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Come in...and be captivated...

"Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"Pond in Fog" Linda Woods; www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com/

Memory on Fire

By Elizabeth Schwing

My earliest memories were here...sleeping on the screened-in porch with my sisters, reading Charlotte's Web under the covers of our cots late into the night, flashlights propped between our knees. We would fall asleep to the sounds of cicadas, owls and frogs, our nightly lullaby. During the days, we would put on a production of E.B. White's classic tale of friendship and sacrifice for our parents. We spent summers here, learning important life lessons: how to gut a fish fresh from the lake, play chess, grow tomatoes. Most important, we learned how to be content living without the amenities of modern life.

When I was older, our cabin was a sanctuary from the teenage angst all around

me. I could escape the drama of high school and know that I was safe here. I could enter this magical place within an hour, driving along the highway with the top down and the wind whipping through my long hair. As I turned onto the dirt road leading to the cabin, I could feel the weight on my chest lift and lighten so that once again I could breathe fully. The gravel crunched under the tires as I eased into the driveway. The lake beckoned me as I started toward the water. I took a running dive off the end of the dock. Floating on my back, arms outstretched, I gazed into the bright blue sky as the clouds transformed into faces, buildings and mountains.

Years later, my father gave me away in the rose garden. I thought about bringing our own children here someday. Much of my life transpired here, in this place. It was a part of me, where I became who I am.

As I stared into the smoking mass of debris, a glint of blackened gray caught my eye. I used my stick to turn it over and finally recognized my old aluminum flashlight. It was melted and the top was gone, but there it was. The firemen said it was caused by a short in the electrical system which we were planning to replace that coming summer. The loss engulfed me. I mourned for what was, and for what could now not be. The orange embers glared at me as I stared into what was once our beloved cabin.

Turning, I slowly headed for the water. I sat on the edge of the dock for a long time. The water calmed me, as always, soothing my aching heart, as its peaceful rhythm washed over me. The cabin was gone, but what it gave us was enduring. I thought about that old flashlight. At first, I didn't even recognize it amidst the ashes, yet it withstood the flame and heat of the fire. Maybe we could, too...

Training Shoes

By Elizabeth Schwing

They are hanging from a nail above my desk so that they are the first thing I see each morning when I sit down to work. They remind me of where I started and how far I have come.

I remember that first day vividly. The sky was a clear blue with just a few clouds. The sun was shining brightly and its warmth took the edge off the cold

spring air. Everyone lined up, the whistle blew, and we were off. At first, we were all huddled in a pack, trying to find a space of our own. All I could hear was the pounding of feet against the track: boom, boom, boom, boom. Just like the beating of my heart. It was a rhythm all its own, and I found myself getting lost in it. I was no longer noticed the other runners around me, but was deeply aware my surroundings. The pungent smell of freshly mowed grass The soothing rhythm of my heart. Everything else faded away. I was breathing hard, but the cold air felt good as it rushed to my lungs, giving them power and energy. I was alone but not lonely.

I rounded the first curve and entered the straightaway which spread out before me in a slanted V. I could feel my stride lengthen as I moved toward the last curve. I could feel my body lean hard into the white line, being careful not to cross it.

I could see the finish line ahead, the same place the race had started just one minute before. I ran as hard as I could and heard the click of a timer as I crossed the finish line alone. I slowed to a jog and gradually stopped. My chest burned and my legs felt shaky and wobbly. I felt thoroughly exhausted but utterly exhilarated. The coach asked me where I learned to run like that. I smiled and told him I grew up playing football with my three brothers, and didn't like getting tackled. He smiled and said he thought I might enjoy track, that I had talent.

The start and finish of the 400 meters is the same; however, you never are. You run as fast as you can for roughly sixty seconds. Your mind clears, and there is nothing but your heart pounding and your feet crunching into the gravel. It's magic.

As I sit down to write, my old track shoes remind me of those days from my youth. I never knew I was a runner before that spring day, but I was. I found out by accident, and it shaped my life. I attended a private university on a track scholarship and discovered that I was also a writer, which I certainly did not know. But now I do.

Remembering Cambridge Snow

By Patrick Kinsley

The snow started falling an hour before I left. I was staying in Boston with an old friend but he was leaving on the Chinatown bus tomorrow. This old friend had given me directions- down the avenue and take a right, walk three blocks and find the bus stop just before the bridge. Take the number 16 across the highway to the square and walk down the street across from the supermarket until you come to the second avenue.

It all seemed simple enough.

Really, I didn't want to be going anywhere. I was almost broke and the phlegm and mucous that had been clogging his head for the last two days was only getting worse. I'd been going all the way for three days straight. Other than my first night in town, it was hard to remember much.

I'd gotten off the Peter Pan and found my way out to Allston, where I spent two hours on shots and beers until they cut me off. So I wandered the streets as one by one the stores and cafes winked out their lights. I found myself putting whiskey in my coffee in the McDonald's on the corner of Harvard Avenue. It was the only place left open.

I'd made the mistake of sitting in the back corner. That's where the derelicts and drunks hung out, sliding nickels and dimes across the counter with black fingernails.

One of them, came up to me, an almost-empty pint of vodka in his hand, and started rambling about the J. Geils Band. It was a narrow escape.

Then I wandered the streets again, another two hours, struggling to light cigarettes against the wind, watching from the overpass the traffic on the turnpike below.

And then my old friend got out of work and she brought me back to her place.

After that, it was beer for breakfast and whiskey all night, the Superbowl party and a taxi to the Public Library. There I found an e-mail saying it had all worked out, the plane left in two weeks. I spent two hundred-odd dollars applying for a visa and took the train home, where I spent the empty afternoon reading *The Black Dahlia* and sipping PBR on the futon.

So I had my Chinatown ticket and my CVS passport photo. All that was left was to tie up the loose ends of my neglected obligations. There were holes in the sides of my shoes and I tried in vain to keep my feet dry as I trudged through the snow.

The wind whipped down the streets like a scream down a long, dark tunnel. I walked with my head bowed to it. My old friend's directions worked fine. I turned the corner to find the bus shelter just where she'd said it would be.

I sat beside a pretty blonde girl beneath the unforgiving fluorescent light. I kept looking down the road and she kept staring at her feet. We only spent a few minutes waiting for the bus to come, and when it did, I wasn't sure it was the right one but got on it anyway. It was just too cold to deliberate.

The bus rattled and wheezed past three stops. When it came to the square, I stepped off and into the glare of a supermarket parking lot. I found the sidestreet. As I passed through the shadows of driveways and the glow of streetlights, I called his buddy Rich.

Rich had been living in Boston for a few years. He'd been one of the first to leave our old hometown, far away in the western part of the state, to get his education. But now there was nobody left back home.

Tim was down in Arkansas, teaching Elementary school to poor black kids. He said he was doing it to take a bite out of his college loans. Guess they'd made him a deal. Sal was still technically living in New York, but he was on the road so much it was hard to get a handle on him. We stayed in touch as much as they could. Charlie was getting his Master's somewhere in central Massachusetts, caged up with that crazy girlfriend of his. Nobody saw him like they used to. Jeremy was back in his parents' basement. And Matt- nobody was really sure where Matt was. We heard rumors involving New York, others involving Providence. I didn't know for sure. It'd been, I figured, almost three years since he'd spoken to Matt.

Rich didn't answer his phone but that didn't dissuade me. Rich almost never answered the phone. When I came to the first avenue, I called again. I'd only been to Rich's new apartment once, almost a year ago, for about ten minutes, on a bright spring afternoon. For all I knew, in the dark and the storm, I could've

been standing right on top of it.

Rich didn't answer the second time either.

"F#%kin' Rich," I spat as I tried to light a cigarette. My hands were raw. They shook in the wind. "F#kin' snow."

I crossed the avenue and slowed my pace. Right on cue, my phone started ringing. It was Rich.

"Hey man," I said. "Think I'm right by your place. I'm on uh...Foxglove. Foxglove Terrace."

"Okay dude," Rich said in the well-godammit-you-just-woke-me-up voice he always used on the phone. "Gimme like ten minutes and we'll come meet you."

"Alright."

I walked down to the next avenue and stood on the corner, watching cars slide along the road. A woman whose face I couldn't see passed by with her big dog on its leash.

The dog reminded me of things long gone- a certain summer and a red car, tripping acid and someone's mansion on some hill. Looking back, it seemed like love, and a true love at that. But things are easily confused in the dim of memory. And I remembered, too, something I'd read somewhere. It said that you can only be nostalgic for something that's been dead a long time.

The snow trickled through the streetlight beacon. It, too, reminded me of a long time ago. It was long before any love, true or otherwise. I was twelve years old and too restless to sleep. I laid in the top bunk and watched a different snow as it fell through a different streetlight, far away in our old hometown, before all this great accident was set into motion.

But it was just too cold to stay still for long. I turned and walked slowly back toward the first avenue. I was pretty sure Rich's house was on the corner up there. The neighborhood seemed familiar. So many things did. Familiarity wasn't much to go on. But it was just too cold to deliberate. My feet were getting wet.

I felt guilty I hadn't gone to see my cousin Jack while he was in town. But I'd just been too f#%ked-up. And Jack was, after all, quite a busy man.

I consoled himself in remembering that I'd made plans to go and see Jack that very evening. But Jack had canceled, saying he wasn't feeling so hot. Which was just as well. Even as long as we'd been apart, I still had more to say to Rich than to my cousin. I'd barely spoken to Jack since we were kids together, running on Gloucester beach, the backstreets of sleepy Wakefield.

I turned the corner of the first avenue and saw a little path yawning into the black soup of an alley. It looked familiar, too, and I strode carefully along the icy pavement. When I saw the red door, I knew I'd been right. Leaving smudged footprints under the forty-watt bulb, I climbed the steps and knocked.

There were footsteps and the door swung open. Rich was a big, tall man with a thick beard and blue eyes. He spoke softly and smiled easily.

We embraced and I stepped inside. I kicked my shoes off in the warm hallway. Castaway snow made little brown puddles on the pale blue wall.

Rich and his girlfriend Amanda took me a few blocks down the avenue to the bar. Amanda was a short, bubbly girl with curly brown hair just like Rich's. She was simple and friendly. I'd always thought she was well-suited to Rich. Rich was given to brooding and moodiness, though I hadn't remembered just how much until we were walking down the street. Amanda made small talk and Rich walked silently, head down, hands in his pockets.

The place was called The Wagon Wheel. The interior was crowned in red light and old rusting street signs. We sat near the door and ordered a few Sam Adams. Much to my relief, Rich insisted on buying the first round. I got the distinct feeling there wouldn't be a third.

We stayed for an hour, watching the glasses sweat, trying to tune out the grating post-punk the DJ was playing. We talked about old friends from the old days, each getting abreast of where everyone had scattered to now.

Rich said Mark and Ashley were still in town. Ashley had finally graduated and

found work as a nurse, but no one was quite sure exactly how Mark spent his days. Whatever it was, Rich said they didn't call much anymore.

We talked about movies, Bob Dylan, Rich and Amanda's recent trip to Disneyland. Amanda mostly kept quiet. She asked the routine questions, laughed at the right times. When the conversation lulled, we listened to two guys next to them emphatically discussing the entire Jimmy Buffet catalog and watched some Korean, dressed all in white, who was sitting down at the other end of the bar, getting sloppier and sloppier on watered-down Margaritas.

I, for my part, made some jokes about New Jersey- strip clubs, crystal meth, misspelled tattoos. I told them about this trip I was heading out on. I was going halfway across the world and didn't even know how I'd gotten involved with it. The truth was, I'd just sort of fallen ass-backwards into it. So that's what I told them.

Rich just laughed and shook his head. Nothing had changed. Probably it never would. I wondered if maybe that's what was eating Rich.

It took us an hour and a half to finish just two rounds. I bought the second one. When it was gone, I made my move to go. Rich and Amanda raised no objections.

On the way home, I asked directions back. I already knew the way, but had to say something to fill up the silence.

I took my leave of them on the corner, to which they protested, to which I in turn insisted. We hugged, promised, predicted, assured, and went our separate ways.

I walked back down the avenue, to the grocery store and the bus stop. I listened to "Long Black Limousine." The snow was only getting higher and heavier. I wondered when, if ever, I'd see them again. I wondered if there'd be more to say next time. How much longer could we keep holding on? It just made everything harder to forget. And, in the end, that was just what all of us needed.

A Lighter Tale of Baggage

By Nicole M. Bouchard

When you think of all the things a person amasses in the course of their lives, objects large and small, some temporary, some lasting, precious or wasteful, we are a species of collectors. From spare change and crumpled movie ticket stubs in coat pockets to heirloom furniture, we are seekers and keepers of tokens that serve as proof of our life experience.

Migratory birds who make their nests in different locations each year or beasts nestled in their caves are hardly in need of garage sales. Our constant need to collect, de-clutter and collect again might seem frivolous to the natural world, but then again, civilization tells its stories through artifacts and the emotions attached to them. Objects are anything but objective.

I think, here, of an item no bigger than half my thumb that travels on important occasions by my side in the cozy pocket of one of my fancier handbags. It certainly isn't one of most precious items or even one that has a great tale attached to it. Really, it is only a moment. One brief memory involving a stranger.

It is next to nothing to look at in its peachy ochre shell, splattered with dots of brown paint over a simple styrofoam body. The artificial egg has a hole on the bottom where the crisp white styrofoam shows through in the spot where it became unglued from a piece of Easter décor. It is smooth to the touch, nearly weightless in the palm and utterly out of place amongst the other contents of the handbag. It would seem to be a complete oddity to anyone who was unaware of how it came to claim its special place.

Distracted by the thoughts of my generation, stepping into a different role, concerns of work, expenses, desires to one day start a family of my own, when to find that very specific place of mine in the world, I was walking around the store in a haze. Possibility, opportunity and expectation all thrilling and antagonizing by turns... 'what if' on each breath, I felt like the season. It was the end of winter, promises of spring to come so near but so far, bursting at the seams with waiting. The section of Easter decorations soothed away some of the dull ache with pastels racing in to wash the wintry gray from the corners of my mind. I was present, yet not wholly aware, still in the dreamy sort of half-presence that comes of long winter months.

Bright laughter and subsequent reprimands caught my attention. A little boy shopping with his mother found the prospect of playing with every item in reach to be delightful. Easter wreaths became princely crowns, glittering garlands lassos and festive rabbit topiaries royal staffs to be held aloft in fairy courts. All of these, the better to worry his mother with.

I couldn't help but smile. Wasn't I the same way? Luckily I had been allowed my whimsical perspective.

Perhaps sensing a kindred spirit, the boy, little more than five, turned his attentions to the more amused audience.

"Aren't these nice?" he called out holding up one of his crowning wreaths.

"Magical," I replied.

"These too?"

"Especially those."

He went to gather more items with his flustered mother trailing after him, telling him to put down his findings and let the nice lady go on shopping. A disappointed shrug was his answer. Yet before he moved on, he secretly pried loose a small egg from one of the wreaths.

Quietly, he rushed up to me with his fist closed. "This is beautiful," he whispered. "Here. I want you to keep it."

This offering was one he took very seriously.

"I love it. Thank you so much..." I could barely finish my sentence before he pressed the egg carefully in my palm and ran off again at the call of his mother.

I spotted them once more in the store before leaving. He'd draped his mother in artificial summer ivy but this time she laughed and tousled his hair.

So I keep the little secret egg in that handbag as a reminder to delight in the present, remember to play and to know that there is a spring for every kind of winter, filled with new beginnings, hope, growth, youth and promise; but most

of all, I keep it as a treasured token of kindness. There are many instances of it in the world. I've been fortunate to give and receive them yet as a species we collect bits of proof about where we've been and what we've experienced so that one small, half a thumb-sized object isn't just the kindness of one stranger, but symbolic of all I've encountered from any I've ever met.

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