

It Was Like Nothing Else in My Life Up to Now

In searching for meaning behind a random encounter and his mother's death, Josh Roiland explores compassion.



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On a still summer night in the last year of last century an overweight woman in a wheelchair appeared, as if an apparition, under a street lamp in a parking lot on the west end of campus. I had not seen her when I pulled my car in. It was an hour till midnight, and I was covered in sand.

I'd spent the night playing volleyball and had returned home to married student housing where I was summering with a friend's wife, while he interned in Minneapolis. She was a nurse who worked nights, and I was an English major lazing between my junior and senior year. We rarely saw each other; the only complication in our cohabitation resulted from my inability to lift the toilet seat when I got up to pee in the middle of the night. In the mornings we'd cross paths and she'd tell me, again, that it was no fun to come home and sit in piss.

That night in the dark parking lot, the woman rolled her heavy body from behind a street-lamp. "Excuse me," she said, coming closer.

"Hi!" she said cheerfully. "Can you, uh—would you be able to give me a ride home?"

She worked at a telemarketing place near the corner of University Ave. and 42nd St. Work had let out, but the buses had stopped running, and she needed a way home. She crossed the busy intersection and wheeled into the expansive parking lot waiting for someone to help her. I was tired and dirty. I just wanted to slink into the stuffy efficiency, shower, and distract myself to sleep with PlayStation. But here she sat.

"Sure," I said. "Sure, I'll give you a ride home."

* * *

I knew before I got in the car. I had known for weeks even though no one would tell me. The phone calls changed. My mom barely spoke, her voice vacant. My dad tried to distract me with sports talk and questions about classes, but he was distracted himself. I knew. I knew it had come back.

Every minute of that five-hour drive home from Duluth, where I was a freshman finance major, brought me closer to realizing what I knew. It was Thanksgiving

break. My friend Jordan drove us both home. I told him, “There’s something going on with my mom.” We talked about anything else until that last mile of gravel before my house. We passed over a short rise and between the barren tree line where I had shot my first deer. Corn stubble stretched from both sides of the road. Then, confirmation: my dad’s pickup truck parked on the road, waiting to intercept us. A quarter mile away, our small house with the large picture window loomed.

My dad gave Jordan twenty bucks for gas as I got out of the car and threw my stuff in the back. We took off around the section, same as we always did, road hunting for pheasants or scouting deer. But it was not the same. I knew it was coming. In the stillness, I braced myself.

“Your mother is sick,” he said, his first words as we began down the road. Sick, a euphemism we would wear out in the years ahead. “She has six lesions on her spine.” I remember how odd that word sounded. What did he mean lesions?

“Tumors,” he said. “She has six tumors on her spine.”

I felt like a stranger sitting there. What was this new language? I didn’t know how to speak. I didn’t cry. We turned left onto the second mile. Finally, I asked about her prognosis. He didn’t know.

“She could live five years or five months or five days,” he said. The road ahead looked the same, but felt somehow worse. Then another left, and we passed my mom’s parents’ house on mile three.

“How are they doing?” I asked.

“Not good,” he said.

On that last mile, before we crossed the threshold of our driveway—that slow curve bending toward the small house where my mom and her mom sat waiting—I told him I was transferring to UND. None of us could have imagined the flood that was to come.

* * *

I moved to Grand Forks four months after the mandatory evacuations. Summer was starting to recede and campus bloomed with new and returning students. I saw

no scars. But then, how could I? I experienced the flood from the periphery, only feeling it obliquely from friends' letters and emails. I read spent stories of sandbagging around Smith Hall—my dorm that fall—then dikes breaking, then exodus, fire. In person, I couldn't reconcile that damage with the patina of hope that a new school and a new school year brought. I hadn't been there and I couldn't see the rot extant throughout the city.

But I tried.

In those first weeks, my roommate and I would funnel our way downtown. We stopped at the Sorlie Bridge and tried to imagine the waterline on the trusses. Then we headed down Belmont and over to Lincoln Drive where we drove slow through the ghost town. Houses ruined inside and out as the water spread, then stayed, before finally ebbing back below flood stage at the end of May. Abandoned homes with messages smeared in mud and sprayed in paint seemed addressed to me: "Sightseers GO AWAY," "Stay Out," and "TOURIST ATTRACTION CENTER." Those signs achieved their goal. I felt low. But I returned several more times and stared and tried to feel.

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During my first weeks at UND, what I felt was an acute sense of missing out. I lacked the shared experience of returning students; I was not part of this community forged through calamity. That absurd desire for tragic communion, however, would find its way back to me. I would learn firsthand loss and recovery, delayed grief and meaningless guilt.

* * *

My mom wrote me 22 letters and sent me 30 emails while I was in college:

“I hope you and your roommates get to be friends so the transition will be easier on all of you. When you drive the car, please be very careful. I don’t want you getting hurt! Are there anythings you can think of that we forgot to buy or bring up? You’ll have to let me know. I will go for now. Call home whenever you want. Love you bunches! Love, Mom” — letter, September 7, 1996

“Sure enjoyed the weekend with all of us together. Kind of like a little family vacation.” — letter, October 7, 1996

“Hope you can get a ride somewhere close for Thanksgiving vacation. Have to let us know.” — letter, October 27, 1996

Most of her messages came after she got sick.

“My CAT scan report came back good with no internal organs involved. I had a bone scan today to see how the radiation is doing. I’m feeling much better, getting to be a regular couch potatoe!!” — letter, December 5, 1996

“Hi Toots, I’m learning how to use this e-mail. Not too difficult. Sounds like you have alot of schoolwork! Today is Dad’s birthday. You won’t miss the cake because its German chocolate.” — email, August 30, 1997

“Tomorrow Dad & I go to Paynesville again. I get chemo tomorrow. Sure am glad so happy that its working! Now I’m going to slowly take walks outside & go a little farther everyday. Get my muscles going again. Enough of being a couch potato.” — letter, September 22, 1997

“Saturday dad and I might go to an auction in Danvers. I want to look at a bedroom set for our room and get rid of this hospital bed....Be careful with your body playing volleyball and remember the floor isnt the same as the sand.” — letter, September 25, 1997

“Hi Joshua, Well the guy is here installing Primestar. Dad & him are outside deciding where to put the dish. I don’t know if I’ll be able to figure out the control. I still have problems with our old one. Guess we can tape movies while we are watching them too.” — letter, October 15, 1997

“You and Jim please stay awake wed. night. Youll both be relaxed after finals. You both keep each other awake. Not one sleep whiler one drives. See you early thurs morning. Am thinking of you and all your studying.keep up the good work. love you bunches!mom”
— email, December 15, 1997

“hi toots, sorry your plans didn’t work out as planned...I know you like things organized and to follow your plans but sometimes you have to be flexible. get your christmas spirit back,ok . love you bunches,mom” — email December 16, 1997

*“well ur mother had good news at the drs. today.
bonescan showed no new cancer activity
ct scan showed everything to be normal, liver, kidneys, lungs, etc.
mamogram was normal
tumor marker count was well within the normal range
so all that was as good as could be expected, she’s going to have a mri on
friday to try and find the cause the cause of the spasams in her shoulder.
saw the dr today and had chemo to day so was a long day and we have to go to
grampas for birthday party tonight...
better go put clothes in the dryer and reload the washer
culdad@”* — email, January 13, 1998

* * *

During my first two years in Grand Forks, I never encountered a panhandler, and while this woman in the parking lot wasn’t asking for money, her forwardness unnerved me. After I agreed to drive her home, she zipped over to the right side of my silver 1986 Chevy Celebrity. I opened the passenger door and aligned her wheelchair parallel with the car seat. I stood behind her, unsure of what to do next. She reached and put a hand on the top of the open door, and then paused.

“Would you mind putting the floor mat on top of the seat?” she asked.

What? Why? I felt insulted.

“Oh no that’s okay,” I said. “My seat is clean. You can sit on it.”

“No, it’s just—” she said with a crinkle. “It’s just that—sometimes I have accidents.” She drew out the first syllable of that last word.

“Sure, yep, no problem,” I said. “Let me—” I grabbed the floor mat and quickly shook off the sand and gravel, and then I placed it on top of the passenger seat.

I felt myself once again begin to dissociate. I was acting and talking in the present, but my mind was moving off to some middle distance. I settled into a space independent of my own interiority. I watched myself but I could not make sense of what was going on.

With the floor mat in place, the woman once again grabbed the passenger door with her right arm and began to hydraulic herself up and out of the chair. I placed my hand on her back and steadied her. I tried to guide her as she rolled counterclockwise onto the passenger seat. She landed on the dusty rubber mat with a gasping sigh, and I closed the door.

* * *

I did not go through the stations like the rest of my family.

I was only three hours away, but I was absent for most of my mom’s sickness. I had class. I had work. I had excuses. I came home for deer hunting and holidays and spring break. Otherwise, I called. I emailed. I stayed away.

When I did come home, my job was distraction. I’d grab her walker and pretend I was a World War II ball-turret gunner. I’d intentionally eat too much supper, then announce to my slightly unnerved family: “I didn’t come to paint!” I tried to make everyone feel better, divert them from their sadness. Really, though, I was distracting myself. I turned away rather than confront reality. Guilt is the absence of courage, and cowardice metastasizes. So my mom and I would play cribbage. We’d watch the Food Network. I’d talk.

My mom slept on the couch. Her bed was too high to climb into and too difficult to sit in. So, every night for two years she stretched out on the sofa, and my dad curled into the loveseat beside her. They got satellite television—I’m sure the first in the county to have it. Each night they’d settle in for endless episodes of Emeril. The hypnotic glow of the TV and the morphine drip caused my mom to doze off while facing the television. Her head, in repose, fell forward, chin resting on chest. A few years of sleeping like this and she could no longer straighten her neck. When she stood, her torso looked like a bass clef.

On one of my irregular visits home I was horrified by this hunch of a woman. Why couldn't she straighten up. Why couldn't she raise her head? Hadn't anybody noticed? I had an idea—a neck brace! Force her head up, damn the pain. And so she did what I asked. She dutifully donned the neck brace whenever I was around. Only occasionally would she protest when it became too much, when I became too much.

“Mom, why aren't you wearing your neck brace?” I'd ask.

“Joshua,” she'd say. “It hurts.” It was the only time I ever heard resignation in her voice.

When I'd head back to school, they'd put the brace away. Her head would once again bob and fall. After a while, sores developed. One in the dip between her clavicles, the other underneath her chin. Red and yellow ovals crusted with puss, seeping and suppurating.

At that point, there was nothing to do except keep the wounds clean.

* * *

How the fuck do you break down a wheelchair?

I had no idea. I'd never done it before. I stood wondering how to flatten this three-dimensional object so I could slide it into my backseat. The woman in the front offered no help. She sat and talked to herself or talked to me. It wasn't clear. Either way, she wasn't reciting the operating manual.

For five minutes I stood under the streetlamp fiddling with that goddamn chair. Finally, it folded. I opened my back door and was reminded of all the shit in my backseat. I had moved out of my apartment earlier that spring, the way college students turn into nomads every May, lugging their life through the summer until school starts again. In my car was a vacuum cleaner, mop bucket, mop, broom, and a bucket of cleaning supplies. I pulled each piece out and placed it on the pavement. I slid the wheelchair behind the woman's seat then Rubik's cubed everything else back in one-by-one.

I closed the door and walked around the car, then paused. It was 11:30 p.m. There

was a stranger in my front seat. A wheelchair bound, possibly incontinent woman sitting on my floor mat in case she pissed herself. I didn't know where she lived, but I was about to drive her home.

I hopped in and put the car in reverse. I reached my right arm behind the passenger seat, checked over my shoulder, and began to back up.

"Can we stop for Weenie Wednesday?" she asked.

I braked, put the car in park. I looked at her, my arm still behind her seat.

"What?" I asked. "What is that?"

"Weenie Wednesday. At this gas station you can stop and on Wednesdays they have hot dogs for 99 cents," she said. "Can we stop and get one?"

"Uh, I don't think so. Not tonight," I said. "Let's just get you home. It's pretty late."

"But I'm hungry and I haven't eaten today and I really want a hot dog and it's Weenie Wednesday!"

"Where do you live?" I asked.

She wouldn't say. Instead, she flung into a fit. I realized she was perhaps developmentally disabled. She pleaded with a toddler's persistence. I caved.

"Okay okay okay, yes, we'll stop and get a hot dog," I said, putting the car into gear and backing out of the parking spot.

* * *

My ninth birthday party was the first that included more than just my family members. Because I had a summer birthday, and lived ten miles out of town, after-school celebrations were not a thing. But my mom organized a party for mid-April, when the frost lets out and it's finally fit for a tangle of boys to run wild outside. I passed out her handmade invitations weeks in advance.

After school, a dozen of us set siege on the school bus where we bounced over gravel roads for 45 minutes until the door accordioned open and released us. We raced each other up the fishhook driveway. Anything was possible.

In Reading class earlier that year we had read a short story about a boy who celebrates his birthday with friends by eating hot dogs and watermelon on a bright summer day. That was my theme, and my friends instantly recognized the premise. “This is just like in Reading class!” they said, seemingly in unison, as we congregated in the kitchen. There was a tray of hot dogs in generic white bread buns and quarter moon stacks of watermelon on the island. My mom had also baked a yellow cake with chocolate frosting and hung balloons up in the kitchen and dining room. I think we both felt proud to pull off such a recognizable celebration.

The party, of course, was a disaster. It imploded the way all gatherings of nine-year-olds tend to collapse. Friends fractured into factions. There was in-fighting, hurt feelings. My lasting memory is of my friends, Mike and Jordan, arguing and shoving one another by the patio door. My brother, then a high school senior, stood washing dishes on the other side of the island. Besieged by brats all afternoon he finally burst.

“Hey!” he yelled, “Fuckin’ knock it off!” He had a jut of an Adam’s apple and a mustache. The two boys froze, then slid open the patio door and slipped out.

Not long after, it was time for everyone to go home. My mom passed out gift baskets to all the boys. Candy and baseball cards wrapped up in tissue paper and tied together with a ribbon. She brought them home in rounds, and I rode shotgun as we crisscrossed the countryside. She drove a hundred miles that night.

I’d like to think that when we got home we sat down at the kitchen island exhausted, but elated.

So did you have a good birthday?

I’d answer between bites of watermelon, spitting seeds into a cereal bowl, gap-toothed smile still not something I was self-conscious about.

Yes! It was the best! Then: Thank you for all of this.

But that didn’t happen. I was nine and she wasn’t yet sick. I’m sure I just grabbed my baseball cards, and maybe a hotdog, and disappeared into my room.

* * *

We were silent as we drove down University Avenue. I don't remember if I asked her name; I know she did not ask mine. We turned onto Columbia Road and headed south, cresting the overpass. I looked left at the run-down Burger Time apartments, where I would move at the end of the summer. Then something occurred to me: I had no money. No cash. No checks. No debit card.

As we neared the Valley Dairy on 24th Avenue, I asked the woman if she had any money for the hotdogs.

"Can't you buy it?" she asked.

We crossed traffic and pulled into the convenience store. I parked at the gas pump furthest port side from the entrance, in what was perhaps a subconscious attempt to block her view as I reconnoitered for discount wieners. I scrounged underneath my seat and dug deep into its cushion's crevice for change. Meanwhile, the woman offered a running commentary on my pecuniary safari: "Well you must have some money." Exasperated, she searched her purse. Together we came up with \$1.35. With this bounty of coins I opened the door, but the woman stopped me with last minute directions.

"Make sure that you get it with mustard, and relish, and ketchup," she said. I paused, and looked at her.

"Sure, yep, I'll make sure I get all that," I said.

* * *

Mom mom's great hope was to visit me in Grand Forks. My family had trekked up to Duluth during my first year for "Family Weekend" and she hoped to see my home at this new university as well. And even as her own health fluctuated, she was vigilant about my own.

"hi toots, hope your breathing is better, dont let it go to long, go to the student infimary and get some antibiotic that does not contain any penicillin! . Dont let them give you amoxillin! Im having a tough day of breathing myself today, dont know if it's the medicine or if im getting asthma, I dont know how you can tolerate more then a day of being short of breath!"

Its terrible.” — email, March 25, 1998

“I M feeling better too, that not being able to breathe really gets you down and dark under the eyes. Its scary when you cant catch your breath, dangerous! What do you want the easter bunny to bring you?” — email, March 28, 1998

“good morning joshua, its a gorgeous day out, sun is shining, dad and tony are out cutting the big tree down....I know I always wanted it down for a a three season porch but now when its too late I want it back.” — email, April 4, 1998

“I told dad that one weekend in July I want us all to come up & see you & your school. Do you have an open weekend in July?” — letter, June 26, 1998

“Hi Joshua, Hope you have your computer figured out. We are coming up around noon on Sat 18 and coming home Sun 19 around noon. Will be great to see you and where you live & go to school. We will probably bring up the girl’s sleeping bags & sleep in chairs or whatever Sat night. Will talk to you later this week. Love you Bunches Mom.

Forget about us coming up Sat July 18. Sarah has to work every weekend & can’t get off. They are too short staffed! So don’t ask for the night off at Apple Bees or at S/A. Really disappointing!! Don’t know now when we can come up. Really makes me angry. Talk to you later. Love you Mom!” — letter, July 6, 1998

“good morning Joshua! I dont know what is so good about it. Dont ask for any days off because we cant make it up to see you on July 18 and 19. Sarah has to work every weekend in July and they are too short staffed for her to trade .I dont know when we will be able to come and see you, Really makes me angry.” — email, July 7, 1998

“Saw Janine V. in the drugstore the other day and she says hi. Says she has hardly seen you all summer. She isn’t the only one.” — letter, July 13, 1998

“You see how late you work friday before deciding to come home that night or start out sat. morning which would be a better idea. I dont like you out there alone at night in case you have car problems. I know I worry too much, but I love you!” — email, August 11, 1998

“I had my wbc checked tues and its just about knocked out completely from the chemo drug so now Im going every day till friday to monte hosp for an injection to stimulate my bone marrow. Hopefully it will be up by friday and i wont need any more shots.” — email,

August 26, 1998

“Hi Joshua, Check with your registrar office and see if you have to finish filling in the blanks from direct loans.

How is your week going? My week is OK except for straightening my neck.”

— letter, September 3, 1998

“sorry we haven’t written for awhile but it’s been hard to find time even though I haven’t worked for two weeks. you’re mothers been vary sick so I’ve had to be here all the time ... you’re mother is some better now, they determined she wasn’t getting enough oxygen so they put her on steroids seems to have helped some....

ur mother says hi and reminded me to tell u about sam, he’s been missing for 4 days, don’t know what happened but he’s never taken off before in ten years so it doesn’t look good.

well i’ve rambled enough for now

cultadad@” — email, November 1, 1998

* * *

There were no hotdogs. Of course there were no hotdogs!

It was nearly midnight. I asked a guy mopping the floor if there were any franks left from Weenie Wednesday. He looked at me and said nothing. Through the window behind the counter I could see the woman in my car, craning her head over her right shoulder with great distress. She was tracking my progress, making sure I didn’t forget the ketchup, mustard, and relish.

I know I had no actual obligation to this woman, but I felt panicked standing there. She expected a hot dog, and I told her I’d get her one. I needed to keep my word. I felt stupidly responsible, and with \$1.35 in my sandy pocket, my alternatives were limited. Finally, in the back of the store I saw they had a bin of popcorn. A bag cost a buck and a quarter, so I bought one.

I left Valley Dairy with the popcorn, and a spare dime in my pocket. I walked sheepishly to the car. I opened the passenger door and was met by her expectant eyes.

“Did you get the hot dog?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “They didn’t have any hotdogs inside.” Her eyes filled, while her body deflated.

“But I wanted a hot dog!” she cried.

“Yes, I understand that you wanted a hot dog,” I said. “But there were no hot dogs.”

I quickly held out my left hand. “But I got you some popcorn!” I said. She snatched the bag out of my hand, and grabbed a fistful. She was excited to get a treat; it didn’t matter what it was. And with the hot dog betrayal behind us, she gave me the remaining directions to her apartment.

It took three minutes to get there. When she saw the building, she pointed and said, “Here it is! Here it is!” I pulled up to the curb and got out while she finished her snack. I opened a back door and repeated the whole belabored routine. Out came the vacuum cleaner. Out came the mop. The broom, the bucket, and finally the wheelchair. I had already forgotten how I flattened it, so I wrestled with that goddamn thing for five minutes to get it street-legal. Meanwhile, she was mined the bag for kernels.

Finally, I got the wheelchair set up, and I rolled it next to the car. She’s finished the popcorn and set the bag down on the center console.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

* * *

Six months earlier she was alive. One morning, a week before Christmas, I walked into the living room and she was still asleep on the couch. Her head was bowed. Her chin on her chest fusing the open sores. Her strawberry protein drink sat untouched on the table. On the carpet, an empty Blue Bunny ice cream pail where she often returned her breakfast. Her rough cloth turban, which looked like a washcloth, was pushed back revealing her scrubby scalp. There was barely fuzz on her bald head. But she was there.

Then that evening she was gone.

I’d spent the day Christmas shopping with my sisters. We sleepwalked through a mall all day, then left in the dark. An hour home through the crystalline night, then

that slow turn up the driveway and toward the unknown. There were no cars parked outside, no note inside. We said nothing to each other. Instead, we wrapped presents.

Later someone called. She was in the hospital, in a coma.

We waited. What else was there to do? My dad called every day. There was nothing to update, so instead he'd tell me: "Make sure you don't leave any towels on the goddamn stove." I don't recall anyone ever leaving dish towels on the goddamn stove, but I told him I'd make sure we didn't.

December morning light in Minnesota is slow and filmy. It was three days later and we knew already, but we waited for the car's headlights to puncture that fog. Through the picture window we saw the car pass through the tree line a quarter mile off. We stood for what seemed like hours.

The door opened and my mom's small mom came in first. She was not brave for us or for herself. She was stricken, wordless. My dad followed and closed the door. We stood there in a line extending from the patio door, as if facing a firing squad.

"Well," he said, trailing off. "It's all over."

And there it was. The mass of the past four years, the black hole that consumed everything, collapsed into a single moment. Three words. We didn't move. He walked towards us. Grabbed us, one by one.

"Hug a little bit," he said. "Cry a little bit."

We did.

* * *

Sitting outside her home, the woman said she was ready. I thought I was, too. I held the door as she reached her right arm out to grab the top of the window. She braced her left hand hard against the center console; the popcorn bag scrunched beneath it. She pushed herself up with great strain. I placed my left hand on her back to help steady her. As soon as she jacked herself halfway up, she paused.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She gurgled something unintelligible, and followed it with a gaseous sigh. Then the air soured.

“Ohhh—I’m sorry,” she said.

I looked down and the floor mat was filled with urine.

“Oh no that’s okay, that’s okay,” I said. “Let’s just get you into your wheelchair and get you inside.”

I tried to push her up with my left hand, but she only pitched forward. She grabbed the door tighter with her right hand and pulled herself up and into the wheelchair. She smelled like ammonia, and I tried not to gag. Neither of us said anything as I popped the chair’s front wheels up and over the curb. I yanked the back end of her chair up and over the hump. With all four wheels on the same plain she took off, not looking back or saying thank you or goodnight. She rolled straight to her building, keyed in a code, and disappeared inside. I remember it now as happening with a cartoonish quickness.

I turned around in my sandy flip-flops and looked at the car. The car my mom drove us home in after my ninth birthday. The car she let me borrow during my first month of college. The car I drove down to the Red River wreckage. The car now with a front seat full of pee. The desultory vacuum cleaner on the sidewalk. Three car doors were open.

How was I ever going to tell this story?

I should’ve thrown the goddamn floor mat out right away; left it there on the sidewalk. I should have done a lot of things. Instead, I silently slid the vacuum into the car and closed the doors. I hopped in and rolled down my window. I made a cautious U-turn, before turning right onto Columbia Road and drove home alone.



Posted by Josh Roiland on May 15, 2017