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09/04/2014

The Exhaustion of Memory

As I sit here writing this, I am not quite sure if this is a memory or the memory of a memory. It is one of those places one keeps going back to in their mind, trying to make more out of it, trying to remember what is missing, but making up those pieces instead. I am not sure now if this is something that has been completely made up, or at least has been altered by my present emotions, by the understanding of events or found sense of gravity certain situations should have. I cannot even say confidently that these feelings are genuine, or if maybe, I have been trained to feel it, learned that certain events deserve certain emotions. As I grew older others taught me what should be, how it is heartless not to be touched at the sight of sickness, or be happy during Christmas, or your Birthday. Parents, aunts, uncles, friends, parents of friends, and even books and movies present all sorts of examples of how to fit in emotionally, how not to be that compassionless stranger that is exiled from all human contact due to his/her coldness. It makes me question the nature of my emotions, the contrast between what my memory tells me, and what reason tells me I should have felt. Right now, I think I must have felt anguished, concerned at least, but as I remember, all I felt was tired, exhausted even.

I was sitting in the back of a van. It was one of those vans that your Mom had back in the day when she drove you around from swimming class to piano lessons, and then back home and so on. The van was in a parking lot, and it was dark. Not in an ominous or obscure way, but just dark. The seats were soft, but it was that point in the night where no matter how warm or comfortable you are, it does not stop being cold until you are wrapped around your sheets and protected by your pillows. I must have been seven or eight, or at least young enough to still be passionate about Barbie dolls. I was in the back seat with my best friend, and of course, a few of the Barbies of our extensive collection. In the front seat was my friend’s Mother, who happened to be my Mother’s best friend. I could not really see her because she was in the driver’s seat and I was just behind her, but I could hear her soothing voice when my friend asked, “Mommy, what are we waiting for? I’m sleepy”. She responded calmly, reassuring both of us that we would be sleeping comfortably soon. The irony is that she is normally quite short-tempered and if I had to guess I would have expected her to say something in the lines of, “Stop asking questions, and just sleep”. However, I think she must have been tired too.

I cannot remember how much time we were there waiting, it must have been quite long though. Through the window one could probably see a glimpse, if not all of the Hospital building, and immense red brick building, half-hidden by the night clouds. Hospital is such a loaded word. When I hear it now it gives me an un-easy feeling. Just the word inspires anguish, or loss, concern to say the least. However, at the time, I felt nothing at all. Maybe I simply did not understand the situation, did not know what it implicated.

My Father was having an operation for a brain tumor. If it had happened today there is no question I would be more than devastated. I cannot even allow myself to invite the thought, but when I look back to that day, I still remember feeling nothing. I do not think I even associate the memory to the operation. It is a time that my parents still talk about rarely, something I dare not to bring up. All I hear from time to time is my Mother saying with heavy eyes, “Today is the anniversary of your Dad’s operation”, followed by her holding on to his arm, and an uncomfortable silence of reflection that is quickly broken up by awkward small talk. Luckily, everything turned out for the best. There was no loss except from my Father’s sense of smell, which is minimal in the scheme of what could have been. I do not even dare to say it, even less to think what could have been the outcome of that night. It was as if nothing had happened, yet, everything could have happened, everything could have changed.

I think back to that time where I still wore two ponytails with excitement, that time where I could observe things with innocence, without judgment, and without the thought of the future weighing upon me. I used to think that my stuffed panda bear was God. Some time after, I realized he wasn’t, and stopped believing in God. Not in a tragic way, but in the way that I chose to believe in myself instead. However, those days were simpler, the days when everything was more authentic, where emotions were spontaneous and not fabricated. There was no pressure of emotions, no pressure of the future. As I said, it might just be that my memory is altered, or that I simply did not understand what was going on, but what I remember was that I was tired. So, so tired.

I look back to when he shaved his hair off. We had a lot of people over at the house, and to me, it felt like a party. I cannot remember anyone being particularly gloomy. Maybe, they were just trying to be strong for him, but all I know is I did not see anyone cry. It actually seems like a pleasant picture in my head, and I loved touching his baldness. It is strange to think that if I see hairless people now walking down the street my immediate reaction is to feel sympathy, and almost a sort of pity. Yet, when it was my Dad who walked around in caps and hats, there was no sympathy, no pity. I cannot even associate him with the images of those who are “victims” of an illness. At least in my eyes, he was never *that* person, and most of them, I am sure, are not *that* person. Those ideas and images we make up the ill to be, is just a series of discourses that simplify life by categorizing and generalizing; it is just another story we tell ourselves. Maybe, my memories lie to me, and I was devastated and preoccupied out of my mind. Maybe, I just do not want to remember, but in all truth, I don’t think that is so. I think I would remember pain more easily.

However, there is nothing quite like trying to look back at life through those un-pretending eyes. There is so little that should be, or must be. The eyes of my childhood simply absorbed the world around me. There was nothing more to smells, or tastes, or touch, they all evoked an immediate response of either embracing or rejecting. Everything was curiosity, and “good or bad” was an instinct, not a rule. Like the bowls of sugar my Grandmother used to give me behind my Mother’s back, or my obsession for molding clay until there were no imperfections, or how I hated, and still do terribly despise the smell of oranges. No one ever told me to react to those things the way I did, I never thought about it twice, it was just natural, instinctive, unlike emotions. Emotions, that we condemn to simplified objectification in order not to have to deal with their complexity, not to have to try too hard to understand them, and therefore, not to have to try to really understand others.

Even though my memory of that night in the van might just be half recollection, half illusion; that is how I remember that time of my life. I remember how happy I was to have my Barbie with me, and the panda bear that I worshiped so dearly, the smiling faces of my parent’s friends, the smoothness of the clay between my fingers, and the combination of crunching and melting of sugar in my mouth. I remember the pride and guilt that came with mischief, the absurdity and disappointment of Birthdays, and how stuffy Christmas always was, although there was nothing better than the sound of wrapping paper being torn because it meant (what seemed to be) an endless amount of gifts. I remember being cold, and being warm, and the comfort of my bed, and how when I was tucked in, my blankets would hug me into a deep sleep. However, I cannot remember feelings, I cannot remember melancholy or preoccupation. I remember, above all, how tired I was. Exhausted even.