

JUST A SERIES OF MOMENTS

by

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His daughter took him to the hospital that day. She made light of the situation, but he could tell that she was shaken. Both she and the doctor had blown the matter way out of proportion. He just got confused, was all. It could have happened to anyone.

He had been distracted by something – his job, the bills – and hadn't been able to find his way home. The doctor, he thought, would see reason. As you get older, these things happen. First time for everything, right? "This isn't the first time, Dad," Cindy told him. He hadn't realized he'd been speaking aloud. "Remember how you kept showing up for work in the middle of the night?"

"I work the night shift."

"Not for three years. You haven't been working at all since you hurt your bad last summer."

"When?" His back hurt; it always had hurt. No injury there, just a little wear and tear of time. He watched as the facility came into site, an elegant building set back in the trees, the mountains in the background. It didn't look like a hospital, more like his idea of a mansion. There was an orderly waiting to greet them, a friendly-looking young girl with braces and blonde hair. "So once I recover from this back injury, I'll be getting out of here. Three, maybe four weeks, right?"

Cindy looked surprised but said nothing. She always has this stricken look on her face,

even as a baby. It was like she thought the whole world was going to fall in on her, or that she couldn't quite believe the reality of it all. Almost as quickly as he had the thought, it vanished. The young girl helped him out of the car, though he really didn't need her help. She called him Mr. Glynn – almost no one did that these days. Norm, he assured her, would do fine.

They showed him around the place while Cindy talked with the administrator. With a shock, he realized that this was no ordinary hospital, but a retirement home. “An old folks' home?” he said. The young orderly – her name was Becky – told him that it specialized in people with problems like his. “I just got confused this one time and they ship me here. That doesn't seem fair, does it?”

“Dad, you were regularly showing for work in the middle of the night. You were getting lost when you went out.” Cindy tried to be understanding. As far as she could tell, his long term memories were fine, sharper than hers in some ways, but for the last two or three years, his life became jumbled and confusing. He was very good at picking up hints from the conversations and weaving them into the holes in his memories, or using things said to create a more coherent picture of what was going on, but he didn't *remember*. She found the experience frightening. The doctor had informed her that although the syndrome did run in families, it was unlikely that she or her kids would have it. Medicine was pursuing a cure and already had some drugs to handle the early stages of the disease.

His room was comfortable, but spare. Cindy found him sitting on his bed, looking out the windows at the trees. The view reminded him a little of his boyhood home; there had been treetops he could see out the window then, where he was sitting on his bed. He could almost smell the crab apples, felt the anticipation of the train whistle from down the hill. It eased the

discomfort somewhat. His things were being brought in and he could set the place up however he wanted. “I hope,” he hinted again, “that this won’t be for too long.”

“Do you remember what the doctor said?” He nodded, although he was a little fuzzy on the particularly. He was sick, he knew that...a touch of the flu, wasn’t it? “You have Alzheimer’s disease. They caught it pretty late...”

“So I should get better in, what, three or four weeks?” he asked. “I have to get back to work. They won’t give me that long off.” She never answered him, but helped him set up the room before she left. She was proud of herself...she managed not to cry.

Norman Glynn sat on the bed and looked over the relics of his life. There were the wedding pictures – Isabella – an stunning Italian girl who’s family moved to the States after the War – in that simple dress, him in his crisp Army khakis; what she could see in him was still a mystery. He couldn’t believe she has stayed with him all these years. The wedding had taken place in Atlantic City, only a few weeks before he went to basic training; the shot was of them after he had returned. Another photo of him was next to that: him in his army uniform a few months after that, dirty and miraculously alive. The smile on his face was genuine; two hours earlier, the slopes had been doing their best to machine gun him to bits on the beach. Korea – dirty and violent. The women had been clamoring for G.I.s they could get to marry them and take back to the states. He had been popular there, good-looking and attractively unattainable; pining for his Venetian *moglie*, eight months pregnant in Pennsylvania. There were medals. Famed and now hung up on the wall, his bachelor’s degree from Lafayette – real education at the time, not just a bit of paper, as his grandson’s was. Yes sir, in those you could go places with a bachelor’s degree; and he had for a time. A print of his favorite painting *The Fighting Temeraire* by Turner

hung at the foot of his bed. The ghostly image of the old man of war being towed under a golden sunset into port for the last time by a small, powerful tugboat – dark black contrasting with the cream and gold of *Temeraire* had always struck him powerfully. The lines from a poem came to his mind, “The flag which braved the battle and the breeze, No longer owns her.” They had something to do with the painting itself; a dedication, he thought, but the author and circumstance eluded him.

He looked around the small, if comfortable room, crammed with the detritus of his life and a small television. “Her last berth to be broken up...” he sighed, looking at the painting.

Cindy and the grand-kids visited less and less. At first he had noticed and been feeling abandoned – after all, it was just for three or four weeks – but now the days flashed by in a haze of scheduled time and activity, and their absence hurt less and less. His son Adam had never visited, nor had he really expected him to. They had had a falling out years ago and had not spoken since. Norman only thought of him every once in a while, when glancing at one of the few pictures he had of his son, always with a pang of regret. It wasn't that he didn't want more of him, but that his son rarely took pictures of anything. He mind, he used to say, captured the images more vividly than the lens. Foolish, Norman thought. It only took an accident, or something like what was happening to him to steal those images away from you. That moment of realization hit Norman in the midst of chess at the same time as he forgot the name of the old man he was playing chess with. They only played together all the time. “Gotcha...man,” he covered. The battle won, he wandered through the common area, where other ancients were going about their business. They were a dull crowd, he found. He could have conversations with

them and they would remember what he said. It was very annoying.

Back in his room, he opened the window to the smell of honeysuckle drifting on the warm summer air. Summer was his favorite time and always had been. It was that moment when life slowed down or stopped for a while. When he could linger on the ropes strung from trees over the canal or the local creek. He, Sammy Schoup, and Freddy Wahler used to play catch down by the Delaware, or if they could find an inner tube from a car, rafting the waters of the river. The soda fountain place in the square - bright tiles and chrome, the radio playing music or the Andy and Amos. Mr. Wasserman's kind face and strange accent "egzing dem what dey wan'." Norman realized he was expecting something. The absence of whatever it was he waiting for was disturbing. While waiting for whatever it was, he missed dinner and had to be found by the night nurse, Emily.

Norman work up lucid. Normally, he would feel lucid, but it was a lie. He was, if only for this moment, *aware!* He threw aside the bed sheet and got out of bed. Despite the cold floor, he moved over to the light switch and turned it on, then moved to the small bathroom and the mirror. The face in it was shocking. It was him, he could see that. But the thick brown hair of his youth was gone, replaced by sallow gray around the head, the top of his pate bald. The blue-gray eyes the dames always used to flash and talk about were still there, if a little rheumy. The face was surprisingly unlined for his age of 72. Glancing at his hands, he saw the liver spots. They had started showing up as early as his late twenties, but it wasn't until one night on the toilet that he suddenly realized the backs of his hands were covered with the splotches of melatonin. Gone was the tight, workingman's body, too. He was unequivocally old. He was unequivocally alone. Like a brand into the brain he remembered the last time he felt clear-

headed: standing in the waiting room at Easton Hospital, waiting on the most important answer of his life...did she make it? Isabella had found a little lump on her neck and gotten it checked out. *Cancer!* The doctor's voice came through as if it were that very day; Norman could not remember his face, just an idealized montage of every doctor he had ever know.

Metastacized...intercranial...terminal...

Thirty years with her. How many times had he made love to her? Thousands? Ten thousand? Two children: Cindy and...Adam. His boy he could never really show love; it just wasn't done. He'd understand. Isabelle...gone five years. Norman started to cry. He'd simply forgotten her. Misplaced her mentally until he could deal with the pain, only he forgot where he put her. His wife, and he forgot where he put her memory.

He brain felt like it was on fire, like the neurons and synapses were fighting for the same youth, life his eyes craved to see. Alzheimer's Disease, he thought. A degenerative condition of the memory. Progression is fairly orderly, and can be slowed or temporarily arrests by drug treatments. His case...too far advanced for the drugs; they were experimental, really. Alzheimer. The name was a joke. They had another name when he was younger; an honest one. Senility. Dementia. He glared at the face in the mirror, trying to will his brain to remember. For one brief moment, he was sure that he wouldn't remember this burst of clarity. In the morning, when he woke he would just hear the trains going through Lehigh Station down on the riverside. The thought made him smile and took away the disgust and shock of the mirror's reflection. Norm settled back into bed and moments later had drifted off. In the morning, when he woke, something was missing and he couldn't remember what. It made him testy for the rest of the morning.

Adam Glynn decided to see his father. It was a tough choice, but he had to go back to the East Coast, and though he would have denied it, he was feeling filial guilt. His father had always been a distant man, had never showed the least support nor the affection. His mother and her family more than made up for it; the Giannpaolo clan abandoned their home near Venice as soon as the Allies had liberated Italy, settling at first in New York City, then venturing out ‘into the country’ along the Pennsylvania-New Jersey border. His mother had claimed, years back, that his father thought “he knows how you feel,” but could never say it. It was the same for his grandfather, she informed him, a cold man most of the time, he could still be kindly. The War – the second one – had hurt his grandfather in strange ways. Not physically, but it simply took the life from him. After the war, he was never quite the same, especially with a couple of pints in him. That man he vaguely remembered, but from anecdotes from his mother and others that had know him, he was moody, demanding, and uncaring on minute, then showed flashes of brilliance and sentimentality that were almost as if he were another person. Adam figured him for a bipolar type, or post-traumatic stress disorder. His life ended in front of a car in the middle of the night, staggering out of a bar. There was a god chance he saw the car and stepped out anyway.

He arrived with his wife Clarissa, a dusky-skinned girl with lustrous raven hair from Tucson. They were on their way to New York City, where he had business. The old homestead was only a little out of the way and they came in through the Allentown airport and drove first to see his relatives. His cousin James was kind enough to put them up and gave them directions to the place just outside of Pen Argyl, near the Poconos. On the way up, he felt tired from the flight, but more trepidatious about meeting with his father he’s not seen in over a decade. The man had never known he existed...now, at least, he had an excuse. He’s been in an old folks’

home for a couple of years.

The staff took them through the place, showing off the dining area, where the patients were finishing their meal. There seems little conversation going on, Adam remarked. His wife Clarissa squeezed his hand, but didn't expect a response. Adam rarely showed affection, especially not in public. In this, he was like his father; or so his cousin James said. His maternal family were lovely, Clarissa thought; in many ways, the Italian family environment was much like her Mexican one that back home in Arizona. They brought Norman out to see them and she was struck by the resemblance.

The resemblance hit Adam, as well. This was his future. He could barely breathe; it was like a stone on his chest. He put on the best face he could smiling and greeting his father like they had never been estranged. The old man looked confused for a moment, but gamely played along. By now, he had learned that if the other person thought they knew you, it was best to play along until they gave some kind of hint as to who they were. Once in his room, Adam asked, "You don't know who I am, do you..?"

Norman responded, "Um..." Adam moved to where they could both see their reflections in the bathroom mirror. "Look at you. Now look at me."

"Adam!" Norman cried out suddenly. "I'm glad to see you. You look different."

"Well, you haven't seen me in years."

"You're doing well in college, though..." Adam had long finished college. He responded, "Not bad. This is Clarissa. I think I sent you a picture of her."

"Yes! Yes, you did!" Norman rummaged through a box of photos that he had in the upper drawer of his chest by the bed. He found one of his son and the woman, dressed from their

wedding with the sun setting dramatically behind them. They seemed to be standing on a mountaintop. “Now, I know who it is...” He smiled apologetically.

“That’s okay, *poppi*,” she smiled. Gently she took the picture and wrote her and Adam’s name, as well as the date of the picture. “So you don’t forget, no?”

“Is she Italian?” Norman inquired, grinning. He always told Adam that an Italian woman wouldn’t let you down..

“Mexican.” Adam told him. “She’s from Tucson...where we live.”

“Good people. I had a rack mate named Ramirez from Las something-or-other in New Mexico. Good man. Saved my butt during the withdrawal.” He patted her hand. “That was Korea, darling. Before your time.”

Adam and Clarissa spent the better part of the day with his father, including taking him off of the grounds for dinner. He noticed the shake in his father’s hands, as well as the occasional wrong word used in conversation. He had been given adult diapers to take with them and told not to make a big deal out of it, should his father loose control during the meal. The idea was unnerving: to grow into an adult that fought in wars, that loved a woman and made children, who held a job for twenty years...the betrayal of the body seemed enormous And cruel. To make conversion, Adam told him of their life together: she was a teacher, he worked designing networks for computers. He had a masters in computer engineering, which impressed his father. “That,” Norman grinned, “is even better than a bachelors!” He rode motorcycles, something his father always wanted to, but Mother thought it too dangerous. Then Norman cut the dinner short. He had to get back and get ready for work, you see. His shift started at three.

After they dropped him off, Adam drove to the nearby highway and pulled over to cry.

Clarissa held the back of his neck while he wept. “He is your father,” she told him, “no matter what.” That wasn’t why he bawled. The sight of him scared Adam. This could be him in a few short decades. Worse...his father had always been neglectful. It seemed a poetic justice, somehow, that he had an excuse to not know who his own son was now. If anything it increased his hatred of the man as much as his sympathy multiplied. He drove them off to New York; he would never return.

Back at the home, Norman undressed for bed and felt a strange sense of failure, but didn’t know why. He had dinner with a lovely couple...he forgot to get their names. The man reminded him of his son, although – of course – he was too old to be Adam, who was just entering college. He had an interest in those new-fangled computer things. Norman wanted to make sure he got a bachelors degree; with one of those you could do anything.

The explosion woke him up. Scrambling, he was able to get out of bed and hit the floor, though harder than he’d intended. His temple stung where it had clipped the wood floor. He shouted for Ramirez, but got no response. Where the hell was his M1?! There was movement in front of him, but there also seemed to be a wall of some sort. It was awfully dark in here. Another flash of light from outside the window (there was a wall) and Norman tried to curl into a ball against the shrapnel. The intel weenies had warned them the slopes were up to something, hadn’t they just; damn if they weren’t right! “Ramirez! You okay, boy?”

The lights flared and Norman steeled himself to fight, although his arms and legs were tired and that bump on the head was troubling him something fierce. A nurse he didn’t was right there beside him. “Mr. Glynn? Norman? You’re okay; it’s just a storm. See? Just a

thunderstorm.”

Norman chuckled and held his head. “Good one on me. Thunderstorm. Ain’t done something like that since the first year back from the war. Could have sworn I got that out of my system...battle fatigue!” He said the last phrase derisively. The nurse nodded and asked, “Did you have battle fatigue?”

“Well, I was always pretty tired,” Norman joked.

“What year is it,” the nurse asked casually.

“Why, 1957. Did I have a car accident or something? My head hurts wicked smart.”

“I’m going to have a doctor look at your head, you just lie still, alright?”

All these people making a fuss. Didn’t he get hit in the pot with that one guy’s arm? Blown clean off by a Korean mortar, it smacked him in the head, the hand actually slapped over his mouth like it wanted him the shut up. Funniest thing you every saw. He laughed and laughed, then it stopped being funny and Haslow – some quarterback type guy – had to drag him out of his foxhole. He couldn’t see for the tears gushing down his face. This wasn’t the same thing, anyway. He was just having a hard time seeing. Probably he just needed sleep.

The doctor diagnosed a heavy concussion. X-Rays were needed. Carefully, they got him into a wheelchair. The whole time Nurse Bartholomew, the name of whom Norman had forgotten months ago, held his hand and talked to him constantly, trying to keep him awake. He was groggy and responsive, but he couldn’t answer her questions.

That was because she was interrupting him. Whoever belonged to the voice had to know that this was a hard time for him – for all the boys. Their fathers were either “over there” or

working overtime in the steel mills in Bethlehem and various plants putting together trucks and motors for the war effort. He had been ten when his father told him he was in charge of the household and had to look out for mommy. Mommy didn't need his help, though, she went to work at the International plant; just another Rosie the Riveter on the line. She kept the food on the table and read them dad's letters when they got to them. Always from some exotic locale: England, Algeria, Italy – the name of the place conjuring up a sudden, familiar face: a slight woman with an incredible smile, dark hair and dusky-skin with light gray eyes that seemed to look right through you. If only he could find that girl...her name might even be Isabelle.

Of course, before the war, times were tough. The depression had made work tough to find and his daddy was always angry and didn't want to talk about it. If he had a kid, Norman guaranteed he wouldn't treat his some like that. A jolt of pain through his back as he was lifted on an examination table translated into the nasty fall he'd had off of the trestle when he was a nine. "Train!" he shouted to Sammy Shoup. Sammy was not there, and the orderlies moving him didn't understand the reference.

The kids weren't supposed to play there, but of course they did. He's been going across the bridge over Iron Street steep hill when the train whistle cut through the thick green trees on either side of the tracks. He had started to turn back, as he had only just started across. Sammy Schoup was already halfway over the trestle; he would make it. Norman turned to take a few faltering steps on the wooden ties when the nose of the locomotive came around the corner. Panic set in, not the least aided by Sammy's screaming for him to move from the other side of the rail bridge where he was safe. There was no way to get off of the bridge in time: the train was practically on him. The brakes suddenly shrieked and sparks blasted from the contact point with

the rail. Norman jumped (on the table he kicked one of the orderlies in the knee) and sailed into space. A second later, he came down, both feet on the sharp incline of dirt and shale and fell along the hill, rolling wildly through the tufts of grass, clipping a sapling, before dropping almost straight down onto the edge of the roadbed below the tracks. He back hurt from the fall and the jolt on the roadside. Around him, the sky was raining fire – sparks from the train still skidding to a stop overhead. He had fainted, and he did so again.

“How are we feeling today?” asked the nurse. Norman could never remember her name. He hoped he would be out of the place soon; everyone else here was old. His father was working, he guessed; otherwise he would be here. He’d never forget *his* son when he had one. Mom didn’t like hospitals, said they were unlucky places. He just figured it was the people that had to go there were unlucky.

“I’m okay,” Norman told her, “but I wanna go soon. I have baseball on the weekend. I don’t wanna let them down.”

As she checked his vitals, she asked, “They still let you play with the war on?”

“What war? Dad was too young to fight in that last one. People flew planes in the war...”

“Settle down there, Red Baron, or you’ll hurt yourself.”

“They had an airshow in Philly. We got to go and watch. There was a guy that played tennis on the wing!”

“That’s great. Why don’t we pick out some clothes for the day.” The nurse opened the chest of drawers under the strange painting of the ship and tugboat. It wasn’t very realistic, and Norman didn’t much like it.

“Hey, these aren’t my clothes,” Norman complained. “These are adult.”

“So they are...let’s just make do for now, shall we?”

“I want *my* clothes!” he shouted.

“You’re in a hospital, Norman. We don’t have all of your clothes here. Do you think you could do this for me? It would make my job a lot easier.”

“Well, only for a few days.” Norman climbed into his clothes, with the nurse helping him. All he had done was fallen off of the Iron Street train bridge. He was fine, but he did have to admit to himself that his balance was way off, and his joints hurt – especially his neck. He had to move slow and got winded really easy. In the bathroom, he got another shock – the first for him, but it was a daily occurrence – an old man looked back at him out of the mirror. It almost looked like his grandfather, but not quite. The nurse was ready for the disassociative moment and tried to console him, but there would be none of that today. Norman burst into tears and wanted his mother (ten years dead) and his father (twelve years deceased.) He threw things and was general inconsolable. After some juice and a mild sedative, Norman was more himself, but the bright boyishness that had developed in the last few weeks or months was gone. He was quiet and didn’t want to talk to the other patients; he looked at them mistrustfully. He wasn’t hungry. He just wanted to go home, so he could hear the trains at night. They helped him sleep.

That night, Norman slept fitfully. He usually only got four hours, at best. Sleep had deserted him over the last few years, just as the memories of that time had. Deep inside his brain, nerve cells continued to erode and betray him. Nerve for muscle control continued to die off, nerves that handled speech and emotional control collapsed, and the memory continued its inexorable roll back toward the earliest memories that they had not robbed from Norman Glynn.

Somewhere in the collapse of the neuronal connections, messages long forgotten were accessed before they could disappear. Norman faintly heard a train.

He opened his eyes and sat up. Mommy would be upset; he was supposed to be potty trained by now, but the cold wet mass in his diaper would discount that. Through the window came the smell of summer honeysuckle – his favorite smell even after (who is Isabelle? Why do I know her smell?) He pulled himself to his feet and staggered to the window. Movement was such freedom! He loved to walk. He was a big boy now and could play outside during the day.

Beyond, the darkened tree-lined hillside looked much like the Easton of his youth. Dark and wooded, even downtown, the place was indescribably beautiful at that moment under a full moon. The moon was fuller than anything else he had ever seen and he wanted to fly to it; to visit the people that lived there. The buildings of the Lehigh Station could be seen – in his mind's eye – and the red brick buildings climbing up the hill toward the uptown areas where the rich people, like the Macks, lived. The train was pulling away from the station and the whistle bleached smoke and noise into the night, a cool, soothing sound to his ear. Norman's heart was two years old again. On the train were people, lit from inside the cars: Sammy Shoup and Freddy Wahler were there – where were they going without their parents? There were others he knew – men in army uniforms, business suits. And a woman: a beautiful creature with storm-gray eyes, tanned skin and thick black hair. She was beautiful beyond all other women in the world.

A calm settled over the man who used to be Norman Glynn, and the boy Norman – at least in his mind – was for a few more days. With the train calling to him, he knew that everything was right with the world; outside the town, the world was going about its business. There would be work for dad, food on the table, mommy would be happy to see him get home

from the factory. And when Norman grew up, the same could be said for him. He would have a wife and children, get a good job and do for them better than his parents could do for him. Big plans swirled with imaginative plains of existence taken from Edgar Rice Burroughs and comic books. Life would be good...and it had been.

Adam got word about his father's demise four years after he had been entered into the facility. He was contracted to do work for a local internet provider when the call came in from his sister. In the last few weeks he was coherent, he thought it was 1937 and he was a boy in Easton, Pennsylvania. He died quietly, in his sleep. Adam sat in the white tiled room, packed with computers and electronic switches and cried for a man he never knew.