

THE WHOLE TRUTH

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I

About a year ago, I gave my sister, Kitty, a draft of an essay I'd been working on. Up to that point, I had never shared any of my autobiographical writing with a family member. Part of the essay dealt with the day of our father's death, and I was sincerely interested to see if she could add any details or observations. I spent an anxiety-filled week, second-guessing my decision, before calling her. I was quite surprised by her reaction. It wasn't that she was offended or angry—I had prepared myself for that possibility. No, in fact she was quite generous in her comments about the piece. However, what caught me off guard was the degree to which her memories of that day—April 15, 1969—conflicted substantially with my own recollections.

She remembered the day as being sunny. I remembered a light drizzle with low gray clouds. She remembered being with me in the bedroom when I found my father's body. I remembered only my brother John being there. She remembered the coroner pronouncing my father dead before Father Ramsey came to perform the last rites. I remembered Father Ramsey arriving before the coroner. As we talked, it became clear to me that this event—indisputably the most central instance of my childhood—was subject to conflicting perspectives.

There were other details where our memories conflicted, but in the end it didn't matter whether or not it had been sunny or rainy or whether it was the priest or coroner who arrived first, because one thing has always remained certain: our father died that day, and both of us remembered watching the ambulance attendants carry his body out the front door.

II

Shortly after that revelatory conversation with my sister, I came across an essay written by Anna Quindlen for the *New York Times Book Review*. In her piece, "How Dark? How Stormy? I Can't Recall," Ms. Quindlen questioned the legitimate employment of specific details in memoir. It seems that because the author couldn't remember the name of her kindergarten teacher, she felt compelled to question how Frank McCourt—the author of *Angela's Ashes*—could remember "the raw, itching sore that erupted between his eyes when he was a boy, or the sight of himself in the mirror on his fourteenth birthday." In support of her incredulity, Ms. Quindlen continued: "I can't remember the spread on my parents' bed. If it was quilted satin, I can't remember running my hand over its smooth surface when I was seven or eight years old. If it was chenille, I can't recall feeling the bobbles beneath my palm as I sat and watched in the mirror as my mother braided my long hair." To be fair, Ms. Quindlen reminds readers that she spent most of her life as a reporter, and that the "strictures of her trade run deep." In this regard, it is completely understandable that Ms. Quindlen is, by nature, suspicious of anything as unverifiable as memoir.

As for me, I know very little about quilted satin, and—to the best of my knowledge—my mother never braided my hair. But I do remember the oil stains on my father's calloused hands, how his finger nails were bitten down almost to the cuticles; I remember how he used to wear an oversized, fluorescent, orange raincoat to my JV football games—rain or shine—so I could see him as he pranced up and down the sidelines shouting instructions; I remember the doilies my grandmother used to keep on the mahogany dresser in her bedroom, the Jell-O-like flesh that drooped below her upper arms; I remember my mother singing in the kitchen on school mornings; I remember the first time I had the wind knocked out of me; I remember my grandfather on his death bed, rolling imaginary Bull Durham cigarettes and offering them to my grandmother (who'd been dead for eight years); I remember how my mom used to take her boys out to the back fence, line us up, and give crew cuts, washing us off with the hose afterwards so we wouldn't scatter loose hair in the house; I remember playing in a sand pile and almost being eaten by a pig.

These are vivid, honest memories. But I would never swear to them as facts. They are honest and true only in that this is how I remember them, verifying where I can, letting the reader know whenever I step over the line into uncertainty or even imaginative re-creation. But within each of these memories is a story loaded with details, dialogue, and imagery. And I've told these stories hundreds of times.

III

"The blurring of reality" is a catchy phrase proclaimed by a self-appointed few out to rescue a gullible reading public from an ontological meltdown. It reminds me of the old "Twilight Zone" episode where a browbeaten author permanently dispatches his wife by burning the tape recording on which he described (dictated) her into being: she feels woozy, puts the back of her hand to her forehead and slowly dissipates into oblivion. Who are these critics? For the most part, I suspect that they are talented writers, columnists, and intellectuals who regard the imminent collapse of the wall separating fiction and nonfiction as having ominous reverberations for literature and for society as a whole. In many ways, I think their concerns are justified. But are they justified in singling out memoir as the prime component of a world slipping into virtual reality?

Turn on the TV and you'll get John Wayne pitching beer commercials or Humphrey Bogart drinking Diet Coke or Fred Astaire dancing with an Electrolux. Watch any broadcast of the national political news then pick up a video of *Wag the Dog* or *Primary Colors*. An article in a recent issue of *Harper's* describes how digital technology calls into question the legitimacy of still photography. Our ability to manipulate images has become so sophisticated that it is now nearly impossible to tell whether an image is a representation of the real world or the product of a hard

drive. We are now told that Ansel Adams, the patron saint of nature photography, played around in his dark room "Making little circles with [a] wand over the area he wanted lightened," laughing in "crazy, nasal, Mephistophelean" glee.

Nevertheless, critics continue to blame memoir for a disproportionate share of this blurring of reality. No less a writer than Joyce Carol Oates has jumped into the fray. In a recent article for the *New York Times*, Ms. Oates suggested that "Memoir testifies, perhaps, to our desperate wish that some truth of the spirit be presented to us, though we know it's probably invented. We want to believe! We are a species who clamors to be lied to." I am not going to address, at least directly, what I consider to be the depressingly elitist, cynical, and patronizing tone of Ms. Oates' observations. Rather, I would like to suggest that what people desperately want, what they've always wanted, is not to be lied to, but to be told a story. And if nonfiction is burning up the best seller lists, it's not because memoirists have learned to become better liars than fiction writers; maybe it's because they're just telling a better story.

In a 1997 interview, fiction writer and essayist Bob Shacochis commented upon the underlying hostility within the literary community over the "appropriation" of traditional fiction techniques—dialogue, scene construction, vividly recollected detail—into today's nonfiction. The real issue, he says, is the quality of storytelling, not whether it's invented or remembered, and "beyond that the arguments become uninteresting, and they get precious. If someone tells you that the memoir or essay is this certain thing, they're really not telling you what they know so much as they're telling you what they've read. It doesn't address the magnitude and diversity of what's been done, or being done out there. They try to tell you that 'objectivity' is the rule in nonfiction, where I regard subjectivity as the greater witness."

For all I know, all of my memories could be inaccurate. But as I write, I am not consciously dissembling, creating instances and scenes to fit the awkward angles of a story line. My past is not inhabited by a cast of stick figures awkwardly dramatizing a plodding, unimaginative plot line. And just because I can't remember everything doesn't-or shouldn't-mean I have to let my past evaporate, or say that it wasn't real. I am not ready to surrender my past, my life, to fiction. The world is a strange enough place as it is.

I don't remember what my father wore under his orange raincoat during my JV football games. But if I wrote about it, I'd tell the reader he had on an open collared, red plaid shirt, with black suspenders fastened to dark green cotton trousers—the kind school janitors used to wear. Oh yes! He'd also have on an old frayed T-shirt, his thick, dark, chest hair curling over the neckband. I'd write all this because it was a standard outfit for my father, because his wearing it beneath his raincoat was both probable and possible. In my mind, when he opens his raincoat, he's not naked. I'm not being "flushed" while my imagination rummages around in wardrobe.

Mary McCarthy, in her memoirs *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*, directly confronted the difficulty of writing from memory. In her foreword, "To the Reader," she wrote: "Many a time, in the course of doing these memoirs, I have wished I were writing fiction. The temptation to invent has been very strong, particularly where recollection is hazy. Sometimes I have yielded, as in the case of conversations. My memory is good, but I cannot obviously recall whole passages of dialogue that took place years ago." McCarthy's discussion of the difference between memory and technical reproduction applies not only to dialogue, but to all the other facets of storytelling. A writer must deal honestly with whatever facts he or she has at hand, limited as the facts may be. This requires enormous storytelling skill, because the past is a moving image, requiring almost constant readjustment of the viewing lens. And the images we retrieve arrive in different ways. What transports me back to the past varies greatly: sometimes it's the way my son drops his head when I'm angry; sometimes it's an old Beatles song, a photo album, or a receipt I found in the pocket of a coat I haven't worn in years.

IV

So I would like to challenge the nature of memory, to question the notion that all must be known before an event can be rendered truthfully as story. Indeed, because a large part of our lives can never be retrieved, it is a storyteller's duty to use whatever tools are at hand.

In *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, Alain De Botton discusses Proust's concept of *voluntary* and *involuntary* memory. Voluntary memory is the memory of multiplication tables, bus schedules, and daily agendas—memories that we intellectually attempt to provoke. Involuntary memory, on the other hand, occurs when a recollection is stirred by "a long forgotten smell or an old glove." Something that has remained dormant since childhood and "therefore remains uncorrupted by later associations." These instances of almost epiphanic intensity are also known as *Proustian moments*.

In a letter, the essayist and critic Sven Birkerts elaborates on just such a distinction when he writes: "What we outwardly regard as important—the big events, the key moves, the prominent characters—may have nothing to do with the story that needs to be written. We can banish the idea of telling the story of our life and concentrate on evoking its mystery." He suggests following the patterns of memory, even if that means you *l* devote six pages to writing about a grandfather's cigar box, then jump to the memory of burning ants with a magnifying glass, and then recall the braid of a girl you sat behind in third grade." Birkerts suggests letting the force of memory, not public concerns, be the measure of an event's importance. As he puts it "You may leave out entirely—or consign to the margins—the fact that your house was burned down or that your grandfather was George Bush. ...[W]hat makes this kind of writing stick is the level of absorption. And if in your writer's soul you remember the smell of wool mittens more than you remember climbing Everest with your father, you may have to write the wool mittens." Involuntary memory—what is called up from deep emotional experience and of its own accord—is immensely valuable to writers of any genre. It is far more complicated than fact—the bus schedules of voluntary memory. It is where the heart and soul of our past resides.

To Virginia Woolf, the present was a platform for viewing the past, the string of experiences we drag behind us like a bedraggled train. We are not imagined. Our past is real, but it is not static. Like the cosmos, it moves unceasingly away from us, and what a memoirist captures is but a glimpse of its receding illumination, a recollective red shift that can only be adjusted through re-creation. Can we change the past? No. But we can change how it is remembered because we grow, change, and (hopefully) learn from our experiences. Or, as Tomas Eloy Martinez writes in his novel *Santa Evita*: "Every story is by definition, unfaithful. Reality, as I've said, can't be told or repeated. The only thing that can be done with reality is to invent it all over again."

So it comes back to what is real—the rightness of a memory or experience—because in order to make a claim on legitimacy, any story, with the possible exception of parable and allegory, must have a basis in reality. That is, what we read—whether fiction or nonfiction—must in some way correlate to our experience, to our sense of what is real. How many times have you put down a novel or story because the plot or characterizations or details seemed implausible? As Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics*: "It is not the poet's function to describe what actually happened, but the kind of things that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary ... Even if the poet writes about things that have actually happened, that does not make him any less a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some of the things that have happened from being in accordance with the laws of possibility and probability, and thus he will be a poet in writing about them."

Or, as author Sherwood Anderson put it: "While art is distinct from real life, the imagination must constantly feed upon reality or starve." But sometimes, in order that the real story may be told, the ineluctable passage of time is a necessity. In his magisterial short story "A Death in the Woods," Anderson describes the death of an old woman during a violent Midwestern snowstorm, a story based on an actual event in his childhood. In the following passage, Anderson's narrator, now an adult, reflects: "The whole thing, the story of the old woman's death, was to me, as I grew older, like music heard from far off. The notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time. Something had to be understood..." What is essential, the narrator realizes, is the perspective of distance and age. As children, he and his brother were too young to understand the point of the story. "A thing so complete has its own beauty... I shall not try to emphasize the point. I am only explaining why I was dissatisfied then and have been ever since. I speak of that only that you may understand why I have been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again."

This same act of remembering and telling in order to arrive at an understanding is the basic premise of memoir: thinking out loud, retelling a story over and over again, using imagination to understand and reconcile a past where reality served as the background music. We recall it only with the greatest difficulty, following the tune as best we can, using our imaginations to improvise notes where the score goes blank. How many truths are there to an event? How much music have we failed to hear? And when the melody finally comes—a sense of longing, a sudden unexplained feeling of hope or sadness—the best we can do is whistle along, staying as close to the original melody as we can.

William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, an almost perfect novel, is written in the form of a memoir in which an aging narrator reflects upon his Midwestern childhood. It is an evocative elegy to youth, centered on a fictional murder in a small Illinois farming town around World War I. Like his Midwestern literary predecessor, Sherwood Anderson, Maxwell uses simple and unadorned language that masks an uncompromisingly complex and richly detailed narrative. The genesis for this novel, published in 1980, can be found in another book he wrote nine years earlier: *Ancestors*, a memoir.

It is generally not wise to read a piece of fiction as though it were autobiography. But for anyone who has read both books, the comparisons cannot be avoided: each narrator had an older and younger brother; each lost a mother to the 1919 influenza epidemic; each had a businessman father who ultimately relocated the family to Chicago and remarried a much younger woman. Even some of the scenes are the same: the fictional and nonfictional boy with his arm wrapped around the father's waist as they paced the floor in the days after the mother's death, and the father blowing pipe smoke into the fictional and nonfictional boy's ear to cure an earache. Both books examine the ways in which memory can best interrogate the past. But on this last point they differ. In *Ancestors*, the earlier book, Maxwell writes: I have to get out an imaginary lens and fiddle with the lens until I see something that interests me, preferably something small and unimportant." But in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, Maxwell's approach to memory is more circumspect as he repeatedly and directly confronts the complexity and unverifiability of memory: "What we, or at any rate what I, refer to as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of a storyteller to arrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past, we lie with every breath we draw."

Is Maxwell suggesting that we are incapable of truth? That is not my reading of the passage. Rather, I believe he is speaking in phenomenological terms, suggesting that because of "conflicting emotions" and shifting circumstances everything we witness is but an illusion, representative of a deeper, underlying reality. In this way of thinking, fiction is a play upon illusion, and memoir is the illusion itself. So, in the end, neither is real. Or, put another way, both are equally real.

VI

It has been my experience that we do not perceive or write about things as they are, but, rather, we perceive or write about them as *we* are. What a memoirist describes is often confined to the perspective of an immediate and unfinished circumstance. But between what we remember and what really happened are the shadows from which the truth will ultimately reassert itself.

Vladimir Nabokov, in his memoir *Invitation of a Memory*, addresses one of the most luminous aspects of memory: the conflict that arises when a child's experience is at odds with empirical reality. In one of the early chapters, Nabokov describes a scene in which his aristocratic father is pitched into the air by a group of celebratory villagers. Nabokov writes: "From my place at table I would suddenly see through one of the west windows a marvelous case of levitation. There, for an instant, the figure of my father in his windrippled white summer suit would be displayed, gloriously sprawling in midair, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome, imperturbable features turned to the sky ...and then there he would be, on his last and loftiest night, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon. ..." The final sentence of this recollection runs for 127 words, during which the child's vision evolves into an extended metaphysical presentiment of his father's death. Could a child have perceived all this? Probably not. But the pristine truth of Nabokov's numinous image serves as the framework for an extended, mature meditation. It is a vision of first things.

VII

There is a story about my father I'd like to write: My father. Forty-five years ago. I have yet to be born. He's flying a single-engine plane above the old house on Franklin Street. My mother is in the back yard hanging out laundry. There are only two children-Holley and John-whom Mom sends in the house when she looks up to see my father swooping low over the neighborhood. It's a beautiful summer evening-a Friday, so she knows that he's already made a quick tour of the city's gin mills.

He's done these fly-bys before, screaming down from above the tree tops in the plane he borrows from Jimmy Durr, a childhood pal. They both earned their wings eight years earlier, flying sub reconnaissance in the South Pacific. But tonight my father has decided to push his fly-by game to the limit. My mother tries to wave him off, but my father thinks she's calling him in closer, and he obliges her, eventually buzzing the whole block. It doesn't take long for Chief of Police Leo LeBeau and the fire trucks to come barreling in, sirens blaring, lights flashing. From the air it looks like a carnival.

Taking the hint, my father gently rolls the plane and heads north, crossing the mile-wide Saint Lawrence River in order to follow the Ontario shoreline. Every now and then he sweeps down to dip his wings to the ocean freighters, their giant hulls lumbering down the Seaway. The ships flash their ruling lights in salute as he rolls south, heading back, descending to just above the water as he comes into the mouth of the Oswegatchie, the last light of the day shooting like flames along the fuselage as he hot dogs it home under the Lafayette Street bridge.

I write about my father because there is no one else to write about him. Because he was real and vital and flawed. Because I loved him. Because I want to imagine him as a man close to my own age now. I no longer seek my father's understanding, I seek, through re-creation, to understand him. And so I return to the beginning-April 5, 1969-where, I suppose, the only accurate written history about my father's death can be found in a copy of his obituary. But my hometown newspaper got a couple of the facts wrong. It printed his date of birth as October 25, 1916 when, according to his birth certificate, he was actually born in 1915. The obituary also misrepresented his military service and the ages of two of my siblings. But these are only details.

So much for the first rough draft of history.