

The Heat of Our Hands

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T*wo minutes* until we measure a yesterday by the weight of wet sand beneath our feet. A white sky: white clouds, white raindrops, maybe a white sun if it ever appears. Wind-chapped grass awaits the lotion of raindrops. We mount one of the hills above the beach—it stretches for miles until it eclipses with that white horizon—and we stare at an ocean. The wind dribbles sugar sand over our shoes; we sink a little.

One minute until we descend down the dunes, down into decades ago. But we stop awhile longer for reasons we don't say. This canvas of saltwater before us means we can each paint a spot with our eyes to pass the seconds. In my mural, I see a person swimming (Is it me? In the soggy denim and Nikes?) swimming and swimming in the salty gelatin until land evaporates. *No minutes left*, so time to go.

We slip down the hill to the beach, carrying this Thanksgiving Day 2002 on our backs and this June 6, 1944 in our cupped hands. They called it D-Day. The name did not mean anything. United States military men used “h-hour” and “d-day” to keep war plans covert, which left battles and muddy camouflage under this meaningless guise. Historians say this D-Day can translate to “day of invasion.” I say many blood-splattered words (death, destruction) start with D.

The five of us stagger out along the shore, each taking a plot of beach for ourselves, never mixing footprints. Dad leads this procession that will walk the beaches of Normandy, and we pretend to know what happened here. I follow next, knowing that the friction of waves will eventu-

ally throb in my ears, so I'll want to ask questions to soothe the sound. My little brother Ryan walks behind me, dragging a stick in the sand and drawing a line that dissolves with every wave. His seventh-grade history class hasn't discussed this day yet. He doesn't know the boats decorated with mosaics of bullet holes or the beating pulses of the paratroopers dropped behind German lines. This beach means something, he must think, when he bends to retrieve a gray rock to add to his drooping pockets. Britney and Mom walk behind us, fifteen and forty-four years old, with saltwater nibbling their pant legs. We all stop for a second because it seems right. Mom says, "It was a day just like today. Did you know that?" She squints into the clouds, and Ryan grinds his stick a little deeper into the sand.

We know it by feeling, not by textbooks. True either way. The June 7, 1944 edition of the *Detroit News* wrote that the D-Day invasion began at six in the morning into a "cloudy daylight." Clouds (check), daylight (check, but my watch glows ten o'clock). We don't see the 150,000 sweaty hearts, the 150,000 kisses on crucifixes to *please get us out of here*, but otherwise yes, it was a day just like today. Journalist George Hicks, embedded on the deck of an American ship during the invasion, reported live on radio to hungry ears back home of the "ships lying in all directions, just like black shadows on the gray sky." These white clouds above us create identical shadows, and they look like dogs, creatures slurping their blood from open wounds. Really, Mr. Hicks, no time has passed.

We continue then, on and on with sodden footprints even though there's nothing to see. We can watch the waves, but they go back and forth until it stings our eyes to watch anymore. Catching up to Dad, I shoot question after question into the air, pulling thoughts from my mind like stub-

born slivers and asking what I already know the answer to just to keep the words coming. Dad knows everything (at seventeen, I remain certain of this) so I ask what I know requires thick, wool scarf responses: we can unravel the answers while we walk. I grasp for these gauzy strips of history to make these beaches real.

An hour later, we stand outside this beach's museum, a white block building abandoned during this tourist off-season. In solemn adornment, a lone American military boat waits near the entrance. I reach a finger out to touch this boat like Dad does, one hand at his side and one hand tracing this blue Easter egg paint. This is a boat, used in a war.

"This is a boat," Dad says, "where the front door opened up like this. So if you were first to unload, you took the bullets for everyone else." He steps away and points to where the open door of the boat purges into the yellow grass, almost ingrown; a simple rectangle, some sort of physics made it amphibious.

Temper like a blister but mind seeping with imagination, red-haired entrepreneur Andrew Jackson Higgins invented this boat in the 1920s. First try, he built the boat in his basement but forgot he would have to remove it from his house. Solution? Knock down a wall and haul it out through the hole. The United States Marine Corps became his first customer, and they bought the boats to transport soldiers and equipment to the beaches. One boat could carry 8,100 pounds of cargo (the weight of souls not being measurable). They didn't need harbors; they could slither their way into Normandy. Years after the war ended, President Eisenhower declared Higgins "the man who won the war for us." His was a sort of legacy that makes you shift in your seat a little upon hearing it: the very boats heralded

for saving the victims of a world war made victims out of their own sailors. Higgins invented boats that saved lives while slaying them too.

“Can you imagine? Think of opening that door—you were right there for the bullets to get you,” Dad says, eyes wide and head shaking. “A slaughterhouse.”

We enter the museum. Inside hang maps with red thumbtacks and photos of soldiers with eyes like black tide pools. A secretary shuffles papers at the desk, but no one else wanders this Normandy when we do. The gift shop stands to our left, where racks of postcards sway (you wouldn't write, *wish you were here*, would you?) and the sleeves of Omaha Beach t-shirts look frayed from too many summer-popsicle fingers. For five euros, you can buy your own miniature American paratrooper. At a factory somewhere, pin-pricked fingers sewed the 101st Airborne Division into little dolls, stapled price tags through their soft felt ears and called them real.

Picking one up, Dad says, “This is how we remember them?” I can't bring my hands to touch the little vinyl parachute on the soldier's back. When President Ronald Reagan commemorated the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, the wind blew hard like it does today. He stood at a podium near the beach and said, “President Lincoln reminded us that through their deeds, the dead of battle have spoken more eloquently for themselves than any of the living ever could.” Watching Dad place the paratrooper back in the mountain of its plush brethren, I think to myself that we, in declaring them souvenirs, have spoken for them too.

The problem with our own legacies: we don't always get much of a say in their creation. We do what we can while we live—showcasing our quirks or performing our own magnificent feats, whatever they are—to

catch someone's attention. We try to imprint our image on someone's brain and thus eternalize ourselves there. We find a way (some inherent force that squeezes our lungs and jams its way up our throats and says, "Go, find a way") to make ourselves distinct. Then we leave, and those who remain sculpt our remembrance with the soft pads of their fingertips.

W.B. Yeats writes his own death. Words in algorithms and sentences like polynomials, he crafts his poem "Under Ben Bulben" into a will. He forgets to mention who gets the mahogany dinner table or the bank account, and writes, rather, of where the ground should break for his final resting place. He writes of how, exactly, he would like his legacy to breathe and stretch and sigh and endure. He tells a reader: *Bury me under this mountain Ben Bulben, here in the Drumcliff churchyard in County Sligo, Ireland. Right here.* He is, of course, much more poetic.

The day I saw his gravestone, another Thanksgiving years before Normandy, only three colors existed: the green grass (only green, bright green like that color that just immediately came to your mind . . . that's it), the gray headstone like a clean chalkboard, the white clouds. The poet speaks through his epitaph, parting a Red Sea of decades with his words:

*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death
Horseman, pass by!*

I was fourteen, and I did not know what this meant. Mom was forty, and she didn't know either. I visualized the trudge of a workhorse passing farm after farm towards home, carrying a weary rider and an empty red

lunch pail. In my interpretation, the poet commanded that rider, “Carry on, please. Don’t mind a dead poet.” Yeats’ withered remains had transcended life, into death or into somewhere this drowsy farmer couldn’t feel. Mom in my old blue windbreaker nodded her head and said, “Yes, it’s something like that.”

A fuzzy rain started to fall and the rest of the family waded through the clouds into the museum. But Mom and I stood there, staring and reverent, like at the grave of a hallowed relative. I could scrape a little evidence from this slate of limestone: the poet did not want to be remembered by his name or by his birthday (neither of which appear on his headstone) but only by the echo of his written words. He succeeded. Mom took a picture; I remained motionless before the grave.

Six years later, I learned what Yeats says to that horseman. He doesn’t urge the weary rider to pass by his resting place; he doesn’t even refer to a weary rider at all. He writes, rather, of the Sidhe, supernatural Irish horsemen. In Gaelic, they say it *shee* like silk. The Sidhe stand tall and exquisite, enjoying the melted butter and pincushion tomatoes of luxury, and they survive through their own ancient legend. They look human, with the same greasy glow to their skin and the same soft rumble in their hungry stomachs, but they can change shape and provide a protection and a healing that a human cannot. Here at Ben Bulbin, they keep watch over County Sligo with each invisible breath.

Yeats wanted his gravestone across the road from this mountain because then, in the river-blue eyes of death, he could see like the Sidhe. Five days after he died in 1939, printing presses sputtered smooth black ink to publish “Under Ben Bulbin.” Yeats became one of the lucky few who

created and sustained his own legacy.

We must leave Normandy now, to continue our trek across France. Once the car crunches over the gravel parking lot and pulls out into the road, we'll leave this place where we went back to 1944 all by ourselves. We don't want to leave, but we know we'll come back next year. Not here, exactly, but somewhere that also sings these ancient yet fresh melodies of history. Because this is what we do. We travel to Europe every Thanksgiving. We stay in buttercup-colored Austrian castles built in the 900s. Smothering blueberries on crêpes, we climb a French mountain trail and speak of Salvador Dalí. We hug our hands around mugs of hot chocolate in a cottage in Ireland, while sheep peer in the window and Dad throws another piece of peat into the fire. We own a Tuscan castle for a week, where we pick green olives. They are not in season, but we are—so we do.

Over Thanksgiving 2001, we drive inland and inland and inland until we find a cave on an abandoned beach in Ireland. The tide stays out, like it wants to pull its cold water closer to the sun emerging from the horizon. Maybe if the ocean could stoke this sunlight, just once, it could warm up enough for us to shed our winter jackets and swim. Rocks stained amethyst arise on either side of me, and the beach boxes me in: mountains to my left and right, sand under my feet, water before me, sky above me. I'm sixteen, but I still wonder, *If I draw my name in the sand with a stick, if I scratch out a hello, will anyone find it? Will anyone say hello back?* I try it anyway.

At lunchtime, we haul brown paper bags of bread, cheese, and apples onto the beach. Peeking into the surrounding caverns, we find one with slabs of rock we can make into tables. With paper plates and a carton

of milk, we picnic on the sand. We picnic in what will be, in an hour, the middle of the ocean. When Dad finally pulls out the carton of cookies (we try new kinds at every store, for every lunch), the tide starts to creep back into the cave. A pool of water forms in the crevasse of every footprint we make, so we run out of the cave. Stuffing plastic forks and chocolate bars into bags, I fear suffocation by saltwater. In minutes, the ocean erases our secret grotto.

When we traveled to Europe for the first time, I had not quite completed half of seventh grade. Dad, while skimming over the airfares on the Internet one midnight, found that Icelandair would fly us to another world for only 100 dollars apiece. When we arrived, I cried because the London estate we rented had dripping gardens and limestone sweating with fog. It had a wooden door, chipped and peeling like a skinned knee, that bore a lion's head knocker and opened into a foyer of soggy stone. With its woolen blankets on the beds and a heater that only came to life a couple hours a day, the flat seeped an aloofness I had never encountered. Through tears I said, "Dad, why can't we stay where everyone else does? In a hotel?" He just smiled and bounded down the steps, on his way to buy train tickets. Before the heater clicked off, Mom made a bed for me on the couch (Ryan and Britney claimed the twin beds in the next room). "This is how we'll always see Europe," she said. "Because this is how Dad knows we should see it. You'll be glad you do."

After we returned home, people asked, "Wherever did your dad find a place like that?" He kept finding these cottages and castles, year after year. People began to know this was what we did, celebrate Thanksgiving on

another continent. I lost track of how many Thanksgivings we missed. New food replaced turkey and pumpkin pie: chicken curry in County Clare, Ireland; Yorkshire pudding in a darkened London carvery, chandelier swinging above the table; bread and strawberry jam in the stone kitchen of our Austrian castle. We began to touch Europe and, though somewhat unconsciously, shape our own idiosyncrasies, ones that make people stop and say, “You spend Thanksgiving where? Don’t you miss the mashed potatoes?” These travels once rung damp, bizarre even, to a seventh grader; now, they chime, distinctly and forever, ours.

Before we leave Normandy, Dad pulls the car to the roadside in St. Mere Eglise, the town just miles from the beaches. Surely someone lives here, despite the shuttered windows and the heavy air. We, however, see no one. Ryan’s finger points to the steeple of the yellow stone church, sharp and nudging the clouds. All the buildings, the brick homes faded with mist and the yellow *pâtisseries*, encircle it. Dad says, “I bet the Nazis captured it for a headquarters. It would be a good lookout.” I only envision an American paratrooper, wisped by the wind a few feet too far when he jumped, skewered on the steeple.

Tearing pieces of bread from a loaf and passing around a knife heavy with peanut butter, we sit in the car for awhile with the doors opened. Britney flips through a magazine, Dad pulls off his glasses to examine the map, and Mom ruffles through the luggage for a deck of cards. Still no one walks these streets. After ten minutes, we close the doors and exit Normandy. Dad decides to take the back roads, the ones that will take us through the little towns. We take these paths because we can’t see anything

from the highways.

They flicker by like a slideshow, the white-shuttered cottages, the towns of twenty farm families, the graying remains of snow on cobblestones. Just like that, people appear from the milky tea of haze, reminders that this backdrop we see in our speeding car sets the stage for breathing bodies. Dad turns on the radio because he can understand the French—I can't, so I just look out the window. I see new people in every town, miles of muddy roads apart.

You become omniscient while riding in a car on a sunless November day. You see all the faces, house after house and mountain after mountain, while each separate being has no idea that the person in the next town, or the next block, even exists. Their images now take up space in your head, your neurons recording these people you do not know. Do you stay in their minds? Do they stay in yours? Somewhere nestled in the folds of pinkish brain?

After miles and miles of watching these people as if they are little clay lives molded by the heat of your hands, you stop. The car swerves or your sister screams, “Look, a crêperie!” or you just can't take it all in anymore. You grasp to preserve what you've seen, to elucidate the foreign faces you now find in your memory.