

## Stories and Storerooms

As we drove away from the campground, conversation immediately turned to reflection. The rest of the youth group had crowded on the bus back to the city, but Griff, a leader who lived near my brother and me, had offered us a ride home. Coasting across the flat, rural roads, he began, “so, what was your best memory?”

Our first question upon leaving is always, inevitably, of what we’ve finished. We pick up the book we’ve just written and begin to choose which pages to dog-ear. Sitting in the passenger seat, I deliberated. I shifted against the armrest and asked, “Isn’t it weird how we just left, like it just ended, but already it’s ‘memories?’”

Maybe reminiscing begins even before we leave, though. We choose experiences that lend themselves well to memory, following paths whose landscapes will unfurl in our minds in the most scenic of ways. We primp not only for each other, but for cameras and for Facebook. The promise of memory tinges and taints our habits. It serves as a warning: *you will remember this*. It lingers in the back of my mind, and I can’t help but seek to please my future self, asking *will I be proud of this?* Even as I act I make mental notes; *who will love this story? What will this mean?* The asphalt stretched into the pale February sky, and I began, “last night, we were walking back from dinner...”

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When we are young, we play “Memory,” the game when we flip over two cards at once and win if they match. Wheelbarrow, balloon, smiley face, chicken, balloon, wheelbarrow: this game tests our short-term visual encoding skills, a subdivision of our semantic memory. I’ve never been very good at it. My strength lies, rather, in episodic memory, which allows us to recall autobiographical events. Episodic memory consists of the stories we tell and the

experiences that shape us; in short, we use it to reminisce. And reminiscing, at its best, far surpasses any series of home videos or online photo album. We whip it out constantly, depicting even the days when we left the camera in the car or when technology failed to depict the full splendor of a sunset or a smile.

More than anything, memories draw us together, both in sharing and creating. An old anecdote, shared with a new friend, fosters intimacy, because of how thoroughly our pasts form us. We can trace everything about ourselves back to stories: “I don’t smoke because my grandfather *whatever*”; “I’ve loved jazz since *whenever*”; or “you remind me of my *whoever*.” Nostalgia brings about vulnerability, so memories build relationships.

Old friendships, especially, find their roots in recollection. My older sister and I communicate primarily through memories. For sixteen years, until she left for college this fall, Allison and I shared a bedroom. We’ve spent late nights trading tales about hilariously awkward conversations or recalling childhood antics. With others, shared memories are our best stories, and we tell them together. We sit cross-legged on a friend’s bed, or gesture wildly while pacing our kitchen; I rush to call out a missed detail, or to deliver a punchline as I feel best. I’m terrible at background, so she usually spins most of the narrative. She protests when I interject, but I always do.

When my sister left for college, I continued to store memories for her. After a weekend away with friends, I sent her an email of anecdotes, attempting to capture the poignant and the comical, sketching characters with strings of associations and idiosyncratic minutiae. Most of our stories we return to again and again, until I begin retelling one and Allison nods along, rolling her eyes and reciting my favorite parts. Memories transcend even our occasional hostility: any conversation beginning with “remember that time?” quickly arouses guffaws.

The two of us have perfected reminiscing for any occasion. If it's an art, we're its primary patrons, its masters and its critics: we muse over each other's versions of anecdotes, tweaking delivery and scope of detail. If a religion, we are its high priests, knowing which memories best suit the rites of the moment. Everyone struggles with recounting graver tales, but Allison has learned to work them in. When we've left one too long untouched, we save it from obsolescence with a giggle and "you know what we haven't talked about lately?" The job calls for thoroughness: we notice the dust-gathering tributes and the neglected punchlines. We are archivists, reporters, librarians, historians.

All acts of storage eventually grow futile, though. Every few years, my physical collections of hoarded objects begin to collapse around me. I wake up and find myself enveloped by countless ticket stubs, broken earrings, unfinished sketches, half-written cards. The most precious of keepsakes can devolve into squalor, and despite our vigilance, we can't keep everything. Like single socks and toothless combs, memories accumulate. Then, inevitably, they accumulate dust.

Because of my fear of forgetting, I try to record even the most trivial moments. For almost three years, from November of 2005 to August of 2008, I wrote in a journal every day. Some days I covered twenty pages; others, I scribbled only a line—"too busy, can't write tonight"—with my left hand, while turning to flip off the light with my right. It worked. A cardboard box in my bedroom holds about fifteen notebooks, filled with pink-pen rambling and loopy tweeny-bopper doodles, and I could read about anything that I then found important. I even know the days I missed, how on June 21, 2006 I didn't realize that I'd forgotten to write.

But I haven't gone back to those notebooks. Somehow, in writing them, I missed the point, because they hold memories I now don't care to relive. Embarrassingly naïve tirades on

sexism accompany gushing adulations of adorable boys, and most of my sentiments are swaddled in cliché. I didn't record everything, of course, and I wonder sometimes about what I didn't. Maybe those undocumented moments could say more about me than countless vapid journal entries. No process is exhaustive: my ravenous hoarding failed.

Perhaps such a failing is due more to my own fickleness than to any inherent flaw of memory: am I just doing it wrong? I ask myself that question when I realize I don't have any good reason to keep reminiscing. I stock stories like loaves of bread and gallons of water, waiting for some unnamed disaster that will confine me in my mind, leaving me to starve but for what I've kept. But when calamity strikes, I may well find I've stored the wrong things. I can't tell what will nourish me. I know little of this strange health. I may refer to "learning from past mistakes," but many of my favorite memories lack any discernable lesson. I don't know why I fear forgetting. I remember greedily, snatch fragments of memory for memory's sake. I hunger for memories. I always crave more.

So here's the fatal pitfall: while we always remember what we want to remember, we may not remember the right things. Preciousness diminishes over time. There's no way, either, to grasp what we've forgotten, because memory can't tell us what we don't already know. It's not a reel of film, ready at any moment for instant replay. There are no books of forgotten photographs to uncover. In this way, memory is damning. No matter how we preserve it, memory is rarely reliable.

People often compare memory to film; we replay moments, we take "mental pictures." In the Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling's characters re-experience past incidents by physically drawing them out of their minds and diving in. For them, memory is a storage room. In reality,

though, it's more like a flimsy cassette tape. Memory is as transient as it is inevitable: we can't call to mind every mundane moment, or even every tremendous one.

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After I began telling my first story, gesturing madly from the cramped front seat, Griff, my brother and I spent most of the two-hour car trip recounting our favorite moments of the weekend. We told them for each other, unfolding each experience in brilliant panorama. I related stories poignant and side-splitting, and they reacted accordingly.

We're always glad to employ memory to build rapport, as communication more straightforward than any *how-do-you-feel*. I knew, though, that this exchange would also form the basis for countless future rememberings. I knew all the tales would grow worn: if you want to remember a moment, keep retelling it. The vignettes from the front seat of the Honda remain the most vivid; I work them into conversation, or introduce them during lulls.

I hold my chronicles as dear, invaluable. But I can't say how I'll think of them in a year or a decade. Memory is seductive, but forever the traitor. Few can handle such unabashed devotion. If you chose, regardless, to delve into reminiscence, be warned as you begin: you're probably forgetting something.