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## A Picture “Perfect” Life (2012)

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## A Picture “Perfect” Life

*By Avery Blackburn*

There’s a picture that hangs in my living room, right above the lazy boy, across from my spot on our couch. The picture haunts me, staring at me almost mockingly for days on end. Who are these strangers smiling? There is a man, woman, young boy of maybe eight years, and a young girl around the age of four. The picture puzzles me, all the young faces so foreign, but familiar. I recognize the younger versions of my mother, father, and brother. They are all near a river as that strange girl is squatting in it, splashing at the glistening river blow. Who is this young girl so in control, with her curling blond pigtails, wearing a blue striped sailor dress sitting in a river with my family? Why is this stranger smiling as she splashes at the fish in the rushing brook? I once knew this girl. She is so far away, ensnared in her own innocence, ignorant of troubles to come and the ways of the world, simply happy. That little girl was me.

The picture fills me with questions, what went on that day? It’s a little fuzzy, and the memories I have, are they actually mine? Or are they an accumulation of my family members’ stories and that visual reminder? Is that what now makes my recollection of that wonderful Tuesday?

I remember the sunshine creating sparkles upon the crystal water. I remember that wonderful blue sailor dress and my favorite white sandals with the big white daisy flowers on them. I remember my brother with his fashionable bowl hair cut and Harry Potter glasses. I remember the blond color my mother's hair used to be. However, one could observe all this from just a glimpse at that picture. Is that all my memory has been reduced to; a picture? And what about the other details; why were we in a river in the middle of a forest?

The story, I am told, goes something like this. We, my mother, father, brother, and I, were halfway into a 16 hour car ride back to our lovely home in Michigan from the ever sunny state of Georgia. The trip was long, uneventful for the first seven hours when my parents had the bright idea to take a hike, on a trail, through a forest, that had no plumbing, with a four year old. Yeah, bright idea, I know. The story continues with an awfully boring hike through the never-ending green forest next to a beautiful sparkling river; until I felt it. Apparently squirming as if there are ants in my pants I looked at my parents and expressed my urge to pee. Of course there were no bathrooms, why would there be in the middle of a forest, with no plumbing, and a four year old? It is because of this precise moment I have decided that children are the bravest of all beings; for with no plumbing, in the middle of the forest, as a four year old, I, with all the blithe that children have,

used the river as my restroom. And that was when the picture was snapped, when this innocence was captured for all eternity.

Today, I would never dream of squatting in a river where anyone could see me. This makes me wonder when is it we lose this innocence? When do the customs of society start becoming ingrained within us? Upon reflection, I have come to the answer that life lessons, the mess ups, the hard times, are what changes us into the adults we are to become; wisdom takes place where innocence once grew. I would not say my life is particularly hard; however, there is one phase of my life, one endlessly-frightening time that I would never wish upon another human being.

It's what stems my need for control. Some believe I am dramatic, especially when stressed; however, the case is I am struggling to be in control, which seems to just escape my grasp half the time. It's allusive that control, if let out of sight, for even a minute, it plays a magnificent game of hide-and-seek, one that I tend to lose the majority of the time.

It was the summer before 5<sup>th</sup> grade when the panic sank its claws into me; the undeniable, overwhelming fear that reared its ugly head for the smallest of reasons. I never understood what the attacks were, nor why, when a good friend would call I would have to find an excuse to stay home. I started dreading unavoidable everyday things. Every time the phone would ring my heart would race, my palms would sweat, my breaths would shorten- an awful cycle of fear that seemed to never end.

Again and again this happened, with every ring from the phone, every knock at the door, with the mere thought of seeing a friend's familiar face at the store. It was agonizing turning her down, seeing the betrayal, my betrayal, in my best friend's eyes. She couldn't understand why I kept declining her invitations. Why I refused to go to her house. She couldn't understand it wasn't her I was rejecting; it was my heart, thumping-thump, thump, thump- the blood rushing through my veins, the swirling of my head as if I had just spun in circles all day. It was the trembles that shook my limbs, the chills that crept up my spine. It was the fear that something terrible, beyond any 10 year old's imagination, was about to happen. Suddenly images began to overtake me, staggering images of horrific deaths. My death and my family's deaths were thrust upon me; images of my body floating face down in a pool, the screams of my baby sister as she was kidnapped, the horror of finding the lifeless bodies of my murdered parents haunted me. Now looking back on them, I can liken them to mini-episodes of CSI.

The worst part about my panic attacks was not the rushing images, nor the drumming of my heart, or the leaping of my pulse, not the shortness of breath, or even the anticipation of an attack. No, the worst part was the guilt; the overwhelming feeling that I let down not just myself, but my parents, my friends. I couldn't step outside the house without feeling an attack coming over me. My daily life came to a screeching halt. I refused to leave our little yellow house; to step foot

outside the place that, before this terror, was my sanctuary. This place that held my childhood happiness had captured my innocence and became my prison. Not a day went by where I was not ashamed. I felt I was stuck in a never ending nightmare, one where I screamed and screamed to be released from the claws that clung so tight to me.

I find myself looking back at that picture wondering where that carefree little girl went. Now I know; she was taken from me, taken by an overpowering panic disorder. It is through these panic attacks that I lost that little girl, my carefree self. I may have overcome my attacks, but they are ever present waiting to overtake me again, waging constant battle. Not all bad things came from my year of terror; I developed a desire to reach out, to help others in my position, which became the reason for my pursuit of a major in psychology. I learned that I am stronger than I thought, that fear can't stop me and it's okay for fear to be present as long as I fight through it.

Once upon a time I was a child who knew nothing of the world. My world was merely four miles long; stretching from our house to school. I was carefree and happy. Life doesn't always stay that way; sometimes it goes in a direction that we do not want it to. We grow up. It's like eating a banana. When we are two we do not care about the yucky brown spots, we just see a fruit that we find delicious. As we age, we avoid any bruised banana parts. We lose that carefree nature, our nerve to pee in the river.

So dear reader, I have now shared my soul for your judgments, expressed to you this tale of my origins. The story of why I am, who I am. Sometimes it is a picture of that glistening Tennessee River, other times it's as rough as the rivers bed and bumpy as the current. However that's life, a constant roller coaster with ups and unfortunate downs. Downs that are necessary in building the person I am to become in the future. I now look back on that picture 15 years later, and I see all the life lessons that I learned, and the ones that I know are yet to come.