

DECEMBER 6TH, 2015
IN MANHATTAN, NEW YORK
LETTERS BY MCKINLEY KEENER

UPPER EAST SIDE

Dear Dad,

I did some things today that are a lot different in New York than at home. I walked along Madison Avenue, but it's not the same Madison Avenue as runs through Greensboro. It did not dead-end into Friendly Center. I went to a lake today too, but it's not the same lake as is in our backyard. I kept looking for mallards but people lined its banks instead of ducks.

I passed by an oyster bar while I was walking and thought about stopping in for lunch. But it looked like the kind of restaurant that would serve you nice rolls in a cloth basket rather than shelled peanuts in a tin bucket, so I didn't go inside. If I took you there, I wonder if they'd turn their noses up at the horseradish you slather on your oysters. I wonder if they actually serve oysters, the real way, steamed on the half-shell or unshucked. Probably not.

It's a good thing that almost nothing here looks like North Carolina. I think I would miss home even more if it did. Or maybe I miss home precisely because almost nothing here looks like North Carolina; maybe going cold turkey on the only place I've ever lived is like amputation. Maybe I feel it like a phantom limb.

Either way, I miss you,

McKinley

MUSEUM MILE

Dear Dad,

I did some things today that reminded me of things we used to do together. Remember all the trips we took to the Raleigh for the museums? I went to some today. Not in Raleigh, of course, in New York; and I didn't drive there, of course, I took the train; and you weren't with me, of course, I was alone.

The Guggenheim is beautiful but you don't like modern art enough to have really enjoyed it. Maybe in that regard, it's good that we are apart. But the Museum of Natural History—that's one you would have loved. One that you did love, the very first time we were in New York together, when we bought tickets after lunch and only got to see half of the exhibits. I walked through the Hall of Birds of the World today and remembered you pointing out egrets and storks last summer on our drive to the beach.

The next time you come up here, I'll take you to the Met and we can peruse through ancient Egypt. I know that civilization interests you so. And we'll go back to the Museum of Natural History and pick up where we left off all those years ago. You never did get to see the exhibit on dinosaurs and prehistoric fish. I saw it this time, and I could picture you there with me, dropping your jaw at the magnitude of the bones, the massiveness of the skeletons. They don't have fossils this large in North Carolina. I think you might be overwhelmed, but it's okay. I live here now, and I'm overwhelmed, too.

Until then,

McKinley

CENTRAL PARK

Dear Dad,

I did some things today that you would have loved to have done with me. I was walking through Central Park and saw a swing-set, so I paused and looked at it and wondered how old is too old when there's one open swing between two grammar schoolers. You could have pushed me, like you used to do on the old tire swing in our backyard, singing Beatles' lyrics while trying not to push me too high.

This week marks the 35th anniversary of John Lennon's death, did you know that? I went to Strawberry Fields today even though there were so many people gathered there, they spilled out of the paved area and into the surrounding grass. I couldn't get a good enough picture face-on, so I took one from the side. Clipped flowers formed a peace sign over the mosaic. I wish you had been there. We could have argued about our favorite Beatles songs until we called a truce at the decision that Paul's lyrics were better, but John had the prettiest melodies.

A couple years ago, you and I watched a documentary on Mark David Chapman and you got very quiet when the timeline slid into 1980. Your eyes teared up when you said that John Lennon and I have never existed at the same time. The very next year, you took me to see Paul McCartney in concert for the first time, and it was dark in that coliseum, but your voice cracked while singing along to "The End," and I know you were choked up then, too.

In a week I'll be home for real, for a whole month, and you and I will do everything we used to, things we haven't done since this summer, when I left you. I don't think I ever apologized for that. You'd never tell me this, because you're happy for me here, so happy, but I know you must get lonely. I brought all of your Beatles records to school with me because I'm selfish, but maybe next week, I'll bring you a couple home.

I'll see you soon,

McKinley