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The Man Who Lived on Rose Street

Alexandra Melnick

Reflection

Around the time I moved back to Jackson, Mississippi, a group of volunteers came together to create and maintain some hiking trails in a previously abandoned area of the neighborhood I lived in. As the woods in our neighborhood became increasingly excavated and more abandoned structures and artifacts were uncovered, this story took shape. Renting and ultimately owning a home in this area, called Belhaven, was the fulfillment of a long and tightly held dream of mine. My partner and I, in addition to a few longtime friends, like to spend time cleaning and walking these trails. I am proud of this community effort and am also aware that this development is part of a larger conversation about equity, belonging, and what it means to share space with everyone in our city since Belhaven is a neighborhood with a complicated relationship to race and class.

It was strange to build a community alongside of dismantling the remains of another, and the experience was made stranger still by the fact that this was all taking place right by our own homes. Today, the hiking trails are a cherished part of our community, and I am still looking for the stories underneath. This story is part of that, and a partial love letter and apology to people who move in and out of that place.

There was a man who lived on Rose Street.

This seems, and is, a fairly normal sentence. In a sense, every man on every Rose Street lives what is a statistically normal life. We all do. (Most of us.) We're made up of the tiny parcels of the ordinary, blended together to create extraordinary, unique experiences, prisms catching the perfectly, blessedly, magnificently ordinary light. (It's a miracle it happens at all and all the time.)

This man we're describing is absolutely ordinary for a man living in our century. So let's differentiate him.

There is a man who lived on Rose Street. A man who sat by his apartment window and waved every morning to a woman who drove home from the gym or an early errand. It was something you could set a clock by. This waving was his function in the morning, almost a duty, and it helped him keep his world up. It became a ritual, a comforting slice of time between two people who only knew each other by their blurry periphery shapes going by.

This man was known to pedestrians and cars alike as the man who sat in a red patio chair, known to his landlord as the tenant who occupied apartment B (rent 850, thank you very much), and known to the many fluctuating denizens of his apartment complex as a quiet neighbor. To the man himself, in his mind's eye, he wasn't just an older sloughing shape, or a man moving in a one bedroom apartment, or the absence his days held. Sometimes, he was a quick, darting thing. Something close to still a boy if he held his shape in his mind.

That boy lived on Rose Street. Which is actually no longer there now. It's not on any current map, printed or digital. In an orderly, organized sense of the word or world, this street is not a place you can even now locate with a zip code or by noticing a mailbox. It's not a delineated space that has somewhere in it a fridge or a dining room table, or anything that belongs to the immediate present tense of household meals and the irrepressible tangle of human bodies and that which comes with it. Rose Street is now an old cul-de-sac resting in the woods wayside. The pavement is worn through, and up over ahead on the highway, the cars rush by.

They turned it into an overpass exit. Which is actually a fairly normal sentence, despite the fact that it's anything but if you experience that process.

Standing on the worn gravel road amidst the trees now, you'd mainly notice the noise and some things with metal and rusting materials sticking out. Sometimes, it's a homeless encampment. It was also the place the boy turned man lived, a street that used to be by the woods and now is not wholly the woods, but something halfway of it, something restless, waiting, and forgotten even by the people who made encampments nearby. Once, by the nearest foundation structures to the river (which is now like the back of a buried victim: tilted, resting, waiting to be discovered) there used to be a house. A yard. There used to be a family, who once in 1963 gave their nine-year-old son the best metal detector their budget could buy.

— — — —

"What is it," shrieked Leo to a tow-headed girl. Frantic with joy and an almost anxiety, the pair's fingernails bit into, worried, pleaded the clay and sand at the edge of his yard. Then, they paused.

"It's a rock?"

She kept digging, while occasionally putting her dirty fingers near her mouth, smudging soil onto her lips. Leo was lost in wonder and in the possibility of lost treasure, his daydreams interspersed by mechanical tinny beeping. Were they explorers of a lost civilization, having come from the future to gaze upon what works they may? It struck him that perhaps all lost treasure stories were similar to alien invader stories, an ancient lost land suddenly interrupted by people and marvels beyond their dreams. Everybody knows somebody who can clearly see their world's end. Maybe it

was the same. In school, he was learning about how America was formed as America, and as his friend's fingers continued to shovel, stumbling on rocks, worms, and other secret creatures, Leo thought for the first time that the house on Rose Street, maybe even Rose Street itself, wasn't entirely his.

"I think it's a marble. . . ."

Dirt piled up around their shoes, creating miniature mountain ranges.

"No! A toy car!"

A sudden sigh shot out of both of them. It was *his* toy car, lost three summers ago. A small, smushed tin thing bought downtown, in a store that was no longer even located in Jackson. Ancient history.

They left it there.

The man on Rose Street walked around the lot behind his apartment. In the wilted rough green, you could see him pace, pause, glance, the breeze just passing over his shoulders. This communal quasi-yard was by some definitions pitiful, a few pits and patches of grass in a parking lot with cement, beer cans, and shards of corrugated tin poking out like the nose of a loyal dog waiting by the door, growing closer and closer every year to his home. The cans waited for the yard to become familiar to them, wholly them. Children ran wildly through the parking lot and surrounding neglected spots, into abandoned lots repurposed as public spaces by the city. The lot wasn't really a yard. To the man, this was a paradise, a few stolen patches of Belhaven, land that seemed as vast as the face of the wristwatch his father had. A paradise in miniature, just like the silent, ticking world of the clock. Powerful.

The neighborhood used to seem orderly, as if each home lined up like numbers on a watch and children rotated through like hands. He thought sometimes it was like he fell through a glass one day and this new world of Belhaven, Alice in Wonderland-esque, broke his fall. Strange. New. Broken water pipes and fire hydrants replaced the adults he knew as a child, the ones who walked around the neighborhoods and seemed so tall. Things here were so low to the ground now, so much of the streets showing a worn baldheaded sky, pockets rubbed through.

All things considered though, this world was alright with him. The man often turned over in his head a dreamlike image of those from his past still living inside a cosmic wristwatch, dialed and moving clockwise, oblivious to the disappearance of a boy who usually was outside. In his best moments, he imagined he lived on the strap then, attached to the heart of the ticking world and holding it together, making it make sense and giving the gears shifting some meaning, some significance and purpose to the world. That was fine. That was his lot.

“Mine,” the man echoed.

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“To write, to do,” thought Leo as he sat in his Bailey Middle School classroom. They were conjugating and subjugating verbs. Outside the window were junky cars; new cars; and brownish, goldish, greenish vans running by. It seemed to Leo a better task to count and catalog these cars then listing out the building blocks of the English language. To look too closely at words, thought the boy, was to perhaps uncover some wires, some essential patio mesh screen that kept the world straight up. Too much poking and wearing would result in fingers cutting through. He imagined golden bars entitled “verbs,” “nouns,” and “participles” hidden in the basement crawlspace of some scholar somewhere, holding treasures to be brought out and shown only a few times a year and otherwise kept safe. Like most discovered things, they might be messed up or taken away by nefarious or well intended do-gooders or at the very least perhaps lose their specialness. No, things like what makes the meaning out of the noises of our mouths and tongues were better left alone, decided Leo.

Or, that’s what he faintly recalled thinking years later.

You see, Leo did not like being reminded he was a “to,” an infinitive verb that was alive and could be coupled with something next or to be put in place of, something left hanging and waiting for a next sentence and direction in which to run.

The word “coupled” suddenly loomed large in his mind, like pink candy or the hood of a new car, an aching sweetness. Solid until you knock, and then your knees feel like they might give way. His cheeks prickled, but he couldn’t stop the runaway-thought train of his sentences before it was too late.

The girl he grew up with was just a few infinitive sentences away from him. To get up, to walk, to go into the third row, and to whisper into her ear—

“Leo,” tentatively called his teacher, a youngish woman. Nervous, blurry in a vague way, like the shape of a flock of birds, something impossibly small and yet large in his view and mind’s eye. She was new, and yet seemed like she’d been a Bailey Middle School teacher for all of time.

“L-Leo?”

“Yes, m’am.”

“. . . Pay attention.”

— — — —

Leo was walking the Belhaven woods. Fifty years later, the man who lived on Rose Street would walk the same land, which was now an outskirts of city parks and walk-

ing trails. Leo and the man both intimately knew (and these two selves were linked by this knowledge) that the real treasure and heart of this neighborhood lay not in the houses, the shops, the Eudora's, but inside the tangle and expanse of river and forest giving way to the water, a birth and a backwards.

Jackson is a river city.

Just like when he was Leo, the man could feel the dirt, smelling like wet and rust. He rejoiced in the sudden cool wafts of air coming through, and in the way the world changes when you reach the part through the trees. Even standing in front of the cultivated gap in the trail's walkway, you could sense something feral. It's the night kissing the perimeters of day all out of order. The inside and opposite of coming home.

When the boy was Leo, he was a dreamer.

Then he was a grown man.

The man who sometimes slipped and called himself privately the Man who *lives* on Rose Street. Not lived, and instead something short of an infinitive verb.

His "driving woman," as he called her, was rounding the corner.

Her actual name, which the man would later come to think didn't suit her but would never admit it, was Carmella.

Carmella pushed her choppy bangs out of her eyes and pulled into the intersection between Monroe and her street, frustrated at the way her broken rearview mirror just ever so slightly obscured her field of vision and thus rendered the car window completely useless. She loved walking her street and hated how fast it went when she had to drive it, unable to note the certain depressions in the road, the hidden mud nestled like a closed hand waiting to give up secrets. The Yazoo clay.

However, she didn't want her car's tire to become a permanent fixture of it.

Her eyes darted up to the apartment complex as she passed, a reflex.

This time, he waved first.

Carmella wanted to let out a whoop of joy but couldn't, unable to explain to herself how this small interaction brought a balance to the start of her day. It was like taming an animal, making a map of new or lost places, and having a secret, all rolled into one and happening at once. She didn't even know what the older man looked like other than brief impressions, didn't think about him much beyond this daily interaction,

but she did know she desperately wanted to plant roots in this neighborhood. This seemed like a start.

Two hands, mirroring each other for a single moment, an ellipses and oracle, in the place where so many streets and faces have come and gone, something close to the creation of solid ground.

Many days, the man just waited. He had retired from his maintenance job with the city, after slowly rising through the ranks to work in the office, then became a mid-dling manager. He had graduated from high school, and even then his innate intelligence was often overshadowed by a desire to go outside, to see the ways the woods worked. When the man thought of his brief educational career, he saw a tall, red-haired boy walking home from Murrah High School on what now seems like blurry, rolling, waving roads.

During the course of his life, he got a girl pregnant. He incidentally got another one pregnant but she left the state and it didn't stick. His days were at the library, the art museum, stretches of staying home. Around him, Belhaven Heights was growing, sprawling, turning in on itself with the sinkholes covering the roads like water-stains and nicks on a worn table. It became something unlike the entity (almost a self) he had always fixed solidly in his mind.

Much like people often do, he watched Rose Street lose its neighbors to jobs, white flight, and other impacts of integration. (Or was it forced desegregation?) He watched the houses get moved into by students, and then folks not exactly down on their luck but teetering on it, and then as the city smoldered in the furnace of the state, folks without any luck (and usually because of someone's design) moved in, and then when they were gone the trees were all.

He wondered how many children in the city knew about the woods here. How many flew through on their bikes, laughing as the rough roads inside the forest sometimes made them bounce or fall, how many children picked themselves up again inside of here. How many walked along the water and gazed at the imprints it made on the land? How many children today can say they know Jackson is a river city?

When Carmella moved here, she didn't know anything.

What is a street if a city doesn't exist? What's the bones of the house when the street is gone? It reminded Leo of a man who ambled on High Street, resplendent with a gold tooth shining in his otherwise empty mouth.

His parents were arguing again.

Late at night (or so it seemed to Leo), the lamps took on a sinister, yellow hue, a high pitched whine sort of color, and he saw it like sealant encasing his cracked open door.

“moving,”
“people gone,”
“what choice”
“dangerous,”
“highway,”
“what type of life will they have—”

“stay.”

It all came rumbling through Leo’s head. In his bed, the words marched inside his head and made a home with him inside the room, helping him set up a camp on his floor. Leo lay still in his flannel sheets and marked the days as the words slowly began to dominate the conversations in the daytime, becoming part of everyone’s house too.

During that time, he sometimes woke up and found himself on the floor. Closer to the action, to the tiny base camp that controlled his neighbor’s lives. The ground. When Leo thought back to those interludes, he saw that as a child he compartmentalized them, kept them separate and out of time to what he perceived as his normal life. He still wasn’t sure why, even as an older man far away from the march of the moving words.

This he did know, even if it took him much of his life to figure it out—those arguments were the first signs that Rose Street was packing up. It folded up in handfuls, like flowers wilting on the dining room table. It boarded up like a hurt face. It began to wander. The street was scarring and healing into a new body, feet deep in strange river beds.

In the end, they had their way. Both the words, the families, and the forces swirling around their lives. The overpass was built. The people scattered into new subdivisions, built new streets, created new lives on the newly shaky foundation that they had survived what they were trying to fight for.

Leo always wondered what had happened to his house.

When Carmella moved to Leo’s street in Belhaven Heights, she found abandoned houses, a wealth of older neighbors, and the omnipresent smell of smoke drifting in from fast food chains nearby. She also found him, out of the corner of her eye and only in slight recollections. A man who always waved to her, a fixture just like a tree at the end of the street.

As the days went by and Carmella settled into her house, Leo slowly disappeared. He stopped registering in her consciousness, and became blips and blots upon her sight line. For his part, he didn't mind.

It worked for him. It's what the neighbors on this transient street had always done, the people in truth not quite neighbors but instead an assemblage of souls who happened to make their way through.

But then came the flood.

— — — — —
The ravenous thing.

As it rained, sudden spurts of water erupted all over Belhaven Heights and hopelessly complicated the tangle of cars, trash cans, living creatures, and garbage that live in and around the streets. When the season's sudden flood rushed in, Carmella was rounding the corner of her street. Just before the sky opened up, she saw Leo in her rearview mirror, sitting in his red camping chair on the apartment complex balcony. The last thought she had before the water came was a wondering, briefly, stirring in her mind at the secret lives we all must lead. How she was late, who was in the ambulance she had passed by earlier, who lived in other houses hidden by weeds and trash on the street and why. The next thing she thought was an embodied sensation, an animal aliveness as the rain shook her car.

She never thought storms could be so hard, so rough, so much like a fist. A hidden hand, a sucker punch to her already cracked windshield.

A few blurry moments.

A reflex, her foot off of the brake. Watery noises sprung up around. Dimly, she recalled flipping in the pool over and over again as a child, chlorine shooting up her nose. The water outside wasn't high. She could easily walk home. But her car—

Leo, the man who lived on Rose Street, put out a cigarette. As he rose, he saw a car puffing and chugging along through the water, a yellow light in the crack of rain curtains.

She was there. Her head rested against the wheel, a moment of frustration, a prayer. The water was pushing against her car now, trash cans floating close, and other debris advanced menacingly. For the first time, he saw her not in movement, in driving, in passing by.

"She's really quite young," Leo wondered. A smile.

Leaning against the iron wrought railing, rain coated his bare legs. Splatters, mirroring the eddies whirling below. He may not live on Rose Street anymore, he mused.

He felt the gap in his chest, an old home, an admitting.

But he lived here.

His street needed help. A neighbor needed help. He could be part of it, part of the fabric of this new strange street made of days gone by, little moments in a bigger life, new-old houses and Jackson stories told in foreign tongues.

There are simple things and there are hard things in this life.

For Leo, it was the simple thing to help her, take her door and help shield her from the knee-high water. The hard thing was what comes next.

The simple thing was to walk down, even if he was unsure. The simple thing was to wade through the water, to approach the red car on the driver's side, shield his face from the rain with one hand and hold the other one open to her.

It was a marvel that what came next wasn't the hardest part of all. It came out like faucet water.

"Do you need help, don't worry, I live down the street here—"

"I know," Carmella said clearly.

"You know?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well, um—"

"You're my friend. You're the one I always wave to, the man at the entrance of Lorraine Street."

"Well, let's get you home."

She held out her hand.

When they joined hands, when old Leo heaved, ushered her to the car park after hitting the hazards on her dashboard, he didn't notice she was crying.

They stood under the narrow overhang of his parking lot, holding and hiding out. He held out a cigarette.

She nodded.

“It’s nice to have a neighbor, a friendly person who lives on our street.”

Leo had to admit.

It was.

Author Bio

Alexandra Melnick serves at Operation Shoestring as the Communications Director in addition to serving as the 1 Campus 1 Community Coordinator and adjunct faculty member at Millsaps College. She is an alumna of Millsaps College and the University of Mississippi, and her work has been featured in outlets such Learning for Justice, Bitterzoet, Geez Magazine, and Rewire. Alexandra is dedicated to building a better Mississippi together with her community, and lives with her husband and unruly cat Gretchen in Jackson.