The Art of Forgetting

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I have always wanted a brother, and for a while I felt like I had one.

My cousin on my mother’s side, Joshua Lester, is a year and a half older than me. The last I heard, he was still living in a small apartment in Chattanooga, Tennessee, working at a steel mill for minimum wage. His mother, who works as a receptionist for a dog kennel, lives in a slightly bigger apartment fifteen minutes away. Every time I talk to her on the phone I ask her about Joshua, and all she can say is, “He’s doin’ alright, I guess. Haven’t heard from him in a while,” and then the conversation tilts back to her love of scuba diving or her insistence on me coming to visit her. I never have, but that’s not what this story is about.

On the day that Joshua turned seventeen, he was riding a bike down his friend’s driveway in Dalton, Georgia, without a helmet. His curly brown hair was neatly trimmed around his ears, flowing freely in the wind as he let the momentum of the bike carry him downwards. His hands, tightly gripping the rubber around the handlebars, turned the rotating spokes out into the street. In the last moment of his youth, his head tilted up and turned to the right, his strong jaw line running parallel to his shoulders. What must it have been like to see the loss of one’s own future? I imagine it happened in disjointed images. A suddenly visible Domino’s delivery truck racing through a suburban neighborhood at one-hundred miles per hour, an opened ounce of marijuana tucked away inside the glove compartment, the drooping eyelids of the delivery driver, contact, the collision, the metal of the bike bending outward as if being molded by a hand, the glimmering hood of the car, the sky, the road, his memory of me bleeding out from his brain and drying into the concrete, then extended darkness, all in one motion. Unconscious, he lay flat in the middle of the road like a dead bird, his broken, left leg nestling up into the back of his right knee cap. His friend ran into the house screaming.

As the paramedics weaved their way through traffic, my cousin was continuing to forget about me. First went the little things, like the time we bought CD’s with explicit lyrics and felt like we got away with something, or when we spray-painted our
names on a broken piece of fencing in our great grandmother’s backyard, the trips to the arcade at the mall, jumping up and down on his waterbed, staying up all night and watching movies that my mother told me I wasn’t allowed to see. Then they got bigger. He forgot about giving me my first sip of beer and my first cigarette. He forgot about playing catch with our grandfather for hours. He forgot about teaching me how to talk to girls. He forgot about wrestling me on our grandmother’s bed and always winning. And he forgot enough of my face that when my mother and I flew down three days later to see him in the hospital he didn’t know who I was when I walked through the door.

“Who is that, Mimi?” he asked my grandmother in a voice that belonged to him when he was a child. The skin on his forehead was scabbed and discolored, and on the underside of his chin was a long black scar holding pus in between its stitching. I turned away and stared into the wall because it hurt to look at him.

“That’s your cousin William.”

He looked back and stared at me for a few seconds. I could sense the silence in his eyes, and I was drowning in it. Together, we had lost something that he would never know existed. What could he have been thinking? How did his mind work? I imagine it was like a clock with no hands, unable to move backwards in time and space. He had no pictures, just meaningless images whose connective string was now in tatters.

I told the two of them that I would be right back and walked to the restroom out in the hallway. I locked myself in a stall, pressed my face up against the wall, and cried so hard that I couldn’t breathe. A slideshow started playing in my head of the pictures my grandmother kept framed by her bedside table. Christmas morning, we viciously tear through pounds and pounds of green and red gift wrapping. Halloween, dressed as two vampires with candy fangs, we almost trip down the stairs on our too long capes. The middle of fall, wrestling our grandfather’s beloved bulldog “Sport” amongst a pile of crunched, orange leaves, his tongue stroking the stink of his breathe on our faces.

After fifteen minutes I let myself out of the stall and splashed water on my face from the sink. The faucet was all the way on cold, but the water felt warm and suffocating. I didn’t look at myself in the mirror on my way out because I knew if I did I
would start crying again.

I didn’t see Joshua for almost two years, and somehow things got even worse for him. Although bits and pieces of his memory (some of which involved me) came back, his long-term memory was almost completely gone. He dropped out of school because he couldn’t remember anything that he studied. He filed a lawsuit against Dominos and got a settlement, but his father divorced his mother on her birthday (four months before the trial) in hopes that with split custody he would be able to obtain half of the money. He did.

Every day after work his mother would come home, sit on the couch, and chain-smoke cigarettes until her three-hour block of “Divorce Court” was over. Joshua started spending more and more time with his father because of it. Somehow he still loved him. A year and a half after the accident he moved out of his mom’s house and got a job at the local steel mill. He refused to get his G.E.D. because he said he couldn’t remember anything that he tried to learn. My mother’s sympathy for her godson began to turn in to bitterness. She told me she thought he was putting on an act, that he was much better mentally than he was letting on and he was being stupid for giving up on himself. After a while I started to believe her.

I wrote three letters to him, and he never wrote back. I called him on his cell phone and on his apartment phone (which I got from his mother). He never answered or returned my calls. I didn’t think that I would ever see him again, and after a while I was fine, even happy, because of it. Maybe my mother was right. Maybe he was just being an asshole who wanted everyone’s pity for the rest of his life. He had forgotten about me, and now it was my turn to finally forget about him. I didn’t owe him anything anymore.

Then my grandfather died.

My grandfather, who we all called “Papa Buck,” loved Joshua more than he loved me. I understood. He was like a second father to Joshua. They went to church together every Sunday and sat in the third pew, wearing matching ties that he had gone out and bought for the two of them. Ever Wednesday night they went out and had dinner together, and whenever Joshua had a baseball game on the weekends my grandfather was always there to watch him. They lived twenty minutes away from each
other. I was five states north of them. I saw them five times a year at most. They saw each other almost every day. And when Joshua’s parents got divorced Papa Buck went from second father to father. He took work off for two weeks just to make sure that Joshua was doing alright, and by then the plant he owned was about to go out of business. When he died, he gave Joshua everything in his will, and all he gave me was a tiny, touristy statue of a Buddha whose origin no one was certain of. My mother cried after she gave it to me because she knew it didn’t mean anything. My grandfather did everything for Joshua, and that was why I knew before we even arrived at his viewing that my cousin was going to be there and that my grandfather’s death was going to be harder for him than it was for me.

It was a long room, flanked by rows of standardized black chairs. The fluorescent lights of the ceiling cast the room in a brightness that seemed ill-fitting. We were the first family there, and my mother was already crying upon seeing the open casket, which was positioned on top of a white tablecloth at the end of the room, flanked by two vases of bursting red roses. His portrait was hanging over the casket, his painted eyes looking out over his still body, hands neatly folded over his waist.

My father told me that I didn’t have to look at the body if I didn’t want to. He said open caskets made him feel uneasy, and he started to fidget with his hands. I told him I was fine and walked over to my mother at the casket, my feet feeling jammed into the ends of the Italian shoes my father had made me borrow from him.

He looked the same. His grey hair was still seemingly planned in its dishevel, perfectly rustled and feathered across his forehead, and the skin on his face was still patchy and red in some places. His lips were barely touching. They ran straight across his face. I looked at him, thinking about nothing, until I started to feel uncomfortable. I noticed my mother was still crying, and I hugged her for a while before going out into the hallway and nervously drinking half the water cooler.

An hour passed and the room was filled with faces I didn’t know. The same conversations ensued, “I’m sorry. He was a great man. I’m sure he loved you very much,” followed by my complacent smile, a half-sincere handshake, and me walking away. After a few minutes I found my aunt, who was engulfed in her own tears that kept crawling into her mouth. Her eyes were swollen, and her hair was flat and frizzled on her shoulders. She told me in a
weak voice that she hadn’t put any makeup on because she knew it would all wash off. I knew she felt the same way I did, that he loved my mother more than her, and I hugged her around the neck, and whispered in her ear that I loved her. I asked her where Joshua was, and she said that he was on his way. But he was already there.

Hidden in the corner of the room by the halo of black blazers my grandfather’s co-workers were wearing was my long lost cousin, his head looking down at the pointed tips of the black and leathered cowboy boots he had been given in the will. His hair was still curly and neatly trimmed, and I could see on the sides of his forehead the scars that had yet to fade. I went over to him.

“Hi, Josh.”

He looked up.

“Hey, William.” His accent was still thick, as if his voice were dipped in a golden molasses. I was jealous of it.

I sat down on the chair next to him and put my feet together, allowing my hands to rest next to each other on top of my knees. The silence flowing back and forth between the two of us whispered everything we didn’t want to say. The letters, the phone calls, the growing distance, the memories lost, the bonds severed, and his refusal to accept the blame. He started talking to me about his father and how he spent the weekends with him now. He told me that his mother was making things difficult for him and that he never wanted to see her again, or my grandmother, or my mother, because all they wanted to do was push him to do things that he couldn’t do anymore.

“I can’t be like you, and I feel that’s what everyone wants me to be like,” he said. “My mother always talks about how good you are, and how smart you are, but she never mentions how lucky you are. After what happened, I can’t be like you anymore, and no one seems to realize that. I don’t want anything anymore.”

If I didn’t know that my grandfather would have cried had he seen Joshua and I fight, I would have wrestled him to the floor and beat the shit out of him in front of our entire family and our family’s friends. My hands snapped from their relaxed, open position to two coarse fists. I looked over his shoulder to my grandfather’s casket, but I couldn’t see it amidst the swarm of people.

“I don’t think anyone thinks that,” I said. I practiced stretching my fingers out so I wouldn’t punch him.

“Well, I do.”

There was more silence between us, and this time it didn’t say
anything. It lingered like fog over a forgotten lake, haunting us.

"Do you remember me and my mother coming to the hospital to see you?"

"Yes." His head was back down, facing our grandfather's boots.

"Do you still not remember?"

I hesitated in asking the question. Despite how much I hated him in that moment, I still loved him. He still was the closest thing I had to a brother, even though he didn't want to be mine anymore.

"I remember some things." He paused to look up and turned his head toward the casket. His mother was still standing in front of it, crying. "But there are some things that I don't remember."

"How do you know?"

"There are just some spaces in my mind that are blank, and somehow I know that there was something there once. I don't know how, I just know."

"Do you wish you had them back?"

"It doesn't really matter now."

He got up from his chair and walked to the front of the room. I watched him as he moved through the crowd, many of whom tried to stop him and talk. But he kept going all the way to the casket where he went up to his mother, put his arm around her, and looked at his grandfather's face. I like to think he was crying along with her.

When we lowered my grandfather into his plot, I made sure to give Joshua more of the weight between us. Maybe he couldn't remember, but he would have wanted it that way. After the service, I watched him climb up the hill toward his car, the tip of his boots digging into the wet grass and leaving small, brown holes. I haven't seen him since.

I've tried to forget Joshua Lester. I've tried to forget all the memories that he's forgotten, tried to make my heart as hopelessly bitter as his when it comes to our relationship. But I haven't. Four months ago on July 17th, two years after my grandfather's death, I sent him a picture of the three of us wearing matching leather cowboy hats and smiling in front of a blue backdrop. Underneath it in small handwriting I wrote, "Do you remember this?" About a month later he wrote back, and all he said was, "No. But I wish I did."