

Journaling Out:
The Accidental Memoir

J.D. was struggling; life had become an imposition on him. There were days when it was night before he realized that the day had passed him over. It was the sickness of habit, I'd decided; it was separating him from himself.

And J.D.'s sin was that he smiled all the way down.

I remember that year. It was the Year of the Snake, a Chinese leap year. I finally met my brother through his writing journal; the way it moved and shaped itself in sync with the boiling memories, the way it stood queerly in the well-lighted corner of my study-turned-self-examination skunk works. That was the year I read those hand-scrabble pages backwards as if it was Lennon's, *A Day in the Life*, spun counterclockwise, hoping to hear some answers to the questions we all wished someone would've asked.

It was like that, it's still like that. It will forever be like that. Pain is an ugly dog and the dead take something with them when they go. I know this from his journal, not from reading it but feeling it as if the blue-ink words were synapses in my own brain.

My brother was a silent, still-life drama with raging dissonance penned behind his pallet. He was a stealth neurotic, only acting out the haunting noirs and the tragic comedies after he'd put his kids to bed and opened his bound journals to cut veins and dip his quills into the red-blue blood. Nobody read them. His wife thought he was working on spread sheets for tomorrow's breakfast meetings.

When she dumped them on my front porch that day, right after the funeral, eyes still puffy and thick, silicone straining against a rayon blouse, all she could say was, "Here, you keep them. I don't understand them. Hell, John, I guess I didn't understand *him*."

"But maybe you could, you know, gain some insight into why..." I asked.

"Ah, c'mon, John. Why does anyone jump off the Bay Bridge? He left me all alone, embarrassed me. Why didn't he just do something simple, like have an affair or get hooked on cocaine? Things everybody does; acceptable and correct. And the Bridge, for Christ's sake? With TV cameras and rush hour traffic? He could've asked for attention in other ways."

"I think he did." I was holding it together, but only barely.

"He never asked me, never told me. His mystery was my undoing. I could never tell if what he was doing was the right thing for us."

"The right thing indeed, Francine. Too much of the right thing, maybe." I realized that she didn't get it, that I could only make it worse.

"How are the kids, Francine?" I switched subjects.

"I don't know, John. Maybe those writing books of his will tell."

"Francine," I asked as she stomped away, "What do we see when we go blind?" She wrinkled up her nose and only turned part way around, silent, brooding, glossing over her sadness with glitter and rouge. "We see what we should have imagined all along," I called after her. "Don't blame my brother, lots of people become victims of themselves." And she was gone, herself a victim, the former spouse of the formerly wounded idealist, burning rubber in her 735i.

They sat in the file boxes all that summer, talking to me but not very loud. I couldn't put them away and I couldn't read them. They were like palace guards standing sentinel against my own self pity. When a seemingly healthy young man decides to end his life before what everyone thinks will be his apex, you don't celebrate it as you would a normal death.

But what is a *normal* death anyway? People die, normally. But their death, along with their birth, is probably the most unique part of their life.

It was a sultry, late August afternoon when I sweat out that revelation. I had caught myself dialing J.D.'s old office number, wanting to ask him about the betting line on the 49ers or if he wanted to take the kids to the park on Sunday and wear tie-dye. One time his secretary answered and told me that, "Mr. Dorn is no longer with us." And for the slightest of moments, I thought I might've dreamt his death and he had simply changed jobs. It was time to read his journals.

My head could no longer remain a refuge, a shelter for how things should've or shouldn't be. I had to know why so that I could get back to that comfortably numb place where all my brain had to do was process information. I reached for one of the dozen dusty books that spilled over the top of the old box, not knowing or caring if there was any order or clarity. I know that pain changes our lives, not fluffy bunny rabbit moments. What I wanted to know was how do things get so perfectly tragic that a thirty-four year old man with two young kids and another forty good summers lining up in front of him can step off the edge of one of the most photographed testimonies to man's dreams? Maybe J.D. just stopped dreaming.

And that's how it started—simply by wondering. I read a few passages, scratched my head, jotted down a few thoughts. Within a week I was digging gopher holes in my mind. By Labor Day, J.D. and I were having imagined conversations about the various aspects of the writing journals. I'd started my own memoir of sorts to test drive this self-aggrandizing. But when set up against J.D.'s boney sinew of armchair revelations--as pathos-laden as they were--I felt like something pathetic was colliding with the truth. It wasn't heroic, not even like brothers trying to bury childhood differences; it was as if separate heartbeats were trying to find one another in the dark, each too weak to sustain themselves alone.

My wife suggested that talking to myself like this was a sign of mental illness. I told her someone was listening. Her eyes gathered something like pity but more like sorrow. I'd seen this before but not in her.

I went to a therapist. He told me to come back every Thursday. I went to a "healer" down by the Wharf, she told me that my friend was "channeling" and gave me the number of past-life specialist. As I walked back to my car I could see the bridge's frowning arc through the haze. Mocking me.

The first time J.D. actually wrote in my own journal, using my hand as his vehicle of choice, "channeling" I suppose, it was early fall and the leaves had covered the back lawn. My wife had left a note on the fridge before she'd gone off to some conference where they, well...where they confer about things. Her perfume filled the kitchen all day.

"John," her high pitched voice caused the dogs to bark, "Time to put your self back into the race. J.D. would want you to be focused. Can you focus on the yard while I'm gone?" The words, "your self" was underlined twice. It was grammatically misused, so I paid it no heed.

Why is it that people can so easily place thoughts into the minds of the deceased? Is it because they can't defend themselves? I'd ask J.D.

J.D., I wrote in my journal, framed as a query, did you find yourself trusting your imagination more than your memory, events more than eventuality, your dreams more than what has passed for reality? Because I'm finding that's no way to write in a journal, no way to face the truth that must emerge like a lanced boil that is painful even to the thought but when cut and dripping red paste into a bucket of words and phrases, it feels like no release has before or ever could again, unless, of course, you continue to bury the future as it unfolds and a new infection grows under your skin. And then you write it again...not because you know how but because you can. Did you find that, little brother?

Heritage-plundering is a learned skill. That's all he said as my finger wrote out his response in blue ink on white space and I mouthed the words quietly behind the closed door.

"Do you remember those months before you jumped even before they began?" I wrote, wondering who I was asking--like a child recalls Baby land, their in-vitro village images that might have happened and might've not? "The pressure must've been building, slowly, then, once it was decided, a sense of the sexually-equivalent urgency put your ass in the chair at night, a pen between your fingers."

Restraint and patience were required, he wrote back in my journal sometime around Halloween, *not the immediacy of wham-slam fulfillment. For the experience of memoir is the way of self-hypnosis--equal parts skill, commitment, subconscious truths, pain, revelation, revilement, nostalgia and if done right, more pain--slow, beautiful, exposing hurt.*

"But little brother," I responded right away, "a journal has to have a beginning but can have no end. When it does, it's called biography or obituary."

And then it's written by someone else. What catalyzes the pen though, can be something profound, don't you think? Did you ever feel...profound?"

But, John, you see, that blanket statement is easily shot full of jingoistic shrapnel. It rarely happens that way. In fact, there is no blank formula for beginning a journal, a memoir or streaming thoughts on a cocktail napkin. For every writer, there is a purpose, under heaven (remember—from bible school, from the song?). I guess I wasn't writer-enough to know where it was taking me. Keeping a journal didn't teach me to say that, it just gave me the courage to lie first and then tell the truth, which, now that I think about it, is the foundation for most good journaling. You lie in your head to yourself about your life and the way it has unfolded, and then you begin to lie on paper, but in the process, the lies fall away with the pretense and slowly, indefatigably, the truth comes out. And when it emerges, as it did with me in that year before I left, you might not recognize it at first. Truth hurts. Humans suck. We suck. I suck. Say it because if you don't, you might as well write fiction where a different kind of truth can be told.

Eliot told it when it said that, "Between the idea and the reality, lies the shadow." In those months before J.D. left, it was dark much of the time. Not gray but black. And the words, the words became moonlight and the worse times were in those long shadows that split the time between sundown and moon rise. We didn't talk, not like we are now. Why didn't you say that things were thick and muddy, I wanted to ask him. And, well...consequential?

Oh, John, but I did. But no one saw, no one noticed through the quiet noise of their own little cat's feet. I don't like gray and don't appreciate ambiguity. I hate those shadowy memoirs that don't even hint because they're too blatant. They only lie; damn romance novels rife with true imagination but false memory, safe-at-any-speed texts with a narrative arc that reads like a flat line EKG. I guess my sign language was more than six degrees from top-dead-center.

When I read this now, it scares me. I know you're right, that pain is the treason of the affected, that all those best-selling homogenous props and postulated pre-empted strikes for re-elections and movie releases and the general malaise of a sagging super-star ego; all those bad memoirs steal from the raw text of a real life. Even if it's a banal one.

"But J.D., I have to know. Isn't silence the final symptom of despair? You were writing up until you flew and then floated. Your life was not cursory. You were inclined. It says so right here—*I will not let life hammer me into a solid, common shape.*"

J.D. didn't write my back until just before Christmas. And during that autumn lull my journal began to take its own shape as an oral history of the subject matter, a collection of individual's anecdotes and a subjective layman's explanation of why, why did he jump? I was using other's words as foundation before I could build my own. And I realized that it wasn't so much mockery as it

was muddled diatribe. "He was a good man," "Such a shame," and "Who would've guess it?" As I felt that subconscious need welling up, I was afraid that if I put a label on it, called it *my journal, my answers*, people would ask "Why should I be so obsessed? It was his decision."

But as the words came and the narrative arc steepened into peaks and valleys that directed the text away from the expository and situated them into a supporting role of exploration, I began to realize that if I didn't try to disguise or pretend my own words would find their way to the other side.

While I waited, I began to devour other memoirs, swallowing these polished publications half a dozen at a time. Some had moments of stinging irony and tragic mirth. Others appeared showy, scripted and well-timed glorified advertorials. The best didn't require me to effort-mine what nuggets lay below the subjective rants and thinly veiled efforts at social posturing. Their personality came through breezily, and you could love them or hate them and everything in between. Behind your back, they challenged you to take a stance, commit to your own feelings toward the writer as subject and the subject as proffered by the writer.

A good memoir would engage. The journal underneath it must've hurt, must've been some fiery, private transaction, a war with oneself where everyone wins. A place where you bring your own redemption because you've mined it by hand; dried blood under the fingernails and all.

The worse ones really pissed me off. "What happened?" I wanted to ask. "Did you find comfort in the shadow of illusion because the dark frightened you?" What genre is this, fairy tale? Science fiction? Docu-denial? It's not even myth because the only lesson here is the degradation of a reader's intelligence, a frightening trend that has not enough value to project beyond a shake of the head. The archetype is banality; forgivable because they're human. Unforgivable for the same reason. It's okay to be a crash test dummy with a typewriter, I wanted to tell them. But that was only part of the self-rhetoric of my convincing. Lord, don't let me fail to engage.

Journal-keepers are writers. And writers are killed for being alike, always the same, always unremembered. But you don't write the true journal to be remembered. The false ones write it to forget their true past and invent something like reality-recollection, where The Bachelor meets Divorce Court and Judge Judy goes on Jerry Springer to speak of her addiction to pain killers just to disguise her nymphomaniacal conquests. They call it memoir but it's really just self-flatulation.

The best do it for clarity; not to hide or morph the weakness but to expose its underbelly and rise above the roar on the wings of self-lacerating revelations. Sometimes you apologize for shit you didn't even pull because you certainly thought about, certainly could've done it. And damn, you sure would've enjoyed it. J.D. had said he thought his wife was so perfect he had to make her mistakes for her.

I wondered about the difference between a journal and a memoir, about the difference between J.D. and me, about being dead and being undead. That was when I realized that J.D.'s words, as much as I missed the mouth from which they came, were no zero-sum game

I had almost put his voice away and filed the journals on a shelf when he came again on Christmas Eve. I had finally stopped calling his office and his wife had not called me back at all.

You want to know, don't you, brother? The words on my books were clues; the answers are in the white space between them, in that space between where you and I used to move around each other like opposing magnets. Was the unyielding gravity of my options so dismal that I had to practice my jack knife from four hundred and fifty feet instead of at the YMCA high dive? Well, that year before I left, if it was a fish, I'd still throw it back because it deserves to be with its own kind. Other years that were spent dreaming or walking the thin green horizon or rehearsing my own demise, all that was just tired laughter. The fact is, the journal might be written during a certain presence but it also leaks into the future carrying the past along with it. You do it right and you don't have a choice. The surviving reader might perceive it as a snapshot of the person's life but a good journal will speak to the author's dead grandparents and their unborn children. It will be sawed off syntax, a primal necessity only understood by those who might've jumped too, unless they could write their own obituary, tear it up and go home whistling a smart tune.

I tried, big brother, I really tried. We'll talk again in the spring when the yellow mustard coats the hills where we would ride our Schwinns. You keep writing. I like what I'm seeing. Because, John, I can hear your heart from here.

I don't regret the things I that I missed that year after J.D. left. What was lost was gained in other ways. I came to know my brother, to know myself, if only between the tattered leather covers. It was a start.

I do regret some of which was cut from the text by my own hand. I can justify it by realizing that people would've been hurt. But what is justifiable narrative, let alone a validated life, if the human condition, in all its tainted pleasures and aesthetic tragedies can't be exposed as a collective? There was that one line from one of our last journals, "we give it together, we take it together," I don't remember the context but only how it fits now, staring at me in the rear view mirror asking questions I already know the answers to; things I learned that year.

The words that were erased while I learned not to, like scenes from an over-edited movie, don't mean that they weren't played out in celluloid or life; it just means you don't get to share them. It's not right or wrong, it just is.

Still, as honest and deft as a writer can be, who are they to say, "That's the way it was?"

And yet, if respect and integrity are foregrounded, and research is thorough, is permission necessary? Maybe we have to first give ourselves

permission to cut our own vein before we bleed on others. If you write a memoir that makes your family squirm, then you've likely succeeded. Right, J.D.?

It was nearly summer, almost a year since he'd been gone. Then he came back.

Yeah, I remember that last journal, its intimate and subtle joys of the loveliest misery. And wish I could live it again, write it differently. So wonderful was the pain, so beautiful the open scars that I stared thinking they'd heal if I just kept writing. Lots of "ifs," John, not enough "when's." But you're doing okay, I see. You've learned much. And you want to keep writing beyond what we have here? You want to tell the stories of others who can't find their own voice? It's no fun dying and waking up in the stories of our heirs.

"Well, J.D., who am I to say that everything is contextual, that one life's bad joke is another's embarrassment? But yes, the writing is connecting me to parts of myself that I'd become separated from. Look what it did for us? I think that at worst, the memoir runs roughshod over lives without regard for feeling and place; the author's lives first to go on record, and then the names are named. At best, it is brutally honest, but honest still, as honest as any memory can be. Both are necessary. We are not islands. We are a species that favors togetherness over otherness. How can one man's story be told unless it is told in context to another being, another animal, another piece of the earth and all its gifted elements?

"Do you ever wish that you'd written other characters into your journal," I asked him?

I did, John. It was your story. I just never got a chance to finish it.

Do you ever wish you'd graduated from journal to memoir?

Of course, but I never made the transition, never made the jump.

"I can do that for us," I spoke into the mirror, "I can cross that bridge."