Jacob Pomainville

Rhyme Sayers, Life Savers

Most of the people I’ve met in my life scoff at any mention of hip-hop, passing it off as a mindless objectification of women, glorification of violence, and fetishism of money. When I play my iPod in my white, nondescript hatchback car with someone new riding in the passenger seat, there’s an initial reaction of bewilderment, followed by laughter as the beginning keys of a hip-hop beat rise out of the speakers. They have the mental picture of tattooed gangsters from the ghetto wearing gold chains and diamonds, causing them to believe that I, a quiet white guy from a small farm-town in Upstate New York, am deluding myself with visions of being a rough delinquent who grew up on the streets, and therefore having some sort of identity crisis. While I can’t deny the struggle for an identity that goes with being a young man, I can confidently say that I am not deluding myself. Hip-hop is art – It is a poetry of reflection and introspection that sails along blue waters driven by bass drums and snares. In times of hopelessness, when ominous jade clouds shroud the skies of the future, hip-hop is a scripture to me, my iPod a talisman.

The green fairy in my closet is calling me to play again. I see its ethereal, misty hand creeping out of the small opening between the white door and the doorframe, slowly beckoning with a sinister finger, beckoning me to let it entertain me and carry me in its ghostly green arms like an innocent baby once again. With an awkward, laborious strut I stagger towards the closet, bumping into my large dresser and stumbling over the pile of books on my carpeted floor, my head and nerves numb from a bottle of Nyquil, the all-too-familiar cool-blue liquid coursing through my small body and clouding my thoughts while a slow sensation of warmth from the vanishing weed in my dresser rises from my feet to the top of my skull. Completing the ten-foot journey through empty food wrappers and containers to my small closet, I reach down and grab the tall glass bottle filled with the translucent green spirit. The ghost of Vincent Van Gogh stares back at me from the label as I swirl the bottle in front of my face, the absinthe inside swishing around like a little cyclone ready to suck me up like a vortex. Snapping back to awareness after spacing out for a few minutes, I screw the cap off and smell the licorice aroma emanating from inside the bottle. If I drink the last half of this, I’ll probably never wake up. I stand still for a minute, swaying slightly as I stare at a spot on the wall and contemplate the number of days that would pass before someone noticed I was dead.

I think for a moment. Not yet. That’s not the plan tonight. One last blowout, you said, remember? Just one more night of this bullshit and you’re done. Tomorrow you turn a new leaf. Starting tomorrow morning you’re never doing this or anything foolish again and you’ll make something of yourself. Sound familiar? Yeah, that’s what everybody like you says: “Just once more then I’m done” – and yet you keep doing it. “Tomorrow,” you say. “Tomorrow I’ll start tackling my problems”. How many tomorrows do you have?

I tip the bottle up to my mouth and feel a cooling burn in my chest, the licorice flavor staining the walls of my mouth. Clutching my chest and catching my breath from palpitations, I let my body melt into the carpet, my back against the base of my brown recliner, wrapping my arms around my knees and lowering my head. I feel like one of those old hollow logs found on the side of a hiking trail on a wet spring morning that collapses into mush under the softest step. How does this happen? I wonder. How does one go from feeling in line with heaven itself one week to setting up camp in the pit of melancholy the next? I can’t remember a time in my life when I wasn’t teetering on this ever-intensifying emotional seesaw locked inside a cold penitentiary.

I take another swig and sloppily wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

Glancing over with glazed eyes, I look at the plant on top of my bookshelf full of books in curiosity as the malicious side of my consciousness creeps into my mind again: What’s the point? You’ve never been able to connect with or relate to anyone, you’re much too weird. It’ll always be that way, just face it. I’m like a dark green sweater hanging on a clothesline on a windy summer day that started out with five clothespins attached to the line. Four clothespins fell off; only one remains on the line preventing me from being blown away in the wind, forgotten. I weigh the pros and cons of finishing the rest of the bottle, taking another swig. Then a thought comes in. An idea: Eyedea.

I crawl over to my iPod that’s on the floor across the room, pull a pair of tangled headphones out of the bottom dresser drawer, plug them in, and scroll through ‘Artists’ until the blue bar hovers over ‘Eyedea’. I stare at the name of the man who I know solely through the music he created, but feels like the older brother I never had; a brilliant individual and the greatest hip-hop artist ever to have lived, in my eyes; the man who died at 28 who I’ll never meet. The only person to shed light on the madness that can occur in my head, to make me feel comfortable with who I am; I start playing his song ‘Here For You’ and put my headphones in.

As the strumming of the melancholic guitar chords starts and the slow drum beat comes in, an almost instantaneous rush of tranquility and calm begins to flow through me as I close my watery eyes and let myself be completely immersed in a surreal soundscape of bliss. *“And sometimes when I watch myself float downstream; I see the beauty of it all, and it feels like a dream.”* The worries that swarmed me like circling vultures above a decomposing wolf disappear, washed away like dirt in a rainstorm. *“And at that time I appreciate the river’s course; Some call it God, reality, momentum, force; I stare up at the naked moon, and she stares down at me; Outside false boundaries I’m all I look outward to see.”* With my elbows resting on my knees and my head bobbing along with the beat, Eyedea’s comforting voice overpowers the ominous voice in my head with ease as he speaks a reminder into my brain: *“The universe is not something separate from yourself; I know you feel alone, but that's why I'm here to help; I know you feel alone, but just look up at the stars; And everything that is out there is what you really are.”*

From the bottom of the pit in my mind I start to see a speck of light shining through the blackness and begin to climb towards it. *“We gotta learn to see the beauty in each moment of life; Everyone has different pasts and we're seeking the light; The world is divided between peasants and kings; But the truth is everybody’s looking for the same thing.”* All the praises and faces of people who’ve expressed their deep gratitude for knowing me pass through my mind one by one. *“Now I want you to know; The role you play is part of the whole, without you it couldn't be, and I mean that with compassion.”* Beautiful visions of birds, trees, mountains, and different places I’ve been to fill my head. *“I'm here for you, in the same way that you're here for me; Each person is an intricate piece of infinity; I feel that if you could see what I see; Then we as humanity could be free.”* I think about the girl I’ve been friends with for years that I’ve never expressed my true feelings and love for. *“I'm here for you, not for any self-centered reasons; Because existence is interdependent and all's related, Connected in its different manifestations of one single mind; You ain't isolated from the world even though it feels like that sometimes.”* I realize that I’m capable of changing the circumstances in my life, and become infuriated by my pathetic and self-pitying behavior of late. I think about the countless amounts of other people in the world who are in the low state that I’m in or lower, and how I can use the pain I’ve experienced to pull them up. That’s my last thought before I collapse onto the floor in the middle of my dark bedroom.

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Obligatory Check-In

I’m driving through winding back-roads and expansive countryside, where earthworms, plants, and lush green hills sleep underneath a pearl-white quilt of snow. Traffic is sparse; the occasional vehicle is usually either an old rickety pick-up truck with a crowd of grimy farmers stuffed in a row on the bench seat, laughing and rough-housing with each other, or a worn yet monolithic tractor controlled by a tiny man who gives a wave and toothless smile as I pass by. Crossing the train tracks and getting closer into the village, intermittent sightings of aged white Colonial houses come into view; some boarded up and abandoned, never to be entered again save the occasional pack of boys prompted by tales of ghosts and murders, and others occupied by large Catholic families brewing maple syrup and raising farm animals.

Pulling into my Dad’s driveway about a half-hour later, the first thing that comes into view is an out of commission 1948 Chrysler Windsor parked on the gravel basketball court that we’ve logged countless games of HORSE on over the years. He recently bought the car, along with a ’56 Dodge Stepside pickup, on Craigslist with plans of restoring the lifeless vessels to their former glory – more projects guaranteed to keep him occupied for months to come. On the right side of the court sits a barn-red wooden chicken-coop-now-storage-shed we built together years ago when we raised chickens. On the north side lies the massive, bleak cement garage that my Dad spends the majority of his free time in, with walls lined with worn steel wrenches of every size, saws, drills, clamps, and an array of foreign tools. In the middle of the garage’s concrete floor is a broken-down green lawn tractor my Dad’s fixing for a co-worker at the mill, just one contraption in a long list of items he’s repaired free of charge for various co-workers and family members.

Right on cue as I pull up in front of the faux-log cabin house, my stepmom’s German Shepherd-Golden Lab mix, leashed to a red plastic line with one end hooked to a wood post that’s been ripped off the porch countless times and the other end wrapped around an immortal oak tree, starts barking rabidly with fire in his eyes and saliva spewing from his mouth. As I step out of the car, my Dad comes out of the wooden spring-loaded screen door, which makes a loud slap as it smacks back into the doorframe. He scolds and yells at the dog to stop, swearing under his breath about “that stupid dog” as he opens the door for me to come into the house.

As my Dad follows me into his house and closes the painted green door behind him, I notice he’s still wearing his evergreen work shirt with the left breast pocket and Irving Tissue embroidered on the right side, the shirt he’s been wearing over his large belly for over 30 years all day every day, work or no work, to the point where to see him without his signature evergreen T-shirt or button-up shirt on would be like seeing him without an arm or a leg. Complementing the soiled work shirt are his signature grey Dickie’s work pants with the usual XL black leather belt wrapped around his hefty waist and a pair of wide mustard-yellow steel-toed boots that formed around his hard feet during the prenatal phase of his life. Gray streaks creep up his disappearing brown hair and his unkempt beard, accenting a round shiny nose and cheeks that invoke thoughts of a tan, exhausted Santa Claus that resents Christmas and his reindeer and was ready to retire years ago, to hell with those ungrateful kids and their shoddy plastic toys. His boulders for hands are calloused to the point where if they were melted down they would turn into liquid iron, the result of a life devoted to cold iron and steel. The pervading word that arises when looking at my Dad’s large figure as a whole is ‘stone’; an unmovable statue of a man who, if he desired, could plant his stone feet into the sands of a beach, arms crossed, and stand against an incoming tsunami without budging an inch.

He lumbers across the fresh kitchen he renovated last year, going the extra dollar with dark granite countertops, rustic wood flooring, and a new stainless steel refrigerator stuffed with leftovers, frozen meals, soda, and other packaged food that will be thrown away in a year. He slowly lowers himself onto his handmade wood bench, wincing at his stiff back and other eternal pains as he opens his laptop and goes back to scrolling through the Craigslist Antiques section.

“Where the hell ya been?” he says.

“I’ve been pretty busy with school and work,” I reply.

He looks at the blue folder in my hand. “What’ve ya got there?” he says.

“My future. I got accepted into New Paltz,” I say with a grin.

“Awesome, that’s great. Congratulations,” he says. “I didn’t think you’d get accepted.”

“Yeah, I didn’t either, but they felt really bad for me so they made an exception,” I reply, laughing.

“Well that’s good, you’ll be able to take care o’ me when yer a millionaire so I can retire early,” he says.

“If I become a millionaire I’ll sit on your porch all week drinking lemonade and laugh as you come home from work every day,” I say with a grin.

“Yup, real nice,” he says, trying to hide his grin. “You probly would, too, freak.”

After ten minutes of exchanging humorous verbal jabs and low-blows with each other, he walks back into the kitchen to take his daily dozen prescription meds that look like skittles in his hands for everything from blood-sugar maintenance to muscle relaxation, chucking the handful of pills down his throat with one big gulp of water. Turning to me, he asks, “You gonna join me for some tv?” “Nah, that’s alright,” I reply. I watch him go down the hall and into his room where he sleeps alone down the hall from his wife, my stepmom. I hear the flatscreen HDTV turn on as my stepmom walks into the kitchen, eyes bright and desperately optimistic as always.

After my chatty stepmom and I catch up for twenty minutes I hear the sound of my Dad’s giant footsteps coming tiredly down the hallway. Walking into the kitchen, he lets out a deep sigh as he grabs his red and white pack of Marlboros from off the granite countertop and heads out onto the porch, the screen door slapping back into the doorframe as he walks out. I follow him out and onto the wood porch, where the dog is still leashed and curled up against the cold. I quietly stand and watch the embers at the end of his cigarette flare up like a phoenix, emitting a steady stream of smoke, with the occasional gray plume spilling from his lungs and into the stale air of winter. He lets out a comment once in a while:

“Somethin’ wrong with the jeep again. Gotta go back to the doctor’s Thursday. This week is gonna suck. So everything’s good with you?”

He squishes the yellow stub left of his cigarette into a dirty green ash tray sitting on a wood rail of the porch and looks at me, waiting.

“Yeah, I have to get going anyways,” I say.

“Sorry, I’m just really tired tonight,” he says with a grin. “I appreciate you coming out though, really. I’m happy that you got accepted into the college you wanted to go to – I hope you make something of yourself and this family.”

“Heh, me too,” I say with a smile.

“All right. Get outta here. Thanks for coming. Keep in touch. Drive safe.”

He yells at the barking dog again as I put my car into reverse, entering back into the faux-log cabin house as the screen door closes behind him, slapping loudly into the doorframe.

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Running Away

I was bent forward, my hands tightly wrapped around the hard leather steering wheel of my royal blue 1990 Chevrolet pickup truck. It was a cloudy day in August and the windows were down, allowing the wind to blow gently through my hair. Going around a long bend, my eyes shifted to the rearview mirror, checking that the drum set I hastily piled up in the bed of the truck was secure. The toms bounced around making a *dum dum dadum* sound, and the cymbals crashed and bashed against the side of the bed. The old, rusted shocks of the Chevy served no purpose on the cracked, bumpy pavement of the countryside roads. *Well I can’t place all the blame on the truck,* I thought. *There was no time to secure everything. I had to make sure I was gone before Dad got home.* Dad. The word resonated inside my head. My stomach churned.

I had gathered my belongings that morning as if I was a robot on auto-pilot, programmed to carry out the sole task of burning bridges. Moving swiftly and with determination, I marched all around the house, making sure there was nothing I was going to forget. There wasn’t much that I needed. Some clothes, a few books and trinkets, and my drum set. As the hustle and bustle of my departure transpired, our smoky-gray housecat laid across the kitchen table, her soft, silky figure spread like a rug. Her head was elevated and her ears were perked as she watched me move back and forth across the creaky wooden floorboards, her emerald eyes glued to the back of my head. After I gathered the last of my necessities, I stopped in front of her before I walked out of the door for one final time. Stroking the top of her soft, tiny head, I smiled at her innocence. *How wonderful it must be, to be free from the chains of moral dilemma and the struggles of human conscience.* As I exited the house, locking the door behind me, I took one last look back as I walked away. I took in a deep, cleansing breath and stood stationary, feeling the grains of the sandy dirt beneath my worn shoes as I listened to the insects buzz and the leaves rustle in the wind. After a minute or two I turned back around and got into my truck. As I shut the heavy, metal door of the truck I envisioned myself as an astronaut ready to launch into the unknown, closing the door of my space shuttle. No turning back. Turning the ignition and shifting into drive, the old vessel moaned and creaked as I pulled out of the dirt driveway.

It wasn’t a trek by any means. Six miles to my destination, roughly. It was not an unfamiliar place. A plain house with wooden boards for siding, painted sky-blue. Mom’s house. It sat almost a quarter mile up from the road, nestled against the base of a small mountain that was covered with dense trees of all kinds; a true safe haven. No one was home when I arrived, an occurrence that hadn’t changed in several years. I was seventeen and could manage being alone in the house just fine. After unloading the dirty, dismantled drum set into my mother’s basement and throwing my clothes onto my bed, I walked to the kitchen and stared at the black, ominous telephone hanging on the wall next to the radio. Reaching up and grabbing the phone, I began to pace back and forth around the house, the knot in my chest tightening with every step. I gripped the phone tightly with both hands as I paced, as if it was the detonator to a bomb that I was burdened with the responsibility of dropping. I thought back to that night three weeks prior that would change everything.

I had been sitting in my bedroom watching television when I heard a soft knock on my door. My dad’s large figure entered and closed the door behind him. That’s when he told me. He had been having an affair with his wife’s best friend for months, and had been cheating on my real mother for the majority of their relationship. He then revealed his plot to impregnate my stepmother’s best friend so that she would divorce him and leave. My bedroom would be turned into the baby’s room and I would be moved to the basement. I was told I could not speak a word of this to anyone. Not knowing what to do, I nodded and acknowledged his words as they left his mouth, but barely hearing any of them. His eyes looked into mine. “So you’re with me, right? You always wanted a younger sibling. You’re not going to betray me, are you?” I nodded my head in slow motion. “Good,” he said as he walked out the door. After that, I walked around differently. Everything I did was slow and laborious; I was alive and breathing, but not speaking, not living.

After what felt like centuries passed, I stopped and hit the Talk button. After dialing a set of numbers, I pressed the phone against my ear and held my breath, my head pulsing. A voice answered.

“Hello?” “Hi, Dad.” “Hello.” “I’m going to be staying at Mom’s for a while…” My upper brain tingled. “How come?” “I think it would be for the best,” I said with a sigh. “…well when will I see you again?” he asked, annoyed. “…I don’t know.”

*Two and a half years later.*

Sitting in darkness, my lungs burned as I exhaled a plume of smoke, letting my body relax into the soft, fluffy couch. As my scattered mind floated, I reached a heavy, numb arm out and grasped a hold of the glass rum bottle illuminated by the moon shining through the window. Taking a swig of the harsh liquor, I laid my head back on the couch, staring into the nothingness above me. This had become the nightly ritual for the past two years; numbing my mind by any means possible; for I had thought that after I physically ran away, my problems would stay there. Unbeknownst to me, however, the psychological issues resulting from increasing pressure, anxiety, and paranoia, and my decision to never speak to my father again would follow me like a swarm of bees. The phone conversation with my dad had been the last time we had any contact. As my glazed and unfocused eyes stared into space and drifted in and out of consciousness, I recalled a strange and dark day.

It was only about two months after I moved in with my mother. It was a dreary, rainy day, and I was cruising around in my old Chevy truck. It had become my favorite means of escape. Alone and lost, I drove endlessly, with no destination. Hours and hours would go by as I traversed unknown roads, flying around corners and maxing out speed on long straightaways, stopping only for gas and an occasional bite to eat at a diner or fast-food restaurant. I was waiting for something, but I didn’t know what. It is a peculiar feeling; like you’re stuck in an endless, dark, void where no thoughts occur, where no hope resides; where you watch the world go by right in front of you. Just an endless pit where you simply exist, and wait. On this particular rainy day I did loops around the perimeter of the town I lived in, taking different dirt paths and winding roads each time. The rain let up after an hour or so, leaving the pavement wet and creating miniature rivers out of the mud on the roadside. On one particular lap, I drove down my dad’s hilly, curvy road. As I came close to his house I cocked my head towards it, but sped up to avoid being noticed. As the property whirred by, I went around a bend, gritting my teeth. My knuckles turned white as I clenched the steering wheel, tears welling up in my eyes. Through my blurred vision I could see another sharp curve in the road coming up. At that very moment, an unknown force from within me took over; an incomprehensible, unfamiliar part of my conscience. Accelerating over sixty-five miles per hour right before the peak of the bend, I gave the steering wheel a stiff jerk sharply to the right and slammed my foot on the brake. The back end gave way and the truck started sliding across the freshly wetted pavement, flying down the hill that followed, spinning around and around, losing control. The tires screamed like a banshee against the slick pavement. (The sound of rubber squealing against the road after a vehicle’s brakes have locked up is a haunting one; much more terrifying than what I remembered hearing on television.) Closing my eyes, I put my arms up in front of my face as I skidded across someone’s lawn and through some loose pine trees. BAM! The Chevy barreled into a ditch and it was over. It all happened in less than twenty seconds. Anger, bitterness, and sadness filled my gut. An older, white-haired man came running out as I flung the door open and collapsed onto the ground. “You motherfucker! You almost hit my shrubs! What the fuck is wrong with you!?” he yelled. I sat in the mud and stared blankly at his face as he went off, his face red as a beet. The police were called. Two weeks later I received a letter in the mail: ‘Your license has been suspended.’

Snapping back to half-consciousness and looking at the digital clock in the distant blackness, I got up from the couch and stumbled dazedly to my bedroom, my mind still in an intoxicated fog. Reaching into my bulky wooden dresser, I pulled out a Xanax confiscated from my mother’s medicine cabinets and washed it down with some thick, blue cough syrup. Slithering into my soft, comforting bed, I laid my heavy head upon the cushiony pillow. My limbs stretching out, I felt a soothing warmth course through my veins. Closing my eyelids and sinking further and further into the mattress, I exhaled a relaxed sigh and let sleep take me.

The sky was blood red, massive meteors flying through the air and exploding viciously into the ground around me. Everything in sight was on fire. The heat singed the hairs on my arms to a crisp and I began to sweat profusely, my head pulsing with fear. *Is this Armageddon?* Hearing a monstrous roar from behind, I looked back. A huge, disfigured abomination with rotting flesh glared and pointed at me, letting out another battle cry and exposing its jagged and diseased teeth. Terror striking into my heart, I turned around and broke into a sprint, reaching an inhuman speed. As my legs bounced off of the cracked earth and my arms pumped, I could feel the world rumble with every step of the deformed giant. I kept my pace as I fled up the steep hill, repeating to myself over and over not to look back. Ascending the rest of the tall, almost mountainous hill, I bent and planted my hands against my thighs, catching my breath. Looking up, I realized the hill had been cut off; it was a cliff. Standing on the edge, I looked down, shocked. A deep, rigid canyon lay below, and the thickest, whitest fog I had ever seen filled its empty space, as if all of the soft, feathery clouds that ever existed had collected there. Sweat poured down my face, my eyes darting around frantically for an escape route. The rabid beast was getting much closer. Staring back down into the pillow-like fog, a wave of serenity and acceptance washed over my entire body. I took another look back. The evil horror was coming up right behind me now, goops of saliva escaping its feral mouth, locked in for the kill. Stepping forward, I closed my eyes and put my feet together. Tranquility blanketing my fear and despair, I spread my arms like a hawk, and jumped.