

Taking My Time

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Lots of people take time, only one steals it. He's stealing from you, too. Every moment you ever stepped inside a bathroom and looked at yourself in the mirror while the fluorescents were still flickering, each little burst of darkness between pale blue light, those moments those were his.

Snip.

And you never even notice he takes them while you shave. Your legs, your face. Admit it, there's a moment every single day that you just can't remember. You call it spacing out, or attribute it to being tired, but next time you nick yourself and throw the razor down, wincing yourself back into consciousness, ask yourself, do you feel anger as his iron tongue licks your blood?

All the moments, the ones you don't use. Those are his.

Every time you ever drink. Even the first time, as I giggled hysterically and fell back into the tall grass glistening with early morning dew, laughing so I couldn't breathe and stars danced upon stars till I forgot what was so funny in the first place. That first moment had already been his. And I interpreted it as bliss.

In college I got so crazy that I glimpsed him through a cloud of bobbing people, emerging as something less than a hazy gray shadow out of focus on the dance floor, walking toward me in the crystal blue smoke. There was no way to tell, not as the strobe light hit the ridge of one thigh, then the other, if he was wearing any pants, if he was trying to be sexy or if he really was that tough. The ears were a bit too tall and he had the perpetual red eye of a subject in a photograph.

His cold, massive gray hands reached for me, his gentle touch turning my flush cheeks cold, thumbs crawling up my face, on the outsides of my nose, eclipsing my eyes like the moon, and just as dark as the music faded.

I've known him, time and time again—come to call him a friend.

At wedding ceremonies, funerals, and church, or meetings at work, every time the speaker goes on and you feel your mind start to wander, he's there, sitting beside you, pulling out the strand of your life and splicing it back together like a movie frame, taking all the boring parts you don't use, the ones you don't want. Then you find yourself clapping, on your feet. When you stare at a computer screen at work, mindlessly clicking away or wherever you are reading this, when you look up, he'll be in the corner, where his gray skin matches the shadows, hiding. He lets you have the fun stuff.

The memorable stuff.

He'll take the family dinners, the endless Sundays, and with it he's slowly sewing whole cloth from table scraps. The worst ones, he leaves you with those.

He could take all the moments with my father. I didn't recognize him when he came home. Not even from his pictures. The only thing that looked the same from the photographs was his uniform, but there were hundreds of men and women wearing the exact same thing, lined up in front of the podium he stood before when he thanked us and my mother for waiting for him, for keeping the faith, and I said it was nice to meet him when it was my turn to hug him.

He walked around the house and gave us orders and once, he woke up me up in the middle of the night by pressing cold steel against my neck. He said to be quiet because they were coming and we had to be careful. We crawled on our bellies around the perimeter of our property, through fescue and brambles, and I told myself it was a game.

It wasn't.

The cold, dew-stained branches soaked my pajamas a little at a time and I remember the mist, hanging above the low brush that bordered the back of our property, and how it disappeared when the back porch light came on.

Mother's silk nightie flounced about her body as she bounded down the back porch. I thought she was going to jump into his arms.

She stopped short, and the mist was on her face, condensed, catching light I couldn't see. It was beautiful but her hands wiped it off, and she made a little noise, then ran back inside.

I can't trade those memories. I think, maybe, they make me who I am, but I'd rather be a nobody, cold and empty inside like my father.

I wonder if my father brought him back from the desert. I often think he did. That, one night he was over there under alien stars in a cold, dry hole, keeping one eye out for scorpions and another on the black horizon for the enemy when he thought, I just want this to be over. I just want it to be done with, and down he came from the stars or he swam up through the sand, sat down and pulled out the strand of my father's life and started cutting whole chunks, hours at a time.

I use a needle. At work, as I stare at the computer screen. I sterilize it with a lighter and stab myself a little at a time, just underneath the nail of my left thumb. I wear a bandage over it so no one can see how it swells up. It keeps me from spacing out, from wanting to wrap the phone cord around my throat. As soon as I feel any slack in the tension of my life, when it feels like one of those moments I'm not really present, I give myself a little jab. He can have the blood if he wants. So long as I keep my life. Every second.

Father lifted weights in the garage a lot, spending hours on the bench, staring at the ceiling between sets. He said that feeling sore was good for the soul, that working hard, punishing the body, made the mind strong. I learned how to bench and how to squat, and how to take drags off his smoldering cigarette when it was his turn. When my friends came by on their bikes, father just shook his head. There wasn't time for friends. You only got one life.

We were spending it together.

I pace when I'm at home, before supper, while the pots are waiting to boil. I'm constantly holding a book and singing when I'm not reading and the neighbors, they close their windows even in the summer.

I saw a priest yesterday. I went to church and lit a candle, and

he saw me when he exited the confessional booth. I expected the old man to stop in his tracks, staring at me as some sort of hungry, toothy demon clung to my back, but he barely even looked up.

I lit the candle for my father.

He told mother she was beautiful, the way the light played off her face, then he walked down the hallway and peed with the door open. We heard sobbing, like a dog that was ready to be euthanized, and my mother took him upstairs and put him to bed. She came back down covering a red mark on her face. I went in the bathroom, with the TV muted, and watched as the blazing light of the commercials burst and flickered on the walls and knew it was like the videos of missile strikes, getting closer and closer to a door before going to fuzz. It must have brought all that pain back for him.

He's doing something with the time. He's not just squirreling it away. He's taking it and creating something. It's big and it's ugly and has a name that I can't pronounce.

I asked my father about his memories one day. About the bad ones from the war. He sipped his beer from the can and eyed me like I'd just broken a glass.

"I don't have any memories," he said.

"How can that be?" I asked. I couldn't have been more than twelve. I knew that people had memories. I'd heard of PTSD and knew that I wasn't really supposed to ask about it. The counselor said to give him space, to listen if he wanted to talk but not ask about it.

Everyone has memories.

He said one night he was with DJ, his buddy, on *R & R* and they were drinking beer and whiskey and playing cards. They were all just sitting there and they didn't even hear the incoming shells. He took another drink, tilting back the beer can, and I caught his hand shaking.

"What happened then?"

"Then a lot of people died. Jesus, kid."

The springs in the couch sighed of relief when he stood.

I wake up when I stab the needle in my thumb. Both thumbs

now. I sometimes forget if I've sterilized it and I think he has those moments, too.

I keep all the lights on but still there is shadow under the kitchen table. When I dream, I think he must be taking six, seven hours a night, because I wake with soaked sheets, like I've been wrestling. In the bible, Abraham wrestled with an angel, all night long. I used to think that was nothing but hyperbole. Abraham was a man. How could he even touch an angel, let alone wrestle with one? Now I think I know; he was trying to hold on to those days. Trying to keep the moments that were his.

They say to give your life to God. All of it. So people go to church and they volunteer or they meditate or whatever. I think all those moments, those belong to God. The rest. Well, the rest we sleep or work or space out.

There is color in his face. I saw him in the morning, in that place between sleep and wakefulness, when you're not sure you're eyes are even open, red lips, and green, green eyes, glowing and disembodied like a Cheshire cat, smiling as he faded into the wall. It had been a good night for him.

I place my finger in holy water and hope it boils. Squeeze a drop of my blood from my thumb into the saucer but still, nothing. My soul is not in hell. I'm not unholy. I'm simply human.

I try talking to Tina every day, but I think she senses I'm a puddle of bad intentions. She's not overly beautiful, her brown hair is mousy and when she smiles a lot of her upper gums are exposed. She's kind of awkward when she moves. But she's competent and there are sexy legs underneath her pencil skirt.

She said yes to a date with me. I'm terrified that we will be sitting at a nice table, and as she's talking I'll see him with those red lips leaning in, pulling that string taught, section it and tie a knot with a smile on my face and I'll have missed something terribly important, like how her best dog was named Canker, and in the end he barked at shadows. Or worse, I'll be talking and see him reflected in the curvature of her water glass, taking time from her.

Snip.

I guess I don't miss it. I guess that's the point. Whatever he's doing with it, whatever he's building, those wasted moments are worth more to him than they are to us. He's actually doing something with them. He's taking them and sealing them inside something, some other kind of life, maybe some kind of weapon.

I wonder if he's rebuilding his son. Or, maybe, if once he has enough time, he'll just step inside me and I'll be on the outside, holding the scissors, waiting for table scraps.

I endlessly drive the needle into my thumb. It goes almost halfway under the nail and it looks like a tunneling blood blister. I've been wearing the bandage for so long people must think I'm deformed. That's what Tina said, as she sat across from me.

"I mean, people can deal with a wart, or a missing nail," she said, fishing. Trying to get deeper.

"I'm diabetic," I lied. I wished I was. Sometimes I really wished I was diabetic, so that when it was all said and done I could blame everything on my blood sugar. I'm not sweet enough, dear, or, I'm so sweet I can't deal with it.

Tina had too many drinks. Too many was two and a half martinis. Her cheeks were flush, her eyes sparkled and as the demon picked up the string he winked at me.

"I'd like to fuck you," I said.

"Well, uh," she stammered, eyelids fluttering. The demon set down the string and folded his arms.

"I'd like to take you home, light some candles, put on some music, pour us each a glass of wine we won't drink, and see how many times we can go. Maybe watch the sun rise in the morning."

"You know you don't have to be so crass. There are any," she hiccupped, played it off as if clearing her throat. "Any number of euphemisms you could have used. Let's go back to my place. I have a really nice bottle of merlot in my place." She pointed a finger at me, "but don't use that line. There's no such thing, excuse me, as a nice bottle of merlot. Cab, pinot noir, maybe. Merlot, no. That's the

mnemonic. No, merlot." She stared at me. "So?"

"So, what?"

"Are you going to get the check?"

I figured that would make the night unforgettable. I didn't think it would get me laid.

She came back to the apartment and we danced by candlelight. We bumped the night stand and the oil fell on the floor. I left it until morning. The third time, as she inhaled deeply and turned her head to the side, smelling the pillow case I wish I'd changed, I saw the flash of his movement, reaching in, taking seconds from her. I opened my mouth to say something and woke up the next morning, her frizzy hair tickling my nose.

That's when I knew it was inevitable.

The floors of my apartment are uneven. Sometimes, when moving from room to room, walking down the hallway, I feel dizzy. When I sit on the couch, it feels like everything is sliding towards me.

My father killed my mother. I remember it. I wish I didn't.

Tina asked for a key. I had to think about it, not because I didn't want her around but because I couldn't remember how long we'd been dating. I tried to remember—as I said yes, of course.

"I'll make you a copy after work," I said, and she cuddled next to me.

I can't use the needle anymore. She saw me take off the bandage and insisted she get a good look at it. Before she changed to business she worked in a medical office. She yanked my thumb forward and gasped. "You need to go to the hospital."

"It'll get better. I promise."

"It's infected."

"Trust me, it's already getting better. I'm on something," I said, and went into the kitchen.

I stared at the little calendar on the fridge. It was August. The first time I asked Tina out was six weeks ago.

The appliances, the dishwasher, the microwave, and even the

fridge, disappeared. Father said they made noise. I tried to remember if they ever made noise, and I got caught in the home ec kitchen at school, bent over, head pressed to the side of a microwave, listening for what my father heard.

Mother was at work, so they had to call him at home. I could hear the sound of the principal's stubble rubbing against the receiver of the phone in his deathly-quiet office, but not my father's voice.

The principal hung up the phone and sighed and tried to smile as he looked at me. "Did you find what you were looking for in the kitchen?"

I shook my head.

"You're too young to skip class. You're not even in high school."

"I understand," I said.

"Wait in the office. Your father is on his way."

At the door, he stopped me. "Wait. Is everything okay at home?"

"Yeah," I said, and waited on the bench in the office until school ended.

I found my father outside after school, standing next to the flagpole, looking straight up at it as the wind beat the carabineer against the metal pole.

"How long have you been out here?" I asked.

He blinked a few times and looked at me. His face was pale as if all the blood had drained. "We don't need to tell your mother."

He's showing me this, and worse, over and over, trading my time for the memories. I'm not sure why.

Tina thinks I take drugs. She saw the needle marks in the webbing between my fingers. I'm a human pincushion. She knows I'm not diabetic and she knows that there might be something wrong with me.

"You don't have a full-size freezer, do you?" she asked the other day. We were walking along the river, holding hands. "Not in like, one of the storage areas in your building I don't know about."

"I don't think so."

“Good.”

“Why?”

“I was afraid you might cut me up into bits.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Isn’t it? You’re a strange little man,” she said, playing with my ears. She likes to play with my ears.

We sat by the water and watched leaves drift by.

He’s taking larger pieces of my life. The days I work, I’m left with water cooler chat, the moments when I stick my tongue out between two fingers at Tina. She knows I’m joking, and I think she likes it, but she told me to stop anyway. It freaked out her girlfriend, Lesley. I had my eyes closed when Lesley came around the corner, making the face as grotesque, as realistic, as it could be. Lesley was repulsed. I know. I’ve seen that look before, on my mother’s face.

On the way home father stopped at the bank and took out a stack of twenties, bought steaks and wine and a fifty pound bag of potatoes and the biggest box of beer cans they sold and a pool with an inflatable ring.

That night the neighbors came over. He cooked for all of them, and one by one as their bladders filled up they went in to use the bathroom and came back out with the same question: what happened to all the appliances?

The hose bled into the night, creating an endless whirlpool beneath the rim of the pool, which struggled to stay afloat, but no one went in. The water was too cold.

Mother got mad, about the pool, about the water bill, and the money. Everyone chased phantom food around their plates with forks while I watched their heads arguing in the window above the sink. We couldn’t hear them over the music playing. We didn’t have to.

“It’s a damn shame,” Arnold, our neighbor, said, and downed the rest of his beer before walking to his car.

Father came outside and stood in front of the pool for a few minutes, looking down at his reflection the way he’d stared up at the

flag pole. People began to whisper.

I tugged on his hand but he pulled away. That's when he took off his shirt and we saw the scars for the first time. There were three on his back that looked like stars, all jagged and purple, like his skin needed blood, and white lines all over his chest. I tried to imagine how he got them, and didn't like it.

He jumped into the pool without testing the water. Almost everyone had gone before he broke the surface. He stood in the pool, not even shivering, and looked over the empty backyard. Rain turned to steam on his body and lightning flashed behind the trees. Father sank in the pool and floated on his back.

Mother came out and yelled at him, saying it wasn't safe with the lightning, and he just waved. When the rain reached us, we went inside. From the upstairs window, I watched the rain dimple the surface of the water around him. There was something prenatal about it, how even with the dark sky raging above him, it couldn't touch him.

It was like the world was drowning him, and all he had to do was stand up.

In the checkout line at Wal-Mart, behind a mother with two screaming children, walled in by fifty kinds of beef jerky, and receiving death glares from a woman in her sixties who still had acne, I knelt and stretched the tape of my life out before him, begging him to take it.

My mother said it wasn't his fault. The army made him like this. He didn't have a choice. She didn't know anything about what they did or what they didn't do. She barely knew him. They had been dating for a month when they found out they were pregnant with me. They got married, he enlisted and by the time he finished basic there were wars raging on three continents.

Timing is everything.

I don't remember the joke at the water cooler. I just remember laughing. Everyone staring at each other all Chinese-eyed, wondering if I'd said something stupid.

I woke in the morning to find Tina on her side, left hand on her

pillow. There's a diamond on her ring finger. She looked happy.

Blood dripped onto the sink from the razor. It feels like I'm sleepwalking when I wake up. My life passing in segments longer and longer. Even if I still had the needle, I wouldn't use it.

Father left shortly after the infamous cookout. We moved out of the house, back into a noisy apartment complex and I played video games at the neighbors' most evenings after doing my homework. The building didn't have a pool and it smelled like pot all the time. After a while, my mother got a new boyfriend. His name was Dominic and he had red hair and freckles and a big, burly smile. When I shook his hand, I felt infantile. He was massive.

Dominic's levity was directly proportional to the number of empty beer cans beside the kitchen sink. Unfortunately, it was a negative equation. After I'd gone to bed and before the television turned off I'd hear him, starting to complain about the things she did or didn't do well enough. My mother was strong. She survived living alone, married to a man she hadn't spent but four consecutive weeks, with whom at one point she thought was dead, and raised me, all by herself.

That's why Dominic hit her.

"Supper was fine," she'd say. "The house is clean enough. You want it cleaner you clean it."

That's when he'd go off about who paid the bills and how he needed to have it his way. It was his right. It was his house.

"It's an apartment," she'd say, and the hollow pre-hung doors weren't thick enough to keep out the sound of breaking dishes and fresh bruises.

I asked mom where father went. She didn't have an answer. Last I heard, he was on some fishing trawler running out of Hudson Bay in the North Atlantic.

His skin is no longer gray but a healthy shade of pink. His lips are emerald green and the red eyes are charming. He is fully clothed in a vintage, if not dapper, suit. That's when I realize whatever game he's playing, I don't even know the rules.

I remember saying I wanted to have the rehearsal dinner somewhere near the ocean.

My boss has been fired and they put me in his place. Apparently, in the time I've lost, I do a great job.

The rehearsal dinner was nice. It was at a swanky joint with a large deck overlooking the bay and a marina where yachts and sailboats rocked back and forth gently to Jamie Cullum as Tina and I danced.

I stood by the altar as a man of the cloth read endless vows. Before I knew it, I was kissing Tina and everyone was rushing us out to a limo.

Boarding the plane for the honeymoon, there was a woman I recognized in front of me. She asked if I remembered her.

I said no. She scowled and walked away.

"Mistaken identity," I said to Tina.

We sat in our seats and when Tina kept asking about her, I just held out the tape to him. He was in the seat next to me, smiling, waiting.

We arrived at the airport safely.

Tina threw up the first morning. It had the same effect as when I cut myself shaving, hearing her in pain. I went into the bathroom and held her hair.

"Did you drink too much?" I asked.

"I think I'm pregnant," she said.

"Oh, is that all?"

When Dominic lost his job, I started to see beer cans piled up beside the sink when I got home. A lot of beer cans. Sometimes, from where I was playing video games downstairs, I could hear him shout at her when she got home from her second job, accusing her of things she couldn't have done. One night after a particularly intense bout of video games, slowly increasing the volume until it was impossible to hear the arguing in the apartment above, I went home to find the house dark and curiously quiet. The television played on mute. I called hello and no one answered.

In the hallway, my sneakers crunched broken glass.

Mom was on the bed, posed like a princess, her dress fanned out carefully around her legs, which were crossed, head to the side, a hand gently across her midsection, skin cold. I stared at her a long time, thinking she was beautiful, even with the purple eye, even with the bloody pillowcase beneath her, even without breath.

He was there in the corner, still as a statue, skin just as gray. Waiting.

I spent that evening downstairs and my friend, Tim, said he knew how to handle it. We swiped a bottle of Black Velvet, crossed through the Cineplex parking lot and sat on a couple of rocks in the field, passing the fiery liquid back and forth and trying to act like we enjoyed it.

“She’s in heaven,” he said. “You know that, right? Your mom was a good person.”

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

When they found Dominic he was all tears and apologies behind the glass at the police station. It reminded me of an aquarium, like he was some awful joke of a pet. One of the officers said he must have loved her, to position her like that on the bed. They found his tears dried on her face. If that was true, my father must have loved us, too. If he’d never left, Dominic wouldn’t have come into our lives.

I knew whose fault it was.

“Maybe today we can go horseback riding,” Tina said.

“I’d like that,” I said, even though I felt like cattle, like he was driving me toward a cliff.

“I know we shouldn’t be talking about this, but I was thinking, when we get back. If it’s a baby...”

She must have seen my look.

“Is the idea of a baby something that you could, maybe warm up to? I mean we did just get married isn’t marriage about starting a life together? A family?”

“It’s warm here. I thought this place would be air conditioned.”

“It’s a grass hut in paradise with a sea breeze that keeps it

eighty degrees.”

She was right. I must have spent a fortune on this honeymoon.

In the corner, he wasn't even hiding. He had his legs crossed long, gnarly fingernails drumming on the arms of the chair. He was definitely more solid, gentrified even, in his double-breasted suit, horns that almost passed for slicked-back hair. He arched an eyebrow, curled a beckoning finger.

“The pool is cooled to seventy-five!” Tina yelled as I dove beneath the surface.

I knelt on the bottom. His suit was wavy underwater, and the rippling sunlight made him shiny, beautiful, oneiric.

I didn't stretch the tape before him; I wrapped it around my neck and gave him the spool.

