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*The part removed*

Abstract:

“The Part Removed” retells a personal family anecdote. Both in form and content, it explores the tension between the parts of the anecdote shared for enjoyment and the parts intentionally left out. Often told at family gatherings, the first half of the anecdote is a story of a seven-year-old boy refusing to go home, having a tantrum and shouting out “You bitch! You bitch!” to his uncle. The part of the story not told is what happens after, where the boy’s distress leads to unexpected threats of violence to his body and soul. “The Part Removed” follows three voices involved in the anecdote: the uncle retelling the story, the “you” who internally replies, and the parts crossed out that are meant to be unspoken. All the while, childhood pain and the possibility of self-mutilation haunt the short story, as it does every time the comedic family anecdote is shared.

Biographical note:

Oscar Davis is an early career researcher, and holds a PhD in Creative Writing at Deakin University, Australia. Teaching across the University of Melbourne and Deakin University in gender studies and creative writing, Oscar’s research is interested in artistic rhetoric and subjectivity, experimental fiction and the cross sections between creative writing and gender subversion. His PhD thesis involved writing an exegesis with an accompanying novel, *Static Sun, Phantom Breath*, which implements and explores a post-structuralist analysis of practice-led research, artistic aporia and the relationships between culture and nature.

Keywords:

Hauntings, erasure, family anecdote, severance

Are ghosts always the remnants of past lives? Or can you be haunted by something that was never there?

A child. Family staring. “You bitch”. A joke.

~~Anger. Hand outstretched. Family staring. A knife.~~

There are never two parts.

—

## Part one

*Has Oscar ever told you about the time he refused to leave shabbat dinner? No? Oh, it's a great story.*

You knew that your uncle would soon bring it up. From the moment you walked through the front door to when you sat down at the dining room table, you knew that he was just waiting for a break in the conversation. It's the same story told every time you bring a new guest to shabbat dinner.

In the past you would audibly groan but this time you stay quiet and look down at your hands. You can't bring yourself to look at your uncle's face – at the gleam in his eyes. The accumulation of hearing the story a million times before causes your cheeks to flush with heat, ~~but mainly you would be thinking of what was always left out of your uncle's anecdote—an epilogue to the punchline.~~

Your guest responds with curiosity, acting as audience members are meant to, as your uncle continues, unaware of your silent protest.

*How old must you have been? Five or six? Maybe seven? It was a bigger shabbat dinner than now. All the cousins and grandparents and great aunties and uncles. Just your normal shabbas – well, normal for our big family – until it was time for him to leave. He lodged himself between the wall and an old cabinet near the front door and refused to move.*

You didn't want to leave because you were playing with your cousin – the one whose name you always used to forget. The same one who often enthralled you into a wild ignorance, like when you both drew directly on your auntie's walls with textas or cheated at Pesach games to split the reward. When your mum told you it was time to leave, you and your cousin were most likely running around the house or crawling under the dinner table, poking the shins of elderly family members. You refused to leave because she was staying longer and you wanted to keep playing.

*His mum tried pleading with him, bribing him, threatening him, but nothing. Gornisht! Eventually, she gave up and said to me, “You deal with him, I’m going home”.*

Listening to your uncle speak, you feel the pressure to show in some way or another, after more than two decades, that you’ve grown up – that you admit your stubbornness had gone too far. But you remain silent. You don’t want to betray the feelings of that younger, foreign self, nor dishonour the person both within and before you. ~~In either case, your refusal to leave wasn’t close to the worst thing to happen that night.~~

The story creeps to the end scene. Each segment is told with perfect timing. The small pauses between images and the looks your uncle gives you and your guest are designed to lure in the listeners and make them anticipate the comedic absurdity to come.

At the time, while crouched between the wall and the cabinet, you were convinced that your stubbornness would force your mum to stay a little longer. But when she left with your brother, leaving you both surprised and victorious, you truly wondered how the night would end. Faced with the opportunity to go off and continue playing, you instead found yourself fixed to the spot. You had gone too deep. You forgot altogether your initial reason to play with your cousin and instead submitted to the sheer will of determination and guilt.

Soon the rest of the family started to leave. Some were embarrassed by you and didn’t know where to look. Others quickly glanced over or gave a slight shake of their head. You remember your nana giving a “boohoo” and a small, cruel chuckle before leaving with your papa. Or at least, you think your papa must have been with her. He died a few years later but for some reason, you can only remember your nana there, alone. He now consists of fractured memories – outings to museums, amoebas under microscopes, the smell of his cologne, the prickle of his cheeks. While the image of him fades into wisps of feeling, you will never forget when your mum unexpectedly rang the doorbell at your dad’s house. She knelt before you and your brother to tell you that your papa – her dad – had died suddenly from a heart attack. He was sixty-six years old; you were eight. Sitting across your bed, you, your mum and your brother held each other and wept – your first shared feeling of death.

*Everyone started to go home, even his cousin who he wanted to play with in the first place. I decided enough was enough. I gave him one last chance to willingly leave, and after he continued to refuse, I pulled him out of the corner and lifted him over my shoulders, fireman style.*

You can still remember the sensation of inertia as you were swung off the ground, your uncle’s shoulder digging into your ribs. At this moment in the retelling, your uncle briefly looks at you, excited for the ending to come.

*I want you to image this: all the way to the car, with him over my shoulder, he was hitting and kicking, yelling out, “You bitch! You bitch!” And the whole car ride to his mum’s – “You bitch! You bitch!”*

Your family laughs, and your guest does too. The ~~first part of the~~ story is over, but your breath remains held a little longer. You shake your head and give a small awkward smile. You don’t want to protest or ruin the mood, so instead you quietly take the role of the butt of the joke, pretending you’re all right with it all. In retrospect, you can see how the image of a small child having a tantrum and calling his uncle a bitch could be perceived as funny. But you can’t bring yourself to laugh, ~~nor to forget~~.

You can’t remember where or when you learnt the word bitch. You probably overheard it spoken by your mum or dad on the phone or by one of the many TV shows that made up a vast amount of your childhood. You do, however, remember when you learnt the word cunt – you were ten or eleven and a friend of yours whispered it into your ear so that you could call your brother it during a fight. To your surprise, it had little effect. Maybe if your uncle’s story was about a child yelling cunt, then you would have found it funny, ~~but then again, it would not have been a story about you.~~

The shabbat dinner continues and the conversation moves on, although you find yourself lagging behind. Your mind is caught within the world of your uncle’s story. You struggle to return to the shabbat dinner and your guest, distracted by a feeling of something lingering just beyond your vision – in the gaps of your fingers and the reflection of the candles off the cutlery. Something like a prayer you know with deep reverence but have never translated into a language you understand. As the night continues, you quietly lose yourself ~~in the forgotten part of your uncle’s story.~~

Does no one else remember?

## Part two

You weren’t aware that the car was moving. In fact, you can’t remember anything between the moment of being thrown into the car and being back at home, standing in the kitchen and holding a large butcher’s knife to your wrist.

Although forgotten, or not seen through white-hot tears, you know that you must have passed through the streets of your childhood. Past the hospice your nana would later die in – where between her breaths that rattled from liquid-filled lungs, you would squeeze her hand as a way to say goodbye. You must have marched past the silver birches in your front garden and through the front door where you cried at your birthday party because too many people were giving you attention. You must have walked down the hallway you swear was haunted because, late some nights when walking back to your room from the toilet, you would feel a spectral pull towards

the glass-stained door, a beckoning down the hallway that brought you to your knees as you attempted to drag yourself back to your bed. You must have passed the living room where you shattered a window with a toy hammer and hid behind the couch late into the night. Past the walls where your parents' marriage fell apart, even though you were too young to remember.

With your uncle and auntie, you entered the kitchen where your mum was waiting. There were others there too – another one or two of your mum's siblings, although you are not sure; your vision wasn't set on them. There was sound – possibly laughter, possibly anger – until the moment you pulled out the knife from the second drawer of the kitchen. You held it over your arm, your soft skin lifted to the ceiling.

“Is this what you want me to do!”

Everyone stared. Time collapsed and only the space between the knife and your arm existed. Even your family seemed to morph into a pillar of cloud – one indistinguishable from the other, staring, unsure what to say or do. Your question was shouted in earnest: did they not care? Did they see your fury as childish? As something to laugh about? While you remember the fog of your family through angry eyes, you can also somehow see the image of yourself from a distance, watching, waiting for what you will do next.

With hindsight, you understand how you must have looked. It was a scene that recalls images of suicidality – of a knife held over wrists, like something you would see in *The Sixth Sense* or *The Royal Tenenbaums* a few years later. But your intention was never to take your own life. You simply, violently, wanted to cut off your hand. You wanted to hurt your family via your own suffering. It was a sudden and great contemplation to sacrifice a part of you to express something beyond tears, words or screams. A friend of yours, many years later, would tell you that you were emotionally manipulating them, and you would question whether that was true – whether a child could do that and why. A part of you doesn't want to admit that you were possibly in the wrong, nor give up that utter feeling of victimhood that you embodied at that moment.

But you also wanted to cut off your hand because you knew – somewhere deep within yourself, undefined and unintelligible – that God was in the hands. You have memories of sitting in shul, as warmth and prayer and decorated windows filled your body in a calming choir of synaesthesia. You held your mother's hand in yours, gently turning over her palm, back and forth, feeling the soft touch of her skin, the scar shaped as a crow's foot on the back of her hand, interlinking your small fingers in hers, knowing, feeling that somehow, in those moments, God is in the hands.

The knife wasn't a threat and you weren't holding your body hostage. But neither was the decision automatic, driven by a gravity greater than yours. Through fiery tears, you were ready to sever ties with your body, your family, your God. You wanted to cut it off and you were ready to do so.

But out from the fog of your mum, aunties and uncles, a question emerged that catalysed time once again – “Do you want to go watch TV with your brother?” Their words hovered over the kitchen, both fragile and immense, like that night you watched the North Atlantic Ocean from Cabo Da Roca – the same ocean you imagine your great-grandfather crossed from Poland to Argentina before deciding to stay on the boat to Melbourne. You were alone and couldn’t tell where the ocean ended, and the sky began.

“Do you want to go watch TV with your brother?”

You can’t quite remember if it was a question or a plea. Maybe it was even a demand; a way to regain authority – “Go watch TV with your brother”. In either case, you found yourself putting down the knife on the kitchen bench, walking past your family to the lounge room, before sitting next to your brother on the couch. He gave you an awkward smile before turning to face the TV again. You weren’t embarrassed or angry. What you felt at that moment was inexplicably lost to silence.

Whenever your uncle finishes telling the first part of your story, you wonder whether he or any of your family remembers what happened after. It sits there, underneath the tablecloth, removed but haunting. At moments like these, you question where the absence of your hand has gone. Whether something that never existed could hold you so intimately. Did it reside in that divorced house where silver birches lined the front lawn? Or in the very spaces between your uncle’s words? Maybe it played out completely differently from how you remember or was an amalgamation of many incidents pulled together.

At the shabbat dinner, sitting in the remnants of your uncle’s story, you find yourself slowly feeling up and down your arm, hoping to recall the touch of your mum’s hands at shul all those years ago. Although it hurts and you find it confusing, you hold your arm’s absence close. It resides on top of your flesh, a doubling of a forgotten past and an eluded future. You turn to your mum and quietly ask her if she remembers the incident with the knife. Whether she remembers what happened after her brother’s story. She looks at you perplexed and says she can’t quite recall. Surprised by her response, you wonder whether a part of mourning is forgetting. ~~Or whether the second part of the story happened at all.~~