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# A Life on the Threshold

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I come from a long line of nail biters. My mother and all her sisters bear the marks (as do I) of cuticle scars and jagged stubby nail beds. We tell each other to “stop it,” whacking each other’s hands mid-bite with very little intention of stopping ourselves. It’s a habit that I wish to break, but in the grand scheme of bad habits, it factors very low on the totem pole. Where some stronger folk might try getting to the root of a minor vice such as this, I believe three coats of shellac followed by a back massage will cover things up just fine. It’s a temporary fix. Once the varnish wears off I’ll be at it again. Of course, going to a nail salon as a habitual biter is embarrassing. I lay my hands on the table and have to endure the scrutiny of my Vietnamese beautician. She tells me not to bite. I could lie and tell her I’ll try harder, but instead I tell her the truth: I’m anxious. I can, in fact, read my anxiety levels by just looking at the state of my cuticles. These days, I’m getting a lot of manicures.

Why the anxiety? There is nothing particularly extreme about my circumstances. I’m a few years out of college and unsure what to do with my life. Apparently there are quite a few of us out there. (I wonder if they are nail-biters too.) Yet somehow the fact that I am in some sort of anxious majority doesn’t seem to give me much comfort. What if we anxious twenty-somethings *never* figure it out? We’re all coming of age, often with not much hope that we’ll ever arrive anywhere. The words “coming of age” imply both a beginning and a point of arrival. They imply that I’m on the cusp of some sort of vocational quest, a journey I didn’t even know I was on in the first place. I wonder: when did this whole journey start for me? Would clarifying my start in some way ease the anxiety about where I am going? Perhaps to understand my approaching adulthood I should revisit my receding childhood.

I’ve been told that I have an uncanny memory. Show me a picture and there is a good chance that I’ll remember something of that day. I remember looking out the window as a four-year-old, my grandmother holding my brother behind me. It was a rainy morning. All the lights in the house were out and in walked my mom and dad with a new baby. I remember them doling out presents to us two kids. I can’t remember what it was but I do remember looking at my new little brother. We were all gathered around him in front of the fireplace. I remember being four and the car breaking down on the highway. (This was before cell phones). A veterinarian pulled over and offered us a lift. I remember being in the back of the vet’s van with a lot of puppies. I remember being three, eating a banana in the mudroom and thinking that I didn’t really like bananas. I remember telling myself I wasn’t going to eat bananas anymore. To this day, I haven’t eaten a banana.

I could go on. There was a vacation in Italy with my grandparents. My grandmother promised to pay me if I said “Ciao” to a little boy. I did. That was also the day I first counted to one hundred and the day I got to pick out my very own Italian bathing suit. I remember being four at a skate park. I saw an ilk of cool-looking rebels with mohawks and funky-colored hair. I remember thinking I wanted to be like them. Because they were cool, and even as a four-year-old, I had a very refined coolness gauge.

Perhaps I have such an uncanny memory because there is so much in my life worth remembering. I

have always had the sense of being part of a community that loved me and was committed to me. I have always trusted that I belonged to someone, that I belonged somewhere. Such a certainty allowed me to develop a strong sense of self at a very young age. Indeed, I've known who I was for as long as I can remember. It seems I have not changed a whole lot since that realization.

When I went to college, my professors told us we were on the cusp of adulthood and we should treat college as a way to experiment: to figure out who we wanted to be, unshackled from who we used to be. From sexual encounters, to food, drugs and entertainment, we were offered endless opportunities for "self-realization." But I already knew myself. Since I was uninterested in sampling these amenities, my peers and professors viewed me as stubborn, unwilling to grow up. In this regard, college had very little to offer me. As my four years of university wore on, I noticed an ever-widening divide between my peers and myself. Upon graduating, I learned that I was entering a world with many other new graduates from other universities, all of whom had been offered the same amenities; many of them had caved to the temptations. I moved to a city where state-of-the-art studio apartments sprouted like weeds, offering new and improved appliances to their young inhabitants. Coupled with the expanding app universe, it seemed as though my peers had struck a seam of endless bounty. And yet, even with this cornucopia of luxury, they were lonelier than ever: full to bursting with shiny objects, yet starving.

Though this seems to be the trajectory of my generation, I am still unwilling to accept these criteria for "adulthood." I am now twenty-four and two years out of college. I have interest in my own self-promotion, but would like to find a way to integrate my gifts within the community where I have such strong roots. I would like to get married and start a family and give my children the same sense of belonging and love that I was given. I would like those children to belong to a particular place where they too might "come of age." It seems as though my childhood has been preparing me to want these things.

I am anxious because I sense the threshold of what my childhood was preparing me for in a culture that no longer values childhood. Yet how can we ever reach the destination of adulthood, if we do not first acknowledge that our journey began *in* childhood? Remembering from whence I came keeps me faithful to where I am headed. Thank God for my uncanny memory, which reminds me who I have always been, and where I have always been going.

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