

I Am a Withering Skeleton in the Yard

I succeeded in avoiding the thought of him for four months, an effort which ended on the eve of my forty-first birthday when I sat up in bed and pictured him slumped and unmoving in his office doorway. My wife woke as I fidgeted with the covers. What's the matter, she asked me.

My dad, I said.

Without a word, she brought one hand from under the blanket and swept her fingers over my back in broad, wandering strokes. I pulled back the sheets and stood at the open window, letting the easy wind from across the cornfields sweep over my naked chest. And I stared at the moon, a great waning crescent in the middle of a blank sky, and thought of him. My wife looked after me but turned onto her side once tiredness got the better of her, so I dressed myself and went downstairs. I rubbed my face in my hands, opened the fridge, stood looking into the sterile glow until the cold chilled me. Empty handed at the kitchen island, I sat and thought to myself that Halloween was coming up in just two months. The sun peeked between the trees as I thought back to vague memories and sensations, slowly uncovering thin strands to connect myself to a different time, something previously lost to me under a veil of forgetfulness I couldn't help but pull away from. With the morning light on my upturned face, I walked my fingers along the withered threads, delicate and fractured, finally visible with the anesthesia of time to clear my vision.

Thinking back to then is like running my hand over worn braille. A sensation stands out, an image, and then all else is gone, and I'm left with only the feelings about my feelings to fill the blank space in between.

I remember Halloween most of all, my two brothers and I at our upstairs window, each wearing our homemade skeleton costumes: black sweatpants and a black sweater, the bones Dad took care in painting over it with perfect, lifelike scale. I remember the display out in the front yard, us looking down at it from the second story window – the gravestones tucked into grass, bats swinging from wires, the thick, gray cobwebs stretching and reaching, the skeletons in their rigid poses, their animation suspended in time. It was our tradition, taking turns hiding as skeletons in the display, each doing our best to fool the trick-or-treaters until they were close enough to spook. I could never do it. They'd see me even before walking up the sidewalk. But my dad, you could swear he was born for it. He would hold his rigid, taut pose in plain sight, just under the large branch of the oak tree, with a stillness so severe a glance could pass right over him, and when they strolled up the sidewalk with their candy baskets, he would jump out with this jumbled, barking scream. And upstairs me and my brothers would just laugh.

Dad would come back in and beam down at us after taking his mask off, his clean-shaven face creasing at the edges. And then I would look over my shoulder to Mom at the dining room table, bent over one of her jigsaw puzzles, her looking back from across the darkness of our living room.

But now, in my adulthood, I have to connect memories that still feel rough at the edges, have to reach across the blank space of forgotten years like I'm reaching for something through a heavy mist, unsure what it'll look like until I can run it through my fingers.

There was my best friend's birthday party in the sixth grade, us coming upstairs from his basement to grab sodas from the fridge, passing by all the adults grouped together on a set of couches.

Hey, what's with your dad? he asked.

I glanced over and saw him across the room from everyone else, the whole blank space of a half-empty room surrounding him, pretending to busy himself by looking at trinkets on a shelf in the far corner.

I don't know, I said.

He set a piece of brass down and caught me staring. His eyes jumped to the corners of the room, then his face settled and he cast a desperate smile over to me as I ran back to the basement stairs.

Our school play, the lights glaring onto my face as I stepped up to my mark; and then, out of the dark mass of the crowd, I caught the lone, isolated face of my father, the painful, scared look he wore. I flubbed, stumbled over my line, and then the scene moved along without me. My father found me afterwards and said, Good job, with his hands in his pockets and then we all drove home with the radio off.

I remember looking at my father differently. I remember struggling late at night to really put it to myself in a way that captured it fully. Eventually I settled on 'fragile.' He's just fragile, I would say to myself, an excuse, an understanding, and an accusation all at the same time.

But I remember this weakness fading as soon as Halloween loomed over us: the passenger seat of Dad's truck, my hand running over the fabric of the seatbelt, him looking over at me slow, all his fragility gone, and saying, Almost Halloween. Then his eyes flashed and he smiled out the windshield. On the way back, after loading all the skeletons into the truck bed, he

said again, Almost Halloween, real slow, as if uttering an incantation, as if the words themselves had power, as if all the mystery and fantasy and otherworldliness that emerged on an October evening could be contained in just two words. Then he rubbed my shoulder hard and drove us home.

Many look forward to fall just to see the leaves change, to see the familiar green warp and explode into deep, fleeting color, and I watched my dad in the same way, looking forward to this change in him, knowing it was always brief and passing. But children grow, old traditions recede and fade, and then only feelings are left in their place, until those fade too and are left as feelings about old feelings, then everything gets lost in translation. And then I went away to college, just as my older brother did two years earlier, and got the call about Mom and Dad's divorce. I expected to feel something, maybe surprise, frustration, or anger, yet felt nothing. Then everyone moved out and the house was all empty and Dad just sat in his office with the skeletons in the garage to keep him company.

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He stuffed our old graveyard set into boxes and scattered the pieces throughout the house – tombstones tucked into the corner of the garage, cobwebs and lights in the attic, costumes and inflatables in an upstairs closet. Every year he bought more skeletons for himself and made the display more elaborate. With all the time on his hands, he started experimenting, playing with theme. One year he staged a vast medieval siege on the front lawn and dressed the skeletons as knights, complete with undead horses and a King Arthur drawing Excalibur from the stone. The next year it was a scene from *The Godfather*, the meeting of the five families to negotiate peace;

the year after was *The Shining*'s ballroom scene. The production value rose every year: he dressed them in costumes, glued cocktail glasses into their hands, gave them wigs.

I know this because I saw them, even helped set some of them up. No matter how badly I wanted to stay away, something drew me back at the start of October; maybe it was habit, or the unconscious urge to see my dad in that rare light, a fleeting change hard to capture.

I stayed in my old room, sometimes glancing in the closet to find my things stuffed in cardboard boxes. But I never went further than a glance. I had the odd fear I would see something forbidden, like finding the wrong memory would uncover some unbreakable hex left waiting for me. So I kept the closet closed and tried to stay downstairs, in the living room, in the neutral space between the couches and the TV.

Dad was scattered, his attention diffused and muddled. Sometimes I would talk to him about trying to decide a major and he would bring the conversation over to the bay window overlooking the yard, and he would look at his display, his mind all far away, my words unable to cross the fog swirling around him. When it stormed, he bundled up and stood in the yard, keeping watch over the skeletons so they didn't topple over and break, his body taut and rigid, the tails of his dark green rain jacket trailing in the high wind.

I stood and watched him, thought back to watching him as a child from the second story window, how large he had seemed to me, tried connecting that to him out in the yard, standing still and solitary in the downpour. I started to notice things about his display, the sleight of hand Dad brought to them. Sometimes there were clusters of skeletons I recognized, three smaller ones looking to a larger one standing over them, and I could see a resemblance to family vacations, photos on Dad's desk, how we would orient around him on the living room couch.

The first time I noticed, I just said Huh then looked back to the trees, already forgetting before I went back inside.

I noticed more and more over the years, warning signs for what was coming, but they didn't connect for me until everything was over and done with. Like how one morning I woke up to Dad yelling from the kitchen.

Bobbie, he yelled. Bobbie I'm making pancakes.

I dressed myself and went downstairs to the plate of pancakes he had ready for me.

I'm not Bobbie, Dad, I said.

He looked at me with a startle before his face settled. Right, of course, he said. I was thinking about your brothers this morning.

That's okay, I said.

He scooped a piece of butter and spread it between his two pancakes, then set the top cake back down. The sun came in warm and easy through the kitchen window, casting the counter in a dull glow.

Hey, he said, what do you think about coming back for Halloween? We could take turns out in the graveyard set just like we used to. Wouldn't that be nice?

I don't know, Dad.

Oh, C'mon! I could freshen up the paint on your old costumes.

I don't think those will fit us anymore.

Well, I could make some new ones.

I don't think they'll be interested, Dad.

Oh, okay, he said, his face pointing down at the table. He forked fat triangles of pancake into his mouth.

What about you? It could still be fun with just the two of us, he said.

No, I think I'll be okay.

Oh, he said. Then he threw a look past me before cleaning his plate off in the sink.

Before I stepped outside to have my morning cigarette (hadn't broken the habit yet), my curiosity got the better of me and I went into the garage. He had arranged the whole space into a miniature lecture hall with rows and rows of chairs complete with skeletons sitting straight and attentive. They all faced forward to a skeleton standing up front, its finger pointing to a white board on which 'HALLOWEEN DISPLAY IDEAS?' was written in large block letters. I frowned. On the presenter, Dad had balanced a pair of his reading glasses; one skeleton in the back, its hand raised, wore one of Bobbie's old hats.

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All alone in that house, his signs I should have noticed came and went, passing by without me giving anything a second thought. Even when I visited, I was too distracted and closed to really pay attention, or I did notice and just chalked them up to his fragility, like the skeleton lecture hall in the garage. He's just fragile, I had said to myself after I left. He's just fragile and he's working through some stuff.

When I visited after he set up the gangster display, he stood at the bay window overlooking the yard and pointed to the skeletons in their gangster costumes, forgot a word, pointed out the window, snapped his fingers, looked to me for help. Fedoras? I offered. He just shook his head, started a sentence but stopped it halfway through, looked at me again, snapped and pointed.

Suits?

Yes! he said, the dull confusion leaving him in an instant.

Or the times when I caught him standing in the center of his office, staring at the clock above his desk, the slow revolutions of the second hand.

Or the time when I finally did notice, the instant where pieces started connecting, the time when I came to visit in the early spring and found him sitting on his hands at the kitchen table, his eyes fixed in exhausted concentration on a ballpoint pen set in front of him.

Everything okay, I asked, letting my duffle bag slump to the floor.

He started in his seat, his eyes drifted over and away from me. Oh hi, I didn't see you come in.

Everything alright? I asked. I took off my coat and set it on the back of a chair.

His lips trembled. I can't remember what they're called, he said. I've been using them my whole life and I can't remember what they're called.

His eyes teared up, as if something were breaking loose.

What do you mean, I asked.

He held up the pen. His hand shook. What is this? he said.

A pen, I said.

He dropped it to the table, his eyes widening, hand remaining fixed in the air, as if he were reaching up to me.

Oh God, he said. Oh dear God.

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Sometimes he cried and I held him on my lap, where he drifted in and out of sleep, sometimes awakening in the middle of an apology, begging for forgiveness, for the chance to take it all back. I just said, shh, no, it's okay, and thought about my phone call with my brothers, how they said he was probably fine, just having some senior moments.

Senior moments? I said. Are you serious?

I was the one who *actually visited*, the only one he didn't have to ask questions about – why haven't they called? – the brother no one had to make excuses for, the one that had to watch Dad's shoulders drop whenever Mom was mentioned, not them. So what did they know?

But they wouldn't listen. And neither would Dad.

I'd bring up brief, under-handed suggestions on scheduling appointments and scans, about maybe getting the opinion of a neurologist, and he would just say no, that there was nothing wrong with him. Please, he'd say, can't we just watch the movie?

Then he and I would look forward with only the TV to make up for our silence. Sometimes I would catch him looking off to the side, away from the screen to a spot on the wall where the paint was starting to fade. Sometimes he wouldn't realize he was drooling.

Another time I visited and when I pulled into the driveway, I saw him sitting on the front porch with his head in his hands, his back heaving from heavy sobs. He's fragile, I thought again to myself, but this time I caught a hint of anger in the thought. I found myself furious at having such a fragile father, such poor strength in him, and I thought back to him at the school play, at my friend's birthday party, and I felt the word turn sour in my mind. *Fragile*.

I don't like admitting this to myself now. It hurts terribly. But maybe it wasn't the sight of him crying that made me angry – maybe, instead, it was the skeleton he had sitting next to him, dressed in my old costume, fake bones over fake bones.

I can't remember what I said after I walked up the porch, can't even remember if I said anything at all. I just remember him noticing me then setting his face back into his hands, and I remember placing my hand onto his back, us waiting there in the auburn night until his crying was over and done with. Afterwards he rose without ceremony and invited me inside.

From the outside it sounded like he was hosting a party, but I knew better even before he invited me in. I knew what I'd see. Sometimes I struggle to pin this moment down in my memory, the music playing through the TV changes each time I think back – sometimes disco, sometimes rockabilly, always something odd and out-of-date – the colors of the streamers, the arrangement of the colored LEDs, but I never struggle to remember the skeletons. They filled the place, arranged in poses mid conversation, mouths stretched in laughter, glasses glued to their hands. Dad weaved his way over to the couch as I walked around. The wind howled against the windows as a dull, settling sadness pressed into me. My feet crunched on glass. I looked down to see the clock that always hung above the dining room table smashed and crumpled, the hands ripped and scattered over the floor.

Dad, I said, now that I was sitting next to him. He had placed one of the skeleton's arms on his shoulder while I was walking around, and I reached over and lifted it off.

Dad, I think we need to talk with a doctor.

His eyes, glossy and unfocused, drifted over to me, gathering a sober coldness that shocked me.

No, he said. I'm going to bed.

But he tripped up the first step and struggled to stand, so I grabbed under his arm and guided him up. He felt heavy, unusually slow, sweat collecting in his wrinkled brow, his breathing heavy and labored by the time we were halfway up. I had to encourage him. C'mon, I

said, just a few more steps, almost there. But in the bedroom I saw a skeleton tucked under the covers, dressed in a set of pajamas Mom used to wear.

How long has that been there, I said when I set him down onto the bed. He didn't answer, just pulled the covers up and turned over.

How long, I said again, but again he said nothing.

Before I turned out the light and went downstairs, I ripped the skeleton out of bed and saw Dad watching it leave with a deep, focused sadness. I brought it to the garage, intent on setting it down and walking out, but instead I sat in the open doorway and stared for a long while.

The rest of the skeletons were arranged around a central table, the clock that usually hung above Dad's desk dismantled and its pieces set out on display. The skeletons bent over it, studying it, confused. One skeleton bent close, its palms laid out on the table. Another skeleton leaned back with its hand under its chin, as if *The Thinker* had rotted away and stood up, yet still kept on thinking. I set the skeleton down by the doorway and asked myself where this had all started, how long this had been building out of sight, who was to blame.

Before setting to work on cleaning up the glass, the skeletons spread throughout the place, I rubbed my face in my hands and grabbed the skeleton still sitting on the front porch, then laid it down on the cold garage floor next to the one that still wore Mom's pajamas.

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Mom and my brothers kept dragging their feet, so I took a gap year to stay with him. There wasn't much else to do. Mom thought it was ridiculous but she sent over a little money each month anyway. My brothers wanted nothing to do with it, said as much in our few calls.

All the days in that house blended with other days, memories of memories of other days. I unpacked boxes and spent days running my hands over old things: childhood action figures, a worn-down pair of shoes, stuffed animals and frayed blankets. But everything connecting those things to me was over and done, and while I could pretend I remembered caring intensely about them, they felt foreign and faraway.

So I washed his sheets whenever he wet them, disinfected his recliner whenever his bowels slipped in them, washed his clothes. After he started an oil fire on the stove – after I found him staring at the pan as flames leapt to the cabinet above it – I cooked all of his food, reminded him to drink water. Most of the time, I just sat him down in front of the television and let him watch the movies he used to show us, sometimes holding two in front of him and pretending he picked one.

Sometimes I would catch him chuckling in an empty room, and when I went over to check on him, he would sweep over me with a confused smile, then look past me to the adjacent room, lost in something, a memory, or a question, or a vague feeling I can only imagine.

Autumn can have a strange power when you look at it in the right way. It's hard to describe, but if I let my mind wander to the memory of that yard at dusk, a cool wind sweeping through, I can come close.

I was standing on our back porch, smoking what ended up being my last cigarette to date, looking over the railing to the tree line that separated us from our neighbors. It was full of lush green except for one maple tree, which had exploded into brilliant scarlets and fools' gold. It

stood out from the trees around it like an infected sore, if infected sores could be beautiful. The wind picked up and the leaves scattered. I smoked my cigarette down to the butt and thought of my childhood in that home, the mystery of October, a blurring between the fantasy of dress-up and the reality of a world I could hardly understand. The cool evening breeze brought the scent of ripe pumpkins from hills over and past the swaying cornstalks, soaking up one of the last sunsets before the final harvest.

And I took all this in over the course of that cigarette, stubbed out the butt in a mug I had next to me, and walked inside to my father's office where he slept on a pullout couch. I didn't know what I was doing, but something was at work in me, the power of the month, of the season, of a circle I found myself caught in, something drawing back to the beginning, just as the seasons change with time.

I shook his shoulder gently. He turned over, awareness barely clinging to his eyes.

Almost Halloween, I said.

He grinned dumbly at me, spit collecting at the edges of his smile. And then his eyes went somewhere far away, maybe to another land, another place, or time, his mind spreading out everywhere, increasingly thin, like a morning fog in early November.

The skeletons went farther and farther back to the edges of my mind, and I became convinced we were all done with them, that he had forgotten about them too, but I should have known better. One night I woke to the sound of a door shutting, quiet but unmistakable. The sound took a moment to settle into me, my eyes gaining focus in the darkness of my childhood bedroom, until I realized it was the front door. I threw the covers back and stumbled over to the staircase. But I stopped myself short, stepped over to the second story window, and crouched down low to look outside.

I saw two skeletons standing in the center of the yard, one wearing Mom's pajamas, the other wearing Dad's wool coat, kissing. They embraced, plastic teeth touching with delicate, quiet love, hands cupping cheeks, an arm wrapped tight around the other's waist. And I saw Dad sprawled next to them, his arms wrapped around the trunk of the oak tree as if he were holding onto the mast of a sinking ship, looking up at them with an aching, horrible wonder. The skeletons kissed and Dad stared and I just looked between them and took it all in: Dad on the ground, hugging the tree, but in another way he was standing, dead, plastic, and so was Mom, and they kissed and held each other and remembered a long-forgotten time when life was good and their children beautiful and the love between them was perfect and incurable.

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October had arrived. The mystery and vague power I remembered as a child came in from the cold, west wind, and settled, building up at the ankles, filling the house from the bottom up. I fed Dad at the pullout couch and watched as the food slipped out of loose lips and landed on his bib, later guiding him by the arm to the bathroom. Sometimes he mumbled a few syllables and laughed, an inside joke with something I couldn't see, a force at work inside him I couldn't touch, and then back to the couch we would go, and I would pick a movie for him and watch his eyes close.

Sometimes he would have a brief flash of awareness in his eyes, recognizing me for an instant, and he would smile like his mouth was all gums and I would smile back, and then the flash was gone, dissipating as quickly as it arrived, like the momentary shade of a single cloud

on a hot Midwestern day. Then he would sleep. Once, he woke with a start next to me and asked where Mom was.

She's somewhere else, Dad, I said.

Oh, he said. Will she be back soon?

I thought about that awhile. Sure, I said.

He smiled again. Gums.

As the month drew on, my mind wandered from memory to memory, sensation to fantasy, and as I laid awake on the living room couch most nights, the muted TV running in the background, it was hard to parse through it all, where dreams ended and began. I wandered through the house in a sleepless daze, looking out windows, imagining things, imagining how I used to imagine those things, and then a brief awareness would poke through the fog and I would look at myself in the mirror and wonder why I couldn't sleep. Something was building in me just as it had built in Dad. I felt empty and delirious, letting the waking dreams sweep back over me.

The month grew dark and the wind whispered raspy through the trees. Rain collected against dead leaves bunched in the gutters. I saw neighbors with their kids in the grass, all bundled up, carving jack-o-lanterns. A weird power carried in the low light of dusk and I felt something at work in the world. Everything had the feeling of mystery and I felt like a child trick-or-treating on their first Halloween. I forgot things and found them again in my mind. Halloween drew close.

But on the morning of October 31st, I could finally sleep. I fed Dad his breakfast and then collapsed onto the couch, and before I could even stretch my arm out for the remote, I fell into the deepest, darkest sleep I had ever known. It was as if some ancient curse had caught up to me and I had slipped silently into the blackness of death. I fed him at eight in the morning and

then slept for sixteen hours straight, waking with the grace of a resurrected corpse at midnight's toll. I hobbled to the kitchen and drank three glasses of water under the warm light, then let out a hot breath and went to check on Dad.

I flicked on the office lights but he wasn't in bed. I flicked them off and on again, as if he would suddenly appear, but I was again greeted by the empty pullout couch, it's cover thrown back. The garage was empty too, the skeletons all gone, and this is where the story always goes. This is why I've had to retell it to myself on those sleepless nights when I leave my wife alone in bed.

I rubbed my forehead, staggered to the front door, and put on my slippers.

What I encountered in the front yard appeared not in sight but in memory. The graveyard set I remember so well from my childhood confronted me as I stepped out the door, and it sprawled throughout the front yard as a seamless replica. The cobwebs spread between the corners of gravestones, bony hands emerged from fissures, skeletons stood taut in their rigid poses, a cold fog condensing around the ankles. I walked with light steps down the concrete path just as a hand might sweep through a photo album. I discovered little details time had sifted from my memory – the inflatable witches hovering over their boiling brew, the hollow ghosts stretching down from the dark branches. I glanced above me to the second-floor window, half-expecting my brothers to be looking down on me with pizza slices in their hands, half-believing my mother was sitting at the kitchen table, her reading glasses low on her nose. And I also half-believed, for just half a moment, that Dad was all better, that the months leading up to this were all a farce, that we were children again with the world spread out in front of us just as starkly as the display was set out on our front lawn. And while I was standing there, hands in my pockets, the skeleton to my immediate right jumped forward, leapt out at me with hands springing up, and

let out an ancient, barking scream. I fell back, catching myself, but then the skeleton straightened over me and gave a loud, young laugh. And as it reached up to remove its mask, I knew everything was back to the way it was, in all its fragility and small moments of beauty, that Dad was back and healthy and young, that he would wrap his arm around me and explain how the world and I were set to get along just fine.

Instead, when Dad took off his mask, I was met with the short, stubby wrinkles of an old man, the graying hair at the sides of his balding head, his hands shivering and weak.

Spooked you, didn't I? he said.

I just stared back and nodded.

Two years later his private duty nurse found him slumped in his office doorway. I hadn't visited since that final Halloween, and everything that came with the news of his death left a maze inside me I've never been able to find a way out of. I wake in the night and sit in my kitchen until the sun rises accusing myself and absolving myself of the most horrible things, admitting I did my part, admitting it still wasn't enough. I only saw the house one more time, a quick visit after my brothers cleaned it out and before they sold it to the first buyer.

I don't like to think of him like that, a wrinkled, loose body folded over itself in a doorway – instead, I'd like to leave him there in that old graveyard display. Instead of him spending the next two years in that empty house, I'd like to believe my dad jumped out that Halloween night, but when he took off his mask he was just as dead and plastic as the skeletons around him. So I'll leave him there in the yard, another skeleton indistinguishable from the rest, and if he holds his pose just right, he can stay out there for as long as he wants, another spirit caught in time and resurrected for all the Halloweens to come.

As I stood on the curb, visiting my childhood home for the final time, I watched as the dump truck made its way around the street corner. I told my brothers I didn't care to keep any of them, and I tried to convince myself of that too, but the truth is I started crying once the garbage handlers tossed the skeletons in the truck with the rest of the trash, and I felt something fragile in me snap once the baler pressed down on them, the plastic, hollow crunch of their bones echoing off the polished glass of the second story window.