

## You Are Here

by **Kelly Garriott Waite**

The picture, taken before color photography was ubiquitous, is gradations of light and dark, bright and shadow. In it, my father straddles a three-foot log, a jagged vertical crack down its center like a lightning strike. The bark is rough and covered in places with moss. The grass surrounding it is mostly short and neat, as if the log had been dragged to this space specifically to make a seat for my father. But it can't be comfortable: Dad's right leg bends back, the toe of his shoe dug into the ground as if for purchase. His left leg is forward, his heel pressed into the grass. His pants—the seventies equivalent of Dockers—are sharply creased down the center. He wears a button-up shirt, untucked, and Converse tennis shoes, their dark laces loosely tied. Dad holds a five-string resonator banjo, its round drum resting on one leg. His smiling face is in profile, that characteristic dimple in his cheek as he looks at the middle finger of his left hand, pressed behind the D string's third fret.

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### **Fret:**

1. To worry excessively and without cease.
2. Music: One of several thin silver strips separating the fingerboard of various stringed instruments into sections. Pressing just behind a fret will divide a string in two, causing its lower half to vibrate faster, thus producing a higher-pitched note. Each fret will raise a string's tone a half-step or 1/12 of an octave.

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Between certain frets, the fingerboard of Dad's banjo was inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the smooth white inside of the shell of certain mollusks: oysters, mussels, and abalones.

I remember swaying from side to side, studying the shimmer of the inlay, watching the colors change from violet and pink to gold and green. Looking at the photograph, I am reminded of the abalone shell that belonged to Dad's mother, a woman who fretted so often that my grandfather sometimes snapped at her, *stop buying trouble*, as she peered through the dashboard of the passenger seat, giving voice to her worries about weather or traffic.

Why steal the mollusk's rainbow to settle it upon the neck of the banjo? More than mere adornment, it served as position markers, grounding my father to keep him from getting lost inside the music. *This is where you are*, the inlay murmured to Dad. *Remember, you are here.*

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### **Octave:**

Used in Western music, an octave is composed of eight notes and their four half steps. The beginning and ending notes of an octave match in pitch but differ in frequency.

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A mere handful of notes, a single octave is insufficient to express musically the range of human emotion. And so, using the fret-string combination, the octave is repeated three times on Dad's banjo.

\* \* \*

A can of Budweiser rests before Dad, its label gazing off camera. A music book is open, its soft cover folded back. I hold my magnifying glass over the book and try to discern the title of the song. But all I can make out is a smattering of notes, fat circles with wings, except for the whole note, which is entirely too heavy to fly and thus has no need of wings.

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**Note value:**

Used in music to show how long to play (or hold) each note. Commonly, a whole note is held for four beats, a half note for two. On it goes, with each previous note value halving itself all the way down to the smallest, rarest note, the 256<sup>th</sup>, a note with six fast fluttering wings, a note so light it barely makes a sound as it briefly alights before flitting away.

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Dad often played "Cripple Creek" and "Dueling Banjos" from the movie *Deliverance*. Sometimes he played "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," a song featured on an album of the same name by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Dad bought this album and stored it beside the seventeen-volume collection of Beethoven's works, eighty-five records in all, which he largely ignored, but which my sister played loudly when she cleaned the bedroom we shared: sonatas, symphonies, and string quartets. I remember the scratch of the needle upon a record. The momentary silence before the room was flooded with sound. I remember, after the room was clean, my sister returning the records haphazardly to the shelves until the cabinet was so messy, Dad could no longer stand it and made us sort out the records and put them into their correct volume. Dad's life was a series of attempts to impose order on a disordered brain.

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When he wasn't playing, the banjo hung on the wall next to Dad's recliner. Beside it was the four-string he'd also acquired. When he got the notion to play one or the other, Dad sat up in one swift motion, his back lifting and his legs folding down simultaneously while he reached toward the wall.

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## **Ängstlich:**

1. German: anxious.
2. Music: anxiously.

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Here's what Dad never told us: He took a prescription medication to alleviate the symptoms of Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder (OCD), a disease rooted in anxiety.

Here's what took me years to tell my children: I also suffer from OCD.

Here's what I hope my children tell my grandchildren: They have anxiety. They have learned how to manage it. There is no shame in mental illness.

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## **Leitmotif:**

A phrase or theme that recurs throughout a musical or literary piece.

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I believe that the leitmotif of Dad's life was anxiety and finding a way to alleviate it. He never spoke of anxiety, perhaps because he didn't want to *buy trouble*. Instead, I believe he sought relief through his hobbies: photography or sailing or playing the banjo, dropping one project and taking up another, sometimes circling back to an earlier one, repeating the pattern throughout his life.

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As expected, Dad gave up playing the banjo. The instruments remained on the wall for longer and longer stretches of time until they became more decoration than

entertainment. With every hobby, Dad discarded its accouterments, in this case, the music books, the silver picks, the pitch pipe. Eventually even the banjos disappeared.

But I don't think Dad was a quitter. Rather, I believe that when a hobby had lost the power to distract his mind—when, for instance, he could play a song without having to concentrate—he dropped it for something new upon which to focus. Every new project had the potential to quiet his mind. Something to tell him: *You are not lost. Remember you are here.*

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My younger daughter, like her grandfather, flits from thing to thing, as if searching for something to quiet her brain, something to ground her, too. She tells me she doesn't want to have children: she's afraid they'll inherit the anxiety.

Can I guarantee her this circle of anxiety will eventually be broken? No. But I try to explain the positives that accompany it: the compassion for others, the creativity, the way of finding beauty in the world where others might not. I'm not sure she believes me. I'm not sure she believes it's worth it.

But perhaps mental illness isn't so much *illness* than the normal about which we do not speak. Perhaps each of our brains are gradations of lightness and darkness, brightness and shadow. Perhaps if we spoke our truths rather than hiding them, we would feel less alone, braver, not as strange as we perceive ourselves to be. Perhaps the heaviness of our hearts and our minds would evaporate. Perhaps if we said, *this is where I am*, someone might reply, *me, too. I am here, too.*



**Kelly Garriott Waite** writes from Ohio. Her work has appeared in the *Hopper*, *Allegro Poetry*, and *the Fourth River: Tributaries*.