

An Afternoon Drive

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IN THE FIELD of psychology, the “postmodern world” has been characterized as a swirling place of constant change and wild multiplicity. In the late twentieth century, psychologists responded to this condition by turning to the “personal narrative” or “life story” to provide man with an identity—the crucial sense of unity, purpose, and meaning. This narrative approach is believed to orient psychology around the person by incorporating the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future into a clean and clear story. It provides us with a narrative structure in which our defining moments are just that, defined.

I REMEMBER DRIVING home from New York City on a Sunday afternoon. It was late October during my junior year of college. I woke up that morning on an air mattress next to my friend Sammy. We were both still dressed in our clothes from the night before and surrounded by our similarly outfitted comrades—McGee, Jess, and Devon—who had made the nearby couch, armchair, and hard-wood floor their beds for the weekend. The five of us had left Bethlehem midday Friday planning to return to campus the next morning, but two days later, we were still in the city where the idea of “infinite possibility” feels as real as its streets and smells and reckless cab drivers and walls and walls of tiny, glowing apartments that, at certain moments, look like stars.

It had been a strange and awesome weekend. I felt like we were at the edge of something, *Desperate to feel! Desperate to be alive!* I probably would have told you then. We stumbled, drinking and shouting and laughing, through those two days—days that, for the first time, I had the inkling were fleeting. On Sunday morning, it became clear that it was not, in fact, the apocalypse for anyone or anything, although our young bodies and young minds were in need of some rest. It was time to go back.

We piled in McGee’s 1989 cobalt-blue Buick. McGee at the wheel, Sammy in the passenger seat, and Devon sitting bitch. Jess was against the driver-side window, putting me on the right, sinking into the worn baby-blue bucket seat. We were each painfully hungover and completely screwed for class the next day, but in ways I still can’t put into words, we were all better—or maybe just different—than we’d been for some time.

We started recounting the weekend, beginning with Sammy’s 2am nose piercing.

“It looks good,” we agreed, considering it was done by a guy wearing a t-shirt that read “I Shaved My Balls For This?” in a Bronx tattoo parlor that tripled as a smoke shop and energy drink emporium.

At the mention of my barroom tryst with “Sunshine”—known to everyone but me as a cross between a young Woody Harrelson and a smurf, “a blue creature who lives in mushroom-shaped house in the forest,” McGee clarified—Jess threw back her wild curls and belly laughed. Devon, her discerning eyes downcast, giggled and her shoulders gently rustled as if she was surrendering to a juvenile impulse.

Next up was the story from our new friend Sean. Sean had been our host for the weekend, and when we arrived at his apartment Friday night, he decided to break the ice by telling us about his first hand job. At age fourteen, a neighbor mom in his New Jersey suburb decided to put aside—or perhaps fully embrace, we couldn’t decide—her maternal instincts and take on the task. It lasted all of thirty seconds, and they never spoke of it again.

“What the fuck was that?” we managed through our convulsive laughter.

McGee couldn’t help but add his old-man humor, “That mom sure is handy!”

I watched his goofy, brilliant face light up.

Then quiet settled in, just Cat Stevens playing over the beat-up speakers. Sammy’s unpolished, childlike feet were resting on the dashboard.

“I don’t want to go back yet,” she said. Like so many of Sam’s cool and casual asides, I could hear the angst just beneath her words, tiny cracks in a dam with deep trenches.

I AM GOING TO tell the life story of a young man named Deo, the writer Tracy Kidder resolved in 2003 after a chance meeting with the Burundian doctor. The ensuing biographical account reveals a history of genocide and migration, profound success and crippling poverty. And while Deo is undoubtedly defined by his experience as a war survivor, a migrant, a doctor, a homeless man, and more, Kidder’s narrative is not just about these grand and fixed points.

In June 2006, Kidder accompanied Deo to see “the stations of his life” in East Central Africa. It was Deo’s first homecoming in over a decade. Amongst a sea of sensational heartbreak and exceptional heroism, Kidder gleamed a moment in which a man recalled a common childhood experience:

And then it was as if the words he was speaking carried his thoughts across one of nature’s narrow boundaries, like the line between rain and snow. He smiled. “You

know, I really love it up here in the evening. It's so quiet and cool and the stars are already out. I remember the first time I saw *etoiles filantes*. What's the English name? Shooting stars. I went running to my father frightened. "There's fire coming from the sky!"

Deo was smiling as we started back down the mountain, and then the spell was broken.

As good readers, we are taught to ask, What does it mean?

McGEE'S BUICK REEKED of tobacco and BO—we hadn't showered since Thursday, Friday morning for lucky Devon—and it rattled like a junkyard getaway car in a Tarantino flick. As we came out of the Lincoln Tunnel, crossing the bridge into dirty Jersey, I remember looking at the cement and steel landscape against the most beautiful fall sky. It had just started to flurry, but the sun was warm on my face. I said to myself, *Don't forget this*. It was a thought as genuine and deliberate as my refusal to eat pork after reading *Charlotte's Web* as a kid.

Looking back now, I am not sure what I didn't want to forget. The feeling of free-falling? The vision of nature? An appreciation for friends? For these four humans? A sense of the inevitable future? A belief in life's comedy? Its tragedy? I am guessing it was all of these things, and none of these things, and things I've long forgotten.

We made it back to campus that evening. The gang dropped me off at my dorm. The next morning, I woke up and went to class.

HOW DO YOU tell a life? You can establish moments of defining significance and who those moments made you, but this structure seems to sell short an experience that is far from still frames. The task of pinpointing a "life story" seems, then, at odds with our complexity and the mystery of the human experience. Tracy Kidder refused to make Deo's life a Spielberg-esque narrative, and the inexplicable power of his biography lies in moments like Deo remembering the sight of the sky on fire, moments that cannot be neatly recuperated into a coherent narrative, theme, point.

It has been nine years since driving from New York City to Bethlehem on that Sunday afternoon. In that time, I have experienced certain traumas and joys, defeats and victories, events that have undoubtedly defined the course of my life, and yet this moment still feels worth noting.

Why? What does it mean?

I don't know. Maybe that's alright.