What it Means to Remember

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Edmund sat at the edge of the old twin-sized bed in his room at his parents’ house. He stared down at the streams of sunlight creeping through his blinds and onto the floor. He remained in this dazed state for a few minutes as he allowed his body to ‘wake up’, until he automatically reached for the hidden pack of Camel cigarettes that were squished beneath his mattress. He placed one between his lips as he stood up, adjusted himself, and walked over to the window. Up went the blinds and sunlight flooded the room, waking Lord Byron who was curled up on the floor. The old Boxer perked his triangular ears as Edmund pried open the window and stuck his head outside, letting the wind ruffle his brown hair. Then he realized he didn’t have a lighter.

He turned around and searched the messy room. Lord Byron was on top of yesterday’s jeans and Edmund had to squat down and coax the boxer off of them. He reached into the front pocket hoping to retrieve a cheap Bic lighter, but only found a wrinkled dollar bill. He kicked clothes around on the floor hoping to find it. He let his eyes scan his room, and then he saw it – not the Bic lighter, but the old silver lighter his grandfather had given him a few years before. It sat on his dresser, where it always had. He grabbed it, wrapped his fingers around the cool
steel, and looked down at the worn inscription “To Martin, with love”. This had been his grandfather’s most prized possession, a gift from Edmund’s grandmother.

Edmund poked his head back out the window. This time last year he was in Pennsylvania, beautifully ignorant and oblivious to what was going on at home. At this moment, he wanted to be back at Penn State, sitting in class, going out at night, tailgating before football games, like everyone else. And yet, he was here, in his old bedroom, sneaking a smoke.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a knock at his bedroom door. He quickly tossed the cigarette and closed the window.

“Come in.” His mother entered and Edmund noticed how old she looked. Her hair, once dark like his, was now speckled with gray, and he was sure he saw little wrinkles outlining features on her face. She threw the laundry basket she was holding onto his floor.

“Ed, I told you last night to do your laundry.” As she said this she glanced down at the mounds of clothes littering his floor. “And you could stand to clean the rest your room a bit. You’ve been home, what? Two weeks? Jesus, boy…”

“Whatever…” He couldn’t even look her in the eyes. “Just leave me alone.”

His mother sighed. “Don’t take it out on me, young man. I’ve been dealing with this a lot longer than you have.” She gave him the look, the one mothers give when they know they are right. Then she left.

Edmund knew she was right. He lay down on
his bed and tossed the lighter from hand to hand. He was in his room, packing for college, when his grandfather had given him the lighter. Edmund was leaving for Pennsylvania that very day. Pop had stood tall and strong, and told him stories of his college days. Edmund remembered the way his grandfather had poked his head out of the window, smoking his pipe. When he had finished he turned around and reached his leathery wrinkled hand into his pocket and retrieved the lighter. “I want you to remember how important this was to me,” he said and gently handed it to Edmund.

Lying on his bed, Edmund recalled how Pop had lingered on the word ‘remember’ and understood the true meaning of that statement for the first time.

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Edmund made his way across the University of North Carolina campus early on Monday morning. The dew on the ground dampened his leather Sperry’s. The smell of wet leaves brought back thoughts of his own campus. Wincing, he ignored the ‘hellos’ and nods from passing students. His father had not been at home all weekend and Edmund desperately needed to talk to him; his only choice was to catch his father at work. He trudged up old stone steps and pulled open a heavy wooden door, glancing around to make sure he was in the history department. A secretary just inside the doorway informed him that his father was in class. So Edmund waited.

He sat in an uncomfortable leather chair in the lobby and enviously stared out the window at the
students on the quad. Regrettably, he had forgotten his cigarettes at home. He fidgeted in the chair and popped his knuckles so loudly that the secretary looked up from her desk. Edmund stood up and pretended to read the flyers posted on the bulletin board in the middle of the lobby. His father always gave long-winded lectures. He was about to give up waiting when the heavy wooden door opened and a tall man with a briefcase entered.

“Ed, I didn’t expect to see you until tonight.”

“Yeah, I’ve been waiting all morning. Not like I had anything better to do. And I wanted to talk to you.”

His father nodded, asked the secretary to forward his calls to voicemail, and led Edmund down a carpeted hallway until he turned into a doorway on the left.

“Have a seat.” His father gestured toward another uncomfortable leather chair. Edmund did not sit down. Merely out of habit his father played his voicemail messages, but Edmund wondered if he was trying to ignore him.

“Dad.” He interrupted a message from a drawling professor. His father looked up. Straight to the point, Edmund told himself. “I want to go back to school.”

“Nonsense.” His father pointed out that Edmund had already missed nearly half of the semester. “Now sit down.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t be here anymore.”

His father looked at him, narrowing his eyes. “I don’t understand? Oh, Ed, come on! Your mother and I can’t do this by ourselves...we need your help. I know it’s hard...”
Edmund finally sat down. “Pop doesn’t even remember I exist, Dad…”

“You need to be here for the family, for your grandfather.” His father sighed, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“He just stares at me like I’m a stranger. It’s…I don’t know…like it’s not even him, I can’t handle it.”

His father just shook his head and sighed again. “Ed, you know he has his moments. It’s hard, I know. But Pop moving in with us is the best thing for him. And you are going to remain here until we get him settled in, understand?”

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Walking home, Edmund remembered at this moment was being dropped off at his grandparents’ house the summer he was eleven years old. His parents needed “some time alone.” Even then he knew that meant time with the couples therapist and maybe even time with the divorce lawyer. He remembered Pop standing beside him on the front porch, smoking his pipe. He always smelled like sweet tobacco. “Eddie,” he said, “Don’t worry, they’ll work it out, and if they don’t, I’ll make ‘em.” Then he winked. The wink replayed in Edmund’s mind.

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Edmund spent the rest of the week helping move Pop’s belongings from his house into his new ‘home’ – the spare bedroom. Edmund had a hard time being around his grandfather now, and he didn’t quite understand why. He had hoped something would trigger Pop’s deteriorating memory these last few weeks. He had hoped Pop would recognize him and
tell him a story like he had years before. Nothing worked. The Alzheimer’s was too progressed. He could only watch his grandfather walk around, confused, in a daze. Edmund had escaped the memory of the man he admired most, and he couldn’t escape from that. He realized that now. All he could do was escape to his own bedroom and sneak a cigarette.