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Put the Garbage Out

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The Garage
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The places we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our convenience. They were only a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at the time; the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

– Marcel Proust

The note from your mother is the first thing to be shown in the Garage, and in many ways, it's a fitting way to start. A message, from a mother, to a child. Putting the lights in, or out; turning things off, or on. The Garage, a small space, like a womb. Putting the garbage out; taking out the trash. Getting rid of things, and perhaps beginning again, or beginning anew. There's a lot in all of this.

"The old is dying and the new cannot be born." Gramsci's quote is right where we're at now. Like a garage, or womb, something is there and not there, more or less out of sight, waiting to live, or finally to be dead. I had this little note from my mother boxed away for years. She's gone. The house is gone. I'm years older than she was when she wrote it. How to think of it now? A garage is a space where we hold onto things, or save them, or a space somewhere in between saving and getting rid of stuff. The old will die and the new will be born. We're in an ushering-in phase right now; it feels right and necessary to think simultaneously about the dead, the dying and the living, and sort through it all. To decide what to keep and what to throw out.

Can you share the basic facts of the note, and the snapshot that's not included in the exhibition? The "who," "what," "when," "where" and "why" of it all?

I'm not exactly sure. It was the 80s. That was our house. We moved into that house in Willoughby, Ohio -- the dumb little town we both grew up in. My mother always hated Willoughby. "Hicksville, USA," she'd say, "Stay outta here kid." Yeah, this must have been around 1983-84. We lived down the same street for a short time. The other place was a four-family rental property; a big, weird, blue house we shared with three other tenants. It was a shitty neighborhood over there; somehow things were different, or better at that house, only a mile up the road. It felt like a new start. I was 11 or 12 years old, she was in her late 30s. It's strange to think of her now, as being that young, even if only then.

I imagine your memories of that time and that house are hazy and spotty, yet still highly evocative, as childhood memories tend to be. What else do you remember about the house and your life together there?

I didn't love that house; it was just somewhere we ended up; where we landed after my parents divorced. We were happy there, for the most part. Her father bought the house for us. She paid him rent; I don't know what the arrangement was exactly. I remember that ill-fitting coat I'm wearing.

When I was in high school, my friends were always at our house. My mother was unconventional; that would be one way to put it. She didn't care if we smoked; she didn't really care what we did. Sometimes I think her "anything goes" approach was her way of keeping me around the house. Most of my friends had pretty screwed-up home lives. Punk kids, goth kids, burnouts, misfits. One summer, we had a bunch of teenagers from Omaha or somewhere out west staying at the house. One of the kids had set his school on fire. There was a skinhead named "Grim." When they finally moved out, they got her a huge bouquet of flowers. Everyone loved her. She was a lot like them -- wounded.

And she loved those years. A house full of teenagers and drama. There were my friends -- the punk kids -- and then her crowd -- mostly bikers, barflies and lawyers. She had a guy living with us for a while, a biker nicknamed "Birdman." He was awful; we didn't get along. Then, in the spring of my senior year, some other guy from the bar was courting her. Once I graduated, I moved out. They got married early that summer.

She didn't want me to stick around Willoughby, but it killed her to see me go. It wasn't just her getting married; I would have left anyway. But now I think that's partly why she married the guy. To not be alone.

How was she wounded? Do you feel like you can answer that?

It was her parents, mostly -- especially her father. He was physically and verbally abusive -- possibly sexually. It's a troubling thought I can't put to rest. She told me about the time he cracked the engine block on a new car he had bought for her, and he beat her up. He could go berserk at the drop of a hat. Another time, we were all at a restaurant and he was lecturing her. She was 40-something at the time, and he was 70-something. She got up, said she had to go to the restroom, and never came back. She had also ordered a mountain of food. He was pissed. She had a friend pick her up and take her home. After dinner, I went out to the parking lot with my grandfather, and when he wasn't looking, I checked for her under his car. I know it sounds crazy, but I had a gut feeling that she might be lying there, waiting for him to run over her with the car. That's it, in a nutshell. Fuck up your life, destroy your life, as a way to avenge something.

It seems that the two of you were very close, and not just in a typical parent-child kind of way, but because of her; the way she was, and the way she focused on you.

Oh yeah we were really close. Our relationship was sacrosanct. She knew what mattered and kept that sacred. She took anything that

vinterested me very seriously. And it wasn't just me; she was like this with family, friends, store clerks, mailmen. Intimacy came very easily for her. A real "I get you" kind of intimacy. With me, it was particularly intense, and loving.

When did you get to New York?

The house was so crazy all the time and I couldn't stand it anymore. I needed to get out of Ohio too. I wanted more. I left at 17. A year later, I visited New York. A year or two after that, I was more or less permanently there. She lived another thirteen years in that house. She died there. Took her own life on a Sunday in early June.

I'm sorry.

Thanks. I'm sorry too. I'll never get over it. What was right about her was so right, and for her to have to die like that felt so wrong. It's complicated. Her life and death, just as it was, is so sewn into everything now. It's impossible to imagine any of it being any other way.

Can we talk more about the note? In one way, it's so mundane. "Put the garbage out." But your mother made it loving and sweet. "Tommy." "Love, Mom." And so it's become sentimental and bittersweet. And now, placing the note in the Garage, we're finding some additional, metaphorical meaning. It goes on and on. What would your mother think of all this? And does the note bring any other specific memories to mind?

I don't know what she would have thought. About this or the rest of the work I do. She was incredibly supportive, but she did once tell me to "lay off the family crap." I know what she meant now. There's a lot of pain and unhappiness unearthed by it all. It's bottomless.

The note makes me think of our life together. The day-to-day. And her drinking. There was always a sort of night-before and morning-after vibe at our house. The note has a morning-after feel. She's putting things together again. Some nights were pretty bad, but then the next day, she'd be up, on the phone, doing chores, paying bills, whatever. There was always this conflict with her -- between holding it together and letting it all go. Year by year, things were let go, more and more. Things were still alright when she wrote this. I can tell by the handwriting.

She probably left the note on the dining room table. It looks like a sheet of paper from one of my sketchbooks. I'd leave them around the house, half filled-in. She'd rip a page out, make a grocery list or itemize her bills.





“Love, Mom.” That was very her. Again, the intimacy thing. It was just like her to write that, and so easily disregarded. But there it is, even in this throw-away note, that throw-away moment. She added the love part. Her best quality, so easily disregarded. I’ve thought a lot about that since she died.

How or why I still have this note, I have no idea. I packed everything up after she died. All the letters she wrote to me. I like that this isn’t “art,” it’s just a note, in a garage. There’s enough art. It’s these little, unnoticed intimacies that we let vanish from our lives. Who saves shit like this?

Can you say anything more about the “disregard?”

Being left behind was a big thing in her life. Her father left when she was thirteen. Her brother left. My Dad. Me. All the men in her life. We all shared some moronic male instinct to flee emotional complexity.

Let’s talk a bit more about the garage. A space close to home, yet separate, apart. A place in which to shelter or store things. A space in which to experiment, to tinker, to make and to build. A place from which things emerge, and travel out into the world. And garages are evocative spaces; they have certain surfaces and smells. What do you remember about your garage?

It is amazing how a garage is all those things. It’s such a rough, seemingly unremarkable and purely utilitarian space. I remember our garage in Ohio, those outdoor lights, and the empty driveway. The smooth, cracked, oil-stained floor. And other odd details...There was a red light. The prior owner was an electrician and there were these odd electrical connections throughout the house. The laundry room had an orange light. I think one light was meant to tell you the other light was on.

Now that’s a whole other thing. I mean, the lights and their colors, like signals, and not really knowing or remembering what it all meant.

Yeah, that’s memory for you, right? The mysterious way incidental, little fragments bubble up, often in great detail, and then submerge again. I used to play my boombox and shoot hoops alone, in the driveway, at night. The house was on a busy-ish street, and in some goofy way, I felt like I was performing for the people passing by in their cars. They would have seen a kid playing basketball by himself, but I imagined myself as something more than that.

Jimmy,

Put the outside
garage lights in
& put the garage out -

Love,

Mum

Ha. I know the feeling. When you're alone, especially at that age, when you're shooting that hoop or flipping that board, there's that imaginary audience, or even your future imaginary self. What about Bas Jan Ader, and the way one of his pieces is referenced in the installation?

I showed you his work "Please Don't Leave Me" -- an installation, with that text painted on a wall, and a spotlight shining on it. Initially, I was thinking about the spotlight and the ladder; I wasn't thinking as much about the text. But then I read it and it moved me, like it always does. "Please don't leave me." There's obviously a connection with what I've said about my mother.

I like it too, for all the same reasons. The setup feels makeshift, almost slapdash. But the message is an emotional gut punch. Direct, raw, powerful. "Please Don't Leave Me" also circles me back to the Replacements -- "Pleased to Meet Me." One phrase about loss, the other about finding yourself. It all goes around and around.

When my daughter was born she was in this pink rocking thing on the kitchen floor, and I leaned down and looked into her eyes, and I'll never forget that moment. I felt my mother's gaze coming out of me, out toward my daughter. It was surprising and deeply moving, and a very real feeling.

My daughter brought what my mother stored away in me back out to her. She's named after my mother -- Susie -- and that's complicated. What did I know? I wanted to name her that before she was born. Now that she's older, and she's so much more herself, naming her after my mother feels narcissistic, even burdensome. I think less about how my mother is dead now and more about how she's alive. So much of her is still with me. All that she gave, I can give. It's the profound "plus side" to the death equation.

It feels like we've made a miniature monument out of my mother's note. What we disregard, regarded. No more dead generals, show me the uncelebrated, the ones who suffered in silence for generations, worked, raised their children, never had enough, paid the idiot's bills, drove the idiot's cars, died and were laid to rest in their idiot funeral parlors. Hopefully there was enough insurance to pay for the funeral expenses.

Dead generals don't teach us as much as dead mothers do. We need to know how to love. We need to know how to help each other. We need to know how to think. And without love, that gets all fucked up too. Put the lights in, take out the garbage.



The ones, love us best are the ones we'll lay to rest
And visit their graves on holidays at best
The ones, love us least are the ones we'll die to please
If it's any consolation, I don't begin to understand

- The Replacements. "Bastards of Young."

The Garage

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