

# Origin Stories

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My dad would bring home thick stacks of computer from IBM, where he worked as an engineer, and running downstairs to the rec room I'd ignore the litany of 1s and 0s, the computerspeak lining the margins in 20th century hieroglyphics I'd never understand, and flip to the back where a smooth white plain of promise greeted me, margins vanishing, onto which I'd scribble in pencil the nascent markings of a football player or rock star on stage or a fancy automobile, my tongue out and brow furrowed, moving the pencil as if stepping off of a high building, breathless on the high dive, tumbling into the volcano, and learning soon enough the melancholy of failure and the curse of verisimilitude—*very similar* was a concept I couldn't master, struggling with perspective and shadow, angle and depth, my rock and rollers in bell bottoms and my baseball sluggers and my cars looking foolish, dumb, childish, babies, really, drawn by a baby who can't draw, and the urge to look out the window above me so strong as to be unnameable but not as strong as the urge to fight looking, knowing that the tableau of neighbor tree air conditioner shrub driveway station wagon in all its dimensional and color-rich glory of *thereness* would dwarf my puny attempts to represent, to render what I'd imagined, the distance between the paper and the world unimaginable.

Steady rain made the station wagon feel like a submarine, how many leagues under water, as we were on the way to piano lesson at Mrs. P's, a drive through slick winding roads after school let out, through and into neighborhoods I'd only see for these lessons, homes I wouldn't trick-or-treat at, homes which windows I wouldn't glance into while walking home from school, guessing at the lives inside but mostly shuddering at the infinity of it all, that home like mine that home like mine that home like mine until it became too much, too heavy, this pre-knowledge that the impossibly unknowable stuff going on inside my own home were reproduced in their unknowableness in other homes, every home, so I'd slide further down in

the forest green seat as my mom drove us to the lesson when I'd rather be home in front of the TV or down in the basement with a paperback, but resolutely the submarine made its way where what awaited me was a glimpse of Mrs. P's husband in the hallway at the top of carpeted stairs, where were their kids? the exotic smells so strange and the weighty sense that this is a home, too, like mine and not like mine, and when my fingers later rested on Middle C and I tapped out "Happy Birthday" or "Three Blind Mice" the focus on something helped, Mrs. P standing over my shoulder, the rain outside falling calmly now, a soft curtain that if only for an hour or so drew together all of these odd, unfamiliar homes.

The nuns said, *He could be a politician, he talks so much!* Just around the bend of puberty, an early Ritalin candidate, bursting with chatter, I glad handed all the kids in fourth grade in a kind of ether, aloft, waiting, without realizing, to be betrayed by the body and its chemical factory of disillusionment and weirdness, waiting, without realizing, to be betrayed by the rising tide of self-consciousness, but aloft now, and hyper, and glad, moving about the classroom and playground at Saint Andrew's as an inflatable ball, soon chattering to the point of distraction, begetting worried frowns from the teachers, invisible conversations with my parents, and the announcement on Hot Lunch Wednesday that I would raise my hand for white milk, not for chocolate, that too much sugar was the problem, the cause of my interruptions, my *Must Improve Classroom Behavior* check on each quarter's report card, and so I and doughy, unpopular Catherine C. were the only kids who would drink white milk, something commencing that day, a curtain lifting slowly in the back of my head, a drama that blended self-pity with self-knowledge, an unhappy and irritating play in endless acts, and I the duped actor, now sitting—the result of the newest attempt to quell me—alone in a group of four desks, three empty seats facing me as the clamor and talk and giggle noise lifted in the classroom. Who could

I interrupt now, a melodramatic politician of the Party of Solitude?

In the photograph, my brother and I are on the couch, we're kids, it's either his or my birthday, and presents surround us, colorful paper splayed open, boxes dug into, the looks on our faces saying *Yes* to each other and to the bounty, other siblings framed out of the photo, absent though certainly there, the sun leaning through the high living room window in the kind of anointment I'll only imagine, or pretend, later, but what's in the photo that lasts? Love between brothers, that other language, the awkwardness of being on display, and the end table, the wooden hinge of the 1970s plaid upholstered L-couch, pulled a foot or so away from the wall just to the edge of the blue shag carpet against the tantalizing edge of which our dog Molly could rest her paws, but no more, the end table is where I'd go, crawl to on those days when I was peevish, or felt gone though surrounded, and wanted to stare inside myself and try and make sense without the language to do much of anything but fail to name the urge, where I'd fold myself and fit into, my back against the side of the couch, utterly hidden from the family, thus the world, my mom a presence nearby in squeaky shoes, Molly a scent, if that, skittering by and away, brothers and friends as vanished as if they'd never existed, there under the end table, where I'd sit for hours, minutes in grown-up time, vowing I'd speak only when spoken to, dusky in the end table dusk, the melancholy whirl of the washing machine and dryer beneath me muffled by the floor, that happy light that once blessed two boys now barely managing to squeeze in there under the end table where I'd go, from where I'd emerge, ready to join again that which I'd expelled, the quiet and solitude I'd gone and found my new scent, but fading, fated.

Joe O. was in the rec room, struggling to play the simple opening chords of Foreigner's "Cold As Ice" on the piano, and I was upstairs in my bedroom—upset about something, red-faced, strangely sequestered that day from the kid I was playing with, the same Joe who lived with nearly a dozen siblings stacked two to a bed in a tiny red box house on Nairn, the boy I went to kindergarten with and who got in trouble with me when we slid on

our knees, side-grins at each other, that language, the boy who went to Saint Andrews with me, growing into the man he'd become, who was more athletic, the day at recess when the bell rang as the football he threw at the tail-end of a play precisely designed zipped on a line into my ribs, stinging terribly, the same boy who in an act of betrayal to my childish leanings went to a different high school where he wasn't big enough to play football so he volunteered to run the first down markers during the game against Good Counsel, where I watched from the bleachers feigning disinterest as he marched up and down the field, a small adult now, barking orders, speaking in a foreign language to kids I didn't know—alone, trying to make sense of the promises made by a pop song badly played by a friend downstairs who was already, although I didn't know it then, leaving.

We had the idea to attach plastic drinking cups by string across our yards, bedroom to bedroom, to talk at all hours of the night, thin voices skimming across pitch-black back yards on twine, private conversations allowing us to be virtually (before that word) alongside each other in playdom from the comfort and security of boy bedrooms—and I don't remember if we went through with it all, but now what matters, and this might be pathetic, is how I imagine it might have been, the furtive talks, the imagined face in the other bedroom, the secrecy and power afforded two eight-year olds to talk in private above everyone's heads, so what matters isn't what we did, but how it could've been, what it might have been like and, for an adult who loves the imaginative life a little too much, who worries about its slipping currency in his world, this is all that matters, because after all everything's better in the imagination of an eight-year old, before grown-ups and failure and lack of nerve remind him of the stubborn stuff on the other side of that bedroom door, and now looking strangely at the iPhone and iPad on my desk I think of that kid and the other one, K, who dreamed up their own network above bland suburban yards, not wireless, not yet, but connectivity in all the quaintness of that century, and its promises to two kids who didn't have the dare to string up twine up after all, and so that's where it all lives, back there, where it never happened.

The block party behind our house would fade into dusk as if stage lights were being lowered, all that was left were gray silhouettes of neighbors, bikes, grills, and parked cars, the dart-like movement of the kids and the lumbering of parents cut-outs against the receding dark out of which something else now would arise, the unnamed smells of scotch and bourbon, car headlights coming on one-by-one to illuminate neighbors sighing and sagging and laughing into their lawn chairs, the tinkle of ice and lowered chuckles a new timbre against the careening Big Wheels and girls' laughter, the booze a kind of foreign oil moving across the tide of my childhood, and so I'd sniff, curious, something added to the strange odors of grown-ups, a smell that seemed to come with the dark and the spent, long afternoons, food eaten, stories swapped, a new, exotic tenor out there in the suburban air, a strange current, beguiling, not mine, humming through the next few years as I grew unafraid of its wattage, plugging in, a decade later winding up with my buddies in the woods behind Kemp Mill Shopping Center chasing Cutty Sark with orange soda that we bought at Giant Foods, that same strangeness, now vivid and joyous and cut with mayhem, descending with a different dusk—into which I awoke, later, wrapped around my ten-speed bike in the county strip along Arcola Avenue, my feet twisted through the spokes, a dog barking somewhere, lights in a strange house coming on, my older brother staring down at me, the streetlight behind him, his car idling, my mom waiting a half mile away on the front porch, blurry.