



Rich Youmans
All the Windows Lit



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All the Windows Lit

On Finding a Photo of My Mother and Father's First Date

My father wears the plaid shirt he never threw away, his face all teeth and dark eyes. My mother is dressed in her best silk blouse, a black velvet bow in her hair. They are sitting thigh to thigh at a restaurant table. My mother holds the rose he gave her; his fingers hang loosely on her shoulder.

first date—
the mechanic's nails
shine like moons

They stare so intently—can they see it all? The dates, the wedding, the red-brick home, the daily insulin that toughens her arm; the picnics and vacations, the midnight reactions, the son whose birth prompts the first eye hemorrhage; more hemorrhages, year after year, until blindness, failing kidneys, infection, and then . . .

comatose—
on her nightstand
again, a new rose

No, their eyes hold only joy. They are waiting for the click, the blinding flash. Later they will see a movie, take a walk, count the stars: the night is fabulous with possibilities. My father leans in close, my mother does not move away.

dinner for two:
over a bitter wind
wishbone's crack

We Visited Every Sunday

Always, my parents followed my aunt into the kitchen to help with dinner, and I sat on the sofa next to him. I had never known him when his words were clear as spring water, spiked with a brogue strong as Irish whiskey. I knew him only after his second stroke. We'd sit there in silence for a few minutes, on that sofa the color of weak tea. Then he'd speak, sounding as if he were underwater—the gargled syllables of a drowning man. Occasionally an understood phrase bubbled through—"How's school?"—from which I wove whole conversations about my teacher's unkempt beard and my attempts at long division and Friday's hot lunch and anything else I could think of. But usually I couldn't understand a thing, and simply nodded and agreed. I think he saw through me, though, for sometimes he would abruptly laugh and slap my knee; I, of course, would laugh with him. And other times he would look away into the fireplace, at pale brick blackened by soot, and say nothing at all . . .

twilight . . .
shadows seep into
grandfather's quiet

Skiffbuilder

Once, before fiberglass, his skiffs could be found up and down this coast, by lifeguard stands or in fishing pounds, skimming over breakers like ducks. Trained as a boy, he needed no plan: he knew in his bones how the grain should go, could tell simply by lifting a plank whether it had seasoned right.

freshly painted
his last skiff
sky blue

Years later, he gave a class at the Seaport Museum, to the few who had heard and wanted to learn. He talked to them about the lightness of fresh-cut cedar, how to steam its long grain. He laid out the still-sharp chisels and slick, showed them how to nail in the battens, curve the bow, his fingers becoming familiar again. “No,” he told them over and over, his voice as blunt as the wood itself, “like this . . . like this.”

skiffbuilder's thumb
—splinter of cedar
buried deep

Swish

Projects playground—
jump shot arcing
from star to star

Evening shadows steal across the low concrete buildings, the cracked-slab courtyards, over fast-food wrappers and bottle shards. He feels the air on his face, moist and cool, as he looks up at the day's last colors: Crimson streaking thin clouds, pale blue fading to violet, soft as smoke. His basketball, like a low-hanging moon, rests beneath his palm. He closes his eyes, imagines it again: the court, the tiered crowd, the ticking clock, the ball rolling off his fingertips and rising over every shout and whisper, every wide eye, rising and rising and then falling falling falling into that final sound of entry, passage, deliverance . . .

longest night—
a boy's chalk outline
facing all the stars

Alexander

Once Alexander discovered the stars, nothing else mattered. His parents bought him a telescope, and the boy spent hours on the back porch every clear night. Soon he could identify Pegasus, Cygnus, Cassiopeia. When his classmates found out, they pelted him with spitballs, yelling “Watch out! Meteor shower!” Or they yelled across the schoolyard, “Alexander, get your head out of your black hole!” Alexander thought only of the evening to come, when he’d have the whole galaxy to himself: the lunar seas of the moon, the polar ice caps of Mars, the tilted rings of Saturn. When he found the Orion Nebula, where he had read stars were forming in dense clouds of gas, all of Earth dropped away from his feet and he hovered, as if waiting to be born. And once, as he stood alone on a cold, clear night, a meteor skimmed the atmosphere. “If you see a shooting star, make a wish,” his parents had said. And he did, his face lifted toward the great night sky. In that moment, anything seemed possible.

first stars . . .
over a V of geese
the Swan’s spreading wing

Alignments

After she lost her sight, I visited every afternoon and read aloud the day's news. She sat in her hickory rocker, her back to a picture window filled with sky. I sat facing her, the paper's sections piling around me as I read through their abundance of bad news. In one day, two drivers exchanged angry words over a fender-bender, until one pulled a gun and shot the other dead; a rally for peace turned into a riot, as war and anti-war faced off; a son, during an argument over his fiancé, threw his seventy-year-old father down a flight of steps. Into the afternoon we sat, her face pointed toward mine. Yet her line of vision never quite hit the mark; usually she stared past my left ear, as if lost in a daydream. I'd ignore it, but now and then she would check herself: "Am I looking at you?" Quietly I would move my chair a few inches to the left, until our eyes aligned. "Yes," I'd say, and continue reading, ever amazed at how such small adjustments could set things so right.

sundown . . .

reading to the blind woman

I enter her shadow

For My Wife on Our First Anniversary

Early spring. I wake to pale light, to the dogwood outside our bedroom window, a few cruciform petals barely visible. My wife lies beside me under a flowered sheet: one thigh touching mine, her brown hair fountaining against the pillow. In half dream, she murmurs—a low sound, distant yet familiar. This is our life together. Slowly, the sky brightens; sunlight washes our room, breaks through window prisms into tiny rainbows. I search them out as if on an Easter egg hunt: one on the frame of the standing mirror; another on my chest of drawers, under the photos of us laughing and hugging. And others—on my nightstand, the cedar chest, the Japanese lantern hanging over our bed. My wife stirs, turns toward me. A rainbow appears on her cheek. Soon she will wake, our day will begin. But for now we lie here, content, her breath warm on my skin. I kiss her cheek . . .

all the colors
waiting in white light . . .
slowly, we make love

All the Colors to Come

Ann comes in from the garden, her hands dark with soil. “Come look,” she says. “You have to see.” We go out to where wooden stakes poke from the earth—a reverse graveyard, each marker signaling a birth to be. “Here are the daffodils,” she says, pointing to a handful of stakes at either end, each with a small photo displaying the flower’s lemony petals. “They’ll bloom first. Then the tulips will take over.” Those stakes are spaced out evenly, bursts of pink and orange-red. “And we’ll have purple sage—it smells like lavender—and dianthus, and day lily. This is silver dust”—she points to a picture of a silvery-green plant with felt-covered leaves—“and over here, next to the Scottish moss, I’ve planted Japanese blood grass. Imagine the contrast, the moss’s soft green against the dark red leaves. It will be be-yoo-ti-ful.” It’s like a bird’s trill, the way she says those four syllables. She moves on to more flowers, reciting their names: impatiens, gayfeathers, cosmos . . .

newlyweds’ house—
on the night wind
fresh mulch

Winter Seed

As autumn fell to winter, they remained: the chickadees, black-capped with white puffs of bellies, chasing each other through fits of flight; the cardinals, the male a bright flame against the snow, his mate more subdued in shades of rusty brown; the intimidating jays with their raucous caws; and the titmice, the juncos, the mourning doves—all remained around our deck, waiting for my wife. Each morning she arrived to lay their breakfast along the railing: oat groats, millet, sunflower seeds. Then we watched from the kitchen table, our own breakfasts steaming before us. We ate slowly, trying to avoid swift motions, fearful of chasing them off. We trained ourselves to think of each move—the flash of silverware, the sip of coffee, the spreading of butter on toast. Outside, arrivals changed the pecking order: birds shifted, flew off, settled again. They ate, we ate. When the seed on the deck ran low, my wife got up, scooped another handful, and flung it from the window—an offering of praise for this otherness in our midst.

morning air
alive with feathers
her plumed breath
as she whistles each note

Still Life

Late September dusk: red sun low over the apple tree, smoke rising from the neighbor's stone chimney. My wife and I sit on our back porch, in the evening's last light. Blue jays flash from branch to branch—from elm to dogwood, dogwood to apple. A groundhog, plump and bristly, sits on its haunches near the porch steps, munching one of the crab apples that litter the lawn. Cicadas chirr in the crisp air, evening stars appear through woodsmoke. My wife takes my hand.

first red
in the elm—
my beating heart

Accompaniment

I walk with my mother through late August heat, along a street of thick sycamores and open porches. Her left hand is hooked onto my arm, and her right grips a cane that *tap-taps* the root-broken sidewalk. Just ahead, lined like pigeons across the porch steps, three neighborhood women talk among themselves, drinking iced tea. They quiet as we approach. I look, but they've already turned their attention elsewhere: the blank sky, the green leaves, the front lawn where a cardinal hops like a flame among marigolds. As if on cue, each woman drinks the last of her tea. They lower their glasses and the cubes fall back in a rush and tumble, loud as a head-on collision. My mother's white cane doesn't miss a beat. "Listen," she says. Through late shadows, a few light notes: *per-CHICK-o-ree*. "Goldfinch," she says. "Listen." From the lawn, a running commentary: *what-cheer-cheer-cheer, purty-purty-purty, sweet-sweet-sweet . . .*

squall winds—
turning Bach's cantata
up to ten

Midnight Reaction

She clutched his T-shirt, pressed her matted hair into his chest. *I see the light*, she whispered. *Hold me, just hold me.* They were sitting upright in their bed, pressed against each other, under a skylight of stars. Her purple gown, sweat-soaked, clung to her trembling body; tomorrow they would find it had dyed her skin lavender. He reached again for the glass of orange juice on the nightstand, brought it to her lips. He thought of all the juice he had given to her over the years, the hard candies, the insulin injections. He remembered the first time he had prepared a needle: He had tapped the syringe furiously, desperate to chase away air bubbles, and when the needle entered her skin he gasped. She had laughed, called him a worrywart, a ninny, a love. He focused on her breaths now, the way each tickled the hairs on his chest. He closed his eyes, put his cheek against her forehead, smelled the damp of her hair: soap and apricots and the coming summer. He stared at the stars. And he held her. He held her.

oranges in morning sun behind the rind the light

Night Shift

They arrive together in the cafeteria—all young, floating in their whites, picking up salads, sitting a table away from him. One he recognizes from the fourth floor; she had asked him the other day about the DNR. Now she's describing the boy she met at her sister's wedding. "Poor guy, he was so nervous—when he asked me to dance, I thought he'd split wide open!" Their laughter rises like the steam from his coffee, shapes forming and shifting. He smiles. On their first date, they danced under lanterns and summer stars; he told her silly jokes, and she laughed as if nothing else mattered. At their wedding, they danced before two hundred eyes, and kissed as if no one were there. On so many nights, they sat on the family room sofa, reading mysteries together, until her nodding head finally slipped onto his shoulder. He'd carry her to bed as if she weighed nothing. Now it's all he can do to lift this mug to his lips, to watch the steam as it reaches that point where everything—*everything*—vanishes into air, into light.

last rites—
along her pale skin
starshine

Hospice

The space between each breath lengthens. Apnea, the nurse called it—one of the last signs. So fast . . . Three days ago he could speak, sip a cup of tea, walk the few steps from bed to toilet. Now he sleeps, steeped in morphine, as the cancer spreads: liver, colon, prostate, marrow. His belly is the size of the beachball on which he used to rest his head, watching me splash in the Ocean City surf, or just staring out toward the Atlantic. So fast, so fast . . . White stubble patches his sunken cheeks, and the skull grows more pronounced each day. We wet his cracked lips, kiss his forehead, sit by his bed. Hearing is the last to go, the nurse said; I trust now that is true. I whisper in his ear, *I love you*. I tell him, *You've been a wonderful father, the best*. I tell him, in the growing silence between each breath: *Listen to the birds, their voices filled with sunlight and blue sky . . .*

bird shadows across
the drawn shade:
the pulse in his neck
flutters

Hale-Bopp

Ann and I stand on our front lawn, our faces tilted toward stars and deep space. We have been out here for fifteen minutes, staring at nothing but the constellations, and I am already growing tired. But not Ann. All week she has been looking forward to this night, when Hale-Bopp could be seen for the first time in 4,000 years. “The last time it came, the Great Pyramids had barely been built,” she’d say. “The next time, none of us will be here.” Now she searches for the comet, its flaming tail. A light wind passes through nearby birches, while behind us our house stands solidly. The soft sound of a jazz sax drifts from the open windows; I gaze up, imagining myself as one of those notes floating up—and then the house drops away, and I am diminished: lost among the measureless black, the stars beyond stars, their lights all echoes of centuries gone. Me, the house, the birches—all are swallowed by the deep night. Then I look toward Ann. Her eyes, bright as planets, peer toward the great sky, watching, hoping . . .

our small house
under galaxies—
all the windows lit

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