

And Then We Are Leaving

Tim Hillegonds

My wife behind the wheel even though she hates to drive, me in the passenger seat buying airline tickets on my iPhone, my beautiful, angry sixteen-year-old daughter crying softly in the back seat of the rental car, the Front Range mountains blurring past the window as we wind our way across I-25 from Colorado Springs to Denver.

“We need to buy her some luggage,” my wife, Erin, says to me, her eyes never leaving the road. “We won’t be able to get those garbage bags through security.”

I look up from my phone, see the sun dipping closer to the mountain peaks, a bright yellow orb slowly fading to a syrupy orange. Up ahead, the road curves gently around Table Mountain, its granite peak eroded in such a way it’s now trapezoidal. To the east, the landscape pools into the dull greens and browns of winter; nature’s stuck in that in-between stage where the snow has melted just enough for the undergrowth to sneak through the ice and gasp.

Earlier, we’d been rushed, grabbing whatever we thought made sense from the floor of Haley’s bedroom, stuffing it all into two drawstring garbage bags—shoes, shirts, pants, shorts, bras, socks, underwear. I’d been jamming spaghetti-strapped tops and skinny jeans into

a crinkling black garbage bag when I realized it was the most time I'd ever spent in my daughter's bedroom.

I turn my head and look into the backseat, wishing Haley would acknowledge me, hoping that if she does there will be something in her eyes—maybe forgiveness or gratitude, maybe acceptance. But she just stares out the window and makes herself smaller by folding even further into the car door.

I look at Erin, see confusion or fear or maybe exhaustion on her face.

“We'll grab her a suitcase or something at the airport and switch everything into it,” I say.

Erin nods, glances in the rearview mirror. I look at the time on my phone, calculate how long it will take us to get to Denver International Airport. Just under an hour. The flight to Chicago will be two and half. I close my eyes and open them. The Colorado landscape passes. Behind me, my daughter rests her head against the window and cries.



For years, the dream I had was simple: one day Haley would decide that she wanted to live with me. I'd pick her up from her home in Colorado Springs, bags packed, her face smiling, and we'd fly to Chicago together, talking and laughing while we snacked on airline peanuts from little foil bags. Her bedroom would be ready for her arrival—painted teal, her favorite color. It would have a bed fit for a princess, with four wooden spindles that reached almost to the ceiling. It would be draped with sheer fabric, the bedding white and plush and new, and we'd settle into our routines quickly, as if we'd both been waiting our whole lives for this. She'd fall in love with Chicago in the same way I did when I was a child. I'd show her the Magnificent Mile and how the streetlights glimmered off the store windows at night, the feeling of enchantment undeniable. I'd take the requisite picture of her standing by the stone lions guarding the front entrance to the Art Institute, green and regal and iconic. We'd walk by the lake together, in step on the concrete path, her hand in mine while the endless blue water

stretched out in the distance until it blended with the sky. Before bed, we'd read together, the pile of books next to her nightstand towering, the time we spent lost in stories becoming a cornerstone memory we'd both return to again and again when we were older.



When Haley was born in January of 1998, I was a 140-pound, angry, substance-abusing nineteen-year-old who had moved to Colorado thirteen months earlier. I told myself I moved because I wanted the adventure, because I wanted to snowboard and rock climb and experience life unburdened, but the truth was that I was running—from my disappointed parents, from the misdemeanor criminal charges I'd racked up by drinking and doing drugs, from the fact that I hadn't graduated high school and my friends were heading off to college.

I met Haley's mother, April, in a Denny's restaurant that I would work at for close to three years, and our relationship caught fire immediately. Within days of meeting, we slept together. Within weeks, I moved in with her. Within months, April was pregnant. And then, just one year after moving to Colorado, Haley was born.

In the beginning, it had seemed so doable. At that Denny's, April and I would sit across from one another, in a booth against the wall closest to the parking lot, from the late hours of the night to the early hours of the morning. We were filled with love and hope and the anticipation of what our futures might hold. We would smoke cigarettes and drink coffee and do crossword puzzles while Haley and her half-sister, Maddie, two years older, with thick blonde hair that curled like eyelashes at the ends, slept in the gray Mazda parked just outside. We would take turns glancing up from our newspapers so we could see the girls' faces through the car's windows, illuminated by the soft yellow glow of parking-lot lights.

April and I tried to keep our relationship from unraveling for as long as we could, but the fabric would slowly and steadily be loosened by drugs and violence. I would try to be a provider for April and Haley and Maddie, but I would fail time and time again. Some days

I would go to work for a utility contractor, wearing grease-stained jeans and dirty work boots, intent on coming home as soon as a day filled with jamming a spade shovel into the rocky soil was completed. But then, as soon as the day was over, just as the sun would start to dip low over the mountains, one of the guys would drop the tailgate on his pickup truck, crack open a beer, and throw me one. “Just one,” I would tell myself, catching it midair, knowing it wasn’t true, hoping nonetheless.

Later, when I would arrive home, April and I would argue—dramatic scenes that sometimes got physically violent—and then I’d storm out into the Colorado night, slamming the door behind me so hard it rattled the pictures on the walls, intent on never returning. And for a day or two I wouldn’t. I would use whatever money I had with me to book a room at a cheap hotel or hostel, and drink and smoke until I was slurring my words and mistakenly trying to light the filter end of my cigarette. But eventually, the money and beer and drugs would run out and I’d be stuck with the heaviness of it all—my daughter was still at home with April, still needing her father, still not responsible for the situation into which she was born. So I would go back to April’s with bloodshot eyes and a pocketful of apologies, promising to do better, to work harder, to finally be what I was expected to be—a responsible adult.

But I was confused back then, or perhaps just scared of the truth of the matter. I was a father, yes, but I didn’t know what that meant, or how to even begin to negotiate the overlap between fatherhood and childhood. I had started one before being fully finished with the other.

So for almost three years April and I tried to make it work. But for almost three years we failed repeatedly, in a splendid and impressive way. And when it was all said and done, when it had finally reached its inevitable conclusion, Haley was just past her second birthday, and I was just past the Colorado state line, on a Greyhound Bus, heading east.



Exactly two months before Erin and I get on a plane and fly to Colorado to pick up Haley, we are sitting in a sushi restaurant off Ogden Avenue in one of Chicago's wealthy Western suburbs.

"You ready to do this?"

I rest my elbows on the table, hold my phone up in front of my face, thumbs poised for typing. I stare at it without actually seeing anything. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Erin smiles and brushes a few loose strands of hair behind her ear. She doesn't look nervous, but I wonder if she is, if this is something she's been looking forward to or dreading. Two months ago, we decided to put some real thought into having a child together, something I never imagined I would do again—even if the next time was intentional and I was older and married and sober. Now, at thirty-six and three years into marriage, I wasn't sure how much longer I'd even be open to the idea of having another child. So Erin and I had decided to think and pray and talk about it deliberately. We would each weigh the pros and cons individually, and then when the two months were up, we would sit down over dinner and tell each other our answer.

Erin glances over at the waiter as he walks by with a water pitcher. "Okay, so how are we going to do this?"

I move two water glasses out of the way to clear a space on the table. "Open up the Notes app in your phone and type yes or no. I'll count to three and then we'll put our phones face up on the table. If we both write the same thing, we've got our decision."

Erin says, "Okay," and smiles. She has green eyes and white teeth and blonde hair that lightens in the summer sun. She's petite and strong and beautiful in her flowy chiffon blouse, and I wonder if our child would look like her.

"Cool," I say.

She looks at her phone. Types. Looks back at me.

I do the same.

"Ready?" I ask her.

"Yep."

I count to three and we both reach forward and place our phones on the table. I read each word slowly. Read each word again. Feel my

face flush. I smile, and my heart pulses in my chest. “Looks like we’re doing this.”

Erin reaches her hand across the table and I grab it. She smiles softly. “Here goes nothing.”



I left Colorado when Haley was two, and then spent the next five years trying to drink or snort or swallow or smoke away the guilt I felt for leaving. But in 2005 I got sober, and for the past ten years, I’d been trying to piece things back together with Haley, to build and maintain a relationship with her that thrived despite the challenges the distance between us created.

But even though I had gotten sober and rebuilt my life and spent a good part of the last decade flying from Chicago to Colorado Springs so Haley and I could spend weekends at the zoo or the pool or the mall, it was just never enough—for April or Haley, or even for me. Perhaps it was foolish to think it ever could be. I know now that no matter how frequent or fun my visits were, visiting is not the same as staying.

At some point over the years, as Haley grew older and the distance between us dented the veneer of our relationship like a hailstorm does a car, I realized the dream I had of her coming to live with me was slipping further and further away. Haley was coming of age, and she was having trouble separating the story she’d been told about me her whole life with what she saw through my actions.

“I just don’t understand why you want to be here for me now,” she once said to me on the phone. “I mean, you never wanted to be here for me before.”

“You know that’s not true, Haley,” I replied, tired from constantly trying to reshape the narrative. “I’ve spent the last decade of my life fighting to be in yours. How many times are we going to go through this?”

For years, I’d thought that somehow Haley would start to understand things from my perspective. I thought that she’d finally see that all the trips I’d taken to Colorado had laid a foundation, however pockmarked,

that we'd be able to build upon. I thought that pictures of the two of us roller-skating together at her ninth birthday party or horseback riding through Garden of the Gods when she was eleven or peering over the railing at the Royal Gorge Bridge when she was eight were proof that I was there, that I'd been trying all along. But it's possible that what I saw as proof of my presence Haley saw as proof of my absence. Or perhaps we were simply focused on different aspects of those pictures.



After Erin and I return from our condo building's Christmas party, just as I sit down on the couch, my phone lights up with April's name in capital letters. My throat goes immediately dry.

I look over at Erin, who's walking across the living room from the kitchen. "It's April," I say.

She sets her glass of water on the side table next to the leather recliner we'd bought the previous summer. She falls into it with a sigh. "Oh, God. Now what?"

"Who knows," I say. "I'm afraid to even ask."

The calls from April had been coming more frequently lately. We'd flown out to Colorado the month before, in November, to sit down with Haley—the first time in over a decade April and I had ever approached anything, let alone a parenting plan, together. Initially, it felt like progress, but I'd lately come to believe that it was simply desperation. Haley was on the verge of womanhood and seemed to be exercising her independence, pushing with enthusiasm the few boundaries that were set for her. April had merely run out of places to turn.

Haley's grades had been slipping to the point where she was failing two of her classes, and the rest of her marks were just above passing. She was smoking weed every day—an issue I had a problem with, but her mother didn't, given Colorado's overall acceptance of it. Haley had also started dating a guy who was a year older than she was—a skinny skateboarder with even skinnier jeans whose Twitter account showed a picture of him with a tab of acid resting on his tongue. He'd become the catalyst to the majority of their mother/daughter battles.

I put the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"She's out of control, Tim. I've had it!"

I look over at Erin and she shakes her head, sighs. I assume she can hear April's voice through the phone since she's practically screaming.

"April, what happened?"

A television drones in the background. There's a slight pause before April answers my question. I hear the telltale click of a lighter and her voice becomes nasally. "She's been acting up all week, Tim. Doing that Haley thing where she just ignores me and sulks in her room downstairs." I hear April take a drag from whatever it is she's smoking and blow it out. "Every time I try to talk to her she gives me attitude."

I get up and walk over to the window. Look down at Calumet Avenue thirteen floors below, then out over the city towards the horizon. In the distance I can see the traffic on I-55 snaking out to the suburbs near Midway Airport. The Orange Line El train weaves into my sightline and for a second I wonder if Haley's ever been on a train.

When I tune back in, April is still talking. "I went out to dinner with my friend John and I told her she absolutely couldn't go to her friend's house. But what do you think she fucking does? I get home and she's gone. I'm so sick of her, Tim. I can't fucking do this anymore!"

In the distance, I see the flashing lights of a jet rising into the air and banking to the west. I once read that in Chinese Buddhism west is the direction of enlightenment. Haley lives to the west. Yet I hardly ever feel enlightened. Only angry. Perpetually guilty. Scared.

I look over at Erin, who's now staring at the television, her face expressionless. I can feel the tension building inside me, my stomach dropping as the reality dawns on me that I'll likely be getting on a plane. That *we'll* be getting on a plane, Erin and I, to find Haley.

I back away from the window and sit on the end of the couch. "If you can't do it anymore, April, then what do you want to do?"

"I want her gone, Tim. I want a fucking break. I've raised her for the first sixteen years. You can take the last two."

Her tone is icy, and it immediately takes me back almost twenty years. We're at her apartment in Silverthorne, screaming at each other. The fight is on the precipice of violence when April picks up the phone

next to the couch her grandmother gave her. She dials a nine. Then a one. And then she's leaning forward, her pointer finger hovering just above the number one, staring at me. Baiting me. *Say one more thing, motherfucker. One more thing and I swear to God you'll be in jail and there won't be a fucking thing you can do about it.*

I close my eyes at the memory. Open them. Settle on Erin's face. Her calmness. An oasis.

I swallow hard. Adrenaline dumps. I stare into the familiar Midwestern sky. I wonder if Haley will like it here, if Erin and Haley will get along. I wonder where she'll sleep in our one-bedroom apartment. My thoughts cycle through my head like a windstorm and it dawns on me for perhaps the thousandth time in the last fourteen years that I never should have left my daughter behind.



The cabin pressure of the plane changes and I open my mouth to yawn, try to pop the fuzziness from my ears. There's a loud ding and the seatbelt sign illuminates. If it weren't for the muffled voices, the sounds I hear would be the same as when I held my grandmother's giant seashell to my ear when I was a child. I rest my head on Erin's shoulder and close my eyes. She reaches over and puts her hand on my knee. I feel how tired I am. How tired the last fourteen years have made me. It's taken so much energy to get sober. To eliminate all the warrants I had. To pay my debts. Become a businessman. Evolve. I've flown to Colorado over and over and over to see Haley, to hold her, to try and make her feel how sorry I am for leaving, but how grateful I am to see her; and right now, in this moment, while my wife flies with me to find my sixteen-year-old daughter who has run away because she is angry at me and her mom and her school and her boyfriend and her life and all the cards that she's been dealt, the weight of my exhaustion, of all our exhaustion, bears down on me like a bailing press.

The captain's voice fills the cabin and he tells us we've begun our decent into Denver. When we land, Erin and I will rent a car and take Peña Boulevard to Interstate 25. We'll take I-25 south to Colorado

Springs and then we'll spend two days chasing after Haley, showing up at hotels and her friends' houses while she jumps out back windows, content to run, to keep running, just like her father used to do, so she doesn't have to come with us to Chicago. But we will eventually find her, and April will—inexplicably—sign over custody to me. And after two long days of searching, Erin and I will meet Haley and her boyfriend in the parking lot of Taco Bell. Haley will get out of the car she arrived in with red, puffy eyes, looking so fragile and so beautiful and so much like the angry teenager I once was. I'll approach her boyfriend and thank him, press a hundred dollars into his palm because I had offered a reward on the Facebook page we set up to help pressure Haley into calling me. And after hugging her boyfriend and saying a tearful goodbye, she will get in the back seat of our rental car, its trunk filled with trash bags stuffed with her clothes, and cry all the way to the airport, to the gate, to Chicago. I will be so relieved to finally find her and want nothing more than to hug her, to tell her things will be all right and that I'm so happy to have her, to finally have her, but I won't be able to because Haley will be so angry at me, and so devastated, and Erin will sense it. And because she somehow knows her better than me in those moments, and in so many moments yet to come, she'll advise me not to.

We will move apartments within the first month, breaking our lease, so Haley can have her own space, and she will live with us in Chicago for ninety-four days. It will be so hard for all of us, but so good in some ways too, and on more than one occasion, as we drive back from the Tuesday-night volleyball league we join because it's Haley's favorite sport, the three of us will blast music and laugh so hard we cry. But then I will go to work on my birthday, in March, and when I come home Haley and all of her things will be gone. Her phone will be turned off. She will have run back to Colorado, assisted by her mother, and I will finally understand that nothing between Haley and me, and nothing between Haley and her mother, her world, any of our worlds, can be fixed right now. And so I will spend the first night she's gone in shock, and I will feel nothing. But then the next day I will walk by her bedroom, the one we decorated together with zebra bedding and teal

accents, and I will enter her room and sit on her bed and weep because it was all so close to being everything I wanted it to be. And sometime after that— after I have time to process everything that happened— Erin and I will realize, over a sequence of long talks while we walk the dog at night, that we had prayed about and considered and ultimately, on that night in the sushi restaurant, decided to have a child. And then, before we could even begin to prepare, we had one, a child, and she was a beautiful, angry teenager, with brown eyes just like mine, crying softly in the back seat of a car.

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Tim Hillegonds earned a Master of Arts in Writing and Publishing from DePaul University in Chicago. His work has appeared in *Brevity*, *Midway Journal*, *RHINO*, *Bluestem Magazine*, and *r.k.v.r.y. quarterly*. He was nominated for a 2015 Illinois Arts Council Literary Award, and received an Honorable Mention for nonfiction in the New Millennium Award 36 presented by *New Millennium Writings*. He is a contributing editor at *Slag Glass City*, a digital journal of the urban essay arts, and is currently seeking representation for his memoir, *A Story Like is*.

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