Memory

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Abstract

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IT WAS curious, and while I tasted that feeling, I unconsciously lowered my book to the cluttered desk, and stared at the blankness of beige wall in front of me. I couldn’t see Al, but I didn’t have to. I knew he was sitting behind me at an even more cluttered desk, hunched over in the beam of light from the goose-neck lamp fastened above him.

That word . . . . He’d only been announcing to the world his dissatisfaction, or frustration, not really expecting to gain any sympathy, or even understanding. But the simplicity of the expletive—stark—had ripped through the silence of my concentration. Had made me stop, and fumble for an explanation—more for rationalization of the feeling that the word had caused. Feeling? It was more than that . . . . it was a taste! I couldn’t very well go back to reading with the taste of a word in my mouth.

I stared at the wall, furrowing my forehead as though to squeeze out the answer to the consuming question mark. Memory—I went through a mental check-list, as I have a habit of doing to jog my reluctant memory. This time of towns and cities in which I’d lived. “Sioux Falls . . . Menasha . . . Davenport . . . . Nothing!” Each town came and went, as my mind sorted through the memories of that period of my life, and then, finding no answer, moved on. “Marinette . . . no. Chicago? It must be. . . .” Chicago, the source of my most vague and least remembered memories. Or are they really memories, for it’s easy to confuse stories people have told me with what I really remember. An aura of unreality—of its being me, but not really me—usually pervades such memories. “The taste of a word . . . ?”
The boy struggled to pull open the huge (in comparison) steel and glass door. Before it was even halfway open, he slipped quickly through, dodging clear as the heavy door was pulled shut by the hydraulic arm with a hissing of escaping air. The entryway was dark, and bare, and the scuffing of his small feet over the gritty terrazzo floor echoed faintly as he tripped to the side wall. There, well above him, was a row of mailboxes of finger-tarnished brass, with a black button at the bottom of each. As though trying to climb the wall, the boy stretched to his full three-foot height (on tip-toes), and reached his chubby, grimy-elbowed arm the rest of the way to the bottom on the far right box. His striped pull-over shirt—too short—crept up when he stretched, leaving a two-inch strip of back, brown and smooth, between it and the elastic top of his blue shorts. Straining, his short finger just reached the button, and the buzz—far off in the building—told him that he'd pressed it hard enough. Then, with the squeak of a damp hand on the smooth wall, he relaxed, dropping back onto the soles of his scuffed sneakers, and he pulled his shirt down over his belly. He left a dirty smudge on the tail. His thick hair was tousled, and hung over his forehead in a kind of scissors-and-bowl style that was about due for another agonizing cut. He listlessly wandered in the direction of another door leading deeper into the building, taking care to lift his sneakered feet well clear of the brass-filled seams in the floor.

His head jerked up as a buzz from a black gadget in the corner by the ceiling filled and refilled the small cubicle with its loudness. He dashed forward then, grasped the big door knob in both hands, pulled and twisted with his whole body, and slipped through like before.

He struggled up the long flight of stairs, past the naked light bulb, high above him at the halfway point. Glancing up from his concentration of clearing each tread, he saw his mother, standing in the doorway at the top. He tripped. Picking himself up, he continued his climb, but watching his mother now, more intent on reading her face than managing the steps.

“You’re late . . . you were supposed to come up at four o’clock.” She wasn’t a big woman, but she’d always seemed
so to him, and looking up at her on the stairway only made him feel smaller. She wore as patient a look as she could, but she was well along with the second child, and patience was difficult.

He had no excuse. The shoe repair shop beside the building had a clock in the window, and he’d seen the “big hand straight up and the little hand on four,” but fun was fun. He only finished his climb and scuffed around her—head down. She guided him through the door with her hand on his head, and pushed him gently clear before she closed the door. He turned, and plopped himself on a soft chair beside the door—dangling his feet a couple of inches off the floor.

“Supper’s ready,” she said as she padded across the room into the kitchen. “Your Dad’ll be home soon . . . you’re filthy, young man. Go wash your hands and face . . . it’s a bath for you tonight.”

He accepted the fact . . . for now, and half-heartedly slid off the chair and headed for the bathroom door.

“What’s for supper?” he asked, wishing for something that could never be.

“Meatloaf, and hurry up!”

He seemed to ignore her as he continued his shuffling (with care not to step on one loose shoestring) across the living room to the bathroom door. He could see her standing at the counter out of the corner of his eye—she watched him with a suppressed grin as he navigated through the room. The grin vanished though, as his high voice wafted in a singsonged one-word phrase. Just one word over and over.

“What . . . what did you say?” Her eyes were wide in disbelief. “Did you say what I thought you said?” Surer now of what she’d heard, her voice was more demanding.

He stopped, avoiding her look, and he knew he was in trouble. Wishing he could take back his words, he waited for her next move. She made it, in moving toward him. He heard her, fearing whatever she had in mind, and nurturing a simple feeling of unfairness.

“Where did you get that word?” She was moving toward him slowly. “Don’t you ever let me hear you say that again.”

He couldn’t stop himself . . . he said it softly, and then he turned and looked at his mother, and, seeing her moving
toward him with an unmistakable cloudiness in her eyes that threatened, he ran. Through the high arched doorway, into the bathroom, he quickly slammed the door and slipped the lock. She was right behind him.

"Young man, you come out of there . . . unlock this door." She rattled the door, furious with the devilishness that had locked itself in. "You let me in there this minute, do you hear me?" She listened for the answering click of the lock, but none came. Instead, the childish voice sang a little tune, that ended in a burst of giggling.

He was enjoying every bit of it. Sitting on the stool, with his feet dangling, he watched the door as though seeing his mother's helplessness right through it. He experimented with the word, chanting it with rising inflection and volume, and changing the tune. To him it was meaningless, but he was impressed with its effectiveness. He listened, holding his breath as the scratching sounds of a hairpin in the keyhole reached him. Giggling again, sure it wouldn't work, he played with the word, liking the way the echo bounced around the small room. He stuck his head in the bathtub, and said it in a strained low voice. Then he giggled, and shook his head, tossing his hair.

"Matthew Johnson, if you don't open this door this minute and come out of there, I'll have your dad get you out! You can bet you'll get the spanking of your life and go to bed!"

Suddenly the fun was gone. She'd gotten mean about the game, and the future wasn't very pleasant sounding. "No, Mommy." He knew he didn't want that. He looked around the room, feeling locked in for the first time. He moved toward the door uncertainly, tugging at the tail of his shirt. "No, Mommy!"

"Then you open this door and come out of there, and stop this nonsense."

He wasn't sure that opening the door would solve everything, but he didn't at all appreciate the alternatives. Reluctantly, he moved to the door, where he paused with one hand on the door knob, and the other on the latch. After a moment, he flipped the lock, and, stepping back, put on his best look of innocence. His mother jerked the door open
and stood there, looking right through his only defense.

"Don't you ever do anything like that again . . . do you hear me?" Not waiting for an answer, she continued, "and where did you learn that word?"

"I heard it, Mommy."

"Do you know what it means?"

His eyes were wide, and fixed on his mother. One big tear broke free and traced a path down his smooth cheek, and his shrugged shoulders answered.

"Well, you're going to forget it right now . . . I'll see to that."

"Yes, Mommy."

"Yes Mommy nothing. We're just going to have to wash your dirty mouth along with the rest of you."

Aghast, he stepped back until his back butted against the bathtub. He began to sob—little catching gasps that shook his whole little body, and big, frightened tears began to flow.

"No, Mommy, Please. I won't say it any more . . . Never, I promise . . . ."

She ignored his pleading and moved toward him.

I found myself smiling vacantly, my eyes dry from staring at the wall. That taste was there in my mouth again, but now I knew what it was. And that stinging soap-taste was proof enough that this was a real memory.

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Haiku

*by David Ryder*

*Pre-med, Fr.*

A morning dewdrop
Tumbling from a waxy leaf
And vanishing . . . gone?