

“Two Ravens”

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Two Ravens

I.

Odin, the Norse father-god, the god of wisdom and war, owned two ravens: Haginn and Muninn, whose names meant Thought and Memory. He sent them out every morning to fly over the land, and at night, the two birds would perch on Odin's shoulders and whisper to him of the news from the world. I often wished that I had my own Haginn and Muninn—not only because having a team of ravens report to me would be easier than reading the newspaper, but because I found it comforting to think of thought and memory as something physical, something I could touch.

My only real memories before the age of seven are all from photographs. I remember the heat of a sun-baked saddle because I've seen the picture: me in the middle of the Arizona desert, five years old, wearing mismatched socks—one green, one red—and seated on a gnarled trunk saddled for tourists. My rotund child-body was dwarfed by the landscape, my face squinting and blurred in front of a long stretch of scraggly brush, red rock, and nothing. The hot saddle burned the backs of my thighs where my brightly flowered shorts rode up.

Other Polaroid snapshots fill in the rest of that summer. My mother and I in front of towering saguaros, our arms held up in the same pose, smiling. My father and I standing at the edge of the Petrified Forest, his eyes shaded by his white straw cowboy hat, stone tree stumps all around us. My father was just average height, but I still only came up to his thigh. Years later, when I had grown to his shoulder, he often spoke of that trip 'out West.'

“We took you all kinds of places when you were too young to remember it,” he would tell me with his trademark pessimism. “And after you were old enough, of course, we never went back.”

II.

Memory was important to my father. He lived in fear of Alzheimer’s, the disease his mother had. He would joke about it—“You know the nice thing about Alzheimer’s? You’re always meeting new people”—but he also told me about the changes in his mother’s memory; how her behavior had altered, her beliefs and mannerisms; how she had become desperate to control her surroundings, aware that something was wrong but unable to figure out what it was; and how she had begun to mistake him for his father, and then, eventually, for some strange bearded man she did not know. My father was wounded by his mother’s forgetting. He was the first of her children to stop visiting the nursing home.

I never knew my grandmother when she didn’t have Alzheimer’s. When I was small, she still remembered enough to tell me the basics of her life. She had lived in Boston, Massachusetts, before moving to Kentucky, and often spoke of the city proudly. Her mother had been a Scottish immigrant named Lotta Belle McGeoch, and her father, a Norwegian ship captain called Richard Olsen. Her parents had disapproved mightily when my grandmother eloped at age nineteen with a Kentucky farm boy. I was never sure if their displeasure was because of the difference in economic standing, or because (as all accounts testify), my grandfather was a self-righteous jackass.

It wasn’t long before my grandmother was unable to answer questions about her life. She was a woman fragmented; she still knew her hobbies, her likes and dislikes, the names of her

parents, but I could never be sure if she really remembered, or if the memories were due to her children's constant reminders. Aunt Barbara would buy her sweatshirts in various shades of blue, because that was Grandmother's favorite color. Aunt Nancy would play "The Sound of Music" on the TV in the other room, because Grandmother loved to sing. "Don't you like this shirt, Mother? It's blue," they'd say. "Here, don't you want to watch this? Don't you love Julie Andrews?" She could do nothing but agree with them.

Grandmother had been a librarian and an avid reader, so we brought her newspapers, magazines, and children's books, but nothing that required much of an attention span. She would often pick up something and read it aloud, then reread it after a pause, having forgotten her action from a moment before. One Christmas, my father yelled, exasperated, "Would someone just take that away from her?" I waited until she had finished reading, then swooped in and snatched the newspaper from her hands, giving only a half-hearted excuse. I knew it didn't matter. I only had to wait a couple of minutes, and then, like the swipe of an eraser on a chalkboard, Grandmother would forget my rudeness.

Until a year or two before her death, Grandmother still knew how to read. We realized that it was really over when she had forgotten how to sound out the words on the page; after that, it was just a matter of waiting for her body to stop.

III.

Whenever I visited Grandmother's house, in the days before the Alzheimer's became unmanageable, I would see the mug. White ceramic, emblazoned with bright blue and red letters: "I'm 51% Norwegian!" I had to ask my father to explain it to me; how could anyone be fifty-one percent anything? He told me that it was a bad attempt at humor: the phrase meant

Grandmother was half-Norwegian, but the makers of the mug had added an extra one percent to convey the message that the lineage was “more” than just half.

“She probably doesn’t even know what it means,” he said. “Someone probably gave it to her as a gift because they thought it was cute.” His voice, full of disdain, conveyed what he thought of that notion.

He often told me about the time that Grandmother had gone with us to Disney World (another vacation that I had been too young to remember) and had insisted on going to a restaurant that served traditional Norwegian cuisine.

“She hated it. *Despised* it. She pitched a fit and refused to believe that it was actual Norwegian food.”

Once, I asked him what traditional Norwegian cuisine was like.

“A lot of bland, white food,” he said. “Every dish was white. There might’ve been some bread.” It sounded like he’d despised it, too.

My father may have been repulsed by the concept of being “51% Norwegian,” but he had his own thoughts on his lineage, and his quarter-portion of Norwegian ancestry had held significance for him since he was very young.

“I read a book and decided that I was descended from Vikings. I had *Viking blood*,” he said. He bared his teeth at me, and I grinned back.

This was not something he had to explain or justify to me. I could immediately see the appeal. Vikings were fierce, nomadic warriors; they raped, pillaged (at the time, I didn’t know what those words meant, but they sounded awesome), and burnt down villages. They had intimidating ships and elegant, fiery funerals at sea. They had a rich mythology I was only just

starting to explore. And better yet, my father, with his long gray beard and cold-blue eyes, *looked* like he could be a Viking. I wanted to be a Viking, too.

I'm one-eighth Viking! I thought excitedly. Suddenly, I was tied into something larger than myself. I had an origin and an ancestry I could be proud of, just as my grandmother did. My blue eyes meant something; my pale skin meant something. If I wanted, I could become a raging warrior, blood-flecked and battle-scarred. The summer we moved Grandmother out of her old house, I stalked through her backyard, shooting small bitter pears from the trees with arrows I'd made myself. I could feel it in my gut and every innocuous thump of my heart: something inside me was tough, angry, and destined for Valhalla, like my ancestors before me.

IV.

I was twelve years old when I found *D'Aulaires' Book of Norse Myths* on a shelf in our book-piled living room. It had lost its dust jacket, and the edges of the faux-leather binding had worn down to the cardboard beneath. Inside its pages were tales of old gods like Odin, Loki, and Thor—all the best ones, in my youthful opinion—and colored pencil drawings that brought the Aesir, Vanir, Valkyries, and Jötnar to life. Every illustration showed flashing metal armor, bright blue eyes, the creak of ice, the long low howl of Heimdall's horn. The book told the whole story, from Ymir, the frost giant whose blood made the world, to Ragnarok, the apocalyptic final battle of the gods.

I read the book over and over again. I became engrossed in the stories of Odin's thoughtfulness and careful planning, Loki's savage trickery, and Thor's wordless rage. I could see myself in all three of them. I could even see my father in them. I liked to think that we both had a bit of the North in us. We were hard as ice; nothing could touch us unless we wanted it to.

But every Norse myth was a story about inevitability, and no matter how many times I read the stories, Ragnarok always came to pass. Heimdall's horn always heralded the last day. And, equally inevitable, my grandmother's disease kept worsening, until finally her body gave out.

My father was terrified of forgetting. I, on the other hand, was afraid of ending. My inner Viking warrior, however fierce and strong, couldn't deal well with Ragnarok. The first time that I really thought about death—that final, terminal sentence—I couldn't sleep. I stared up at the ceiling, my mind full of sightless eyes and morbid visions of maggots. Finally, I got out of bed and wandered the halls of my house. It was late at night and raining, appropriate for my mood.

I went into the kitchen, planning to get a drink of water to try to chase some of the horrific images from my mind. My father was there, sitting by the open window, watching the rain beat against the trees in the backyard. He looked up at me.

“I have insomnia,” he said. “What's your excuse?”

“I couldn't sleep,” I offered lamely, suddenly feeling tears threaten. “I guess I'm kind of weirded out.”

He grunted and looked back out at the rain, motioning for me to join him. I pulled up another chair. The cool, damp summer breeze misted our faces. We were silent for a few minutes before he spoke.

“When I was living on the farm,” he began, which translated to *When I was a boy*. “We had this tin roof. Whenever it rained at night, you could hear the raindrops on the roof. It made this pinging sound. I'd lie there and listen to it.” He paused. “You can't get the same effect with roofs these days. I always thought we should get a metal roof, but with the insulation, the sound still wouldn't be the same.” He nodded out at the night. Rain drummed lightly against the

roof of the shed, and I could hear leaves rustling from the weight of droplets. “This, though? It’s a good substitute.”

We sat there for a long time, watching the rain. No photographs were taken, no tales told of ancient gods... but I think, sometimes, that if thought and memory had been ravens, we could have wrested them from the sky that night. They would have perched on our shoulders forever, gently cawing with the sound of water.