A Place to Be Somebody

I don't go back to visit Delaware often. The place feels hostile, in an inverted way. It feels hostile because I feel so natural, being there, and I'm forced to confront the hostility that *I* nurture for the place. I hate Wilmington. That's what I like to tell myself.

That's what I told myself when I was there last Thanksgiving. I was staying at my grandmother's new apartment. She was at work, and I was alone. I decided to walk through the park nearby. The sky was a gray that felt like a blanket. There was a hint of rain on the air. It was a flavor of weather that I often miss, even though I don't like to admit it. As much as I say that I hate Wilmington, as often and loudly as acceptable, it is the place that I compare every other place to. It creates the benchmarks and girders of my subconscious mind. When I call a place "dry," I really mean that it does not rain for days on end in the early spring as it does in Wilmington. When I say that Ohio (for example) is a wide and open space, I mean that trees do not always surround you there as they do in Wilmington. My sense of place is depends on Wilmington because, well, it was formed there. I can never completely cut myself away.

That was made clear to me by the Brandywine creek, when I stumbled upon it in the park and suddenly found myself knowing exactly where I was. I don't imagine that many people would find it strange to know their way around their hometown. But because my grandmother's place was in an unfamiliar part of town (and my sense of direction was never very good), I was able to draw a distinction between the Wilmington that I was returning to and the one that I had known before I left. That illusion collapsed

as I traced my way along the water, past the memorial stone with the underwhelming poem that compares the river's flow to time (groundbreaking!), under the I95 overpass, past the lone crane that's been fishing from the same rocks for 10 years, and then because I knew where I was and where I was going, a left turn, across the stone-walled bridge, up the hill to west 18th street, and to the steps of one of the houses I lived in, when I lived in Wilmington.

It was only one of the several such houses that I have called homes. But in seeing it again, I was suddenly confronting all of them at once.

The house that my parents bought soon after I was born. Where I would run to the door every time my father came home from school, to greet him, because I was that young and because I really loved him that much. He would pick me up and acknowledge me, and then go downstairs to paint. This was the house where my father's cancer came back. Sometimes he and my mother would argue loudly. At some point, in an argument that I didn't see or don't remember, my mother told him that she had to leave, to go to Ohio. To earn her PhD. He said that they were staying. She corrected him: he was staying. I came back to visit him often, from Ohio, and every time he would leave a beanie baby somewhere in the house for me. The nights that I stayed with him, he would play Sade's "By Your Side" on the living room speakers as I fell asleep. (Even now, when I hear that song, I feel like he's speaking to me. "You think I'd leave your side, baby? You know me better than that.") In that house, I showed my father the dreadlocks that I had started growing to look more like him. In that house, my father gave in to the ravages of his chemotherapy and cut off his own. He didn't die there. He died in the

hospital, a few months before I turned seven. One of his brothers sold the house soon after.

And then this house, the one that I found again on my walk along the Brandywine. My mother and I rented this house from one of my father's brothers when we came back from Ohio. This was the house where I learned how to ride a bike. My stepfather moved in with us here, finally, after three years of struggling through the immigration system. He was Kenyan. He cooked japati and rice when I came back from school. I wanted a yellow room, and so I had a yellow room. I didn't have a bathroom without mold in the corners and a wall bulging from the water pooled behind it, and we didn't have a dishwasher or cable television, and my stepfather didn't have a job, and my mother didn't have a job that didn't make her miserable, and one day when I came home I didn't have my dreadlocks any more, but . . . I don't know what concession I can make. I'd like to say that it didn't always feel poisonous there, but I'm not sure that would be true.

It all looked smaller, coming back.

There was also the condo that my mother's mother's parents lived in, for as long as I knew them and several years before. I don't remember much that happened here before things went wrong. There was kindness, and love. I know that I loved them. Then, my nana's sudden and inexplicable fixation on television westerns. It's because of her eyes, my family decided. She likes them because she doesn't have to be able to see to understand them. Then, the even more sudden and inexplicable outbursts of anger. She began to claim that there were always other people in the house, that we couldn't see, and maybe it was something more than her eyes. A visit to a doctor, and Stage V Alzheimer's

was suddenly in our lives. An explanation, but not the one that anyone ever wants. We took her home, and there was a confrontation in the living room. She yelled at my mother. My mother took me and left the house. I was 12 years old. Driving away, I saw my mother crying. “Are you sad because she was angry?” I asked, because I couldn’t think of anything else to say. “No, she’s not angry. She’s afraid. I’m sad because I didn’t know she was that sick.” We did everything we could so that she could stay home, until the night she held a knife to her husband’s throat, because she thought he was cheating with one of the people that she could see but we couldn’t. We had to send her to a home, and she died before we lost her completely. I don’t know if that was a blessing. My grandpop died three months later, because a doctor gave him a blood-thinner instead of a blood-clotter. My mother and I moved into that house after they both died.

And the house that’s hardest for me to talk about, even now. I always want to tell these stories, all of these stories, in present tense. As if I can refuse to accept that they *happened* to me, as if they’re fictions that I’m creating or events that I can change as they happen. So forgive me if I say that my mother and I *move* in with her parents because we can’t live with nana’s and grandpop’s ghosts, and that *is* the first time things feel right for me in Delaware since my father’s death. We would watch movies together, my grandfather making commentary, wheelchair parked in the middle of the room, slapping his cheek with the remote. And then on a Wednesday in October my mother drives me home from school and my grandfather’s walker is on its side outside of his room. I go to investigate, and my grandfather is lying naked on the floor. We all know how these stories go. My mother’s fragile scream. A 911 call, desperate and useless attempts at CPR. His body is cold. He’s been dead for hours. The house is dark: we didn’t have a

chance to turn the lights on. The ambulance arrives. I call my grandmother. “Grandaddy was on the floor, and he’s not breathing-” “What do you mean he’s not breathing?” My mother takes the phone. “Come home,” she says, simply. Nothing more needs to be told.

I’ve come home, but it’s not mine any more. I don’t belong here. I don’t want to belong.

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Grief came in stages for me, in almost every sense of the word.

I assume familiarity with the five stages that lead to acceptance. Acceptance is the opposite of Denial. In denying the loss, you let it consume you. By accepting that something has been lost, you can move on and let go. A paradox.

I think that what I have just said is a lie. I think that it’s a lie that we tell people who are just starting off, in mourning, because we don’t want to tell them that it never goes away. No one ever leaves it behind. All we ever do is manage, and continue.

In any case, Acceptance was always moving farther from my reach, while people continued to die. Between 2004 and 2012, my family lost more people than I feel like counting. My mother refers to it, now, as “that time that my whole family died,” or “the time I lost half my family,” depending on how she’s feeling. I referred to it, then, as the “dark years.” I mythologized it, because I always thought that it might be over, until the next person died.

I’ve learned that Acceptance, at least for me, requires time and room to breathe. My mother and I had neither, so we had to settle for something almost like acceptance, with a lowercase ‘a.’ A holding pattern. A more careful routine, like a life where the script has already been written. A stage.

I wore it like a badge, this thing that I mistook for healing. “I cry almost every night,” I might have told a friend, with pride in my voice. It was true. I would cry more nights than I didn’t. There usually wasn’t any trigger. I would be lying in the dark, trying to fall asleep, and then I would be weeping. I would wait a minute or so to see if it would stop, and then when it continued I would run barefoot out of my room and find my mother to cry into her shirt. She would hold me for a few minutes until the tears stopped coming out, and we would say that we loved each other and I would go back to bed. If I am accused of performing, then the accusation is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. The performance *was* me, and I had to convince myself that I was proud of my pain to believe that I was proud of myself. Jamaica Kincaid might call this script of ours an “event turned into everyday,” the event being the ways in which our lives had been shattered, and everyday being our attempts to manage, and continue.

We continued. My mother got her doctorate. I went to one school and then to other schools. My mother married my stepfather, and then they divorced. There was a child, for a few moments, for almost an hour. After that, there was a very small body being lowered, wrapped in cloth, into the ground. Still, we continued.

Through all of this, my family tried to protect the part of me that could cry. They would say it explicitly: “It’s okay to cry. It’s good to cry.” My father told me that, when he was alive. Afterwards, my mother and his brothers took up the mantra. They had to be explicit, to protect me from the implicit that I found everywhere else. Men don’t cry in media, unless in a quick moment of weakness, preceded or followed by some heroic effort. Never routinely. And maybe, as I got older, the times that I claimed my grief were met a bit more with “haven’t you gotten over that, yet” and a bit less with the mix of pity

and kindness that we save for small children that have lost parents. The truth is, I don't know what happened. I only know that I cried less, then even less, then almost not at all by the time I reached middle school.

Catholic school. Religion class and required sports and spontaneous fights when the teachers weren't looking. With an enrollment of less than 40 boys, my school was a tiny oasis in the dark side of Mayor Baker's Wilmington. The Mayor was already the first Wilmington mayor to be elected for three terms, when I enrolled. The renovation of the riverfront was an undeniable success. Wilmington's corporations were doing as well as ever. Yet, some areas of the city, including those around my school, saw as much as 50% of households living in poverty. People without access to jobs had to find other ways to survive. Their methods were often illegal, and desperation breeds violence. The murder rate was on the rise. Every year was the deadliest year ever, until the next.

Home was safe enough. School was safe enough. It was moving between them that was the problem. So it came to be that one night, on my way to the bus stop because I took the bus home, I was followed. I didn't notice. It was late autumn, so dusk was almost over. I didn't have a habit of looking behind myself while walking, so I didn't see them. A classmate, not quite a friend, saw what was happening, and took stride beside me. He told me to come with him, and there was urgency in his voice, so I did. He took me to his house, and that is the end of that story. A good ending.

Other endings aren't so good. For example, several years later there was the story of Brandon Wingo, or at least the end of his story. He was an alumnus of my middle school. He was walking home one day, and he never arrived. Brandon would have been in elementary school, when I was followed. I didn't know that his story would be aborted

in the same way that mine was merely paused. But after that night, a murder rate of 39.5 for every 100,000 people became a stronger kind of truth for me. I felt unsafe.

I think that even then, I wanted to take off from my past like a rocket. My grief would be the first stage of that rocket. I would have accepted it as a part of me, and let it move me, but then I would detach and let it fall back into the past. I needed a reason to escape, and now I had it. Now all I needed was a place to escape to.

This was all subconscious. When letters from boarding schools began to arrive, and my mother asked if I wanted to visit them and consider applying, I surprised myself by saying yes. It was with the same self-regarding wonder that I flew to California to visit a school in the mountains of Santa Barbara.

I wasn't that surprised, though, when I fell in love with the place.

Admissions officers apologized on behalf of the weather, that it made the campus look dreary. We found this funny, because the scenery was still beautiful enough to rewire our conceptions of what a high school could be. Horses trotted beneath orange trees. The teachers that lived on campus didn't keep their dogs on leashes. The culture was based on trust and a shared commitment to being good. The school was a dream. This was a place, I thought, where I could be myself. Myself but without the grief, this time. When I flew back to Thacher nine months later, this time bringing all of my belongings that I didn't want packed away for the move that my family was making, I felt like my life would be fundamentally different. I thought that the bad part of my life was over. I was leaving it behind, and it couldn't hurt me any more.

I had already cut most crying out of my life, so stopping completely wasn't too hard. With the thin walls between dorm rooms, I didn't want the other boys to hear me. In

part from blind animal social fear, and in part because if they heard me crying then they would know that I was damaged, and I didn't want to be damaged any more. And so I went about not being me, being a tangled not-me, for about two months.

And then Uncle David died.

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Uncle David was 94 years old. He had been ill. It wasn't a surprise.

But I loved him, and I hadn't been home to see him off.

A classmate (we weren't really friends yet) found me by the avocado trees, seeing how far I could throw them. "You should chill out," he told me. And there I was, moving to stage left, turning my head just a little so that my audience could hear.

"I'm having a really bad day," I replied.

My mother and my grandmother had their house on the market (this one was the house that my grandfather died in). They wanted to move to Tucson, but they hadn't quite found a place to rent yet. Someone needed to take care of Uncle David's estate, so they camped out in his apartment for a few weeks.

This was painful for everyone. All I noticed was how horribly inconvenient it was for me. I came back for winter break just in time to say goodbye to our house in Delaware. After that, my break was three weeks spent in his Harlem apartment, which was packed with his stuff.

I was miserable. I was cranky and mean-spirited. I wanted to go back to California. I didn't know why I felt so bad, because I had decided not to acknowledge the reasons piled around me. The silent, incessant reminders of a loved-one no longer alive.

I had been to his apartment several times before. During my last visit with him, he brought out a huge book. *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*. He was a pianist. He had been an openly gay jazz pianist since the depression, and kept it up until he just couldn't play any more, well into his 90s. I am telling you this because you have to understand that Uncle David was also David Wilson. 'Uncle David' is a title, or a figure. Two words on a page. It could even be your Uncle David. David Wilson was a man. He was an incredibly brave and kind man. "I want you to have this," he said, about the book. He was smiling. "I'll give this to you when I'm gone."

On the third week of my break, my mother sat down with me in my uncle's living room. The room was stacked high with furniture and china and kitchen appliances, things that would be sold or given away. Things that had been his. I felt uncomfortable.

My mom brought out the book. "He wanted to give this to you, remember? You should bring it back to school."

I nodded, and took the book. I didn't feel like I was in full control of myself. How could he be so brave? I was imagining an openly gay, black man in the *depression*. How did he manage to be so unashamedly himself? The other side of the question cut deep. What is it that's stopping me from doing the same?

"The night before he died," she said, "everyone was gathered around his bed." He had been in hospice for a couple of months before he went. "He was talking to all of us, telling stories and jokes, you know how he was. And then he stopped talking, and looked past us. He looked urgently at what he was looking at, and held up his hand." She demonstrated. The meaning was clear. *Not yet*. "And then he was back with us." She put her hand on my back. "He's okay."

I felt like I was going to implode.

"You know it's okay to cry, right?"

I dissolved into sobs. For the first time in months. And so I stopped running away, for a few moments, because I'm not able to cry and ignore myself at the same time. The psychological community calls it "Crying that Heals." I felt raw, and open, afterwards. I felt better. But there was a lot more healing left to do.

I'd like to say that I came to understand something in that moment, but saying that would be untrue. I continued blocking off and ignoring myself. I continued thinking that I could sever myself from my past. I kept becoming someone that wasn't me, for about two years. I traded my empathy for passivity. My self-confidence mutated into solipsism. It took twice as long to undo that damage.

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It's hard, when so many memories of home are painful, to want to go back. Despite what I say that I feel, Wilmington is not a bad city. Go in the spring, after the April rains have quieted down, and see the cherry blossoms bloom. See the cute wooden sign that calls the city "A Place to Be Somebody." Feel the way the wind runs soft down the tunnels made by asphalt below and tight-packed houses on two sides. Those houses are only prisons if you're afraid to leave, as so many in Wilmington are. But leaving doesn't mean that you can't come back. By 'you,' I mean myself. I have no obligation to return to my home and I don't intend to.

But then, that possessive, 'my,' is misguided. The tangible home, the actual place, was never something that I could own. And try as I might, the intangible home, that which I carry with me, will never be something that I can give up. Acknowledging that is

as important as acknowledging what happened to me there. I can't be myself without Wilmington, even when I'm not there.

I'm reminded of what I told my mother, when I realized how quickly another one of my aunts was disintegrating. "Sometimes it feels like a nightmare that I can't wake up from." I was referring, at the time, to being alive and having to watch people die. But it could also mean my experience of being myself. I'm tangled. I'm often lost. The thing about nightmares, though, is that they'll never end if you run away. You have to turn around and face them. To take control of the stories that you tell yourself, you have to recognize that the nightmare, this whole time, was also you. Then, maybe, you can accept yourself. The kind of acceptance where you don't try to leave yourself behind.

By 'you,' again, I mean myself.

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