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Memories without a Home

by Nicole Alexander

Homelessness haunts us all. One of the reasons we walk so nervously around the homeless on our streets is that we don't want to get too close to something we fear so deeply. —J. Edward Chamberlin

A disheveled man hobbles toward me wearing tattered jeans and a dirty cap. He holds a plastic bag, which I assume contains all his possessions. I become aware of the designer sunglasses on my head, keeping the hair out of my face. I push them down over my eyes. Disdain fills me and expands into rage. I lower my eyelids for a moment, and he disappears from view. When I lift them, our gazes meet and I peer into familiar, wounded eyes. They steal the air from my lungs. I never fully understood the phrase "It took my breath away" before a soccer opponent, back in high school, slammed into me. I dropped to the grass, stunned and listless, as I waited for oxygen to return to my lungs. My own teammate, unaware of the hit I had taken, shouted at me to get off the field if I couldn't play.

According to science, the brain stores painful memories to keep us safe so we can prevent similar experiences from occurring again. My teammate's words stung more than the physical hit.

Get off the field if you can't play.

When my father's father died, my Papou, I cried myself to sleep at night for weeks, remembering the reasons I loved him and all the things I would miss. But I was twelve then. At twenty-six, I can't cry for my father, who is not dead but like a cat with many lives, is testing fate. Sometimes my emotions surprise me, though, and sorrow wells up inside a place that feels too small, like when I'm passing a stranger who lives on the street in San Francisco, the opposite side of the country from the place I call home.

I want to tell you so many things.

I want to tell you but I don't know how.

I'll start here:

I used to beg my father to take me to the park. He'd promise to but there were other things competing for his attention. One day, when he made good on his promise and brought my best friend and I to the playground—my favorite one with the twisty tunnel slide and spinning platform that I spun around and around on until the world disappeared—I realized after just a few minutes that I had to pee. This was a dilemma; I knew if I told him, we would have to go home and then we'd never return. I couldn't risk that. My best friend, incidentally, had to use the bathroom too, so I convinced her that we should pee in our pants. My dad didn't get mad often but when he did it was startling and confusing. "Why did you do that?" he asked sharply, shaking his head, line creases emerging on his forehead, a sternness I wasn't accustomed to. He announced impatiently that we were going home. I was devastated; my plan had backfired.

I also want to tell you about this memory:

In Westchester County, New York, a couple years before I moved to San Francisco, my father sat on a bus stop bench, waiting for me. When I spotted him, a scowl hijacked my face, profound irritation swelling inside me. It spread like fire through my heart and belly as a thought that would later haunt me entered my mind.

On his way to nowhere. My father is on his way to nowhere.

I stared at him with interrogating eyes: *Why are you waiting for me at the bus stop?* When he opened the car door, revealing a toothless smile that stabbed me with forgiveness and shame, my face softened. "Hi, dad," I said in a gentle tone. I understood then why he was sitting on the bus stop bench: to protect me, to shield me from the homeless shelter across the street.

We drove to a crummy diner for lunch—one in a series of diners we visited throughout this time period, culminating in my father's mysterious death, which not even an autopsy report could explain—exactly how he would have wanted it. It was a sunless winter day and my mood matched the gray. We ordered coffee and scrambled eggs and talked about inconsequential things as I moved food around the plate with my fork and reassured my dad that I was doing fine, slightly exasperated by the question, because I

was not doing fine; I was dangling by a precarious cord that felt like it was about to snap. I didn't admit this to anyone, though, not even myself.

"Life is what you make of it, baby," my father offered, his ability to hold the bigger picture still intact. His eyes retained a bit of their spark but his face looked like it was caving in on itself, all the years of suffering written in its creases.

I also want to tell you that my dad used to be a magician. He would roll up his sleeve and lower his elbow onto a table as if preparing to arm wrestle. With his other hand, he picked up a shiny quarter. I watched with wide eyes as he slid the quarter up and down the back of his arm. He stared at his forearm to indicate this took great focus, but despite his effort the quarter repeatedly escaped his grip, bouncing and settling with a clank on the table. He would shake his head to feign frustration each time the quarter dropped, that signature sparkle in his eyes. I had seen this trick many times throughout my childhood, but it never failed to fascinate me as he slowly opened his *empty* hand. The quarter had vanished. "Where did it go?" I'd ask, mystified.

"Magic," he'd announce with an amused grin.

My memories of my dad are blurry. He wasn't home often but when he reappeared from wherever he had been, he cut vampire fangs out of paper and chased my cousin and I around the house to our chorus of squeals and yelps. He took me on adventures, like to the town of Sleepy Hollow to search for the headless horseman.

I also want to tell you that I sometimes idealize the father of my childhood, which according to psychology, is a common trait for a child of an alcoholic.

Back at my father's new "home," I stopped the car on the side of the road, but I didn't want to drop him there, so I steered the car down the shelter's driveway with a rapidly beating heart. *My father lives in a homeless shelter.* These were unfamiliar sounds, like a foreign language I was forced to dissect but still could not understand. I pushed the words away and pulled them closer, like a dysfunctional relationship. We sat in the car for another moment, faced with this concrete building where my father lived, which was hidden from the road but on a familiar street—one I had known since childhood.

We called the restaurant Wings. It was on the same street as the homeless shelter,

located inside the small county airport. Despite the connotation that an airport restaurant might have, Wings was upscale and, on occasion, catered parties for celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor. My dad would tell me about the color theme chosen to match her violet eyes and about conversations with Richard Gere, who wanted to know why my father thought the character he played in *An Officer and a Gentleman* was one of his best.

At Wings, the corner table was ours. My mom and I would sit on the burgundy, bench as I sipped my pink bubbly drink with the cherry on top and watched the planes, through the big window, ascend and disappear into the sky. If Rosemary was on duty, my life was complete. If she wasn't in sight, I'd ask my father, anxiously, where she was and he'd encourage me, a smile forming, to go find her. I'd wind my way through the kitchen, basking in the attention of the kitchen staff, to the adjoining diner where Rosemary also worked. She'd make a big show of my arrival, pulling me toward her and wrapping her soft arms around me, enveloping me in her affection and floral scent.

I was an adolescent when Dorothy, my dad's boss and friend, decided to sell Wings. My dad attempted to buy the restaurant but a stranger outbid him and renamed it the Star-top Express. This seemed to mark a turning point in our lives; a pivotal loss for my father in a growing list of missed opportunities and failures—some self-inflicted, such as gambling away his and my mother's life savings and subsequently causing an unexpected eviction that my mother never fully recovered from (for most of my life, my mother lamented about the beautiful things she once owned), and some not self-inflicted, such as the loss of his true love, stolen by his best friend and resulting in an illegitimate son (and brother I have never met).

My father once told me that his new career, after losing Wings, was betting at the horse track and that he used a method passed down to him by elders, which worked for about six months until he lost everything ... again.

My father reached for the car door, catching himself before showing his teeth, conscious of the missing ones. As he opened the car door he said, "We have arrived at my castle"—an attempt to lighten the mood. And then, after noticing my pained expression**,** "Don't worry, it's not as bad as it looks." My father, with his big imagination and knack for storytelling, did not convince me this time. I knew it was *that* bad. I couldn't help but wonder—a fantasy of my own—if my father had bought Wings, if he hadn't been

outbid, if our lives would have taken a different course. One without rifles and hospitals and homeless shelters.

But the practical side of me knows that you cannot buy wings. Those are earned.

I want to tell you about the dream I've had since childhood:

I start to fly but can't ascend. Every time I gain momentum, I lose speed and plummet to the ground. I'm being chased and flying is my only escape, but I can't take off. In my waking life, when I feel fear and shame, I escape from experiences by quitting, failing, and self-sabotaging. Once, I dreamt I was being pursued by a gunman inside a building with a long, spiral staircase. I ran for my life down the winding staircase and through a door to the outside, sensing I was still not safe. Along the way, I had grown wings—oversized, white, feathery angel wings. Heavy wings. Wings I couldn't fly with.

I want to tell you that I was twenty-four and working in a retail job, a dead-end path, and in a state of, what is referred to in psychological terms, as functional freeze … o*n my way to nowhere*. One day at the store, I overheard a couple of co-workers discussing a movement organized by Westchester residents, like themselves, to ban the homeless shelter, which, unbeknownst to them, my father lived in. I stared at the floor, my face burning with emotions I didn't fully understand.

I also want to tell you about this memory that is lodged the most deeply:

My dad's best friend's car rolls up the driveway. Butterflies invade my stomach. Time slows, like when you're at the end of a high diving board, wondering if you should reverse. My brother and his tribe of "lost boys" formed a mini-search team earlier in the day, traversing through the woods behind our house, after discovering the note on my father's bedside table, along with the missing rifle. This was the reason the police were now in our driveway in possession of a white square of paper with a scribbled message.

My dad gets out of the car and walks toward me apprehensively. My dad's best friend trails behind him. The police officers approach my father, who stutters and attempts a smile: "I wrote that a long time ago; it's nothing."

"Did you write that, Killer?" my dad's friend questions, creases of concern on his forehead.

My dad loses his footing and I look away; watching my dad lose his balance is like watching a dog being beaten. I stuff those emotions down my throat with the rest of them, as one of the officers grabs a hold of my father's arm to steady him. "It's okay," he says in a commanding tone, "You need to come with us now."

I made the phone call. I feel like a traitor because I did not believe that my father had harmed himself but because we needed help. I watch my father being lead, against his will, into the back of the police car and I stand, frozen and alone in the driveway. The way I will remain for a long time.

I also phoned my mother that day but she stayed at work. Her bosses admired her work ethic; she was the employee who arrived earliest in the morning and began cleaning the shop without even being asked.

The Banshees were a big part of my childhood. I want to tell you about them.

My dad, cousin, and I went on a search in the woods to find them.

"Where are they?" my cousin asked, eager to lay eyes on the creatures who lived in the forest.

"Be patient, they're difficult to spot."

We tiptoed, scanning the wooded area for signs, our feet crunching the leaves beneath them.

"Are we going to see them?" I asked.

"Shhh." They must have heard us and disappeared, but if we're very quiet we just might," my dad smiled.

"Okay," we whispered dutifully, looking up at my dad and the tall trees; in awe of an adult who had access to another world.

I also want to tell you about the time, on a summer evening, when we were driving home and I was parched. I requested juice and after, I imagine, hearing about it one too many times, my dad halted the car on the side of the road near some trees.

"Why are we stopping here?" I asked, eyes wide, the inky sky lit up above us. All was quiet except for the cicadas' end-of-the-summer lullaby and the sound of my dad shaking a big tree branch. "One apple juice coming right up."

I was convinced my dad could do, pretty much, anything, so I was surprised when

he didn't return to the car with my cup of juice. My mother let me in on the joke: "Daddy was teasing." It took a moment to shake my disappointment. *So, you can't get juice from trees?*

The man who stood behind a bar: his home and hell. I want to tell you about him. He had spaces where teeth used to be. And a different voice. A weaker, wavering one that sounded like my uncle Gus, his sensitive and troubled older brother who struggled with an addiction to painkillers. I want to tell you that this shaky sound was not the sound of my father, a man named Achilles, a fitting name for someone who once sought out adventure and never backed down from a fight. A mythological figure of strength with one fatal flaw.

I want to tell you about a little brother who wore his hat so low his eyes were hidden as salty tears streaked his skin while the social worker asked pointed questions. I want to tell you about the lockdown ward with people who screamed out to no one in particular. About a little brother who saw too much and a mother who didn't see anything at all. I want to tell you about the private room we sat in with the social worker and how we heard, every few minutes, the desperate, frantic shrieks of a patient on the other side of the door--like a refrain—and how we glanced at one another uncomfortably each time, disturbed by the expression of agony. I want to tell you that when my mother remarked, "That poor woman; things could be so much worse," the social worker responded, "Actually, things are pretty bad."

I want to tell you that it was a relief to hear the truth. I want to tell you that I was both there and not there, like two versions of myself. I want to tell you that my brain focused on this complaint: How could they expect a person to get better in a place with heavy pad-locked doors and no sunlight?

I want to tell you about the tears that tumbled down my brother's face like they had no beginning or end, and how he glared at the ground, hiding under his baseball cap, and wiping at his face, half muttering and half pleading, "I don't know what's going on." I want to tell you that when the social worker asked about money my dad had taken from us, I shrugged it off, saying that it wasn't that much and he only did that when he was desperate, unwilling to share that my mother used to take her pocketbook with her into

the bathroom. I want to tell you that my dad hated himself for stealing money, punching a wall when I confronted him.

I want to tell you that my mother used all her energy to hold everything together.

When my brother was a child and full of energy, he'd often break things. My mother shouted about it, her fury rising in an explosion of emotion, as if he had committed a heinous crime—and then she'd get to work on fixing it. Once, when he accidentally knocked over an antique vase, the pieces scattering after the crash, my mother carefully and patiently put it back together with super glue, concealing the fault lines.

My mother was not known for her patience—except when it came to fixing things: untangling knotted necklaces; threading the lost ropes of sweatpants or hoodies back through the other side; erasing stains, cleaning floors. I handed her the broken or ruined things and she always accepted them.

It's different, though, when it comes to experiences.

I try to force the pieces of my story together, but I am beginning to understand that this method doesn't work for the type of material I am handling. And, so, I want to tell you about it, not to mend the jagged edges but to see them more clearly.

I want to tell you that my mother kept working at her day-job through all the chaos and dysfunction, unable to turn her head to the right or left due to severe neck pain, and sleeping on an old, beat-up couch because it was supposedly more supportive than the bed. I want to tell you about the time she said her deceased mother and aunt came to visit her in the middle of the night, shaking the couch cushions over and over and calling her name, trying to get her to make a move.

I remember questioning my mother at the age of four or five about the man in the moon. I saw the luminous globe in the sky and had spotted the outline of a figure inside it, an evil entity who would prey on us, a force threatening our safety. I was petrified and unsatisfied by my mother's flippant response: "The man in the moon? Who told you that?" She laughed. She did not understand the weight and urgency of the matter. "So, he won't come get us?" I persisted, unable to understand why she was ignoring me, since I was sure we were in dire need of protection.

I want to tell you that I was never sure why I was unable to move forward in life, like everyone else. I want to tell you that my life has been on pause, that *I* have been on pause. My familiar mantra: *What is wrong with me*?

In the movie, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Tom Wilkinson plays a doctor who has invented a mind-erasing machine for memories you would rather not hold onto. Without such a device, those of us with difficult memories need to find a way through.

The hunting rifle that rested against the wall of my father's bedroom was there long enough that it no longer seemed out of the ordinary—a bedside table, books, and a loaded hunting rifle. One day when my father wasn't in the house, a rare occurrence during this time when he was unemployed, I saw it as my opportunity to remove the rifle. I felt foolish, like an actor in a Lifetime movie, moving stealthily. I was also terrified I would accidentally set the gun off as I transported it to the garage. Later that day, when my father came home and realized the rifle was missing, he became enraged. His face was hard and mean when he shouted that it was his father's rifle, and he didn't want it to rust in the garage. As if this explained why a loaded rifle rested, at the ready, against his bedroom wall, a bedroom he barely left anymore.

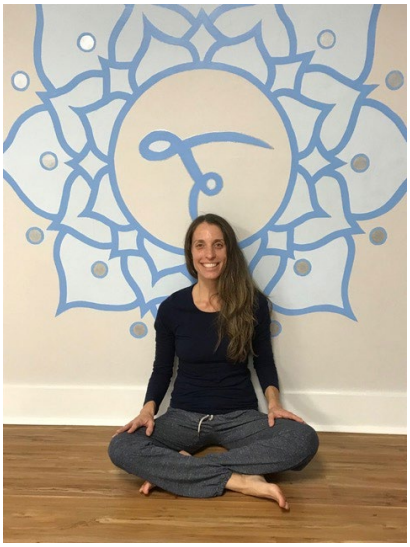
The psychiatrist at the mental hospital had a 'heart to heart' with my father and explained to us that my father's depression over being "out of work" was natural. He prescribed medication for his depression and sent him on his way; my father was, once again, let off the hook. I saw the grief in my mother's eyes when she learned that my father was coming home, but I had the opposite reaction; I couldn't sleep at night, knowing my father was trapped in that sunless place.

Where in the brain do these memories go? Scientists say long-term memory processing and storage is complex and not well understood, involving the hippocampus, neocortex, prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and basal ganglia. Where in the body do the memories live? The jaw? Shoulders? Heart? Hips? Ever since I can remember, I have clenched my jaw fiercely, and ground my teeth at night, sometimes waking myself up with the cringeful sound of enamel being worn away. I habitually run my tongue over the edges of my teeth and feel the grooves and holes that reflect years of damage.

In graduate school, I used to say I was searching for the through-line in my story, the larger theme that would tie it all together and make it complete. A teacher who read one of my stories commented that it wasn't "coming together." She was correct, and in moments when I feel vulnerable or ashamed, I sometimes hear those words: *Not coming together*. On my computer I store pieces that have been rejected or haven't fully taken form, in a folder titled *Memoir*. They have been there for a long time like that: memories without a home.

I want to tell you that I have been working, slowly, on bringing these memories together, these disparate parts of my being, like my patella, destroyed in a car crash when I was in college. The doctor announced that there would be no surgery because the pieces of my patella were too fractured, shards and slivers that could not be put back together, not even by an orthopedic surgeon. They'd have to heal on their own, join awkwardly back together while I wore a rainbow cast, chosen by a good-natured emergency doctor (*look what I found*!) that covered my entire leg from ankle to thigh. The end result did not resemble a kneecap so much as an uneven and jagged surface. The surgeon informed me that since cartilage cannot be replaced and I had lost a lot of it, I'd have to just see how far I could get on the knee without it. He warned me to tread lightly—no running or high-impact exercise. I didn't listen.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken items "with gold," joining together the parts in order to see the imperfections and flaws in a new and beautiful form. I want to tell you that maybe when that happens, I will realize that nothing is wrong with me at all.



With a background in Trauma-Informed Yoga and Ayurveda Wellness Counseling, **Nicole Alexander** teaches and writes through the lens of healing. She is a graduate of Antioch University—Los Angeles' Master's in Creative Nonfiction program, and her writings have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Diverse Voices Quarterly, Open Salon, Breathe Repeat, Coffee and Sweatpants, Elephant Journal, Yoga International, Yoga Renew, Cozy by Sweet Starlight,* and *Westchester Magazine*. Nicole enjoys hiking and spending time in the great outdoors, cuddling with her feline babies, and learning to balance on her niece's hoverboard.