

My Ninth Grade English Teacher Told Me Memoirs Should be Memorable

A month ago, an interviewer asked about the most memorable times of my life. I replied the way I was expected to. Something about getting published for the first time, meeting the man I love, opening for the Who in concert and getting to meet them backstage. All true. All memorable.

And yet, I found myself biting my tongue as I reached the end of the list, consciously withholding an incident I knew should be added beside the others. I shook my head and smiled instead.

I could find no proper way to phrase “That time I was chased naked through a field by a man with a shotgun”.

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Summer of 2005. It was late, or at least late by my standards back then. I was in the car with my best friend at the time, a girl who would never grow past five foot even and made up for her height deficit with an overabundance of emotion and personality. We were both in semi-formal wear, her dress spring green and fluttering to her knees while mine was midnight blue and sweeping to the ground once I had removed the silver spike heels I could only sort of walk in. Our salon-bought updos had degraded into a mass of artful curls that swung gleefully on either side of our faces.

We had just left an award ceremony for the marching band, an institution that contained not only powerful turns of phrase that I realize now are uncomfortably similar to the repetition used by cults to indoctrinate new members, but also boys with whom our fifteen and seventeen year old selves were devoted to entirely.

To be honest, I don’t remember most of the award ceremony. I do remember that Ian, my on-and-off infatuation for most of my teen years, ruffled my hair on his way returning to his seat. I think it was the first time he had acknowledged my existence in months (which meant, of course, that I felt, once again, ready to marry him on the spot).

Meanwhile, my best friend had some similarly life-changing interaction with Steve, *her* on-and-off infatuation for most of her teen years that, to be honest, I don’t remember the specifics of. The specifics don’t matter. What *does* matter is that we both felt invincible, hopped up on too much caffeine and the teenage adrenaline of first love mixed with the smell of fresh cut grass outside and the feeling of warm summer breezes on our faces. What does matter is we were in a car driving to an abandoned back road that saw more travel by tractors than by cars. What does matter is that we had a plan.

We left our shoes in a pile on her backseat, and the asphalt warmed the bottom of my feet as we darted across the road, giggling the way only teenage girls drunk on nothing ever can. We were connected by a joining of hands, hers in mine. I was half a stride ahead of her, leading her into the dark dappled forest. If she felt hesitation, I didn’t let her show it.

I had grown up in green and growing places, but found grass stains less and less in style as I joined adolescence. I turned away from my roots found in trees and adopted black hoodies and apathy to fill the space. But that night I was traveling back in time. I had to release her hand because she was too slow, and I needed to keep moving. Formal gowns are not meant for

running through underbrush, but somehow the fabric never caught or snagged (well, it probably did but it didn't *feel* like it did). I shared the grace of the deer and the rabbit as I leaped over fallen logs. I would swear I could feel the pulse of the forest itself.

I stopped abruptly at our destination, tripping for the first time over an exposed root and staggering right up to the edge of the water. It was a pond; the water still and reflecting the night sky above. Pinpricks of light and the thin sliver of the very first crescent to come out of the new moon stared at me from up and down. My palm rested flat against the tree.

I don't know how long I stood there alone before my friend arrived beside me, panting and with a small twig sticking out of her curls. Her lips were turned up though, and that was important. I reached out to squeeze her hand.

"Come on. We're going in."

"I can't get my dress wet!"

In response, I reached down and pulled my dress off over my head and tossed it aside. She looked skeptical but there was something magnetic about the water. She shook her head and pulled her own dress off, taking the time to hang it on a branch.

I jumped first - I always jumped first. I remember that the words that moved through my mind felt so profound to fifteen year old me.

Sink or swim.

The water was so cold that my breath stuck in my throat and I thought for a second I was going to drown because none of my limbs were responding. Perhaps I had been frozen completely and people would come to see my crystalized form caught mid leap of faith.

But then I was breaking the surface and gasping for breath and laughing. It was a wild laugh, unplanned, and I didn't realize I was doing it until it had already escaped into the air and I couldn't call it back. My best friend squeaked when she came up beside me, a noise of alarm. Neither of us had expected it to be so cold.

We looked at each other and I knew she wanted to go back to shore, but I couldn't. I wasn't ready yet.

I just started swimming one way, finding a river that slipped off into the woods and kept moving. She followed me, I could tell by the sounds of splashing although I never looked back. Looking back seemed to defy the moment in some very real and punishable way.

She was the one who noticed the break in the trees. I was far too busy moving forward to take in my surroundings, only focused on one hand following another following another. She called my name and I had to look back.

She was hovering, treading water, beside a set of roots that looked like a ladder, woven into one another and twisting upwards in a perfect set of handholds and footholds. I pushed myself up it, propelling myself towards the night sky and coming out into the thick smell of lilacs.

In front of me was an open field filled with clover flowers. Fireflies flitted from flower to flower in a way I had come to associate with bees. The sky was open above us, bordered by the line of trees that wrapped around the field like a fairy ring. We could see the moon and count every star as it sat, still and sparkling.

I then proceeded to do what any sane person would do if presented with such an experience. I began to frolic nude through the field and catch fireflies. Obviously.

It was a liberating experience that bordered on cliché. I ran without reservation and felt no sense of modesty. I laughed with abandon and shouted my joy to the world. My friend was more

reserved. She stuck to the edge of the woods and smiled shyly as she held her hands out to the fireflies, asking them to dance. They did a dance I like to imagine as the steps between courtiers, in and out with as little contact as possible, moving around one another in perfect circles, followed by dainty curtsies and formal bows.

Of course, the booming shout of "Hey!" shattered both our paradises. Like the deer to the gunshot, I turned my head over my shoulder, my whole body contorting in confusion while I remained completely frozen. Perhaps this was a dinosaur, my thoughts offered without consulting me. Everyone knows dinosaurs can't see you if you stand perfectly still.

The silhouette at the other end of the field was not dinosaur shaped, though. It was masculine, solid with broad shoulders, both hands placed around the heft of a large gun that was pointed up at the stars who had dared lead us here, as if he held them responsible for our trespassing (which, to be fair, they were).

It was my friend who moved first, grabbing my arm and pulling.

"Come on!" she hissed as she was already moving.

I had dragged her in here, somewhat literally, and now she was dragging me out, breaking the spell laid over my shoulders and getting me moving again. It took a dozen staggered steps before I was running of my own accord. Suddenly the trees that had felt like old friends were teeth of some monster, snapped shut and growling. The grass was slippery underfoot and we were sliding and screaming.

Looking back, I'm sure that man had just been roused by our shouting and came out in a sleep-ridden daze to figure out what was going on, just as confused by our presence as we were of his. But in the moment, we both knew that he had come to do unspeakably horrific things to us, like shoot us, or catch us, or tell our parents. And so we ran.

In the end, I was the first to jump, as I ever was. It wasn't the opening we had gone in, but the adrenaline had claimed my senses. I reached a point of intense panic and dove through the first opening I came to, hitting the surface with a crash of flesh on still water. My friend followed.

We swam and it was a rush of cold water over skin and blind forward momentum.

What followed next was a comedy of errors. We found land again only to discover that our dresses were gone, stolen away by some mysterious figure in the forest (or, more likely, we came up on a different bank, failing to notice in our panic, and our dresses are still out there somewhere, tattered and waiting patiently for us to return). The path I had galloped down effortlessly an hour before now grabbed my ankles at every turn and threatened to send me sprawling into the brush. The bare expanses of our legs and arms were scratched raw by malicious branches and cruel brambles.

When we reached the car, we found it locked. The keys mocked us from the very center of the driver's seat and then we were shouting at each other. Frustrated terrified energy turned to ingenuity, and suddenly we were testing twigs against the opening of windows. They had to be thin enough to fit through the crack, but strong enough to push the button. Anyone who had happened by would have thought we were mad, huddled nude by the window with our elbows at odd angles, poking desperately at the buttons on the inside door with sticks stripped of their bark. Nevermind the cheer that went up when we finally got it open.

I don't remember what I told my father when I got home, how I explained that I was soaking wet, or wearing my friend's ill fitting clothes. I'm not sure I did. Perhaps I just waved him off, saying I didn't want to talk about it in such a manner that invented an entire three act play in

his mind of the drama I had endured.

But I went to bed with the truth, curled up against a night I would never forget. I let the adrenaline rush end and send me spiraling into an exhausted and dreamless sleep, fingers closed around my pillow as if clinging to the very tactile feeling of what it meant to really be alive.