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A Picture in Time

Sarah Crawford
Syracuse University

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A Picture

Sarah Crawford

I distinctly remember the juxtaposition of our appearances when we first met in the fifth grade. He was short in stature with dark, closely cropped hair and pale skin that contrasted with the freckles scattered across his face. I was an awkwardly tall ten-year-old with long, dirty blonde hair and skin so tan you would have thought that I spent the majority of my existence outside. Even though he was a good five inches shorter than me, his presence was commanding and tough, which was downright terrifying for a girl who could barely form the words to answer a question in class. However, as the year progressed, we discovered one trait we shared:

competitiveness. Everything between us was a challenge. Who could write the longest paper? Who could get the highest test score? Who could finish the math problem first? It was the foundation of a friendship that had yet to be built.

Flash forward seven years to our senior year of high school. We are hardly recognizable from our elementary school selves. I am no longer the fragile, shy girl that used to hide from strangers and foreign situations. He no longer tries to intimidate other people to compensate for his lack of height.

One day, he calls me. He tells me he has stumbled upon a “fun” place that’s 15 min-

in Time

utes from our high school—he had been killing time while waiting to pick his little brother up from wrestling practice.

“It’s a really long stretch of railroad tracks and it leads to a giant overlook,” he explains. “I thought you might like it since you’re always taking photos of that kind of stuff.”

“I take photos of more than just scenery,” I reply.

“Sarah,” he says in a light tone of voice that always accompanies a serious, yet brief evaluation of my inability to lie. “No you don’t. Just bring your camera.”

“Okay.”

We agree upon noon the next day, a Saturday, and I hang up, then immediately go to charge my camera battery.

He arrives thirty minutes late, as per usual. His habit of staying up at night, perhaps due to undiagnosed insomnia, makes it nearly impossible for him to wake up and get anywhere before two in the afternoon. If he didn’t have a lead foot, and a responsible younger brother, I doubt he would even make it to school in the mornings.

He steps out and opens the car door for me in a way that suggests he is indirectly apologizing for his tardiness. He’s nicer than he would like to admit, no thanks to that tough guy exterior which exists only to thinly veil his true self. Sometimes his personality reminds me of the layers of the earth we used to learn about in middle school science class. His outer appearance—muscular,

toned, dark, and mysterious—is akin to the lithosphere; it’s misleading to the true depths of what lies beneath.

As we drive, a steady downpour of rain splashes upon the windshield and darkens the road before us. This is my favorite kind of weather. His too.

“The sun just makes everything too bright,” he remarks, as if reading my very thoughts. “When it rains the world becomes tolerable. It’s like I can actually see it for what it is, with all of the colors and details.”

“I always feel like the sun drains the color out of the forest, but the rain brings it back,” I say. “That’s why days like these are perfect for taking pictures.” He gives me a look that reads *I told you so*, even though he doesn’t say it. He’s secretly smug like that.

We whiz by residential neighborhoods, crammed with colonial style houses, and turn down a backcountry road that takes us past an expanse of farms and pastures. The rural scene is so distinctly characteristic to south central Pennsylvania that it makes me wonder if I’ll long for its familiarity when I leave for school in the fall. I think of the saying “we don’t miss what we have until it’s gone,” but I can’t help wishing that there were some way to appreciate what we have while it’s still ours. I think about mentioning this to him. It’s the kind of thought he would appreciate contemplating.

Right as I turn to do so, he jerks the car off the road onto a hidden gravel path that runs alongside the railroad tracks. My head hits the low ceiling as the car changes elevation, and for some reason I find myself laughing, not crying out in shock.

“Are you incapable of slowing down even for turns?” I say, readjusting myself and slid-

ing lower into the seat in case there's another cataclysmic, abrupt turn in the road ahead.

"When you signed up to be my friend, your safety was not guaranteed on adventures," he responds jokingly. I roll my eyes at him and his apathy toward my bruised head.

He pulls to a stop at an indiscernible location along the tracks and we get out of the car.

The rain has dissipated for the most part and left behind a sweeping gray sky that illuminates the trees and grass around us.

"So, where do we go now?" I say, already taking out my camera to snap a few photos.

"Follow me," he replies confidently. He jumps onto the railroad tracks and sets off at a quick pace. I wait until he's about twenty feet ahead and snap a candid of him walking in the center of the two straight metal bars. His black hair stands out against the sky, but his green jacket and jeans match the surrounding forest and river that runs underneath the tracks in the distance. I examine the photo as I hurry to catch up and wonder what someone could determine about him from this one shot. Would they know he hates horror movies but watches them anyway in order to conquer his fears of the unknown? Would they be able to tell that he has a passion for writing, but no plan to do anything with a journalism degree once he graduates college? Certainly not. They'll judge him based on his physical appearance. He's just a boy, casually striding down a seemingly endless stretch of railroad tracks with no clear purpose or intention, and yet, somehow, that description sums him up pretty well too.

About a mile into the walk, the gravel beneath us gives way to a wooden bridge, with gaps spanning half a foot across to each

board. Below is a drop of forty to sixty feet, straight into the fast, unforgiving water of the Susquehanna. A seagull, one of the odd and unnative birds in our area, swoops over my head before taking a plummeting nose dive down the steep drop into the river. My stomach seizes as I imagine myself falling down too, just as fast, but with no graceful entrance into the water. I feel my feet stop moving before my mind fully registers my surroundings. He doesn't stop. He doesn't fear what I fear. He knows what will happen if he slips and he's okay with it.

"What?" He asks, spinning around gracefully, practically teasing me with his confidence and ease on the rickety boards.

"I don't know about this," I say hesitantly.

"Sarah," he replies in that familiar teasing, yet honest, tone of voice. "You know it's fine. Trains go across this bridge every day." He holds out his hand for me, which I take reluctantly and lean on his strength as I take my first, unsteady step onto the beam.

"See, you got this no problem," he says encouragingly as I take a few more steps.

Suddenly, he releases my hand and begins gallivanting off down the tracks at an incredibly fast pace.

"Hey, wait for me," I call out, my words immediately getting dragged off by the wind that has suddenly picked up now that we have no trees to protect us. He glances back with a smirk and shrugs. Suddenly, I feel a rumbling stir within and I swear I can feel the competitive aspect of our friendship rising from the grave of our past. A fire ignites in my feet in an intense need to not only break free from my fears, but to prove to him that I can also be confident 40 feet high in the air with no safety net below. He lets out

one concise, signature chuckle as he realizes that I'm picking up speed. Game on.

We're different now, but in some ways, the children we used to be still exists within us.

A month later, he calls again. There's a new hiking trail he had just finished reading about in the local paper that promises great scenery and adventure.

We set out early the next morning so as to avoid the stifling humidity strongly associated with southern Pennsylvania in mid-July. By some miracle, he arrives on time, clad in one of his signature white shirts, jeans, and work boots. I don't think I have seen him wear shorts since we were in the seventh grade, but I never thought to ask him why.

We walk for an hour, him running ahead in an attempt to grab hold of our final fleeting moments of reckless youth by jumping across small ravines and climbing up trees. I straggle behind, always stopping to snap photos of the leaves that perfectly catch the soft morning light and colorful wildflowers that stand out amongst the common green of the forest.

After awhile we come to a bend in the trail. It has been recently sliced open by the storms of summer and a small creek traverses through the mud, carrying the fresh rainwater and an admirable, temporary beauty.

We stop and he sits down.

"I don't want to fade into oblivion," he says, his voice thick in a serious undertone I do not commonly associate with his normal, sarcastic behavior.

"Then don't."

"It's not that easy," he replies with a heavy sigh. "What's easy is for people to fall into

the trap society has placed for them. You graduate, you get a job, you have kids, and then you die. There's nothing more to your life than routine."

His words slip away with the soft babble of the water, but the weight of their honesty settles around us.

We don't speak, but let the sounds of the forest create a white noise that

drown out our own thoughts about the future. He is positioned so firmly on the rock that it almost looks as though he has been painted into a picture and I am merely a patron in an art gallery observing the scene. He is the silent king of this forest, at least for a few seconds that is—and I need to commemorate his existence. So, I raise my camera, and snap.

We're different now, changing almost every day. But, if we're lucky, perhaps, enough parts of us will stay the same so that our memories are safe from the routine oblivion of life.

