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## ***Memories Fade***

*Aetna Creative Nonfiction Undergraduate Prize*

Overgrown grass droops onto the tar driveway scarred by narrow fissures. Thick and tall stalks are darkened by the shadows of trees whose branches stab at the decaying home; its green and white paint chips away, revealing the harsh blackened frame beneath. The garage door creaks and groans as it rigidly slides up. But now it is motionless like the rest of the home, like the stairs and balcony breaking away from the core, as if trying to flee. Dust and grime covers the windows, spreading to the loose shingles and lopsided gutters. The stairs, the chimney, even the mailbox are barely visible within the weeds and fallen branches. Raspberries once grew somewhere in the yard, but they are now gone, killed by the invading growth. Soon the leaves will fall. Autumn, and all will be buried in orange and yellow. Red.

*Someday. Someday soon we'll go on a fishing trip together, just the two of us. Uncle Jim and his nephew, a few days out at sea, on one of those huge boats. Do you know the kind? A deep-sea fishing ship. I went on one when I was younger. We'll go for a weekend. Would you like that?*

Of course I would, but I know it will never happen. I don't tell my uncle I know. I just nod, smile, pretend to believe his words. I want to believe.

The kitchen floor is recently polished. A fresh scent of lemon lingers in the air as outside, apples sway from their tree in the newly cut lawn. My uncle, a hulking figure wearing thick-lens glasses and a bulging button-up blue shirt, leans over the table, gorging on apple pie just cooked by my grandmother. The shining iron fence, the trimmed tree with bright red apples, the green painted house all seem suburban television-show-perfect. Even the thorny tree at the center of the lawn looks somehow inviting. Most of all, my Uncle Jim looks like a kind, happy man enjoying himself with family.

That's how it used to look, over ten years ago. Before my grandma died, before my uncle's mental collapse. I don't like to consider him crazy. The word sounds hurtful, but it's sometimes difficult to describe him any other way. You could say he lives in his

own world, with his own thoughts and visions.

*You're my favorite nephew. You know that? My little Mikey, a one of a kind. Do you still remember when you ran around the lawn calling me Unca? Or when you used the blocks with letters on them and spelled out words? Dog, cat, house. You ran in circles around the apple tree, then you climbed it and made me pull you down. You did it again and again, and I'm pretty sure you could get down by yourself.*

I do remember. I remember calling him Unca. I remember sitting in the dark basement, surrounded by at least a dozen fish-tanks. My uncle loved his fish. He spent all his money on them, hundreds of tropical fish and tanks of all sizes, jugs of water and spare fish equipment filling the basement and garage. Tank-lights provided the only glow to pierce the darkness in the windowless basement. That, and the television as we watched cartoons. Recorded *Looney Tunes* and other classics. We laughed. We smiled. I'm pretty sure Uncle Jim enjoyed them as much as I did, even if I was just a little older than ten.

He still tells me the same stories, asks me the same questions. It's almost as if time hasn't passed for him.

*I remember when you were this big.* He holds his hand at his waist to demonstrate. He has done this almost every time I have seen him in the past decade.

We never journeyed on our deep-sea fishing trips, but we did hike into the depths of the Algen Heights woods. A little neighborhood in Ledyard, Connecticut that overlooks the river. The houses rest on a hill that climbs above the water. Small houses and narrow driveways, tidy lawns and fresh coats of paint. A lot of senior citizens. It seems most people don't leave Algen Heights until death forces them away. My uncle is no different.

He and I fished to the east of Algen Heights, hopping over the guardrails and traveling into the woods on narrow path. Spring, and we trudged through mud up to our thighs, crossed streams on fallen trunks, until finding those elusive pockets of deeper water where trout bred. Rainbow trout, dinner when we returned to my grandma, covered in mud. She always frowned at us and shook her head because of the mud we tracked through the kitchen. I was young then, around ten or twelve during the last trip. I never thought to feel bad about trekking mud through my grandma's kitchen. I was too excited about dinner.

*Still playing the piano? How long now? Twelve years? Wow, I'll have to come over soon and listen to you play. I'd really like to hear that. I'll bring my flute and we can play together, just the two of us. I really want to hear you play. Maybe you could record something for me.*

I still practice piano, but Uncle Jim has never heard. He rarely leaves his home, and I don't want to record a CD for him when he refuses to tell me the truth. Maybe I'm selfish. Maybe he's incapable of speaking the truth. I don't know. Sometimes I sit at the piano, stroking the keys while staring out of the large front window of my home, at the stairs. I imagine Uncle Jim ascending those stairs, nodding his head to the song, smiling because he enjoys the melody. He finally hears me play, and together we share our love for music. He carries his flute at his side, already hearing his own notes inside his head. The image has yet to become reality.

My uncle has never been a man you would consider normal. He's always been a strange man, but in a kind, quirky way. I spent a good deal of my childhood at my grandma's house, where my uncle still lives. My grandma does not. She passed away due to a blood clot. A doctor accidentally dislodged the blood clot from her leg. It went to her heart. An error, and it killed her. About twelve years ago now.

*Which Christmas tree do you like? This one? Well, it's not too big. It's a good size. A good tree. Let's take it home and decorate it. All the decorations are in the attic. We'll put on Christmas cartoons, you, me, and grandma. We'll decorate the tree and eat cookies. Maybe some hot cocoa.*

With the death of my grandmother, visits to what is now my uncle's house became less and less frequent. As much as I try to hold onto the memories, they begin to fade.

Snow falls past the window as we decorate the tree in bright red and gold and silver bulbs. Some are made of glass, but Uncle Jim lets me touch them anyway. He trusts my child hands to adorn the tree. We stand back and marvel at the glistening tree standing before the window. Snow falls outside.

Me sleeping in my grandma's bed. Her jewelry box plays a haunting melody, faint yet sharp so it passes through the pillows and into my ears. She's still alive. I'm still young. A spongy, diapered doll rests on the floor beside the bed. It has always frightened me, its plastic eyes blue and piercing, one of its arms hanging off. A nightlight glows on the wall. A luminous cross, and Jesus kneels below it, praying. I now wonder what he was praying for, his face in such anguish, the cross in a garden.

Uncle Jim and I watch home videos. I'm still a child, not entirely understanding the history on the screen before me. I have never seen my mother and uncle so young; they are like different people I never knew. Barely older than me. There is my grandma as a middle-aged woman, smiling into the camera as she adjusts her scarf.

I can barely recall the images, but I remember an eerie feeling as I stared into the past. There's something terrifying about seeing your family, the people you love, in ways you never imagined them. Young, different from the way they have always looked in your eyes. You forget they have a past.

But the past is now all I have of my uncle. The apple tree rotted, as did the picnic table. As for the inside of his house, no one can say what became of it. I suspect it's decaying much like Uncle Jim. He's still alive, but we know little more about him. We try to help. We call, we attempt to reach him any way possible, but he pushes us away, my mother, his sister, especially. She brought him food and coats and other things to help him survive in the home that ages almost as quickly as himself. He accepted the gifts for awhile, but over time he grew distant and cold. He stopped answering phone calls, and when my mother did rarely contact him, the conversation was anything but pleasant.

*See this? This is your mom and dad when they were married. Don't they look different? Your mother looks so young, and look at your father's beard.*

A framed picture on the wall beside a chest full of comics. I haven't seen many photographs of my parents from before I was born. I haven't seen the picture my uncle points at in more than a decade, yet I remember it better than any other picture. A white wedding gown. My father's full black beard. A brick sidewalk. An arched trellis covered in leafy vines and white flowers.

*I just can't go outside with this foot of mine. I hurt it. Hurts to walk. I would cut my grass. I just get so tired. I'll take a little break while you guys work.*

Uncle Jim tells me this when I'm around eighteen, as I volunteer to cut down his forest of a lawn, grass half as tall as me and so thick a lawnmower is rendered useless. My mother and I chop and hack and bag grass for half the day. We gather fallen branches and sweep leaves into more bags. Hours pass and it looks like nothing has been accomplished. The yard is a mess that requires days of work, a whole team of workers. Halfway through my uncle stops helping and sits down, complaining of his exhaustion, his foot. We never return. It is the last time my mother and I visit my uncle together.

A few years pass and my uncle grows more bitter. He accuses our family of stealing from him, of never trying to help him. He never accuses me, not directly. I'm his Little Mikey. It's the family's fault, not mine. Even so, I feel stuck somewhere in between, resenting my uncle for what he's done to us, for being so important to my childhood and now never seeing me, for lying to me, promising me things I know will never be true. Yet I do sympathize for him. I

know there's something wrong inside his head. Maybe he doesn't understand that he's hurting the people who love him most. Maybe he doesn't realize he's lying. Maybe he fully intends to keep promises that are now impossible for him to keep. He won't win the lottery again and buy me another video game machine. He may die before I see him again.

It's near to a year since I last saw him. February, a cold day, a stinging wind rushing up off the water. I'm driving with my friend Justin on one of our random adventures through Connecticut, taking back roads that lead to nowhere. I realize I'm near Algen Heights and I decide to show him where my parents grew up. My father's house, where his mother still lives. The house looks neat and tidy, the lawn freshly cut.

Beside it looms Uncle Jim's home, where my mother was raised. I drive past slowly, somewhat ashamed to be showing my friend such a sham of a house but wanting to share my history with someone. I know Justin cannot understand the pain I feel for seeing the house in such a pitiful state, nothing like the image my memories conjure. Justin does not share my fondness of the past, the most lucid memories I cling onto. He has never stepped foot into the once welcoming home, laughing with Uncle Jim and grandma, reading comics and listening to his pet birds chatter at each other. My history is not Justin's history, yet it still feels good to let another into this world of mine that now exists only in the form of memories. Deep down I hope some of the pain will be relieved. The car rolls down the street. I point at the house when I see Uncle Jim outside, a broom in his dirty hands as he sweeps the driveway for reasons I cannot imagine. With the rest of the house falling apart, and the driveway covered in sodden leaves, sweeping the area near the mailbox can be nothing more than an excuse to pass time. I contemplate for a moment, then turn around in a side street and park the car near the curb, a driveway away from my uncle's. I tell Justin to wait a few minutes. I have to see my uncle. No one in my family has seen or spoken to him in nearly a year.

Once a husky man who loomed over almost anyone, Uncle Jim is now skeletal and hunched over as he sweeps dirt into more dirt. I call to him from down the street. He turns once, his dusty, thick-framed glasses now huge on his sagging face. He glances at me for a moment, over his shoulder, then turns away. I call again. He turns again, this time his face showing recognition and surprise. A smile.

I might be the one person he won't turn away, the one person he trusts and knows would never hurt him. Although he never answers his phone, I am now here, directly in front of him. He once towered over me, but now I feel larger than him, wiser to the world and his

detachment to it. Although not entirely, I understand him. The real him.

Uncle Jim greets me as always, with a Little Mikey and a hug. His arms are thin, his dirt-covered shirt drooping off him and smelling of mold and trash. But I cannot back away. This is my uncle, a relative once closer to me than any beside my mother and father. No matter how dirty and delusional, this is my uncle, a piece of my family I have lost but would give almost anything to have him return to the man he was ten years ago. I still see kindness in his eyes, the love he has for me. I see those things, but also pain, as if part of him understands what has changed over the years. Maybe I hope for too much, force myself to see things that aren't really there.

*How are you? Still in college? A junior now. Wow. Still playing piano? I really want to hear you play. I remember when you were this big, just a little kid inside playing with blocks and toys. You have really gotten tall. Soon you'll be taller than me. Still playing video games? Yah, which ones? Oh, I haven't heard of that before. Is it new? I just play the Super Nintendo.*

There is no awkwardness between us, almost as if time hasn't passed. But it has. Uncle Jim is evidence of that. He looks defeated, yet, at least for now, happy. I look behind me. Justin watches from the Buick parked alongside the street. I turn back, smile and nod as my uncle starts talking about a fishing trip, how we should go soon. I want to believe him. I wish his words are true.

*You know how the craters got on the moon? I did it. They used to call me the Pancake Slugger. I'd hit baseballs to the moon and they'd make craters. I was better than Babe Ruth.*

A story I've heard so many times before, yet it sounds fresh and new, even with its childish humor he still thinks I find amusing. This time, though, the story is also painful. I am reminded of my uncle's delusions, how he has spoken to Jesus, mermaids, little people, how he has been graced by angels and the dead. I know the Pancake Slugger is only a joke, yet I cannot help but be reminded of the other parts of his life I wish were fictional. I nonetheless smile and mutter, pushing back tears I want to cry for my uncle, and some for myself. I want to cry because of what I've lost and will likely never regain. I want Uncle Jim back. I want my childhood back so I can tell him to never change. I want to relive moments that are now fleeting from memory. I want to remember my uncle as the man who took me fishing and helped me climb trees.

But I can't. Instead, I remember the defeated man standing before me, a man who does not even realize what has changed.

I want to read comics with him again, walk through the

halls of his home, watch cartoons and listen to the song from my grandmother's jewelry box. I want to stare at my parents' wedding photo and sleep beneath the cross's artificial glow. Just one last time to fortify the memories. Maybe then they will last longer.

But looking at my uncle, I realize it's best that I never enter his house again. The change I see in him hurts enough. The house's exterior resembles my uncle's depleting condition. The inside would only corrupt my memories. Everything has changed.

*It's good to see you again, Little Mikey. I miss you. Every time I see you, it's like you've grown another foot. Soon you'll be taller than your Uncle Jim.*

I laugh, and after some small talk as we both repeat ourselves, I tell my uncle I have to go. My friend is waiting. We have to go.

He tells me he loves me. I hug him, tell him I love him too, that I miss him. The words sound empty. He does not know how much I miss him. Maybe he has some faint idea, some recollection of how his change has, in some way, also changed the people closest to him. I may never know.

I get into the car and immediately start the engine. Uncle Jim is again sweeping the dirt, his head down as if in deep concentration.

"Why is he sweeping the driveway?" Justin asks.

I sigh. "He might not have a reason. He's just sweeping."

Justin nods. I'm sure he wants to ask more, and I eventually tell him the story, but for now I remain silent and drive down the street. The car begins to pass Uncle Jim. He looks up. He seems sad, like he doesn't want me to leave. He waves and I return the wave as the car slowly drifts by. I haven't seen or spoken to him since.

*Do you remember when you were just four or five years old? Grandma and I took you to the park, and you called the water doddy-dough. We never knew why. You just pointed at the pond and called it doddy-dough, and you chased the ducks around. But they always came back when we fed them chunks of bread. The ducks always came back.*