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Onliness

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CHRISTINE DAVIS

Onliness

*Own-lee-ness | \ 'Ōnlēnəs *

When I was in elementary school, I had an imaginary brother. He wasn't so much an imaginary friend as he was an imaginary accessory, something I felt I had to have since everyone else had one, like those awful Skechers with the brightly colored stripes on the sides and foam bottoms. I viewed having a sibling as a sort of privilege that I hadn't earned, or that I wasn't right for—like my fifth grade feet that were too big to fit into those shoes. Apparently I hadn't done the right set of things to warrant a sibling, so instead I made one up.

His name was Warren, chosen because we often received mail at my house addressed to a “Warren Davis,” as if the post office, too, couldn't fully believe that I was an only child. I sympathized with the post office; I could hardly believe it myself. None of the members of my family had ever been named Warren, nor had the previous owners had any connections to a Warren. He was probably a result of some data brokers getting a hold of our information for junk mail purposes and inputting the wrong name, but whatever the case, Warren was born. Warren was in college and went to the University of Florida, partly because it was close to where our grandparents lived, but mainly because their mascot was an alligator. That was part of the deal, too: Warren had a pet gator that he kept in his room, and he had gone through several roommates until he finally found one who could handle living with his ferocious pet. I never went as far as to pick a major for Warren, but I know that he was an incredibly super senior with little hope of ever graduating, and that at some point in middle school, I made him gay as a show of support for my developing liberal ideologies.

Of course, when I would look through the photos of my earliest years, trips to California for family reunions or Easters at my grandparents, his absence was duly noted, because he obviously couldn't leave his pet gator alone or miss his classes. No, he was absent because he never existed, except in the minds of my very gullible neighbor and myself. I convinced my neighbor on multiple occasions that Warren was really real. I used to pick up the mail after we got off the bus and then show it to Douglas, inventing tales of how Warren would have loved to tour the vineyards on the East End if only he could come up for the summer, but it was hard to find someone to watch the gator. Doug would stare at me with wide eyes and an open mouth, and I would laugh to myself and run inside to tell my mother how I had convinced Doug again that I had an older brother. She would shake her head and sort the mail, throwing away the catalogs and the postcards addressed to Warren, my only proof, my only vestige of hope. But there was no sandy haired boy to hold me when I was born, no tall and lean and scabby-kneed ten-year-old to hold my hand as I fed ducks by the pond near my house, no rapidly growing teenage trickster to pull my ponytail at my elementary school moving up ceremony. All of these pictures exist, they just lack his presence.

My mother is also an only child, but I don't tend to count her in the same category as me. Theresa Ann Gorman, often affectionately called Terry Ann, grew up in Rosedale, a neighborhood in Queens, surrounded by activity as a child. Her mother, the darling Annette, everyone's "Honey," spent the summer she was sixteen volunteering at a children's hospital in the Bronx where she contracted polio at its height in 1952. She began the next part of her life as a quadriplegic after three years in an iron lung, and married her childhood sweetheart, Herb. Due to the nature of my grandmother's condition, there were always people around to help: my great-grandmother and great-grandfather, who I affectionately referred to as Granny and Grampy; their son, my grandmother's brother and my mother's uncle, Johnny, who was only fifteen years older than my mother; and a flurry of nurses and home healthcare helpers. There was never a shortage of people in their household, nor pets, as my mother owned ducks and German shepherds, birds and exotic fish. It was like having a small farmhouse in the middle of the borough, bursting with people who were constantly moving or doing.

From a young age, my mother never wanted to have kids. The concept just never appealed to her. It wasn't that she'd had a bad childhood or that something had happened along the way to deter her. She just wasn't interested. This was quite different from what my grandmother had envisioned for her daughter. After my grandmother had my mother, one of her kidneys had been removed, and this combined with the effects of polio made it unsafe

for her to have more children. Annette had expected that her daughter would want to have lots of kids, considering that she'd missed out on growing up with anyone else, but she wasn't too upset that my mother felt this way. It seemed just as well. When she was nineteen, my mother was diagnosed with a severe hormonal imbalance, which at the time was a fancy way of saying, "it's going to be near impossible for you to have kids." This was something that went over without much fanfare for my mother, who felt that if anyone was going to be diagnosed with something like this, it might as well be her, given her inclination toward not wanting kids. This now seemed like a pretty stable out for never having to try.

When she and my father got really serious, she made this point clear to him, and he said he was okay with that, even though he really wasn't. In a great show of love and devotion, as grand gestures and romantic moments are not the hallmark of my parents' relationship, he loved her despite the fact that she could never have any children, and he married her without hesitation. Somewhere along the way, though, as my parents attended countless weddings and saw all of their friends beginning to start families, my mother could tell that this small clause to their happy life might have been more of a deal-breaker than either of them had originally anticipated. While sitting through another wedding, on Valentine's Day of all days, my mother decided, without much basis of truth, that my father was going to run away with an imaginary blonde nurse named Cathy and have a billion kids, because nurses always seem to have a ton of kids, and she was not okay with this. She still didn't really want children, but she would at least make an attempt if it meant she got to keep her husband. So she told him they should try.

My mother's condition was given a name in 1990: polycystic ovary syndrome, or PCOS. Women with PCOS have high levels of androgen in the body, which accounts for supranormal levels of testosterone. There is no cure, and women with PCOS often have great difficulty getting pregnant. It took my mother five years and several rounds of fertility treatments and hormone therapy before she was finally able to conceive. By around year four, she decided that she actually really wanted to have a child, and after that, the various treatments her body was undergoing began to stick.

I was a turkey baster baby, a description my mother hates. "Isn't there a better way to say that? Is there like an acronym for artificial insemination or something? Uck," she makes a noise on the other end of the phone, and I laugh a little at her discomfort. Sure, a turkey baster isn't the most clinical language, but it paints the right picture. The easiest and most common insemination technique, artificial insemination takes place when a syringe filled with semen is injected into a woman's cervix. While my mother seemed to have quite a few problems when it came to getting pregnant, it turned out my father had his own issues as well, due to weak swimmers ("oh God, are

you going to write that? And people are going to read this?”). This treatment eventually did the trick in 1993, and I was due to be born nine months later, on April Fool’s Day. My mother despised this, and, as if in agreement, I grew to be an enormous baby, forcing my mother to have a cesarean section, scheduled for March 30th. Almost immediately following my birth, my father had a vasectomy, and it was solidified that I was to be the one and only child of Bob and Terry Davis. After years of expensive, painful treatments, they finally had their miracle baby.

In comparison to my mother’s vibrant upbringing, my father’s was as *Leave it to Beaver*, apple pie Americana as it comes. His parents were blonde and blue-eyed, tall and well-off, and they had two children—my father, the oldest, and another boy, Scott. They lived in a house with a white picket fence and a dog, and the family took road trips and camped, and the men liked to fish. They could have been on the cover of *Life* or featured in a travel brochure, they looked so perfect. But looks aren’t everything. My father was a good student, a Boy Scout, a “man’s man,” an almost exact replica of his father, but Scott was softer, funnier, and most importantly, younger. My grandmother adored Scott, and he got away with everything, while my father was expected to play the part of the hardened older brother. Scott took after his mother, and Bob took after his father, and they began to resent one another for the things they had to be in the eyes of their parents.

I don’t think my grandparents ever intended to have their sons grow up to hate each other. I don’t think any parent imagines that for their kids. But time and circumstance and expectation pushed them away from each other. They passed their views on to their children, influencing their decisions. I was five when I started to see cracks in my family, the way my father and uncle stood when they were in the same room together, shoulders back, hands clasped in front of them, faces devoid of emotion, as if they could never let down their guard. I hardly ever got along with my four cousins, who we never see or speak to since they moved to Virginia a few years ago. The other half of the Davis family doesn’t really exist to me, at least not in any positive light. I’m sure Scott never imagined he wouldn’t be able to rely on his big brother, never thought they would hate each other so much. They had all the makings of a happy family. Would Warren and I have suffered the same fate?

If you were to ask me how many kids I would like to have, the answer is a hard and fast two. I’m adamant that I would never put one child through the experience of growing up alone, of having no one else to play with or talk to or fight with. It wasn’t that I had a bad childhood or that something happened along the way to make me feel this way: I’m just unwavering on

the fact that I will have more than one kid. While my mother grew up in a house that was teeming with activity, my upbringing was as quiet as quiet can be. Never interested in video games or the great outdoors, my mother and I spent my younger years in separate rooms in our small house reading books, waiting for my father to come home from work. While I have always been happy for my deep-rooted and early love of reading, it was the lack of interaction of any kind that often left me feeling lonely, as if I was missing something. It became clear when I entered school that what I had been missing were other people.

While this could have greatly stunted my interactions with others, I'd grown up the center of everyone's attention, lovingly looked after by my parents, my mother's parents, and a wonderful godmother. I was slightly spoiled and everyone's favorite, with bright blue eyes and curly corn silk hair, and I always seemed to be smiling, laughing, dancing. I was—and am still—excruciatingly tall, which garnered attention without much additional effort on my part. I adjusted moderately well to sharing the spotlight with others when I entered grade school, and I have only rarely gotten the, “Oh, you're an only child? That explains it,” comment thrown around when it is revealed I have no siblings. I imagine, however, that this discussion of my easy adjustment to school and my central role within my family may elicit some kind of knee-jerk reactions about only children. It wasn't until I realized that most other households had more than one kid that Warren began to make appearances in my mind, and it wasn't until I was much older that I realized the significance of his non-existent existence.

“Are you going to want to visit our graves after we die?”

My mom and I are sitting on our separate couches in the den, watching Bravo's barrage of bad reality TV, when she interrupts the Febreeze commercial I'm clearly engrossed in to drop this unrelated bomb into my Friday night festivities. I plant my spoon in the pint of Ben and Jerry's we've been passing back and forth, and give her a strange look. “What?”

“Well, after we die, do you plan on visiting our graves? Or do you think you're not going to care?”

I swallow and shake my head, confused by her cavalier tone. “I don't know, I guess I figured I'd visit, but I haven't really given it much thought.”

“I ask because your father and I are looking at a plot out east, but if you don't stay on Long Island then you'll have to fly up to visit us, so I don't really know if it's worth it.”

“Are you asking me to figure out where I'll be living when you two finally bite the dust? You're going to need to give me a more thorough timeline if we're going to pinpoint exactly where I am.”

“Well, that’s what I’m saying, should I just wait to see where we move?” She flips the ice cream over in the small pint, scooping up big gobs of the softer ice cream on the bottom, an action I detest. The void I sometimes feel for sibling interactions is often filled by my mother, who is a terrible sharer in all aspects of her life, but especially when it comes to food.

“We? What is this *we*? And stop flipping the ice cream, you know that I hate that.”

“Christine,” she says, finally breaking eye contact with the not-so-real housewives to look over at me. “You’re our only daughter. Do you really think we’re not going to move if you leave the Island?”

Of course, I have thought this. This may not be something that every child has considered, but it makes the most sense for two people whose entire lives revolve around mine to follow me wherever I go in life. Their social lives and personal interests ceased to exist after I was born. My mother even quit her job, while my father got a second one to offset the cost of a third person, with the stipulation he be off every Saturday to spend it with me. I became their sole focus, their only amusement, the epicenter of their lives. I don’t like acknowledging that reality, so I brush her off. “Mom, I’m gonna move to Florida, and you hate Florida, your air conditioner will never be cold enough, and you have like three months left of payments on the house, why would you move?” She seems hurt that I hadn’t assumed she’d be joining me wherever I land, so she shrugs and turns her attention back to the TV.

“Just something to think about.”

It is something I think about, and about the fact that there’s just me. At moments like these, Warren creeps into my thoughts, reminding me that things could’ve been different, that my life might have played out in a different way.

There’s a certain pressure to being an only child, especially one so greatly fought for. I’ve always felt this. Before I got to college, I was a good student, a good kid, partly due to the kind of person I was, and partly due to the expectation that I be good. I was involved in all the right things, like school plays and track and field, and none of the bad things, like drinking and dying my hair. I was constant, dependable, a reliable child my parents counted on for eighteen solid years. When it came time to pick a college, I broke their hearts by picking one eight hours away by car. My mother begged me to look at schools in and around Poughkeepsie, as it was the perfect distance for her to drive up on Sundays to get brunch with me or for me to go home on Friday nights to have dinner with her and my dad. Instead, I picked a remote and distant college in the middle of nowhere with spotty cell service, and it seems my version of rebellion really began here, with the distance I created between my parents and me—both physical and emotional.

My first year at college was far more difficult than I had expected it to be. Yes, being an only child meant I was indeed fond of my parents and greatly attached to them, but I hadn't thought it would be so difficult to be far away from them. I called them every night, getting great reception in the basement by the laundry room. I would tell them about my roommate and my classes and my first college party. As the year went on and life upstate continued to disappoint, I began to make plans to transfer back to Long Island. My parents' glee was audible over the phone, making the idea of returning even more appealing. That summer, as I toured colleges close to home, I began to feel the tug of the umbilical cord holding me back, and I put an end to the tours and the talk of transfer. I realized it would be easy to run home and be welcomed back with eager, open arms, but I had to try harder to be on my own. If I didn't at least give this necessary distance a shot, I feared I might never leave Long Island and my parent's house and the things with which I was most comfortable. And while comfort is a wonderful thing, it was becoming less and less appealing to me as I realized there was so much more going on outside of the small sphere of life I had grown up in.

This understanding came readily to me during a semester I spent in Florida. I took a job at Walt Disney World that I ended up loving, and it seemed that being somewhere I liked and doing something I enjoyed was all that it took for me to be able to live a happier life. I had made a commitment to work until the first of August, giving me a single week at home before I returned to school. While I was happy with where I was and what I was doing, my parents could not say the same. The frequency with which I updated them on my life was lessening, and they worried about all of the little things I'd have to get done during my one week at home. By mid-May, my mother began to demand that I come home, a request that was virtually impossible to comply with, as getting time off was a difficult task.

My happiness away from them seemed to be causing a great deal of anguish for all parties involved. I felt my parents couldn't be happy for me though I was actually enjoying myself, and I felt an immeasurable amount of guilt after each conversation we had on the subject. I tried to talk to them about their reaction to my happiness, and how it felt like they preferred my previous misery at school, and were unaccepting of the joy I'd found that didn't actively involve them. My father's sad reply was simply that they missed me, that this new chapter away had made them feel like they weren't a part of my life anymore. Feeling guilty, I faked a medical leave of absence from work with two and a half weeks to go, and went home to see my parents.

The three of us went to the beach, got dinner, watched TV together. Nothing spectacular, considering the lengths I felt I had gone through to get home. I did my best not to act as if I resented being home, that I was there out of obligation, a child trying to please her parents. I thought often during

my visit about how I need my mother and father, but not nearly as much as they need me. I had made it through the summer without feeling desperate to see them, but they couldn't make it. I didn't know how to handle this level of devotion, as I don't think I return it quite as powerfully. Maybe it's different because I'm not the parent, or because I'm young, or because I've never had children of my own. I wonder if I will want to love someone this intensely, this fiercely. Right now it seems stifling. I flew back to Florida after six days and finished up with my job, thanking everyone for their concern about my wisdom teeth being removed and assuring them I was doing really well. I still haven't gotten them taken out.

My friend Michael is repeating my father's life. With a mother and a father and a younger brother and a dog, Michael's only difference is growing up upstate rather than down. He tells me his brother is funnier, better looking, has more friends, is even smarter. He says he kind of feels like a disappointment, not measuring up to the expectation of a big brother, not paving the way enough, but it doesn't seem like Jason needs it. The lines are already starting to be drawn, too. Michael's connection to his mother is clearly stronger, while his father seems to be most proud of Jason. Soon Michael will come home from college and will do something stupid, maybe dent the car, and his father will rip him apart. The next month, Jason will do damage much worse to, say, the kitchen; ruin the stove, smoke up the wallpaper. They'll need to remodel. But no one will really bat an eye at that. It seems like an unlikely story, but it's happened before.

I'm fascinated by Michael's family dynamic, and I draw the comparisons between Michael and my father as if their situation is so unique, that the likelihood that I would know two people with similar upbringings and parental alliances and expectations is statistically impossible. But people repeatedly point out the holes in my theory. Lots of siblings are like this, friends tell me. "My sister is clearly my mother's kid, and my dad likes me way better," my best friend simply states one day, as if this is not uncommon in families. Maybe it is just uncommon to me, because I have no experience with it.

The more people I ask, the more I look into the sibling dynamic that I've been so desperate to experience and that I'm now desperate to understand, the more I realize that the connection that I thought I'd found between Michael and my father is actually a rather common one. Lots of siblings take a liking to just one parent, or resent their brother or sister for being better at something they both do. While the hope in having more than one child is that siblings will one day grow up to form a close bond, and that they will develop necessary skills in the process of growing up that will help them be better communicators and more understanding of others, this is not always

the case. In fact, this seems like the rarity, like the Hollywood version of sibling bonds, the kind of relationship I use to conjure up in relation to what I wanted from Warren. But this doesn't seem to appear in nature as often as I thought it would. If Warren and I had played out exactly as I'd imagined it, we would have been an anomaly.

I've come to realize that I had very idealistic notions of what a sibling would do for me. I needed Warren to take some of the pressure off myself. I needed someone to have gone before me and seriously fucked up, so that when I finally got caught for everything stupid I've ever done, I wouldn't be such a failure. There would be some sort of understanding, like "Warren did worse," or "What can we expect, she learned it from Warren." There's no bar to measure me against when I'm on my own, no person to blame, no finger to point. No one else with whom to share the weight of parental pressure and scrutiny.

But on the flip side of that coin, I don't truly know if Warren's presence would have benefitted me. What if Warren had been great at everything he did, and instead of being a weird slacker with a pet alligator, he was an Ivy League grad working at a law firm? What excuse would I have then for my failing grades, my lack of motivation, my insecurities? Perhaps my parents' comments would take a turn for the worse: "Why can't you be more like Warren?" or "When Warren was your age, he never did this!" What if my fantasized version of Warren was wrong and he let me down? I guess there's no real way of knowing what kind of person Warren would have been, but I do know what my mother and father are like. I love my parents, I really do, but it can feel suffocating to be their only child. It's a lot of pressure on a person, one who often feels as if she has to make life decisions that not only benefit herself, but her parents as well.

This summer I'll be home, working at a summer camp, and in the fall I'll stay on Long Island to student teach, ringing up a grand total of eight months spent at home in 2015. I don't think I spent eight weeks at home in 2014. This elongated stay is my apology to my parents, as well as my going away gift. After college I'm moving to Florida, and they most likely will follow within a few years. It's an indisputable fact, a sort of cosmic pull. We can never be too far apart from one another. Maybe while we're all down there we can meet up with Warren, and he can catastrophically fail or piss off my parents in an attempt to make things easier on me. But I know in reality it will just be me, doing my best to be the daughter they worked so hard for, the daughter they love so much.