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Ripples

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Ripples

Long before I was even thought of, a man lost his struggle with despair. Not content with entering his grave alone, he shot his wife, dragged her out into the lake, and then turned the pistol on himself. He left his twin girls in the house where they hid under their bed, holding one another for comfort, consoling from fear. This man was my great grandfather. The story was passed to me by my mother, so I only have the bones. Luckily, he had a brother who took them in and gave them the life all children deserved. But not unlike physical scars, mental scars loiter and overstay their welcome. His actions sent a ripple through the lives of his family for generations to come, and this familial rage would cascade into my own trauma. Trauma, like waves of the sea, cannot be contained.

I had been at my duty station for a few months, and I was struggling to keep a grip on reality. While enlisted, all one has to do to escape reality is walk into the health clinic and say things like, “Yeah, Doc, I can’t fuckin’ sleep, and this kink in my neck is driving me batshit.” I was given a cocktail of drugs, of which I crushed on my bathroom sink and funneled up my nose with a cut-up straw. Ripples collide and continue on. I washed it down with any alcohol I could find (including mouthwash) and ended up in the emergency room. I’ll never forget seeing the faces of everyone I love flashing across the ceiling of the ambulance, my guts doing acrobatics. It was like a sad slideshow of taunting family photos; every face was strung out with disappointment. How could I possibly leave these people behind? How could I stay with them? The last face to echo off the inside of my skull was my mother’s.

It seems like I have spent my entire life trying to please my mom, but it’s really only been since I knew she existed. I was roughly nine years old when she showed up on the doorstep. This was followed by two years of family court battles, and a smear campaign between my parents.

“Your dad put my head through a sliding glass door.”

“Your mother was a drug addict and a whore.”

“One night I came home and your father had friends over and there was an eight-ball of coke on the coffee table right next to where you were watching cartoons.”

“Your mother abandoned you and gave you up for a different family.”

“He punched out a window in my car and pulled you through the glass when I tried to take you with me. He had a fucking gun, Nick.”

The endless waves slap the shore and suck me back in.

In my high school years, I had the rebellion knob turned up to full blast. Anything I was told to do, I did the opposite. I will never forget coming home from school after losing my temper or pulling an idiotic stunt and waiting in my basement bedroom for my dad to get home. We lived in a modified double-wide on a hill in the sticks, with a gravel driveway the length of a football field. I could hear the stone and mud grind underneath his truck tires as he pulled up to the back of the house where the garage and barn stood. The worst days were when the weather was nice, and he would drive his Harley to work. He, of course, had to have drag pipes installed on the steed, so I could hear him coming from two miles away. He would boot my door open, forehead vein throbbing in rhythm with his breath like one giant pulsating organ.

The dam bursts wide open and the waves put me through the sheetrock adjacent to the sliding glass door, and fear is the undertow.

I was visiting my mother for Thanksgiving last week, and the mood was more somber than usual. After the passing of my brother, my stepfather was struggling to accept it. He was really my stepbrother, but I never looked at it that way. Eight years ago he was in an accident; he broke his neck while jumping on a trampoline, rendering him a paraplegic. He passed away in his sleep just a few weeks before the holiday.

My mother told me that she caught my stepfather sneaking into their storage barn with a rope, and had taken him to a mental health clinic. I asked him how he was holding up, and all he said was, “I hate myself honestly, Nick. I have too many people who depend on me.” As he sat with his head hung and a dead stare at the concrete patio, I knew what was happening behind his eyes.

The same chopping waters that churned behind his eyes had haunted my Grandpa Ramon for years. He was the kindest, happiest soul I had ever met, yet he struggled like many of us do. Alone. He brought me some of my most cherished memories: first time freezing my ass off in a tree stand, first rainbow trout caught from the brook behind his house, the smell of sawdust and a strawberry swisher as he gnawed on it like a cow and ran a piece of Walnut through his router. He had found a way to keep the squall under control, until leukemia ate him alive.

I'm sitting in my living room writing this essay, and my habitat is serene. String lights glow in the corner, snaked around my girlfriend's endless plant collection. The kids just decorated the Christmas tree, and it gives off a sense of normalcy. The only sound is my dog Pork's snoring, just like my beloved Grandpa Ray with a snort and a whistle. To all appearances, it's calm, but inside me the waves still thrash, and the sharks fight over chum. Can the levy hold? All I know is that I need to find a way to act as the dam that blocks the waves, and keep it calm for those on the other side. Harness my anger and transform it into passion, capture rage and turn it into empathy and understanding.