

Lies, etc.

1. *“You can’t make a profit without property.”*

I learned to read by naming the properties I aspired to own: New York, Baltic, States Avenue (the cheaper ones), then gradually the ones my tongue faltered on, the ones that, no matter what I rolled, always eluded me: Marvin Gardens, Ventnor and Pacific Avenues. My father taught me to be, above everything else, money hungry.

I was six years old when I first won Monopoly, sitting on my father’s lap. He leaned in after I collected all the orange properties, his salt and ginger vandyke beard scratching my ears: *Pay attention, son, this is where it gets good.*

I began slowly collecting green, blue, and purple paper tribute from my brothers. Turn after turn, they dropped their forest-colored houses into my chubby palm, drawing back quickly, fearing I might snatch their hands from them in my blind capitalist conquest. My father watched, belly-laughing and scratching his neck stubble, taunting my brothers: *You’re gonna let the baby beat you?*

I focused on the words *beat you*. I was being cutthroat, which my father loved. He was traditional that way. A man of blood and sweat and hard work. I was a boy who poured through atlases in my free time and regularly hummed the *Curious George Film* soundtrack as I cooked dinner with my mother. But when it came to Monopoly, I took after my father, throwing my arms up in brazen anger and raising my pip-squeak voice when a rule was flaunted.

I like to think my bullish, piercing gaze made my brothers fold their properties face-down, displaying the bronze words MORTGAGED for all to see. I snorted in my brothers’

face and flicked their pieces to the carpet when they offered get-out-of-jail-free-cards after an expensive visit to one of my sprawling, scenic, blood-red estates. The sports car, the top hat, the boot, the thimble, all met the same shameful fate by my finger.

Eight years later, my father had trouble refinancing his office park in southeast Charlotte. His office park wasn't anything spectacular: a few beige concrete buildings with black windows, cracked parking lots, and poorly-kept shrubbery. No brilliant hues of the miniature plastic hotels and houses I grew up with.

He was away from home for three weeks courting investors, treating them to authentic baklava in a diner called *The Landmark* (once visited by Guy Fieri himself), while my mother and I passed the days lumbering between our patio and our dock, taking cat naps and cutting through pontoon wakes, unaware my father was staring down men in blazers. Men aching to flick my father to the carpet.

He'd tear down the drywall on the second floor and make a bigger break room. He'd rid the air vents of dead squirrels. He offered to update the carpet, if they'd just let him play the game a little longer. But these men had heard it all before—the middle-aged father pleading, promising anything, in exchange for a little more time to turn the place around. These men did not come to wheel and deal, to let my father pass go.

2. *"Don't worry son, nothing's gonna change."*

After two or three months of my father failing to pay back the mortgage on our house, the bank foreclosed on the property and we moved to Salem, a town on the muddier side of the lake just south of the Duke Energy nuclear power plant. Our new backyard ended in a mulch cliff. It felt like a trap, like the jagged earth was rising from the frigid water to swallow me whole. Unlike my old backyard, there were no cool moss patches or freshly laid straw upon which I might lounge. The house appeared gaunt and narrow and short, like some poor Victorian child battling malaria. The smell of mildew clung to everything. Shirts, dogs, food. The oak trees drummed on my window at three AM (most likely summoning something), whereas the pines at my previous house respected my privacy. A painting hung across from my bed picturing a girl, arms draped over the balcony of a garden gazebo, remaining idle during the day and coming to life once I turned off the lights, hopping towards the edge of the frame, giggling from lily to lily. On numerous occasions I woke to the the oatmeal coat of my walls, the navy threads of my bedsheets, the arms and neck of the porcelain girl in the painting tinted green, as if some spirit forced soul-sucking night-vision goggles on me during my sleep as a reminder I was infringing upon an already ghost-occupied home. *At least rent's paid*, my father joked, glancing at me, then the girl in the painting, who did not laugh.

After a six month stint there, we moved again, leaving without a look back from our car seats. The new house was once owned by my grand-uncle, a man who worked for my father before he suffered a fatal stroke while chainsawing a tree in his backyard at midnight. If the house in Salem had a semblance of grace, our new house had no manners and never attempted to welcome us. It was located in Easley, between a MetroPCS and a closed Stop-A-Minit. Confederate memorabilia and University of Kentucky wall decals decorated the house, casting an aggressive blue about the place. Cockroaches walked among us and no matter how many my

dog and I squashed, squished, drew and quartered, they kept coming back. *What a great place to land*, my father said.

3. *"I'll know more in the coming weeks."*

My father bought a plot of land near Boone before the recession, before he lost his job and started spending his days deceiving his children. He planned to build a house on that plot after my brothers and I graduated and went off to college. He constantly talked about the mountains. He loved imagining himself picking out blackberry jams from the markets on Poplar Grove during summer, trying on the finest plaid flannels from the Mast General Store during fall, spending his day simmering in a hot tub, drifting back and forth, during winter.

We visited the property every so often, my father tramping over holly shrubs, making sweeping motions with his hands, asking us to imagine the house, the glowing furnace with *real* wood, the patio where we'd play chess on lazy Sundays (and maybe smoke a cigar with him once we were old enough), the living room with the glass coffee table, perfect for a game of Monopoly. My brothers and I imagined the backyard, a forest that allowed us to pretend we were Dan'l Boone, raccoon cap pulled tight over our bowl cuts, pump-action pellet gun pressed to our chests.

My father never had a boss. He was always self-employed, always the one to huff coffee-breath down others' necks. At the age of twenty my father owned and operated his own business toting Atari gaming systems around Gainesville, Florida in the back of his white pickup

for delivery to frat houses. By the time he reached thirty, he abandoned Pac-Man (for better or worse) in pursuit of small, molding office parks.

Once my father lost his office parks, he became certain the only way back to baklava and tailored blazers was to sell his mountain property. He refused to get a job. Working for somebody else was not an option. The money would come. He tried convincing us it'll all work itself out, it usually does. What "it" was, I'm still not entirely sure.

Meanwhile the boat and jet skis sold, the golf membership expired, and bills accumulated. The car was parked in the driveway one day, in a compound the next. Leftovers lasted us longer. Showers and electricity came and went. My father grew his hair out, sat on the couch and prayed more. I quit the track team, got a job scooping ice cream, hoping maybe he'd know more about the property, or whatever the hell "it" was, today, tomorrow. At least by the end of the month.

4. *"I must've misplaced my watch."*

I heard my father sold his watch to pay for groceries the other day. *I'll check his wrist the next time I see him*, I thought. Maybe when he asks for a hug. Maybe when he reaches for one of his stemless wine glasses with the words "Cobalt Boats" stamped on the side. I'll let him open the fridge and point at the dark cherries (Great Value), the cottage cheese (Breakstone's, slightly more expensive, but worth every penny, according to my father), the bagels (Thomas, blueberry, on sale), and then I'll pop the question: *Where's your watch?* He'll slap his wrist (partly in an

attempt to pull the wool over my eyes and partly because he forgot he really *did* sell his watch). He'll walk around the kitchen and say *I must've misplaced my watch*.

Before the watch, my father sold his iPad, which, I'm told, got him a bag or two of green grapes (Sun World). I'm not sure what all he's sold, but the last time I visited my father, the walls seemed a little more bare, my father's closet appeared smaller, as if he were missing a pair or three of shoes, and my bookshelf bore half the books it used to. (Notably missing was my collection of Rick Riordan's work, including *Percy Jackson*, *The Heroes of Olympus*, and *The Kane Chronicles*, which I begged my father to buy me for my eleventh birthday).

5. "*I'll be there.*"

My grandfather's funeral was held in my grandparents' backyard. The day before the funeral I Windex-ed every window, picked spider webs and dead snails out of every screen door, power-washed every wooden porch, scrubbed every door and chair, and bleached every cooler in that damn house. (I was also in charge of setting up the tiki torches and arranging fold-out chairs in the driveway for the guests).

I heard my grandfather's buddies play taps the next day. I watched as my grandmother was presented with my grandfather's flag, folded in a triangle and stuck in a glass case. I shared the stories I knew of my grandfather: him evading Franco's fighter pilots in the Strait of Gibraltar; him throwing my mother into a bull shark infested river to fetch the grill that slid off his sailboat; and years later, him sitting on the couch, watching Fox News for hours. The time my grandfather picked me up from surgery when I was eight years old, because my father stayed

at the office to hold a conference call with his business partners, even though he said he'd meet me in the waiting room and take me to get Marble Slab afterwards.

At the funeral, my relatives (plus a few family friends who I met when I couldn't yet walk or form sentences, much less remember faces) asked me why my father wasn't there. They approached me when I was stuffing my face with brie and pita. When I came out of the bathroom and as I snooped around the alcohol, there they were. Patiently waiting. They looked at me like I was a stray who yapped and whined if you got too close. They looked like they wanted to pet me, to offer warmest sympathies, but did not want to toss me a slab of meat, for fear I might get attached, that I might follow them home and appear at their doorstep, night after night, begging for scraps, for a place to yap and whine about my father.

I waited for him, sat in the fold out chairs and stared up at the gray clouds whisking themselves into a thunderstorm. I pretended I expected him not to show: a shoulder shrug, a *That's my father for you.*