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Digging Through Memories

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Digging Through Memories

Invincible No Longer

As I lie there looking up, the thud of my back against the ground still pounding between my ears, I think about death. I think about how it's only natural to die outstretched on the ground, looking at the sky through the maze of tree limbs above me. That's how everyone dies on television and in the hospitals. They look up to the sky – to their new home. Then I wonder what it is that makes them die when they're lying there – lying there like I am. Their shirts always move but then when they die their shirts don't move anymore. My shirt isn't moving.

I hear my Dad's footsteps crunching across the yard, twigs snapping under the force of his stride. I try to get up, to see him, but I don't have to and I can't because he's there. He's got his hands on me telling me to breathe, telling me it's going to be okay, but I don't believe him because people only say it's okay when it's all wrong, when something really bad is happening.

Circles

I don't really know why I was running in circles. I don't really know why I was running in the first place. I was probably running in circles because I was running around one of the flowerbeds that my parents planted and I was probably running because most five year olds only know one speed: fast. But I wasn't really running that fast. My Dad could have just as easily walked next to me and stopped me as he could have dangled a cookie over my head and taunted me all the way back to the house. But he didn't. He trotted behind me; he chased me and in that

moment I was the fastest kid on Earth. I was the fastest because I was beating my Dad. No one beat my Dad. And that's what I remember – not what I was doing, but how what I was doing made me feel.

Every year I lose a set of memories and gain a set of new ones. Every year I remember less of today and more of my childhood. I assure myself that such a process is natural, that memories fade, shift, and change regularly, but I know that even if it's true, even if it's natural, it just means I long for my past a little bit more each time I remember something for the very first time.

He Runs in Circles

You wouldn't know it to look at him now, but he used to run all the time. Ever since he finally figured out how to move his legs like pistons, he'd run like a train until the sun went down. Even then his mom and I would have to call him in for supper. He'd be down at the creek digging for crawfish until he found one big enough for my approval. I didn't care what he found. He was my son and he was all boy and he was happy.

I remember when he was little he used to run in circles around his mother's flower gardens. We'd be coming up the driveway from a walk and he'd hop out of his little red wagon and dart over to the closest flower garden and run in circles screaming, "You can't catch me, daddy, you can't catch me!" until I came over and chased him up the rest of the driveway.

I'd give anything to chase him around in circles like that again; I'd give anything to see that toothy smile one more time. He's still my son and he's still all boy and he still smiles because he's happy, but he's not my little boy anymore.

Crawfish

You develop an eye for it after a while, he says. Then it's just a matter of getting in position and figuring out which way they're going to go before they do.

I loved catching crawfish, but I loved watching my Dad catch crawfish more. Sitting on a stump watching my thirty-some-year-old father creep through a creek bed with his eyes wide open, his tongue folded in half nestled on his lower lip, his breathing silenced, was better than watching Saturday morning cartoons. Watching him come bounding back across the creek, a three and a half inch lobster-like crustacean between his index finger and thumb, a boyish grin spread broadly across his face, was better than commercial free Saturday morning cartoons.

It's All About the Shapes

That's what my art teacher used to tell me. Profiles, buildings, animals, abstractions. They were all made from the careful arrangement and contortion of shapes. I really took that to heart when I decided to tell my parents what was on my mind.

I gathered together all the pictures I'd drawn, all the pieces of wood I'd painted, all the vases and pots I'd shaped and glazed. It was quite the collection, really. Then I found a pair of scissors and I made more art. In only a couple of hours I was able to trace, smash, fold, and reconfigure a portion of eight of my childhood masterpieces into the capitalized phrase, *I Hate You*.

My mother was truly upset by my actions and chose to speak with tears rather than words. My Dad never said anything but his face expressed a mixture of sadness and a twisted approval of my creativity. *Don't forget the explanation point next time*, he seemed to be saying.

Hit Me

Most of the time when I hurt other kids it was on accident or I simply didn't realize the amount of force I was capable of wielding. Most of the time the bigger kids in middle school turned out to be bullies. I was just too ignorant of the significance of size differences. Since first grade, when my size really became an issue, I adopted the practice of allowing my victims to hit me back in exchange for their promise not to tell the teacher that I had hurt them. It worked well. Most of the kids were too small to actually inflict any harm on me and so long as I faked being hurt, they thought it was all real and kept their lips sealed. And, if the kid did go tell the teacher, I could just say that they had hit me too. The only time it failed was when the kid refused to hit me.

That only happened once – after a series of unfortunate and unfair events in which the principal's son cheated his way to winning in the final round of the board game *Risk*, made up new rules for our basketball-based recess game *Knock-Out*, and cheated off my vocabulary homework. I became so enraged by the fact that he got away with everything that I proceeded to dig my thumbs as deep as I could into his pathetic little arms. The grinding of my thumbs back and forth across the rolls of fat over his biceps was something like a deep tissue massage without the license or sensitivity. Upon realizing what I'd done when I saw the tears slipping down his cheeks, I immediately let go and resorted to my hit me methodology. It didn't work and the little brat went to the teacher who then came to me and said, *just don't squeeze so hard next time. It leaves evidence.*

The Humility of Death

I had a humiliating moment one Wednesday. I wanted to add some honey to my tea, but for the life of me I couldn't get the lid off the jar. No one was around. I twisted and strained and contorted my body into unimaginable positions. I squeezed the lid at different angles. I tapped it on the edge of the countertop. I beat it over the edge of the countertop. I sat down, exhausted, and thought how is it that something so small could be so strong? Ants are strong like that. Maybe there's a little ant in there, holding the lid on so he can hoard all the honey to himself. I searched the label for special How to Open instructions. I reached for my glasses. Then I just stopped. I was getting older, I thought. I was dying.

My First

No one ever thinks they'll do it. I didn't. But then I did. My first one was short. I blew through it the like wind in a train tunnel. Sitting around a campfire with friends, I realized I was the only one without something between my fingers. But that wasn't what made me do it. Maybe it was one of those things you have to try so you can say you've done it. Then you can tell those who do it not too, that it's bad for them. And when they say, well how would you know, you've never tried one, you can reply, yes, yes I have actually. But that doesn't make them stop doing it.

My Last

My friends told me to slow down. Too many in a row can make you nauseous, they said. I never got nauseous. They never believed me.

Then someone taught me how to do it right. How to breathe like a dragon. How to make those stupid little rings and how to look cool doing it. How to take ten years off my life. How to smell like sickness and look like a bad decision.

It wasn't my own habit that repulsed me. It was seeing other people who also enjoyed my habit that got to me. Not just the ones who'd been enjoying it long before I even knew of its existence. The young ones. The boys. The girls. All of them. But that didn't make me stop.

I enjoyed all aspects of the camaraderie that existed among those who do it, save one: bumming. It was always more of a downfall for me than a benefit, quite simply because I refused to participate in the deal fully. I always shared, but I never imposed my needs on others.

I met a group of strangers one night while I was waiting for a friend outside a bar. A blonde in tight jeans asked first. Saying no wasn't even an option. Then a brunette asked, then her friend and her friend's friend asked too. One by one I watched as my pack grew flimsier and lighter as it passed between the fingers of strangers until finally it made its way back to my hand, completely emptied of its contents.

I quit not long after that. Even dragons die eventually.

I Thought You'd Be Here Forever

But you're not. You're gone and I'm left here crying like the last man on Earth. In stillness, silence, and solemnity.

Depressed

My friend suggested it was seasonal depression but I don't believe in that. Everyone gets sad every once in a while. Just because the radio only plays happy songs doesn't mean your life must follow an equally upbeat playlist. And not everything needs a label. Sometimes things just are. And they're better that way.

It wasn't until after I got in my car that I noticed it. A flyer stuck between my wiper blade and my windshield. I debated leaving it there, hoping it would fly off once I got moving. I might

get a ticket for that, I thought, and got back out and snatched the paper off the glass. Shifting to reverse, I read the STD and Oral Sex title, and shifted back into park. I got out of my car to see if any of the other vehicles had flyers. None of them did. This could mean one of two things: either everyone else already got their flyers and trashed them or I was being singled out. Seeing as how about 85% of my neighbors were widows over the age of 75, I hoped for the latter. I hated how their little dogs barked incessantly and nipped at my heels every time I walked outside.

As I got back in my car and looked in my rearview mirror to make sure I wasn't backing over any old ladies, I noticed I was smiling. I was happy. I was about to go buy groceries and I was happy. No one's happy about the prospect of buying groceries. But I was. I was tickled that someone out there had the wit and the daring to leave such a provocative flyer in the public view on my windshield. I wish I had thought of that, I thought. The unexpectedness and the content were brilliant, but the secrecy was what brought the smile.

Baiting the Worm

Most of the time when people – usually men – talk about fishing, they tell an old tale about some monster they caught when they were a young buck and with every retelling their arms spread a little farther apart and their grandchildren believe them a little less because, let's face it, they're getting older.

I have my tales too – I even have pictures and fiberglass replicas as proof – but I don't tell them. When I think about fishing I think about my Dad. I think about how he did all the work and all I did was stand there and drop the line in the water then yank it up prematurely because I thought I saw the cork move but it didn't. I just forgot to blink. That's how focused and excited I was.

But my Dad did all the work. I'd point to a rock and tell him I thought it had worms under it. Worms we could use for bait. But half the time it had a nest full of snakes instead. Then when we finally did find some worms I refused to pick them up and drop them in the bucket. They were slimy and they wiggled and I didn't want to hurt them. That's why I made him put them on the hook for me too. He'd show me how to do it every time but every time I'd just watch. I didn't want to get dirty.

Now most of the time when I go fishing I go by myself. My Dad doesn't live close by anymore and there isn't a lake in my backyard. But still, even though he's not there, I talk to him. He talks back, too. He has to remind me how to bait the worm.

Tug on the Line

It's not that he never liked to get dirty. He just only wanted to get dirty when he *wanted* to get dirty. I'd tell him he could wash his hands off in the water but ever since he saw that snapping turtle he's been scared to even stand near the edge of the lake, much less wiggle his fingers in the water. He always liked to go fishing though. I taught him everything my daddy taught me. How to tie all sorts of knots, what bait to use for bass, what to use for trout, how hard it is to kill a catfish, why Sunfish turn bright yellow. All the things any decent fisherman should know.

He's alright now but he used to miss so many fish. I remember one time he had a big bass on the other end of the line. One of the biggest ones I've ever seen, but he missed it. He yanked the line too soon so the fish got all worm and no hook. I always told him to just give the line a little tug first to see if anything was there. Let the fish take it first, I'd say, then give it a good yank.

I miss fishing. I miss fishing with him. He's never around anymore and I don't feel right going by myself. But every time one of the guys starts with one of his stories I tell him my son's got him beat. He sent me a picture of a shark he caught one summer. A damn shark.

Babies Like Danger, Babies Like Strangers

I don't actually think she's cute, but her parents do so for the next 45 minutes I pretend she's the cutest little peachy-cheeked kid I've ever seen. Her parents are gorgeous. Her dad has a nice, strong jaw line and her mom's never seen a surgical knife and never will because she doesn't need to. Her eyes are like dreams. The kind you try to describe to someone but never can.

But isn't that how it always happens? Two pretty people don't make another pretty person. They make a critter. One of those walleyed creatures that you'd swear was responsible for all those bumps you hear in the middle of the night. Her cheeks were that ugly orange color, either from eating too many carrots or from the lollipop she threw at me when she got here. I can't tell if they're smooth or sticky. She's bald. Bald babies aren't cute. Old men who lost their hair are cute, in a geriatric sort of way. I feel bad thinking about how ugly she is so I call her un-cute in my head to alleviate any guilt. God made her that way so I can't make fun of her. That's like telling God He failed art school.

She's so cute, how old is she? I ask. *She's 13 months*, her mother replies. 13 months. 13 months? Why not just say a year? Is that extra month really that important? Do you really think I care that much about how old your kid is? I want to say these things, but I want to make money more so I just take their order and smile.

She looks at me every time I stop to check on them. *Would you like some more tea?* I ask the father. She doesn't have to look up at me because she's been looking at me the whole time, since before I ever got there. Following me the way the eyes of people in photographs follow you when you walk by. She didn't know me but she liked me.

They leave a twenty tucked under a can of baby food on the table. Maybe she'll get her mother's eyes, I think. They change with time.

Soft Things

I didn't go to UVA, but for the longest time my favorite shirt was one from the Virginia Crew Team. Something about the way it fit. The way it felt. The way I felt when I wore it. Gradually the logos and the words began to fade with wear. The little spaces between the threads turned into gaps and the gaps turned into holes until finally the sleeves just came off altogether.

A friend of mine asked me why I didn't toss the shirt in the garbage. I told him I liked it. He asked me why and I told him it had sentimental value. *Well can't you keep it in a drawer somewhere?* he stated more than he asked. I told him I had a buckshot go straight through me when I was kid and this was the shirt I was wearing when it happened. He didn't say anything. *I'm just kidding*, I said. *I just like soft things. Why do you cut your hair so short?* I asked. *What?* he asked. *Why do you cut your hair so short?* I asked again. *Because I like it*, he said. *Well I do too*, I said, *it's soft*.

He's There

And I'm there, on the other side of the door, fumbling with my keys. He knows I'm there but he pretends he doesn't. He knows I'm there, but he won't flip the latch and open the goddamn door. He knows I'm getting annoyed, getting mad, getting hotter by the second. Hotter

like the way last Tuesday's Indian food gets hotter every day I let it sit in my fridge. But he plays dumb. So I play dumb too. I match his look of surprise when I walk in the door. *Oh, I didn't know you were home, I say, so good to see you.*

She Didn't Think I Saw It But I Did

Let me see, I said.

No! I can't, she said.

Why not? I asked.

Because, she said.

Because why? I asked.

Because I don't want you to, she said.

Well why don't you want me to? I asked.

Because they're wrinkly and gross, she said.

What? No they're not. Come on let me see, I said.

She turned to face me again, but her hands were wedged between the bottom of her thighs and her seat.

You can't see them, she said.

It wasn't her wrinkly, gross hands that she didn't want me to see. It was that promise wrapped around her finger. That nine year old reminder of a time she fooled herself into forgetting. She didn't think I saw it but I did.

You can look at my feet, she said. They're pretty.

Elevator Etiquette

I took an elevator to the top of a building in Washington, D.C. once. That was the first time I ever saw a television inside an elevator. The average elevator ride couldn't last more than a minute tops, I thought. Are people really that concerned with breaking news that they can't wait until they get to the next floor? I wondered. On the way back down the same clip was playing and I realized that it wasn't even a live feed. It was just a recording. Then the elevator stopped. I moved to the right, still facing the front, and made room for another gentleman. We dropped another floor then stopped again. I moved back to the corner, the gentleman moved to the far corner, and a third gentleman took his place between us in the middle. We stopped again after two more floors. The third gentleman stepped back, allowing the lady to enjoy the center spot. By the time we reached the ground floor there were at least seven other people in the elevator. No one brushed shoulders or said excuse me or made eye contact. How was such a precise orchestration of movements possible in silence? I wondered. How was this not awkward? I thought. Then, just before the doors opened and everyone poured toward the revolving lobby doors, I realized they had been watching TV.

Now I Can See But I Can't See You

I hadn't had my eyes checked in over a decade so I figured it would be best to let the ophthalmologist run all those fun little tests. I was just trying to take care of myself. I didn't realize they were going to blow a stream of air directly into my eyeballs, then shine a bright beam of light straight through my retina to my brain, then dilate my pupils to the point where my iris disappeared, then tell me I'm perfectly healthy and bill me for an experience that all I have to show for is the ugliest damn pair of sunglasses I've ever seen.

I started having a lot of headaches sometime after all that so I went back and had a simple eye exam. The kind where you sit in the chair and say one or two, depending on which lens is clearer, but the truth is they switch the lenses so fast that I'm not really sure which is one and which is two. But there's no air being blown into my eyes this time. The only air that gets blown anywhere is the air that's trying to escape from the gap between my eye doctor's teeth. It's screaming at me as it comes out. Finally, it seems to shout, I'm out of there. I'm out of that filthy dungeon.

I'm listening to the air and looking at his teeth when I realize I can't hear the screaming anymore. I can't hear it anymore because he's stopped talking and he's looking at me looking at his teeth. *Are you in college?* he asks. Oh great here comes a lecture about maturity, I think. *Yes,* I respond. *How are your grades?* he asks. *Fine,* I say. None of your business, I think. *Well it's a wonder,* he says, *but I think I know why you're getting all those headaches. You only use your left eye. What do you mean?* I ask. *It's complicated,* he says, *but basically, your left eye is doing all the work for both eyes. With glasses, we can make your right eye start pulling its weight. Your reading comprehension will improve, your grades will go up, and your headaches should subside.*

After a week or so, my eyes adjusted and my headaches went away and although I doubted the doctor's claim that my reading comprehension would improve, I did finish books a lot faster than I had before. Despite the advantages of glasses, however, I also faced some pitfalls. I lost my peripheral vision. I didn't lose it in the sense of it ceasing to function. I just couldn't use it because my frames got in the way.

I'd get a text from a friend at least two or three times a week. *Way to ignore me today,* they'd write. They didn't wear glasses; they didn't understand. I felt bad, I felt rude, so then I

just started turning my head to face anyone and everyone who I thought I might have known.

Then I just started looking at everyone. I became that awkward kid who went out of my way to look a person in the eyes, search their face for a sign of recognition, realize there was none, then turn away just as suddenly as I had come.

Then one day I thought I saw someone I knew, a close friend, and started to throw my hand in the air to wave, but before I realized it wasn't my friend and had a chance to fake a head scratch or pretend to swat a fly, they made eye contact and got that knowing look on their face. That look that says, *Oh you poor thing, you thought you knew me.* It was like one of those moments you have when someone says something you don't understand and you automatically ask, *What?* in response, sometimes even before they finish asking you the question, but then your ears reconnect to your brain and you realize what they asked but they're already repeating the question and you can't stop them. You just have to wait for them to ask it again.

After that I didn't care if people thought I was ignoring them. I didn't care if they thought I was rude. I cared about my dignity.

She Trusts Me

And I can't understand why. It's a problem I've had for as long as I can remember. People come into my life and before I know it I know more about their lives than I do my own. As a writer, I'm okay with that because first, I consider my life relatively drab and boring in comparison and second, because I always need new material and third, because chances are none of them will ever know that after I listen to them for an hour or for five minutes a day for a year, I go home, I sit at my computer, and I write their story for them.

But I have to be careful how I write about her because I know she really trusts me and because she reads everything I write. If I ever have a bad day as a writer I just send her an e-mail and read her response the next morning. The next day is always better than the previous one.

I don't know if I can write about her, at least not yet, not now. She's not some lover I can use to invoke passion from my pen. She's not an idiot I can criticize and malign with my own witticisms. She's not a saint worthy of praise. She's a friend and she trusts me and I've never written about that before. Maybe I'll write about beginnings.

I wonder what she would write about me.