

Fractured Memories of Hope

by Denis J. Underwood

Sometimes the name they give you is all wrong. Her name is Hope, but Quentin's losing faith in ever finding out who she is or what she meant to him.

Two years ago, Quentin moved his mother to a nursing home. While cleaning her apartment, he found a photo album hidden behind a book shelf. He'd never seen the album or any of the photographs before.

In one picture, he's on a red tricycle, grinning at a little girl who his mother calls Hope. His straight hair is so blond it looks white. Hope has curly hair, the color of maple syrup, and her eyes are set wide apart, unlike his. She's plump, a wingless cherub. It's the only picture in the album where Hope is smiling.

The photos seem to corroborate his mother's stories, the things he didn't even know to ask about until he showed her the album. Now he wonders if what's coming from her mouth is the truth or simple rambling.

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Quentin regularly makes the drive from Chicago to Fort Wayne to visit his mother. He had wanted to relocate her to Chicago, but she refused to be uprooted. The friends she insisted on staying near have either died or simply don't visit anymore.

Sitting next to the bed, caressing his mother's hand, Quentin waits for her to wake up. Stooped people, shells of what they used to be, shuffle their feet through the corridor outside her room. Most are in rapid decline, like his mother; she rarely gets out of bed anymore. He likes to imagine that she's in the midst of a beautiful dream where she recognizes everyone, has stimulating conversations, knows the facts and only says things once. Like the quadriplegic who dreams nightly of walking, he wonders if an

Alzheimer patient with a touch of Parkinson's constantly sleeps in the pursuit of lucidity.

The tremors in her hand begin; she's awake.

"Hi, Mom."

"Quentin, is that you?" she says softly.

"Yes, Mom. Where are you right now?"

"In a home, but the wrong kind...not my own."

"What's your name, Mother?"

"What kind of question is that? Elizabeth, of course."

She responds in a voice that's clear and quick; a rare voice. Like the cop he is, he asks questions to gauge alertness, to evaluate answers.

"Where did Hope live?" he asks, smiling at her.

"Hope lived a few houses down from us in Kalamazoo. She was your best friend."

Quentin had his first memory of Hope a month ago, borne on January's lashing winds -- the ones that regularly brought tears to his eyes. He wasn't sure why the memory had dislodged, alighted and stayed with him, instead of remaining anchored in darkness. Persistent images had hijacked his thoughts, and she seemed to stare back at him through the years; warmth had filled his chest. He finally concluded that the memory was from the 2nd grade, 1974 -- the earliest memory he'd ever had: Hope, with a rare smile, seated in a desk across the aisle.

Now he wonders why the memory took so long to surface. He doesn't even know Hope's last name and can't get it out of his mother. Research in Kalamazoo -- looking at county records, making phone calls -- had yielded nothing about who she was, where she'd come from, or where she'd gone. A first name gets you nowhere. If she and her family had been renters, they may as well have been ghosts.

"You two loved to collect toads together," his mother says. "You had secret spots where you'd gather them up."

"What year was that, Mom?"

"Before she went away."

Bottles of pills, a box of Kleenex, the photo album -- all are on the stand next to his mother's bed. Quentin picks up the photo album and opens it to a picture of Hope, barefoot. She's holding a bright yellow pail. On the grass, piled beneath a shrub, toads are frozen in the anxious moment before they right themselves and hop away.

"Hope would always sneak away and free them. And then you'd throw a fit," his mother pauses, lifting her knobby index finger toward him. "You liked to name them, come up with stories for each one -- you'd get so attached."

Then, like a needle skipping on a scratched record, she starts over, "You two loved to collect toads together..."

Often his mother repeats the same story she's told only minutes before. He's impressed by how similar each version is one to the other, unlike the punks he deals with on the streets that are always changing theirs. Each of her retellings has the same descriptions and dialogue, the same pauses and inflection, as if read from a script. Quentin has memorized her stories. It's easy since she doesn't learn new ones. And, her known repertoire is narrowing, suffering attrition.

"Do I have a sister?" he asks, purposely leaving Hope's name out.

"Your Dad left when you were little -- after that, it was just you and me."

"I know all about my father. What about a sister?"

"Turn the channel," she says, pointing over his shoulder to the corner of the room. There's a look on her face as if porn just came on.

"The TV's not turned on, mom."

"Of course it is, turn it off."

"Where did Hope go?"

"I wish we could have stayed in the country," she says with a sigh, turning her gaze toward the lone window in the room. Beyond the glass, a tree branch, dark and stripped, sways beneath the cold gray sky. "Country, country, country..." she says, as if she can't get the word out of her mouth fast enough, like it's the only word she

knows, and she's trying to say something meaningful, but all other words are filtered out, replaced by the one word.

Quentin knows it's useless to continue. The word will be repeated until she's overtaken by sleep, and then, perhaps she'll dream about their first home. When he was growing up, his mother had told him all about the house in the country. The way she talked about it, she had been content there. His father was still around then, before he enlisted; after a tour in Vietnam, he never found his way back. Eventually, Quentin and his mother moved to Kalamazoo for a secretarial job she took with the college.

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When she wakes, he hopes that she'll be recharged. He leans back in the chair, flips the pages and studies the photographs -- some are in color, some are in black and white. Conversations do not rise from the pages; not even whispers he'd shared with Hope. Is it normal to be devoid of such memories? Quentin tries to remember his father, but he can't. He figures that for the first years of his life, his eyes, ears, and brain acted like a broken video camera -- one that immediately erased everything it recorded. Kind of like his mother now.

May as well have lived two lives, he thinks: one before memory and one after. And how can you remember someone else's life? You can't. After forty years of living, he realizes that there's no way of knowing what his own eyes have witnessed.

Confusion. Incomplete stories. He's aware that traumatic experiences can cause memory loss. Jumbled memories, discombobulation. A brain can modify what it sees; mold it to its own liking. A mind will protect, and insulate -- especially a child's. In the end, what's normal for a child to remember? He has nothing to compare his memories to.

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His mother is awake again. He holds the photograph of Hope with the toads in front of her face. She stiffens, laboring to catch her breath.

"Oh. Poor girl. You were so sad when she went away," she finally says.

"Where did Hope go, Mother?"

"Away. Her father wasn't a good man. At least, he's who I think did..."

"Why was he bad? What did he do?"

"It was just Hope and her father. Kind of like you and me, but switched up."

"Was she my sister? Was my father her father?"

"Your father, he left us."

"I know, but --"

"It was best for you," she says sharply, as though she's losing patience with a child who won't listen.

"You kept something from me?" he says, going with it, not thinking too much.

Her parchment-paper eyelids flutter for a few moments until they lock tightly together. Finally, she says, "Under the shrub was where you found her."

Quentin sees himself on his bike, the one with the training wheels. He's riding fast, a blur to either side, away from something - he's not sure what. Then he goes over the handle bars, ankles flailing through the air until his forehead hits the sidewalk. The skin splits open. Darkness, then he's running. His sitter is going to be mad since he's strayed far from his front yard -- to play with Hope, maybe? He runs to a house where he doesn't know the people. A woman answers the door, and her face goes ashen. She leaves and comes back with a towel, throws it over his head to soak up the blood, then she faints.

Whenever he looks in the mirror, he sees the scar, its faint red indentation. The memory of how he got it is new, a revelation.

"You used to throw a fit whenever she let the toads go," his mother says in a tone that's slightly different this time, soothing. Her voice is thin, losing momentum.

Hail bounces off the glass like a handful of buckshot, startling him. Wind shakes the widowpane, and, for a moment, he thinks it

might find a way through, like all the fractured memories of Hope. Everything that had receded to the depths, seemingly vanished, was waiting to be discovered and re-assembled. What else could his mother tell him about Hope? What words might trick her into revealing more? He thinks about grabbing his mother's arm, shaking her, but he stops himself. Awake and then asleep is normal for her. He resolves to let go of Hope, at least for the rest of the day.

