

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

Recall an early experience that changed your understanding of death.

The Dark Place

It was simple game of hide-and-seek, and a lesson in physics and death.

When I collided with Danny Leman we were both running for home. I was hider, he was seeker. Touch the big tree next to the swingset, and I would be free. He out-sized me. He was a freight train to my Corvair. I was running as fast as I could, when he came out of nowhere and we smashed head-on. He stumbled, then stood up straight. I flew backwards, landing on my back, unable to move.

I couldn't breathe.

I looked up in confusion at the blue sky. When he knelt over me, I raised my arms to my best friend, unable to speak, unable to breathe. I thought, This is my death, and my friend can't save me. A minute later, probably less than that, my breath came back. We collected ourselves, dismissed hide and seek for the day, and swung on the rope swing hanging from that tree.

I was ten years old. I had already fake-died many times. And so had he. We played war down by the river with our friend Dean. On Tuesday nights on ABC TV channel 12, we watched Sergeant Saunders in "Combat" kneeling over an unnamed private who had taken a slug in the gut. They exchanged a few words, then the private closed his eyes and exhaled. Saunders took up his gun and carried on.

We took turns dying in each other's arms, exhaling our last breath and going to sleep. Dead for a few seconds. It was cool to die, but more fun to be Sergeant Saunders.

Around this time Dean's mother was dying of cancer. My parents never used that term. They didn't tell me she was dying. One day Dean and I were in their kitchen, and Mrs. Gaul explained things to me. Her name was Marion. She was pale and thin, her still dark hair pinned back, wisps of it free. She leaned against a counter, wearing a nightgown and robe. It was in her throat. She opened and closed her mouth. It was big, she said, the size of a grapefruit, and they couldn't take it out. She looked away, lowered her voice, and said, almost in a whisper, that she didn't want to go to that dark place. She didn't want to be under the ground.

A few weeks after that, news came she was gone. I looked out into our backyard that morning, at the tree and the rope. Dean was swinging there.

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