

Shades of Yellow

How to not walk away

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West River Memorial Park, near the New Haven–West Haven border, features an impressive, World War I statue in bronze and granite carved by Karl Lang in 1936. Timothy Francis Ahearn, the sturdy doughboy hero, has thighs like a Heisman Trophy winner with a tapered trunk and muscular arms. When I was returning to life in 2007, slowly kicking back into gear after a two-decade long struggle with self-injury and bipolar II disorder in the mid-2000s, I visited the park frequently. The soldier stands around nine-feet high, and is oxidized green from the weather. He's caught mid-stride, writing a message to officers in back of him, warning of what's ahead. He's a hero, a symbol of bravery, of resilience.

In that period, leaving a New Haven group home, trying to reconstruct myself as a mostly healthy, middle-aged man, I'd sometimes stop and touch the statue's base, or take a snapshot. I've seen him covered in snow, rain, and Mother Nature's dander in spring, and he looks the same—dependable, reliable. Like nothing would ever knock him over.

Nothing.

The first time I saw my father fall I was four. He tumbled off a friend's motorcycle in our neighborhood's cul-de-sac. Maybe he skinned a knee, but the fall gave me a panic attack. I gasped and sprinted to him. He laughed it off, but to me it was excruciating. I made him promise he'd never ride again.

It was an irrational, silly thought, but, to me, Dad was always Dad. He'd always known what to do, whom to call, what the correct, rational and moral decision should be in any situation. When I'd see photos of my three-year old father, adorable, hanging on to his mother in the sea at White Horse Beach in Plymouth, Massachusetts, I sensed, I *knew* he could already grasp everything. Looking at his little pudgy boy-face, I figured that kid was just inordinately

wise. OK, maybe he couldn't *drive* as a three-year old, but he could handle everything else. There was no doubt.

Some years later, I held my father's penis in my hand and steered it towards the plastic urinal as he lay supine in the ER at St. Raphael's in New Haven. He broke his neck in a freak fall at the local gym. Dehydrated from a long trip to India, he exercised the next day back and slipped in the shower. He fainted twice but struggled each time to a standing position. On the third fall, he passed out and fractured neck ligaments. Surgeons said a millimeter more to the left and he would've been paralyzed. For months he wore a neck brace, and today his feet and hands are slowed somewhat, lacking their former dexterity.

The Christmas Eve after the accident, I took him to a ten-dollar barbershop in Guilford, and helped him into a swiveling, lime vinyl chair. I took his brace off and there lay the wounded neck, tender and kind of wobbly looking. His shoulders sagged, and his face was pale, stricken. Oprah's talk show was on in the parlor, famous faces were singing holiday songs that day, and my father recounted his story.

"What an odd thing," the barber said, when my father finished. "One slip and your life changes forever."

The barber didn't fit my stereotype—no chubby veteran or wizened Italian senior citizen, but a middle-aged woman with heavy makeup, and a nice round ass. The walls were covered in advertisements for Brylcreem and Ivory soap, and—straight out of a Norman Rockwell—boys scrambled to grab a seat in the corner. They picked up the local newspaper, snuck glances at Oprah. Later, when she finished with Dad's hair, the barber lightly touched his neck and said, "You take care of that thing, hon."

"Jesus," he said soon after the accident, "all I want to be able to do is zip my own goddamned pants."

During that first week in the hospital, I escorted my father to the restroom, helped him urinate and zip up after, and realized a corner had been rounded quicker than I ever anticipated. Face to face again with fucking yellow.

That color is multiple things in my world, most of them alluring yet simple: flowers, corn on the cob, sunshine, a crayon, bananas, a Cheerios box, legal pads, a bunch of M&M's, and an aching Y2K song by Coldplay. But in our family, growing up, "yellow" was also a covert term, a stand-in more polite than piss and other crudities. *Never use them in the house*, my grandmother bellowed.

For the most part, our unfinished saltbox on Cape Cod was dominated by the malodorous stench of three young brothers. Starting from toddler-ages through junior year of high school, bedwetting was the great equalizer, a bond of raw shame that drove us to silence, or, at most, a peculiar kind of self-lacerating sarcasm. My sisters, one the baby and the other, the oldest, escaped this wrath somehow. We brothers were close in age, myself in the middle with a three-year younger brother, and an older one by two years. No matter how unique or talented, or developmentally disabled each one of us was, in the end, morning would come and greet us with sheets stained yellow. Our family didn't have the money for much counseling, and pediatricians told my mother: "The boys will grow out of it, just wait and see, time will tell."

Years later, a therapist of mine said aptly: "Each of you brothers, in your own fashion, were royally pissed off, and anxious as all get out." Growing up, the topic of urine had a place, a stature in our house. As a kid, I remember my Dad setting the clock for midnight to wake us up, only to find we brothers had already drenched our mattresses. Christ, the frustration my poor father must have felt. Even my grandmother, a dynamo who held off death until ninety-eight, ended family visits with the credo: "Tank out—everyone must *fully and thoroughly* tank out!"

At times, it felt like my whole family—cousins too—were rigid with anxiety and possessed an excessive-urine gene. My parents spoke about purchasing a bed alarm clock for us that was sensitive to moisture, but they nixed that idea because the minor electrical current involved might cause a shock. In my family, people steered clear of talk about electric shock. Whispers of psychic nightmares—

suicide, lengthy institutionalizations, and other miseries in the extended family oozed out to children's ears from time to time, and after a while, skittishness and silence ensnared the topic of the brothers' shame in the same way.

When my father checked on the three of us before he headed to bed, and found us wet, he never chastised us, or mocked us, just had us get some towels to sleep on until morning. My poor mother, who had to face the daunting laundry pile daily for years, was enraged not so much at us, just at the gender roles in the sixties and seventies—why she was the one that had to stay home and do the washing and drying.

Years later, after I'd briefly "dried out," the behavior returned to haunt me as an adult. I'd grown psychotically depressed and obese in my twenties and thirties, and doctors responded by shoveling in their medications, trying to ease the blackness. My bladder was helpless against the onslaught, and I soon found myself at thirty-two, stuck in quite a physical and psychic rut. The only decent thing about that period was that my roommate at a New Haven group home, a schizophrenic-compulsive from Palo Alto, suffered from the same. We both dawdled in our dampness in the mornings, pretending we didn't know this fact about one another. I remember thinking, "Well, at least he won't mind the smell."

Every morning, I shuffled over to the Howe Street Laundry, plunked down significant change, and listened to the washers and dryers chug, swirl and hum. Still, it wasn't such a big deal when I awoke soaked at the group home. I mean, after all, a few colleagues were leaving turds in the shower, so my retention difficulties didn't weigh me down a ton. It was uncomfortable and awkward, yes, but at that point in my life, I took any advantage offered. To not be on the bottom rung gave me an odd solace.

Now, for the first time in forever, my father looks mortal, fallible to me. Over the past years, as his body healed from his accident, he left behind a wheelchair, a walker, and a cane, so he did, in fact, return. He's steadfast, a rock. Or, should I say now, a partially

damaged rock. I always imagined those circle-of-life moments were going to wait till he was 101 years old. That they'd wait for a better time, when I could handle things with more clarity, finesse, and maturity. I know it's too easy and crass to say that, in the end, what binds us isn't talk shows, barbershops, or statues—if I wanted to end as tastelessly as possible, I'd say what binds us is yellow, pure and simple.

But I'd never end that way.

A buddy of mine speaks of a Zen-like balance in caring for himself and his SUV. He's a successful, full-time automotive service writer at a GM Dealership in Fairfield County, and also is an adult with schizoaffective disorder who preaches basics: setting the tires, rotating them, keeping an eye on the engine. The metaphor gets beaten to death, I know, but it's an effective strategy. Take life step by step. Eat right, do your work with pride, take your meds, write good stories, and have supportive people around you, and if you don't, seek out new ones. Hank has always maintained a groove of stability, even in his most riotous and horrific days. We'd sit next to each other at a local psych unit and I'd listen to his advice. Hank was the guy to go to if the hospital started sinking into the sea at three a.m. I always knew he'd find a way to get us the hell out.

When I'm back in New Haven, which I lived in for twelve years, I can feel dislodged by the pace on the streets. I see many striving faces—young women and men on fire, burning up the universe with their iPads, notebooks, Samsung gadgets, and their ambitions. It's a grand thing to be reaching for better days, more fulfilling lives. And it scares me to feel so outside of that sometimes, and I know many of my old colleagues feel the shame.

I see a few of them on the street around the group home I lived in for a decade on Broadway, I notice that stunned, harried look in their gaze. So far from sharing a warm embrace or a substantial conversation. A long ways from feeling needed and loved. Instead, a few have approached me when I'm in the neighborhood and ask for

five bucks for a Red Bull and a Snickers at the bodega, or a bucket of wings and a biscuit at Popeye's. Often, when I see myself reflected in their glasses, my own doubts slam me like a kick to the solar plexus: How can I be sure I won't end up alone again, dragging blades through my body? How do I make certain that the swirling blackness won't obliterate me like it did so many times before?

My father is now seventy-five, a savvy businessman, a philanthropist, a friend to so many who don't have the emotional tools he acquired over the years in struggles with the mental illness in his son, and with losing a younger sister. He's on the elliptical each day, but his latest problem is a hip that needs to be replaced, so he's slower, but not by much. Today what I notice most are his hands: they're sore and dark with age spots, and remind me of his mother's.

Grammy was a wild force of a lady. She taught French at Lexington High School in Massachusetts for years, and sometimes treated her grandkids to a taste of what she was like in the classroom. When we mumbled at her growing up during holidays or visits, she suggested better posture to begin with, chins up, and added her very own *pencil rule*.

"When addressing someone, and properly articulating each consonant and vowel, one should maintain eye contact, and *easily* balance an unsharpened number two pencil on one's upper lip for the length of the conversation." Years later, after she retired, and became a widow, she toured Europe on her own, and offered lectures to senior citizens and any type of community. Her lectures were on the Civil War, and her most popular talk by far: "The Unmentionables—Antique Underwear and Lingerie through the Ages."

When I was a boy at her house in Lexington, Grammy once told me that, during the nighttime, enormous bushes, beach grass, peonies and pear trees would sprout from her hands and arms.

"I was panicked when I first saw these things," she explained to me. "I thought people would think I'm nothing but a useless potted

plant, or that I belong alone in a forest, surrounded by insects and wild, cackling animals."

"What'd you do?" I asked.

She gritted her teeth and balled her fists: "I reached in and ripped those shrubs, flowers, and trees out by the roots—just tore the damn things off, and tossed them through the back window, and soon I had these age spots."

I studied her face for a trace of smile, but didn't see one. I followed her to the back door, and she pointed to bushes, stray weeds and flowers growing beside her stone walkway.

From time to time, I still drive by Timothy Francis Ahearn's likeness at West River Memorial Park. Maybe artist Karl Lang's creation only works as a visual pep talk for me when I'm feeling depleted, but if you happen to be on your way to the Yale Baseball stadium, or along Route 34 behind the Yale Bowl, take a gander. Pull into the park, walk over to him, and reach up. Feel the strength.

I think of my Dad, and how much I'll miss him when he's gone. I also ponder lost peers, old roommates from the group homes and psychiatric hospitals who took their lives, or who've receded deeper inside themselves, and who don't appear to be coming back out. Are there any lessons for us in an old statue?

There's a memory that still makes my eyes wet. In late June of 1989, after my first breakdown and hospitalizations at St. Raphael's, patients had a walking group twice a week led by this vibrant, pretty nurse named Diane. On my first outing, Diane toured Edgewood Park with us. The nurse and I were the same age, twenty-three, and I'd yet to pack on the 150 pounds from all the psych medications that would soon be thrown my way.

Later in the week, it was cool and gray and we vowed to make it to West River Memorial Park, despite the light rain. Diane and I said there was no way in hell we'd return to the hospital until we touched the statue, who Diane referred to as Napoleon, and when we made contact, she said: "See you next week, Sarge."

The brisk walk of a half-mile felt so important to me—essential. I was young and depressed, and would spend the next two decades trying to live a life without thrusting cigarettes, cigars, and razors into my flesh. But for those mornings, maybe three or four all together, I could flirt with a pretty nurse and feel the pulse of desire, and pray desperately that the anguish and rage inside would end so I could return to my life, and start over.

Substantial and true psychic health can be quirky, and hard to predict. I've observed many with emotional storms tumble, sink into the mire, and disintegrate completely, never to be heard from. And yet other times I see those with despair and anguish reach towards life, turn towards a pulse. They rise up, partially redeemed, and get another shot. They step out and away from the emotional formaldehyde that's been coating their skin for years, sprinting free and clear, and shake that crap off for good.

Look on the nightly NBC television news: a depressed woman with PTSD, who lost a leg in Iraq, is now married with kids and a medalist in Para-Olympic games. Or on a park bench near a hospital in Topeka, Kansas, twenty years ago, a peer of mine with schizoaffective disorder, and OCD, once so traumatized she was mute, became a text-book reader for a visually-impaired patient, giving freely of her voice.

Light does emerge somehow. And yes, that shade of yellow and its odor lingers for me, like the smell of entropy and disaster, but there's things to be joyful over as well. And though it's ancient news, nothing explosive or revelatory about it, life continues despite the ECT, suicide attempts, scars, and four-point restraints. Or more recently, dancing with my wife ten years to the day since my last hospitalization. Silence and mourning, yes, prayer and meditation, absolutely, but then we sow, water, and re-emerge.

We beat a drum, write the lyric, strum the mandolin, dim the lights, cue the projector, or just put our feet up, and enjoy the show. Because just when you've checked people off the useful and necessary list—or when that *unsteady, unusually disturbed* bag of bones

mumbling in the corner at the city trolley stop seems without purpose—do you grasp what can occur?

Well—for one—the late afternoon sunlight might touch her face just so, and tulips, magnolias, bonsai trees, and hydrangeas could sprout up along her hands and arms, and presto! A wounded, broken woman transforms into a human arboretum. Suddenly, she's a nature poet, spinning earthy, verbal tales, showing off golden petals, twisting and undulating like a seasoned performer, opening herself up to vast possibility. Maybe even making your day.

For what the troubled lady was selling at the trolley stop years ago was hope for sure, dignity, too, but more simply, beauty. A slightly worn and redemptive yellow rose. All for the price of one dollar.

Now who in the world could walk away from something like that?