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Glass Onion

It was late afternoon. I had fallen, and I couldn't get up. "Help!" I had cried, followed by the usual description of my plight, but no help was near, and I had no panic button. There was no scheduled visit from Meals on Wheels, so I knew I would likely remain fallen for a long time--or at least until I could get up.



There was a silent summer night on Indian Island in central Maine where the lake was so motionless you could see the stars reflected as in a softly undulating mirror. The moon had risen a few diameters above the mainland, silhouetting the trees against the silvery darkness. At the far end of the lake, a loon warbled hysterically for a moment, and its cousin, nearby, dove under water with a soft ploosh. In a few minutes, it would silently return to the surface hundreds of feet away.

At the near end of the lake, little more than a mile north of the island, the shadow of Mt. Phillip clove into a deep V cut almost to the horizon. In the center of that gap in the blackness of the mountain was a comet, motionless, posed for privileged viewing. In a tiny distant swoop, the curved fading tail simulated actual motion, but the comet hung in the sky like a photograph, as still and silent as the lake.

Great Pond lies close to the northern extremes of the continental US, and enjoys more frequent displays of aurora Borealis than most of us get to see. Blue and green curtains hang and sway from high above Mt. Phillip, and on a calm night they reflect in the lake in a vast silent animated Rorschach symmetry.

One night, some weeks after the comet, there were no northern lights, but the sky offered a strange performance I had never seen before. High above, toward the East, round rusty bursts of cloud appeared, like faint silent explosions very far off in the sky. Each one looked like a cartoon bomb blast, a ball of white with short red rays shooting out, and each burst bloomed and faded for several seconds while others waxed and waned all around nearby. This went on for an hour while I considered a dozen explanations and then gave up to the inexplicable.



Great Pond bubbled and swirled against the old wood hull of the *Vircona* as I lay back against a pile of anchor rope. I could see the bright blue sky through the tiny hatch in the *Vircona's* bulkhead. There was just room enough under her deck for a six-year-old to curl up among an antique kapok life preserver, an iron mushroom anchor, coils of rope, and an empty gas can. Everything smelled of gas and oil, and the in-line six rattled and roared amidships, driving the thrumming hull through clear water.

Later, I sat on the bed in Dad's cabin, looking due north out the cabin door. The August stillness had darkened and a summer rain approached from the north-west. The lake was calm again and I could see the line of the rain advancing across the still water. As it approached the island, the hiss of uncountable droplets arose, sweeping softly closer and louder until it filled the world. For a moment the drops fell on the nearby blueberry bushes, slapping their wiry leaves with a new spatter of sound, and then the whole cabin submerged in a din of rain on the roof and walls and the world dimmed for a minute. Then the tiny storm moved on down the lake, its thrum and hiss disappearing into the distance, and in the ensuing silence I heard individual drips from the cabin's eaves, and then another loon, so far away I almost couldn't hear him, and yet the echo lasted for hours.

I can hear it now, although I can't get up.



My friend George was coming over to play--well, not play, exactly, because we're too old for that now--but I was looking forward to it because he's kind of mischievous, and when we get together we usually cook up something interesting, like the time when we were five or six years old and we stomped all my older brother's lead soldiers into a jumble of flat painted metal that

looked like old dead leaves on the floor. I was so young I didn't get in serious trouble for it, but in a grand irony of adult reasoning it was my brother who got scolded, because he had left his fragile toys out and should have known better with a pair of sixers prowling around.

Anyway, George was coming over any minute now and I figured we'd have a drink, maybe go out and see a movie, maybe hit a bar on the way home and see if we could pick up some girls. Sometime around 5:30 PM the doorbell rang and I opened it. There was an old man standing there, quite old in fact: 75, 80, or more.

"Can I help you?" I said.

"It's me," he said.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I recognize you," I said. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"It's me," he said again. "George. You told me to come over."

I was flabbergasted. "But you're--"

He looked at me with a funny expression. "I'm what? What's wrong with you? You really don't recognize me?"

I squinted and looked at him again, really close. I guess I could see some George in his face. Maybe a little of George's mischief in the corner of his eyes. "How can you be George?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?" he said. "You called me a couple hours ago and said come on over. So here I am. What's the problem?"

I looked at this little old man standing in my doorway and I didn't like the way it made me feel. Why was he so old? I blurted it out. "Why are you so old?--You look 80!"

He gave me another funny look. "Well, I am," he said. "I'm 82."

My jaw dropped. I stared at him.

After a while, he said, "Hey. What's going on? You're 82 yourself. We're the same age, remember? What the hell's wrong with you?"

I stared harder. It was true, we were the same age. But he looked 82 and I was only, what, 16? 25? I couldn't quite remember, but it wasn't 82. That would have been impossible. I wouldn't dream of being 82.



I must have dozed off.

I think I might have been seven years old. I'd been sent up to bed a little

early because we had company and grownups with guests don't want kids around.

I was trying to fall asleep, but I could hear the jumbled sounds of conversation and tableware from the dining room. They always sat around for a long time after the meal to have a few drinks and talk.

I thought I heard my mother's voice. She wasn't speaking loudly--no, she was shouting, screaming, in fact. I sat up and strained to hear, but it only lasted a second and all I could make out was one phrase, "Well, I don't!"

There was a crash, a splintering sound like something smashed and broken. I tried to imagine what was going on, but it was impossible. My mother and father never screamed or yelled. Nobody ever smashed anything.

Everything had gone quiet. I lay in bed, absolutely motionless, listening to the tiniest sounds in the house. I could just make out some people speaking very softly.

The screen door slammed, and someone began walking along the gravel driveway under my window, very briskly up the hill.

I heard another set of footsteps, hurrying. They were heavier and it was probably Dad, going after Mom.

Something terrible must have happened; something really terrible that could make her scream. And somebody had smashed something.

Did one of the guests throw a platter and scare her? Did she smash something because she was so angry? What could possibly make her that angry? She could get mad at me, for things kids do, and she could snap at my brother or sister for things older kids do, but she never yelled.

She certainly never screamed. And nobody, nobody, ever, ever smashed anything.

Hushed voices floated up from below, into my window--my father's voice. He was saying something, his voice urgent but very quiet. We had no nearby neighbors; dad probably knew I was listening. The two sets of footsteps continued up the curving driveway, to the top of the hill, and out of earshot into the woods.

I continued lying there in absolute silence, listening for the tiniest sound. There were no more clues from downstairs. The guests must all be

whispering, or they might have gone away. No, they came in cars, so they couldn't have left without a sound, without driving under my window.

I lay very still, listening and listening, my eyes scrunched shut. Were Mom and Dad OK? Was something happening I should know about? Was something terrible going on?

I listened and listened, but after a while I heard only crickets and katydids in the soft summer darkness. The windows were open: the wind breathed through the trees on the upper lawn, but there were no footsteps. Mom and Dad were gone into the night, away into the woods, urgently whispering.

Mom had seemed to be walking as fast as she could, almost running, and Dad had been hurrying along to catch up, murmuring something, maybe something about what had happened, whatever had made her scream. I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what to make of it. My mom lost control of herself, and now they were both gone.



Several years later in winter, my parents and I were back at our house on Storm King Mountain, as always, up through the snow for the Christmas holiday. The house was still chilly, closed and shuttered since our last weekend visit, and the radiators hadn't been hot long enough to catch up. The lights were on in the kitchen and I don't think any of us had even been upstairs yet.

I was just standing there, leaning against the hot radiator while the snow fell all around outside and the evening light faded away. My mother and father were in the living room. Dad had built a fire in the big stone fireplace and I could hear it crackling.

And slowly an unfamiliar realization crept over me that this--what I was experiencing right now--was definitive happiness. Even at ten years old I knew there was something special about what I was feeling: everything was right. My parents were content in the living room. We had made the slippery trek up the Palisades Parkway from New York, and were now safely ensconced in our big shingled house surrounded by trees and white blanketed lawns, probably to be snowed in for at least a day or two. We had plenty of food, and the furnace worked, and the house was warming, and mother and dad were at home.

The thought came to me, *I have to tell someone about this*. So I picked up my glass of ginger ale and put in a couple of ice cubes, and walked into the living room feeling, perhaps for the first time in my life, like a complete person. I had something to say.

Dad had just finished putting another log on the fire, and Mom was sitting in her chair, just resting and gazing into the fireplace. A few soft incandescent table lamps were on, and the ceiling was lined with paneled rafters with deep shadows between them. A huge concrete mantelpiece was set into the stones of the fireplace and a dark smoke stain reached up from the arched opening, across the chimney, all the way to the ceiling.

A painting of a sailing ship hung over the fireplace. We had found it in the log cabin nestled in the woods a few hundred yards from the house. It was a very old log cabin, with horse-hair chinking between the logs. The painting of the sailing ship had real starched cloth sails that bulged out from the canvas, and very fine threads had been strung from the tops of the masts like real rigging. A tuft of cotton had been artfully glued at the bow of the ship to simulate the spume and spray. It was a three-masted schooner and my dad always viewed it with fondness, remembering his teen years in the merchant marine in the early 1920s.

I sat down on the couch and sipped my ginger ale and I could sense that my parents were also aware that all three of us were in a strikingly idyllic scene at that moment. Christmas wasn't far off and there was a special charm in the air, and this big old house with the crackling wood fire was almost too perfect.

I spoke up after a while; I had to say something about how this seemingly ordinary experience felt. "I just wanted to tell you guys," I said, and then I paused. Dad looked up questioningly, perhaps anticipating a comment about something interesting I'd read, because we tended to talk a lot about things we had just learned. He was a surgeon, but he still acquired new knowledge every year, every week, pretty much every time we talked. Right now my mom was probably glad nobody was arguing about anything. For her, when there weren't any intense discussions going on, we could all just savor the moment. "What is it, dear?" she said.

"Well, I don't know. This is going to sound kind of funny but I really wasn't sure what I wanted to say. It just felt so good, so right, that I had to say something."

“What did you feel, dear?” my mom said.

I was a little embarrassed. “It’s just so good right now,” I said. “I’m really, really happy.”

My parents glanced at each other and smiled. They looked back at me. “Well, that’s great,” said my dad, with a big grin on his face. “There’s nothing like sitting in front of the fire on a cold winter’s eve.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s it,” I said. “But, well, part of it is that I’m really glad to be here with you guys. It just feels so good to be at home.”

My parents looked at each other again, a bit longer this time, and I know now, thinking back, that their hearts were swelling. This was an unspeakably perfect moment for all three of us.

A couple days later we were still snowed in and I spent the afternoon at a neighbor’s house. By the time I started to walk home, it was night. It was just a short trek past an old tennis court and then through the woods to the top of the hill overlooking our house. A fat moon had risen, and I was admiring its clear cold light on the snow.

It was the kind of snow that crunches and squeaks; it came just over the tops of my boots and every step sounded like styrofoam. The leafless trees wove intricate silhouettes against the sky and the whole forest seemed to glow with its own luminescence. The air was clear and crisp, and bright stars speckled the sky around the moon, which shone like a floodlight on the snow-covered hillside.

Looking down at the house, I could see that Dad had finished putting up the Christmas tree in the bay window, so it seemed to be half inside and half outside. The glare from the living room spilled out from all the windows and cast glowing trapezoids of warm interior light onto the snow. I could see faint splashes of color from the Christmas lights on the lawn outside the living room, and the crystals on the hillside sparkled with moonlight and reflected ornaments.

Snow covered the roof and all the shrubbery around the house and barn, and there were no tracks of vehicles on the driveway, no footprints in the snow anywhere, except just ahead, where widely separated perforations betrayed the recent passage of a deer. The house and the whole world were aglow, and the season was in the air, and this was another perfect moment.

Many decades have passed since that evening walk through the snowy woods, and I’ve remembered those two moments again and again. I didn’t

know at the time how important they would become. I recognized their perfection, but I had little sense of how rare they were. Now, each time I think of either scene, I think of both. I remember being young, living in a world where perfection was possible, where someone could be truly at home and the outside was safely outside. Nature could be cold or hostile, but only beyond the glass, and all it took was a pane or two and a crackling fire to achieve perfect refuge from the cold. And all it took was two adults, a mom and a dad sitting in their favorite chairs in the living room while the firelight flickered and glowed across their faces, and a Christmas tree casting dashes of color onto the snow in another white, dark, wonderland of perfection outside.

Each time I remember this, it adds another layer to a stack of a thousand recollections. Each layer holds the same pair of scenes, and each scene is perfect and simpler than the last, so that now there are really only two tiny bright diamonds of recollection left to see. These scenes now live outside of time, and each one represents that feeling of safety and satisfaction and perfection and happiness, joy even, that sustained me during those two moments, a few days apart, one winter when I was ten.

These thoughts now are only moments. The thought itself lasts only a millisecond, and then the next thought comes and it, too, has barely any duration. Each one is like a momentary button-press flashing a brief brilliant light of unforgettable warmth and happiness that cannot exist in reality and, amplified by half a century of layered recollections, never existed, even then, when I was ten.

A memory becomes nothing more than a name, a label on what was once an experience that consumed time and space. The memory is just the sudden flush of recognition of the momentary feeling that once arose during some long past and even unknown original experience, and has no dimension or duration.



My childhood friend and I sat in the dark, on folding chairs of aluminum tubes with nylon webbing, chairs with a unique metallic creak I could recognize a mile away. Summer was peaking, and the hot sun had gone for the day, and there was nothing planned for this evening, so we just sat by the pool at the edge of the woods and listened to the rustles in the

underbrush and watched the stars reflected in the water. The late-night katydids and peepers were in full song, and if you said nothing you could be overwhelmed.

We watched the sky, waiting for shooting stars, and told each other sparse adolescent assertions of our emerging self-awareness. We were patient and calm, because infinite life and infinite summer lay before us-- and because it was night. But in our hearts we were waiting for a beautiful girl to silently take our hands and lead us to the promised land. We sat by the pool, and listened to the world, and spoke occasionally, affirming our continued existence in the boundless night.



No one had come to my aid, as I expected no one would, but the afternoon had turned itself into evening while I lay helpless on the floor. By then I had noticed a little relief in my lumbar region, and I managed to turn over. For a few minutes then, I had continued to lie without moving, worried that I still lacked the strength to get up, but then I did raise myself into a crawling position with no more than a minor twinge or two, and a few minutes later, with the help of a nearby chair, I was back on my feet.

