

Polaroid Venation

By Jasmine Sky Ruff

Jacob fishes a red toolbox out from under his bed and jiggles the lock. He sweeps a small screwdriver aside and lifts out a Polaroid photo that has been softened by age. In it, he holds his brother, Dan, in his arms. The edge of the photo is yellowed and it bleeds into the blue sky. He remembers that they were unprepared because Ms. Bates had taken the photo on “two” rather than “three”. Underneath it reads: “Me and Dan, 1998.”

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It had rained hard the night before and that morning the fog had been thick. When they reached the entrance of the forest, Jacob’s sneakers were soaked. The smell of wet earth filled his lungs and it was sharp from the cold. Around Jacob’s neck hung his father’s camera; it bounced against his chest with each step. Dan cupped his hands in front of his mouth and blew hot breath onto them.

“I should have got you new gloves,” Jacob said.

Dan shook his head and said his least favourite teachers insisted that he wore gloves at recess, and how his favourite teachers didn’t mention it. Jacob wanted to tell Dan that he didn’t have to lie to make him feel better, but he knew Dan was too young to understand, so he nodded.

It was Dan’s last day at home. The court had deemed their father-Garry-an unfit guardian. Jacob had just turned eighteen, so he could live where he wanted, but Dan had to go into foster care. He remembered the three hearings as a blur-testimonies, evidence, and Garry’s chain-smoking.

Dan ran ahead of Jacob and picked up a fallen branch. He wielded it above his head, smiled, and charged.

“Lancelot, you will pay!”

Jacob took a picture of Dan mid-war cry-the stick above his head, and his mouth open. Dan clipped Jacob’s calves.

“Watch where you’re swinging that thing Arthur.”

Dan nodded, before saying, “That’s King Arthur to you!”

Jacob slipped the photo into his back pocket. A hangnail on his middle finger caught the rough denim. He brought the finger to his mouth and tried to bite off the loose piece of skin, but the skin was too slender. Jacob wiped his finger on his jeans, and could feel his heartbeat in its tip.

Dan stopped and looked at Jacob over his shoulder. He beat his foot on the earth.

“Slow-poke.”

Jacob laughed and jogged towards his brother. When he caught up they

turned down a path. It was narrower than the one they had been on. As they walked Dan stretched out his hands to catch the sunlight that shone through the branches. A moment before Jacob saw the bridge he heard running water.

Garry had built it before things got bad. The days when they used to go on "Nature Tours." Jacob remembered how he used to come home with his pockets filled with pebbles and leaves, and how they would sort through them in the garage. "Keep... Keep... Get rid of." Garry taught him the veins in a leaf were called "venation" and that they had two purposes: the first being to provide food and water to the plant, the second being structure. Nearly every leaf that was brought home was preserved. After Garry would open one of their encyclopedias and place the leaves among the pages. He remembered how Garry had promised that when all the books had been filled, and the leaves had dried, that they would put them between two pieces of glass and frame them.

On the other side of the bridge was an arbutus tree. Jacob lifted Dan and Dan scrambled into the branches. Bits of bark flaked off the tree and Dan disappeared behind the leaves. Through the leaves Jacob saw the red lights of Dan's sneakers flashing. He told Dan to smile. Dan leaned against the trunk, crossed his arms and smiled, his tongue poking through the space left behind from missing teeth.

Jacob chuckled.

"We gotta get going."

"What? We came all this way for just for that one picture?" Dan said.

He nodded and pulled a leaf out of the bush next to him. "I want to be back home before Dad gets up."

Dan stuck his bottom lip out, and Jacob said if he kept it like that a bird would lay an egg there. Under his breath, Dan asked if Jacob would still love him when he was gone.

"Of course." Jacob reached up and helped Dan down. "Of course."

They walked home holding hands. Dan talked about the Power Rangers and why the pink one was the best.

"You have a crush on her don't you?"

Dan was quiet for a moment and then nodded.

"But that's not why she is the best. She's the best fighter and she has the Pterodactyl Power coin which is really cool."

When they reached the perimeter of the forest the fog had lifted. As they crossed the lawn they saw Garry through the sliding glass door. He was in his housecoat pouring a cup of coffee. Garry waved when he saw them. Jacob felt his chest tighten; he wished they had made it home earlier.

Jacob opened the door and picked Dan up under his armpits and swung him through the entrance. Dan stuck his arms out straight to his sides and giggled.

"Where'd you two go?"

Jacob bit at his hangnail, and from behind his hand he said, "To the forest."

Garry nodded, and looked at his coffee as he said "Shoulda told me, I woulda come."

Jacob said he was sorry and something about how he hadn't wanted to wake him up. Garry's eyes were red and he hadn't shaved in a few days. There were a few grey hairs in his beard. The smell of coffee made Jacob's stomach uneasy.

"Want some cereal?"

Jacob and Dan nodded.

Garry swayed when he reached into the cupboard for bowls.

"Cheerios okay?"

Jacob and Dan nodded.

While they ate they listened to the clock above the table tick. Jacob watched his father eat and noticed a bit of milk caught in Garry's beard. It quivered every time he chewed. Garry licked his lips and looked up.

"Things are going to get better Danny, and I'll have you back in no time."

Dan dropped his spoon. It clinked against the bottom of the bowl. His eyes were glassy. Garry pulled him into his lap, kissed his head and looked at Jacob. The drop of milk was gone. Jacob rested his head on Garry's shoulder and when he breathed in he smelt tobacco.

"Don't worry Danny-boy, I'll have you back with Jacob and me before you know it."

The doorbell rang at 8:59. Jacob answered it while Garry and Dan talked; he could hear Garry promising to visit and call. Ms. Bates smiled at Jacob and asked him if he could get Dan's things and put them in the trunk of her car. Jacob had always wanted to hate her.

"Rough morning?"

"What do you expect?"

She nodded and licked her chapped lips.

"I'm sorry."

As Jacob walked up the stairs he watched her look around the house. He felt suddenly conscious of the dust on the blinds and the full garbage can. Dan ran from Ms. Bates and cried every time she came near him. She told him that if he behaved he would get sweets, but he slapped her outstretched hand. Garry watched Dan, his hands clasped under his eyes, over his nose and mouth; he was shaking. When Dan ran up the stairs and slammed his bedroom door she asked Jacob to get him.

Jacob knocked on the door.

"C'mon Dan. Don't let Daddy's last memory of you be like this."

Dan opened the door and held Jacob's hand as they walked down the stairs.

Garry held Dan and rocked him in his lap. Ms. Bates stood with her back to the kitchen, her breath being the only reminder she was there.

Jacob took Dan out of his father's arms and brought him out to the car.

“Thank you Jacob.”

“Ms. Bates, would you please take a photo of Dan and I before you leave?”

She looked at her watch and nodded.

“I’ll miss you.”

Jacob shut the door, and leaned his head against it. The wooden frame was cool on his forehead. He heard a beer can crack and a small sob. He put his hand in his pocket and traced the veins of the leaf with his fingertips.

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Jacob runs his thumb over the corner of the photo; another is stuck behind it. He unpeels them. Dan smiles, he is leaning on the trunk, one hand outstretched in front of him holding a thin branch. A bit of blue sky peeks through. In the corner of the photo is a black smudge-Jacob’s thumb. Written in pencil: “Dan, 1998.”

WINNING ENTRY



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Jasmine Sky Ruff lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. She is studying Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of British Columbia. *Polaroid Venation* is part of a collection of short stories in progress. Jasmine also writes plays and comics. In her work she likes to explore the intimacy of routine, and the fallibility of memory.