

Coda

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O kay, the mind plays its own tricks. So go for what is certain. As in *honest*. Let the rest of your life be free from fraud. Even the petty pretenses that cover your real feelings and make the day go round. If you're bitter, be bitter, I say. If you're blunt, be blunt. I remember the day she read the most honest sentence she had ever seen. Or that's how it feels to her now. She must have been in seventh grade, filled with all she did not know. Her hair in a ponytail and her plaid skirt falling just below her knees. The boys had taunted her all day, laughing because she liked to read. Laughing their way under her skin.

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more.

Ernest Hemingway, from *Men Without Women*

If she could write a sentence like that, she could penetrate the past. Go straight for the heart of it.

The lodge in New Hampshire where we stayed in a little white cottage and ate in the Inn's dining room with windows looking out over an expanse of lawn to

the White Mountains. We can both agree that was real, can't we? The morning mist. Hiccup of a breeze. The mountains tame. Nothing like the jagged, dark edges of Macgillycuddy's Reeks behind the cottage we rented outside Killarney. The one where we both stepped back in time.

Let's play it again for the sake of discovery. What is behind memory? Beside it? Below?

In the fall . . . and suddenly there you are, ironing a mottled red maple leaf between squares of waxed paper, tipping it into your book where it may or may not surface in some future year. You love the season—the pumpkins, the pitter of leaves dropping from trees, skittering along the sidewalk. The deep-set days. Everything round and perfect as the word, *October*.

The war . . . you have never seen war, but you have imagined it. Felt its restless anxiety as a kind of background noise. You were born during a war—the one that meant rationing books and no rubber for tires and soldiers coming home. Then Korea, Cold War, Vietnam. And far away—Iran-Iraq—the way war has of coming back bigger, if not better. You have seen its aftermath: rubble kept intact as reminder. And then, too, the Berlin Wall, now also rubble. The man in Devon who came to the table to thank the Americans for what they had done. What had they done? They had gone over, come over, lived through, rescued, and released, that's what. They went to the war.

Was always there . . . so that the long, slow wash of time was held in abeyance, while in the streets people walked, made small talk, and nothing appeared out of the ordinary except for the ordinary. Odd, how the body accommodates, gets used to, adjusts, adapts. How “always” becomes a constant.

But we did not . . . no, never. We did, do, not. We hide behind the negative, as though the word “not” was all that stood between us and action. If not war, then how else have we failed to act? We did not dance. How trivial. Still, that's the way I would complete the sentence, letting all its desire drain out on the sand. We did not dance that night away, and now it's too late. The body no longer imagines the waltz.

Go to it any more . . . though there's no "it" to go to. At least not one with an "any more" to round it out, prop it up, push it along. Any more. In time. In amount. In addition. The phrase presupposes a future, but the future, now, seems so finite. So terribly finished.

It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.

Here's what Hemingway managed to convey: a tone so simply honest. No adjectives to mar its stark, straightforward sense of being on the cusp. On the edge of a mountain. The brink.

Though substitute "sea" for "war" and you hear in your head the missing tides, but there's nothing to take you into reverie. The memory of self standing on a beach, maybe, looking out to the horizon, looking west. So many seas. Just say Firth of Forth and the day goes cold and moody. Say Copacabana and waves rise, convulsive, under a molten sky. Damariscotta: the green Atlantic surges and swells. The noun will do to muster lobster boats or the little lighthouse at the end of the spit. Here, in our tiny Northwest town, the sea is gray, glossed with the sheen of undercover sun. In Hemingway—the Mediterranean writ large as, far below, it glitters a forthright blue.

We came down around curves, through deep dust, the dust powdering the olive trees.

We came down around curves and we—you and I—are there, simply rounding the bend to where the scene unfolds. Though we—you and I—have never been to Italy. Or not together. Our memories chase each other through the haze of orchards. The mottled leaves. The wine, the canopy of shade. The road uncoiling as it dips down to the sea. But we don't go there. We go to places we share, places where the air is strident. Lupine. Or dogwood. And the river noisy in its rush to go somewhere.

That lodge—that's where we stayed an extra day to cook a meal for the bicyclists. The owner's girlfriend left him on the eve of a big commitment: she'd arranged for thirty cyclists to eat and stay overnight. What could he do? So we

volunteered. Turkeys to dress. Lasagna to make. Huge stainless-steel bowls, roasters, and pans. Wine to buy. Carrots to peel. Whoever cooked for thirty, who knew proportions, who knew the waiting baskets of bread? We worked all day and then left before the cyclists arrived. So who knows how it all turned out? Its dimensions?

And the bicyclists, who were they? A bunch of ten-speeds locked together at the trailhead. A long line of reflective vests slowing traffic on their way uphill, slowing the day to a monotonous round of pedal, pedal, push, push, next and next and next. A collective *whoosh* down toward the streambed. A hungry horde at the gate. Bought. And paid for.

Not one face to recognize. Not one to remember. Not an adjective among them. Only the fact of their upcoming presence. Though we can conjure the fresh white napkins. The silverware laid out in rows. The owner in his T-shirt, lost in his excess of worry, his whirlwind breakup. So what is memory but the sum of syllables? Clouds piling up in the sky and the mountains suddenly menacing. Our car pulling out of the drive, leaving him there to muddle his way through the slicing and serving and smiling while, all the while, his heart was not there, not there at all. While, all the while, the argument ticked through his head, and each time he heard it, he knew he was right, so why did he miss the details? Her hard-hearted laughter. Her bare arm brushing his shoulder. Her wild mouth a billow of smoke. Her mean, tormenting jokes. Her painted toenails. Her loud, ringing disrespect.

See how difficult it is! Even the doctor asks for adjectives, asks you to describe the cough. Is it dry? Or raspy? The adjective reigns. But the cough itself—you lie in bed at night listening to the faint after-purr of air making its low rumble in your left lung. You cough again, your body tugging at its seams. You try to lie still, but the body rebels. You hold the cough drop in your mouth carefully, carefully, so you won't suck it in, choking on what might help you. You lie in the dark and you worry away at description—as though anyone wants to know the dimensions of your cough, the scope of it. Though the stethoscope was cold on your skin, and he heard it, yes, that place where your wings would be if you had wings, the crepe paper rustle that provides confirmation.

Why, she asks, does the exact sequence matter so much to her, the exact words—said where, and when? When he tells the story, it does not feel like the life she has lived. False note, when what she wants is the tuning fork of what was.

The cough filled the car. Riddled. Wracked. Though riddled implies holes punched through, and wracked feels more like twisted iron. But this was both at once—raddled, wricked—and her fever added to the commotion. The bridge stretched its lyre over the water. Her lungs that taut, that musical.

In the spring, the cough was still there, but we didn't hear it anymore. It had become a part of us. Not something we might mention as in *remember that cough?* but something ubiquitous, a given, a state of being, if you will. In the spring, we were in a state of uncertainty again, and the trees came alive without us.

What she wanted was the solidity of the noun. What Stevens called *The the*. Though Stevens was not where she went for solace. She thought of him as a poet of adjectives, and when she went back to the poems, she saw there were not as many as she had remembered. But still, his nouns were less than solid. It was Frost she turned to. His ability to say it plain so she knew where she was and where she was coming from. *The tribute of the current to its source*—and she could see the stream interrupt itself, ripple backwards at each stone's insistence, water rising white to the surface, swirling backflip—a cough—before it settles into the wider expanse that drifts past at a pace of its own. Swift enough to make its muffled gurgle, slow enough to look, for a moment, as though everything were steady state. Stream. One word. No need for anything else.

The "I" has mostly disappeared. Resurrected in memory as someone who used that pronoun. Who walked into a room with the I intact—sensibility, and a sense of ownership. More and more, the I lives in a past that is non-negotiable. It was. It is. And to think that it will evaporate—just like that—like water struck by sun, and no one can retrieve it. Maybe the shared memory . . . But that is suspect, always vanishing into another point of view. The I would like to retain perspective. The I would like to know *why* it wasn't going to the war any more. Why those words called out to a girl with a plaid skirt, a future ahead of her that she fully intended to go to.

Near Knaresborough in North Yorkshire a small stream flows downhill, drops over a rocky overhang into the River Nidd, turning anything in its path to stone. It was near this petrifying well that Mother Shipton—considered a witch—made her famous prophecies. Much of what she foretold came true. Could that be called the opposite of memory? We stood there, looking up to where objects had been tied under the lip of the rock: teddy bears, baby shoes, teakettles, cricket bats—people’s lives, memorized in stone. We stood there, watching water work to contradict itself. Petrify: transitive verb. To solidify, yes, but also to terrify.

What verb would you choose for the way those red-winged blackbirds landed on the cattails? They came in for a landing, for sure, but was it hard or soft? Swift or leisurely? Did they bank and circle, or simply head like an arrow for their target? All I know is that it is possible to feel the arc of their flight, and hear their *ck-ck-wa-heeeeeee* filling the distance. They seem always to be plundering the pond, or perched at the spiky tip, chipping away at the day.

There were days when the soccer field seemed to glow in slant October light, and boys flew across it, the checkered ball incidental to their youth and energy. Two of the boys were my sons and their long legs surprised me. In the shadows of early evening, I was a red car, a ride home. I hold them there, knowing in hindsight some of what has become of their lives. But none of us knew more than that moment of eloquence when the ball spilled before them like water.

See? I remember bicyclists I did not see. I remember my thoughts of them as I stuffed the turkeys, patted on butter, tucked the aluminum wrap. But I did not see them swoop through the gate and pull up to the porch, yanking off helmets, dusty and tired, soft laughter in the front of the pack, a groan behind. In my mind, they threw down their bikes and spilled onto the grass, and the owner came out to greet them. There was the smell of woodfire, of cauliflower and cucumber and, softly, the cinnamon of apple pies we’d also left behind. And where were we? Somewhere long gone, somewhere on the road to home, past Vermont, maybe almost to the Adirondacks. They spilled out on the lawns as solid and certain as if we were there. The girlfriend? They were in her mind, too—the final

indignation of a final fling with someone who simply took what she had to offer without offering much in return. She was well rid of him. And the bike club—it could eat store-bought frozen food for all she cared.

Sometimes it's something so small you wonder why you've kept it at all. A window seat. Curtains lifting in the breeze, then falling back, lifting, falling back, lifting, falling back like a butterfly wing, all afternoon, all afternoon. A barn with its great high ceiling and sunlit streaks of dust swarming in the rafters. So small, and yet there they are, adding one day to the next to the next on the way to this one.

Sometimes the scene is vivid—the huge locomotive churning into the station, hissing as it grinds to a stop. The huge wheels dwarfing everyone. And your grandmother stepping down with her leather suitcase. Her solid black shoes. Her braid. Sometimes hazy, as the curtain lifts and falls back somewhere—where?—some time when you were small and mesmerized.

Middle of April, middle of the day. The eyelids grow heavy. Not a nighttime fatigue, but a shutting down. The fever crawls up the spine, eases its way into the ear, the throat. The thermometer ticks off its degrees. The body flares. The eye closes, lets in the time the girl stepped down from the bus, climbed the wide steps and entered the cool interior of the library where, because she knew the girl would be there, Miss McCabe had put aside a stack of books. She'd broken the rules for this girl, giving her books from the Adult section—Hemingway first, then Fitzgerald, Faulkner last. Not a woman among them, though sometimes she felt guilt when she passed by Cather on the shelves. Passed by the girl's place in the world in favor of places Miss McCabe had never seen: France, New York—she'd never even been to New York—the furtive heart of Mississippi. Let the girl enter the stream, feel the words flow around her ankles, swirl, and move on, taking her with them. Let the girl have a life she could call her own, not this musty cave in a middle-sized city where the streets were all called First, Second, or Third, or, for variety, the name of the rivers—Tioga, Chemung.

You have a past of your own, and I do not believe you when you say “this is what was”—there are too many places where our stories do not settle their differences. Behind the pickets, a deer in camouflage. Flick of tail. Of ear. Lifting of hind

leg. Strobe effect. The tail again, here, then there, as though several small birds were flitting in the branches. When she appears—the whole of her—casually strolling onto our lawn, she looks up and then ignores us. She owns the place. There's no other interpretation.

Somewhere poppies burst into flame. The sheer, fierce heat of them. Stone walls make their way over the moors. Wind fingers the back of the neck; a man walks the horizon; a curlew calls. The girl does not know what a curlew sounds like, but still the call rises into clear air. The story unfolds, red as the poppies, red as the earth, red because its primary status insists on an adjective. If she could do without it, she would.

1963. Edinburgh, Scotland. A young woman hurries down Thistle Street to Number 11—Chambers Publishing Company—where she will take an antiquated elevator to the fourth floor. There Miss Agnes Macdonald, eighty years old, will open the door to her knock and take from her the edited version of the letter S. All week the young woman has pored over dictionary entries, weeding out the words she will omit, weeding out the most obscure definitions of the words she is keeping, working and working to replace single-word definitions with phrases, then using the selected words in sentences. All week, she has found herself sitting at the top of double-decker buses, crisscrossing the city, listening to how teenagers talk. Now she will hand over the typewritten pages she has produced. It is spring outside and the cobblestones give back the sunlight. Flowers are growing in the Princes Street Gardens. It is still winter in Miss Macdonald's attic office, and she may or may not offer a cup of tea. She may or may not reveal the seven layers of clothing she wears to keep warm. Miss Macdonald will thank the young woman, then take out a pair of scissors and carefully cut out the pages for T, hand them to her for the next few weeks' work. She may or may not show her her spidery scrawl on the pages for R, which she has reserved for herself. But something will happen there, as the dictionary is bandied between them, the words that together they've chosen to preserve performing their slow pantomime. All winter, the young woman has lived on words, cashing her meager check, then returning to the cold-water flat she shares with her husband with crumpets from the local bakery. All winter, the dictionary has ebbed and flowed, and soon the job will be over. U-V-W-X-Y-Z.

She hopes they will see her through to summer. Fifty years later, the woman will open the faded orange and green cover and be surprised at the simplicity of the definition: *n.* the warmest season of the year—in cooler northern regions May or June to July or August—Also *adj.*—*v.i.* to pass the summer. It will be spring, summer still a premonition. It will be spring and she will be wary of memory, its uncanny accuracy.

On the television, an April blizzard. As in whiteout. Route 80 across Wyoming closed. When she was there, it had been the middle of May, long enough ago to call it her past. Gates barred the road at every exit out of Laramie. Snow sweeping into town—a heavy, wet invasion. And then over! Sun wiping the city clean again, so they could drive on west, then south on the loneliest dirt road they'd ever seen. No car for hours in either direction, though horse trailers were parked by trails that led off over square miles of ranch land. Where were the invisible men who rode under that intemperate sky?

Unnecessary memory. Useless collection in the junk drawer of your mind: the telephone number of your eighth-grade friend, the price of shoes in 1960, your great-grandfather's middle name, names of babies you've never met, names of streets and towns and counties. Names of old lovers. Names for love.

Unbidden memory. Refrain. Reprise. Over and over—aria da capo—he turns his back, leaving her forsaken, though she sat so still she could hardly breathe. She sat so still that even in the present those scenes have no verb.

Obsolete: steam engine, record player, roller-skate key, running boards, clotheslines, elevator man, house calls, Sunday hats, Selectric typewriter—Q-W-E-R-T-Y-U-I-O-P—the little silver ball twirling and twirling. Spiral down into your past and you only go deeper into its fog. The dog at the end of the block. The hold-out oaks, the crisp hands of their leaves clinging to the branch long past Christmas. Everything moves in consonance with your deepest dreams. The past sways in a long, slow dance. Memory makes of our lives what they were, what they weren't.

Sometimes we need to learn to remember. My grandfather drove a horse and buggy, coming to the automobile late in his life. He used to shout "whoa" before he would step on the brakes. The times table, fixed so early in the mind, begins

to unravel. I need to think twice about 8 x 7, 12 x 11. The litany of general obligations: Tuesday exercise, Thursday garbage, first Wednesday meeting, unless it falls on the 1st, then second Wednesday. Still, I hold to the discrete moments that matter—the where, when, why of them. The what—now that’s a different story. “What” contains consequence. And consequence contains corollary. And corollary contains upshot. Outcome.

We went to soccer games in the old stadium where trains screamed past three or four times a game—freight trains trailing their yellows and deep reds across our line of sight, or passenger trains with their bright strip of silver light. The skyline grew dark and lights winked on in office buildings across the river. On the field, the players moved up and down, back and forth under the floodlights, and we watched their elaborate weavings with fixed attention. Attend. Intransitive verb. Pay attention to what the heart calls up: those trains streaking toward commemoration.

Does remember count as a verb? Its action the making of action.

And who will be left to remember these days of uncertainty? The sheer difficulties, the small satisfactions. The ordinary life going on being ordinary. Yet ordinary is what we strive for in our sense of going on, going forward, going where we simply have to go. Who will be left to contain the past—our particular past, the one we have shared—when we can no longer state it? So I state it now. You were there with me.

It was a cold spring and the rain would not stop falling. The road dropped down to the strait, and the sea was dull and still. Foghorns broke into the morning. Crows huddled in bunches along the telephone wire, and the wind carried their sounds down to where the wet earth waited. Other birds came frequently to the feeder, but we didn’t hear them. We sat by the window looking out at the doe flickering in the garden.

Coda: is it afterthought or addendum? The sea with its measureless verbs.

