

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

What object did you think would change you?

If I Squint I Can See That

I thought I might need glasses. In a few weeks I would be going off to graduate school to study literature—I mean Literature. This was going to be a big deal. I mean Big Deal. I would get a master's degree, then who knows? Maybe a doctorate? And get a job teaching college.

“Do your eyes bother you?” my mother asked.

“Well, maybe.”

“Try these,” my dad said. He handed me his glasses. I put them and took them off. He smiled at this joke.

“It's just, I haven't had my eyes checked in a long time. Maybe never. There's going to be a lot of reading.”

I had acquired a few supplies. A white cable neck sweater with red and blue trim, a navy cable neck sweater vest with red trim, two white short sleeve Izod shirts, and a blue blazer. On my to-do list: get a new ribbon for my Olivetti Underwood manual typewriter and get fitted for glasses.

“We could make an appointment with Dr. McMeekin,” my mother said. The other Mc. I'd seen Dr. McGowan the dentist that summer, who I think subscribed to the belief that a little pain builds character.

It was hot the day I got in to see Mr. McMeekin. I wore one of my Izod shirts and brought Tess of the D'Urbervilles along to read in the waiting room. It was an old hardcover copy, a trophy I had brought home from England the year before, the text on thin sheets of India paper. Sitting there in the waiting room, I squinted a little when I read, then unsquinted. I could see it okay, but where I was going, I figured glasses would come in handy.

The doctor was a big man, like Big-Ten linebacker size. He had white hair that formed a controlled triangle above his forehead and was swept back over his ears. He wore glasses with large black frames. He took patient history. Both parents, glasses. Brother? no. Had I suffered any head trauma? No. Did I feel strain while or after reading? Yes. Which? I was going all in. Both, I said. I looked at a letter chart on the wall behind me, as reflected in a mirror in front of me, and frankly did my best. There were a few more diagnostic measures, after which he came back and announced that he thought I was probably okay. Was I sure about the strain issue? I said

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that I was. And that furthermore I was off to graduate school and would have a lot of reading to do.

When I picked up my new glasses ten days later, I noticed little difference wearing them or not. The frames I had ordered were gray metal. I practiced wearing my new glasses at home. They hurt my ears. I could have gone back to Dr. McMeekin for adjustment, but I didn't want to. He knew, and probably the staff knew, and now I knew, that those lenses were simply windows.

At the end of that month I took them with me to graduate school. The complete works of Edmund Spenser clocked over 200,000 words. Dickens' Bleak House weighed in at 300,000 words. Same with Thackeray's Vanity Fair. Emily Dickinson's poems were short, all 1800 of them. All my classmates, it seemed, had read more than I had. Glasses did not help. They hurt.