SHEILA SUNDAR

YELLOW CURTAINS

NEARLY TWO DECADES ago, shortly after I moved to New York City, I found myself at an Asia Society fundraiser. The party was somewhere in the Upper East Side, in the type of gleaming limestone townhouse I had never before set foot in. I don't recall what I was doing there. There were only two rich New Yorkers in my family circle—old friends who had immigrated on the same modest and comfortable economic plane as my parents, then earned their wealth through a combination of entrepreneurship, dubious investments, and real estate holdings, so I assume it was through one of those friends that I secured the invitation.

I arrived hungry, and there was no dinner, just Indian appetizers served with French panache: samosas sliced in half and drizzled with date chutney, tamarind scallops served on lettuce leaves, tiny papadum dotted with chickpeas and pomegranate seeds. I filled my plate and listened to speeches about the history of U.S. and Asia partnerships, the current state of U.S. and Asia partnerships, the importance of the next generation in solidifying these partnerships. I was too young to trust my instinct that the whole thing was absurd. Instead, I assumed that this was what wealth looked like: beautifully presented and artfully meager. That it was only the gauche and middle class who would show up at such an event expecting to be fed.

At some point, I slid into a conversation with a group of Indian women and one of their college-aged daughters. The daughter was discussing her hopes of joining the Peace Corps, and the mother—in what seemed to be a well-worn topic between them—was trying to dissuade her. Aren't there better ways to make an impact? Perhaps go to law school? Study medicine? In a final line, playfully delivered but tinged with cruelty, she touched the girl's arm, leaned closer to the other women, and whispered, "You don't have to be white-skinned to feel the white man's burden."

On the subway ride home, I replayed the comment in my mind, each time feeling it like a slap. I was a graduate student at Teachers College at the time and had believed, for all of my conscious years leading up, that I could shift the hard demarcations of the world, that I had the power to make it more forgiving and more just. My experience was eroding this faith. I spent evenings huddled with classmates around small tables

in Columbia's Grace Dodge Hall, discussing the theoretical dimensions of language and literacy and power. That part was easy. But by day, I worked as a student teacher in a small East Village high school. The students, bright-eyed in their teacher's immediate presence, slumped over when I walked to the front of the room. Some laughed when I turned my back to them. "What the fuck is she saying?" a student asked in the middle of my lesson—a lecture on Zora Neale Hurston that had been meticulously planned but was rambling in its delivery. In the depths of my loneliness, I sometimes remembered a clip from an essay I had read in college. The line had stuck in my mind, though the breadth of the writing didn't yet speak to me: "Was anyone ever so young? I am here to tell you that someone was."

I WAS FIRST assigned Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* by an undergraduate writing professor who everyone assumed was brilliant because he was terse and had unkempt hair and didn't bother learning students' names. I pretended to love his class, just as I pretended to be moved by Didion. Privately, I found the book to be alienating. I could not relate to her descriptions of Malibu, the California wealth that had oiled her daily existence and moved her from the West Coast to the East and back, her Henri Bendel jasmine soap and her belief, carved into the page, that "If I needed money I could always get it . . . Nothing was irrevocable; everything was within reach."

To borrow Didion's phrase, I was an Eastern child. But her description of East Coast children—"an uncle on Wall Street and who has spent several hundred Saturdays first at F.A.O. Schwarz and being fitted for shoes at Best's and then waiting under the Biltmore clock and dancing to Lester Lanin"—was foreign to me. I spent my East Coast childhood in a characterless New Jersey suburb. When I came into New York as a young child, my family ate lunch at Saravana Bhavan's or the Ganesh Temple Canteen in Queens. Later, when my mother was a graduate student at CUNY, I would sometimes accompany her to campus on summer weekdays, reading at the Au Bon Pain on 5th Avenue until she finished her classes. We would go sidewalk shopping, buying knickknacks from South Asian and West African and Middle Eastern street vendors, cheap treasures that meant the world to me because they came from New York and I was beginning my slow infatuation with the city. To any white child who has wandered those untouchable aisles of toys at F.A.O Schwarz, I will raise you a more thrilling experience: that

of a brown child, the child of immigrants, surrounded for the first time by a sea of different accents and skin hues.

A DECADE LATER, toppled by the demands of teaching, I was a living example that one did not have to be white to feel—and fail at—the white man's burden. I stayed in my classroom until late each evening, long after my more capable colleagues had gone home, rewriting lesson plans and repeating an insipid mantra posted in our faculty lounge: "Nothing will work unless you do." Nothing worked. I screamed at students when they wouldn't listen. I sent seven girls at once to the principal's office, only to end up there myself at the end of the day. One afternoon, one of my students was hit by a car outside of our building. I sat with her in the hospital until her mother arrived in tears, touching her daughter repeatedly to confirm that she was alive. I wondered if I would ever have children, then surrender them to the mercy of first-year teachers and Brooklyn crosswalks. Over time, as I inched toward competence and eventually came to love the job, I was haunted by the toll of this first, terrible year. To this day, I can name those sixth-grade students. I can tell you their assigned seats and the color of their winter coats. In Didion's words, "I recall with embarrassing clarity the flavor of those particular ashes."

Like Didion, I met my husband in New York. I fell in love with him because he was sharp and incomparably funny, because he had clawed his way from a struggling Louisiana town to law school at NYU, and I had never met anybody so capable and so undaunted. Our first child was born six winters later. As I struggled to nurse and heal, first from vaginal tearing and hemorrhoids, then from the isolation of motherhood, I stared through the window of our Fort Greene apartment at the boundary between excess and blight that divided the million-dollar brownstones in which we were living—albeit as renters, on a single floor—and the Ingersoll and Whitman Houses along Myrtle Avenue. Years later, a *New York Times* reporter would write a shattering piece about a young girl named Dasani, living in a shelter a stone's throw from that window, about the hard and concrete deprivations of poverty. Sometimes, as I mourned my losses—leisurely brunches, the compactness of my pre-pregnancy body, ad hoc gatherings with friends—I thought of a night when I was very young, crying to my mother about some childhood grievance, and she had pointed to the sky. "Look how big the universe is," she said. "You're just a speck."

The Year of Magical Thinking is a catalog of flashbacks, some of enviable beauty, others of unimaginable pain. Snaps of Didion's daughter read like a dream sequence: the beach where Quintana would forage for mussels, the simple braid she wore on her wedding day, the sweet childhood notes scattered around their home: *Dear Mom, when you opened the door it was me who ran away XXXXXX-Q*. Though Quintana's illness haunted me, shattering what I believed to be the permanence of motherhood, though I wanted to reach into the pages and pull her from the brink of death, I was consumed—for years after reading the book—by another tragedy that surrounds the focal losses of husband and child: a niece, Quintana's cousin, murdered by her boyfriend. Dizzyingly, the book drifts to more gilded memories. Didion at the pool in her Brentwood Park home, driving to St. Tropez, November in Paris, and Christmas in Honolulu. Novelists choose the arc of their stories. Memoirists do not. In laying these memories side by side, Didion reminds us that the comforts of life are no balm for its other losses. That you can drape yellow curtains around your New York apartment, live a life of dappled poverty, fall in love with the city you live in, and still feel the fullness of loss.

IT WASN'T JUST loss I felt when, in my early thirties, I moved with my husband and two children to New Orleans, but a return of the speck complex; I was floating through a place so much bigger and more consequential than my own singular set of emotions. My morning commute took me past Jim Crow–era segregation academies, a former sugar plantation marked with a plaque reading, "How Sweet it is!," and a 1960s elevated freeway built during the frenzy of highway construction, shuttering a thriving Black commercial district. One fall, when I was working as an administrator at a small charter high school, I invited an acquaintance of mine to speak with one of our classes—a man named Robert who had just been exonerated after serving twenty-three years of a life sentence for a crime he did not commit. "How many of y'all's families have been impacted by incarceration?" he asked. Nearly every student raised a hand.

I was never taken by Didion's writing about the South. It was too anthropological, too removed, too untouched by the peculiar humanity and contradictions of the region. But I leaned on the essence of her work again when, in the spring of 2020, I was offered a faculty job in the English Department of Mississippi State University. It was a dream

position, expansive and self-guided. "We want you to craft and grow our creative nonfiction program," the department head, Dan, had told me. And for a stretch of time, after I'd been offered the position but before I'd signed a contract, when I believed the job to be mine, I began that process. I envisioned a new type of Southern classroom, steeped in personal narrative and critical exploration of history. I drafted an initial syllabus. My husband and I looked for homes in Starkville, and we prepared the children for the complexities of the move. Weeks later, Dan, with whom I had been in warm and consistent contact, informed me that the position had been canceled, upended by a complaint of reverse discrimination.

"Was there a more qualified white candidate?" I asked him, to which he responded that there had not been. The complaint was more theoretical.

For a full year, I tried to write about this event—the indignity of a revoked offer, the absurdity of claiming reverse discrimination in small-town Mississippi—but each attempt was caught between two contradictory truths: I was devastated by what I had lost, yet in the scope of Southern racism, I had lost very little. Eventually I did draft an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in which, alongside the factual details, I discussed the netherworld of being Asian in the South. I described a moment that passed years prior, at a hotel in Mississippi, when, lingering next to my breakfast table, an elderly white man mistook me for a member of the waitstaff and handed me his dirty plate. But my anger over this incident still makes me uneasy, as though there exists a fundamental gap between my humanity and that of the woman he assumed I was. As though I have the right to be angry over a slight that should—at the heart of it—not even be a slight.

On one of the long and isolated days at the onset of the COVID pandemic, I passed a white woman and Black man arguing outside of a new, high-end furniture store. I was on my bike, a block from my house, and I recognized the woman as the store's proprietor. For months, I'd watched her, in her bleached hair and heels, supervising deliveries and standing by as her construction crew of Black and Latino men laid tile and painted walls. On this day, she was loud and erratic, threatening to call the police while the Black man, whose truck was parked on the curb, paced and muttered his side of the story. I offered to the man to wait with him for a few minutes, to provide a buffer should she follow up on this threat. In this, I realized later, was a subconscious reasoning:

a white woman's word would supersede a Black man's, and a brown woman's word would be somewhere in the middle.

"No," the woman told me. "You can take your little bike, and you can ride up the street."

For weeks, I stared at her storefront with a constant, simmering rage to which I knew—objectively, mathematically—I was not entitled. I considered the different levels of power the woman wielded against my own: the fixed authority to cause physical harm versus the passing opportunity to embarrass. One evening, I went into the store and took in the unimaginative rows of beige couches and marble coffee tables. I sat on an $800 cream-colored block chair called a Mongolian Lamb Pouf. I waited to see if she would recognize me, or if I would summon the will to confront her, but neither happened.

"Maybe we should leave the South," my husband suggested. I reminded him that the state in which I'm a transplant is one where our three children are deeply rooted. The youngest, eight years old, was born here. On summer Saturdays, we drive hours to a rotation of small towns so they can participate in regional track meets. "That's the school that has the yellow track," my son says of one. "That's the town that has the gas station that sells fried okra. That was the meet where I won the fifteen-hundred." They know the landmarks by heart: Lake Pontchartrain, the bald eagle's nest just past the Bonne Carre Spillway, the stretch of Mississippi that cuts into Louisiana's eastern border, where they still pick up their feet when we cross the state line.

As Didion reminds us, "Six months can become eight years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve."

YEARS AGO, I visited the Massachusetts town where, as an undergraduate, I had worked as a tutor in a small, alternative high school. During that long-ago stretch, I became friends with a man named Jim Foley. We often met for coffee or ate lunch together in the faculty break room. There was some light flirtation, though neither of us ever acted upon it. He was one of the first people who ever asked earnestly about my future plans and talked about his, with whom I practiced the give and take of real conversation.

Jim was killed in 2014, while working as a journalist in Syria. After months of reading every related article and social media post, of calling our few mutual friends and acquaintances, I thought I had made an uneasy peace with his death. But that afternoon in Massachusetts, turning

onto the road that took me into the town of Holyoke, I could barely breathe. I drove past the school, then pulled over and sat for nearly an hour in a gas station parking lot.

Didion calls this the "vortex effect." One memory touches another, and then another.

At the margins of my own sadness was the nagging thought that I had no right to it. Jim had loved so many people. Theirs was grief in its purest form. What, if anything, was the name for mine?

It was for this reason that I didn't talk with many people about Jim, but on that short list of confidantes was a childhood friend of my husband's, Brian. He had served as a marine in Iraq, and was someone who, I imagined, knew how to live with this curdling mixture of sadness and guilt. Among the details I shared was the fact that I had been living in Egypt during the years when Jim frequently passed through the Middle East. We could so easily have reconnected, had I just looked him up. I told Brian that I agonized over the possible reverberations; maybe Jim would have stayed for a bit in Cairo, then traveled to Syria a day or two later.

"Yes," Brian told me. "It hurts." Beyond this, he didn't say much, and I assumed that this was an effect of surviving war, the ability to withstand loss without having to constantly poke at the ashes.

I saw Brian again in late August of 2021, a year marked by a brutal convergence of events. Hurricane Ida had hit the Gulf Coast. Across the world, the United States was completing its final withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. In the weeks leading up to the storm, my husband and I talked about little besides Afghanistan. We shared and discussed the same circular round of articles. We gathered around the radio in the morning and the television at night and tried to help our then twelve-year-old process the human toll of failed policy. After the storm, when we were without power, we ran the generator for a few hours in the afternoons so that we could charge our phones and listen to the news.

A few hazy days later, we drove to my husband's hometown of West Monroe. Brian, who had moved back for the uncertain duration of the pandemic, met us at a brewery called The Flying Tiger. Eventually, the conversation shifted to Afghanistan. We were tentative at first. Brian looked on the brink of tears, and the kids were within earshot. When they wandered off to play tag, Brian let himself cry. "I have no reason to be this upset," he said, apologizing over and over with the same addendum. "I didn't even serve in Afghanistan. I served in Iraq."

A friend once asked if I had ever seen a grown man openly cry. Neither of us could come up with a single example. "Maybe men don't have enough to be upset about," I joked. Looking back, I'm embarrassed by the cheapness of that line, my suggestion that there is anything demographic or proprietary about grief. Instead, there are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, tailored to our gender, our relative privilege, or our relative luck.

Didion writes about a man, lying in the hospital bed next to her daughter's, who had been injured in a construction accident; he was being visited by a co-worker who had been at the site at the time. "They stood around his bed and tried to explain what had happened. The rig, the cab, the crane, I heard a noise, I called out to Vinny. Each man gave his version. Each version differed slightly from the other's. This was understandable, since each witness proceeded from a different point of view, but I recall wanting to intercede, help them coordinate their stories."

There is a throughline in Didion's writing: our stories compose a larger story. On any side is one worth telling. Our twenties are worth a story. Our windows, our curtains, our former apartments, the losses we bear and the ones we witness. On the drive back from the brewery, I thought again and again about Brian's repeated addendum, the useless particulars of fact and geography, and the burden—not only of grief, but of believing it isn't ours to carry.