings, Chris and Lizzie. We said mostly "I love you," speaking in a high wheeze. "Get to the airport," I heard, before losing the call.

That journey home is in pieces, fragmented frames spanning the distance between the Dominican Republic and Connecticut. I stop crying when I leave the Learning Center and won't cry again until I see my sister. At Jon's house in the neighboring town, I take a real shower and eat Oreos from an open box on his kitchen table.

After ninety minutes on dry, cracked highways, we reach the Santiago airport where inexplicably there is a Nathan's hot dog stand. I eat a hot dog and drink a Heineken. Jon has already booked a flight.

I go to the bathroom and realize I have an Internet signal. I'm standing at the urinal when I open Facebook. The first thing on my news feed under the heading "suggested video" is the WTNH story "Timothy Granata Killed Mother Claudia Granata in Orange."

My cousin Enzo has already gotten into a fight in the comments

section. Someone has posted "ban white boys with guns and mommy issues." Enzo has responded with a paragraph. I stop reading when I get to the word "knives."

This is my first detail.

The plane takes off an hour late. I sit next to Jon and there is a lightning storm. Later he will tell me how terrified he was. For the middle hour of the flight I watch the flashes of lightning. Sometimes they are only seconds apart.

My father, Chris, and Lizzie are outside when we get to the hotel. It will take two days for the police to allow us back in our house. I cry when I see my sister. She's standing between the two of them, her head resting on Chris's shoulder. Both of her hands are on his left arm, and she only lets go when I get out of the car.

I've traveled 1,500 miles to arrive at a hotel we used to pass every day on our way to school. It's fewer than five minutes from home.

Three weeks before Tim killed Mom, I was at home. Before I left for the Dominican Republic, I had time to spend at home; the high school I taught at finished classes in the middle of June. By the time I arrived home, Tim had become nocturnal. It was work to see him; he had rejected the sun.

Sometimes, lying awake, I would hear his heavy feet in the hallway. On nights when I forced myself to stay up, I would catch him in the kitchen when he emerged to eat. He ate ravenously, but rarely deviated from his limited menu. He'd eat pan-sized egg white omelets or serving bowls of Caesar salad. Some nights when I lingered in the kitchen, I watched him heat up grilled chicken, bury the chicken in boxes of green spring mix, and douse the combination in cartons of dressing. He drank coffee by the pint glass, but never with ice. Steam would escape from the top, his massive right hand obscuring the glass.

At night, in our dimly lit basement, Tim lifted weights. Over the course of seven years he had amassed an arsenal of weight-training material. Some of his heavier dumbbells, metallic and bulbous, had butt ends almost as big as my face. He was my six-foot-one, two-hundred-and-sixty-pound little brother. He was a heavyweight wrestling champion and had wrestled for one of the country's top college programs.

Tim was fourteen when he first started lifting weights. Over the course of a year, he transformed from hip-heavy pear to broad iron anvil. I could no longer wrestle him without fear of serious injury. I remember when

he discovered he could dominate me. His strength had eclipsed mine for a while, although it took some time for him to realize the extent of his power. I could still trick him into a headlock and neutralize his strength with a few sharp squeezes from my forearm.

We were in the basement the first time he beat me, horsing around on the thin green carpet. I clamped onto his shoulders, but he shook off my hands with a powerful shrug and pressed my body away from his. Emboldened, he took the offensive, and when I tried to duck his lunging tackle, he latched one arm to my waist, wrapped me up, and pinned me to the ground. With his forearm on the back of my neck and his knees pressing me into the floor, the balance of physical power shifted.

After he pinned me, we stopped grappling. It felt wrong, like the natural order had been upset, the rigid hierarchy of male siblings inverted.

Every year he got stronger. No one trained the way he did. I would watch him load a barbell until it subtly curved, its metal alloy shuddering like a slender bow. He never grunted, never yelled, never needed the stereotypical machismo to groan his weights into submission. His lifting was controlled violence, and though he was quiet, the pulsing dumbbells punctuated the dead air of our basement in staccato rhythm. When squatting he lowered himself by inches before springing upright like a loaded coil.

"Force equals mass times acceleration," Tim would say, and Tim's mass was accelerating. Tim was accelerating. The weights accelerated. As he curled, lunged, and pressed, as he pushed, pulled, and pried, the bundles of muscle expanded at his shoulders, on his back, and in his thighs. In high school, he was "a house," "a brick wall," and "a horse." He was "stud," "beast," "monster."

Yet in high school, he was also Timmy. His classmates and friends called him Timmy, his coaches, too. Off the football field and off the wrestling mat, people wanted a teddy bear. They wanted the gentle giant who also played the flute, who loved nerdy video games and painting tiny models of alien elves. They wanted the goof, the kid who danced to pop songs in the locker room, the kid who spoke in funny accents in class. They wanted Timmy, the responsible one, team captain senior year, the only one some mothers allowed their sons to ride in cars with. They wanted Timmy who carried Chris off the field when Chris got injured; they wanted Timmy who passed out doughnuts after school assemblies and Timmy who performed in jazz ensembles.

And he was that Timmy. I need him to have been that. Without this Timmy, without the afternoons we spent running through the sprinkler

in the backyard, I'm left with only the monster that emerged. Still, our memories with Tim on Christmas mornings, at the beach, or in the crowded backseat of Mom's car all muted our perception of his madness, allowing us to lie.

Everything is fine, we would say, but Tim was accelerating. Somewhere, in ways mostly imperceptible, Tim was accelerating. Somehow it started, on an atomic level, a single cell, something misfiring, an electron hitting the wrong synapse, a chemical imbalance slowly putrefying his brain. Even in high school, that reaction must have been building, accelerating, mounting some type of dysfunctional momentum: a force too big to control, too unwieldy to lift over his head, too heavy to set down on the slate floor of the basement among his weights, his barbells, and eventually, bottles of his own urine.

Tim became nocturnal during the months before he killed Mom. He became nocturnal after he was prematurely discharged from the hospital, after he flushed his pills down the toilet, and after he refused the outpatient clinic. He retreated into a world he created behind his bedroom door.

That summer, he lifted weights during the darkest hours of the night. Sometimes his heavy dumbbells would crash to the floor. The sound, only slightly deadened by the thin carpet, echoed through the house. At first these thuds elicited shouts from upstairs, asking if everything was all right. Eventually our mutable definition of normal silenced these shouts. Eventually we slept through the thuds, the hollow sounds becoming the new white noise of our sleep.

When I was able to speak to Tim, he spoke mostly in the ranting manner that accompanied his mania. He rambled about a Bible passage, about Mary Magdalene, about all women being whores. I had moved past the pitched battles of months before, when I had confronted the delusional extent of his misogyny. I had decided to believe that his words were not his own, that they came from elsewhere. He told me as much on one occasion, on the night before Chris's college graduation, when I was drunk in Chris's dorm. Tim told me about the demons, his all-too-literal demons, the ones that poured coins over his body, that animated a sledgehammer in our garage, that convinced him to burn a package sent from his ex-girlfriend and to sprinkle salt on the scar it left in the grass.

In isolation, all of Tim's actions and behaviors would have been crisis calls, yet they had become little more than signposts on his path to madness.

"Everything is fine, but…" we would say, our flexible definition of normal neutering our desperation.

There is no other way to explain this.

THE LAST DAY I was at home before leaving for the Dominican Republic, I stayed up late, hoping to see Tim. He never emerged from his room, so I planned to wake up early and see him before he hibernated. I stretched out on my childhood bed, surrounded by the posters of Michael Jordan and the Boston Red Sox I had plastered to my walls in middle school. The room remained a time capsule, pictures from Acadia National Park, my complete set of Redwall books, boxes of the work I did in high school; every object pointed to a different time.

When I went to bed that night, I was not afraid of Tim. For three years I had been afraid of what he might do to himself, or of what his life might become, but I had no fear *of* him. Until that night, my fear was only *for* him.

He woke me with three thundering fists on my door. The impact shook the entire frame. The knob vibrated and I thought it would topple to the floor.

"What? What?" was all I managed, in a half-awake wail. I sat up against my headboard, completely rigid, sheets tangled around my legs. There was silence, and then heavy shifting on the floorboards. I heard him move away, though he could have come in. I didn't yet have a reason to lock my door.

I got up when I heard his door close. The noise had also woken my mom, and I saw her as I walked the five steps to Tim's door. I knocked, gentler than he had, pausing after a few taps to say "Tim?" There was no response, so I knocked again. "Tim? Did you just knock on my door?" I looked down the hall and made eye contact with Mom. She watched silently, squinting without her bifocals.

"That's fucked up, man. That's fucked up." His voice was low behind the door. "Go back to sleep." He almost swallowed the last word and I waited to respond. I looked at Mom. She had taken a few steps down the hallway. The dent of a pillow dimpled her reddened cheek. I raised one hand to tell her to stop.

"Good night," I said into his door.

The next time I spoke to him was two months later, during visiting hours in his prison, separated by glass.

His fist on my door may seem minor. It is minor, in the context of the violence he eventually committed. It may seem like a moment I could have folded into my delusional definition of normal. Everything is fine, but Tim woke me up last night.

And yet, when I returned to my room, I locked my door. I lay there for hours, awake in the echo of his knocking fist. I lay shaking from the violence of his fist on my door. It was different now; this pounding had been aimed at me. This violence, violence I hadn't feared when I was alone with him just a day before, had been brought to my door.

Though I had watched him suffer, heard him cry and rant, and felt the extent of his delusional anxiety, I had believed that Tim would never be violent. I had believed this in spite of the threats he made during his hospitalization, violent threats to the people trying to care for him, people he claimed were holding him against his will.

I had believed that he wouldn't become violent despite how he bent his opponents' bodies, flattening them into forced supplication on wrestling mats. I had believed this despite the callous way he ranted about his friends, dismissing them as shallow and superficial—rejecting even his best friend, Chris, whom he accused of abandoning him, even though they had shared our mother's womb.

I had believed that he wouldn't become violent because I loved him, and because I loved him I continued to use the lie. I lied to make him the Tim I used to know; everything is fine, but Tim is struggling.

As soon as I became afraid of Tim, I lost him, in pieces. Fear stripped him away, piece by piece, until he was only those three thunderous knocks on my door. I lost the little brother who wore shark goggles at the beach, who hoarded his Legos, who sat in the bow of our canoe, paddling with precision as we traveled together, farther than our parents would ever allow.

I left the morning after he shook my door. I didn't fold my clothes. I poured coffee into a borrowed travel mug that I promised I would return at the end of the summer. I said goodbye to Mom in the driveway. She was still in the pink nightshirt she wore hours before, when we stood outside of Tim's door. She had the dog's leash in her hand, and when I hugged her, he jumped toward us, resting a paw on each of our hips.

This was the last time I saw her, and all I remember is the dog scratching at our legs.

As I drove down the driveway, I looked back, stopping on the heavy curtain darkening Tim's room. There was still a metallic decal on the window, the fireman's helmet, faded after twenty-two years. That silver

sticker, placed when Tim was a baby, alerted firefighters: "Child Inside."

The next time I saw our house, I was standing behind a strand of police tape. The tape sagged like a long finish line, strung between our mailbox and a telephone pole.

I drove for an hour, wrapped up in fear of my little brother. It took an hour of separation for me before I could pull off the highway to call Mom and tell her that I was afraid. I called her to say that everything was no longer fine.

First I brought up the meaningless fears, like my fear that he would never finish college or be able to live on his own. I ranted about his building impulsivity, about how much more quickly his moods changed, about his visual hallucinations. I yelled about his access to a car, about people sleeping behind unlocked doors, about his refusal to talk to anyone who tried to treat him. His illness had seized control, I told her. Nothing was left of the loving boy we remembered.

When I stopped, I was breathless from my shouting. I stopped on the threshold of my greatest fears, fears so ugly I could only voice them after emptying myself of all others.

"What if he gets a gun?" I said, barely whispering into the phone. "What if he gets violent? What if he has an episode and turns on you guys?" I pleaded for something, for anything, for any reassurance, for any guarantee that my fears of Tim were unfounded.

"I think he could be violent," I said, and then I repeated it, so we could both hear it again. I repeated it to her, almost sobbing on the side of the highway, knowing then that everything wasn't going to be fine.

Yet slowly she convinced me I was wrong. Slowly, with the same soft words she used to quiet my childhood nightmares, she comforted me. We were not lost. She did not need me to guide her home.

"Everything is fine," she said, using the lie we told each other. "Everything is fine."

I WASN'T THERE when Tim killed her. I wasn't there when, after trying to communicate with the voices in his head, he emerged from his room. He tried to reach the voices through the Google search bar on his computer. While I stumbled through Spanish phonics in a small, distant classroom, he used his computer as a medium, typing his side of an argument with his madness.

"Don't let them kill me," he typed into the blank search bar. "I'll stop. I swear. I can't. God hates me."

Because I wasn't there, I learned these details from the police reports, memorizing the facts so I could triangulate exactly where Mom lay—in the family room, next to the bookcase, in front of the crate the dog slept in. Her legs extended toward the windows, and I know which floor panels touched her face.

Because I wasn't there, I listened to every word when the coroner took the stand at Tim's trial. I listened while he enumerated her injuries, all sixteen fractures and wounds, her severed spinal cord, the defensive cuts on her hands. The red spots in her eyes, he explained, came from my brother's massive hands on her neck.

And because I wasn't there, I watched when they showed the pictures, projected on monitors for all in the courtroom to see. I didn't look away as my father squeezed my hands, sitting next to me, on a bench ten feet behind my brother. All I could see of him was the brown jumpsuit that covered his broad back, but I could tell that he was looking too.

We looked, at her slashed throat and bruised face, at her head propped for police photography, cheeks blue and swollen, burst capillaries staining her skin. Tim placed a coin on the back of her head after she died, a Susan B. Anthony dollar. Its edges, he attested, unlocked a portal through which he could communicate with his demons. He placed it on the back of Mom's lacerated skull, nestling it into her auburn hair, hair she used to joke about coloring, since she wasn't a grandma yet.

Because I wasn't there, I visit Tim in prison. I track how he slowly shakes the fog of his psychosis, how his forced medication slows his racing thoughts. In some lucid moments he asks me questions.

"What was her funeral like?" he once said.

"The music was beautiful" was all I could say, looking away from his eyes. I focused on his fingernails, long and yellow, as he pressed the prison phone to his greasy right ear.

I sit in the parking lot after my visits, sometimes for more than an hour, listening to the voice mail I have saved from Mom.

In the voice mail, there is no mention of Tim. It's about a trip to Maine we were going to make, a few months before she was killed. She laughs in the middle when she tells me that we might have to share a room.

When I'm sitting outside the prison I tell her why: why I visit Tim, why I imagine her body in our family room, why I reconstruct that scene. I tell her it's because I wasn't there. I tell her like she doesn't already know.

When I have these half conversations, I know what she would say. I'm certain of it.

She would say, how could you have stopped him, your muscle-bound little brother? How could you have pried him from the grip of his psychosis? You would be dead next to me. We'd be dead together, next to the bookcase where we stacked our photo albums.

Alone in my car, I lean forward, as if she's whispering to me. I try to hear her when I'm driving, when I'm aimlessly turning and merging, when I'm ignoring street signs and leaving landmarks behind. I try to get lost and imagine her next to me. I try to get lost, so I can hear her tell me that everything is fine.