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Yellow Shirt Riddles

Holly Rose Hansen

Baby-Yellow

The story I'm most curious to write is the one I forgot. I know I forgot it, in its entirety, because Rachel,¹ my ex-sister-in-law-more-like-a-sister, told me about it two years after it happened. During one of our all-night talkathons, where we cry but mostly laugh about the darkest moments in our lives, Rachel started telling me a story I had no memory of. "Come, on," she said, "you remember when Kevin came to his parents' house after one of your blow-ups . . ." She repeatedly recounted details, but not one stitch of that yarn belonged to me. At first I was frightened, realizing my brain had done something extraordinarily funky. Then I wanted to recall the moment for myself. I believed her, but I couldn't understand how or why I could block the memory out. Nutters, people on heavy medication, and victims of trauma lose their memories, not normal people like me. It was easier to believe the fight got lost somewhere in the chaos of those crying years, like children do at busy shopping malls, and if I got on the PA system, my little lost memory would surface from the crowd. But when I strain even now, the only memory I locate in the slot where that fight should be is the image of an ordinary collared shirt that I wore to work a year after the divorce. This image baffles me. How did that shirt, without my permission, replace the fight memory, and what message is my subconscious sending me? The shirt is the pale yellow of pre-ultrasound pregnancy, not a color I'd imagine connected to a silent fight I had with my husband in front of his family, which everyone heard anyway. The more I push this forgotten moment, the more my brain cloaks it with distracting riddles, as if to say, *don't go there, you're better off not knowing.*

Writing my silent fight in vivid details might be cathartic, bringing healing, but memory and meaning are lost. My pallet isn't empty though; I can paint pictures of things that matter least. Like the gold, U-shaped '70s armchair I was probably sitting in when Kevin, my then-husband, opened the front door to his parents' house—because I can remember that chair. I'd seen it every Sunday for five years. Except I can't remember if I was in that chair or out in the back garden, sitting on the faded red picnic table, escaping Heber's summer heat amid the corn and asparagus.

The bits of fight I do know, skinny Rachel lent me—an interesting dilemma to examine my life only in the colors another's eyes have seen. I'm not sure I like it. While editing this, I called Rachel to refresh my "memory" again because of my frustration trying to write true descriptions of things I can't remember. She told me I drove an hour from my house to Heber to surprise Kevin with dinner—a make-up for the fight we had before he left on a backpacking trip with his dad and brother. Rachel told me how my smile stayed frozen on like nothing happened when I said "Hi" to Kevin as he walked by without saying a word or looking in my direction. But it was my eyes, she said, that gave me away, looking like a lost child's. Those lost eyes watched as he ignored my greeting, grabbed his dinner and backpack, and drove off in my cherry Toyota pickup, leaving me standing—I don't remember where—but Rachel tells me I was there. I suppose I made my excuses for Kevin to his family, smiled that fake pin-up I'd been doing for the last three years, and drove myself home. I divorced him two years later. That I remember.

Untying

Bill Kittredge said, "If you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self."² I believe I've risked a great deal of sentimentality in writing the emotional death of my married, abused self.

Pink alpine glow was the last beautiful thing I saw. Spindrift rolled off the mountain in rising undulating clouds that poured into our eyes, mouths, down collars, into hoods. It was impossible to find camp and set up our tent inside the swirling white. I wasn't even sure we were on the mountain anymore, and I was terrified of stepping off. We dug seats into the sheer sides, an almost ineffectual exercise with snow lifting and moving at once, filling in our small places of security. And night was impossibly long; sitting on coiled ropes in the dark, snow pricking our faces, munching frozen candy bars for warmth. I don't remember slipping, but must have because waking found me alone, my eyes a stranger in the place where they opened. I could see him somehow—alone in that crouched

position, the rope clenching his harness, crampons crushing dry snow. He would try to look for me once he realized I had gone, perhaps when the early light of morning revealed my absence. But he would never find me. I would not even know where to look. He did not hear above the slipping wind the rustle of my body as I rolled away. It is strange I did not feel it, exhausted as I was. It was simple, really, why I fell into the night. We untied the short rope tethering us together. When had we taken it off? I couldn't remember loosening the knot. But it happened, I knew. How strange, it wasn't the mountain that took me after all, but our own folly. It is an odd thing to know of one's own dying, to analyze it with detachment, not regret. And what would he do? Would he see my end of the untied rope? He would come down the mountain, of course, because that was the only thing to do. He would go, stomping the snow, digging his axe as he taught me, sometimes reaching instinctively to belay his disappeared partner. He would not return to this mountain, but certainly would go up others. Climbing them, he would think of me, only speaking my name when it was whipped from his lips and tossed incomprehensibly into the spindrift and perhaps the alpine glow.

Tying Quilts

Mom and I were relieved—they weren't playing inane baby-shower games, like tasting and guessing contents of baby food from unlabeled jars. A baby quilt was set up instead. I was surprised I remembered how to do it, mostly. Pierce the fabric, push down hard, up again, needle slipping, under thick red yarn, feel fibers tug as you pull. Done already, move on, next marks waiting, cut the yarn when the row is done, pull tight knots, the baby will wind them in tiny fingers. I learned to tie quilts at girls camp and church socials. Lujean Spencer, with white poodle-permed hair, was the authority. She taught me to stretch fabric on wooden frames, push big silver tacks, roll a tied section under to start another row. The quilt Lujean helped me make, cut from blue cloth reminding me of baby eyes, is folded unused at the top of my closet. The yarn is perfect, not frayed by any baby's hands.

These were the life skills they taught good girls at my church. When we weren't tying quilts for Kurdish refugees or making hygiene kits for the homeless, our leaders were doing their best to convince us we could become saints. I can see my teacher, her perfectly manicured nails holding the thin white manual. The answers were simple, and I knew them all. Read your scriptures, pray, beg forgiveness. Those answers haven't changed much. I still believe. But my manual is not white anymore. It's

an 8½ x 5 blue spiral notebook that I carry almost everywhere I go, and scribble in: jotting down lines that run through my head at night; stories I'm working on; conversation scraps; bits of class lecture; song lyrics; prayers; secret notes to my best friend; anything that will help me tie up the loose ends that are running willy-nilly through my head. These pieces get terribly disorganized, almost frightfully so at times, until I believe I'll never straighten it all out. But I do somehow, shaping the scraps into a pattern. Simplicity is not an attribute I'd pin on my life, but I've come to prefer attempting to organize the chaos rather than pretending it's not there.

Broken

I made orange-passion fruit juice this morning in my glass pitcher that kind of looks like the Kool-Aid man. I have two of them, exactly the same. One I got for my wedding; the other I got five years later for my divorce, I guess you could say. I can't tell one from the other, so alike they seem to me. I'm happy to use them both, the juice tasting as good, pouring out as well, mixing as smoothly. Both were gifts from family members, wishing happiness, giving what the occasion and conscience demanded. The first pitcher I unwrapped in a white dress standing in a reception hall; the second gift I got outside my townhouse. I was walking to my door from the carport when Kevin's sister's family appeared on the sidewalk, holding a wrapped gift and the new baby I'd never seen, already six months old. It was dark and Christmas cold, but they couldn't come in. They were tired, the night spent, excusing themselves with their two babies' bedtimes. Hannah was strapped in her car-seat, so I kissed her there, my tears wetting her toddler face as she cooed out something sounding like Aunt Holly. I hugged Micah, crying harder now, his big toothy grin revealed in the lamplight. And Chrissy, large glasses glinting, awkward and fumbling with the baby, crying too, the dark past of the asphalt beneath our feet. Sniffing, wiping at the tears washing over my cheeks, no Kleenex, just brushing it on my jeans, asking about his siblings who wouldn't speak to me, hugging them, holding the baby, not knowing what to say. Smiling and crying and wondering what I was doing outside on a dark and cold Christmas night with people I used to call my family. I waved to them, wiping at my eyes as they drove, their headlights flashing, blinding me as they turned away. I went inside and, without turning on the light, unwrapped the box, the cool beams of the streetlamp streaming through my gauzy curtains. *Another pitcher*, I thought, *just like the old one*. I don't think they knew they completed the pair, don't think they could have foreseen the irony when they picked it up at Lechters or Walmart as they dashed off to

buy other things on their list. But I did as I put it in the cupboard next to its mate. There wouldn't have been space, not before he took his bowls and pie plates.

It's a good pitcher, even though I have to put Cling Wrap over it when I put it inside the fridge to keep the juice from tasting like salsa and potatoes. I like that I can see swirls in the orange-pink juice, that it's heavy in my hand, solid as I pour, that the glass belly feels icy cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, the glass would shatter, forever broken on the hard floor, unfixable, to be swept up and put in the garbage can. Perhaps finding pieces, little shards months later as I sweep a forgotten corner, or while walking in the kitchen one morning wanting some juice, but instead pushing a hard sliver in my toe, the red drop of blood forming unexpectedly. But I do not drop it; I hold it carefully, wash it out, and put it safely in the cupboard with its other, their bases kissing. I do not know which one was the start and which one the gift of the end, nor am I able to tell which I like better, so alike they seem to me.

This essay by Holly Rose Hansen (hollyrosehansen@gmail.com) won first place in the *BYU Studies* 2009 personal essay contest.

1. All names have been changed.
2. In Richard Hugo, "Writing off the Subject," *The Triggering Town: Essays and Lectures on Poetry and Writing* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 7.