

A Memory of Loss

The other day I was watching my girlfriend and her teenage son in another wrestling match. Both of them were sprawled on the hardwood floor of their kitchen. She was tickling him, grunting and rooting like a pig, her son alternately laughing and howling with mock pain, his teenage voice a gravelly, potholed road that will soon get an asphalt paving. Though he is as tall as she is now, and stronger, he allowed her to pin him. I reminded myself that they are both Czech, and I have lived in the Czech Republic for some years. She is an atheist, smokes, is divorced, all qualities that my mother, a staunch Catholic, would have strongly disagreed with, if not considered sinful. Her son, unlike my younger brother, is outspoken, can't fix a thing, has no patience with people, gets bad grades at school, often skips school, and is an only child.

Nevertheless, despite these drastic differences, I suddenly see my mother and younger brother intertwined on the floor, grappling, struggling for breath. Again I see my parent's bedroom in East Texas with the woods visible through the ceiling-to-floor windows, the winter trees leafless and scraggly, in cold sepia, both of them near the doorway, between living room and master bedroom, the madness flowing afresh, the cream-colored tiles underneath their bodies going red, gooey, and slippery, my sanity suddenly precarious, suddenly focused yet again on them in that final moment. Then I am back, standing in an apartment by a glass table in the outskirts of Prague with Soviet-era, high-rise apartment blocks everywhere filling the windows.

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More than twenty years ago, I was still in Monterrey, Mexico, at my grandparents' house when the call came. The call came on such a slow day, so unexpected, despite the warnings, on a date that marks history, like Sept. 11th or Dec. 7th, only that this date was entirely personal. The round clean date-New Year's Day, 1990- would make the time elapsed from that phone call so easy to calculate in the future, a simple subtraction to obtain the age of tragedy and its aftermath.

Besides the devaluation of the peso, everything across the border seemed the same as on all previous family visits we'd been making since childhood: the olive-colored curtains that were eternally drab and covered in a second, see-through plastic curtain to keep off the dust, the same strings of mango and purple lights around the same mini artificial Christmas tree that was screwed together year near the stairwell leading to the guestroom. My older brother was going to join us later and was still working in New York City on the 53rd floor of the Chrysler building; my father was in the living room reading *El Norte*; my grandfather was working the rag in the car port, wiping the city grime off his Chrysler; my grandmother and I were in the kitchen. She was using the rolling pin to flatten home-made flour tortillas. The kitchen of that house was the safest, warmest place I knew in the world, the table top sky blue with glitters like those rubber bouncy balls in gumball machines, a table we gathered around every year, the blue gas flames heating huevos revueltos in a black iron skillet and milk for a hot chocolate (same can of Kwik from the previous year), a big breakfast coming up just for me.

It was late morning. I would have remembered the time exactly if the cuckoo clock on the living room wall hadn't been broken again (again the pine cone shaped weights were not doing their job). My father in the living room took the call and, from the way he started choking on his own saliva, I knew something was wrong but at first I thought the news related to one of his friends he'd known since medical school, long-term friends he regularly saw while in Mexico. The silence was filled with his choking and the frying eggs and my grandmother, without even knowing what the call was about, her hands still covered in flour, began to wail, frantically thumbing her rosary beads, leaving each Boston baked bean-colored bead dusted in flour. When my father finally managed to tell me what had happened, everything went blurry, out of control, into horrid little time capsules: my mother and younger brother were found dead in our house in East Texas. The police suspected a murder suicide, my mother the culprit.

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Months before, while still a junior at university, I'd heard about my younger brother's decision to temporarily "stop out" of Stanford and move home. I'd heard stories from my father and older brother about just how bad my younger brother's situation was becoming. I'd heard he was becoming increasingly withdrawn and, upon our mother's insistence, they'd already taken him to several psychiatrists in Houston to be observed, interviewed and subjected to a battery of tests. It was, however, only until my winter break, until I actually went home (unlike my older brother I didn't go home for Thanksgiving holiday, too busy preparing for tests, spending time with other friends) did I start to realize the stories were indeed true: my younger brother was indeed in a very bad depression I'd never seen the likes of. I was hoping I could get through to him since we'd been close growing up. My father believed Christopher would be fine, the trips to the psychiatrists unnecessary, their fees exorbitant to boot. My father thought the usual end-of-the-year vacation to Monterrey to visit the grandparents and all the relatives would help, followed by a return to Stanford. A "stopped out" student could return at any time.

"Just let him be," declared my father yet again to my mother in the upstairs guest room once we arrived to Monterrey. We were sure that when he ate machacado (my younger brother's favorite) and got foot massages every night (another of younger brother's favorites when administered by grandmother) he'd improve. "Leave him alone," my father said, his voice rising.

"He'll get out of it," I reiterated too, heartily agreeing with my father. "Sophomore slump. It's common. That's why there's a word for it. I was almost in one too, if you remember. He just needs to go back, find his own way. It's not easy with all those geniuses and prep school kids around. He'll be fine. Leave him alone for God's sake. We'll take care of him. We'll go out with the cousins."

Christopher was downstairs in the living room rocking in my grandmother's rocking chair, rubbing his forehead. I remember the rubbing even now, as if he were picking at a late outbreak of acne or itching at mosquito bites but only on his forehead. I remember the mumbling too and the long bouts of silence and how he spoke about the same thing, about the students at Stanford. It was like talking to a hollow tree with an owl inside, or the proverbial broken tape recorder.

Before going to Mexico, I'd spent a short time with him in our house in East Texas. I took him out into the woods behind our house where we'd built forts, explored frozen creeks with our dog, conducted countless explorations in our youth. The leaves crunching underneath us, I led him to our fort that we built with our own hands. It still stood, the timbers rotten, and I said he'd be fine, not to worry about the students at Stanford, not to compare himself to them, not to worry about lower grades or if they'd done things he hadn't or if he decided to switch universities (my mother was adamant about me not encouraging him to go back; she was positive he was at the wrong school), hoping the trees and our childhood intimacy and the cold would shock him awake, connect him to the earth, the dogwoods and pines and the Indians we used to imitate, but I couldn't get through. He just stood there in the frozen thin forest, the outlines of the brick walled house rising behind us at sharp angles, ignoring what I told him about putting on his gloves, motionless or following me, repeating things like "Don't know what they talk about, always talking and talking they are. About what? I'm not sure, I don't understand..."

In Mexico, with everyone around, there was even less time to spend with him. In a rare, quiet moment, after everyone else had gone to bed, my mother asked me for the first time how I was doing at school, how my studies were going. We were in the old-fashioned kitchen again, the same one where she'd learned Spanish and Mexican cooking, pregnant with my older brother, while my father had been off in Vietnam serving as a medical doctor. Her green eyes sparkled; she smiled for the first time since I'd been home. She was listening, really listening, as a friend for the first time, I believed, rather than as my mother. A beautiful stage in our relationship was beginning, I was sure, a stage in which we could speak like equals, and her mind was momentarily off my younger brother in asleep in my grandparent's room. "He'll be fine," I said again. "Just relax. Just leave him alone." Her green eyes twinkled like flames shining through a Coke bottle. We always drank lots of Coke in Mexico.

The next day however my mother was again hovering around him like a frantic nurse, not letting him out of her sight, not letting me take him out with my cousins to go out dancing or for a drink or to attend a rock concert. "Too much stress here," she said, "too many people." Here she was referring to our dear relatives as "people?" "We're going back early," she insisted, announced, ignoring all of our pleas to let him be and return with us, as planned, on Jan. 6th, Reyes, an important holiday in Mexico, as well as my older brother's birthday. All my relatives stared at her with her hands on my younger brother's shoulders as he continued rocking in my grandmother's chair. My mother always knew best. They had always been in awe of her. Christopher started rubbing his forehead again, no opinion on the matter either way.

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Back in our house in East Texas, everything looked normal when we returned. The bed had been made, the floor mopped, the kitchen cleaned, the whisky she'd been drinking in the kitchen (she never drank hard alcohol and never straight from the bottle) dispensed of. The cleaning lady, a friend of the family for years, told us how she had found them in the morning. From the utility room, she'd spotted them, straight ahead, at the threshold of my parent's bedroom, their bent and inert bodies on the floor blocking the doorway. She called out to them and, hearing no answer, actually went about cleaning thinking they were perhaps practicing some form of yoga or stretching, as my mother sometimes did with us, depending on her health theory of the moment.

As friends of our family started arriving, as well as the relatives we'd just left behind in Mexico, I couldn't look at myself in the mirror. How could I care about my personal appearance when they needed me to help them pass to that other world? And how could I care about myself when I could have done something to prevent it? If only I had refused to listen to my mother and taken him to that concert. If only I had spent more time with him in the woods. If only I had gone home for Thanksgiving. If only my father had listened to his friends' advice. If only he, all of us, had been less wishy-washy. If only, if only. When I did permit myself the luxury to comb my hair or wash my face or brush my teeth, I saw only my own selfishness, my own indifference, or them staring back at me like a pair of ghosts floating restlessly through one of Dante's upper rings of Hell, their fates forever crossed and tortured.

The very fabric of reality had morphed, and I'd entered a terrible darker reality from which I could not escape. Instead of time neatly notched on a clock or calendar, a giant hole was now sucking at my whole life in either direction, pulling the past and immediate present (there was no future) inexorably to the same abyss that shortened my breath, deleted the world of colors and hope and will and absolutes, made me fear sleep (So this was what the movie *Nightmare on Elm Street* was all about?), little difference between sleep and being awake. I was a monster sprouting new heads every day: one for misery, one for guilt, one for sadness, one for fear, another for another negative emotion, each head strangling the other. I began to understand the drug trips other students spoke of, the dark matter filling the universe.

Thinking in destructive spirals was the only type of thought I seemed capable of, unanswerable questions and self-recriminations repeating until the same self-annihilation resulted. I became revisionist and schizophrenic, presenting all the facts to myself like a defense lawyer and then arguing the opposite case as a prosecution lawyer in a colder, clearer light. I remember thinking, despite all the evidence, that the police had to be wrong, that there had been some terrible mistake, that a robber had entered the house and killed them both. Based on my entire life and upbringing, it was easier to believe a random double murder than what had actually occurred, as if assigning their deaths to a malignant outside force would somehow assuage their violent ends.

The guests were either too somber or chummy, too compassionate or silent, requiring either too little or much of my attention. Even my dear Mexican relatives were distant, sitting before piles of homemade arroz con pollo and enchiladas in the kitchen like impassive gods come down from their temple tops to bear witness to a necessary double sacrifice on land (from every window the forest was visible and the forest had become a place of dead things). The homemade food that I had been eating with such gusto my whole life, until only a few days before, was now odorless and tasteless, fit only for the garbage. No consensual explanations or wisdom on their part was enough, their hugs cold, like embraces from roughly hewn stone statues. Most of all I was angry with my older brother for showering during this time, for grooming himself in front of the mirror, for entertaining our relatives and his "buddies" from junior high and college, for actually smiling, for his NYC attitude, for telling his endless stories with optimistic endings.

I remember this one bald guy, some distant Mexican uncle of mine, who came late to the reception at our house. In the living room he talked about speeding on the Texas side with his CB radio, using his handle nickname, the Bald Eagle, to communicate with truckers so they could all jointly avoid highway patrol. I didn't know if he was telling a normal story or a joke but

I laughed so hard, I couldn't stop laughing. I felt like a madman, I laughed to tears, crumpled onto the stairs, and the more he spoke about the antics of the Bald Eagle swooping down from on high, the more I laugh crumpled. I remember all my organs bunched into one tight wad in my stomach, one of the few organs left, my mouth howling, my eyes squeezing into ever tightening wet rags, the tears unstoppable, spilling right back into my open mouth to be recycled again, spilling in quantities that seemed impossible for two mere eyes to produce.

Oh, I remember the funeral home. A first encounter with such shocking death is a great memory enhancer, makes geniuses of us all with photographic memory. The flower bouquets seemed to exhale a toxic gas in a paneled room whose oak panels and Italian marble were absurdly fake, of the cheapest quality, no more absolutes remaining in this world, the room flooded in a yellow light, the sickness infecting everyone, making the flowers wilt. Again I imagined their struggle in those final moments, as my mother accosted him in the bedroom with the loaded gun, and as I reached the bone smooth twin caskets, I closed my eyes, wanting to remember them alive, not wanting to see the scratches they had inflicted on each other in that final struggle, according to the police report. I reached into my pocket and took out my brother's prized Chinese cricket box, feeling under his silken pillow to slide it under. There had been no time or will to find a cricket in the middle of winter and the box I'd grabbed at the last second. My mother, the perpetrator, got nothing. To remember anything good about her at that moment was impossible, like trying to spy light in a black hole that she had been responsible for creating.

Deep memories tucked away in perfect safety played sudden tricks on me. An enormous man in black stood knocking at the front door. He was my all-star little league baseball coach but now he was the hearse driver. Instead of wearing a yellow cap with maroon letters, and jeans whose back pockets bulged with keys and a Red Man tobacco pouch, he wore a black suit, enormous black boots, and drove a long black car that was so long it had to be backed up into the driveway, too long to turn the corner. Instead of spitting and saying "Give'em all you got on your fastball, son" he shuffled clumsily like Frankenstein and said "I'm sorry."

It seemed to be raining every day during that time, the rain falling endlessly out of bleak preternatural darkness, my emotional landscape perfectly matching what reality had become, as if I were controlling the weather or unleashing my insides on a world that no longer deserved to function. The very sun had been swallowed, and the bare trees and everyone was covered in cold slick graphite, all of us coal miner survivors.

At the funeral I remember one spark of hope, when my grandmother couldn't get out of the hearse. Her pantyhose got stuck on the door; she was obese and couldn't maneuver her leg out; several people had to help her as she struggled, a tiny moment of normality, a tiny hope that I could return to the other normal world I had always known until so recently. But then, in a blink, the twin caskets were lowered down into a cruelly manicured lawn. When the boxes went out of sight, time suddenly sped up and with the shovels of dirt came a resounding BOOM! Time had never played such tricks before, or made such noises. Until that moment I still thought they'd spring out of their coffins, announcing the hoax was over, the sleeping potion worn off, the cricket box saving the day. If only I had put a cricket in that box. If only I'd been more forgiving and forced myself to write a few lines of farewell to my mother. If only, if only.

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I couldn't stay at home, urged my father. I had to go back to university, he said, as if only he reserved the right to stay behind in the town, in the same house, and be buried alive. The change of scenery didn't help. I remember feeling naked on campus, mad as a hatter, as if a huge sign hung around my neck "OVER THE HOLIDAYS HIS MOM SHOT HER OWN SON-HIS OWN BEST BROTHER- POINT BLANK IN THE STOMACH AND, BECAUSE HE FELL ON HIS BACK AND ATTEMPTED TO GET UP, SHE SHOT HIM AGAIN, THIS TIME CLOSER TO THE HEART. THEN SHE NEEDED ONLY ONE BULLET MORE WITH THE MUZZLE POSITIONED BEHIND HER UPPER FRONT ROW OF TEETH TO CHECK OUT HERSELF!"

I dropped out of crew, no longer able to rouse myself out of bed at 5 a.m. to jog and pull splintered sticks to propel myself backwards. I tried to drop out of my un-housed fraternity, ashamed to break all my pledges, but the more the "brothers" tried to help me, the more I went mute, or avoided them altogether.

I remember those first counseling sessions in the back of the campus church that my advisor urged me to attend. I attended a few. We held hands in a circle, prayed together. The handful of other students had lost only one family member and due to a "normal" extraneous cause: cancer, car crash, drug overdose, murder by stranger. And one other female student hadn't technically lost anybody at all: she was raped by a friend. When it came my turn to speak, I exercised my right to remain silent.

I told myself my loss was something, yes, but nothing compared to a child soldier's in Africa, for example, or what happens to whole families caught on the wrong side of a dictatorship. I still had half my family left, I kept telling myself. Get with the program, I'd think in my dorm room, alone again. There are worse losses to suffer. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Grow up. Every family suffers tragedy. Don't blame your bad grades, absent love life, and failure to show up to class and appointments on this. Don't disappear at any moment without saying goodbye. Don't be a phantom with no responsibility. Don't be so irrationally sensitive. When I would call my father, his voice would be barely audible, and I would speak loud and confident, lying, filling silence threatening to suck us into each other from both ends.

After I graduated (barely), I went overseas to teach English, the easiest, perhaps only option as I had no specialty and no desire to go home as home no longer existed except as a mausoleum. I wanted to reinvent and lose myself from the toes up, and the farther away from that house in deep East Texas the better. By then I was sure what caused my younger brother's depression, as well as what drove my mother. Hind sight, when repeatedly analyzed in slo-mo with psychiatrists, grief counselors, and friends I wanted to get close to, made perfect sense based on societal, biological, and psychological principles. Any idiotic detective could have figured out the trail of clues my mother had left behind. But then, alone again, sometimes I'd think perhaps I too was an aberration. Perhaps the madness was latent inside me too, a ticking time bomb, as I'd been closer to them. Every time I got into a depression in my six tatami mat room in Kyoto, or felt crazy (easy to blame on being labeled a gaijin, when you don't speak the language fluently),

I'd think, "It's not so bad. Now I am closer to them in their last days. At least I can understand them better now."

Returning to the house was only possible when my father remarried a feisty Spanish woman eight years later. The model airplanes and rockets in my younger brother's room would mock me, frozen, ready to fly. The family photos my step mother hid away in drawers would burn like radioactive isotopes when discovered, still dangerously burning due to long half-lives, and my inability to forget and forgive. My mother's clothes still hung in her closet after all that time and my stepmother helped my father forget by either throwing or giving them away to charity. No matter what my stepmother did though, I would keep seeing that spot on the floor between their bedroom and living room, their bodies crumpled and inert, the madness flowing afresh, my whole being losing its grip, future plans thrown out the window, myself getting drawn once again into that spot under the doorway that couldn't be rubbed away. It was good to be overseas, really better not to return home at all, and I was relieved when they sold the house.

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Now, twenty years later, if I think of my life as a time line, there is still an excised circle on New Year's Day, 1990, but the hole has become more filled in, more flattened out, less gaping, more like a speed bump to remembering what came before.

Yet I know I am better because the recurring nightmares have stopped (always my younger brother starring in different plots, my mother making brief spoiling cameos, me co-starring but ultimately inept, unable to save). Sleep in general has improved and now I don't jump out of bed in the middle of the morning, hyperventilating before my over rapidly beating heart bursts out of my chest in an auto Aztec sacrifice. Over the years the deaths of my grandparents and other relatives were easy pills to swallow. Those funerals were hard to attend only because I lived overseas but the ceremonies were cathartic even, natural ends to full lives.

Memories of my mother started surfacing rapidly when I moved to Spain to be closer to my stepmother and father. I suddenly remembered by comparison. My mother was Catholic too but more devout, considering the times she dragged us to church. She pinned her hair into a bun too but more like a Russian fur cap with the ear flaps up, and her hair was brown, never dyed red or yellow. She never liked to sunbathe by a pool as her skin was much lighter, mole-forming under too much sun, as she was of Irish ancestry, though she did often work in the garden dressed up like the invisible man. My mother worked hard too, not as a director of an insurance company, but in my father's billing office she herself set up. My mother was very pretty and she preferred turquoise and jade jewelry, not huge, gleaming disks of gold and bronze that clang together like cymbals. I remembered she liked the slow, sensuous songs, not the bold stamp and snap of flamenco. I remembered her rapport with local country people like the old yard man and cleaning lady, not European aristocrats and millionaires who my stepmother likes to rub shoulders with.

I remember Christopher had many hobbies such as building model airplanes and rockets, breaking locks and codes, collecting junk and phonebooks, and astronomy (we always did this last one together). He was a natural with his hands, patient, an academic standout in junior high and high school. I remember one day when he was about eleven years old the ice maker broke.

Because he didn't want the service man to charge \$100 just for the drive out to our house, he took the ice maker apart himself, piece by piece, cleaning and labeling each piece, and in three days the ice maker dropped perfect cubes again. His last model airplane took his whole senior year of high school to build. It was gas powered, the propeller so big and powerful it could easily slice off a finger, and, just to be safe, he let the president of his model airplane club take over the remote controls on its maiden flight. But I have repeated these statements so many times over the years, my memories of him, them, often feel limited to these idealized statements.

I visit my older brother and his family in Brooklyn whenever I can and remember what our family used to be, again by comparison. They have two boys and want another boy, like we used to be three sons. My sister-in-law is from the NY area too, just like my mother, and my sister-in-law uses the same cookbooks my mother used. Last time I was there she cooked us a Mexican dinner that brought back more good memories and I saw more of my mother's recipes written on note cards in my mother's loopy, confident handwriting fall out between the pages of the cookbooks. My older brother and his wife hang the same Christmas stockings for their children my mother darned and made for us. I let them have mine (the red Santa with white sequins for a beard) as I have no kids and am still not married.

And when I in the Czech Republic consider my girlfriend and her son, when I disagree with how she raises him, so different than how my mother raised us, I say nothing, or very little. I consider cultural and personality differences. I consider the fact that they are both healthy and alive, life a very important factor. As they wrestle again, her son acts like he's going to pull one of his mother's toes out of its socket; she starts crying for him to stop, threatening him, sitting on his face when she gets the upper hand again; he becomes a turtle in its shell, legs flailing, fake whimpering. These two are so different than my mother and younger brother, I tell myself again, but it's good when he spends time out with his friends doing whatever he wants, when she leaves him in his room and does whatever she wants. It's good that they both know when to let go.