

# The Walker

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*Our firsts and lasts were leaves burned  
the hour we left.*

*—Ted Hughes*

You could say that my life and The Walker's life—well, it's all been a question of firsts. And to be honest, I thought for a long time that it was always going to be that way.

Until now.

See, ever since I bumped into The Walker—well, found out who he was (we've never really been introduced although I feel like I know him better than myself, my daughter, and even my wife, Sage)—he's been around. Around at all my firsts. First love, first driver's license, first hot dog with my dad in Candlestick Park on vacation—you know, the usual momentous occasions in your life that go down in your memory as "Firsts."

First biopsy.

It's like he's been around forever. Until now.

Which is why I'm worried. I haven't seen him in a while. I look out the window at the glazed December streets, and he's not there. I drive through town—down past the flashing blue and pink neon arrow on top of the Westwood Cinema, Ace Hardware, the John Deere lot, the courthouse—and I don't see him. I guess it's because now I'm actually *looking* for him, you know? It's like now that I'm looking for the guy instead of trying to avoid him he's not there. I miss him, actually. I miss seeing his red and black mackinaw, his grizzled sunken face—kind of grandfatherly. Even though I've always known he's a nut. Seriously, absolutely whacked out of

his skull. It's still been comforting, though—creepy and comforting—to see him whenever I've experienced some "first" in my life.

And I haven't had a first in a while—excluding my wife's recent trip to the doctor's office. So I can't figure out why he's gone, why he hasn't come shuffling around our place in his dirty gray irrigation boots, his orange hunter's hat with the earflaps pulled down, his breath blowing out plumes of evening mist, like some dark night train, endless, timeless. Seriously, the guy's a legend in my book. Just as powerful, just as memorable. A full-blown mythic legend.

Only I haven't seen him for a while.

And that's a first.

I can't stop looking for him. Three or four times a day I part the Venetian blinds in our living room and look out at the hardened December streets, hoping to see his face in the wreaths of Christmas lights, hoping to see him hanging outside the Clean Spot Laundromat next door, cupping a cigarette in his hands, looking off into the frozen dawn for some lightning-colored shard of truth, some answer to it all, like he was always able to give me from a distance. A close distance—always.

"Who are you looking for?" Sage asks me, whenever she catches me staring out the window.

"Nobody," I say, turning and smiling at her.

But he wasn't nobody—still isn't. He's The Walker, and he hasn't walked my way for a while now, now that I'm looking for him, which is a first. And I hope it's not the last.

So what do you do? What do you do when it's a Saturday morning, early, and it's almost Christmas, and a legend has died in your life—well, is on the verge of dying—and you and your wife are waiting for the results of her biopsy to come back from the lab at the hospital in Pocatello? What do you do? I mean, in a way, this is a first. A big first. What do you do when the doctor said the earliest you could find out the results would be Monday or Tuesday? Tuesday at the latest, he said. And so you sit, staring out the window, talking to each other but knowing that it's almost Christmas, which a long time ago was another first, a first for everybody involved—a worldwide first. And all you can think about is, "Hey, this could be it. This could be the last time we're going to look at each other, the last time we're going to say things like, 'Dear' or 'I love you' or 'What are you looking for out the window—I'm right here.'"

What do you do when your wife could be on the verge of dying, and

all you can think about is some crazy guy you saw walking around and around in circles in the North Park, back when you were just a fourteen-year-old kid taking a driver's education course?

Maybe it's because whenever you run bang up against something that's going to stop time for you, you cling to everything you've ever felt to be timeless in your life, like you're clinging to some kind of talisman that will stay the elements, stop time, ward off evil.

Like The Walker always seemed to do.

So what do you do?

I'll tell you what you do. You get up in the early predawn hours of December, you throw on whatever you find in one of your late grandfather's old war trunks—boots, hat, coat—and you take a walk down to the nearest park and sort it out.

You do what I do.

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First Driver's Education Course—September 23, 1984. 11:45 A.M. Jerome, Idaho. My hometown. That's where I first met him: The Walker. I was taking my first driver's ed classes, and we were driving around the old North Park, which was right across from Main Street, facing Towle's Motel, and the old, gray stone church—Lutheran, I think, or Presbyterian—where I attended kindergarten when I was five years old. We—and my friends, Samantha Barnes, Greg Ainsworth, and Brett Thueson—were all driving this white Dodge around the North Park, trying to get Joe Mattie, our driver's education teacher-cum-football-coach, to pass us so we could get our licenses. Joe Mattie was a Boston transplant. Don't ask me how he got out to our side of the world, but he did.

See, I'd never met any driver's ed teachers from Boston, anyone from Boston, for that matter. So, it was kind of a first for me, too. Actually, I think you'd've been hard pressed to find anyone in my town who even knew where Boston was, or what country it was in. Back in the early seventies—or so the story went—Mattie had redshirted at Idaho State in Pocatello as a middle linebacker and shattered the record for tackles in a single season, a record which still stood at the time of my first driver's education course and which maybe even stands today. So we were all in this white Dodge, trying to get our licenses, and Joe Mattie made me pull up around the North Park, around past Towle's Motel and my old kindergarten church.

"Let's see ya parahlllel pahking," he said. "Right heah, right heah."

"Right here?" I asked.

"Yeah, right heah. Parahlllel pahk. This is good."

So, I parked. He pulled out his clipboard, jotted some notes.

"You should always check ya mirrah," he said, looking at me, tapping the rearview mirror with his coach's forefinger.

"My mirror?" I asked, looking at Samantha, Greg, and Brett in the back seat.

"Yeah," he said. "Always check ya mirrah. All right, let's go. Remembuh S.M.O.G."

"Signal, mirror, over the shoulder, go," we chanted in chorus.

"Ah," he smiled widely, looking around at us. "Youse guys are learning. That's good, that's good."

Then he saw something.

"Hold it," he said. "See that?" He pointed at something out in the North Park.

Greg, Samantha, and Brett craned their necks to see.

"Where?" I asked.

"The Walker," he said, pointing over to an empty space between some pine trees and oil drum garbage cans whose dented lids were chained on.

Only he said it like this: "Wahkuh."

"The Walker's been there," Joe Mattie said.

For a while, we sat there staring at something he saw but we didn't, staring and not saying anything until he finally told me to signal, check my mirror, check over my shoulder, and go back to the high school parking lot.

On the way back, we listened to his story. I drove, and Samantha Barnes checked how many times I checked my rearview mirror.

"The Walker," Joe Mattie said. "He just walks. Around and around. I saw him once when I was a kid growing up in Boston. It was down in this park near my house, the house I grew up in—Schmidt Park, I think it was called—I can't remembuh now. Anyway, it was where they had all the swings and World War II tanks and stuff, you know? Yeah, he was down there, even way back then. He wore the same thing—this orange hunter's hat with earflaps, and this red and black mackinaw, like a lumberjack's jacket. Jeans, I think, old jeans. And he wore irrigation boots, this kind of gray, muddy-colored rubbuh. And he'd walk. All night. Around and

around. Eventually, he wore an oval into the grass, and the park commission, the local city council, made him stop doing it because they said he was wrecking their grass, see. But that's it. He'd walk around and around, wearing a brown oval, like a race track, into the grass. First and last time I saw him, though. First and last. I guess, that is, until now."

Then we were back out at the high school, perfectly parallel parked.

"All right," Joe Mattie said. "Next time, we'll do highway driving. Take you out past Cindy's Restaurant on I-84 and let you merge."

"Woo," Brett Thueson said. "Can't wait to merge."

And I didn't want to let it show on my face because, well, I was in the company of my friends, people who had an opinion of me. But I *had* seen what Joe Mattie had seen: an oval like a race track worn into the park grass by the tan cinderblock restrooms and oil drum garbage cans, about fifty feet long, compassing two pines trees, like a scaled-down high school track circling a football field.

So I didn't say anything.

Which was a first.

But I went down that night. That night, I pried my bedroom window open—I was dressed in jeans, white high-tops, black hooded sweat-shirt, my parents' Kodak Instamatic in the front pocket. I crawled out into the window well. It was a September night, breezy and just warm enough. The stars were out, and I could hear the crickets serenading me with a thrill all the way down in the North Park and beyond. Quietly sliding the window shut behind, I scrambled up out of the window well. I jogged down the driveway.

It was about midnight. But I was wide awake. There was this—I don't know—energy—humming in my body, like I was about to do something I'd never do again. But that's the power of firsts. There's these things we only do once, well, things we're *supposed* to do only once, things we *really* do only once, if we're honest with ourselves—marriage, love, the birth of a child, scoring a touchdown against the South Fremont Cougars in sudden death, having biopsies, waiting at home for biopsy results from the hospital in Pocatello—these are the things that we'll never do again in the same way, never again at the same level of wonder, awe, or terror.

That's their power. They have the force, instantly, to change us forever. And that's a long time. Really: forever. Most of the time, we spend our forevers looking back at what we wish we could do again for the first time: first once again, we want to kiss someone beautiful who loved us

outside the high school Valentine Formal on February 14, 1986; first once again, we want to take the ball on a 60 Strong Draw and bulldoze through the defense and break out into the open for a tie-breaking touchdown and clutch come-from-behind victory at homecoming; first again, we want to be married, fall in love, start a career, have a child. We want to relish the firsts over and over again, to savor them like luscious white fruit, which is of course impossible.

So we take early morning walks in the winter of adulthood to simulate these firsts in our minds. We sneak out our own windows at night, hoping to take a picture of this first, hoping even to secure it, to preserve it—to *steal* it—for ourselves so we can keep it forever. But eventually, we find out what I found out that night, which is what I'm still finding out: first is also last. First will always be last. Like with kisses, loves, biopsies, and waiting for lab results to come back from Pocatello by Monday, or at least Tuesday. That's what Sage's doctor said.

We find out this.

Firsts last forever.

That night, I jogged down Avenue C, turned right at Garfield, passed the old silver water tower that loomed like a mute skyrocket in the wide open September midnight, and jogged down Avenue B to the old North Park. My weighted breath clung to my lungs, vapory and sweaty. It was a football player's breath, the breath of a young kid trying to hang onto his firsts forever, trying to keep a catalog of first events, ones he never wanted to let die, ever. I jogged past Lonnie Ambrose's house, past Pat Towle's.

And there I saw him.

It was just like Joe Mattie's account of his Schmidt Park, but it was my North Park.

He wore an orange hunter's hat with the earflaps down, and he wore gray muddy-colored irrigation boots with yellow and red bands around the tops. Jeans, lumberjack's mackinaw. With a kind of staggering but steadfast purpose, he was walking around and around, treading an oval track into the grass, as if his very next step would right all the awkward angles in the universe.

I wondered: How long had he been there? How long would he stay? How could he wear a track into the grass overnight? But had it been only overnight? Who was he?

I raised my Kodak Instamatic, aimed it.

But the lens was fogged, so I lowered it and reached for a loose T-shirt tail to swipe it clean. When I looked up and aimed it again, he was gone. Then he was standing beside me, holding my parents' camera, lowering it, shaking his head *no*.

"Why?" I asked, pulling the camera away.

"Nobody takes a picture of me," he said.

I couldn't see his eyes, but I could smell his breath. It didn't smell bad exactly, just redolent with time, fragrant with age, like cedar and fresh moss. I could smell things I'd never smelled before in someone's breath. I could smell it all: movie popcorn, a canyon wind, the breath of every December and June that had been and would ever be, peppermint, the smell of a newly cut football field, the breath of children and the breath of marriage vows, and the wind that breathed life into Adam. It was like Eden. But it was the North Park. And there was no Eve.

His voice was young. I mean, by the looks of him, The Walker had to be about seventy, maybe even a hundred. He wore his orange hunter's hat pulled down, so I couldn't see his eyes, but I knew they were under there—checking me out, admonishing me, lecturing me for trying to take a picture of a living legend, for trying to preserve the unpreservable. He shook his head, *no*, again.

Calmly, he took back my Kodak Instamatic, which shimmered and changed to star-colored vapor in his hands, and then he said something, rubbing the gray stubble on his hollow cheeks. Well, he started to say something, but then he stopped. I could tell he was trying to make it right, trying to make whatever he was going to say the most momentous occasion of my life. He rubbed his chin, looked off toward the weedy west fringe of the North Park. A police car rushed by, cutting the night in half. Above us, the opal streetlights fizzed and hummed, mobbed by white moths. Turning back to me, he shifted his weight from foot to foot. Unnerved, I examined his old hunter's hat, the mackinaw, the mud-colored boots.

*What a weirdo*, I thought. *Weird-oh*.

Then I realized why he'd been waiting.

"Not a weirdo," he said. "Just somebody trying to keep it alive."

"Keep *what* alive?" I said, laughing.

I mean, hey, I was fourteen. I had no respect for eternal, meaningful things.

"What alive?" I prodded. "What's 'it'? There's no 'it.' You're a guy in

rubber boots who walks around when he should be sleeping. You know, you're probably freaking a lot of people out in this town. What are you talking about—"Keep it alive"? What's that kinda crap?"

He made a gruff sound in the cellar of his throat, as if clearing my impertinence from the concrete floor of the cosmos.

"Just remember," he said, tightening his hat down with both hands. "You heard it from me first."

Then The Walker walked away.

And I went home and never told my parents about how I lost their camera.

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First kiss—Jennifer MacKenzie. February 14, 1986. Jerome, Idaho. 548 East 16th Street. Sometime around midnight. Jennifer and I were standing outside her mom's house, and we'd been standing outside for about an hour. Seriously, an *hour*. What had we been talking about? Who even knows, man! I can't even recall, now as I sit here—trying to think about how the lab technicians in Pocatello are undoing the little vials that contain four small samples of tissue from Sage's left breast—I can't recall what, if anything, happened in that hour. But she was beautiful—Jennifer, now, as she was back then. Beautiful, as Sage is to me now. And as Sage was last night and every night and as she will be every day and night to come. Which is kind of a first, isn't it? Another first, right here, right now (where is he then?).

I mean, how can I in the same flurry of memory and vision see my first kiss and my first and last love both as paragons of beauty, as standards of the same paradoxical thing? Is it possible? Can old codgers in hunter's hats, mackinaws, and irrigation boots really turn your parents' Kodak Instamatic to thin, immaterial vapor? Man, who knows? All I'm telling you is what happened to me. All this stuff, for the first time in my life. That's all.

So, yeah, it went this way: Jennifer MacKenzie and I are standing out under this sheet-metal carport, just outside her mom's house. Her mom, who's single herself, is blasting some Stevie Ray Vaughan—"Darkness, Darkness"—or something like that. I've got this blue ball of electric energy, like a valentine dynamo, churning pink and red and yellow and white, down inside my stomach and chest, and Jennifer MacKenzie, all dressed up in her pinkish white satin Valentine formal, is smiling her beautiful smile, smiling with her beautiful teeth. I've already spent an hour out talk-



ing with her under her mom's carport, but it's time to go, and she's smiling and laughing and thinking I'm funny (I *am* funny, of course, really funny for the first time in my life). She guides my hands to the slender satin dream of her waist and pulls me to her—well, I pull, too. Our hips are close, our stomachs are close, and she's absolutely the sweetest, starriest human I've ever been close to. And her lips. Man, her lips. I can feel her lips on my lips, her teeth close to my teeth. She says this one thing, "Mm." Like she just tasted something warm and delicious, like a sweet roll slathered in icing, warm out of the oven. Just like that. Not sexy. Not lustful, really, either. Just "Mm." And man, let me tell you, that's something I'll never be able to bring back, nor should I really, I guess, except here.

But the stars were out, and we were leaning back against her mom's house out over there on the north side of town, out north of Gayle Forsythe Park, past the new baseball field complex, the pitching cages, the high school, and out beyond that was nothing but potato and sugar beet fields and doddering Holsteins and the absolute edge of the universe where God first put his pencil to his clipboard and made a few notes that set the whole thing in motion, perhaps even putting down a few things that had to do with me and Jennifer MacKenzie, perhaps saying nothing more than "Mm," perhaps with the pencil tip in his mouth, thoughtful, perhaps writing down "Positive" or "Negative" when he came to the part about a lab test in a hospital in Pocatello. "Breast tissue," his notes probably recorded. Date: December 12, 1998.

But man, that "Mm"—that's all it took. Stevie Ray Vaughan was blaring out "Darkness, Darkness" inside Jennifer MacKenzie's house, the stars were out, my body was absolutely jumping with love and energy, and I could feel the beginnings of a universe in the lack of space between our bodies, between Jennifer's soft Valentine's Day formal and my rented crème tux. It was all there—the beginnings, the holding, the "Mm." Then there was a little wet click, a release, and our lips were plucked apart; she was looking at me, smiling, laughing, wetting her lips with her tongue, and loving me—yeah, really loving me—just for that moment out on her mom's carport under the broken light fixture and the swirling mayflies. Really loving me. And I was loving her.

Then it was her mom.

"Jenn," her mom called, Stevie Ray wailing in the background. "It's time to tell your friend to go home."

"Friend?" I asked. "Am I your friend?"

"Well," Jennifer said, rolling her eyes up to the stars. "It's my mom, you know."

"Yeah," I said. "I'll see you at school."

"Okay," she said. "Bye."

"Bye."

Then the screen door opened, and Stevie Ray took her—her beautiful satin glide and flow, her perfume, her lips, her "Mm." Then I was behind the wheel of my parents' Volkswagen Rabbit convertible, still feeling Jennifer MacKenzie's lips on mine, still feeling her waist, her firm wired-in stomach, her hands pulling my hands, her tapping heart drawing my body and soul up to somewhere way above the potato fields and carports and moms and stereos. I put the Rabbit in reverse, pulled out of her driveway.

That's when I saw him—The Walker.

I'd remembered to check my mirror.

In the night, in my rearview mirror, he stood behind me, wearing the usual: hat, mackinaw, boots. There was a flash: no camera. But he held his hands up, fired off a burst of white light between his fingers and walked off.

Next day at school, Jennifer told me that instead of me she liked Jeff Poole who drove a red '67 Mustang and wasn't afraid to smoke pot.

Mm.

Years later, in a college apartment, Sage would blow Jennifer MacKenzie's first kiss out of this known universe and keep it going, satellite-style, on forever. And I'd go walking out all night afterwards, absolutely sleepless, looking for some drifter in an orange hat, mackinaw, and boots.

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First funeral with military honors—Gavin A. Dupree, physics professor and retired colonel. My grandfather. October 15, 1998. Rexburg, Idaho. I remember that I stood in the reception line near the casket down at Flamm Funeral Home on Mohawk Drive. The whole family was there—parents, uncles, aunts, cousins. And our cute red-headed daughter, Shanda Dee, in a white lace pinafore and carmine bow, bouncing in Sage's arms. Sage was wearing a black satin dress and a pearl (fake—gift from me) necklace. About halfway through the reception, an old guy no one knew shuffled through the line. He shook hands with my entire family, smiled. He wore new jeans, had his hair slicked back with Grecian For-

mula. He'd shaved, but it looked like he hadn't shaved in a while—there were a few bloody nicks in the pliable flesh of his neck and cheeks. He shook hands with me, stopped and looked in my eyes, squinted and cocked his head back as if sizing up a new recruit.

"Knew your grandfather," he said, popping a blue breath mint in his mouth. "Always wanted to get back down and see him. But I guess it's too late. Had some things of his, things I always meant to give back."

"Mm," I said, casting sidelong glances at my parents, my Aunt Janet and Uncle Terry. "Like, what things?"

"A trunk," he said. "War things."

Then he turned thoughtful, wet-eyed. I realized he was still shaking my hand, a methodical up-and-down hydraulic motion, like our handshake was the thing pumping the tears out of his eyes.

"We were in the 3rd Infantry Division together," he said. "At the reduction of the Colmar Pocket. January 19, 1945. First time an infantry division was ever given the Presidential Citation. First and last, thank God. Used to go out fishing with him, too. Hunting once in a while. Chopping wood. He loved to get out. Used to see him walking down at Davis Park at all hours. We'd go together sometimes, too. Loved to get his exercise, eh? He was a good man. You'll take the trunk, won't you?"

"Sure," I said, releasing his hand.

"Good," he said, pointing over to where the old war trunk rested on the blue foyer carpet. Next to the trunk stood a pair of irrigation boots, under the hanging coats and umbrellas. "Right over there."

At the funeral's end, he was the only one lingering around, so we coaxed him into taking a picture of the whole family.

"Sure," he said, grinning. "Anything for the family of my old war buddy. Squeeze in, now."

And I wasn't sure if the flash came from the camera or his smile.

Weeks later, Sage and I were sitting on our living room couch, playing with Shanda and flipping through some photographs of the funeral.

"Hey," Sage said, stopping at one. "Look at this."

"What?" I asked.

"This," she said, pointing at a picture—it was a group shot. The whole fam damly.

"It's the family," I said. "So what?"

"Who's that guy?" she said, pointing to an old man in the back row. He had slicked back hair, a mile-wide grin, hollow cheeks.

"One of my grandpa's war buddies," I said. "Gave me the trunk."

"What's he doing in the picture?" Sage asked, wide-eyed.

"Came to the funeral," I said, shrugging and looking at her. "Remember? He was one of the last guys there. One of the first guys—first and last."

"Yeah," Sage said, pointing again at the picture. "But what's he doing in the picture? He took the picture. What's he doing in it?"

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First home run—July 23, 1981. Jerome Recreation District Baseball Field. Down off Main Street, north of Shaefer's Dry Cleaners and the Northside Tavern. First and last home run, really. Chris DeLucia was pitching for the Gano-Dehlin Huskies, and I was batting for the Volco Blockbusters, coached by Kurt Burton's dad, Ted, and Jeff VanDerBruyn's dad, Lyle. Anyway, it was a full count, and—no, the bases weren't loaded—but I was up to bat, and Chris DeLucia, that hot head, was pitching. The Huskies were up by one, and I remember that Mike Welch was dancing out on second base, not sure if he wanted to try and steal, not sure if he wanted to try and let me hit him in. My coaches, Lyle and Ted were, I think, trying to signal for Welch to steal third and home, probably, because I wasn't a very strong batter. So, anyway, I was digging down in the batter's box there on the old Little League field, where all the games used to be played before they built the fields out at Gayle Forsythe Park, only a quarter mile from Jennifer MacKenzie's mom's carport of love.

So, I was digging in, looking just as flashy in my gold and green uniform as Chris DeLucia in his royal blue Huskies uniform. He was in eighth grade. So was Mike Welch. I was in seventh. And it was pretty simple. He rifled a fast ball, and I swung. I felt a solid *crack*. This feeling of connectedness that bloomed in the shaft of the bat, shot up my arms and chest, and carried the ball and me way out over the A&W section of the pea-green home run fence.

And that was it.

"Great job, son," my dad said, slapping me on the back.

"Way to go!" Ted Burton shouted, high-fiving me.

"Nice!" Lyle VanDerBruyn barked.

"Woo hoo!" Mike Welch said, slapping my hands in the dugout. "That's a first!"

Then we rode down to the A&W for free victory root beers in Lyle

VanDerBruyn's white Econoline van. It was the van we all secretly coveted—red pinstripes, fur-lined seats, tinted bubble windows, mini-fridge with poker table and cup holders inside, sleeper cabin on top, shiny chrome ladder and covered spare tire bolted on the back doors. On the way, all the windows got rolled down, and as we cut through the town's main intersection and only stoplight, we chanted, "We're number one! We're number one!"

Afterwards, however, I rode my bike back down to the Little League field, past the Northside Tavern, and out into the overgrown grass behind the home run fence, looking for the ball. The field was deserted. I leaned my ten-speed up against the fence's faded ads: Ace Hardware, A&W, Jerome Floral. I walked back and forth. I knelt in the heavy windblown grass. But I couldn't find it. Nothing.

"Hey, kid," he yelled.

I turned.

It was summer, and so he had his mackinaw slung over his shoulder, his hat crammed in his back pocket. His jeans were tucked into his boots. Of course, back then, I had no idea who he was. His hair was light brown, receding, like a wisp of grass across his sweaty forehead. His face was sunken, like a desert floor. Thin, tan—a skeleton with skin. A skiff of silvery stubble glazed his jaw, like snow on summer grass. He squinted, tossed me a baseball.

Then he held his hands up in front of him, holding an invisible camera.

"Click, click," he said, smiling.

"Thanks," I said, glancing at him only for a moment.

Then I turned and ran for my bike, hoping it would be the last time I'd ever see him.

And since we're on baseball . . .

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First pro game with my dad—June 12, 1983. 4:35 P.M. Candlestick Park: Oakland A's versus San Francisco Giants. On vacation with my parents. I don't know why my dad and I went to the game. See, I was born in San Francisco while my dad was going to medical school. So, I think it was something we felt we just had to do for some reason, some kind of father-and-son ritual that everybody has to do at least once. Another first and last. And so we went. We sat in the sun all day, watched a pretty bad

game, ate hot dogs, and then we rode the city bus back to our room at the Best Western, and my dad told me about all the hard times my mom and he had endured when they were first starting out: the bills, the low pay, the lack of furniture, the little crackerbox apartment up in San Francisco's Mission District.

On the way back to our motel, we laughed nervously at a roistering gang of drunk guys who sat up in the front of the bus. The group was laughing loudly—they were schnockered is what they were—preaching, chucking a baseball back and forth, clapping, laughing so hard they choked. Eventually, the ruckus got so bad that the driver told them to cut it out or get off the bus. That quieted them down.

Then, a thin guy in a stupid-looking orange hat got up, cleared his throat, reached his hand out to all the tired, dirty people on the bus, and said, "I hope everyone on this bus—is blessed."

My dad looked at me, and the bus went silent. Immediately, the drunk crew collapsed into heaps of spasmodic choking laughter, grinning, rolling around, punching each other. The guy with the orange hat seemed to be the ringleader.

"Yes! Yes!" they shouted. "Amen, brother! Almighty!"

At the next stop, the driver booted them off. I watched—as the bus pulled away—as the guy in the orange hunter's hat talked to his buddies, who were heavier than the first guy: two of them African American, one Caucasian. His two African American friends sported navy blue coveralls, and the other man—a short, red-haired guy—wore a T-shirt and jeans. I watched as they disappeared out the dirty back window of the bus, as the guy in the orange hunter's hat pulled a lumberjack's mackinaw out of a blue Adidas duffle bag. Also, a pair of irrigation boots. They laughed and laughed, falling over each other, leaning on each other's shoulders, slugging each other in the gut.

"Weird-oh," my dad said. "You know, some people just don't know when to give it a rest."

"Yeah," I said, rolling my eyes, pretending to agree. "I know."

I remember feeling like I'd seen the guy in the orange hunter's hat before. But I didn't really think about it until a few weeks before this Christmas when I sat in the living room of my own house, looking out the window for somebody I knew but had never been introduced to, thinking this: biopsy, Pocatello, Monday, or maybe Tuesday.

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First airplane ride alone—March 12, 1987. TWA flight #1109. I was an American exchange student going to stay in Germany. New York City to Frankfurt. The plane was a DC-10, and about halfway into our ascent, a guy in the seat behind me tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a magazine. It was a copy of *Photography*.

“Want this?” he asked. “I’m not going to use it.”

I didn’t see him, but I could smell his breath.

I was too drowsy to realize what was going on, and so I just mumbled, “Sure,” taking the magazine. Then I fell asleep. Somewhere over the Atlantic, I woke up and started leafing through the magazine. The cabin was filled with the steady nighttime rush and hum of a long flight. I looked out over the wing, over the streamlined blue clouds sheathing the planet. I could see lights like shattered fragments of December tinsel in the distance—below, above. I thumbed through the magazine in my lap, not really paying too much attention. Then, in an ad for Kodak, I saw a picture of a boy and girl, dressed in formal dance attire, kissing under a sheet-metal carport’s broken porch light. I recognized the faces, the time. The ad said: “All this can be yours forever!”

Startled, I flipped the magazine closed and unbuckled my seatbelt. Kneeling in my seat, I looked back over, trying to see who’d given it to me. In the seats behind sat three women, all sleeping.

“Excuse me?” a stewardess asked, stepping closer. “Is anything wrong? Can I help you?”

I shook my head.

“No, thanks,” I said, sighing. “I’m just tired.”

“Well, try and get some sleep. It’s a long flight.”

\* \* \*

First airplane ride with Sage—November 30, 1993. Logan, Utah, to Rochester, New York. We were going to see her parents. In Salt Lake, we switched from our tiny prop plane to a Boeing 737. Seated in aisle 14, Sage and I held hands. We’d just been married, you know? So, just after take-off, a familiar-looking woman in a blue and gold stewardess’s outfit came down the aisle.

“Can I get you two anything?” she asked. “Pillow? Blanket?”

“No, thanks,” Sage said. “We’re all set.”

"No, thanks," I said, recognizing the eyes, reading the gold, winged name badge pinned to her navy blue uniform lapel. "No, thanks, Jennifer."

Then I smiled and nodded to Sage. "We've got everything we need."

In Rochester, home of Kodak, I stayed up all night, watching Sage sleep soundly in our motel bed at the Braidwood Inn. The sheets were navy and royal blue, some green and gold swirls woven in, too. I stood near the coffee table, the complimentary notepad and pen in my hands, trying to describe exactly what was going on outside our room. "There he is," I wrote. "He's out there. He's out there right now."

My thoughts, in blue ink, rambled across the pad's cream-colored surface. "He's walking, not anywhere. Around and around and around. She can sleep, but I can't. He's just walking around. He's wearing the same thing: this hat, orange with earflaps, like he's some deerhunter or something. He's got irrigation boots on—this flat, stale gray, muddy color, and the tops are red and yellow. Like, I don't know, like, where's he going to be irrigating, I'd like to know? He's got this mackinaw on, too, like some lumberjack." Then, in mid-thought, I put the paper and pen down. I walked to the window, parted the dusty brown curtains.

Down below our window, he stood in the parking lot between a green Ford pickup and a black Mercedes. He was waving up to me—to us.

Then he started walking again, wearing a path into the grass beyond the parking lot.

In the morning, he was gone.

"What were you doing up all night?" Sage asked me, emerging from the shower in a towel. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Nothing," I said. "I don't know—"

"What's wrong?" she asked, coming nearer, letting her towel fall.

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing?" she asked, pulling me to her. "I know what nothing is, and this isn't nothing."

"It's just that this is a first," I said. "You know what I mean?"

Her eyes searched mine. Strangely, they were the eyes of someone who'd never been kissed.

"A first," I continued. "We'll never pass this way again type of thing? You and me—us. Never again. It's epic. I don't know. I just couldn't sleep."

"You're a weirdo. You know that?" she said, pulling me closer.

"Yeah," I said, pulling her to me, holding on. "I do—mm."



And since the subject is firsts . . .

\* \* \*

First of all firsts—November 23, 1993. 10:00 A.M. Logan, Utah. We'd just gotten out of our car, and the guests and family were all somewhere else, probably still down gabbing at the Bluebird Cafe. We were walking up the steps of our new apartment—it was a dive, really. Some guy who worked for Century 21 had bought it—nothing but a big shack—and had slapped a fancy name on it: VanDyke House. Problem was, it was nothing but a fire trap: bad wiring, one door, and only two windows. But it was \$275/month, with utilities, and so we'd taken it. So, we got out of the car and walked toward the steps, and I was feeling like I'd done this before somewhere, only there was this feeling that this was a moment I'd experience only once. But somehow I felt like I'd get to experience it over and over again, like I'd be able to have this first again sometime down the road when all the towns and cities and baseball fields and airports collapsed and burned and flared into a tiny blurred point of light in God's great ever-developing photograph: I'd get to have this again. This first would be my last and last me forever.

We walked, smiling, up the steps one by one, not saying anything, Sage in her white satiny wedding dress, me in my tux. At the door this time, however, there was no music, no Stevie Ray Vaughan. Certainly there was no darkness, darkness. There was only this light that would last forever, pouring through the little screen window (there were bugs, dust—hey, it was \$275 a month). But light, and this first forever. This time, I was able to go inside. I didn't have to stay outside the home because it was my home, our home. And Sage smiled, laughing up at me with her eyes.

Outside, Logan showcased its own mundane November day. Thanksgiving was on the way. Curved puffs of snow capped the tall, mangled arbor vitae outside, I noticed. I heard some kids call, "Hey, wait up!" I heard cars drive by, the humming of an endless engine in me. Then, the streets were empty. Inside, Sage and I were dressed, but then, little by little, we weren't. She was leading me, and then I was leading her, and there was this lightness, lightness, walking around and around our cheap \$275/month apartment, inside and out. In the bedroom, I remembered to check my mirror. I saw the curve of my own body in the mirror, the curve of hers, like I'd never seen before, like the very edge of the world it-

self, curving both away from us and toward us, all of it like a continually developing photograph that some day would include lab results coming back from a hospital in Pocatello on Monday, Tuesday at the latest. Ours, first. Lasting forever.

That afternoon, when I woke up, I looked outside in the parking lot behind VanDyke House. The snow was melting off the glittering blacktop. I didn't see him.

A trio of auburn sparrows chirped on a cold, black telephone wire outside. Droplets of sparkling, sun-filled water dripped from the wire, near the birds' feet.

"Biopsy!" they chirped.

That day, we took a walk down Logan's Center Street, past the huge nineteenth-century houses, the Needham Mansion. We ate chicken noodle soup and club sandwiches at the Blue Goose Restaurant. We bought each other chocolates and gifts at Coppin's Hallmark. We walked to Merlin Olsen Park, down by the river, and we walked around and around, holding hands, talking, creating the universe with our words.

"Look!" Sage said, pointing to a worn path in the park's north corner. "Somebody's walked around there, around those trees."

"Yeah," I said, looking at the brown oval in the grass. "Weird."

\* \* \*

First child—December 22, 1997. 2:11 P.M. Baby girl. Redhead. Name: Shanda Dee. Johnson City, New York. Helped into our car that day by a security guard in mud-gray boots, grizzled beard. Friendly but restless, in a hurry himself. Took a photograph of us at Sage's request.

\* \* \*

First thought—December 12, 1998. No.

Last thought—December 12, 1998. Yes, positive.

First thought again—December 12, 1998. The results will take forever. A few weeks until Christmas. Maybe I'll take a walk. Just down to the park so I can sort things out.

\* \* \*

So what do you do?

You do what I do.

I grab the first thing I can find to wear—I don't really see what it is that I put on, just some old stuff from one of my grandfather's war trunks—a hat, a coat, some boots. Like a man with purpose, I stride out into the December chill. Outside, it's freezing. It can't be more than two or three degrees above zero. It's early, gray. Saturday morning. No one is out. No cars on the street. Sage is sleeping; little Shanda Dee is sleeping, too. The roads, all up and down 100 West—perhaps throughout the whole town—are encased in dull gray ice. At the end of our driveway, my head down, bundled up, I take a right. At the corner stop sign, I hang a left, walking down past NAPA Auto Parts, Papa Kelsey's, and Rose Photography Studio.

I don't know what else to do, so I walk. I walk past the business district, trying not to slip on the ice, trying to keep up a pace, trying to keep warm, trying not to think things like: biopsy. Things like: lab results. Or things like: maybe. I walk, trying not to think things like: Pocatello, Tuesday. I walk on legs of stiff ice past a row of old houses behind the Rec Center. All the lights are off, I can see. Here, the street rises into an incline, and I have to lean into the hill, like a draft horse trying not to skid backward. I glance up, and a razor wind whips down the street, blowing through the threads of my pitiful excuse for a coat. I think: *It's so dark. I'm freezing! Maybe I shouldn't have come,* I tell myself. *Maybe.*

At the professional plaza and the doctors' offices, I take a left, walking briskly down through the parking lot, passing a few empty cars. Once out of the parking lot, I turn right, heading up Main Street. Heading where? To the park. Smith Park, the one down at the end of Main Street, by the hospital. Tuesday, I think, walking. Or maybe Monday. Perhaps. I am thinking and walking but trying not to think, just walking and remembering how to parallel park, how to make sure to check over my shoulder, give a signal, and then go. I check over my shoulder, lope across the street, hands jammed in pockets like a drifter. *That's the procedure,* I rehearse to myself. *It has to be in that order,* I think, walking.

At Smith Park, I cut through the middle of the snow, passing between the tennis courts and the old 1901 Best Brand steam tractor, the jungle gyms and swings. I walk, thinking: *biopsy.* It's a tumor, they said. About the size of a quarter. But to me, it sounds like a baseball-sized lump in Sage's left breast, and I want to rear back and take a Hank Aaron crack

at it, sending it out over the A&W sign and beyond, right out of the known universe.

I walk, thinking, not knowing where I am walking, head down, my face freezing into a mask gritting its teeth. Tuesday, I think. Or maybe Monday. Would it be Wednesday, though? Could it actually take that long? I cram my hands deeper into the scratchy pockets of the musty coat I'm wearing. My chilled knuckles ring like they've been rapped by baseball bats. My bitten ears sting. The park is empty, blanketed with perfect snow. All around, I see nothing but black December sky, the dimmed houses, and their shoveled walks. Walking, I feel hypnotized and dazed by the way it all swerves around my head in an endless looping puzzle of stars and questions, around and around. Houses, sky, December, biopsy—one revolving and forever-developing picture. Soon, however, I sense that the sky is softening, warming, lightening. But it isn't my thoughts. It's true.

I stop walking.

I look around, down at my feet.

I find that I'm standing on what looks like an oval track in the snow, standing where some heavy-footed, downtrodden person has walked in restless agitation around and around. The walking has worn a path into the snow, even down to the frozen grass.

Then I see the sky has turned the rosy, frozen blue of a December morning. I hear giddy laughter to my right, and I see two kids, a boy and a girl in winter clothing. They are holding a brand new sled and a camera. They are looking at me.

A flash—they take my picture.

"Hey!" I shout, running after them. "What are you doing?"

"Get out of here!" the boy yells to the girl, grabbing her red sweater and pulling her by the arm. Like startled deer, they bound toward a nearby house. As I run, I sense that they were making fun of me, and so I hustle after them across the snow of Smith Park, lifting my knees high like a line-backer hoofing it through the tire drill.

Before they can escape into the house—a small, pale brick house with a clean-shoveled walk—I catch them both by the shoulder and spin them around. Brother and sister, I think to myself, vetting them up and down. But when I look closer, I see that they are teenagers: boyfriend and girlfriend. In love, too. I can smell the love. Like the first light and wind reflected off the first December snow. Immediately, I realize the camera and the sled they carry are newly opened gifts to each other.

"Thought you were Santa Claus, mister," the girl says, smiling. "Haven't we seen you before?"

"I live around here," I answer, circling a finger in the air. "Down past Main."

"Thought you were Saint Nick, dude," the boy laughs. "Well, gotta go."

"What were you doing out there?" the girl asks, hanging on her boyfriend's arm. "My mom almost called the cops on Thursday."

"Yeah," the boy says. "My dad is a cop. I almost called *him*."

"Well," I say. "I don't know—just walking. I got a lot on my mind."

"Walking!" the boy bursts out. "Just!"

"A lot!" the girl laughs. "We almost called the cops!"

I look at them. They are looking at something, looking at me. They see something I don't.

Then I look at their house. My reflection, in the big living room window—it's like some distant close-up. I check my mirror, check it again. I see myself in the house's mirrored front window, a club-carrying prehistoric firestarter preserved in ice. I see the clothes I'm wearing: some bum's crazy getup. It looks like I haven't shaved for days. I look fifty. My right hand flies to my face, and the teenage lovebirds twitter and chuckle again as I probe the stubble on my sunken cheeks. I watch as the reflection in the window mirror adjusts the orange hunter's hat; screws it down more tightly on his head with both hands; fixes the earflaps; buttons up the mackinaw; stamps his cold feet in the mud-colored irrigation boots to get some blood circulating through his tingling toes. The young couple laugh and smile at me as I stand, transfixed, by my own image, by my own first impressions of myself.

"Uh, yeah," the boy whispers out of the side of his mouth to his girlfriend, tapping his temple. "This is a first. Let's cruise, huh? Saint Nick's, uh, a little loose upstairs?"

He tugs at his girlfriend's arm. But she holds on for a question.

"Really," she says. "What were you doing? What are you *doing*?"

And even though her boyfriend laughs at me, mocks me right there in my boots, I say it. And it is delicious to me, like something I've never tasted before.

"Mm," I say. "Just trying to keep it alive, man. Keep it alive."