

Placeholder

[How It Ends]



You seek to fill the minutes, this summer of pandemic. No desire to create or consume, left vulnerable to memory in your mind's vacuum.

Jeff B—flared nostrils and buck teeth. He was 18 and you were 14. Sun pendant necklace and greeting card congratulating you on your baptism in a pool wearing a two-toned green bathing suit covered by Sonora Museum t-shirt to conceal proof of budding breasts and

your mother rubbed herself on the shower faucet, she said, when you told her you unwittingly rubbed yourself in your sleep, woke with fish-smelling fingers covered with sticky powdery substance, stung your nose when sniffed and

you bled and said *I think I'm dying* and mother smiled and said *probably not*. You didn't realize at the time, but Jeff B. had a crush on you. Where was he when his frizzy-haired sister Julie B. hosted a sleepover, you begged mother—overprotective and strict—to let you go and she relented, you girls built octopi from styrofoam balls, yarn, and googly eyes and

your puppy Odie broke the necklace from Jeff B. and tore one eye off stuffed Pluto big brother got you from Disneyland (or was it his flavor-of-the-month girlfriend Peggy H. who urged him to buy a souvenir for his kid sister), Pluto, the one-eyed stuffed dog you held onto into maturity. And that is why you tied Odie's mouth with a rubber band—funny how he swiped at it unsuccessfully—the poor neglected dog jumped over the backyard fence and hung himself

years later, little brother suggested intentional death, Odie forced to breathe through his nose—how sick—you loved the sound

the white zipper made going up and down the yellow jacket you wore at your birthday party, a gift most likely from mother and father, the sound of plastic on plastic when you moved your arms around, whatever happened to

Jeff B., who sat next to you at the Kingdom Hall in a dark blue suit, hot flushed face, his and yours, did you ever thank him for the gift and

Roy, dark dry skin said *She's too skinny* when his sister outed your crush, he rolled his eyes when he saw you and Jeff sitting side by side in the house of worship. Roy your first crush, love note held in sweaty hands you thought your crayon drawn sentiments were hidden but no, Brother so-and-so looked down with his mustached grin long before your first period and

where is Jeff B. now? At some point, he moved away, memories awash with glaze, mother let you go and you played hide and seek outside their apartment complex, painted brick walls for cover, wouldn't mother be tiffed if she knew after dark hours. About Jeff, your first regret,

what you don't regret is what never happened before your first period at 13 by the Filipino man who stared at you in a way that made you feel strange at the large assembly hall in the hot city climate of Escondido amongst the Great Crowd of brothers and sisters, the throng who would

live forever in earthly Paradise under 144,000; remember? You were around 16 when you had an epiphany—lying on Mama’s brown fur bed spread furry like Chewbacca, the spread you’d later find stacked at the bottom of the blanket pile Papa kept in the bedroom where Mama coughed up blood, the stain still embedded there how could he hold onto it like he did her clothes until he too died from Cancer and you felt sick when you found it amidst all the other things that would go to Goodwill—that you might just be one of those indestructible heavenly bodies, how wonderful to shred this skinny unattractive body. You would look back one day as a grown woman and imagine what could have happened, and never regret, but you regret Jeff, both of you too shy to say it straight, the funny fluttery feeling when sitting next to him in orange cushioned chairs in the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses on Walnut Street. Jeff B., the much older boy with a crush on you,

a rarity in a soon to be long line of romantic rejections and *You just don’t do it for me or I don’t think we’re sexually compatible*. How you sat at the coffeeshop the morning after mechanical sex and you wore a sexy midriff shirt you thought would keep him around, to think

if all that never happened, could’ve been a child bride like Leslie P. who had a double wedding with her sister when she took her marriage vow at 14, they stood on the stage of the Kingdom Hall on Walnut Street, hands joined to the P brothers, oh wasn’t it all just grand, Leslie P the same age as blushing nervous you haven’t changed all that much, minus the blush. You—
redundancy.

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You are a redundancy, and so is everything you write. You erase, rewrite, burn. Even that is a cliché, as is this college ruled composition notebook re-constituted as a writer's journal. Poser. fraud. Why would anyone need to know your life story? Or your thoughts on existentialism, dread, writing and art as (non)commodity. Improbable that you'd arrive on the other side where a select few bask in the glory of a Pulitzer, Nobel, Guggenheim, or some such accolade, or achieve pseudonymous fame like the Neopolitan novel series writer, obscurity taken to its extreme. Even as you write now, coaxed into staying, writing what will never be seen by anyone but yourself, no hope for notoriety even to the slightest degree.

If your plight was yours alone, then there might be hope, but philosophers and scholars you admire—Montaigne, Sartre etcetera etcetera—regurgitate too, only they are more skilled at pulling the wool over their eyes—there you go again with worn platitudes. Some are unwitting plagiarists, others brazenly borrow outright. You try writing what comes to you moment by moment hoping your stream of consciousness will forget the maxims of more eloquent thinkers who came before you.

Everyone these days has some kind of superpower, but not you. Here may lie your originality. Yours is a super-weakness leaving you vanquished of the cornerstone of creativity—curiosity, for even when you don't try, you see through every book you read or movie you see—no matter how groundbreaking or unique the plot structure—they all share the same eventuality.

You designate the bottom shelf for partially read books—*Infinite Jest*, *Arctic Dreams*, you don't even have the urge to flip to the last page, because no matter the twist or turn, you say *We know how this ends*. Not out of boredom, but because of inborn predictability. Each story their story and yours and everyone else's. Every story—even the ones with open endings—comes to the same conclusion, you know it, you can feel it. You don't want to hear it—*It's not the end that matters, but the journey*. For you, even the journey reeks of construct, your supersight peers through the veneer, no matter the dressing.

Yet—a glimmer of hope: You recently read all the way through Peter Stamm's *The Sweet Indifference of the World* for the promise of this one captivating line: "It felt as though we were in a dream world in which all things were possible, but nothing mattered." One of the truest sayings you have ever encountered, and you have come across many, the same sentiment expressed in variations on the theme: Beckett's *I can't go on, I'll go on*. Kierkegaard's illuminated thoughts on *The Sickness Unto Death* (anxiety and dread), Queen's *Nothing really matters to me*, and so on. The world is sweetly indifferent to Stamm's writer who meets his doppelganger and the doppelganger of his ex-girlfriend, a narrative where the characters traverse space and time and you read on, for they are much like the characters in your own narratives: Your childhood self leaping across barriers of time and space to guide you through shadows of memory in *My Red Balloon*, the title of which you borrowed from the short film *Red Balloon*. Here you return full circle to the root of your frustration, redundancy, how it reaches beyond memories, the books you read, the books you write and seeps into every aspect of your life. Could it be the remedy lies within the malady itself?

Memories plague you in your mind's wanderings, for the same memories return and they tell you that you have not changed, not really. The stories you tell yourself about your memories are just as much constructs as all the books you have read and ever will read, taking the bits and fragments and forcing them to fit a narrative of uniqueness or specialness. You know full well that the past is the past and no amount of recall can change the present moment, which is constantly changing into the past, inexplicable, all things possible but not mattering (see how that crept in, Stamm's sentiment expressed in different wording). You have grown weary of memories coming back to you repeatedly to taunt you with their similarities, for no matter the ways you blend and flex, they reveal that you have not really changed, not really, the same fear of not-so-much death but the struggle to get there and the wounds and bruises from living never healing and yet... If living is, as you believe, assimilation of the previous moment's hand-me-downs, then you are living some kind of walking death, blind to the promise in each new moment—similar to the immediate past, yet not exactly the same and yet...

By the time you read this, I will have long past clicked this Dr. Grip pen and clipped it to mark the page of infinite beginnings. Is that original? Somewhere some time someone penned a similar sentiment (probably with a different pen).

Because first lines are key to literary success.

Because you must grab attention in the first sentence.

You read somewhere that no one ever writes about happiness, otherwise no one will read it, unless they are specifically writing *about* happiness to cater to an audience looking to achieve happiness (this part you came up with on your own); even then they must also write about sadness or tragedy as a starting point to get to happiness, i.e. you cannot appreciate happiness unless you are also capable of suffering. You were convinced to remain here against your better judgment. Herein then, give yourself permission to write, not *about* suffering or happiness, but *on* suffering and happiness. Be open to write on memories as they emerge, yes, even if they appear to be the ones that linger. You'd be lying if you said you'll not summon memories willfully, for even the slightest encouragement is sure to woo them forth. The past is the past, no amount of purposeful recall will change that. Here we are in the present forever becoming the past.

Do we not always return to the same trope as a species—some are just better at the packaging, and boy are we a forgetful bunch; soon as something “new” comes along, groundbreaking, like giddy schoolchildren, we rush to get our fresh off the press autographed copy to eventually be consigned to the bookshelf or in a cloth bag to be pawned off for credit or cash.

Not for you now. Not any longer. You will do no such thing because you no longer have the desire to consume. You can't shake off the feeling *We dance around it but we know how it ends.*

You pretend that the way this particular brain freeze from your favorite flavor ice cream will make for a subtle shift in the stream of moments that coagulate into the narrative of a life. You give it one more chance. You start at the point of origin, you start with you. If you can identify each memory as discrete yet connected to every other moment, then you will be addressing the sense of redundancy. The very act of recall an exorcism towards making yourself anew.

You choose the medium-sized bowl of Mexican Vanilla, your favorite, and your partner chooses the same but in a sugar cone; when he gets up from the booth you ask him to grab you a paper cup of water to stop the inevitable cough from consuming cold things. The cold rushes to both your heads and you agree it's worth it, this is the best ice cream around, even if it is more expensive than store-bought. What makes this visit beyond banal is that it is curbside, during the time of the novel Covid-19 virus. You ordered the ice cream online, then drove 30 minutes into the city just so you could get a chance to shake off a month-long cabin fever induced by shelter-in-place. Surely this makes your regular trip for ice cream different. True. But the end result is exactly the same, momentary satiation, then back to your habit of checking the news every five minutes on number of cases and pandemic deaths, this is not novel, just think—the Bubonic Plague, Black Death, Spanish Influenza, retrieved from the archives only when needed such as times like this, they say history repeats itself and it's true.

Moment, once. Moment to moment, linked. Each new present similar to but never exactly like the immediate past. One moment you are 10, next 10 plus a moment, ad infinitum until no new moments. Death. One moment you are 10 plus until moment 50. Are you really the same you at

50 as you were at 10? Yes and no. Yes, that same feeling of subjectivity or continuity. No, every 10 years cellular you is brand new, for one moment. Like dominoes set a quarter inch apart, non-touching at first then push-off, you know what follows, when the last piece is down, you look at the snaky row of black, you can't tell any of the blocks apart when they're face down like that until you pick each one up and turn them over each with its own number of dots. The chances for this exact same configuration are next to nil, just as the chain of memories triggered will and will not resemble all others. For each time you remember, You are and are not new. For two, even when you recall one memory at a time (if this is even possible) and prod it to slowly unfold, you view it through a filtered lens distanced in space and time. Peer more closely and you will see that childhood you is and isn't you.

You do.

You sleep walked into brother's bedroom during an afternoon nap, or he sleep-walked into yours; either way, you sat across from each other, he with one leg up and one tucked under and you Indian style, with his box of Legos in between you. You sleep talked: *Can I play with your Legos?* He laughed and garbled: *Are you asleep?* You slowly drifted awake and together you built models not to code, but indiscriminately from guesswork and imagination.

Another sleep-walk memory—no wait—one of fainting: You had a fever, a teenager. Cold sweat, dizzy, you slumped onto the bed. When you woke up in the bedroom shared with now deceased sister—the room was pink, was it? No, just the sliding closet doors that over time got

misaligned, Papa never replaced them, why not? He replaced his closet doors with new ones, the ones less damaged in the adjacent bedroom which became his office of solitude until he died Wednesday, December 5th at 3:41 AM, just you and a hospice care worker, it wasn't fair you had to bare it alone. This strange hospice worker made you uncomfortable when he said he was watching as you slept (fakely) on the couch then said he was only kidding. When he asked to use the bathroom, later, sister asked, where was Papa's rings and watch, had the worker sneaked into Papa's used-to-be-bedroom office and rifled through his desk? You felt sorry for this older man, almost 24 hours on his feet, the only one assigned in the area, Filipino like Papa, volunteered to stay with you until your sister who lived just a couple of miles away could come hours later, brother-in-law said *Oh my God* and turned away as if repulsed by your Papa like how you viewed Mama with mouth yawned open as her chest rattled and her dentures slipped and you said *I'm scared* and Papa said *Don't talk about your mother like that*, his poor sweet Josephine, used-to-be Papa rolled into a sheet and carried away in a van—black or white?—doesn't matter, just the cold fact that the sheet shrouded body of your father, and you nearly fainted for a second time in your life.

When you were around 10 years old, in the fifth grade, you won a book float contest with a \$5 reward to get whatever you wanted at the Los Altos Elementary School book fair. It was the '70s, and for that time period, you scored quite a few things for a measly five bucks: stickers to add to your photo album sticker collection, maybe a Beverly Cleary or Garfield book, and maybe a pencil with an animal shaped eraser or the kind that when you rolled the pencil in between your hands quick the fuzzy hair grew crazier and the googly eyes googled. This is one of those

repetitious memories. You feel strong feelings each time you remember: Warmth, happiness, and an affinity with your oldest sister, the same sister who lived close to your father when he was sick and took care of him, she helped you build the award winning Winnie the Pooh book float. She did most of the work, so you really didn't deserve the prize; she molded Winnie the Pooh and Christopher Robin figures from clay then your only task was to place them in the oven to be baked. Because this memory comes frequently, you are almost certainly certain of the details. Then you found, not an actual photo of the event, but a negative. Lo and behold, you found it when rifling through your picture collections, one in a plastic container, and the other in Papa's wooden box with the lettering that spells out "Subic Bay, Philippines," where you happened to be born, which he happened to use for stowing treasured wallet inserts with photos of his darling Josephine, your Mama, one where she's sitting in front of the old piano wearing a white bathing suit, another looking up holding a vinyl record, and then bottle-feeding baby you (you so want it to be you), he always said you looked an awful lot like your mother. At first, you had trouble finding the negative and even doubted its existence, but alas, a KodakChrome slide that held to the sunlight you could barely make out you as a child, the slide was so small but nevertheless you could see with some straining of the eyes your eyes were closed and you wore an oversized sweater, but the figures glued to the old shoebox were too tiny to perceive on the tiny slide. You found a place to process the photo and requested size 12"x18", not realizing that this is awfully large for an unprofessionally taken photo of silly you standing in front of the school sign indicating date of establishment of Los Altos Elementary School as "April 24, 197*. The last number in the series is hidden from view but you conclude that it was obviously the '70's and you really were 10 and in the 5th grade. You fills in the gaps.

Your memory was misplaced or mistaken when you could have sworn your award winning float included an oven baked Christopher Robin, only Winnie the Pooh with a shelf, table, honey jar, and mat that says “Welcome,” quite unpolished compared to your mind’s re-enactment of the scene, for one you blush at the ill-drawn attempt at a kitchen window and the misspelling of “Winni” for “Winnie.” Still, the blown up photo testifies to the gist of remembrance, which means what? You are the girl in the photo, yes, the same sleep walking fainting girl, only she is not you in that she has one concern and one only—*What will I buy at the bookfair with my money?*

You inhabit the being of the long-haired girl wearing pants too big passed down from big brother, with whom she will share toys and phases of closeness and distance over the years, the girl with the sleepy eyes who forgets to say thanks to her big sister for scoring a win and caring for an aging and ailing father. Fresh new curiosities emerge in this phenomenon of dual-being: *What will it be like to be me tomorrow?*