Pasatiempo

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“P A S A T I E M P O”

by Jun Sato

a work of fiction—

i want you to feel what i felt. i want you to know why story-truth is truer
sometimes than happening-truth — tim o'brien, the things they carried

here is the happening truth—

sarah—and though this is the happening truth, that is—was—not her name—
turns twenty and starts hearing voices in her head, voices that keep telling her to do
and say sad, impulsive, destructive things to her friends and family.

it’s not clear whether the voices tell her to do this specifically or whether this was
her only means of escape, but about a year after she first starts hearing the
voices she hangs herself in a closet at her parent’s house on a wednesday night.

here is the textbook truth—

schizophrenia is a mental disorder characterized by a breakdown of thought
processes, most commonly manifested as auditory hallucinations. the onset of
symptoms in males typically occurs during adolescence, and in females during
young adulthood. an estimated 2.2 million individuals suffer from the disease in
the united states.
although a causal connection between cannabis use and schizophrenia remains unproven, statistically, cannabis users are twice as likely as non users to develop schizophrenia, and those suffering from schizophrenia are twice as likely to have partaken as those unaffected.

the textbook truth is that every time i got high with sarah—and i got high with sarah many, many times—i was nudging her brain closer and closer to the psychosis that would kill her.

the textbook truth is that i killed sarah.

this is what i remember—

one day, maybe junior year of high school or the summer after, sarah and i were in my mom's car, we had just picked up and were driving somewhere to get high and sarah was breaking up the bud by hand and packing a bowl, and i had brought a grinder and it was sitting in the cup holder and i asked her why she didn't use it and she laughed and said breaking it up was like foreplay, why would you ever skip foreplay? and ever since every time i broke up bud and got sticky fingers i would think of sarah and her foreplay and sometimes i would tell whoever i was smoking with that i have this one friend back home, and one time she said that breaking up bud is like foreplay, haha, ain't that the truth. the first time i smoked after she died i was smoking with some girl and i said the line like a reflex and as soon as i said it i realized that i would have to edit it—i used to have this friend, she's dead now, but one time she said—

and on a saturday—and now i can't remember if it was before or after the foreplay day—my mom gave me twenty bucks and asked me to get the car washed so i called sarah and asked her if she wanted to get high in the car wash, smoke a bowl and watch the spinning brushes and the soap suds, and she said sure. actually, it must have been before, because i wanted to make a move on her and
figured that the car wash would be a great spot, and that was the first time we kissed, in a car wash, sometime during the rinse cycle.

and later, but not that much later, after school one day, by the gym where everyone congregated before walking or driving home, I saw her kiss a kid I bought weed off of.

and much later, across the country, sitting in a car parked on a cliff overlooking the pacific ocean, smoking black tar off aluminum foil through a used tampon tube, and that indescribable sensation of floating,

and a cafeteria table, earlier, maybe sophomore year, before I could drive, my friend sits down with an artsy looking girl while I’m eating my pizza or chicken nuggets or lasagna or whatever plastic food they were serving that day, and my friend says this is jazz, she’s new, she just moved here, and I say hey, what’s your real name? she says sarah, she says nice to meet you,

and at my house, laying in bed with her, smoking a bowl, keeping an ear out for the sound of my mother’s car pulling into the driveway,

and my neighbor assuming that she was my girlfriend because she was over at my house everyday, and me wishing she was but knowing she would never be,

and the first time I ever hit a cigarette, years before I met sarah, back in middle school, and how dizzy and nauseous and cool it made me feel,

and working at rite aid and hating the fluorescent lights and the rows of merchandise and stealing packs of cigarettes from behind the counter and smoking them on break,

and how sarah smoked newports and how I would steal them for her, too, sometimes, and laugh at the juxtaposition of a lily white high school girl and the stereotypically black cigarettes,
and how whenever i bum a cigarette off someone and it's menthol i think of sarah
and her newports,

but the truth is i don't really smoke cigarettes anymore.

some of those stories were happening truth and some of them were story truth
and some of them were honest lies. everything fits together because the only
way we can experience the past is through narrative—but narrative is auto-
mutating, like cell division and genetic drift, a darwinian race to the most
adaptable truth, or the most comfortable, or the most compelling. in other words,
the law of entropy holds not just in the physical realm, in cells and star systems,
but in the abstract—in truth, in dreams, in memory. in other words, the truth of
our memories degrades over time, and this breakdown of truth is no more
preventable than the aging of our bodies or the collapse of empires or the
inevitable heat death of the universe.

but all of this is changing. the little lies we used to tell to keep our lives coherent
no longer fly; everything we do is recorded and cataloged online, in status
updates and photo uploads, so that the person you used to be five years ago still
exists in some tangible way, so that our past can be viewed unfiltered and
immediate, so that we can pinpoint exactly where the story truth of our narrative
branches out from the happening truth.

the happening truth is that sarah and i didn't know each other for most of our
lives, and then there were a few months where we got high together everyday
and sometimes made out and occasionally went further, and then she got a
boyfriend and then i got a girlfriend and we didn't hang out but just said hi to
each other in the hallways at school, and then we graduated and we went away
to college and we made a couple halfhearted promises over facebook to see
each other the next time we were both in town but we never did, and then she
started hearing voices.
and the story truth is that this is how most of our relationships with other people go: we start apart, and we collide briefly, and then we drift apart again. the truth is that people are like billiard balls on a cosmic pool table, hit around by the alternating cues of fate and chance, careening off the walls of the universe, coming together, pushing off each other, until eventually we’re all buried in holes.

here is the digital truth—

like so many other things nowadays i first found out that sarah died on facebook.

things like—oh she had a baby? oh they got married? oh he got into law school? oh she had bacon and eggs for breakfast?—things like that, things in which i have no interest about people i don’t talk to or care about. to facebook sarah dying means as much—or as little—as pictures of someone i met once at a party.

the last status sarah posted the night she hung herself was cryptic. spaceboooooooook, she said, with eight o’s—a smart pun? a commentary on the digitization of truth? i didn’t know, but i liked it.

and then the next day someone commented on that status that sarah’s mom was looking for her and sarah should call her back.

and then a flood of pictures of sarah, with captions like she was one of the best, look how beautiful she is. and then a picture of a sunset with the caption looking down on us from heaven.

and then one of her ex boyfriends posting that he finally knows what it means to miss someone.

and at first i think it’s a sick joke, a spacebook experiment, but i realize that it’s true, she’s dead, and i don’t know how yet, i assume it’s a car accident or a drug overdose, and i want to know the truth.
someone once told me that when we die we live on in the memories of our loved ones. but the truth is, when we die, all we leave behind are our facebook pages. because the truth is, our loved ones will die too—and in any case the memories they have of us are as unreliable as this narrative. the only truth that we leave behind, then, is a series of zeroes and ones on a monolithic server in menlo park.

when i realize that the facebook posts are not an ongoing joke but a tragedy, i call allie to see what the fuck happened. and allie, of course, has her own narrative, with her own convenient lies, her own shortcuts, her own truth, that she has repeated, on the phone, to everyone that saw sarah's facebook page and wanted to know what happened.

allie was sarah's best friend, but that was a relatively recent development. when sarah hung herself allie and sarah were in that stage of human relationship where they hung out everyday, like that brief period in high school when sarah and i were there. allie and i used to be in that stage, before sarah even moved to our town, but that is a different story.

allie says that she has repeated the story so many times that she doesn't even feel anything in retelling it. then she cries. but, she says, she knows that sarah and i were better friends than most of the people that have called her, asking for details, so she doesn't mind telling me.

about a year ago, sarah started hearing voices. she did what they bid, which meant that she abruptly left home and went to live with an ex boyfriend in ohio, then came back to our hometown and started dating a heroin dealer, then called another ex boyfriend and told him they were soul mates, told him to come stay with her, all the while still dating the dealer—and on and on, soap opera plots, just generally twisting her life into a convoluted mess. but, allie said, she was still the sweetest girl, and we would go hiking or to yoga classes or out to bars or whatever and you wouldn't even know except sometimes she would scream in frustration at the voices, telling her to slap someone or throw a glass or cut herself, she would scream she didn't want to, and it really scared me.
and as i listen to allie i selfishly wonder why the voices never told sarah to come to california and declare her undying love for me.

and oh, we talked about you sometimes, allie says, we had nothing but good things to say about you, allie says, and i can hear her smiling, but i can't tell if she's making that up for my benefit or not.

and then sarah's parents put her on medication and that helped with the voices but turned her into a lifeless zombie, sleeping fifteen hours a day, and they were expensive too, so about a month before she hung herself they took her off the medication, and that was the last straw, allie thinks, to get on those tranqs and benzos and anti schizoids and then off so suddenly, that was what pushed her over the edge.

i thank allie for letting me know what happened, and she says she misses me and i say i miss her and we both say that we should meet next time we're both in our hometown, and we both say to keep in touch, to never hesitate to call, we both say we're sad it took something like sarah hanging herself for us to realize that we'd drifted apart,

but even as we said these things i think we both knew that they were hollow words, that the most keeping in touch would ever mean was liking a status on facebook, a happy birthday text, a christmas break encounter at a local dive bar.

after sarah died her parents were too heartbroken—presumably, although perhaps it was anger, or guilt—to deal with anything. she had no obituary, no funeral; she has no gravestone. some of her friends organized a memorial for her in a park. i was invited on facebook. though i live across the country now, i still declared to facebook that i would attend, to show that i would be there in spirit but also to demonstrate, to myself, that digital truth, while approaching happening truth the way a derivative approaches a limit, still has its inconsistencies.
a few months after she died i went back home for a week to placate my mother. i drove aimlessly through my hometown the way we used to in high school, hoping that everything i saw would remind me of sarah. but i hadn't considered how fast people fade, how heavy could be the weight of months accumulated. nothing reminded me of sarah. nothing reminded me of anything.

my flight back was early in the morning the sunday before school started. the night before i went with some old friends to see their new friend's band play a show at a dive bar and we all got drunk, and then afterwards we got high at their apartment. when i finally got home it was so late and i was so crossfaded that i decided it would be a good idea to just stay up wait to sleep on the plane. i lay in bed half awake dreaming of whitewash and nooses and classrooms and needles and spoons and by and by i noticed the dawn approaching and i closed my eyes and my mom was shaking me telling me i was going to miss my flight.

every day has a beginning and ending, like every life has a start and finish...
with your thought in mind i walk the streets down to the shores and i sink into the pacific — laura jane grace, beginning in an ending

go stand at the edge of the sea. the water is warm, the waves softly lap at your bare feet. stare at the sun and the clouds and the seagulls, out into the horizon. listen to the rhythm of the tide and leaves rustling behind, imagine distant shores, think that maybe you could stay there forever.

but stand there long enough, and you begin to sink into the sand, first your toes, and then up to your ankle, even your calves. and then the sun goes down, the tide comes in, a storm brews in the distance.
if you stand still and take root in the sand, eventually the waves will come
swallow you, sweep you out to drown.

so i understand. sometimes you have to step out of the sand. sometimes you
have to leave the beach.

the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live,
mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time,
the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn,
like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding everywhere like spiders
across the sky and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and
everybody goes awww! —jack kerouac, on the road

sarah is not the only friend of mine to suffer from schizophrenic episodes,
from nervous breakdowns. she is, so far, the only one that’s died.

last week a friend of mine from stockton went away to a treatment center.
he said he was hearing voices, that he was having trouble distinguishing the past
from the present from the future. he said the medication was fucking with him,
that he felt dead most of the time and insane the rest.

the truth is i’ve always been drawn to crazy people. i’m not sure if it’s because
crazy people are just more interesting than the sane, or if i’m subconsciously
deciding to hang out with people that i can feel sane in comparison to, but the
truth is also that it doesn’t matter. we don’t pick the people we’re drawn to.
we’re just drawn to them.
there’s this exit at the end—or the beginning, depending on which way you’re going—of highway seventeen, just before the fishhook interchange with highway one, called pasatiempo drive. if your windows are open, as they should be, having just driven through the beautiful stretch of winding green mountain road that is highway seventeen, then this is where you will first catch a whiff of saltwater. and if you’re heading back up seventeen, away from the beach, with sand in your hair and on your feet, then pasatiempo, exit one, with the ocean at your back and the mountains ahead, is where you are confronted with the enormity of america, the expanse of hills and mountains and valleys and plains and cornfields and rivers and deltas, all the cities and suburbs, all the high schools and convenience stores and parking lots and vast stretches of two lane highways with only gas stations and fast food restaurants, that separate santa cruz from atlantic city, the santa monica pier from coney island.

the happening truth about pasatiempo is that it’s a ritzy golf course for white people rich enough to afford ritzy golf courses but not rich enough to afford pebble beach.

the story truth about pasatiempo is that it is a liminal space, between stockton and santa cruz, between ocean and land, between beach and mountain, between school days and vacation time, between stress and freedom, between sleep and dreams. the story truth is that all we do on this planet is pass time until we’re gone. the story truth is that people fade fast as months and years accumulate. the story truth is that pasatiempo isn’t a place, or a highway exit, or a golf course—it’s an idea, it’s a cryptic facebook status, it’s a five piece band playing fuzzy chords at a dive bar, it’s foreplay, it’s a bummed cigarette, it’s a hacky sack circle, a phone call, a mountain trail, a set of waves, it’s the process of rolling a joint but not necessarily the process of smoking it, it’s what happens while you’re making plans, it’s a cliche, it’s a platitude, it’s a pretty girl hanging dead in a closet and it’s the kid across the country who used to know her, sitting at a table, half drunk, half depressed, half alive, trying to make meaning out of her death.