

Alma Mater Fight Song

What if Yale had actually said yes?

Jonathan Kiefer

My mother died before I could determine whether she'd

plotted to keep me out of Yale. When I applied to transfer there from the perfectly fine university at which I'd spent my freshman year and realized I hadn't heard a reply, I asked her about it. "Oh yeah," she said. "They sent a letter a while ago; you didn't get in." It was as if she'd never have mentioned it had I not inquired. When I asked if I might have a look at that letter, she said she'd thrown it away.

That's going on fifteen years ago now, and it's still bothering me. I hadn't applied to Yale the first time around, partly because I'd grown up in Clinton, just a few towns away from New Haven, and I'd figured college should take me further afield. Mostly, though, it was because I didn't think there'd be any point. I didn't have what it took, nor any delusions to the contrary, either. I'd declared myself pretty clearly not Yale material. Plenty of folks from my high school were putting in for it, and these were flare-bright and promising and highly achieving people, palpably my betters.

Which in retrospect is why I'd have preferred to remain among them for another four years, instead of with the intellectually inert livestock that seemed so alarmingly common at my perfectly fine university. Those people did make me feel smart, it's true, but only until I suddenly felt dumb for somehow winding up surrounded by them. My petition for transfer was a tantrum of elitist impatience. And, in fact, it got me admitted to another Ivy League school. That letter came to me directly, and it did wonders for my sense of superiority to the livestock, if not for my perspective.

But the Yale situation remained a mystery. I began thinking maybe I'd actually been accepted. I began thinking maybe my own mother had lied to me, deliberately withholding what might have been the greatest opportunity of my life. I tried to understand why she might do that.

We'd never been able to decide or agree on the distances at which we preferred to keep each other. Thanks in part to her bipolar disorder, her marriage to my father collapsed when I was very young. She never remarried. She stayed alone in a series of apartments in Middletown and I moved with my two older brothers and my father to Clinton. Connecticut's heartland and its coast seemed so far apart to me in those days, and I took my parents' separation hard. Visiting my mother on weekends left me an emotional wreck, often bawling my way out of school on subsequent Monday mornings because I missed her so much. I don't remember getting over it.

One of my brothers went to Wesleyan. We could see his dorm from my mother's apartment windows. But he and she visited each other infrequently; they developed a kind of standoff that would last until her death. The other brother didn't go to college. He went to drugs, and to fraud, and to prison. By the time I'd gotten established at the prep school from which my betters would eventually be matriculating to Yale, my mother told me she didn't want to be a parent anymore. Maybe she didn't say those words. But I think she did, and I know she meant them.

I sympathized. All my life, I'd known her as a gentle, beleaguered soul. Even at her most frustratingly distant, even when obviously she was wracked by her illness, I could feel for her, and cherish her innocence. Real anger only comes when I think about that unseen, nearly unmentioned letter from Yale.

I stayed put at the perfectly fine university and got as perfectly fine an education there as I was willing to earn. I endured the livestock and in time even found a few betters from whom to glean profundities. I was incalculably enriched. The trustees were calculably enriched. I went on with my life.

My brother had me on the phone the day after my mother's stroke. He asked if I had her living will handy. To my surprise, I responded with deceit. I put the phone down and sat still for a minute; I was pretending to go retrieve the document from safekeeping while in fact I already had it right next to me on the couch. I discovered

that I was ashamed of my expectations.

Maybe my mother was ashamed of hers.

In insecure moments, regret pinches me like a fouled joint that forecasts incoming weather fronts. My mind goes back to wondering. What if I actually got in? I've confided this to girlfriends, who've found it unsettling. "You'd never have met me," they kindly say.

"Yeah," I think and sometimes say. "But Yale." Extraordinary people come and go from our lives no matter where we are.

As a journalist, I can imagine situations in which I'd need to verify somebody's academic history, including admission decisions of decades past. Whether or not that information would even be obtainable, I can see myself getting to the bottom of it with brevity and confidence. But what kind of a jackass calls an admission office after fifteen years to double-check on himself?

Mr. Kiefer?

Yes.

Thank you for holding. Okay, I have managed to track down your information here.

Oh, great.

Yeah. We turned you down. You were right.

Oh.

Pretty clearly not Yale material.

Um.

Oh, and one other thing.

What's that?

You're a terrible son.

So I haven't called.

The Connecticut coast and heartland seemed exquisitely close together when I returned there for her final days. We had no chance to communicate. I couldn't ask at last about Yale, nor ask forgiveness for having to ask.