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The Colors Around Us: Stories of the Love of Family

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The Colors Around Us



Taken on my fourth birthday, 2005

Stories of the Love of Family

Alanah Hunsdorfer

Senior Capstone

English Studies, Creative Writing and Social Action

Creative Project

Dr. Lee Ritscher

School of Humanities and Communication

Spring 2023

*For my family.
You are my inspiration for everything I write.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Project Proposal.....	1
The Colors Around Us: Stories of the Love of Family	
Belongings.....	4
First.....	9
Lavender Devotion.....	14
Overtime.....	18
Only for a Moment.....	23
Reflective Essay.....	29
Resume.....	32

Project Proposal

1) **Name:** Alanah Hunsdorfer

Concentrations: English Studies and Creative Writing & Social Action

2) **Project Description:** For my capstone project, I will be discovering the definition of family through the lens of various identities and showcasing the way in which family dynamics are in constant shift due to these identities. Through a collection of short stories, I will be exploring my own family experiences as well as the different ways family connections show up in all of our lives.

3) **Alignment with Common Theme:** As the course theme encourages us to dig into the “Hidden Histories” of the world around us, I will be delving deeper into different cultures, identities, and intersectionalities and how familial ties manifest themselves in people’s lives. There is so much familial love that occurs in our lives, and not just from the family we are born into. I want to highlight the complexities of family and the hidden stories that fall outside of the norm.

4) **Purpose:** My project’s primary focus will be to emphasize family and the different ways family is defined throughout our lives by the people around us. I think we are often blinded by the nuclear family dynamic, but there are so many other versions of what families can look like, and I want to illustrate this through my capstone.

5) **Format Rationale:** I believe that short stories will help bring a more personal feel to my project. There’s nothing more personable and relatable than telling stories. It’s how people learn. And it keeps people engaged. With such a personal topic like families, short stories will help me examine these families in a thoughtful way. A well-written story can transport anyone anywhere and can make them visualize things that they themselves have never experienced or

seen. Stories are a good way to make people see what they otherwise wouldn't. And I also think that stories are the main method used by families to pass down traditions and cultures, so there's really no better medium to present this theme of family than writing stories.

- 6) **Capstone Title:** No Matter What: Stories of the Love of Family (probably will change as I complete the project)
- 7) **Working Summary:** My capstone project will include a number of short stories in which I navigate through the various versions of family, using a wide variety of characters and settings in order to tell my stories. There will be stories revolving around queer characters, adoptions, children of divorce, single motherhood, etc. I would really like to emphasize and focus on the idea of "found family." If we look close enough, we'll find that family is all around us, regardless of blood, and I would like to explore this idea further. My project serves to morph and dissolve the traditional idea of family that is fed to us at a young age.
- 8) **Expectations:** I plan to do at least 5 short stories in my collection. It will probably end being more than that as I conduct my research and gather more ideas. I will be researching family dynamics in different cultures and places but also finding the stories that not everyone hears about, the families that are viewed as different in society. I also plan to conduct a few interviews with people that I know, just to see what I can discover about family from the people around me. I will be building characters from my own observations of the world I live in, but my research will aid me in filling in the gaps and becoming more knowledgeable about the stories I will be telling.
- 9) **Specific Skills and Tools Required:** Through my creative writing classes, I've learned a lot about developing stories through characters and dialogues. I will utilize my skills as a storyteller and writer to bring my project to life. I've learned through my experiences with

writing short stories that the plot means nothing if the characters fall flat, so I will definitely be focusing on building strong characters and personalities. With a project like this, it is definitely important to show, not tell, and my past experiences in writing classes at CSUMB will help me bring more depth to my stories, especially the skills that I have acquired with building imagery and illustrating my characters and scenes.

10) Next Steps: My next steps will be to nail down a general idea of what stories I want to include in my project. I need to line up a few interviews with people, and do some of my own research on the topic. I also need to iron out the overall narrative that I'm going for. While I want all of my short stories to be different, I want there to be an overarching idea that ties them together and makes them flow in and out of each other in a cohesive manner.

11) Timeline:

Feb. 24 - Mar. 10: do some more extensive research for project, gather story ideas, create outline of stories, plan characters and storylines

Mar. 10- Apr. 14: write the majority of the collection of short stories

Apr. 14 - Apr. 28: edit pieces, rework anything that doesn't sound right, polish stories, make sure everything is put together neatly and cohesively

Belongings

“Okay! You’re all set! Here are the keys to your dorm. *Don’t* lose them. The school likes to take money from students in any way they can. They’re practically *hoping* you lose your keys, so don’t let them win, yeah?”

She gives me a mischievous smile, her eyebrows raised in a way that tells me she *genuinely* likes taking scared freshmen to their dorm rooms and bombarding them with information that they’re probably going to forget about in five minutes. My designated RA has been talking a mile a minute for the last half hour, and I’ve only absorbed about a quarter of what she’s said. I don’t even remember her name. Kallie? Kassie? Katie? Katie. I think it’s Katie. I *hope* it’s Katie. First person I ever meet in college and I’ve already forgotten her name. Great job, Madison. Way to start off on the right foot. I manage a grimace, grabbing the keys from her outstretched hand.

I take a look around the room while she goes over her clipboard one last time. Everyone warned me that my first year dorm room would be small, but they really weren’t kidding. There’s a bed on the opposite side of the room with about 5 feet of clearance between both walls. A desk is situated by a window in the far corner. The room is dark and cold, and it makes me wonder how this could ever feel like home. A chill runs up my spine at the thought. This *has* to feel like home. Nowhere else does. I quickly cross the room to open up the blinds, letting the natural light cascade over me.

Much better. Not so dungeon-like. Maybe I’ll even be able to breathe.

“There’s a bunch of welcome mixers going on this week. They’re put on by the school, but they’re super fun! Great way to meet new people. I’ll be at the pride one tonight. You should

come and say hi!” Katie rambles enthusiastically, an excited sparkle in her eyes that makes me smile. A *real* smile this time, not just a grimace.

My family walks in with the rest of my bags, setting them down on my side of the room.

“She won’t be going to that mixer, right Mads? You’ve gotta get ready for classes on Monday,” my dad chimes in, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Oh, she has plenty of time to get ready for classes! The Pride Mixer’s open to everyone. Even allies!”

“She won’t be going to that one,” he says more firmly this time, tightening his hold on my shoulder.

I watch as Katie’s sparkle dims a little. Her eyes flit over to me, and I can’t seem to hold her gaze, can’t seem to explain myself. I look down at my feet ashamedly, hoping the moment passes quickly.

“Right! Well, I have one more thing for you!”

Katie’s excitement returns, and I look up to see a small pin in the palm of her hand. It has the school emblem on it, and in a small loopy font, it reads, *You belong here*. My eyes meet hers, and she beams at me, placing it on my fingertips before turning around and leaving the room.

You can tell that it’s one of those cheap freebies that the school had made for the incoming freshmen. A feeble attempt to make us feel less homesick.

“We better get going. We want to beat the traffic,” my mom’s voice breaks me out of my trance.

I look down at my unpacked bags and my bare room, the way they seem to represent a finality, an ending as well as a beginning. I thought my parents might stay and help me decorate

or put away my clothes, but maybe it's better this way. Rip off the bandaid quickly. I give them both a hug and watch as the door to my dorm room closes behind them. Quick. Final.

I glance back down at the pin Katie gave me. An empty room. A new beginning.

You belong here.

Maybe I do. *I hope I do.*



I'm being dragged down the hallway. Physically dragged. I mean, I'm not on the ground or anything, but Katie's grip on my wrist is tight, and any second now I might trip on my own two feet and take us both down. Just a few minutes ago, she showed up at my door and *insisted* I go to the Pride Mixer, chattering on about how it's *so important to get out of your room and the school hosts these events for a reason and who wants to mope in their dorm room on their first night of college anyway?* I did. That's exactly what I was planning to do. Curl up on my unmade bed, surrounded by my unpacked bags, and bask in the feeling of being lonely.

"You're gonna love my friends. They're super chill," Katie practically squeals out, leading me into a large dancehall type room donned in rainbow from floor to ceiling.

"Wow," I gasp out, involuntarily, trying to absorb the room in its entirety.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Katie smiles at me, finally letting go of my wrist.

A variety of pride flags are hung up on the walls, each one representing a different identity or label. Most of them I'm familiar with from my late night Google searches in high school, when the house was quiet and my thoughts were racing. But some of them I've never seen before, and I make a mental note to look them up later.

When we reach Katie's friends, I'm thrown into the center, Mariah Carey's "We Belong Together" ringing through my ears. I guess there's no time for introductions when Mariah Carey is involved, but I don't mind. First impressions are not my strong suit.

I'm not much of a dancer, haven't been since the seventh grade when I was so excited to go to the spring fling with my best friend, Samantha, but she ended up ditching me to have her first kiss with Austin Vanderbilt under the bleachers. I wasn't good at dancing then, and I'm sure as hell not good now. But Katie's friends laugh and touch and dip and swirl, and we're all kind of a little uncoordinated and maybe I'm overthinking it. Maybe I overthink everything.

To our surprise, the DJ never plays a bad song, and before I know it, I've been dancing for 2 hours non stop, and I still haven't unpacked or made my bed yet. There's a lull in the music as the DJ makes a few announcements to the crowd, and I take the moment to tell Katie that I should go. That I should get back to the nothing that I had planned for the evening.

"What? No, you can't go. The party's just getting started," one of Katie's friends interjects. I think his name is David. I know close to nothing about him except for the fact that he was nice enough to place a rainbow feather boa around my neck when I got here and that he seems to be a die hard Taylor Swift fan. "Style" came on a half hour ago, and he went absolutely nuts.

"I have to go unpack. My room is in a sad state at the moment."

"We can help you with that," David answers simply, sincerity behind his red heart-shaped sunglasses.

"Oh my god, yes! We'll help you decorate!" Another one of Katie's friends exclaims. They introduced themselves as Jax earlier. *J A X*, they clarified. *Don't spell it like that weird playground game with the bouncy ball or I will be incredibly upset.*

They have this really cool mullet haircut that I've always wanted but have never been brave enough to do. Maybe I'll finally work up the courage to pull it off. Scare my parents into oblivion.

"I couldn't ask y'all to do that," I finally spit out, moving my attention away from Jax's hair.

"You didn't ask. We offered. And, besides, what are friends for?" Katie adds, a soft smile on her face. The gold glitter she put around her eyes earlier has flaked off onto her chest and arms, and I can't help but notice how she shimmers under the light of the dancehall. It's very fitting.

"Yeah, you've put up with our dance moves for two hours now. We're basically family," David shrugs, pulling me out of my thoughts and tucking his long hair behind his ear.

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. I know he meant it as a joke, but I can't help but feel like there's truth behind his words. Who else would help you unpack and decorate your dorm room on your first night of college other than your family?

I take a look around the room, at the small groups of people laughing and talking and *dancing*, and I wonder if they feel it too. The *hope* that rests in the colors around us.

Before I can give them a real answer, Katie grabs my wrist and drags us all to my dorm. *A not-so-empty room. A new beginning.*

I think maybe I can finally belong.

First

“This will be your room, Marcus. We weren’t sure what you liked, so we chose neutral colors, but we can totally change the color of the walls. Or your bedspread! We can change that too. Whatever you want. Your brother was a little easier to shop for, but just let us know if you’d like to switch it up a little bit. We’re up for anything, really!”

Suzie Talks A Lot has not stopped rambling nonsense since Eli and I have gotten here. Ironically, her name is actually Suzie, and unfortunately, to my dismay, she does talk a lot. I take a look around the room, surveying what I guess will be my new sleeping quarters. Suzie called it my new home earlier.

I won’t be calling it that.

But she really wasn’t kidding about the neutral colors. Every inch of the room is covered in a hundred different versions of gray that I didn’t even know existed. A bed in the corner has throw pillows that I don’t know what to do with, and the bedside table has a weird lamp that looks like it has scoliosis. Somehow it’s more depressing than my 10x10 room that I had to share with two other kids back at my last house. That one didn’t last long.

It *is* nice though, despite everything. Despite the awful feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me this isn’t going to work. This isn’t permanent. I’ve been in the system for five years. Adoption papers don’t mean anything. I’ve been here before.

Besides, Suzie and Michael didn’t want me. I’m 15 years old, and if I’ve learned anything from being in foster care since I was ten, *no one* wants to adopt a teenager. They wanted Eli. And since I’m the only family Eli’s ever known, they decided to adopt both of us.

They *wanted* Eli. I’m just an unfortunate add-on.

Suzie's looking at me expectantly, a worried furrow in between her eyes that she's trying desperately not to show. I guess I should ease her worries, make her feel like she's done a good job. In theory, from what I've seen in the movies, she should be the one comforting *me* in this scenario. But when have the movies ever mimicked reality? Sometimes you have to be the adult at an age where you shouldn't have to be the adult.

"Looks great," I finally manage, attempting a smile that I'm sure looks more like a scowl.

Oh well. Doesn't matter anyway. I give myself a week. Two weeks tops, before Suzie and Michael decide that *maybe I'm just not the right fit*, and I'm pushed back into another group home or foster care family.

I do hope they keep Eli, though. He deserves a nice, stable, childhood. He's only five.

Michael appears behind us, a rigid but goofy grin on his face, placing a hand on the small of his wife's back. I can't help but think that they're certainly an odd looking couple. Suzie has frizzy orange hair and a petite body. Michael has jet black hair, gelled up into what I think is an attempted quiff, and a chunkier figure. She seems erratic and nervous. He looks so calm that it almost appears like he isn't quite privy to the knowledge that he's now fostering two kids with the hopes of adopting them. It feels like they're at odds.

Maybe that's why they fit.

"Eli's all set up. He's looking through his toys right now. Do you need anything, son?" Michael questions, his eyes landing on me, the same goofy grin on his face. Only now, it's a little bit less sure. On the verge of unease.

And maybe it's because of my withering stare, because he just called me *son*. Which, okay, I know he probably meant it as one of those terms of endearment, like honey or sweetie,

one of those words people say when they want to show affection in a cutesy way, but I can't help but cringe at the thought. I don't care how much they want Eli. I'm not their son.

I quickly shake my head no, walking into my new sleeping arrangement and taking a deep breath. The neutral grays consume me, casting a gloom over my face, and Suzie gives me a look of sadness, her eyes dimming with pity. It takes me back to that day all those years ago when our mother had decided she couldn't take care of both of us, and I stood, scared and confused, in front of the foster care social worker, my baby brother in my arms, as she explained how the system works and where we would be staying. *I'll try my best to keep you and your brother together, Marcus, but... he's a baby. He might go quick.* A chill runs up my spine, and I shake my head out of the memory. Eli never went quick.

And neither did I.



“Dinner’s almost ready! We were hoping we could all eat together. As a family.”

Damn it. So close. I'm only five steps away from the front door. Five steps away from freedom. I should have been quicker. All I need is an hour to myself to go on a walk, an hour outside of this house, where the walls feel like they're caving in around me. If I make a run for it, maybe no one will catch me. Suzie's got this stupid hopeful smile on her face like everything is just *peachy*, and why can't she just leave me alone?

“You can't have a family dinner without a family,” I say, malice lacing my words.

Her smile drops and her mouth closes and *good*. Maybe she can finally just *shut up*.

“Well... I know the adoption isn't final yet, but Michael and I consider you and Eli our family now,” she murmurs, just above a whisper, uncertainty plaguing her voice. I almost feel bad for her.

Almost.

“You don’t have to pretend, you know.”

She tilts her head in confusion, her eyes darting over my face in search of an answer.

“Pretend?”

“That you care about me. I know you want Eli, and that’s great. I get it. He’s still a kid. You have a few more firsts with him, you know? You can drop him off on his first day of kindergarten, and sign him up for his first sport, and take him to go get ice cream after his first recital. But you can’t do that with me. I’m done. There’s no firsts left. You didn’t want to separate us, and okay, *whatever*, but you don’t have to worry about me. I’m fine. I’m practically an adult anyway. You can have Eli and leave me alone. You don’t have to keep pretending that you *actually* want to adopt me.”

Silence hangs in the air between us, my words hovering over us like a drone ready to strike. I can feel tears prick the back of my eyes, but I quickly blink them away. I will not cry. I *will not* cry. Suzie takes a hesitant step towards me, and I can see on her face that she’s trying to figure out the right thing to say, trying to find the right words and put them in the right order so that maybe things can just be *right*.

“I do want to adopt you.”

“Stop it.”

“I do, Marcus. Michael and I want *both* of you. You *and* Eli. We want a family of our own, and you and your brother happen to complete that family,” Suzie explains, a softness in her voice that I’ve never heard before, the erratic energy she exuded earlier, dissipated.

“And you’re right, we didn’t want to separate you. But only because we wanted you as you are. Separating you wasn’t an option because we wanted you *both*,” she adds, with an intensity in her eyes that even I can’t muster up the energy to challenge.

Eli runs into the room giggling, Michael trailing close behind him with a smile, heading to the dinner table to sit down. Suzie holds my stare, and before I can stop it, a tear trails down my face. I really didn’t want to cry, but a part of me wants to believe her. A part of me *does* believe her. I break her gaze, wiping the tear off my cheek and sitting down in my designated chair to eat dinner.

My designated chair. My new home.

“Marcus, have you ever had a family dinner before?” Suzie asks, placing a bowl of mashed potatoes in front of me.

I slowly shake my head no and scoop some onto my plate.

“Well then, I guess this will be your first,” she smiles, sitting down next to me.

I look up in surprise, her words sinking into the bottom of my chest, the pit of my stomach, the place that always tells me I’m not good enough, that I will *never be good enough*. Maybe I finally am.

I guess that’s a first.

Lavender Devotion

“I just think you’re missing out on something, honey. I worry you’ll regret it later.”

Lavender fills my nostrils as I watch my mom carefully snip and arrange her fifth flower bouquet of the month. As a kid, I used to sit on the barstools at the kitchen counter and watch her for hours, methodically and strategically placing every single stem and leaf until she got it just right. Only to do it all over again a few days later. She replaces them the minute the tiny petals show any sign of wilt or strain.

Sometimes I wonder if she’d do the same thing to me if she could.

I take a deep breath, trying to maintain my composure. The lavender scent consumes me again, and I try not to gag on it. I’ve always hated the smell of lavender. It feels sticky and heavy, and it reminds me of this house.

And conversations like these.

“Mom, I’ve told you a million times. Liam and I are fine on our own. We don’t want to have children. And, besides, why would I want to bring a child into a world as fucked up as this one?”

She scoffs at that, rolling her eyes in my direction.

“You’ve always been quite the pessimist, Olivia.”

“I wonder where I get it from,” I mumble under my breath, a part of me hoping she hears me.

She doesn’t, which is probably for the best. I’m not a pessimist, anyway. I’m just *realistic*. It’s not my fault reality sucks. All I can do is never have a child that has to come to that realization themselves.

“Don’t you want to know what having a family feels like?” She questions, nonchalantly, clipping the last of her flower stems, like she, as my mother, didn’t just insinuate that I had no idea what a family is.

“I already *have* a family, Mom. I have Liam and my friends and Bruno, and I don’t need children to make me feel complete. I already am.”

She huffs, shaking her head and carefully gathering up all of the leftover clippings and dirt on the counter. I wish she was as delicate with me as she is with her flower arrangements. I’ve caught her speaking to them on multiple occasions. Giving them encouragement and praise.

You, my friends, are so beautiful. You’ll be perfect for the living room. Do you need some more water? I can get you more water. We don’t want you to be thirsty now, do we?

Flowers can’t talk back. Maybe that’s why she loves them more.

“Dogs are not children, Olivia. And I’m afraid one day you’re going to wake up and realize it’s too late,” she sighs, setting her new vase of lavender on the dining table and walking out of the room.

Her voice rings in my ears while I stare at the clean white tile that borders the back wall of the kitchen, trying desperately to forget the words that just fell out of her mouth and drown myself in the spotless abyss of the backsplash. How does she keep it so clean?

One day you’re going to wake up...

No. Stop it. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to go through this same old stupid conversation again. I’ve had it too many times.

When are you and Liam going to settle down, Olivia?

An apartment is too small to start a family, Olivia.

Your biological clock is ticking, Olivia.

You'll never know what real love is until you have a child of your own, Olivia.

Bullshit. I know what real love is. I feel it when my brother texts me every week from across the country to see how I'm doing. I feel it when my friends drag me out of my apartment to go shopping when I'm having a bad day. I feel it at work, when I finish a project I'd been working on for weeks, and it hits me how *good* I am at my job, how much I genuinely *love it*. I feel it when Bruno curls up next to me at night, letting out a huge sigh because he's content and it's *such a hard life being a dog*.

And I feel it when I finally make it home from work everyday, the house smelling like grilled onions and garlic bread, Liam standing in the kitchen with a small excited smile on his face, ready to ask about my day.

I *know* what real love is.

I don't need a child for that.



Bruno greets me at the door when I walk in. Scratch that. Bruno *attacks* me at the door when I walk in, his tail dancing in the light of the entryway. I hang up my coat before crouching down and giving him a hug. He's always so happy to see me. Even when I'm gone for five minutes to take out the trash, he waits at the door and kisses me on the cheek when I come back. I'm like a soldier who's come back from war.

He would write me love letters if he had thumbs.

When I peek around the corner of the living room, I see Liam asleep on the couch, his face relaxed and his breathing steady. I grab a blanket from the top of the recliner and lay down next to him, trying not to wake him up. Bruno has other plans though because he jumps up on the

couch and lays on top of both of us. To my dismay, Liam stirs, wrapping his arms around me and giving me a smile.

“How was your visit with your mom?” He asks, his voice gravelly with sleep.

“Not great,” I whisper, mustering up the effort to give him a tight lipped smile.

“I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?” He whispers back, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear.

I shake my head no because I’ve talked about it with him before, and I don’t want to keep going over the *same* argument in my head. It’s too tiring.

“Bruno is my child,” I say instead, and Liam lets out a raspy laugh in response.

“Yes he is. You birthed him and everything,” he agrees earnestly.

“15 hours of labor! Can you believe it?”

Liam laughs again, and it’s like music, like a symphony of all my favorite sounds.

Sometimes I wish I could bottle it up and keep it stored away. Open up the cap when I miss him. Let the sounds of his laugh wash over me like a wave. All consuming and so very *lovely*. We lay together for a few moments before I break the silence again.

“You’re my family,” I say, hugging Liam closer and scratching Bruno behind his ears.

Liam hums in agreement and kisses the top of my head.

I *know* what real love is.

I have a family to prove it.

Overtime

“I’m sorry, honey. You know I wish I could be there, but I work. I’ve called out too many times this month already,” my mom sighs, scrubbing the bottom of a pot that’s needed cleaning for five days now.

The sounds of the dishes clinking in the sink attempt to drown out the anger that’s brewing in my chest. I take a deep breath, trying to not let it consume me.

“It’s the last game of the season though! You promised you’d come!”

No such luck. I can never calm myself down. The school counselor, Mr. Schmidt, has been doing these silly mindfulness exercises with me for weeks. My basketball coach recommended me for it. Something about how I need to *gain clarity on the court* and *a calm mind makes good decisions*. Basically we just sit in silence for 10 minutes and hope that we become cool, calm, and collected by the time we open our eyes.

It hasn’t worked yet.

“I know, Nicky. I’m sorry. I’ll try to make the next one, yeah?” She whispers, sounding defeated, her voice getting lost in the rush of the water.

I clench my fists, feeling tears prick the back of my eyes. I hate when she calls me Nicky. I’ve told her a million times that I just go by Nick now, but it hasn’t stuck yet. Nicky was cute when I was three, maybe. When I was stumbling on my feet and tripping over my toes. When my dad would pick me up and laugh at my clumsiness.

Easy there Nicky. We don’t want you cracking your head open now, do we?

That must have been before he decided he couldn’t care less whether or not I cracked my head open and packed up his bags to leave me stumbling after him.

“There won’t be another one if we lose,” I mumble, keeping my voice low so it doesn’t crack.

I know it’s empty promises anyway. She won’t make the next one. Or the one after that. It doesn’t matter how many games I have. She doesn’t have the time. She *never* has the time.

And I’m not a little kid anymore. I don’t need to be babied. I don’t need my *mommy* at my game.

She shuts off the water, drying her hands on a towel before walking over to me and kissing me on the cheek.

“You won’t lose,” she says simply, a small smile on her face as she wipes her thumbs under my eyes.

At least she won’t be there if I do.



67-66. We won with a last minute shot at the three point line. My ears are ringing so loud that I almost can’t make out Coach Jackson’s inspirational congratulations to us from the center of our team circle. His voice has a rasp to it, lost from a long game of *not following directions* and *forgetting every single play he’s ever taught us*. I don’t really care what he has to say at the moment. I’m happy we won, obviously. Happy that we pulled it off at the last possible second. Happy that my senior year season isn’t quite over yet. Happy that we get to go to the championships.

Sad that my mom’s not here to see it.

Coach Jackson’s yell fest in the locker room at half-time keeps replaying over and over again in my head. Like an echo that bounces off the walls in my brain looking for an exit.

I don't know what the hell's going on out there. You guys are acting like you don't even know each other! You have to play as a team. You can't do everything on your own.

He was right, of course. We *were* playing pretty awful. Half of us stood hopelessly waiting for the ball to magically come our way, and the other half were refusing to pass it. We weren't playing as a team, and you *can't do everything on your own*. Not in basketball.

Not in life.

Sometimes it feels like that's all my mom ever does though. She cooks and cleans and works and makes sure my sister and I have everything we could possibly need. She does *everything* on her own, has been since my dad left us over a decade ago.

And I've been icing her out all week.

My sister greets me with a smile when I walk to her car with my bags. Laura's a bit of the silent type. The type that never says exactly what she wants to say but hopes a touch to your shoulder or a raise of the eyebrows will suffice. She's always been like that, even when our dad was still in the picture. Sometimes he would grow angry at her perceived indifference. *You have to talk sometimes, Laura. People will think you're stupid.*

When we were kids, Laura would quietly listen to me complain about everything going on in our lives, everything I was annoyed about, everything mom was doing *wrong*.

Dad would have gotten me those sneakers I wanted.

Dad would have taken me to Connor's birthday party.

Dad would have let me stay home from school.

Laura would listen, and she would nod along, and she would let me go on and on about my sad and unfortunate life. And sometimes, after I was done, after I had said every mean thing I

could possibly say about our mother, she would take a breath and softly say, “at least mom is here.”

No, Laura’s not stupid.

And at least mom is here.



When I make it inside my front door, I’m expecting an empty house. My mom said she’d be home a little bit after us, mentioned there would be leftovers in the fridge for us to nibble on. But instead I’m met with the overwhelming scent of food, traces of tri-tip and mashed potatoes, and my stomach growls at the possibility of eating.

Almost losing a basketball game takes a lot out of you, I guess.

I put down my bags and head into the kitchen, my eyes resting on my mom setting the table, Frank Sinatra humming faintly from the speakers on the counter.

“You made my favorite dinner,” I whisper, my voice in battle with the music.

My mom looks up startled, obviously not hearing Laura and I come in. She gives me a smile, folding a napkin and putting it over one of the plates.

“Did you win?” She asks excitedly, her eyes light with anticipation.

“Yes, but you made my favorite dinner,” I repeat, a little louder this time.

“Well you’ve been so sad this week that I couldn’t make it to your game, so I asked my boss if it would be okay if I left a little early today so I could make dinner for when you got home, and he wasn’t particularly happy about it, you know George, but I explained everything to him, and he told me that I could leave if I bring him a tri-tip sandwich tomorrow, and I thought that was a pretty good deal considering the fact that he’s usually threatening to fire me, you know?”

I stand in silence for a moment, trying to absorb everything she said in her rambling, trying to process the fact that I've been treating her like crap for days because I'm selfish and insensitive and still angry at my father for ruining our family. And my mother is standing in front of me, my favorite food on the table, her presence in my line of sight, proving to me that she and Laura are all the family I'll ever need.

I cross the room and engulf her in a hug, my height forcing her to stand on her tiptoes to reach me.

"I'm glad you're here," I say, wrapping my arms around her a little tighter.

Because she stayed.

And she's *here*.

Only for a Moment

Flight 201, to California: ...

We watch with unsteady breaths as the information screen goes red and confirms what we've all been worried about for hours now.

Flight 201, to California: Cancelled

A collective groan runs through the airport transit lounge. It's *April* for crying out loud. Flights should not be cancelled from a snowstorm in *April*. It doesn't matter to me anyway. I'm not in a big hurry to get to California. I'm not in a big hurry to get *anywhere*. I'm just trying out something new. Something better than Connecticut. Only been here for six months, but I don't feel the need to stay.

Which is not an uncommon feeling for me.

None of us should be surprised though. A mixture of rain, hail, and snow has been slamming into the airport windows for five hours now. I've watched six different men over the course of the day pace back and forth in front of those windows, running their hands through their hair until it's no longer perfectly gelled. They pause every now and then, huffing out a breath and glancing at their watch. You know it's bad when the dads with the court classics and jean shorts are worried.

Nobody knows an airport schedule better than them.

"Attention guests, all upcoming flights have officially been delayed or cancelled due to storm advisories from the National Weather Service. We are working on getting your flights rescheduled for early tomorrow morning, but as of right now, we advise you to sit tight in our comfortable waiting areas until the storm blows over. If you have questions, please feel free to

visit our help desks. Thank you for your patience and understanding,” a staticky and robotic voice fills the airport, barely louder than the howl of the wind outside.

“Welp. Looks like we’re stuck here,” the man sitting next to me breathes out, dipping down in his seat and tilting his head back to close his eyes.

I look around at the different people sitting anxiously in the room. It’s a pretty small airport, so there’s not many milling about. Most of them left earlier in the day, anticipating that their flight would most likely get delayed. The smarter ones probably didn’t show up at all.

Some people are on their phones, trying to make calls that won’t go through. Others are listening to music, in what I think is an attempt to drown out the storm. A loud shriek steals my attention to the center of the room, and I slowly make my way over to a small group of kids playing charades. If I have to be here all night, I might as well have some fun. There’s a timer ticking on an empty chair, and one of the boys picks it up and giggles.

“30 seconds! Hurry!” He spits out through laughter.

A girl, no older than seven, maybe eight, is frantically flapping her arms in desperation, her eyes wide at her team members.

“A bird!”

“A hawk!”

“An airplane!”

“Oooh! That’s a good guess!”

The girl shakes her head vigorously, agitated by her team’s cluelessness. She’s doing this weird squawking noise that I can’t quite put my finger on. Doesn’t sound like a chicken. It’s more intense than that. Reminds me of the noise the velociraptors make in the movie Jurassic Park. Wait.

Bingo.

I lean over to one of the boys trying to guess and whisper quietly at his side.

“Pterodactyl.”

He whips his head around to me, offering a quizzical look, but eventually he smiles and gives me a slight nod.

“Pterodactyl!” He yells, and the girl erupts into cheers of celebration at the right answer.

And probably at the fact that she can finally put her arms down and stop violently flailing about.

“What’s your name?” The young girl asks me breathlessly, the excitement still in her eyes as she high fives her team and sits down next to me.

“Joe. What’s yours?” I answer, giving her a fist bump for the win.

“Lucy!”

“That’s a nice name.”

“Thanks! My dads named me! I’m not sure which one though. They always fight over who came up with it, and I don’t know who’s telling the truth anymore,” she chatters on quickly, kicking her feet underneath the chair.

“They’re sitting over there!” She points to a couple guys in the far corner of the lounge space.

One of them is asleep, his head resting on the other's shoulder who's awake, glasses perched on his nose as he reads a book. He glances up in search of Lucy and smiles to himself once he sees she's okay. His partner stirs in his sleep, and he kisses the top of his head before returning to his book.

It's a nice scene. Just the two of them. A harrowing storm outside. A sense of comfort in the corner.

It's nice, and it makes me sad, and I *should* be on a plane right now to California.

Instead I'm butting in on a game of charades with a bunch of eight year olds. I tear my gaze away from Lucy's dads, and all of the kids are staring at me, questioning looks in their eyes.

"Who are you here with?" The boy that I gave the charades answer to asks me.

There's a suitcase sitting next to him with a tag hanging from the zipper, a clumsy collection of words scrawled in crayon across the front.

This bag belongs to Drew. If found, please give it back to him.

I'm unsure if Drew is aware of the fact that someone might not know exactly who he is or where to find him if they come across his bag, but I admire his forward thinking.

"No one, actually. I'm flying by myself," I say, which is evidently the wrong answer because every single one of the kid's mouths drops open in surprise.

"You're here by yourself? My mom won't let me do that!" Another boy exclaims, absolute shock in his voice.

I let out a laugh because I'm *probably* a little bit older than him, just by the looks of it. Obviously I'm not positive. His skechers do look quite sophisticated, so I can't be too sure. But I'm 22 now, so I *think* I can fly alone. I'll have to check the fine print next time.

"Will someone at least be waiting for you at the airport when you get there? My aunt is supposed to be picking us up when me and my dads land in Nevada!" Lucy blurts.

And, ouch. That hurt. First the cute couple in the corner and now this? Kids really know how to kick you when you're down.

"Uhh. Nope. I don't have family in California. I don't know anyone there."

“So why are you going then?” Drew’s eyes are round and curious, and I wish I had an answer for him.

I wish I had an answer for *me*.

How do I tell him that I don’t have family anywhere *else* either? California’s just an excuse not to think about it.

A strong gust of wind throws a flurry of snow and debris against the windows, and the kids jump in fright at the sound. Perfect timing, mother nature. I needed a reason not to answer that question.

“Let’s play another round of charades, yeah?” I suggest, trying to distract them from the storm outside.

It seems to work because all of them eagerly jump up in anticipation. Drew hands me the deck of cards with various subjects written on them. I pick one off the top and read it.

Blender

How is one supposed to act out a *blender*? Who made these cards? I sigh, standing up and taking center stage in front of my audience of children. I put my arms up in the air and quickly spin in a circular motion, creating a weird vibrational sound with my mouth. The kids explode with giggles of delight, seemingly forgetting about the scary weather.

And as I stand there making a fool of myself, running in circles, trying my best to *be* a blender, I forget about everything else.

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I’m woken up the next morning by Lucy shaking my shoulder, too much energy in her eyes for someone who just spent the night at an airport. Kids amaze me sometimes.

I sit up in my chair, taking a look outside. It appears to be clear now, a blanket of snow across the ground but nothing new from the sky. Rubbing my eyes, I try to focus on Lucy's figure hovering over me.

"Our flight is boarding in a few minutes! I just wanted to say goodbye before my dads make me leave!"

Her voice rings in my ears before I process what she's saying. I look up at the flight screen and see my flight is scheduled to take off in a couple hours.

California, here I come.

"Thanks for letting me play charades with you last night," I say through a smile.

"You're welcome! You looked like you needed to have some fun!"

I give a startled laugh because *wow* kids are brutally honest, and wasn't *I* the one trying to help *her* get through the storm? I nod along though because she's right.

I *did* need some fun.

"Okay well, bye! Have fun in California!"

And with that she walks off, her small suitcase in tow as she joins her dads in line. I smile to myself, looking around the lounge, at all the people who watched me play a dozen rounds of charades last night, everyone who laughed along and cheered when the kids guessed right. Some of them even joined in after a while, wanting something to pass the time as the storm roared on.

The memories of last night wash over me and rest peacefully in the back of my mind, feeling soft and warm. And maybe I don't have a family in California. Maybe I won't have anyone waiting for me when I get there, but for the first time in my life, I had a family here in this airport.

*If only for a moment.*



## Reflective Essay

“The Colors Around Us” started out as a frustration for society’s perception of what a family is and *should* look like, and I wanted to address my frustrations in a way that would highlight the variety of familial relationships and educate others on what that might look like in an engaging and exciting way. But through my writing of different scenarios, building characters, and connecting with my stories, it became clear that this was just as much of a learning experience for *me* as I was trying to make it for everyone else. As I created this collection of short stories in these last few months, I realized that my own perception of family was rapidly shifting in the process as well.

I knew when I started my collection that I wanted my characters to be a significantly strong presence in my stories. It didn’t matter what the plots were. If my characters fell flat, so would my stories. I built my character’s personalities through dialogue and detail. Who we are often manifests itself in how we interact with others, so dialogue contributed heavily to the structure of my stories. I used a lot of poetic elements in my work as well. Repetition of phrases and symbols were a huge part of how I constructed my stories in a way that made them more meaningful and memorable.

I took a lot of inspiration from my favorite writers, like June Jordan, and how she’s able to take a moment in time and bring it to life on the page. I worked hard to develop strong imagery, envisioning the setting and scene I wanted to create and building that image from scratch. The bigger picture is great for seeing central ideas as a whole, but the small details of a story is what makes it *real*. Our own personal stories wouldn’t be nearly as interesting if we cut out the tiny things. The moments deemed insignificant are usually the ones that help define us.

As soon as I decided on my topic and what I wanted to focus on this semester, I knew that short stories would be the way to go. There's nothing more relatable than telling and listening to a story. It's part of the human condition. We *love* stories. I find them to be such an effective way to not only explore different topics in an interesting fashion but to also learn something new along the way. Stories are meant to be captivating and entertaining. They are known for their ability to capture someone's attention and leave a lasting impression on their audience. When drafting my stories for my project, I knew I had to find the balance between entertaining my audience and enlightening them on different examples of family. I wanted my stories to evoke emotion, but I also wanted them to inspire. My stories should be able to hold your attention as well as motivate you to question your own perspectives on family. It was challenging to maintain that balance throughout my pieces, but it was rewarding to see the end result.

Building this collection of stories was a long process. I had to make sure that I was encapsulating a wide variety of stories that would accurately represent my main claim: family can look a lot different than a couple of parents and children. There were so many stories that I wanted to write, so many possibilities that I considered, but I had to narrow down my focus quite a bit. I brainstormed a lot, discussing my ideas with my own family, my friends and peers, and my professors. These stories are works of fiction, but they do represent *real* people, so I needed to ensure that I wasn't misrepresenting any human experience. I asked questions, gathered information, observed people's interactions and experiences, and conducted tons of research, in order to discover how others defined family themselves. My stories were written from a first person point of view, so I had to ensure that I fully understood the perspective I was trying to emulate. This collection transpired in a very organic way, but I still consider it unfinished. I

imagine it much like the content of family, ever changing and always evolving. Family is happening all around us. We just have to look close enough to see it.

The theme for my Capstone section was Hidden Histories, an implication that there are stories out there that have yet to be discovered, stories that need to be told. There were a million different ways I could have approached this topic, but I wanted to write about a subject that was relatable to everyone, while still discovering the hidden histories that surround us. Familial relationships are usually the ones that shape a large portion of who we are. It's unfortunate that we have such a rigid definition of what family can be in our society today. Not everyone fits into what is considered normal, and my goal was to tell those stories, to reveal the existence of those who fall outside of stereotypical ideologies. A lot of us are living proof that stories can be easily hidden and ignored, but that is why it's so important to take the time to uncover them.