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FINDING WHERE I AM: A COLLECTION OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

by

Jana Lloyd

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a collection of five pieces of creative nonfiction written over the academic years 2003–2005. Creative nonfiction is a genre that, in some form or another, has always existed, though trends in form and style are constantly in flux. Based on the experiences of the actual author, creative nonfiction seeks to present the journey of a mind at work, in a style that is candid, quirky, and insightful. It seeks to persuade its reader by establishing a likeable and trusted narrator; by relating interesting facts that teach the reader something about the subject at hand; and by appealing to the reader’s emotions, especially through techniques of metaphor and figurative language typically employed by writers of
fiction, poetry, and drama. Thus, it utilizes the three main tools of rhetoric laid down by that great orator of yore, Aristotle; namely, ethos, logos, and pathos.

Rather than exploring one subject in-depth, as is typical of a thesis, this work explores a number of different topics, as is typical of creative nonfiction. The topics include my physical quirks, especially a congenital defect that prevents me from smelling; my volunteer experiences at the Provo, Utah Boys and Girls Club; the traditions of fishing and storytelling in my family; and my burgeoning interest in family history, which was stimulated by a trip to Pine Valley, Utah—a small, rural town in southwestern Utah where some of my early Mormon ancestors settled. The pieces are united more by form than by content, as well as by having been filtered through a single consciousness. Mostly, they are supposed to be enjoyable reading.
GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Jana Lloyd

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

_____________________________   _______________________________
Date                              Bruce Jorgensen

_____________________________   _______________________________
Date                              John Bennion

_____________________________   _______________________________
Date                              Patrick Madden
As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Jana Lloyd in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including tables, figures, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Bruce Jorgensen
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taught me much about writing; in fact, I think it was in his 318 class, as an undergraduate, that I was first introduced to the personal essay, and where I first had an inkling that I might like to write creative nonfiction. It was also some of his encouragement in that class that made me think I could do it.

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Foreword: About My Essays and About Creative Nonfiction

A sure way to contort anyone’s features is to tell them you’re writing a thesis of creative nonfiction.

“Creative nonfiction?” they ask, slowing the words down. “Isn’t that, like, an oxymoron?”

I’ll admit it does sound strange. Usually we think of writing as either made up (created) or not made up (nonfiction). Creative nonfiction combines elements from both types of writing. Although it is grounded in the actual experiences of the author, it’s considered creative because the author is not concerned with accuracy and preservation as a historian is; she is concerned with entertaining a reader and making meaning (sometimes for herself as much as for her audience) out of the events of her life. She shapes them into a narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end; and the protagonist—a representation of the author—undergoes a change, learning something about herself and the world. A form of storytelling, creative nonfiction teaches the reader something, using the medium of the particular (unlike philosophy, for example, which works through the abstract).
The main difference between creative nonfiction and other forms of storytelling is that it is restricted to the truth—where fiction writers can reach out into the unknown for material, writers of creative nonfiction must resist the pull away from reality and stick to “the facts”; like writers of formal verse, they operate within rigid constraints. Only where the poet is bound by meter and rhyme, the creative nonfictioner is bound by real life.

Creative nonfiction is also considered creative because it employs techniques generally thought to belong within the realm of fiction, poetry, and drama: scene, dialogue, figurative language, and so forth. And while it is based on fact (writers of creative nonfiction often do research in addition to reporting their own experiences), it is not usually facts and figures they hope will persuade; it is the pleasure of personality and the “delights of literary style” (Lopate, “What Happened to the Personal Essay?” 301).

It has been said that creative nonfiction represents a mind at work. Elizabeth Hardwick wrote that the essay, a progenitor of creative nonfiction, is “thought itself in orbit,” and William Gass wrote, “The hero of the essay is its author in the act of thinking things out, feeling and finding a way; it is the mind in the marvels and miseries of its makings” (both qtd in Klaus 169).

As the representation of a mind at work, creative nonfiction does not seek to hide the foibles, quirks, prejudices, and inconsistencies of its author; in fact,
candor is one of its primary appeals. If the author does his job well, the reader likes and trusts the narrator because he is intelligent, feeling, and fallible—the way any likeable human being is (Lopate, Introduction to The Art of the Personal Essay xxiii–xxzii). And one of the particular delights of creative nonfiction is that it affords the reader access to the peculiarities of an individual. “The fascination of the mind is the fascination of the essay,” wrote Edward Hoagland (qtd in Klaus 169).

When I first started writing creative nonfiction I was surprised how hard it was; I thought that if it was the record of a mind at work it would be as easy to write as an entry in my journal. But it wasn’t. Creative nonfiction is much different from journal writing. For starters, the audience is different. The audience of a journal is 1) yourself, 2) your descendents, and 3) your fans—if you plan on becoming famous. Each of these audiences has an intrinsic interest in you, so you can indulge in all kinds of laziness and egoism that wouldn’t be tolerated by an audience less endeared with you. If, in a journal, you ignore the rules of engaging writing, your audience is bound to forgive it at the very least and think it “fascinating” and “telling” at the very best—the way a mother thinks anything her child does is interesting, simply because he’s related to her. When writing creative nonfiction you have to earn your reader’s respect and attention. To do this you must write economically and humorously, making yourself into a
character on the page (“Maximize [your] pitiful set of quirks . . . and project them theatrically, the way actors work with singularities in their physical appearances or vocal textures,” Lopate says in “Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character,” page 6), and you must use your experiences to have that character teach the reader something. In journal writing it is the job of the reader to figure out the author; in creative nonfiction, it is the job of the author to figure herself out, and then to explain herself to the reader (who hopes to have something about himself explained too).

When Mary Lythgoe Bradford tried to define the personal essay she decided it had three distinguishing characteristics (which she unwittingly borrowed from an essay on Emerson by Kenneth Burke): I, eye, and aye (86). The I comes, again, because the author writes from his own experiences, using the first person narrator. Also, because the essay is the portrait of an individual. Scientists write out of personal experience, but you don’t usually get a portrait of the scientist when you read her writing. She uses passive voice and other impersonal tactics, and eliminates her emotional involvement with the material at hand. Instead of “I conducted an experiment to see whether Colby Jack or Swiss cheese molded faster,” she writes, “An experiment was conducted in which the growth rate of mold on both Colby Jack and Swiss cheese was determined”; and instead of “I was so glad that Colby Jack molded faster than
Swiss (because I bet my lab partner ten dollars it would), that I punched the wall and sent my fist through the plaster,” it is, “After ten weeks of culturing it was determined that the Colby Jack did indeed mold faster than the Swiss cheese, at a rate of fifteen more spores per cm² per day.”

The eye in Bradford’s formula signifies that the essayist is concerned with detail. Mark Twain’s directive “show, don’t tell,” is an oft-rehearsed adage in the world of fiction, but it applies to nonfiction as well. Inasmuch as it is the aim of either type of writing to give the reader an experience with the author and with the world, the more detail the author provides both about herself and the world as she sees it, the more successfully is her aim achieved. An author who writes, “My friend lost the competition and I was sad,” succeeds in taking the reader through one rather thin version of an experience, but an author who writes, “My friend—Jenny was her name, and we had been friends since the second grade when she ate the rest of my coleslaw so I could be excused from the cafeteria—lost the spelling bee when she spelled Sacagawea with an ‘h’ between the ‘w’ and the ‘e,’ and I was sad, though I could not deny feeling a little happy since I, myself, had passed to the next round after properly spelling ‘lariat,’” takes the reader through a different version of the same experience. Both versions are acceptable depending on what one wants to emphasize, but the more detail one
provides, the more closely the reader’s experience may approximate that of the author’s.

The difference between fiction and nonfiction in this respect is that while fiction’s mantra is “show, don’t tell,” creative nonfiction’s is “show and tell.” The author wants to provide the reader with the detail and sensory data that will allow her to experience the event, but, unlike most contemporary fiction, which steers clear of overt moralizing (implicit moralizing is always apparent, because of the way the author makes us react to the characters and their decisions), the essay can be more direct. It includes the writer’s thoughts and feelings on a subject; it allows meditation, rumination, and philosophizing. Notwithstanding, contemporary essays usually aren’t hortatory the way sermons are; you rarely hear a writer of creative nonfiction say “and so you should do this . . . .” Its method of persuasion is to build its ethos first—by making you trust and like the author—and then to slip logical and emotional appeals into the writing in such an interesting way you hardly notice—a slow, non-painful inoculation.

Finally, the *aye* in Bradford’s formula means that the essayist bears testimony. He bears testimony, Bradford says, “to life itself, its variety, its humor, its pain and to the many lessons it teaches” (88). For me, a Mormon, this also means I bear testimony to Christ. Rarely is this explicitly mentioned in my writing; everywhere is it implicitly evoked, I hope. Because any piece of writing
that reveals a narrator (sterile, fact-driven reports don’t count), reveals the
author’s world view, his ethical or moral vision. It cannot help but seep up
through the words; as I hope mine seeps.

So: personal experience artfully rendered; I, eye, and aye. That’s what I
mean by creative nonfiction.

***

This thesis is a collection of five pieces of creative nonfiction written over
a three-year period. “Portrait of My Body, Or A Case Study in Narcissism,” is an
imitation piece written early on in my essaying career. It’s modeled after Phillip
Lopate’s piece, “Portrait of My Body,” which I read during my second year in the
program, and loved. I put it into this thesis not because it’s original but because it
marked a turning point in my writing and because it presents an accurate
portrait of my physical and mental self that I thought my family, who know me,
would enjoy reading, and my posterity, who don’t yet, ought to.

One time a friend in my writing program—his name was Matt, and we
had been friends since the second grade when he ate my coleslaw for me (just
kidding)—told me that when he was teaching his students in a beginning
English class how to craft personal essays he only wrote two things on their
papers: 1) more detail here, and 2) you’re bluffing. This was a great lesson to me,
and I adopted it as a writing rubric for myself: 1) do you have enough detail? I always asked, and 2) are you telling the truth?

Phillip Lopate’s piece does both. He chronicles all of the odd and beautiful parts of his body, implicitly if not explicitly admitting to his vanity. Twenty-four years of inspecting my every crack, crevice, and pore had likewise made me an expert on my own body. So when I went to write the piece, mimicking not only Lopate’s candor but his attention to detail, I had enough information to write a complete essay. Seeing how much easier it was—and better-sounding—to write about something I had a clue about, reinforced Matt’s theory about the importance of using detail. It also taught me I was going to have to start looking at a lot more things than my profile if I wanted to write well. The honesty of the piece taught me that an essay is most effective when it awakens a “shiver of self-recognition” in a reader, as Lopate says (Introduction xxvi). When you read an essay you should think, “That is so true,” or “We do do that.”

As I continued to write I relied on Matt’s formula of details and honesty; the rest of the pieces I included in this thesis were the ones I felt followed this formula the best. To write “A Brief Boys and Girls Club Diary,” I read up on the history of the Boys and Girls Club; volunteered for six weeks at the Club in town; took notes when I went; and interviewed Amy (pseudonym), the director of the program. I was honest about my feelings while volunteering, not feigning
benevolence where none existed, but not dishonestly villainizing myself either. The portrait of myself that comes out is, I think, accurate: a girl who wants desperately to do good, daydreams about her philanthropic success, falls short of her ideals, but grows nonetheless.

“My Anosmia: A Commentary on the Need for Opposition in All Things,” was successful because, as with “Portrait of my Body,” it was written from things I knew intimately. Anosmia, the lack of a sense of smell, is a condition I was born with, so I had a store-house of experiences to draw from when writing about it. I also supplemented that knowledge with research. I checked out library books; I went on the Internet. And I took notes of the factual as well as the emotional. When I found a website dedicated to fostering conversations among anosmics (Anosmics of the world unite!), I cut and pasted a good twenty pages of bitter, buck-up, and be-ware commentary from fellow anosmics onto my Zip drive—a good portion of which (maybe too much) made it into my essay.

I tried writing an essay about my anosmia once before, but with little luck. This was in part because I hadn’t done enough research yet. By the second time I tried to write the piece I not only had much more reading and writing under my belt, I had had a change of heart concerning my anosmia. More research, and a greater appreciation for my other senses, which I cultivated through more reading and more time, led me to wonder what I was missing by not being able
to smell. Something I once cherished as a sort of attention-grabbing trademark was now borderline loathsome. I wanted to know what it was like to smell. I asked my friends. I tried to imagine it and even to do it (lots of loud, noisy inhalations). I conducted smell and taste tests with my friends. And I was sad; I was genuinely sad. I’m not trying to exaggerate my loss, but to a degree commensurate with my burden, I was sad.

This taught me another lesson about writing, which is that the more deeply you feel something, the better you write about it. I started calling this the “authentic experience” test: unless I had had an authentic experience with a loss, a place, a person, or an inquiry, I wasn’t going to write about it well; at best it would be a regurgitation of other people’s authentic experiences with the subject. Writing a research paper, I’ve had someone tell me, is 80% research and 20% writing. In other words, once you’ve done your homework, the writing is easy. So it is with creative writing. Only “doing your homework” in creative writing includes not only researching, but living. The formula for writing: something important happens, you ask a sincere question, and you learn; then you write about it. Of course, a lot of the learning happens while you’re writing too.

“Fish Stories” uses detail, but it uses detail I gleaned from my father and my brother during repeated phone interviews. I tried to write the piece by relying on my own memory and it was much less effective; their detail and their
authenticity carry the piece. It only works as my personal essay because in the end it is about my experience listening to these stories growing up, and feeling close to my family because of it—which was an authentic enough experience for me, maybe the most authentic of all the experiences I wrote about (my trip to Pine Valley being a close second, maybe a first, depending on what time of the day you ask).

As for honesty, I wrote this essay no less than eight times in my life, six times for creative writing classes, and twice for this thesis. One time, I even turned it into a sonnet. The first time I wrote the essay I was fourteen. My freshman (high school) English teacher assigned us to write a short, autobiographical narrative on the most boring topic we could think of, and make it as interesting as we could. I wrote on fishing. Not because it was the most boring thing I could think of (I could think of tons of things more boring than that—including the Odyssey, which we had just read in class), but I couldn’t wait to tell my dad and my brother—both avid fishermen—that I chose fishing for the topic of my essay on the most boring thing in the world. What a brat.

In the story I start by walking up to my grandfather’s stock ponds in New Mexico (we had just studied the “journey” motif in class, and I took it literally), where I tried to catch a fish so I could get my name carved onto the tree where my dad carved all of our initials when we caught our first fish in the ponds. I
was desperate to catch a fish and “pay homage to the shrine in the woods” (and also to use the word “homage,” which I had just learned), and I did; the only problem is that when I felt the hit I freaked out, screamed, and dropped the pole (this much was true—I had done that before). For some reason mysteriously not explained in the story, however, I could not just try to catch another fish; I had lost my chance forever. It’s quite the tragic ending.

The problem is that it’s a lie. I included details from real life (the pond, the tree, the bumbling fisherwoman), but I also included one major detail that wasn’t from real life: that I wanted to catch a fish and get my name on the tree. I didn’t. I couldn’t care less whether my name was on the tree. In fact, I liked that my name wasn’t on the tree. As evidenced by the story. Not only did I not catch the fish in the story—the fish I snagged and let get away was Henrietta, a legendary Rainbow Trout in our family ponds that my dad and my brother had been trying to catch for years. By including this untruthful detail I accomplished what I wanted: I sealed my fate as non-fisherwoman in the family. Forever after that we told the story about the time I let Henrietta get away, eventually leaving out the part about the story being just that—a story. I loved it.

Over-dramatic fiction that made it onto the refrigerator. But not an essay.

In college I tried to rewrite the essay several times. I kept the journey to the ponds, and kept the tree as my big symbol of victory, but I changed the
ending. Now what I was concerned with was not making sure everyone knew what a bad fisherwoman I was, but making it sound like an authentic fishing piece. Since I had only been fishing a few times I borrowed heavily from my one source of fishing knowledge: *A River Runs through It*. And at the end of the story I caught the fish so I could include some blood and guts.

One of the final times I wrote the piece I was starting to realize that I could not write about fishing as a fisherwoman, because I wasn’t one. So I changed the story again. I ex-ed the journey, and ex-ed wanting to get my name on the tree. And instead I told some of our family fishing stories and admitted my ambivalence towards fishing—sometimes hating it, sometimes wanting to like it so that I could fit in with my dad and my brother. But I couldn’t leave it at that. I called my brother, got just enough details to make it sound like I was authentic, and wrote about taking a final fishing trip, the end of which was an aha moment in which I realized, after all those years, just what I had been missing.

Sometimes I’m a real idiot.

The piece you see in this collection is, finally, after eight years and eight drafts, the truth: that I do not love fishing, that I do not know anything about fishing, but that my brother and my dad do. And that, while I am still not converted to fishing, I am sustained by the stories of fishing that my family tells, including the one where I play the bumbling fisherwoman. There it is; it took a
long time to write. And I think it’s the best version yet. Maybe next year it will be even better.

Which brings me, at long last, to the final essay in my collection: “Finding Where I Am: A Personal Encounter with Pine Valley, Utah.”

Before I wrote this essay I read quite a bit of literary journalism, which is a sub-genre of creative nonfiction. Like journalism, it involves a reporter going somewhere, interviewing someone, taking notes, and writing up “the facts.” However, unlike journalism, which is usually brief and ostensibly objective, literary journalism is lengthy—sometimes book length—and allows for the author’s reactions to the material (i.e., subjectivity). As Norman Sims said, “standard reporting hides the voice of the writer, but literary journalism gives that voice an opportunity to enter the story” (3).

When I decided to write an essay on Pine Valley—a small, rural town in Southwestern Utah that my ancestors helped settle in the mid 19th century—I wanted it to be a piece of literary journalism. My original goal was to go there; stay for a week; read everything I could about its history; talk to everyone I could, from my relatives to the campers in the nearby Dixie National Forest Campground; and come away with a character sketch of the valley. Some sort of really really ridiculously intelligent commentary on the evolution of the town
and maybe on the evolution of towns in general. Pine Valley à la Mike Wallace and Barbara Walters.

The essay is nothing like this. Because I only spent five days in the valley, and because I am a mild agoraphobe, I had a hard time talking to anyone; I could barely leave the house. I found it easier to go hiking in the mountains than to interview my Uncle Erle on what it was like to be on the town irrigation committee; and to stay inside and read books on my great-great-great grandfather William Snow than to ask the owner of the one restaurant in town to tell me what brought him to Pine Valley.

When I got back home I thought I was ruined. I couldn’t write the piece of literary journalism I wanted. But I had done an awful lot of reading, and I had found a new love for my ancestors and the place, and I needed to write something for my thesis or I wasn’t going to graduate. So I started writing. And writing some more. And I crossed it out and wrote it again. And that went on for a couple of months. I finally started making headway when I remembered the second half of my old formula: honesty. I couldn’t write about Pine Valley the town, like the expert that I wasn’t, but only about Pine Valley the place I was starting to know and love, with all of the things I was starting to know and love about it. So the piece became the only thing it realistically could be: the tale of how I came to get interested in my family history and in Pine Valley through a
trip there that was intended to be something else, but ended up being only that. 
That was the authentic experience I had had, and that was the experience I had
details with which to write about, and that was the piece I wrote. It’s not perfect,
and I wish it were better, because it means so much to me, but I think that even
with all its faults, it’s enjoyable, because it does mean so much to me, and you can
see that in the piece.

In addition, while it wasn’t the piece of literary journalism I originally had
in mind (realistically there was no way it could be—literary journalists often
spend months, even years in a place to provide an accurate description of it), it
did benefit from something the literary journalists taught me: how to serve as a
travel guide for the reader, combining my expectations, experiences, and
reactions with dialogue, scene, and historical research. It also taught me that it
was OK to make my intentions and actions as a writer transparent in the piece:
rather than writing about the town as if I were omniscient and already knew
everything about it, I allowed the narrator in the piece (a characterization of me)
to admit the gaps in her knowledge and teach the reader along with herself.
Moreover, I didn’t hide the fact that I used a tape recorder, read books, and
interviewed people. The narrator is someone visiting an unfamiliar place, doing
research, and taking notes—with the intention of writing about it. A common
narrator in literary journalism.
The literary journalists taught me about something else important: the symbolism of fact.

As literary journalists immerse themselves in a culture, a place, or an event, they record the facts and the details of their experience. Then they report them to an audience. The accumulation of these details has the effect of making the reader feel like she’s been to the place and lived through a little of what the author has lived through. And what’s more, the details begin to accrue symbolic meaning. David Quammen, a literary journalist, wrote about this process: “I always called it synecdoche. Which is an idea disguised as a fact. It has to be a fact first and appreciated as a fact. Then the aftertaste has symbolism” (qtd in Sims 8). And John McPhee said that he “buffs and polishes a fact until it reflects a greater reality” (qtd in Sims 8). After reading this, mulling around with it for a while, and doing some more reading and some more writing, I began to see what they meant.

I remember the first time I realized, consciously, a fact had taken on symbolic meaning. I was reading a piece that, appropriately enough, John McPhee had written, on his mother. He starts off the essay with the simple writing formula of details and honesty. Instead of saying, “My mother was so
great, she loved us so much, and ours was a loving relationship,” he starts with,
“It has been alleged that when I was in college [my mother] heard that I had stayed up all night playing poker and wrote me a letter that used the word ‘shame’ forty-two times. I do not recall this” (80).

After giving the reader example after example of his mother’s not always perfect, but still loving ways, he does not end with “the moral of the story is that moms are great and we should all appreciate our own more,” which might work in didactic, but not in most creative, writing.

Instead, he relates one more experience, about his mother taking him to La Guardia Field in the dead of winter to watch airplanes, because she knows how much he loves them. While there she buys him a toy parachute packed into a black, rubber ball. When thrown into the air, the ball releases the parachute. “It was a wonderful device,” McPhee writes:

If you threw it high into the air, the string unwound and the parachute blossomed. If you sent it up with a tennis racquet, you could put it into the clouds. Not until the development of the ten-megabyte hard disk would the world know such a fabulous toy.

Folded just so, the parachute never failed. Always, it floated back to you—silky, beautifully—to start over and float back again. Even if
you abused it, whacked it really hard—gracefully, lightly, it floated
back to you. (82)

And that’s where he ends. No “isn’t my mother wonderful?” or anything
like that. At first I was disappointed; I thought the ending was abrupt and
unsatisfying; I wondered where the art was. Then I had one of those moments of
epiphany. I reread the final paragraph and realized that, while McPhee was
literally describing the qualities of the parachute, he was also praising his
mother. He probably didn’t mean for this to happen when he started—he was
just describing the parachute—but as he began writing about the parachute I’m
sure he recognized that, while serving its purpose as a literal fact in the story, it
was also a fact he could “buff and polish” to reflect “a greater reality.” The
description represented the sum and substance of the entire piece: that no matter
how much he abused, or took his mother for granted, she always floated
gracefully back; she never failed.

As I recorded the facts of my experiences, (not knowing other than in a
general way what the subject of my pieces was going to be), I found that those
facts began to tell me what the piece was about, and those facts began to take on
thematic significance, just as McPhee’s parachute had. Here’s an example of
when that happened.
It was in the piece, “My Anosmia.” I started by writing about when it was I first realized I had anosmia. I tried to be honest, writing about realizing, in
grade school, that I had no smell, because I couldn’t smell the objects in the boxes
our teacher placed around the room. And I tried to be honest when I admitted I
was freaked out—but not because I couldn’t smell; rather, because I was going to
get a bad grade. (By the way, this is a good example of “show, don’t tell.” You
learn from this fact that I am duty-driven, respectful of authority, a conscientious
student, and that I sometimes miss the forest for the trees—all without me saying
it in so many words.)

I continue, writing about all of the smells I remember people talking about
as a kid, knowing I couldn’t smell them, yet not knowing because I never
stopped to think about it, or care; and about finally realizing, after telling
someone about my anosmia and getting a startled reaction, that I could use my
disorder to get attention. I admit that, at that point in my life, I liked that I was
anosmic.

Then I talk about doing research on my anosmia, so I would have more
pathetic facts to startle people with; then so I could write a paper on my anosmia
for a class. All of this is true. I record the facts that I learn from my anosmia
treasure hunt: two million people in the U.S. suffer from anosmia; it’s caused by
damaged olfactory receptors, sinus blockage, head trauma, and so forth. And
then I mention an experiment I read about where scientists plugged the nostrils of salmon traveling upstream to get back to their birthplaces, where salmon always travel at the end of their lives to spawn. I write,

The fish waffled at the entrance to several tributaries, confused.
Who knows what a fish thinks? Were they distraught, frustrated?
Did they try other ways, other senses, to locate the place of their birth, the place where they were programmed to return after four years at sea, there to dedicate their last energies to the perpetuation of the species? Or was instinct the only thing disturbed? Whatever they felt—whether they recognized their loss consciously or were aware of only a vague sense of disorientation, a subconscious frustration—the loss of smell kept them from getting home.

Not as beautiful as McPhee’s. In fact, it borders on down-right cheesiness.

But the literal description of what happens to the fish takes on symbolic meaning for what is happening to me in the essay. Just by mentioning someone not being able to get “home”—a word that connotes warmth, safety, love, and fulfillment—I evoke a feeling of anxiety, loss, frustration, and incompleteness that contributes to the mood I am beginning to adopt in the essay (but for me, as for the fish, who are not capable of deeper thought, it is not a fully articulated or recognized loss yet). And whether the reader recognizes it or not, he too is
beginning to feel a growing sense of loss with me, not because I told him to, but because I made him feel that way.

I did not intend for this to happen; but I recognized it as it was happening, which was when I was simply narrating the facts of my research: scientists plugging little fishies’ noses.

This also happened while I was writing the essay on Pine Valley, “Finding Where I Am.” I describe taking a picture of the headstones of my ancestors in the cemetery. Writing the paragraph I describe what I literally did, which was play around with the aperture:

First I stop up the aperture, to get a greater depth of field in the picture. The valley, the church, the Snow home, are all in focus behind the headstones, one with them, I think, just as they should be. Then I stop down the aperture, and make the depth of field shorter: the Church, the mountain, the home, the valley, are all still there, but when the picture is printed, they will be out of focus. Here, standing in the cemetery north of the valley, with my progenitors at my feet and the camera at my eye, giving me a birds-eye view of where I’ve been the last few days, I envision the print and realize that this is the only view of the valley, and of my ancestors’ lives—no matter how much I want it otherwise—I will
ever get: a blurry one. No matter how much I want to know everything about the valley, learn every fact about their lives here, I won’t. It will be a wind-shield-wiper-in-the-rain blurry, imperfect view, always a little too far away, always a little too out of focus. But it will still be there, I reassure myself—a backdrop, no matter how hazy, to my life, forever—just as it is to my picture now.

I did this. I went to the cemetery and I took a stopped-down and a stopped-up picture, but it wasn’t until I was writing about it that I realized I could make the blurry picture an emblem (in this case, a more direct one than McPhee’s—I spell it out for the reader) of my understanding of the valley and of the life that had gone on there before me: blurry, imperfect, but ever-present, and ever-important to the whole picture.

This happened too when I was writing about seeing the cemetery first thing when you entered the valley. This was a literal fact, but one I used to represent how one first had to pass by the people who founded the town to get to the town, and an understanding of the town, itself.

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I said that the difference between fiction and creative nonfiction is that nonfiction writers are restricted to the truth. This is almost accurate. One question that writers of creative nonfiction ask themselves, debate with others,
and explain to their readership, is whether or not (and if so, how much) they can deviate from the truth. Anyone who has narrated an experience to a friend and added a detail or embellished dialogue to “make a better story” understands how this is an issue for authors of creative nonfiction. Annie Dillard, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which reads like a work of first-person nonfiction, was criticized for including a cat that she did not have, in the book. When questioned she said it was a “literary device” (see discussion of Dillard’s case in Miller and Paola, *Tell It Slant* 40–41).

At first I was infuriated when I found out that Dillard added this detail to her work. I lost my trust in her as a narrator. But as I read and wrote more widely in the genre I realized that many writers do similar things. Although writing can seem (especially to the uninitiated) as though it flowed uninterrupted from muse to writer to paper, this is not so. Writers of creative nonfiction rarely sit down and pen a piece from memory alone. They interview family members, as I did for my fishing piece; they do research, as I did for my piece on anosmia and my piece on Pine Valley; and if they’re anticipating that they’ll write about an experience they bring paper, or a laptop, to take notes—as I did for all of my essays except “Portrait of My Body.” They make up details they cannot remember (the color of a truck, the weather, the dialogue in a conversation); and they consult pictures, people who were there with them, and
even almanacs and historical documents. Some feel it is acceptable to combine five characters into one character, or to compress time. Occasionally, as with Dillard, they distort facts for an artistic effect.

Most writers agree there is an ethical line that cannot be crossed—altering cardinal facts—but disagree on the “smaller” things. Some stick scrupulously to what they remember, not inventing and not filling in the gaps. But most adopt a middle ground, arguing that it is acceptable to invent a little, as long as one sticks to the so-called “emotional truth.” Writers of this type believe that the goal of creative nonfiction isn’t to provide an accurate picture of one’s memories; it is to recreate an experience for oneself and for an audience—which may require doing research to remind yourself of what happened, or even to find out things you didn’t notice the first time you lived through the experience. It is also to interpret and to make meaning out of experience. In effect, it is to create a story from things that actually happened. Sometimes, many writers argue, this allows for literary license.

When I wrote “Fish Stories” I added to the stories my family told about the legendary fish in my grandfather’s ponds, Henrietta. For instance, I said that she was the only known fish with eyelids and that she winked at us, to mock us. No one in our family said that. I made up the conversation that my dad, my brother, my sister, and I have on the phone with our mother after my sister
Alison passes out on the river. Alison did pass out on the river, and we may have called my mom to tell her about it, but we didn’t have the conversation I say we did. However, we had conversations like it, with someone adding details, altering the events, and trying to improve the story. Although the actual conversation did not happen, it “felt right” as I wrote it because it had the feel of a conversation we might have had, or at least captured the type of exaggerating (sometimes downright lying) we did while telling our fish stories to one another. It captured the emotional truth.

If someone had asked me, as soon as I’d finished “Fish Stories,” whether or not it was a true story, or whether those things had really happened, I would have said yes. But as I look back at the details now I see that I made some of them up—as I’m sure my family made some of the details up when they narrated the stories I record.

Perhaps you’re wondering what else I fabricated. In “Finding Where I Am: An Encounter with Pine Valley, Utah,” I collapse a five- or six-day trip into a three- or four-day trip for no good reason I can remember (I think I decided to because I couldn’t remember what happened what day and needed to cut down the length); and I also left out many things I learned and sometimes combined things I learned from different sources, or different times, into things I learned in one book, from one person, or in one sitting. Sometimes it was because I was
lazy; sometimes because I couldn’t remember. But everything always “felt right.”

In the final scene, when Tweeter Gardner is walking me to her house in the dark
she says, “We’re glad you’re here.” I don’t think she said that. (It’s hard to
remember because, as Annie Dillard said in “To Fashion a Text,” pages 242–43,
when you write about an experience, your writing appropriates your memories,
changing your recollection of the experience forever: “After I’ve written about
any experience, my memories—those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and
feeling—are gone; they’ve been replaced by the work. The work is a sort of
changeling on the doorstep—not your baby but someone else’s baby rather like
it, different in some way that you can’t pinpoint, and yours is vanished.”) But
they were glad I was there, and if they didn’t say it they showed it. I wanted the
reader to feel how I’d felt—I had that emotional truth to convey. As I was writing
my goal was not to recreate the play-by-play of my trip; it was to recreate the feel
of the trip for my readers (I had my family in mind while I was writing) and,
along with that, to recreate my change of heart.

Maybe you are upset, as I was when I found out that not all of Annie
Dillard’s “facts” were “facts.” I hope that by explaining this upfront I have done
my ethical duty as a writer, delineating my goal and methods and not purporting
to be anything I am not, or to have done anything that I didn’t.

Maybe you are wondering why I don’t just call my work fiction.
Eugene England wanted Mormon novelist Virginia Sorenson to also be recognized as a personal essayist because her fiction was based on many important spiritual experiences that had happened in her life and, he said,

It seems to make a difference in our ethical response if we believe that at least a major part of the experience was really real—that it indeed happened in real time and space to people like us, particularly to the implied author, whose integrity is being created for us as an authoritative guide in our own pilgrimages. (45–46)

Sorenson, he said, was writing about the creation of her own ethical self, both as it was shaped in the past by certain events and as it was being shaped in her reconstruction, sometimes fictionalization, of those events on paper.

That’s why I cannot call my work fiction. It matters to me, and to my readers, that I believe most of the things I wrote about actually happened. It matters to me that my readers know that my dad and my brother are fishermen, that we did tell these stories around the kitchen table and at my grandfather’s ranch in Mora, New Mexico, and that Henrietta existed—in our imaginations. It matters that my readers know I took a trip to Pine Valley, did the research I wrote about, heard those stories about my great-grandfather from Dean Gardner, visited Levi’s grave, and had the change of heart I describe—even if I didn’t get the urge to watch Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (which I said I did while I
was there) until months after I’d been home and was still feeling the effects of the journey. And I can’t call my work fiction because unlike fiction—which reveals the author’s beliefs, but is primarily about the ethical and moral development of others—my work is about the development of my own ethical self.

In an essay entitled “Arrow and Wound: The Art of Almost Dying,” in Harper’s Magazine, Mark Slouka asks whether we can trust Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky’s account of his near-death experience. In the account, Dostoevsky is placed before a firing squad. He whispers, “We shall be with Christ”—a line from a Victor Hugo novel—to his companion Speshnev. And he has an epiphany that alters him forever after, converting him to the religious life.

We’ll never know whether Dostoevsky whispered that Victor Hugo line, Slouka says. And what if he didn’t? Well, it doesn’t mean the account isn’t worthwhile. He writes,

Every retelling is inevitably a distortion, but that does not mean it is without value. We can’t help but tell the truth. Although we will never know what Dostoevsky experienced that December morning in Semenovsky Square, we can, from his retelling, with its particular fingerprint of stresses and omissions, learn a great deal about him. . . . We can see, with perfect clarity, what he wants us to
believe he thought or felt. Nothing reveals us as clearly as our attempt
to shape the past. . . .

What our inadvertent self-portrait reveals, if we study it closely enough, is that our consciousness, rather than being shaped by a particular event, predated it. That we were, in a sense, anticipating it. That, to recall Kafka’s haunting insight, “the arrows fit exactly in the wounds” for which they were intended.

Dostoevsky experienced what he did in Semenovsky Square because he was Dostoevsky. Because he already carried inside him, like a patient wound, the “cursed questions,” he would seek to answer the rest of his life. . . . The experience, in other words, was already prepared for him by the time he got there. As it is, to some extent, for all of us. . . .

And we fit it as perfectly as the arrow fits its wound. (40; italics mine)

So what if Dostoevsky didn’t tell the exact truth about the mock execution he experienced? As long as he was lined up against that wall, and as long as he had his religious epiphany—during the event or between the time of the event and its telling, or during the rewriting of the event—or, most likely, all three—I say it’s true. Or, better yet, I say it’s creative nonfiction.
As I’ve reread the narratives in this thesis I’ve learned a great deal about who I am by the stories I chose to tell about myself, and by the way in which I chose to tell them. I would not have experienced, nor written about my body, my anosmia, the Boys and Girls Club, our family fishing stories, or Pine Valley, the way I did if I did not espouse certain ideals, entertain certain misconceptions, and have certain strengths and weaknesses. I was shaped by the experiences I had, but, as Slouka said, I also shaped them. My character predated them and affected not only the experiences as I lived through them, but the experiences as I recalled and narrated them. “The style is the man,” the classic rhetoricians used to say. Again, writing and reading these essays I have had an interesting time learning about myself; I have had an interesting time finding out where I am.
Works Cited

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Portrait of My Body, or A Case Study in Narcissism

This piece was inspired by Phillip Lopate’s essay, “Portrait of My Body.” In the piece, Lopate details the idiosyncrasies of his body, as I have done, leaving the reader with an interesting corporeal caricature. The work, I think, is also a commentary on the preoccupation most of us have with our own bodies. When I read “Portrait of My Body” I thought, “Hey, I could do that,” so I did. I recommend that everyone write his or her own ‘Portrait of My Body’ essay because one, it’s fun, and two, it provides a lot of insight into your character. It would be a great thing to leave for your posterity; that is, if they’re not too weirded out by it. Which I hope my family isn’t.

I have a mole the size of a small button on the outside of my upper left thigh. I have always been proud of this mole and used to like to wear a bathing suit to show it off. Of course, that was in the days when my thighs were effortlessly firm; nowadays, I wear shorts over my swimming suits. I have no other moles, but I do have two prominent freckles underneath the right side of my lower lip, which I’ve often thought would come in handy if anyone ever wanted to make a caricature of me. No one has. I did go to a party once where
they hired a portrait artist—the kind that sits on the street and does uncanny charcoal drawings of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Ross Perot—and had myself sketched. But he was an amateur, and a second rate one, and he didn’t use the freckles.

I have freckle couplets like this on various other parts of my body. Several spot my arms, including a set on my right shoulder that form a backwards seven. I also have a pair on my behind, which I discovered several years ago (to my delight) in the shower. Although I no longer remember it, my best friend of eleven years tells me that the first time we met (we were twelve) I showed her the two freckles below my lip and a matching set on my arm, and said that my forearm and my jaw had been connected at birth, but that the doctors had been able to separate them, leaving only these matching freckles as evidence. (The second thing I did, she tells me, was invite her over to my house, pull out our family photo albums, and spend three hours showing her all of the pictures. It is a miracle, she says, we are still friends.)

One other freckle should be mentioned, and this is a barely visible one above my lip, opposite the dynamic duo. When I was nineteen I discovered a tiny discoloration there and, always having admired Cindy Crawford, I tried to darken it with a ball-point pen. It worked, and I started using a light brown eyeliner to “bring it out” in the mornings, though after several years of doing so
in a poorly lit bathroom and then seeing it in a well-lit one, I stopped making it so sacrosanct a part of my routine—especially during the day.

I have lots of scars. One puckers my elbow like a belly-button; another, a small scar about the size and shape of a pine needle, lies like a stitch on my left shoulder; and a third covers part of my kneecap like a patch. All three are the result of the first hurdling event I ran in high school, when I fell on the second to last hurdle and slid across dirt and gravel (the school was too poor to buy a rubber track) to the last one. After everyone crossed the finish line the assistant coach helped me off the track and used tweezers to pick the rocks out of my knee, which looked like a piece of watermelon. I was proud of those scars, but my dad wasn’t.

“You shouldn’t get scars,” he said, as if they were a poor choice to avoid, like taking drugs, or getting a tattoo.

Other scars keep the patch company, which is odd, since I wasn’t tomboyish or athletic growing up, and didn’t spend much time outside “getting dirty.” Yet there they are. I’ve forgotten where all of them came from, except for the hurdling scar and one other one, which I got on a mountain biking trip in southern Utah. A boy that liked me invited me to spend a weekend in Moab with him so he could impress me by spending lots of money on me. Although I’d never been mountain biking I said “a little” when he asked if I knew how to; I’d
been on a bike, and I’d been on a bike in the mountains. I thought it was an obvious hyperbole, designed to keep us both from being embarrassed by my lack of exposure to rugged outdoor activity. He thought it was an attempt at modesty, and took me on Slickrock, a 12.5 mile trail that attracts as many as 100 biking junkies from around the world on any given day. Movies in the many Moab mountain biking shops warn novices away from it.

I didn’t kill myself, but I did manage to fall off several times (including in the first 30 seconds and in the last 5 minutes—just when I thought I was getting the hang of it), and on my last fall I tore my knee, my shoulder, and the skin covering my hip bone as I slid across six feet of sandstone under my rented bike. I had purple and yellow bruises over my entire thigh, like a collage of violets, and the sores were large and wet—the kind that won’t dry no matter what you do, and never quite harden. The gauze I wrapped around them that night became part of the scabs and I had to cut around it to get the bandaging off. For weeks I walked around with tufts of white dressing grafted into my skin.

I have a small, hairline scar on my right nostril, which I got at my grandfather’s ranch in Mora, New Mexico, when I was twelve. My brother, my father, and my grandfather told me that grasshoppers spit acid, and though I didn’t believe them I wanted them to think I did and started hopping around the ranch, trying to avoid poisonous grasshopper loogies. I jumped my way into a
barbed-wire fence that split my nose in two. All I remember about that incident now is lying on the bathroom floor with my dad standing over me, trying to decide whether he should take me to the doctor’s, which was over two hours away, to have me stitched up. My father, a dentist, doesn’t trust doctors (he saw first hand that medical and dental schools were full of ordinary people like him), and thought they would do a bad job of it, so he decided just to use a butterfly bandage and hope for the best. That night I slept by my brother on the cot; he read to me from his Choose Your Own Adventure book and let me pick all of the endings.

The last “scar” of note is a small notch on my right tibia, approximately two inches above my ankle. If I run my finger along that part of my leg it slides perfectly into the groove in my bone (I can almost hear a ‘click’), which healed imperfectly after I broke both tibia and fibula on the playground, in the first grade. I was playing tag with my friend Andrea and ran up a piece of platformed playground equipment, planning to throw myself down one of the slides along the way. By the time I got to the top platform, however, the only piece of exiting apparatus was a candy-cane shaped, metal pole. I sprinted across the platform, dove for it, missed, and fell ten feet onto the pavement. Even then I was a ham: “Why me? Why me?” I screamed, until the P. E. teacher, Mr. Coolen, put a splint on my leg and called the ambulance.
I am 5’9” and have always thought I was too tall, although whenever I say this in front of my friend Ginny, who has a 6’1” sister that played college basketball, she rolls her eyes. In Jr. High I stood leaning with one foot slid far away from my body, so I would look shorter. I still do, out of habit mostly, but also when talking to someone shorter than me. I have always thought short women to be prettier than tall women and my ideal height would be 5’7”, though I’d go as low as 5’2”. I am also attracted to shorter men—the first boy I dated was three inches shorter than me.

I am always surprised when I see myself in a full-length mirror because I am about five inches taller than I expect myself to be. My sister, who is the same height and relatively the same build as me, and who has the same gestures and gait, has often been annoyed at me for staring at her in social situations; I like to see what I look like. And although I know that I am not so tall as to be freakish I have sometimes felt it. For instance, a year ago I felt like an Amazon woman when I received a picture of me with four friends and the top of my head had been cut off by the photographer.

I have a horrible walk and have been told that it resembles a male’s. My friends have tried giving me walking lessons—pushing my shoulders back, making me take long strides and swing my arms, but for all the vigor I devote to
their exercises in the first five minutes, I am easily bored and settle into my old ways, and gait, quickly.

I have dark hair and I like that it is dark (sort of an anti-blonde pride), but it is also wavy, which I do not like. I’ve used a variety of tools, including flat irons, curling irons, pomades, leave-in conditioners, serums, waxes, and an assortment of blow-drying angles to try and keep it straight. It is also thin and so has kept me modest on other occasions when I might have been tempted to think too much of my appearance. Because it is dark but I have pale skin, I have been told more than once that I look like Snow White. This is meant as a compliment, but it annoys me since Snow White is, as everyone knows, the ugliest of Disney’s heroines.

I should mention that I have large eyebrows. For years my sister told me to pluck them, but I was too lazy to do so until recently. Now I pluck them, but don’t keep it up, and you can always see stubble. I don’t know which is worse.

I don’t like shaving my legs either, and rarely do so in the winter, when I wear jeans and long skirts. In the summer, because I never wear anything shorter than my knees, my calves are smooth, but my thighs aren’t; year-round they remain a jungle of long, dark hairs that rarely see a razor blade so much as gleam in their direction.
My face was relatively clear of zits for the first twenty-four years of my life, after which I started breaking out on my neck and jaw line. I was so upset that I applied mega-dosages of Benzyl Peroxide—a drying agent for people with acne—to my face, which only irritated it more and caused me to break out over the rest of my face. After that cleared up, having zits on my neck and jaw didn’t seem so bad.

I have large pores that have caused me hours of anxiety. I also squint and scowl, even when I’m in a good mood. I am missing most of the flap on the upper part of my left ear. I have congenital anosmia, which means I was born without a sense of smell—a fact that has saved me in a dozen social situations ("Tell me something interesting about you"), and a fact that, like the mole on my thigh, I take a certain smug pride in.

I do not have sweaty palms.

On the radio the other day a man came on and said he was going to pay a large sum of money to have his calves enlarged. He’d tried for years to bulk them up naturally, but no amount of exercise seemed to affect them, and he was finally giving up on natural methods and enhancing them artificially. I myself have never been into enlarging and am mostly into reducing: I have an eighty-dollar plastic step designed for the effort, nine videos (three Tae-bo tapes, two step-aerobics tapes, two editions of The Firm, and two of Buns-of-Steel), some
wrist and ankle weights, and a two-year gym membership to assist in the process.

When I sleep (I’ve been told) I move my tongue and lips and make a moist, slippery noise. I also like to sleep in the fetal position, with one arm across my eyes and the other between my legs. I used to sleep like this much more often; now I’ve tried out other positions and have adopted them into my routine, including one where I lie on my back and keep my right leg pulled up to the other like a ballerina.

I am a nice enough looking person, but must live with the knowledge that it is a manufactured look. My teeth, for instance, are straight, but heaven only knows what they would have looked like without three years of orthodontia—a mess, no doubt, a cacophony of teeth, protruding from the gums at odd angles, no rhythm to their asymmetrical dance. I have waxy yellow scabs on my scalp that only go away with a strong, tar-based shampoo. (As long as I am confessing about wax, I might as well mention that a prodigious amount resides in my ears too—so much so that every few months I have to clean them out with syringes full of hot water, or I start to lose my hearing.) I have drawers and bins and bags brimming with exfoliates; toners; moisturizers; mud masks; cucumber masks; deodorants; perfumes; tweezers; loofa scrubs; wax strips; ten or eleven shades of eye-shadow; ten or eleven shades of lipstick; three pencil eye-liners (two black,
one brown); one liquid eye-liner; one compact; one bottle of foundation; two packs of sponges; one stick of rouge; and two tubes of mascara.

My inner, as well as my outer, eyes are enhanced by the miracles of modernity. In the optometrist’s office, my eyes showing their true colors, they serve me about as well as two black lumps of coal pressed into my face. Even the large E at the top of the eye chart is elusive, waving like a piece of black weed under a fast-moving stream, and every year I need a thicker lens to compensate for the two worthless marbles in my eye sockets.

I like to play a game in front of the mirror where I pretend I’m given one and a half seconds in which to touch any flabby part of my body I want and have it go away permanently. Would I go for my hips or my thighs first, I wonder, honestly torn. Then I time myself to see if I can make both.

I spend a lot of time looking at my profile, from the left side mostly. Straight on my jaw is too square—a trait I inherited from my mother and my grandmother—my hair too limp, and my eyes too uneven. From the right side my nose is all wrong. The hairline scar on my nostril is too visible from that side, my nose seems to have too much of an upward slant, and my nostril is too wide. My pores, too, seem larger on this side, and my freckles, which from the front are a favorite fetish, distort at this angle. This all changes, however, when I swivel the mirror to the other side. On this side—the left side—my nose, magically,
turns up at a delightful angle, inviting awe and admiration every time I see it.

My pores are smaller and my hair falls just right: straight, and (*is it my imagination?*) thicker.

This essay is the easiest one I have ever written, and for one simple reason: you write best about what you know best.
A Brief Boys and Girls Club Diary


Today in class they assigned us to volunteer at the Boys and Girls Club. Five hours. It’s a tech writing class and we’re supposed to redesign their parent handbook, write a grant for a program to keep kids out of gangs, and make a Club website. The five hours at the Club are supposed to be an immersion technique—get us used to the place, how it works, and what their needs are. Even though I’m not going out of any magnanimous reasons, per se, I’m still excited. I’m always looking for ways to warm the hearth of my heart and I’ve begun entertaining fantasies that this will be the service project that finally unleashes heretofore unimagined reservoirs of altruism. These fantasies resemble scenes from the movie Stand and Deliver, where I play a feminine version of Edward James Olmos, minus the pock marks.


Today was my first day at the Boys and Girls Club. When I walked into the office I was met with this scene: a girl of thirteen with black fingernails and a
dog collar bracelet was digging through the lost and found; another kid with a cut lip was doing a handstand on a chair by the wall (he was in time out); and a Hispanic boy with Adidas sweat bands on his wrists and forehead was speaking rapid Spanish into the telephone. I tried using my two years of college Spanish to figure out what he was saying, but the only word I could pick out was “vamos.”

I stepped over the phone line to reach the sign-in chart. At orientation they gave us four rules: safety first, respect everyone and everything, have fun, and sign in.

There were three places to offer my services: the snack room, the gym, or the homework room. The snack room was already manned with four employees and three volunteers, and I hate when thirteen-year-olds show me up at basketball, so I went to the homework room. That is definitely within my league.

I met Leilani, an eight-year-old with buck teeth and blonde hair to the middle of her back that looks like it was permed with a waffle iron. She was walking around with sort of an absent-minded gait, carrying an egg timer and *Harry Potter*. The two part-timers on duty told me she was supposed to read for twenty minutes.

I sat down with her, had her set the egg timer for twenty minutes, and asked her to read to me; this lasted about one minute. She kept stopping and
staring around the room at the posters on the wall, or at the other kids. At one point she noticed a broken ceiling panel.

“Look,” she said, “the roof’s broken.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s keep reading, OK?” I was trying to be good and keep her “on task.” Besides, I was getting into the book.

“Should we tell someone?” she asked.

“I’m pretty sure they know,” I said.

Then, as if it was the first time it had occurred to her, she said,

“Teacher, is this a old building?”

It creeped me out when she called me teacher.

February 1, 2004.

This is an old building. White cinder block with green trim, it sits on the south side of a dead-end street full of low-income houses. I can tell the words Boys and Girls Club on the sign by the door have been painted over the words Provo School District Latch Key Program.

Amy, the director, told me that the place was built in 1972 after a few women in town started up a Boys Club in their home and the program got too large. They ran into financial problems, but one of the board members had a connection with Johnny Miller, the golfer, who paid off the mortgage. Since then
the building has been used for several different organizations. Twice it functioned as a Boys and Girls Club, but both times the Club was stripped of its national affiliation when they couldn’t provide the financial support or staffing to keep it open.

Amy has been running the current Boys and Girls Club now for seven years. The whole thing started her senior year at college because she needed a 450-hour internship to graduate. One of her professors had a $60,000 grant to start up some kind of youth organization and knew about the building, which was vacant by then. He told her to go and have a look and see what she could think of. She went exploring and in the closets she found boxes full of old pamphlets and materials on Boys and Girls Clubs. She called some of the numbers to find out more about the organization and its connection to the building; that’s when she found out about the two previously failed attempts to run a club there. She cleaned out the building, which was full of dust and cobwebs. She made fliers and posted them around town. She set up a table of cookies and punch. Even though it has been seven years now, she still remembers the opening day: October 27th.

Now she wears business suits and sits behind a mahogany desk covered with stacks of paper and a large desktop calendar marked up with appointments: presentations to schools; an interview with the newspaper; a national meeting in
Chicago; parent orientation; club field trip to Seven Peaks Water Park. She’s perky, fun to be around, with freckles. She smiles a lot.

“Yes, I remember when we opened,” she says, laughing. “Our Grand Opening was October 27th. Three boys showed up.”


I went to the homework room again today.

“Do you need help?” I asked three girls leaning over a *Where’s Waldo* book.

“No,” one of them said, without looking up.

“You can help me,” one girl shouted from behind. And then she said, “Sit here.” I did. She did long-division problems on a white board while I watched. Occasionally I corrected a mistake. After a while she said,

“You can help someone else now.”

“Need help?” I asked a girl bent over a math textbook. Her eyes were almost covered by a Raiders’ ski cap.

“Yeah,” she said. “Do I times 24 by 8?” I sat down and looked at her textbook to see what question she was looking at. I guessed it was the one with the big red “x” next to it.

*A rectangle of 24 square inches has a length of 8 inches. What is the height of the rectangle?*
“Let’s draw a picture,” I said. I couldn’t wait to explain this to her; Edward James Olmos, here I come. I drew a rectangle on her homework page with my pen.

“Hey,” she said, and tried to erase it.

“Sorry.”

“That’s alright.” Underneath the shadow of her beanie, she rolled her eyes.

“In the last problem they gave you the length and the height and you multiplied it to get the total amount of the rectangle,” I started. “Now they are giving you the total amount and the length, so how do you think you will get the height?” I slowed down and enunciated the words, as if I were talking to someone who spoke a different language.

“Times 24 by 8,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

I paused.

“Do you know how to do division?” I asked.

“I know how to do division,” her friend piped up. She had been watching us from a few feet down the bench. “And I’m only in third grade.” She smiled and I could see her retainer.

“I just remembered I have to do my reading,” beanie-girl said.

What? I thought. I was just about to teach you some algebra and turn you into the most envied egg-head in fourth grade.
“Don’t you want to finish this problem?” I asked. I debated about my next words; *Don’t put off till tomorrow* . . . sounded about right.

“When you said that you sounded like the Cat in the Hat,” she said.

“What?” I said.

“You sound tired.”

“Is the Cat in the Hat tired?”

“No. He just sounds weird.”

As soon as I left I saw her steal a glance at me to make sure I wasn’t looking and then ask a friend for help on the same problem.

*February 9, 2004.*

Kind of depressed today. My mother, who has been called as a seminary teacher in our ward back home, sometimes sends me handouts and talks from her lessons. Today I got this one, on pink stationery:

“When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives. Our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities.” —President Ezra Taft Benson.
Here’s the problem: President Benson put God—who doesn’t measure success in acclaim or accolades—first in his life, and got appointed Secretary of Agriculture. Not to mention becoming president of the Church.

At times like this, when I’m tempted to think I have to do something great to do something good, I recite old adages from Grandma (“We can’t all be captain; some have to be crew”), or summon favorite Sunday School stories, like the one about Naaman, who wanted Elisha to command him to do some great thing to be healed of his leprosy rather than simply go to the Jordan and bathe seven times.

I am inspired by Bensons and Elishas, called to action by them, but it’s the Amys that remind me of the River Jordans swirling at my ankles, beckoning me to step in the water and bathe once, twice, seven times, and come forth clean. It’s the Amys who remind me to stop waiting for God to burn a bush and tell me to deliver my people, kill first sons, part seas, and bring manna raining from heaven like snow.


When I asked my friend, who is volunteering with me, what she thought of the Boys and Girls Club she was silent for a while.
“Have you noticed how it smells in there?” she finally said. “I don’t think they’ve ever washed the walls.”

It’s their parent handbook that embarrasses me. Maybe I’m just extra sensitive to it because I’m supposed to be revising it, but the multi-colored pages are reminiscent of sherbet ice-cream and break every rule of Document Design 101: don’t center everything, don’t use more than two or three fonts per page, avoid underlining. The logo on the front cover is in such poor resolution that it reminds me of the ink blot drawings I used to do in elementary school, and tacky clip art molests every margin.


Today Leilani was running around the homework room in circles asking everyone if it was free time.

I brought a tape-recorder so I could interview Amy. Again, don’t mistake my obligation for magnanimity; it’s another homework assignment. I transcribed the tape at home afterwards and, after getting over my helium-voice, started getting inspired by it.

Jana: Are there any special kids or memories that you have?
Amy: Yes. Back when we were still small, averaging about twenty to twenty-five kids, there was one kid—I still remember his name was Chris—and he was court-ordered here. A hard kid, you know.

Anyway, it took us a long time to break through to him. I was specifically working with him, because back then I worked in the office during the morning and with the kids in the afternoon; we didn’t have enough resources to split the staff. Well, I decided to teach the kids etiquette because one time I asked them how they should act in a restaurant and the only restaurants they could think of were McDonald’s and Chuck-A-Rama. Can you believe those were the only two restaurants that came up out of all those kids?

Anyway, I had a connection with Magelby’s—it’s a pretty nice restaurant here—and I had set up to where we would go and have this formal dinner. The whole thing was based on behavior—they couldn’t go unless they could behave, and they had to meet the requirements for our etiquette class. Well, Chris really wanted to go, and he worked really hard to. He was very well-behaved. And since he was the oldest kid in the club I had put him in charge. I said that when we went to the restaurant he was supposed to say, ‘Boys and Girls Club is here. There are twenty-six in our party.’

Well, the day came and Chris came running in. He had on shorts—cut-off Levi’s—and we had told the kids they didn’t have to wear dresses or anything,
but they had to at least wear slacks or something nice. Well, Chris’s family didn’t have a lot of money, and he came running in in these shorts and he was just crying. He was just crying. He was fourteen, and a big kid then. He says, ‘Amy, I want to go so bad, but I only have one pair of pants and my mom says she won’t wash them.’ Well, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh.’

I lived three blocks away at the time, and I called my husband and I said, ‘Bring some pants. Chris needs some pants.’ So then he brought the pants, which were a little big for Chris, but they worked. And he was so excited to have them. We went to the restaurant and he was so well-behaved and the kids . . . they didn’t want to touch anything. They had two glasses and all this silverware, and they didn’t know what to do. . . . It was the most wonderful experience because they just felt so important, and it was important enough for them that they behaved. That’s what excites me about this job, because I think, ‘OK, there are one or two that we make a difference for, and I’m seeing that OK, we’re OK, we’re doing OK.’”


In the library I found three feet of shelf dedicated to handbooks on running Boy Scout and other youth programs, eleven or twelve on how to run a Boys Club—the name for Boys and Girls Clubs until 1990, when the program
began serving both boys and girls in response to “the changing needs in our local communities and society.” The handbooks date back to the 60s. Creative Arts and Crafts for a Boys Club, Active Games for the Boys Club Game Room, How to Host Dramatic Productions, Manuals of Camp Operations, Suggested Constitution and Bylaws for a Boys Club. I pulled out the one titled Professional Leadership in Boys Clubs, which had dust on the cover. I opened up to page one.

“Experience indicates that those who have been most successful and happiest in Boys Club work have possessed the following basic qualifications,” it said, followed by thirteen items. Good character and good health made the list, as did a pleasing personality, an attractive appearance, and the ability to exercise democratic leadership. “An understanding of boy nature and the problems of boys,” was number eight; energy was number ten. And, my personal favorite, number six: a sense of humor.


A tall black girl with a pile of braids on her head asked Kathy, the secretary, who was in jeans and a purple Park City sweatshirt, if she could exchange her dollar bill for three quarters.

“How about four?” Kathy asked.
“Y-es!” she said, and ran out smiling, the quarters in her fist. I looked at Kathy and we both laughed.

Another girl came in and approached the desk.

“Why weren’t you here yesterday?” Kathy asked. “We missed you.”

“I had to go to a play for class,” the girl said. “Jane Eyre.”

“Isn’t that an English play?”

“It’s got a little bit of England and a little bit of English in it. It’s sort of like both of them combined.”


Google is teaching me all about the Boys and Girls Club. The first one started in Hartford, Connecticut in 1860, when three women noticed the streets were full of boys—mostly immigrant children whose parents were off to work at the factories. Distressed that the boys had little to do other than wander the streets and make mischief, the women invited a few in for coffee, tea, and cake. Delighted (it must have been the food!), the boys came back the next day and brought friends. Eventually, the women found a building for the boys to come to and called it the Dashaway Club.

Over the next few decades other clubs for boys sprung up around the nation, virtually independent of one another: one in 1868 in Providence, Rhode
Island; one in 1869 in Salem, Massachusetts. In 1878 a prominent lawyer in New York was visiting with a Mrs. Clark, superintendent of the Wilson Mission School for Girls, when rock broke through the window and landed, with some glass, in his lap. Mrs. Clark explained that things like this were a frequent occurrence, a result of the “lawless street boys” with too much time on their hands. The lawyer, Mr. Harriman, started the Boys Club of New York and placed the rock in the clubhouse foundation. By 1906 several of the Boys Clubs had joined together to create the Boys Club Federation of America. Take it from there.

Most of the kids in the club here are either minority children or from so-called lower class families. Maybe a few lower middle-class or middle-class families. Both parents work, so they need a place for their kids to go for a couple hours after school, before they get home. I don’t know what kids from upper class families, whose parents both work, do. Hire nannies or babysitters? Send them to more up-town after-school programs? (Whatever or wherever those might be.) Figure it’s OK to be a latchkey kid if the house you come home to has nicer furniture and a 54-inch screen TV?

Amy was excited when I saw her last week because a new elementary school, in a low-income area, had been placed within their club boundaries.

“You know what this means, Kathy?” she said to the secretary. “We’re going to get that grant.”
February 27, 2004.

I helped Leilani with her reading again.

She sat down beside me on the bench with her Harry Potter book and set her egg timer for twenty minutes. She read the chapter title: *The Boy Who Lived.*

“That’s Harry Potter,” she told me. I nodded, but didn’t say anything, not wanting to encourage her to get off track. She read another two lines.

“Voldemort killed Harry Potter’s mom and dad. That’s why the chapter is called *The Boy Who Lived,*” she said.

“Oh,” I said, hoping that by staring at the book she would also turn back to it. Instead she flipped the book over to show me the cover.

“This is Harry Potter,” she said. I nodded.

She read another paragraph and stopped to look at the egg timer. She put her face up close to it. All the while I kept noticing how she was holding one page of the book in her left hand and slowly pulling it away from the binding.

My mother, a librarian, would die. She yelled at me when I used pencils as bookmarks because she said it destroyed the binding.

“OK, let’s keep on going,” I said pluckily.

When, a page later, we got to a part where they mentioned someone drumming his fingers on a car steering wheel she stopped again.
“Like this,” she said, wiggling her fingers. She squinted and pressed her face up to the egg timer again.

“Does she need glasses?” I wondered.

“How much minutes?” she asked.

“Fifteen.”

“Dudley is Harry’s brother,” she said.

“You mean cousin?” I said. She had sucked me in. I couldn’t just keep staring at the pages, willing her to stay focused.

“No. Dudley is Harry’s brother,” she said.

“If Mrs. Dursley is Harry’s aunt, and Dudley is her son,” I said patiently, “that makes Dudley Harry’s cousin.”

“But they live together,” she said. “So they’re almost brothers.” Then she added, “After Harry Potter’s family got killed he had to go live with his aunt and uncle because they didn’t have daycare back then.”


Today was my last day volunteering at the Boys and Girls Club. Service hours up. Kathy, the secretary, told me that Friday is her last day.

“Oh?” I said.
“The county job I applied for called me,” she said gloomily. “They’re going to offer me more money and full benefits.”

“What can you do?” I asked. It sounded like a pretty good deal to me, but I didn’t want to look heartless.

“Cry a lot,” she said. Now that she mentioned it I could see her eyes were a little puffy.

I looked down at the final parent handbook sample I’d brought in to show Amy. Because the original handbook was only about six one-sided pages and had a lot of redundancy in it, my group and I had convinced her to turn it into a four-fold brochure. I’d envisioned something high-quality, ultra-professional. Color. Glossy finish. But there were only about $200 in the budget for 500 handbooks. We ended up being able to buy 550 cream-colored, cardstock brochures from a paper supply company for a little over $100, and we’d spend half that printing the rest of them—in Black & White.

“It’s not what I wanted,” I thought, as I looked at it. “But at least we convinced Amy not to do it on bright blue cardstock, like she wanted.” Her idea of a good brochure was fun and colorful; ours was shiny and sleek.

“Should we have given her what she wanted, though,” I wondered as I stared at the politically correct, in-focus photograph on the front cover, with five Boys and Girls Club kids smiling up at me: four girls, one boy; three minorities,
two Caucasians. Just because we had some technical writing background didn’t mean we knew everything. And besides, wasn’t our job to make the client happy? And what’s more, wasn’t the number one rule of tech writing to create a document that effectively met the needs of a particular audience? Maybe what these parents needed was fun and colorful.

I opened the brochure up to the front cover:

_Hello from the Boys and Girls Club of Utah County, ‘The Positive Place for Kids.’_

We’d also talked Amy out of an exclamation point right there. Everyone knows exclamation points are a big no-no.

_In every community, boys and girls are left to find their own recreation and companionship in the streets. In addition, an increasing number of children are left at home with no adult care or supervision. Young people need a safe, fun place to go after school, where they can participate in constructive, character-building activities and develop meaningful friendships. The Boys and Girls Club of Utah County is an after school and summer program designed to offer just such an opportunity._

“So you’re done too?” Kathy asked.

“I guess,” I said. “We finished the brochure.” I handed her my copy and asked her to have Amy call us if she had any questions.

“If she likes it we’ll go ahead and print up the rest and bring them by next week, before new parent orientation,” I said.
On my way out, I saw Leilani. She was carrying an egg timer and *Harry Potter*.

“Hey,” I said, and gave her a little wave, but even though she was headed straight for me, she didn’t notice. She was walking slowly, gazing at no place in particular in front of her. No acknowledgment of even seeing me as she passed, almost hitting my left thigh.

I might come back. I might not. Probably not. So no reservoirs of altruism have been opened. Oh well. Anyway, even if I never do come back, even if I never do see Amy or Kathy again, even if I never do help Leilani get through *Harry Potter*, I’ve learned something from them; learned something from three Hartford, Connecticut women who roll, like red carpet, down the staircase of generations, and land at my feet, inviting ascent.
My Anosmia: A Commentary on the Need for Opposition in All Things

I suffer from a condition known as anosmia. Which means I can’t smell. Anything.

When, exactly, I discovered this, is hazy; I think it was the second grade. The way I remember it, we were studying the five senses. When the unit on smell came up Miss Gifford set boxes with holes in them around the room. She placed objects with strong scents in the boxes and told us to go to each “station,” smell it, and guess what was inside.

At first I wasn’t fazed I was having a hard time; I assumed it was as difficult for everyone else. I stood in front of one box for a long time.

“Rose,” I wrote down on my paper. No, that wasn’t right. I erased it, stuck my face up to the box again and made a long, noisy inhalation.

“Orange.” I stared at the box. Was it an orange? Another whiff.

“Peppermint.” Come to think of it, what did peppermint smell like? I guess like how it tasted. Sniff, sniff. I started brainstorming objects I knew smelled.

I only knew they smelled because people said they did.


My classmates were moving at a steady pace from box to box. I looked at Jaylynn Thomas’s paper, trying hard to see not *what* she had written (so I wouldn’t be cheating), but *how much* she had written. She had at least seven things.

I put my face closer, so my nose was touching the box.


Sniff, sniff.

“Rose. Peppermint. Orange. Chocolate chip cookie?” It seemed like the other kids were running from box to box now, fast.


I was horrified. I was going to get a bad grade.

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I don’t remember thinking about not having a sense of smell again until high school. And even then there was no earth-shattering event, no lightning bolt, no ton of bricks, no slap in the face.

Since we were teenagers, flatulence dominated our conversations.
“Nasty! Who farted?” a phrase repeated often, came up even if no one had.

A girl on the bus said, “Excuse me, I fluffed,” one day, and never lived it down. People still addressed her as Fluffy in our senior class yearbooks.

Farts could even make rank: silent but violent; machine-gun; A-bomb.

Embarrassing, hold-em-in stories were folklore: Ryan was dancing with Maryanne at homecoming when, all of a sudden, he just let it go. Even Mr. Pillsbury heard it at the D.J. table.

Holding it in the public restroom until you pushed the handle, and then let it go under the loud, sucking sounds of the toilet was a common technique. Bathrooms too close to the living room or kitchen called for all the stops: lighting a match, turning on a fan, using room deodorizers.

We told stories like the one that’s been floating in and out of my email inbox for a couple weeks” “One time I was in Taco Bell and I saw a mom bring in her three-year old son. A few minutes into the meal she said, ‘Honey, do you need your diaper changed?’ ‘No, mom,’ he said. A few minutes later: ‘Honey, are you sure you don’t need your diaper changed?’ The reply: ‘NO, Mom!’ Then finally: ‘Honey, are you sure you don’t need your diaper changed?’ The little boy stood up in the booth, pulled down his pants, and yelled, ‘No, Mom. It’s just farts. See!’”
I laughed at the jokes. I told my own embarrassing fart stories: the time in grade school when I farted during silent reading pinned it on the guy next to me. I loved fart stories. Guys were sometimes surprised how much I loved fart stories.

And of course we discussed B.O. Bad breath. Cologne that was too strong, perfume that was too fruity or not fruity enough. Obsession. CK-1. Red Door. Vanilla Fields. Victoria’s Secret. I bought my mom Chantilly for Christmas, my dad Old Spice, and my brother something I no longer remember the name of, though I can see the bottle in my mind’s eye: green glass, a gold aspen leaf embossed on the front. I asked for a bottle of Sunflower for my birthday.

I always forgot to wear it though.

Until one day I decided to put it on for Church. It wasn’t the kind that sprayed; you had to tip the bottle and dab some on. I turned it over onto both my wrists, my neck. I wondered if that was enough and turned it over onto my left wrist again, making sure it was good and wet.

“Whew!” my sister said, when I walked out of the bathroom.

“Did I put too much on?”

“You just need a little bit,” she said. She picked up her own perfume bottle and spritzed some a few feet in front of her, to demonstrate; then she walked through the mist.
“That’s it?” I said. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” she said. By this time I had a washcloth to my wrist and was polishing the skin right off. Out, damned spot!

I stared at the bottle—a friend that had betrayed me.

Did I realize then that I couldn’t smell? Yes. I think. The problem was I didn’t think.

We lived in the country, by a large field of something-or-other, which they fertilized with manure every spring. When we pulled in or out of the driveway, it caused heads to turn.

“Oh man,” someone would say.

“Phew-EEE!!”

I smiled, nodded, didn’t say (or smell) anything, but felt camaraderie with them anyway. We were all in this together. Still, I tapped at the window. How was that smell getting in here? I wondered, not thinking about the air vents. Were we not shielded even in the car, under our Dodge mini-van carapace? How could odor be such a powerful thing?

“I just never notice anything until someone else brings it up first,” I told myself, and others. “Then, I notice it. If it’s really strong, or really close, of course I notice it.”

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1 This is an allusion to *MacBeth* so it doesn’t count as swearing.
My grandmother had a poor sense of smell.

“When I worked in the nursery,” she told me, “I was carrying this kid around and one of the other workers came up to me and said, ‘I think yours is the culprit.’ I didn’t understand what he meant, so I just laughed and nodded my head and kept walking around the room. A few minutes later he approached me again. ‘I think he needs to be changed,’ he said, pointing to the kid. I was mortified. I had no idea he had messed up his diaper, and I was just carrying him around, clueless.”

My grandmother had a poor sense of smell; so did I. I liked the idea that I had inherited something from my grandmother, something that set us apart and made us different, special.

When did I first acknowledge the truth, and when did I first divulge my secret? I don’t know; I don’t remember. But I know that it spread like a stink-bomb when I finally did.

The reaction was always the same: people were incredulous and curious. I realized this was valuable information, information I could use to get noticed, to make people laugh. It became my favorite thing about myself. I loved that I couldn’t smell.
Someone might say, “It smells like sulfur out here,” and I was giddy. I put my game-face on.

“Oh really? I wouldn’t know.” Pause. “Actually, I don’t have a sense of smell. . . .”

I was a one woman circus: the eight-foot tall man; the human pretzel; the girl with the monkey tail: “You can’t smell? No way! Nothing? Not anything? Not even [insert your favorite strong smell here, good or bad]? Have you ever been able to? Can you taste?”

Then I went into my story. No, never. Don’t ever remember being able to. No recollections of any smells. Was born like that. My grandma can’t smell well either; it may be hereditary. I’ve never smelled roses. Not even a dead skunk. Not even gas. It doesn’t bother me; I don’t know any different. I manage. There could be worse things. It’s not like being blind or deaf. No, not even cologne. My mom thinks it’s from when the neighbor kid bashed my face in with a lead pipe. No, it doesn’t make me sad. I can taste just fine.

I didn’t think about my defect much, except as a quirk to play up. It was my signature, my hallmark, my trademark. Barbara Streisand’s nose. Michael Jackson’s moonwalk. Barbara Walters’s lisp. Jana can’t smell.

Until college, I didn’t even know my disorder had a name. But one day, deciding I needed to beef up my routine a little, I went on-line looking for more
information. I asked Jeeves what it was called when you didn’t have a sense of smell. Anosmia.

I found a site run by a man who advertised himself as an anosmic. Only he wasn’t full-fledged. He lost his sense of smell periodically, during allergy season. A transient anosmic. A Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde. He said it was horrible when he lost his sense of smell; he couldn’t taste anything, he said. All food was bland, like “wet cardboard.” He spent his off-season pouring Tabasco sauce over everything to try to give it some flavor.

But I tasted just fine. I detected different flavors; I favored certain foods. Only. Only what if this guy was right? What if I just didn’t know what I was missing?

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A year later I went grocery shopping and put everything in the trunk of the 1987 Chrysler Lebaron I had inherited from my grandmother. When I got home I unloaded the groceries, but forgot one thing: the milk. For several weeks I drove around with it rolling around in the trunk, oblivious to it until I drove my sister somewhere.

“What stinks?” she asked. We scavenged around until we found it. It had morphed into a ball of cheese floating in gray water. Little cheese-ball babies bobbed around it like cork.
After that I was self-conscious giving anyone rides, and I never let anyone get in the car without a caveat first; I had to tell them the story of the cheese-ball, in case it smelled.

“Do you smell it now?” I asked my friend Maggie.

“How about now?”

The most telling thing about that story is that I knew the milk was there all along. Or I suspected it. For three weeks a little voice told me to check the trunk and make sure I had gotten the milk out. But I didn’t, hoping I had left it in there. I knew what would happen, and I knew it would be a great story to add to my anosmia act. This one time I left a gallon of milk in my car on accident and I couldn’t smell it . . .

Matches stuck up to my nose threatened to burn me before they offered me so much as a whiff. If I closed my eyes in a room I didn’t know whether candles were burning or if brownies were baking in the oven. I babysat kids all day until brown slugs sliding down their legs reminded me that I should change their diapers. Expired milk crossed my lips before warning me it was sour. My roommate pulled me into the other room before going on a date: I just wanted to tell you so you know—whatever he’s wearing, he smells so-o good.

Boiling green beans over the stove one day I couldn’t find a lid, so I put a porcelain plate over the top of it. I don’t know if it scorched the plate, or what
happened, but in two minutes my roommate, who had been one floor above me, behind a closed door, came running down the stairs.

“You can’t do that,” she said, pulling the pot off the stove.

“What?” I said.

“I don’t know. Whatever you were doing. It stinks. Can’t you smell that?” she asked, even though she knew I couldn’t; we had been friends since I was twelve. She opened all the doors and threw open the windows; then she marched back upstairs, angry.

Two hours later my other roommate came home. The windows and doors were still open, but the first thing she said was, “MAN! What did you burn in here?”

How could odor be such a powerful thing?

***

A few years ago I tried to write an essay on my anosmia for a creative writing class. We talked about detail and being an expert on your subject, so I decided I needed to know more about my anosmia. Even though it had been years since I had gone onto the Internet looking for information, I tried to find Dr. Jekyll’s web-site. I couldn’t. But I did find lots of other hits, one a web-site put together by a twenty-five-year-old congenital anosmic named Max, from London. He had a few undocumented facts about anosmia, a smell directory of
good and bad smells listed by people who could smell for the benefit of those who couldn’t, and a Reader Feedback section.

Dear Max, When I was a kid I fell asleep while cooking supper and was woken by the neighbor—not the three feet of black smoke just a foot or two above my head. Taxidermy gone awry has decomposed in my room, I’ve had food poisoning enumerable times in my life, and I’ve been to the hospital more than once because of ammonia poisoning—no sense of smell when you don’t know it is dangerous in this western society of ours.

Dear Max, Eating is especially interesting for me, an anosmic. My husband will tell me he can taste different ingredients in whatever we’re having. He can pick out chilies, onions, meat, etc. while all I can taste is ‘enchilada.’ I do a lot of the cooking, and often I would put in spices because they looked nice, and then he wouldn’t like what I made because it had too much parsley or paprika. Whereupon I would ask, ‘Paprika has a TASTE?’ I’ve learned how to tone that down, but I guess I made some pretty bad meals in the past. :) My favorite foods are either salty or spicy (very hot), but vegetables are so boring—like Styrofoam, really—that I never eat them.

Max, thank you. When I read all that has been posted here and the relief that you provide for those that felt as if they were all alone, I wanted to cry!
I moved beyond the Internet and checked books. My mother is a children’s librarian, and she always told me that juvenile literature was the best way to get a quick, uncomplicated understanding about anything. So I went to the juvenile section first. I learned that if I were any other animal (besides a bird, dolphin, or whale, who also have little or no sense of smell), my condition would probably kill me. Seventy percent of a shark’s brain is devoted to smelling: it can detect a single drop of blood in twenty-five gallons of water. Salmon travel thousands of miles using their sense of smell to relocate their birth place and spawn there. Once scientists nabbed fish on their way back from the ocean to their fresh water homes and plugged their nostrils. The fish waffled at the entrance to several tributaries, confused. Who knows what a fish thinks? Were they distraught, frustrated? Did they try other ways, other senses, to locate the place of their birth, the place where they were programmed to return after four years at sea, there to dedicate their last energies to the perpetuation of the species? Or was instinct the only thing disturbed? Whatever they felt—whether they recognized their loss consciously or were aware of only a vague sense of disorientation, a subconscious frustration—the loss of smell kept them from getting home.

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Dear Max, I am so happy to have found this site! Having no sense of smell never really bothered me, but the past few years I’ve begun to feel that I am really missing out on something and have been thinking how mind-blowing it would be to suddenly have a sense of smell. Like many of you I had thought as a child that I would just learn to smell later. But in the 4th grade I had to write an essay describing each of my senses upon walking into a bakery. The whole class was going on and on over the smell but I came up blank on that sense; that’s when I realized it. Of course, my parents didn’t believe me—they thought I was just looking for attention. They finally took it seriously when at 15 I was sitting in front of the stove while the chicken was burning to smithereens. My mother asked me why I didn’t turn the stove off. ‘Couldn’t you smell it?’ she asked. I was insulted. And, of course, there’s all those people that don’t believe I can taste if I can’t smell.

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Many animals use pheromones, or released odors, as a signal to provide identification, communicate moods and feelings, send warnings, label territory, mark trails, or announce readiness to mate. Some humans have a better sense of smell than others, and some say it can be developed and become stronger. A perfume scientist was insulted once when someone asked if he could tell people’s mood by smelling them. Of course he could, he said. Another scientist said he could smell his friend’s footprints, and created an experiment that
proved it. Humans, he said, could be trained, like German Shepherds, bloodhounds, and other dogs, to smell the sweat particles that leak from our feet, travel through our socks and the soles of our shoes, and land on the ground, leaving an invisible trail of our passage. A controversial topic in the world of smells now is whether humans release pheromones that play a part in physical attraction. Some people who lose their smell later in life report a decreased sex drive. In one experiment, rats whose olfactory bulbs were removed stopped mating.

***

Dear Max, My 28 yr. old son had little or no sense of smell from as early as I can recall. It puzzled me, then, that he couldn’t smell cookies or other tantalizing foods cooking. Anyway, he has to rely on someone else to do smell checks. I also want to note that he doesn’t seem to have body odors. The man can’t smell and doesn’t smell. I do wonder if men who have congenital anosmia get married, as it seems that their bodies can’t respond to female pheromones and consequently may not experience ‘passion.’

Dear Mom, I can assure you that men with congenital anosmia can experience passion! On a good day at least. Sincerely, Max.

***
Two postage-stamp sized areas coated in mucus dangle millions of olfactory receptors into our two nasal cavities. As odor molecules dissolve into the mucus and are picked up by cilia on the olfactory receptors, corresponding signals whizz up one of two olfactory nerves, on either side of the nose, and up into one of two olfactory bulbs in the brain. The bulbs send these signals through olfactory neurons, out to different areas on the cerebral cortex, where the odors are processed. One of these spots is the limbic system, where the brain registers emotions; another is the hippocampus, where the brain stores memories.

In one test children were asked to complete a difficult task while a certain odor was wafting through the room, then divided into different rooms to complete another, simpler task. The previous odor was wafted into one of these rooms, but not the other two. Children in the room with the same odor fared much worse on the simpler task.

Some companies circulate lemon into their air-conditioning units in the morning to keep workers focused, and cedar in the afternoon to boost energy. Some hospitals have found that the smell of a tiny purple flower called heliotrope reduces anxiety in patients, and spray it in rooms where patients receive MRI scans.
In yet another test, people were exposed to a series of new smells and new photographs. In four months they had forgotten 50% of the photographs. In a year, they had only forgotten 35% of the new smells they had learned.

Smell and taste are distinct senses. While “smelly” molecules follow the olfactory nerves to the brain, “tasty” ones are taken up by one of the five types of taste buds (salty, sweet, bitter, sour, and a newly discovered one named umami, or “meaty/savory”) and follow distinct nerve fibers in the face and throat to areas of the brain separate from those that register smells. However, as food is put in the mouth volatile molecules break off from it and float up to the nose, affecting the sense of smell at the same time. As a consequence, most people confuse the two senses. As much as 90% of what people believe to be taste is actually smell.

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Dear Max. I am 29 years old and unable to smell. Today I decided that after all these years of convincing myself that I don’t care . . . I really do care.

Hi! I come from Lebanon and cannot smell anything. It makes me sad.

Estoy en shock!! Nunca pense que hubiera tantas personas con la misma enfermedad que yo, siempre pense que era la unica (que envidiosa ¿verdad?) Me llamo Alejandra tengo 19 años y no se lo he platicado a nadie excepto a mi mama asi que fingo
Scientists have identified about 17,000 different smells, though they disagree on how many we can detect—somewhere between four and ten thousand. Some theories say primary smells, like primary colors, combine to make up all of these thousands of smells. Some postulate seven primary smells; others nine. Some postulate thirty or more. An example of primary smells: musky, floral, pepperminty, pungent, putrid. Humans have about 5 million olfactory receptor cells in their nose, the same as a mouse. Rats, 10 million. Rabbits, 20 million. Bloodhounds, 220 million.

***

I was born without a sense of smell, but got it back in my twenties, when I started having kids. However, I sometimes confuse smells. Imagine my shock at finding out I was not really enjoying that ‘new baby smell’ that all my friends were going on about. I was enjoying the smell of baby poop!

I want to focus on the positive. Changing my babies’ messy diapers never bothered me. I also laugh when people wrinkle up their faces when there’s a skunk around. Watch them next time when it happens. It’s really funny. I can’t smell roses, but
I have a great imagination. When I put my nose up to them and feel their cold petals, and close my eyes, I can almost smell them.

Much like the X-Men, non-smellers have been harassed and tormented for generations. It’s time that we rise up, unify, and go to war. Either that, or just take the following suggestion to heart: Stay away from friggin’ Sushi! I ordered some yesterday and noticed that the texture was slightly different but I didn’t think much of it. Well, guess what? I was food poisoned.

So I’ll never know what popcorn smells like. Big deal!!

Probably the dumbest question people ask me is ‘so if you can’t smell, does that mean you can’t breath through your nose?’ Yes I can.

In my employment I sometimes deal with decomposing dead people and it is quite funny watching others have to leave the room.

I’d hate to develop a sense of smell now, at age 47—what if the people I like have B.O.? What if the taste changes for all the foods I like? I am not a picky eater, and never have been. I don’t see it as a medical problem at all, just another quirk.
One of the best things I found in those children’s books said that some North American Indian tribes used to make medicine bags that contained things with meaningful smells for them. They called it a medicine bag because when they took out and smelled some of their favorite items it brought back good memories and made them feel better. “Why not begin starting your own medicine bag of favorite smells?” the author wrote. “You could collect seaweed from a special trip to the beach, burnt wood from a campfire, or a small piece of leather from your favorite riding horse. Place the items in small plastic bottles or tinfoil. Years later your medicine bag of smelly souvenirs will bring back memories that are more vivid than an album of photographs.”

Most regular Ear, Nose, and Throat doctors can’t and won’t do anything about anosmia. But a few taste and smell clinics around the country specialize in problems like these. One of the most famous is in Washington, D.C. The doctor there has spent his life studying smelling and tasting disorders, and developed the first tests for rating someone’s olfactory awareness. He has a higher success rate than anyone else for helping people regain lost or distorted senses of smell. I emailed him once and asked whether he thought anything could be done for me—a congenital anosmiac with, as far as I could tell, no sense of smell.
whatsoever, and no reason to believe that it was caused by sinusitis, nose polyps, smoking, or viral infections, but rather by heredity or damaged olfactory receptors, nerves, or bulbs. He emailed back and said that they had a high success rate among people with hyposmia (partial loss of smell), and that the only way to know what caused my anosmia, and whether or not anything could be done, was to fly out there for some tests. But D.C. is on the other side of the country, and insurance companies don’t cover experimental, non FDA-approved tests for anosmics. It will be a while before I go. Some day.

***

“OK,” I said to my friends. “Line up. It’s time to see how this is really affecting me.” I had a pack of Starburststs and some generic, fruit-flavored hard candies. I blindfolded them.

“Plug your noses and then I'll give you each a hard candy to suck on. I want you to tell me what flavor you think it is,” I said. I had a notebook to record their answers.

For three of them, the outcome was the same: with their noses plugged they got the flavor wrong 100% of the time, saying they could only tell that it was fruity, sweet, or tangy. But with their noses unplugged they had 100% accuracy: lemon; cherry; orange; peach; strawberry; grape. In the other two cases my friends guessed every flavor wrong with their noses plugged and got between
25% to 90% of the flavors correct with their noses unplugged. While my roommate Kari was sucking on a cherry-flavored Starburst with her nose plugged she debated between strawberry and orange; then, she accidentally dropped her hand, opening up her nasal passages.

“Never mind,” she said, “it’s cherry.” She opened her eyes.

“Oh, this is so sad,” she said. “I never realized how much you were missing.”

***

The living room is quiet; my three roommates and I are all studying from our various textbooks.

“Hey?” I ask, breaking an hour’s silence. “Do you think that’s why I hate Asian food so much? You know, because I can’t taste all the spices?”


“Come on, it’s not that bad,” my other roommate chimes in.

I know she’s right but I can’t stop thinking about the taste test I conducted a few weeks ago. When I closed my eyes and had the girls feed me the candy, I was confident I would be able to tell the difference between them. After all, I already knew grape was my least favorite flavor.
But I got them all wrong. Every single one of them. I said the grape one was strawberry—my “favorite.”

***

As I sit here, typing this, I’m thinking about my senses. It’s only been the last few years, really, that I’ve begun to appreciate them. I have this saying written on a 3x5 card on my desk: “We don’t start developing a self until we realize there is something outside of ourselves.” Life is a process of such unselfing, of realizing that there are others—other people, other objects, other forces—outside of us, and learning how to take them in.

For instance, I used to hate poetry. It was enigmatic and esoteric. But recently I’ve become addicted. I can’t wait to go to bed so I can read a poem in the last moments of my day, wrapped in a down comforter, the green desk-lamp shining down on me from the top of the bedstead. I carry poetry anthologies in my backpack to read at bus stops, sometimes leaving the house early to have extra time to read while I wait, or staying at the bus stop on the other end and reading for another forty minutes before plodding off to the library to do “meaningful,” or “productive” work. My favorite time to read poems is in the early morning, when no one else is up and everything is still quiet. No sensory overload to distract me from the one image I want to enjoy: the poem. And is it
ironic, significant, somehow meaningful, that the poems I used to find the most
deplorable, I now find to be among the most beautiful? Captivatingly simple.

_Above the boat,

bellies

Of wild geese._2

_From the bough

floating down river,

insect song._3

How can one image, one noise, be so powerful?

***

I’ve found myself, in the last couple of days, trying to imagine smells. I close my eyes. _Gasoline_, I say forcefully, as if trying to make it apparate. Then I concentrate. I drop my chin, suck air in through my nose, but instead of smelling I find I start rolling my tongue around and swallowing, like an infant who sticks

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2 By Kikaku, Japanese poet, 1661-1707
3 By Issa, Japanese poet, 1763-1827
unfamiliar objects in her mouth to get a feel for them. Then I imagine flavors. Anything burned.

When I try to imagine how chocolate smells, instead of getting a scent my other senses jump in: hot chocolate hitting the back of my throat; the cold hard block of a Hershey bar with its sharp edges, my teeth snapping it; melted chocolate on my fingers; a cocoa-flavor. I can only smell in metaphors.

It’s like being in that classroom again, breathing in and concentrating so hard. The old feelings of frustration come back (though not as strongly as if I had a smell to take me back, I think bitterly), and I have my nose pressed against that box, willing myself to smell something, thinking if I stay there long enough, concentrate with more force, try harder . . . Or is it the same feeling? Is there something else now? Something that wasn’t there before?

***

I’m in a computer lab, typing, and hear the sound of hundreds of keys around me, my own among them. In a way, it is as melodic as water over stones. Is it my imagination, or does the girl behind me keep hitting the letter i? I know I heard someone punch the space bar. The girl next to me just scratched her jeans, and I can hear her mouse clicking. Knuckles crack. A backpack unzips. A stapler bangs. Some guy’s exercise pants swoosh as he passes behind me. If I look over the partition of my carrel I see rows of scalps—bleached blondes; shades of
honey and bark and even night; the reds and blues of baseball caps; neon pink highlighters behind the ear—like rows of colored pixels that would make a picture if I could zoom out far enough. Someone’s heels scrape the linoleum outside. A giggle. A cough. I add a sniff. Someone—I think Mr. Spacebar—echoes it. I lost part of my hearing once, for a day, because my ears were plugged with wax. Being in crowds was maddening: all the sounds mixed and I couldn’t figure out what was coming from near and what from far.

***

Here’s a fantasy of mine: a genie that resembles Mr. Clean comes out of my salt shaker and offers me a chance to smell. Once I would have thought twice before taking it. I didn’t care that much; it didn’t affect my life in any way I could see. Besides, I liked the attention. I might hesitate, still. More out of fear at seeing Mr. Clean than apathy about smelling. But still. I like who I am, and I don’t know any different. What if, as Max’s readers’ said, the people I liked smelled like B.O.? Or I was overwhelmed by smells and couldn’t tell the difference between roses and baby poop? Or I didn’t like my favorite foods anymore? I’ve read about blind people getting their sight and going crazy with sensory overload. All they could see was light and colors in motion, but no objects; they had no depth perception; they ran into things and had to close their eyes to find their way around; they wanted to go back to being blind.
My roommate was right. It’s not that bad. I’m not blind or deaf. Or lame. But I do wonder what I’m missing. Especially when I consider my other senses. And especially when I think about what I’m missing in my taste. If it’s so good like this, imagine how it could be.

“You know, in a way,” someone said to me the other day when I told him, “that would be paradise. You’re missing a lot of good smells, but there are some really, really awful ones out there. Just be thankful you don’t have to smell those.”

It is paradise. It’s a regular Garden of Eden. Nothing smells good and nothing smells bad. But I think, now, I’d rather take the fall.
Fish Stories

“Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence. I am not talking here about those specialized stories that we call novels, plays, and epic poems. I am talking about the more profound stories that people, nations, religions, and disciplines unfold in order to make sense out of the world. . . . [Humans] require a story to give meaning to their existence. Without air, our cells die. Without a story, our selves die.”


My father grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, fishing the Guadalupe, the Jemez, and the Colorado Rivers with his father, his brother, and his black lab Lady. It was not unusual, he tells me, for them to wake up at four, drive an hour to the Guadalupe, fish until seven, and be back in time for my grandfather to be to work at eight. In the summers they spent weekends and at least one full week fishing on his great-Uncle Harmon’s ranch in southwestern Colorado.

The Notch Ranch was 640 acres and lay at the base of the San Juan Mountains near Pagosa Springs and Durango, Colorado. It was called the Notch
My grandfather, David Lloyd (left), and father, David B. Lloyd (right), with trout from the Jemez Mountains in New Mexico. 1960.

My dad (right), and his siblings, with a string of trout, probably also from the Jemez Mountains. 1960.
Ranch because the mountains looked like the notch in a gun sight. Uncle Harmon, who was a geologist for Shell Oil in Texas, bought the ranch during the depression and built hunting and camping lodges on it, as well as a 9-hole golf course, which is where my dad learned to play golf.

Because the land was newer in those days, and fishing hadn’t yet become popular, the fish and the limits were bigger. The rivers were difficult to get to, my dad says with nostalgia and pride, because they lay at the bottom of box canyons, with only logging roads leading in. But if you managed the hike you could fish all day and never see another fisherman.

In the morning they fished the east fork of the Piedra River for Brown Trout, then moved to the ponds, which Uncle Harmon had stocked with Brook Trout from the east. They’d finish off the day by going up to Williams Fork, which was about 50/50 Rainbow and Brown. The limit was twenty fish per person, the average size of the fish twelve to fourteen inches.

A pool at the top of a 300-foot waterfall became one of their favorite spots. It took most of a morning to hike to the top of it—Uncle Harmon marked the way by nailing Mason jar lids to trees—but when you arrived a school of native cutthroat were waiting for you.

“Unlike a lot of other trout, which had been transplanted from the east,” my dad says, “these cutthroats were native. They had hardly been seen by
humans before and they were so hungry they fought over the flies. If you put a
dropper fly on (which is a second fly tied higher up the line), you were sure to
catch two fish on every cast.”

They’d have their limit within an hour and spend the rest of the day
hiking back down.

Of course, that was before the yuppies came. My grandfather, my uncle,
and my dad wore tennis shoes and jeans to fish in; then businessmen started
showing up in Gore-tex, breathable waders and fishing vests, depleting the
rivers’ supply of fish and eventually pushing the limits down to five fish per
person, the fish to ten inches.

“We called them gear heads,” my dad says.

***

“How old were you when Grandpa started taking you fishing?” I ask my
dad.

“Oh, we were young, really young. Maybe five or six. Soon as we could
walk, probably. If there was a thunderstorm and it rained real hard the rivers
would get muddy and the fish wouldn’t take flies anymore; they’d eat worms or
ants or whatever was washing in. That meant we had to switch to bait. My
brother and mine’s job was to carry the bait jar.”
“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Grandpa fished fast. He’d cast one or two times in a hole, and then move on. He could fish faster than we could walk. As a kid it seemed like we were running to keep up with him, carrying those bait jars. That’s when the story about the grasshopper jar happened.”

“What’s the story about the grasshopper jar?”

“You don’t know the story about the grasshopper jar? Well, we were fishing this one time. It was a Sunday. We were fishing and I was running so hard to keep up with Grandpa that I fell and cut my wrist on a jar of grasshoppers. Grandpa ripped off part of his T-shirt and tied it on there to stop the bleeding. Then he got one or two more casts in before he took me in to town to the doctor’s.

“It was a Sunday and the only doctor we could find was an obstetrician. She gave me a tetanus shot right in the wound. Then she stitched me up. I remember that tetanus shot. It was right in the wound. It hurt. I still have the scar on my wrist to prove it.” He turns his arm over to show it to me.

***

My dad works for the Coast Guard, and we grew up all along the West Coast: Alaska, Oregon, California, and Washington. Look at our family photo albums and you see pictures of fish from all these places: Cutthroat, Rainbow,
Brown, and Brook Trout, laid out in rows on the grass, usually with a pocket knife beside them to provide a sense of scale.

Fifteen lb. Coho and thirty lb. Chinook from Ketchikan, Alaska; one-hundred lb. halibut from Kodiak, Alaska. Fifteen lb. steelhead from the east fork of the Millacoma River in Oregon; fourteen-inch trout from Eel Lake. And, of course, twenty-plus inch trout from the ponds on my grandfather’s 150-acre ranch in Mora, New Mexico—some a rare, now endangered, subspecies of Rio Grande Cutthroat transplanted from the nearby Santiago Creek.

I flipped through those albums a lot as a kid, looking at those pictures. I loved those pictures, even though I couldn’t have told you anything about the fish. I especially loved them if my dad was in them.

There is only one other photograph in all these albums, I remember thinking, where he has a smile this large and this real—one from his wedding day.

***

I didn’t know we had home videos until my mom brought them out one Christmas, about three years ago. We set up the old projector and flashed the movies up onto the white wall of our living room. They were so grainy and scratchy they seemed as old as I felt watching them, myself a younger version of me that I no longer recognized. My mom started getting sea-sick.
My uncle, brother, grandfather, and father with trout from my grandfather’s ranch in Mora, New Mexico. About 1979.


My dad with two Chinook Salmon. Tillamook, Oregon. 2002.
The first video, all two hours of it, was of my older brother Doug as a baby, eating applesauce. My dad, who is ultra-neat, ultra-orderly, and ultra-fastidious, decided when they first bought the camera that it would be wise to put only one subject on each reel.

Fortunately, they learned their lesson after that.

The next reel had a few different items on it. It started as a Christmas reel—we had all finished opening our presents and were standing outside with our new toys. My brother had a bike, my two younger sisters had a ball and a hula-hoop, and I was on a pogo-stick. We were all standing there, holding onto our toys and looking bored. There was no sound, but you could tell we were given some kind of a cue by my dad, who was behind the camera, because all at once we put on big smiles and started playing with our toys: I jumped up and down, my hair trailing a few seconds behind me; Alison bent down to pick up her hula-hoop, throw it at her hip, then bend down to pick it up again; Christy threw her rubber ball at the ground, hard, like she was trying to kill an ant; and Doug started riding his bike in circles around the three of us. After a while I got a whiny look on my face and mouthed, “Can we stop now?”

That brought a few laughs, but nothing like the reaction that came when that footage ended and the next popped up: some scenes of my dad, my grandfather, and my brother fishing on a river up on Kodiak Island, Alaska.
Everyone looked cold—but my grandpa, who had passed away the year before, was looking very young and very happy in the film, with his fur-lined jean-jacket on.

“Alright,” my dad said, sitting up on the couch.

“Awesome,” said my brother, who also sat up in his chair, and leaned forward.

“Oh brother,” my mom said.

“Pfff,” I added, though I was enjoying myself—enjoying watching my brother and my dad get so excited, start talking heatedly about size, species, and color.

Then Doug brought out a videocassette of his and his wife’s new home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he was attending law school. Ostensibly, the video was of their town, their apartment, and their new son, Brandon. The longest footage, however, ended up being of a river that ran through the town. The cameraman—my brother no doubt—was looking down at the river from above, maybe from a bridge or something, and had zoomed in so that the water extended to the edges of the TV screen, making it entirely gray. Every few minutes something almost discernible moseyed by, like the blip on a radar screen: trout.

“Oh come on,” I said. “This is like watching a sonogram.”
“Shhhh,” my brother said, waving his hand at my face to signal me to be quiet.

“Check it out, Dad; that’s a school of trout. They actually run right in that river, right in the middle of downtown. I think they’re a good seven, eight inches. I haven’t tried yet, but I think you can fish it.”

My dad was now kneeling in front of the TV. My mom rolled her eyes, got up, and left. I moaned, but lay back on the couch to watch—not the video, but my dad and my brother, who were no longer aware of who was or wasn’t in the room. And I smiled.

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“When your dad and I were first married,” my mom starts, “he took one of his friends fishing. They left about four or five in the morning, like Bruce always does, and about seven o’clock that evening his wife called me.

“‘Mardell,’ she said, obviously upset. ‘It’s getting pretty late. Aren’t you worried about them?’

“‘No,’ I said.

“‘Well, what time do you think they’ll be home?’ she asked.

“So I had to explain the way fishing works with your dad.
“‘Look,’ I said. ‘Either the fishing is so good they’ve got to try one more hole, or the fishing is so bad they’ve got to try one more hole. If Bruce isn’t in bed when I wake up, I’ll be worried.’”

***

My dad stopped fishing at Uncle Harmon’s ranch when his dad—my grandpa—decided he wanted a ranch of his own. Instead of going to Uncle Harmon’s to fish on the weekends, they went ranch-hunting. My dad was sixteen.

This business of ranch-hunting lasted four or five years until, finally, my grandpa found his ranch in Mora, New Mexico, below the east slope of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. It had a small creek running through it, with Rio Grande Cutthroat that ranged in size from eight to ten inches. Grandpa built a stock pond near the creek, over a third of an acre of land, so he could transplant the fish into it and let them grow to their full size, unmolested by man or beast. At first he dug a canal between the creek and the pond, and a few natives washed in. But not many. So he and my dad began catching them out of the creek and transplanting them in.

They used minnow traps or fished them out, carrying them from the creek to the pond in white, ten-gallon buckets. They might catch twenty or so over a
few days, and these Grandpa would raise for three or four years, until they had
grown to twelve or fourteen inches.

The year of the big stocking trip still lingers in my dad and my brother’s
memories.

“I remember it,” Doug says to me. “There was a mile or two stretch of
creek on Grandpa’s land, and there’s a bridge on it—you know where the bridge
is. Below the bridge we called the lower section, and above it the upper section.
On the first day we spent all morning on the lower half and caught eleven fish,
not very big, maybe six or seven inches. On the second morning we spent half a
day fishing—this time on the upper half of the river—and we caught ten.
Normally, that’s where we’d stop, but the ponds were really low that year and
we wanted to stock them up good. So we went out a third day and spent the full
day out there and fished the whole river. In the morning we fished the lower half
and caught ten; then we went and had lunch. After lunch we fished the upper
half and caught ten more. So after three days of fishing we had forty-one fish.”

My dad tells this story too, but his memory is not as sharp as Doug’s. If
Doug isn’t there to correct him he’ll flounder around for a number, say they
ended up catching about eighty fish. He also leaves out the last part of the story,
which is that at the end of the third day he set the ten-gallon bucket on the
ground to rest, lodging it between two rocks, and that somehow it tipped over
and most of the fish got away; they grabbed two or three before the rest flopped back into the creek.

“You better believe Dad’d remember that if I was the one who had tipped the bucket,” Doug says.

Fishing on the creek at Grandpa’s ranch presented special challenges. It was not the typical river you’d fish—wide, with lots of bank to stand on. Trees and bramble grew up to the edge, and cobwebs stretched between many of the branches. Fishing it meant crawling on your belly or stooping under tree branches, all the while lugging a bucket of water and fish, not to mention an extra appendage: the eight-foot rod.

Cobwebs, trees, and branches made it impossible to cast overhead, or to do any kind of rolling cast from the side. So Dad and Doug developed a special technique for fishing the creek, which they called the bow and arrow approach. Once they located an opening in the trees near a good hole they held the rod tip straight in front of them, pointing the tip at the opening. They held the fly in the other hand, pulling it towards them to make the rod bend, and mount tension. Then, whoever was holding onto the fly let go and shot it past the length of the rod, through the hole, and into the river.

It took a while to master this technique, as it required aim and precision. Also, it was a one-chance affair. Unlike on a normal river, where you could cast,
reel in, and cast again until you caught something, no second casts occurred on the creek because as soon as you pulled the rod back the line tangled in the trees. You had to detangle it, or cut it off, before you could cast again. So it was important to catch a fish on the first try. If a fish did bite when the fly landed, the fisherman, who was often kneeling down, jerked and sent the fish flying into the trees, where it dangled from the line tangled in the branches. Whoever was not casting was the bucket-man, and it was his job to get the bucket to the fish in time to catch it before it wiggled off the hook. This was difficult because the buckets were full of water and, by the end of the day, fish, and could weigh up to forty pounds. It was hard to get through the brush without spilling any of the fish in the bucket, and make it to the fish in the trees in time to save it from falling back into the river. Then the line had to be untangled from the trees, which took another five minutes, and you were off crawling through the brush again, on the lookout for another clearing in the trees to launch your fly through.

Eventually my grandpa built another stock pond next to the first. He also started buying fish eggs from a hatchery in LaJara, Colorado, to transplant into them. Usually he bought one-hundred or so eggs for each pond, Kamloops Rainbows that originated in British Columbia. The Kamloops could get up to eighteen inches long.
One year, though, the hatchery sold a special load of Rainbows from New Zealand. These fish were big and mean. Two feet long, they were also fat—like footballs, according to my dad. And they fought hard. One, in particular, was especially large, and especially feisty. We called her Henrietta.

Henrietta was at least two-and-a half feet long, though she might measure out at three feet when she first woke up in the morning. And she had a second sense for anything that looked or smelled like it was human. Ten flies could be having a pow-wow on the water, and you’d cast and plant your fly right in the middle of ‘em and Henrietta would come up, catch all ten of those other flies—she was quick as lightning—and leave yours untouched. Sometimes, if you had a fly on the water she’d surface in front of it like she was a submarine, wait until she was sure you were watching, open her mouth real wide like she was gonna take it, then close it and swim away, leaving your fly untouched. One time—this is a true story—she winked before swimming away. She is the only known fish to have eyelids.

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Doug: “Do you remember the time Dad got caught without a license on the San Juan? He sent the judge one of the flies he’d been using on the river that day and the judge cut the fine in half.”
Jana: “And then there was the time when you asked Dad if you could take your friends fishing with you on one of your early, before-school fishing trips. He said yes, but only if he could blindfold them so they wouldn’t be able to find their way back to your favorite holes.”

Doug: “Yeah. That was good. And we always went early—four or five—whether it was a school day or not, so we would be the first ones to the river.”

Jana: “Yeah. And you guys always took both cars—for intimidation you said. If other guys saw more cars parked by the river they might think the hole was crowded and go somewhere else.”

Doug: “You know, Dad always said there’s only one way to take a picture with a fish. Hold it out as far away from you and as close to the camera as possible—that way, the perspective makes it look bigger.”

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The second stock pond at the ranch was about the same size as the first, and, like the first, almost a complete circle. But it had a small, five- or six-yard inlet of land on one side, with a pine tree on it. The first pond, referred to simply as “the pond” until the second one was built, became the “old pond,” while the
new one became—you guessed it—the “new pond.” Black as oil, they had mossy brown edges that resembled dirt-rings in a toilet bowl. The background for the ponds was the Sangre de Cristo Mountains; the foreground was a grove of quaking aspen. Straight as crayons, with white bark, the aspen trees had round leaves that shook and shimmied with every gust of wind and changed from green to yellow with the seasons.

The year my brother turned seven he caught his first fish in the ponds and my dad carved his name, and the year, onto one of the aspen trees at the pond’s periphery. Aspen bark is particularly good for carving things into because it’s white, but heals brownish-black. Within a few years the cut swells into a dark, knotty protrusion, about a quarter-of-an inch thick. So an inscription, like “DOUG 83,” is as legible as ink on a page. Dad said he would carve mine and my sisters’ names on as well, as soon as we caught our first fish in the ponds.

My two younger sisters, Alison and Christy, both got their names onto the tree at young ages. Alison was eleven when ‘AL 94’ was carved into the tree and Christy was nine when ‘C 95’ was posted. But it wasn’t until 2001, when I was twenty-one, that I caught my first fish from the ponds and got my initials carved onto it at last.

I’ve thought about that often since, and wondered why I didn’t catch a fish sooner. In part it was because I didn’t know how to, but that was a small
part. My sisters didn’t know how to fish either, and Doug had coached them through the process: tied on their flies; taught them how to hold the pole in the right hand while stripping out more line with the left, sending a larger and larger S fanning out the top; showed them how to keep tension in the line, to watch and feel for a hit; and, finally, how to engage in the give and take, the reeling in and letting go of line that tired out the fish, brought him slowly closer, and formed the entire rhythm and dance of the landing. If I’d wanted, he’d have done the same for me. The fact was that I didn’t want him to. And not because I was apathetic about getting my name on the tree—far from it. I liked that my name wasn’t on the tree. Because, every summer when we went and looked at the names, and fingered the dark scars in the bark, my name was felt too—an indelible absent presence.

In the family folklore I played the role of incompetent, uncoordinated, non-outdoorsy, anti-fisherwoman. Like most characterizations, it had some basis in truth—I did not like fishing, had never shown any interest in it, and wasn’t good at it. But that role became as exaggerated as the tales about the ones that got away.

It started, I think, when I was a freshman in high school. My English teacher, Mr. Everett, assigned us to write a personal narrative. When I complained (I was teacher’s pet—I could do that) he tried to spark my interest by
assigning me to write on the most boring topic I could think of, making it as interesting as possible.

The most boring topic I could think of? Fishing, of course. It wasn’t really—I could think of plenty of things more boring than that—but the idea of telling my dad and my brother that I had been assigned to write on the most boring topic in the world and chosen fishing gave me pleasure.

The story made the refrigerator. It was flowery, adjective-ridden (as my uncle still likes to point out), sentimental, and dramatic. Since I hadn’t been fishing I had to rely on the latest Blockbuster release—*A River Runs Through It*—for all of my details. I pulled out all my thesaurus favorites too: homage, pilgrimage, palpable. In the story, I headed up to the ponds at my grandfather’s ranch to try and catch a fish and ‘pay homage to the shrine [the aspen tree] in the woods at last.’ My brother was there to help me and saw me hook a fish, but when I did I panicked, screamed, and dropped the pole. Not, however, before he had seen the fish; it was Henrietta.

***

I asked Doug about the first time he and my dad tried to teach me to fly-fish the other day, and he told me this story:
“It was the first time we taught you how to fly-fish, I mean really fly-fish. We’d taught Alison before and she was pretty good. Not really good, but pretty good.

“Of course, dry-fly casting is kind of a genteel thing, with a soft presentation. The line is supposed to land softly on the water, but you were out of control. You were thrashing the line like it was a bull-whip, smacking this grasshopper down on the water. Me and Dad were getting pretty frustrated with you. And I’m thinking, there is no way she’s gonna catch a fish today. When we first taught Alison to cast she was pretty good, and she didn’t even catch anything. But you—well, it looked like there was a blender running at your end of the lake.

“But this one time, after you’d thrown the line down and caused all kinds of ripples in the water, you let it sit there for a few seconds while we were giving you some more instructions or something. That’s when, all of a sudden, this huge fish comes up and takes the grasshopper. I saw it and it was big; I mean it was big. And I started yelling ‘jerk, jerk,’ but of course you freaked out and kind of screamed and let the line go slack so the fish got off. But it was like Big Bertha of the lake, I’m telling you. That fish was Big Bertha of the lake.”

I don’t know if my Henrietta story came from this one or if this one came from mine. They probably worked reflexively, informing one another. Either
way, it doesn’t matter. I can’t wait until the family’s together at the ranch, so we can tell it again.

***

The years that the New Zealand fish were in the ponds were good ones. Because the fish were so big, they were twice as enticing as the standard Kamloops Rainbows from the hatchery, or the Rio Grande Cutthroat from the creek. And the fact that they were so smart made them even more appealing.

After my dad and my brother caught a few the fish wised up and stopped taking the flies, so they got creative. My grandpa fed the fish little brown fish-food pellets, which looked like dog food, throughout the year. On our last day at the ranch each summer, we usually took up a couple buckets of the food to give them a good feeding before we left, and also to get a feel for how many fish were still in the lake: once you got them all rising you could count and get a pretty accurate measure.

So one year, when the New Zealand fish were in the pond, Dad and Doug devised a strategy. They made some special bait by gluing two fish-food pellets together on either side of a hook. Then they crawled, army-style, up to the ponds, wearing dark clothes, and carrying a bucket of fish-food pellets and their rods, with the special fish-food hooks. They hid behind the pine tree on the inlet of the new pond and Dad threw some fish food out to the fish to get them rising.
My brother, Doug, fly-fishing on one of the ponds at my grandfather’s ranch in Mora, New Mexico. About 1999.

The Aspen tree at my grandfather’s ranch, where my dad carves all our names when we catch our first fish at the ponds. My name is not yet on the tree.

Me by the Aspen tree at my grandfather’s ranch, after finally getting my name carved on at the top (j 01).
My dad with a rare subspecies of Cutthroat, called the Rio Grande, from the ponds at my grandfather’s ranch. About 2002.

Stocking truck making a delivery to the ponds at my grandfather’s ranch. May be carrying a young Henrietta.
After he’d tantalized them with a couple of handfuls he decreased the amount of pellets he threw out until he was throwing one pellet onto the lake every ten seconds. Once the fish had been conditioned to expect a pellet every ten seconds, Doug stepped out, counted, and cast his fish-food hook onto the lake, in the exact spot where Dad threw all the pellets. They crouched and waited. A large, New Zealand fish swam up to the bait, eyed it, and turned around.

That night they decided it must have been because the hook had two fish-food pellets on it, and they had been tossing out only one pellet as a decoy; something about the double-pellet looked fishy. So they prepared more decoys, which resembled the bait: fish-food pellets glued into pairs.

The next morning they headed back up to the ponds. Like the day before, my dad started with a handful of food to get the fish interested; then he moved down to single pellets thrown out at ten-second intervals; finally, he threw out the pellets that had been glued together in pairs. Within a short while the fish were taking them, without trepidation. That’s when Doug made his move. Quietly, he came out from around the pine tree, close to the ground.

“One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .” he counted, until he reached eight. Then he made a quick rolling cast to get the pellet out onto the water on the count of ten. Sure enough, a fish came up and took it. They got two twenty-inch Rainbows that way before the fish stopped taking the pellets.
That was one of the great victories at the ponds. And they would have tried the same technique on the old pond as well, but the next day Grandpa’s Irish Setter, Rusty Penny II, found the fish-food bait that was drying on the hooks and ate a couple. We had to drive him two hours away to the closest Vet, who told us to feed him mashed up balls of bread to keep the hooks from tearing up his insides until they were, uh, expelled. Grandpa was so mad he forbade the use of fish-food pellet bait at the ranch ever again.

But that night we grilled trout over the campfire.

***

When my brother came out to college at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah it was for religious, academic, and social reasons. But it didn’t hurt that the Provo River was famous for its fly-fishing. He fished every season, winter and spring his favorites because not as many people came out in the winter and all the good hatches came on in the spring. His favorite fly alternated between a size 20 blue-wing olive and a size 16 gray sow bug. He started tying his own flies and learned how to make a gray scud that worked better than any he’d found in the stores; the secret was to leave the red stripe off.

Although he’s been gone five years now, he still comes to Provo every April to fish for three days, sometimes bringing my dad. And sometimes he can
talk me or one of my sisters into going too, since we are all now studying at the same university.

I remember the first time we went; it had been a long time since I’d tried fishing, but I was excited because I anticipated a sense of camaraderie, and hoped a good story would come out of it.

As we skirted our way down a hillside we came upon a sign that warned us not to step in spawning beds. I looked at my brother and he shrugged. It was the first time I realized he might not know everything about fishing.

And when, later in the day, I found my dad fishing further up the river, he told me he hadn’t been having much luck until the guy a few yards up from him gave him a few flies to try; then he’d caught his first fish of the day. I glanced upstream at the man—he was too scrawny and too nerdy to be a good fisherman. Besides, he had on a stupid-looking safari hat.

“He’s been pulling them out left and right all morning,” my dad said.

“Howdy,” the man called, when he saw me staring. “Whereabouts you from?”

“Washington,” I said, to sound important, though I’d been living in Provo almost seven years by then.

“Welcome to Provo then,” he said. “That your dad?”

“Yes,” I said, straightening up. My dad nodded.
“Good. Good luck on the river today.” And he was off—moving further upstream and out of sight. I waited until he was gone before casting. Since when were fishermen all buddy-buddy, I wondered, making small talk and offering you their flies to try out. From the way Doug and Dad talked, I’d always assumed fishing to be as far from a team sport as you could imagine.

That afternoon we saw one big mayfly hatch; all the bites made it look like the river was pocked with raindrops. My brother landed ten or twelve that hour, and I got two—both snagged in the side. So there was some talent to this fishing thing after all.

And it was my sister that ended up with the good story. The next day she took my place on the river and a big snowstorm came up. Of course that didn’t stop Doug; they kept on going. Until Alison locked her knees and passed out on the river.

“I looked upstream just in time to see her fall backwards, straight as a board, and smack the water,” Doug said to me when they got back. “I was really scared. I ran up after her, and called her name a few times, and she came to pretty quickly. But after that we had to take her back to her apartment to get some dry clothes.”

On the phone with Mom that night, we were telling the story like this:
“So there I was, when I looked upstream and saw Alison pass out. She fell straight back, flat as board, and hit the water with this resounding thud.”

“IT would make a better story if you had a fish on when she fell,” my dad says.

“Yeah, OK. So she falls and I’ve got this Rainbow on my line—huge, like the biggest fish of the day—and I’m thinking, do I stay with the Rainbow or go for Alison? I decide to go for Alison.”

“But he grabbed her pole first,” I say. “Because it was floating away.”

“Yeah. I grabbed the pole first, because I didn’t want to lose it, and then I grabbed her. Lucky the water was really shallow there.”

“And then he went back to his pole,” Dad says.

“And then I went back to my pole,” Doug says, “and the Rainbow was still on.”

“The Rainbow was still on,” Dad says. “And then he fought it for almost twenty minutes before he landed it. It was twenty inches—the biggest fish of the day. Big Rainbow Trout. It was a beauty.”

“Good story,” I say.

“Good story,” Alison says.
My dad with a Rainbow Trout from the San Juan River, New Mexico. About 2002.

Me with a much smaller Brown Trout on the Provo River, Utah. About 2003. (Notice I don’t know how to hold a fish.)
“Good story,” Dad says.

“I’m glad you’re alright,” mom says.

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My dad gets emotional when he talks about the last few times he went fishing with my grandpa. Grandpa was in his seventies, and had had a few operations on his heart. Both my dad and my brother were worried how he would hold up.

On one of their last trips to the Piedra, both my dad and my brother stayed close by, making sure he was alright. My dad did everything he could to help him have a successful trip, including shadowing him and pointing out good spots to cast. Finally Grandpa said, ‘Why don’t you guys just leave me alone.’ So they headed down the river about thirty yards, keeping him within eyesight. About three minutes later he had one on.

“Come on, we’ve got to help him land it,” my dad yelled, and he and Doug took off running, stumbling over boulders and rocks to get to him. By the time they reached him, however, Grandpa had landed the fish, which turned out to be two fish—he was using a dropper fly. Both measured out between fourteen and fifteen inches long, which was large in those post-yuppie, downsized days.

“Told you I’d be fine,” he seemed to say.
Soon after that they took a trip to the Guadalupe, one of the same rivers where my grandpa had taught my dad to fish in earlier years, running along the banks while my dad ran along behind, the bait jar in hand. Dad and Doug should have learned their lesson the first time, but they stayed near Grandpa, watching him cast. When he hooked one—it looked to be about thirteen inches—my dad yelled “Quick, help him,” and they both jumped in the water.

“He could have probably landed it on his own just fine,” my dad says. “But we were worried he couldn’t. I grabbed the line, which was a stupid thing to do, because then it lost all its give, and the fish was able to get off. Doug was standing downstream, in a hole below a little fall, and he saw it coming. He pulled out his shirt to make a little net and caught it as it was coming over the falls. There we were splashing around in the river, with me holding onto Grandpa’s line and Doug soaking wet and holding the fish against his chest in his shirt. We looked up at Grandpa on the bank and he was just kind of standing there, with a disgusted look on his face that said, ‘You two are a disaster.’”

My brother told that story at my grandfather’s funeral.

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Somewhere down the line, further back than we have records for, it’s possible that fishing started as a means of survival for our family—a necessary part of the daily routine of farming and hunting required to live. As far as we
know, however, fly-fishing started with the Lloyds in Wales, as an avocation. They brought their hobby with them to the New World when they settled in Pennsylvania, and passed it—along with their black hair—down through the male line. A family of coal miners, they moved west, following the natural resources that could put food on the table. And they fished for fun along the way.

Fishing is still just a pastime for my dad and my brother. Although we eat the fish they catch, we could live without them. And yet, when I watch them come in sunburned and smiling from a long day on the river, or listen to them tell fish stories around the kitchen table after dinner, or up at the ranch, under the silent shadow of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, I can’t help thinking that—for them as well as for us—it is part of a much, much larger act of survival.
Finding Where I Am: An Encounter with Pine Valley, Utah

I turn east off State Highway 18, about thirty miles north of present-day St. George, Utah, onto Pine Valley Road, and follow it into Pine Valley Mountain. I drive slowly, try to take in every detail; I want something important to happen here, and have the feeling that every moment counts. A mini-cassette tape-recorder that I bought especially for this trip is sitting on the passenger seat, and I reach for it, press the red record button.

“T’m driving into Pine Valley right now,” I say into the tape recorder. “It’s about 11 o’clock in the morning, Thursday, September 2nd, 2004. These are the mountains where my [I pause to count the “greats” on my fingers], great-great-great grandparents, William and Ann Snow and Robert and Lenora Cannon Gardner, settled back in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is also the place where my great-great grandfather Jeter Snow was bishop for, like, thirty years [actually it was forty, but I’ve forgotten the number now, so just make up something big].

“My great-grandpa Levi Snow lived here too. And my grandma, Cherril Snow Lloyd. She spent her summers in Pine Valley and her winters in nearby
Santa Clara or St. George. When she left here in 1947 there were about twenty houses in the valley; now there are about 400. I’ve come here to find out what Pine Valley is all about. [Pause.] To my right are some fields with cows. Plants everywhere: lupine, oak, sage, juniper, mahogany scrub.”

Actually, I have no idea what any of these plants look like—except sage—but in the reading I’ve been doing on Pine Valley preparatory to this trip I earmarked those, and some others, as native vegetation. Mental note: learn to identify all the plant life in the valley.

After driving about eight miles I reach a turnoff (it takes excruciating effort to determine that it’s headed north) for Grass Valley and Pinto. I slow down some more, look at the back of the stop sign, and notice it is full of bullet-holes.

“Great detail,” I think, proud of myself.

A short distance past the stop sign the road takes me up to the gates of the Pine Valley cemetery. I’ve been to Pine Valley maybe three other times in my life, but have never visited the cemetery. I add that to my list of things to do: learn native flora and fauna; visit cemetery. The road makes an abrupt southward turn and changes into Grass Valley Road. In front of me now, below me, I can see the valley.
An ATV passes me on the right, on a trail that parallels Grass Valley Road on its final descent into Pine Valley. I feel and hear the \textit{ba-bump, ba-bump} of my car passing over a cattle-guard, which seems like some sort of line or final barrier I’m crossing, some sort of accidental mark left showing from the invisible bubble surrounding this Shangri La, and half expect something to change as I pass over it and penetrate the bubble. I almost will myself to get goose-bumps.

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Grass Valley Road, or “the Lane,” as it’s called by townspeople, slopes down into the valley for about a quarter of a mile before intersecting Main Street at a right angle. This point, where the Lane and Main connect, is the center of town, the Sun, the North Star, the point around which the compass swivels to inscribe the circumference. Like any good Mormon town, adapted from Joseph Smith’s 1833 description of the Plat of the City of Zion, the town is laid out in a grid of even squares, the houses and barns on the lots, the farmland on the exterior. But the ideal is mitigated by the real, the temporal, the circumstance-at-hand: Nirvana culturing in a terrestrial Petri dish. Since the valley is long and narrow, a scratch of a dale that extends about five miles east to west and two miles north to south, only one row of Joseph’s grid could be laid out. The town consists of one unpaved road, Main Street, running the length of the valley, one parallel road (‘‘Back Street’’), a block south of it, and about nine perpendicular
streets extending up both, reaching out to various lengths depending on the geographical constraints. If you looked at the town layout from space it would resemble a slightly uneven football lacing, or maybe a ladder with rungs of varying lengths sticking out past the edges. A little suture across the landscape.

And in the center of town, on either side of the juncture where the Lane and Main connect, sit two prominent buildings, guarding entrance to the town: the church and the Snow home.

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An egg-white monolith standing in stark contrast to the grey-green mountains rising some three-thousand feet behind it, the church draws your eye first. The Snow home, on the other hand, is made of brick and screened in by Cottonwood trees; it disappears into the surroundings. But as you drive further down the Lane it makes itself present—like something from one of those magic-eye posters, where 3-D objects pop out of visual soup when you cross your eyes just right.

As I drive in I look first to the church, and also to a large white tent staked down in the field just north of the church. Services are being held in the tent for the next few months, while renovations are made to the building. I also see the aqua flash of a port-a-potty, the orange and silver glare of worker’s vests, and the
movement of trucks around the building—the only movement, other than the pacing of a few corralled horses, the ATV, and me, in the valley.

This building, I know, boasts of being the oldest Mormon Church still in continuous use. It was designed by Ebenezer Bryce, of Bryce Canyon fame in 1868, because he was the only one in town with any experience in architecture; he had been a ship builder in Australia before joining the Church and moving to “Zion.” So the building, which was put together with wooden pegs (no nails were available), and rawhide strips, is also famed to be built like the upside-down hull of a ship.

Nowadays anyone who cares about Pine Valley knows that, because it was published in a history of the town that came out in 1980, and because missionaries are stationed at the chapel from Memorial Day to Labor Day, giving tours. But that hasn’t always been true, even of people born and bred here. My grandmother laughs when she tells me that she was attending meetings here a few years back and someone mentioned the church being built like an upside-down ship. She, who had gone to Church in that building for twenty years, turned to her sister Gwen and said,

“Now where on earth did he get a dumb idea like that?”

Which makes me think you can know a lot of trivia about a place and still not really know anything about the place at all. Which makes me think that the
opposite is true too: that you can live your whole life in a place and not even know where you are.

But it is not the church I am concerned with today; it is the Snow home, where I’ll be staying for the next three days.

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When I was younger I thought Pine Valley was a house. An old and ugly house. My parents brought me here for a couple of family reunions, but we stayed two days in the valley at most, and other than the picnic held in the canyons east of town, spent most of our time in the old Snow home where my grandmother had been raised; hence me thinking that Pine Valley was a house.

It was a large house, two stories, and made of brick. My great-great-great-grandfather William Snow, who settled in the valley in 1865 after moving west with the Mormons, built a house for my great-great-great grandmother Ann just east of it, but it was razed before I ever came to the valley. The house we stayed in was built by William’s son Orrin at the turn of the century. When Orrin and his wife left the valley for better opportunities, they sold the house to Orrin’s brother Jeter, my great-great-grandfather. His oldest son, Levi Snow, ended up with the house after Jeter passed away, and my grandmother was raised in it. After three generations in the valley, my grandmother broke the chain when she
View of Pine Valley from the cemetery, with the Lane and the Church visible.

View of Pine Valley from the northwest, off Water Canyon Trail.
Pine Valley Church. Designed by Ebenezer Bryce; erected by townspeople, 1868.

Snow home, Pine Valley, Utah. Built by Orrin Snow near turn of the century.
met my grandfather working in a government office in St. George and followed him back to his hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

No one has lived in the house since Levi passed away. Gwen, another one of Levi’s daughters, is its unofficial caretaker. She lives in nearby St. George. On weekends she and her children come up to mow the lawn and take care of upkeep and general maintenance. Then they turn off the water, lock it up, and go back to St. George. The only other time it has occupants is for the Jeter Snow reunion, held every summer, when thirty or so of Levi’s descendants come up for the reunion and spread out over five bedrooms and eleven mattresses—some with frames, some without.

What stood out to me the times we came to the Jeter Snow reunion when I was a child were the ceilings; they were at least twelve feet high. Other things I noticed: the plaster had long cracks in it; the doors were almost as tall as the ceilings, with painted transoms over the top, ornate doorknobs, and large keyholes; the living room had a fireplace that spilled ashes and soot out past the hearth; a sagging couch in the living room was covered, corpse-like, with a white sheet—which made the house feel unused, warehouse-like, even ghoulish; the steps up to the second story were narrow, uncarpeted, and oddly steep; the rooms upstairs were dark and the beds seemed (and probably were) a century old. One bathroom serviced all thirty of us, and, like the walls, was strangely
disproportionate to what I knew of architecture: it was so large it held a toilet, a
tub, a water-heater, a washing machine, a vanity, and a dresser. I could have
done a cartwheel in it. What nobody explained to me was that the bathroom was
large because when the house had been built there was no such thing as an
indoor bathroom; this room had originally been a bedroom.

up for the reunion and spread out over five bedrooms and eleven
mattresses—some with frames, some without.

The other thing I remember about being at the old Snow home is this:
When I tried to be helpful and offered to load the dishwasher, the grown-ups
laughed.

“There is no dishwasher,” they said. “You’ll have to do it the old-
fashioned way.” I didn’t know there was an old-fashioned way.

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There was a time, my grandmother tells me, when the houses in the valley
only extended up Main and Back Streets; she can close her eyes and name all the
people that lived here, starting at the east end and moving, in her mind’s eye, all
the way down the length of the valley. Maggie Calkins, the crazy widow who
tore boards from her house to use as firewood, and who wore black high-top
boots with brass buttons that were long out of style; Malin Cox, who had the
only radio in town and let the handful of teenagers pile into his house on
Saturday nights to listen to “Hit Parade’; Bess Snow, who taught Sunday School and always ended early to read stories to the class; the Halls, whose house doubled as the post office; Baldwin and Noel, the Forest Service supervisors, who went out with the men one night a week to kill deer in the valley that were eating their hay (the men could buy half the deer, the other half was given to the Shivwits Indians); Glenn Snow, who later became president of Dixie College.

This was in the 1920s and 30s. Now, some seventy years later, houses are everywhere, pushing the limits of the valley. They fill up acreage around the edges once used for farming and grazing, now sold and subdivided because you can’t make a living as a rancher anymore. They creep up the sides of the mountain like ivy up a trellis and fill up the canyons like trees. As well as any other spot that looks like it might be persuaded to lie horizontal for a while. The old-school part of town, with some of the venerable buildings and agricultural land, and some meadows with too high a water-table for development, still lie along the center of the valley, nucleus-like, while newer, bigger, brighter colored houses circle it on the outside like (a) a suffocating death-grip that threatens to squeeze the doughnut-filling out of the middle or (b) new-growth, rings on a tree, geological layers, signaling continued life. Both similes are correct; take your pick.

***
Before going into the house, I find the pipe by the pile of firewood and turn the water on, just as Gwen told me to do when I picked the key up at her house in St. George last night. Then I scrape my shoes off on the porcupine-shaped shoe-cleaner, unlock the door, and go in. I bring in everything I brought: one large suitcase; my tape-recorder; camera and tripod; a sack of groceries (two apples, a bunch of bananas, a loaf of bread, a small block of cheese, milk and cereal, and two Cup Noodles); a dinosaur of a laptop I borrowed from my boss; two cardboard boxes full of books—anything I could find on Pine Valley from my dad and the library; markers and a large piece of cardboard. The markers and cardboard are because I want to make a map of the town. What did this place look like when my great-great-great grandfathers William Snow and Robert Gardner lived here? And then when Jeter and Mary Alice Gardner Snow were here? Who lived here when my grandma was growing up? Who lives here now? I’ve always been this way; it’s all-or-nothing with me. Either I know everybody who lived here, when, and what they were like, or I know nothing.

Inside, I survey the house. The last two summers I’ve come back to the Jeter Snow reunions here, first with my uncle, then with my parents. It was coming to those reunions as an adult that kindled my interest in Pine Valley for the first time, though my dad had tried to get me interested for years. But with family everywhere during the reunions and limited time, I couldn’t get too good
a look at the house, and only a superficial look at the valley. Alone now, I want to explore all of it.

The house is still huge, even to my adult sensibilities. A kitchen, a living room, two large bedrooms downstairs, plus a bathroom. And upstairs two more full-sized rooms and a small attic room. Same tall walls, ornate doors, and cracks in the plaster.

The kitchen, the first room you enter, has been painted sky blue, with a matching floral wallpaper covering the top half of the walls. A black cast-iron, wood-burning Stewart stove takes up the northwest corner, and sits next to a newer, white, gas stove. Like a pair of salt and pepper shakers, I think. The wood-burning stove has long since lapsed into occupational schizophrenia: no longer needed for its cooking skills, it hires out part time as a counter and a shelf, home to two toasters, a microwave, a coffee-pot, a box of matches, a few miscellaneous bottles, a star chart that looks like it came out of a cereal box, and some frying pans. The wood pan, a faithful lackey, stays by its side, but instead of wood it holds a blue doggie-dish.

Next door, in the pantry, a medieval-looking milk-separator serves as a coat rack for plastic grocery sacks of Coco-puffs, Vanilla Wafers, and Campbell’s Cream of Chicken soup (though I won’t know it’s a milk separator until I talk to my great Aunt Gwen later). Shelves with mostly non-perishable goods on them.
A four-foot counter with a sink, all the dishes stored next to it in piles, or in the drying rack, the silverware in mason jars. Apparently they didn’t believe in much counter or drawer space in the early 1900s.

In the living room, I see little decoration. Only a dusty painting of a seashore (who dreamt of seashores in this mountain?), another painting of the house done by a local resident, and a needlepoint. Opposite the fireplace, which, along with two portable heaters, is still used to heat the house, is a fourteen-inch TV on a little night-stand-looking thing. And next to that, on a table that must be at least fifty years old, sit coloring books; a Wonder Woman plastic action figure, with a lasso; a Smokey the Bear, “You can prevent Forest Fires” ruler; some Mary Higgins Clark books; and movies like Forrest Gump, While You Were Sleeping, and For the Love of the Game.

I dig through the closet in the bedroom north of the living room (which still has my great-grandfather’s sweaters in it, though he has been dead some twenty years), and find a crate with old flowers from the valley, pressed to perfection. A date in the corner reveals them to be exactly eighty years old, and a name by the date reveals them to be Edna’s, Levi’s sister, who, I will find out later, was one of the first women in Utah to get a PhD. Botany, of course.

Upstairs I search through Edna’s old room and find a trunk with letters inside, written to Edna by my great-great grandfather Jeter Snow. The trunk also
has some of Levi’s old algebra books in it. Next to Edna’s trunk is a picture of the
room’s next occupant—Roma—who was Levi’s daughter and Edna’s niece.
Jeter’s letters, Edna’s trunk, Roma’s picture: three generations in three feet.
Outside the room is a card-table with a TV and Nintendo—add another
generation.

The house is full of items extending back through the last one-hundred
years. Much of it was removed long ago, I’m sure, but a lot of it is still here—like
the wood-burning stove, the milk separator, the old letters and flowers, the organ
and pale green and pink paint in the parlor. And next to that stuff, hanging from
it, sitting on top of it, are newer things. The detritus of decades I think, waxing
alliterative. It’s a strange amalgamation of old and new worlds, this house, a
living history book. If I had to pick a metaphor for it I would say it’s a
palimpsest—a piece of parchment that has been written on more than once, with
not all of the original writing erased.

***

I take a bite out of an apple while deciding between a Cup Noodle and a
toasted cheese sandwich. Finally I decide on neither because both require turning
on the gas stove. I was born without a sense of smell and am paranoid about gas
stoves. With my luck, I’d burn down the old Snow home and get ostracized from
the family. So I cut off a hunk of bread and cheese and eat it plain. I would have
toasted the bread, or heated the water in the microwave, but I can’t find a socket in the kitchen.

While I’m eating, the phone rings. It’s my grandmother.

“How are you doing?” she asks, as if I had some kind of deadly disease.


“I’m a little worried about you being in that big house all by yourself. It’s lonesome, and kind of scary. And I know it can be getting cold in September. Are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine, Grandma.” I have no qualms about being here by myself, but it makes me feel good that she called. That someone knows where I am and is worried about me. I’m pretty sure she is worried about me being scared and cold, but I wonder if she’s checking up on me in other ways too. Making sure I’m not up to no good down here. My sudden interest in Pine Valley has surprised everyone in the family, I think.

“My number should be there by the phone, if you need anything.”

“OK, Grandma. Thanks.”

It’s dark outside. I am glad they’ve installed a few light sockets; I might be forced to be scared if I was using a coal oil lamp, like my grandmother did when she lived here.
I turn on the TV, which, I find, gets two stations: 8 and 11. There’s some election hoop-la between Kerry and Bush on channel 8 so I put some sweats on and curl up on the ghost couch to watch it.

Who was president when Levi lived here? I wonder, and try to figure it out, but can’t. I have a horrible memory, especially for historical facts. The phone rings again. It’s my dad.

“How’s everything going up there?” he asks.

“Fine. I stayed at Gwen’s house in St. George last night. I took her some banana bread. She told me how to turn on the water and the water heater and everything, so I’m great.”

“Do you have any food?”

“I bought a bag of groceries.”

“The closest gas station is fifteen miles away, in Veyo. Do you have enough gas?”

“Yep. Filled up on the way in.”

“What are you gonna do up there anyway?”


“I don’t know what you’re going to write about; everything’s been written.”
“Just stuff, Dad.”

“OK. Well, call Marie Gardner anyway. She’s the oldest resident in the valley, so if you want to know anything, she’s the one to talk to. Be careful.”

I hang up, munch some animal crackers I found in the pantry. Sit at the kitchen table and read from the Book of Mormon for a while. Both my aunt and my uncle call to see how I’m doing.

After getting off the phone with them I decide to settle in for the night. I could sleep in any of the beds, I guess, but there’s no way I’m going upstairs. I tell myself it’s so I won’t have to come down those narrow stairs in the dark, if I have to use the bathroom, and because there’s no way I’m using the chamber pot in Roma’s room upstairs. But Levi’s old room and the parlor are both downstairs and I don’t want to sleep in them either. The living room seems like the most inviting place, since it’s central and large. What is it about being in the middle of something, rather than in the corners, that makes me feel safe? What is it that’s brought me to this valley, when I could have read the books in my bedroom, 300 miles away?

I double up my socks and put on another sweatshirt—if I won’t light the gas stove there’s no way I’ll light the fire. Three blankets later, and lights off, I’m ready for sweet dreams.

***
On my first morning in the valley I wake up when my body wants to, which happens to be about 6:30. I won’t shower today, so I roll off the couch and pull some wrinkled jeans out of the suitcase by my feet. I walk, creak creak, across the wooden floor to the bathroom and brush my teeth, do my make-up. The dim lighting makes me look good.

“You are so so fine,” I say out loud, since there is no one in this big house to hear me. I peek out the window in the bathroom, which faces east, and can see the sun up over the mountains. Gardner’s Peak? I’m not sure. Mental note: flora and fauna; visit cemetery; map of town; important historical sites; names of mountains and canyons. For now I’ll say it’s Gardner’s Peak, though. It feels cool to look at a mountain named after my ancestor. I stand up a little straighter.

“We made it through the night, Levi,” I say, and head back out to the kitchen. “Whadda ya want for breakfast? A bowl of raisin bran? Me too.”

I wonder as I spoon and chew the cold milk and crunchy flakes what Levi would have eaten for breakfast. Not raisin bran, but milk could have been involved. Of course it would have come from his own cows. A thought stops me: where did he keep the milk? I try to remember when refrigerators were invented, but can’t. One thing about me—for as much as I’m interested in history I sure have a hard time with dates. All time compresses into a gooey booger in my head—like those ones you made out of rubber cement as a kid.
“No, seriously, Levi. Where did you keep the milk? Did you have ice chests? Did you bury it under ground? Don’t laugh; I really don’t know.” I vaguely remember my grandmother saying something about keeping things outside, under wet cloths. It gets chilly enough here at 6500 feet that that might just work.

I take my bowl of raisin bran out onto the wooden porch that I’m pretty sure Gwen’s son-in-law added to the house a few years back, because it looks so new. It’s quiet out here: no cars, no voices. The mountains rise abruptly on all sides of me, making me feel safe. I grew up mostly on the coast, where the ocean stretched out fathom on endless fathom to one side, and the land, on the other side, stretched out just as flat and far; it could not be fathomed. Too many trees make me feel claustrophobic, but these mountains do not. There’s something comforting about these four walls, like all the world’s in here, a stage. Someone will take care of me: drop flakes of food, change the water, make sure the air hose stays submerged.

Looking at the mountains rising thousands of feet above me on all sides suddenly makes me think of the tall walls inside the house. Maybe they were just used to having more air to breathe back then. Even the houses were “wide open spaces.” Of course there are other old houses in the valley whose size wrecks that theory, but it’s a nice thought anyway. The good ol’ days.
I watch a school bus come down the lane to get the handful of school children in the valley and haul them out to Enterprise, about twenty-five miles from here. Probably twenty-five or thirty families live here full-time now; the rest of the homes are summer homes. Most of the people are probably older, retired couples who’ve come back for a combination of peace and quiet and nostalgia, but apparently a few families and a couple kids call this place home too.

Out to the east, in a fenced-in pasture by the house, is a horse, eating. I walk past the spot on the lawn where William and Anne’s house would have been, walk past the brick structure that held number 3 tubs for washing, but which is now filled with dirt and debris, and pull some long weeds to stick through the rails as an offering. The horse takes them and then nuzzles my arm, which makes me feel uncomfortable.

“Sorry, Levi. I’m just a city-slicker.” I head back into the house and rinse out my bowl and stack it in the drying rack with the rest of the dishes.

What’s on the docket? Gwen is coming up later today, or tomorrow morning, after she gets off work. It’s a nice gesture. Everyone’s worried about me being here alone, and maybe a little curious about why I’m here in the first place. I don’t mind Gwen coming up—I should get to know her more, the sister of my grandmother, and interview her about what it was like growing up in Pine Valley while I’m at it—but I anticipate some awkward moments as well. Perhaps
I should do my reading now, I think; then, when Gwen’s here I can go exploring, talking to people in town, maybe hiking so we won’t have to talk too much. Inside I feel a pang of guilt—I could read these books anytime, but I’ll only be here for a few days; there won’t be a chance to talk to people again for a while. Shut up, guilt. I grab a banana and sit down on the couch, with a book on the Mormon settlement of southwestern Utah—Utah’s Dixieland.

***

The point of being here is to experience Pine Valley—to explore the town, map it out for goodness’ sake, talk to the people and get a feel for the contemporary climate as well as ask questions about the past. To play journalist, ethnographer, historian, anthropologist, cartographer, sociologist, all at once. But now that I’m here, I’m chickening out. Exploring the house and cataloguing the insides into my tape recorder, I tell myself I’m doing important “research.” But really I just don’t want to have to talk with anyone, to intrude, to wear my ignorance and outsider-ness on my sleeve. The truth is I like being in the house all by myself, with my books; it’s safe, and comfortable.

“We’ll talk to someone in a while, Levi,” I say.

***
My father Levi Snow, the son of Zerrubbabel Snow, was born July 22nd A.D. 1782. My mother, Lucina, daughter of Wm. Streeter, was born October 16th A.D. 1785. Was married November 29, 1801.

[I,] William Snow, son of Levi and Lucina was born December 14th A.D., 1806 in the town of St. Johnsbury, Caledonia County, Vermont, at which place I resided until I was 22 years of age, most of my time with my parents.

The country being new and thinly settled and my father having met with some misfortunes once lost his property by being involved in a law suit and once had his house, furniture, bedding and clothing burned leaving him in destitute circumstances which gave me but a limited chance of education.

In December 1828, I purchased a piece of land in Charleston, Orleans County, Vermont and in the spring of 1829 went to Charleston to live where I resided most of my time until 1832, laboring on a farm and acting as constable and clerk of State and county—and in May 1832 Lyman E. Johnson and Orson Pratt came ---- [illegible] to the neighborhood and preached the gospill at which time I with joy received it. I was baptized on the 19th of May under the hands of Lyman E. Johnson at which time Brother Winslow Farr and his wife, Olive (who had been healed of a disease that had been upon her for many years) and Sister Sherman was baptised. In a few days the number was increased to 18 and a branch organized. I continued searching the scriptures until 16th July having
had many blessings from the Lord and testimonies concerning the truth of the work of the Lord as came forth in the Last days and my duty. . . .

On the evening of the 20th I preached at the schoolhouse near my fathers where I spoke for the first time before the congregations of the world concerning the gospel of Christ and on the 21st I was married to Hannah Miles and returned home to Charleston, taking her with me.

This is William Snow, in the first pages of only twenty pages of diary-autobiography he kept during his seventy-three years of life. My great-great-great-grandfather. Converted to Mormonism in Vermont two years after the Church had been organized. Baptized younger brother Erastus, who later became an apostle and helped lead the colonizing efforts of the “Cotton Mission” in southwestern Utah. Moved to Nauvoo, Illinois with the rest of the Saints who had gathered there; was friends with the prophet Joseph; helped build the Nauvoo Temple?? (I’d like to think); stayed in Council Bluffs, Iowa three years by request of Brigham Young to grow food and build shelter for the Saints on their way to the Great Basin, after having been persecuted out of the East; headed a vanguard of 136 wagons across the plains, in which time thirteen people died and two were born; lived in Salt Lake until Johnston’s Army came through and everyone moved south; took up residence in Lehi, Utah, where he lived in a fort with the rest of the town because of hostile Indians; received a
letter calling him to move further south and help build up the Dixie Cotton Mission; son, who didn’t want to go, burned the letter; received a second letter; went; settled in Pine Valley at recommendation of brother Erastus; was probate judge of Washington County (put Brigham Young’s daughter in jail); was bishop of Pine Valley for fourteen years, until death in 1879.

Finally, tucked in the middle of a biography written of him by a great-grand-daughter, I find a physical description of him: over six feet tall, with “piercing” blue eyes. I stare at the two pictures I have of him, the only two in existence as far as I know, both just photocopies. I feel irreverent, but I can’t help thinking it, Grandpa: you look a little like a monkey.

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It’s hard to understand Pine Valley, I’m coming to see, without understanding a little of its context. First of all, the mountain in which this valley is located is an anomalous island in the middle of a red butte, petrified sandstone, and black lava desert. It’s the last part of the Wasatch Mountain Range, which extends down through Utah, but is separated from it by some distance, “like the period at the end of a long sentence,” one historian of the town wrote.

When Brigham Young stood up in the October 1861 conference in Salt Lake and called 300 families to go south on a mission to raise cotton for all the
settlements, which were starting to extend out from the Salt Lake Valley like tentacles, he was sending a lot of people to their death. Prehistorically, the place had been a lava bed. The land was chaffed and chapped. Vermillion bluffs. Black lava leftovers, like burnt edges on a wavy lasagna landscape. Hot temperatures. When it did rain the two major rivers in the area tended to flood and wash out settlements; nor could they be easily controlled by canals. The soil was full of alkali. Shallow pools of water near the river beds served as breeding grounds for mosquitoes, and thus, malaria. My great-great-great grandfather Robert Gardner, whose name was among the 300 read over the pulpit, jokes in his diary about what he’s heard of the land:

“[They] said wood was rather scarce down there, but by going twelve or fifteen [miles?] to where there was some cedar and by hunting around we might find some sticks long enough for the fire place by splicing two sticks together. . . . Another advantage of the country was that it was a great place for a range. When a cow got one mouthful of grass, she had to range a great way to get another. . . . Sheep did pretty well, but they wore their noses off reaching down between the rocks to get the grass.”

When Robert Gardner arrives in the new Dixie Country (Oh my gosh, I get it now! Dixie. Because of the cotton. Utah’s Dixie. Like the South), he runs into a small group of twenty-eight families who have been sent south by Brigham four years previously, on an experimental cotton-growing test-run. Some of them
William Snow (1806–1879) and his wife Ann Rogers Snow (1835–1928).

Robert Gardner (1819–1906) and his wife Lenora C. Gardner (1840–1924).

Levi Snow (1897–1982) and his wife Golda Isabel (Belle) Hafen (1898–1939).
are his old friends, but they horrify him. Stricken with malaria, the brave pioneers are blue with the chills. And besides that, their clothing has long since been worn out and they have made new clothes out of the experimental cotton they’re growing. The cotton has been dyed with surrounding weeds and is, of all colors, blue.

“Their clothes and their faces were all of a color,” he writes, “being blue with chills. This tried me harder than anything I had seen in all my Mormon experiences . . . but I said, ‘We will trust in God and go ahead.’”

A colony of smurfs. Blue Martians on a red planet.

In the midst of this inferno, rising like a column of steam from desert that rivaled any one of Dante’s rings, was Pine Valley Mountain, between 8,000 and 10,000 feet tall. A giant pimple in the middle of nowhere. Its steep sides reached up and grabbed the rain from the clouds where it was hiding, channeled it into streams that ran down its ridges and provided water that helped sustain life in the area. And it was a godsend in other ways too: 15 to 20 degrees cooler, valleys with meadows of tall grass and tall pine—some of the only wood around. Most of the men in the area who ended up settling in this mountain’s valleys were lumbermen, like Robert Gardner; they ran sawmills that provided wood for the rest of the settlements. Others grazed cattle in the lush meadows. And some just went to get away from the blasted desert.
“My word, Levi. Your grandparents were pioneers.”

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I pick up the phone, which I’ve been staring at reluctantly for the last fifteen minutes.

“Hello, Marie Gardner? This is Jana Lloyd. I’m calling because I thought you could tell me something about my great-grandpa Levi Snow. I’m actually staying over in his old house right now. . . .”

An hour later I’m walking down the street to meet Marie Gardner. Her house is a short two blocks away. A black F-150 passes me, on its way up into the camping/picnicking/recreation area in the canyons east of town. Ever since the National Wilderness Act of 1964 declared 50,000 acres of Pine Valley Mountain a part of the 100 million acres of national wilderness land to be preserved, the government has controlled that canyon. A ranger is stationed at the entrance, and over seventy campsites are filled with people from May to October, not to mention those who come up for picnicking and hiking and horseback riding. It brings much more traffic through the town than would be here otherwise.

An ATV passes behind the truck, with a man and a woman on it.

“Need a lift?” the man calls out.

“No, I’m almost to where I’m going,” I call back. Up ahead I can see a woman standing outside, waiting for me. She picks an apple from a tree.
“They’re kind of sour,” she says, holding it out to me. “But you can just take one whenever you want. The kids pick ’em off and throw ’em at each other, and we don’t mind that either.”

Her house is small, one-story, wooden—much smaller than the stately Snow home. Behind it I can see a maroon car (a Buick?) with a license-plate that says “MARIE” on it. The lock on the gate is broken, so we have to duck and squeeze through a small gap in the fence. We sit down at a wooden picnic table outside the house, because she doesn’t want me to see how dirty the inside is; she’s been cleaning up, rearranging, and ordering things since her husband passed on earlier this year. She’s also babysitting her grandkids’ two Labrador retrievers, which begin pawing at the table and barking as soon as we sit down.

“This is so embarrassing,” she says.

“Do you mind if I record this?” I ask. I lift up my mini, press the red button. “Just tell me how you ended up in Pine Valley, what it was like living here, you know, that kind of stuff.”

Marie has been in the valley sixty-plus years. She came here as a young bride, in the forties, followed her husband Dean Gardner, who was also descended from Robert Gardner and William Snow, like me, though through different wives than the ones I came through. Her husband raised cattle along with his dad and my great-grandfather Levi. Raised them, took care of them,
drove them, and rounded them up. Marie, about the same age as my grandmother, came into Pine Valley as my grandmother was moving out. Her husband was one of the few of his generation to stay, one of the true long-timers in the valley, one of only a couple of families to have left someone from every generation in the valley. Marie’s sons both have places in the valley now, and though they live elsewhere most of the time, they still run a herd of about 125 head (not counting the calves)—mostly Hereford and Black Angus. Not many cows in the valley anymore. The cows feed up here in the spring and summer; then they’re driven south, where it’s warmer: Beaver Dam Wash, the Arizona Strip, the Mormon Well. In the fall people come down to size up the cows, name a price, high or low. But this year they’ve done it a new way; the cows are videotaped and shown on TV, so no one has to travel.

“Yes, I knew Levi,” Marie says. “One of the first nights I was here—we bought that house from Dean’s dad for fifty dollars—we went up Lloyd Canyon with Levi and some others. We brought ice-cream; they sang songs. It was a real good time.”

“He sang?” I ask, incredulous. This doesn’t sound like the version of my great-grandpa that I know. The first thing anybody says about him is that he was small. The second, that he was quiet.
“He didn’t share his talent much, no, but he could. It was more like yodeling I guess. If I pressed him he would and it was real pleasant.” She continues on, but I realize she’s mistaken my “he” for her “he,” meaning Dean, her now deceased husband.

“Do you remember anything else about Levi?” I ask, not quite knowing how to explain what I’m after: What he looked like; what he ate for breakfast; What on earth a cowboy—which I’m just starting to realize he was—does all day.

“Anything else?” I ask.

“I remember that once he cut his hand real bad. Maybe on a smashed headlight or something like that. He came walking up to our place with a white dish towel around his hand; it was soaked through with blood. I put pepper on it and it stopped bleeding. Later we took him to the hospital and the doctor left that on. You may not believe me, but it worked.”

I’m quiet for a while, not quite sure how to proceed, so she fills in the silence.

“We used to play Rook down to the Church on Sundays. One time when Levi was in charge of the dessert he brought cantaloupe and ice cream. That was the first time I’d ever had that before.”

“So he was kind of a, kind of like a cowboy, right? What did he, I mean, your husband, he ran the cattle with him?” I fumble over my words.
“Yes. There was a group of them: Malin, Ras, Rex, Levi.”

“So I guess they took care of the cows?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Was that Sand Cove you said—where he wintered the cattle?”

“Yes.”

I don’t know enough to ask an intelligent question about a cowboy’s life. It took effort for me even to say ‘where he wintered the cattle,’ because I’d never thought about cows having to move from one range to another before just now, and was trying out a new phrase, and a new concept—one I’d picked up while Marie was talking. The phrase felt funny on my tongue, and I hoped it wasn’t obvious.

And though I knew she wouldn’t know, what I really wanted to ask was, How did he feel when his wife died of breast cancer at age forty-one? And when his son drowned at age fourteen? Did he cry? Pray? What did he think about and do in that big house, all by himself? What did he feel like when he was riding a horse?

***

A few hours later I’m walking arm-in-arm with Marie and her daughter Louise (“Tweeter”) down the street. It’s dark, and if it weren’t for the moon we
wouldn’t be able to see anything. I’m wearing cut-offs, which Marie comments on.

“You’ll learn not to wear those, soon enough.”

At Tweeter’s suggestion we are headed down to the house of Larry Gardner, Marie’s son, who grew up in the valley helping his father take care of their herd. He also ran with my great-grandpa Levi.

I can’t get a good look at the house in the dark, but when we enter I’m shocked at its newness, as I was the first time I visited my dad’s uncle, Erle, in his summer home in the valley. I just expected all the houses in this valley to be old, like the Church and the Snow home. I guess I thought William and Ann Snow would be in there, perfectly preserved, like Edna’s flowers.

I smile at the kids on the floor, watching The Little Mermaid.

Marie calls Larry out from the bedroom and introduces him to me.

“This is Jana, Bruce’s daughter. Cherril Snow’s granddaughter (using her maiden name). Levi Snow’s great-granddaughter. She wants to know about Levi. I thought maybe you could tell her more, since you rode together.” Larry is friendly and obliging. He pulls up a chair for me, sits down himself, takes off his hat and grins.

“Your dad,” he starts. “Your dad used to come here when he was a kid, for a couple weeks in the summer. We used to play all kinds of practical jokes on
him.” He proceeds to tell me about getting a hose down my dad’s pants, and getting him to put coal all over his face without knowing it. I smile and sit up straight, proud, as if he had been the hero in the story.

“But you came to hear about your granddad, not your dad, anyway,” he says. “Of course I mean your great-granddad when I say granddad. You know that. Levi. Levi was, well, he was a small man. He was a quiet man. He was a good man too. We used to worry about him living over in that big house all alone, after Belle died. Sometimes I’d go over to check up on him. Most times he was sitting at the kitchen table, reading. Often times he was there reading the Book of Mormon. I’m glad I remembered that to tell you—he loved the Book of Mormon. He was Superintendent of the Sunday School for a while, and I remember him conducting meetings sometimes. He wasn’t real anxious to be talking in front of a crowd, but still, he was always at Church. Some of the other people in town, they were good, but didn’t go to Church. Levi, he was good and he did go to Church.”

The kids in the living room pull up chairs to listen now; it’s story time. They turn down The Little Mermaid.

“We used to ride together,” he continues, “and he’d always talk and I’d really strain my ears because he’d ride in front and I’d never hear what he was saying. I’d have to keep saying, ‘What, what? Turn your head sideways, Levi.’
But he just kept on. But he was very, very pleasant. I don’t ever remember him getting too upset at too many things. Lucy was his favorite horse—he rode her the most. And then he had another horse, but I’m not gonna tell you the name of that one. It wasn’t a very nice name.”

“Just give her the initials,” one of the kids says from the couch, laughing.

“Well, it’s just that horse had to stop all the time,” he says, looking embarrassed. “He’d go about a quarter of a mile and then he’d have to stop and stretch out, or go to the bathroom. I can’t remember what his real name was [everyone is laughing now, including the kids and the grandkids and me], but anyway, we used to like to go down to Levi’s place because he’d let us play in the barn. We could go up on the high beams and pretend like we were parachuting, or being Superman, or whatever kids do, and then we’d jump off those high beams into the hay. Levi, he also had a spring in town, and it was one of the better springs in town, and it was piped down to the house. It still is in fact—that’s the water that comes out on the lawn up there. But it used to come in the water trough and when we would be playing or working or on the mountain or whatever, we never packed canteens, and we could hardly wait to get back to Levi’s water trough to get a drink. We used to race. Actually we’d open the horses up coming down the lane, and we’d go full tilt, hit the corner and come around. Yep, we always raced to Levi’s water trough. It used to have a stand-
pipe about three or four feet higher than the trough, so it was a nice stream of water coming down it all the time, and we’d put our head under it and drink and drink. It was cold and good.

“And it used to be that the overflow from the spring would be collected up in Levi’s pond. His was the favorite swimming pool in town. Everybody used to swim there. Before we came, when the older kids were here—like Levi’s kids—they swam in that pond all the time. And they alternated days. The girls would go one day and the boys would go the other day. No one had any swimming suits then.”

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“What I remember about Levi,” Larry is saying an hour later, “Is this image of him in the summer time. He always had on his rubber boots and a little pony shovel that had been worn off, so that instead of a full shovel blade it was about a half a blade; it was really a sharp shovel though. In the spring we’d all work ditches together. There were four in town—North ditch, which came around the back of the fields; Shingle Mill, which came through the middle of the fields here and emptied into Levi’s pond; Town ditch, which came down in front of Main street; and South ditch. We worked all those ditches with shovels, and it always amazed me how Levi could outwork, well, work right alongside all these big guys in town and not ever tire; he was really steady.
“When we rode he always looked forward to finding the people in Central, because he didn’t pack a lunch and he didn’t pack a canteen. Well, it was common practice that everyone kept a jug of water under the seat or the floor boards in their truck. If it was glass then they’d wrap it in a wet gunny-sack to keep it cool, or sometimes they just used an old plastic Clorox bottle or something. Well one time he was coming back from riding out on the Beaver Dam Wash and he came across Lou Bowler’s truck up in Central. He was so thirsty he grabbed the jug out of the back of the truck and had about three swigs down before he realized it was gasoline. ‘Larry,’ he said to me, ‘I was drunk the rest of the day.’

“I only heard Levi tell one joke. He told me one day he was out on the Terry Ranch on the Beaver Dam Wash, all alone, and he was eating a can of pork and beans. Well, he was so bored he started eatin’ the beans one by one, counting each one as he ate. He got to 239 beans and there was one left. ‘But Larry,’ he told me, ‘I couldn’t eat that last bean.’ ‘Why not?’ I asked. ‘Cuz then I’d be 240,’ he says.”

With his Utah accent it sounds like Too-Farty.

“And let’s see—the Snow brand. It was a lazy S, with an I below it—that was on the right hip. And it was an LZ on the left hip.”
Many of these stories I’ve heard before—heard my dad and my uncle tell them around the dinner table, or heard others tell them at those too-few family reunions. But in a way I’m hearing them for the first time, here in Larry Gardner’s house, here in Pine Valley, with the context, the history, the who’s who who sorted out a bit better. It’s like going to class having read the material I’m supposed to beforehand.

And a few of the stories, or details in some of the old stories, are new, and I gobble them up, try to emblazon them on my brain, like a brand. In a way they are a brand, always have been: a part of me I’ve carried on my DNA since I was born, regardless of whether I knew it, or whether I cared. But a brand nonetheless, staking out its territory, claiming me.

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Wait a second. My great-grandfather was a cowboy? I blush thinking about all the times I’ve mentally laughed at men in tight Wranglers or verbally assaulted country music. I have the sudden, strong urge to watch Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. And I feel like Moses, who sympathized little with the Jewish people until, as an adult, he found out he was one of them. And like Moses, I want to redeem my people: stupid government, cutting range rights. Over-grazing nothing. Can’t you see you’ve ruined them, ruined a way of life? It’s good, honest, hard work. Now they’ve sold out, died out.
For the first time in my white, middle-class, suburban, college-educated, 20th-century, American life, the story of the great West means something to me.

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One of the books I found in my school library before coming here was a collection of brief vignettes a woman in Pine Valley recorded about each of the people living here when my great-grandfather Levi was alive. She interviewed everyone in town (remember there weren’t many), and then recorded their tales. Levi’s is the shortest because, when the woman went back to play the tape she found his voice was so quiet she couldn’t hear most of it.

“Probably one reason his children can’t remember more about him is that he wasn’t around much,” she writes. “He got up early in the mornings and did half a day’s work before breakfast. He would return to the house for dinner around noon, then continue with the work, milking and livestock feeding after dark most of the time. His was a six-day work week.”

One of my other favorite stories in there, though, is about the time he came home to his big, lonely house, and found a pie on the table. He asked a neighbor if she had brought it and she said no, but she would bring him one. He asked another neighbor if she had brought it and she said, no, but she would bring him one. He ended up with three pies.
Another thing I didn’t know. She writes, “Levi is an avid reader, spending many hours reading the scriptures as well as magazines, newspapers and books. He has a keen memory.”

“So, Levi,” I say. “You liked to read?”

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The next morning Gwen shows up. We sit at the table and eat our breakfast in silence. A pleasant silence, I think, except that I’m wondering if she thinks it’s pleasant.

Almost every picture I’ve seen of Levi—and I haven’t seen many—is out of focus. But everyone says Gwen looks most like him. She too is short, slight. Gray hair all one length to her ears. An unanimated, though not unkind, way of talking. Expressionless face. Eyes that look soft, kind, but like they’ve known hurt.

“I think I’ll head up to the cemetery and take a look around today,” I say.

“Then maybe go up on a hike over to Water Canyon. I’ve got a map that says the trailhead starts just west of the cemetery.”

“I’ll drive you up,” she says. We get into her rust-colored pickup and head up the lane. I’ve got a backpack with my last apple, some cookies that Gwen brought, water, and my camera.

“When should I start worrying?” she asks.
“Oh. Three o’clock or so.”

“Take this then,” she says, after glancing at my wrists. She hands me her watch and drives off.

The cemetery takes up about ten acres, with about two acres of it plotted off and used, about 200 people in all, mostly Mormon pioneers and their children and grand-children. A few great-grandchildren.

Perhaps it’s appropriate, I think, that the first thing Pine Valley road takes you to is this cemetery. Perhaps it’s appropriate that, before you can get to the town, you have to pass by those who built it up; that before you can enjoy their legacy, you must first meet, and come to terms with, them.

The cemetery is not landscaped; only native plant-life (which I still don’t know the names of, I berate myself), crops up between the headstones. It’s not golf-course green like other cemeteries I’ve been too; it’s brown, grey, an almost translucent green. I walk among the headstones, looking for any name I know. The only thing that bothers me in here is the graves that are mounds. I know the bodies are enclosed, buried deep, but the earth bulging like that makes it seem like they’re right there, pushing out of the earth.

_Burgess. Jacobson. Beckstrom._ All names I recognize from the history I’ve read of the town. Then I see it. Large. A big plaque in front of it. _William Snow,_
1806 to 1879. Endowed Nauvoo Temple, Personal Friend of Prophet Joseph, Noble First Bishop of Pine Valley.

I walk up closer and squat beside the grave. A small block of stone is next to it, maybe six inches high, four inches thick, with the initials A.R.S. on it. Anne Rogers Snow, my great-great-great grandmother. And on the back the initials J.M.S. Jane Marie Snow, another wife. Every feminist influence I’ve been exposed to over the years tells me to cry out in disgust that her grave goes so unheralded, that she doesn’t even have her own marker, while William’s stands stately, practically the largest headstone in here. But I can’t feel that way. I know William was a good husband.

I look around for some of the others. Jeter Snow — there he is, with his wife, behind William. Robert Gardner and his wives. I surprise myself though, by not caring as much as I thought I would. There’s one gravestone I want to find more than the others, though I didn’t realize it until now. Where is Levi?

Finally, I find it, up against the east fence of the cemetery. Levi and Belle’s headstones. Belle, quite popular with the boys, but who only had eyes for Levi after she met him. Belle. A whole nother line of my heritage I haven’t even explored yet, I think. I’m just getting started.

Then I see Burton’s headstone, there beside them. Burton, the son who drowned at fourteen. And Roma, the oldest. Divorced. No children. I’m
surprised to see her here; I thought she would be buried somewhere else. I guess she didn’t find anywhere else as “home” as this.

I read the date on Levi’s headstone. 1897 to 1982. My heart starts pounding, despite my having warned it against clichés. I was two years old when he died. How did I never know that before? How did I not know that for two years we occupied the same space? Like William and Robert he seemed so far away; there goes that gooey booger in my head again.

Suddenly it is important for me that he have seen me as a baby.

“Did you see me, Levi?” I ask. “Did you ever meet me?” And somehow, quietly, I know that he did not. But I remember a new picture now that I’ve seen of Levi, though I don’t think I ever realized it was him before. He’s standing beside a young version of my dad, in the airport. Yes, that has to be him. He’s very short in the picture I remember. The face is right, like Gwen’s, and almost in focus. He’s very old, kind of bent and worn looking, with sort of a crooked smile. He’s there to see my dad off on a mission for our Church. My dad is headed down to Brazil. One of the first of Levi’s grandsons to go. I think of Levi reading the Book of Mormon by coal oil at the kitchen table. He must have been proud of my dad.

My dad. I didn’t think about my dad knowing Levi, about Levi being my dad’s grandpa, the way Cherril is my grandma. I think about the way I think
about her: lots of love yes, but kind of matter-of-factly. She’s just my grandma.

And so Levi must have been ‘just Grandpa,’ to my father. Just my grandpa. It’s so easy to romanticize his life, to mythologize, sentimentalize, hyperbolize.

Levi’s been taken down a notch in my mind, but not really in a bad way. In fact, I might know and understand and love him more at this new level. And, likewise, my grandmother has been taken up a notch, in a way that also feels more accurate and more appropriate. I think about my children wanting to know about her, in the future. And I have another urge.

Mental note: learn native flora and fauna; map out town; learn names of mountains and canyons; watch Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid; call Dad; call Grandma.

I squat down and lift the plastic bowl of flowers on Belle’s grave that’s tipped over, and fold out the flattened ribbons. I get my camera out of my backpack to take a picture and circle the graves for a few minutes, trying to find the right angle. But isn’t it obvious? If I stand facing south I can fit the valley, the Church, the Snow home, the pastures, the mountain wall all exactly as they should be in the frame: surrounding Levi and Belle.

First I stop up the aperture, to get a greater depth of field in the picture. The valley, the church, the Snow home, are all in focus behind the headstones, one with them, I think, just as they should be. Then I stop down the aperture,
View of the valley with the back of Levi and Belle Snow’s headstones in the foreground.

and make the depth of field shorter: the Church, the mountain, the home, the valley, are all still there, but when the picture is printed, they will be out of focus. Here, standing in the cemetery north of the valley, with my progenitors at my feet and the camera at my eye, giving me a birds-eye view of where I’ve been the last few days, I envision the print and realize that this is the only view of the valley, and of my ancestors’ lives—no matter how much I want it otherwise—I will ever get: a blurry one. No matter how much I want to know everything about the valley, learn every fact about their lives here, I won’t. It will be a wind-shield-wiper-in-the-rain blurry, imperfect view, always a little too far away, always a little too out of focus. But it will still be there, I reassure myself—a backdrop, no matter how hazy, to my life, forever—just as it is to my picture now.

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It surprises me how much I’ve come to feel a connection with Levi while I was here. William, Ann, Robert—they’re the pioneers, the ones with the grand stories, and the ones who left the most records, or have had the most written about them. And it’s easy to romanticize their lives. But just as I romanticized their lives, I sometimes vilified Levi’s. I must admit I thought him a weak link for a while. William was bishop. Jeter was bishop. What were you?
The one who stayed. After the original pull for the valley—the lumber—was exhausted, those who stayed had to turn to the valley’s next greatest resource: grass. The sons of these pioneers became ranchers. But ranching, as opposed to lumbering, takes up a lot of physical space. Fewer people could inhabit the valley. The population dwindled. The valley was a pot filling with water; each generation some of the water had to be displaced. And since the valley was so small, there was a low saturation point; the land could only support so much life, especially an agricultural life.

All of Levi’s brothers and sisters ended up leaving, being displaced. Many of them went on to do “great” things. As I’ve mentioned, his sister was one of the first women in the state to get a PhD. His three brothers became mayors in neighboring towns. Levi was the one who stayed.

Levi was a cowboy.

It’s true that he was the oldest boy, and thus most likely to inherit the property in the valley. It’s true that because his father’s health had been poor when he was younger he had had to stay home and help on the ranch. But he must have loved it too; otherwise he wouldn’t have stayed.

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You know, growing up I hated nature, Levi. When we visited the Grand Canyon all I recorded in my diary was that they served three kinds of cream
cheese in the hotel. I yawned at the Ansel Adams calendars Santa brought and asked if he couldn’t send something more along the lines of Dorothea Lange, or even Precious Moments. When we stayed at my Grandpa Lloyd’s ranch in New Mexico I stayed inside and baked high-altitude brownies or watched all six hours of *Anne of Green Gables*, imagining myself in the strong arms of Gilbert Blythe.

But I’ll tell you what. As I’ve gotten older it’s come a little. It started simple, with wanting to take walks; sitting still outside, by myself, and paying attention. Now, though I forget if I’m not careful, I can feel it more. Wanting to plan backpacking trips with my friends, go on extended hikes. So I can see a little, I think, Levi. And I’m starting to learn what it is to do something useful not only with your mind but with your hands. And the rigor, the routine, the monotony mixed with the surprise—the occasional surprise that made it into family folklore. I may almost understand.

And though I wanted you to be gregarious, the life of the party, to bear powerful testimony from the pulpit, I understand more about that. I understand, for one thing, how you could stand it to be alone, in this house, when the family was in St. George during the winters, so the kids could go to school, and you stayed here, or further south, to winter the cattle. And after Belle died, and the children left. I could understand how you could stand to be alone, because I like to be alone.
And I understand the quiet part too.

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On my last night in the valley I spit out my toothpaste and hear something banging on the screen door. I’m all alone again, because Gwen had to get back to St. George.

My first thought is that someone is trying to break in—of course on the only night that I haven’t locked the door. Then, remembering where I am, I think maybe it’s an animal. Do you run from cougars or fight them?

“Really, Levi, I am such a greenhorn, I swear.”

When I peek out the bathroom at the front door, Tweeter Gardner is standing behind the screen.

“I saw that your car was still here and thought maybe you wouldn’t want to sleep here all alone,” she says. “Why don’t you come on over to our place—we’re all eating peaches and cream.”

I gather up my things and follow her a block down the road, my tennis shoes crunching on the gravel and the tall weeds at the side of the road brushing my pants. I can’t help but think about something Marie said, when I was talking to her:

“Levi was up in that house all alone so often. But we took care of him. We had him over for Sunday dinners and made sure he wasn’t by himself.”
And here are the Gardners rescuing us Snows again, from our isolation, worrying about me up at the house, all alone.

“This valley is a special place,” Tweeter says. “I was lucky to have grown up here, and I will keep coming back as long as I’m alive.” She slips her arm through mine, to help guide me in the dark.

“We’re glad you’re here,” she adds, and squeezes my arm.

Which makes me think you can know a lot of trivia about a place and still not really know anything about the place at all. Which makes me think that you can live your whole life in this world and not even really know where you are.

I can’t hear anything but us walking. It’s cool and dark. I look up ahead of me and envision what I know is there, though I can’t see it because of the darkness: mountains on all sides of me; two miles of unpaved road leading up into the canyons where the mills that first brought white men to this valley were located. And to my right, all those new houses filling up the canyons. The future of Pine Valley. To the left, the few fields and cows that remain from an era when twenty families called Pine Valley home, though they had only been the future to a time before, when milling and lumbering had made the town boom, with upwards of 500 residents. Behind me, if I could see them, would be the white chapel and the old Snow home, at the center of the valley, and of my understanding of the valley. And up on the hill to the north, overlooking it all, I
would see the flag waving over the cemetery—over the place where William and
Ann and Robert and Lenora and Jeter and Mary Alice and Levi and Belle have
lain all these years, though it was only this year that I first knew it.
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