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Creative Non-fiction

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Lee Torda

If you want to know how I spent my summer I'll tell you. I read eleven books—a summer record for me unheard of since those heady days of childhood summers when Aunt Lee took me to the library, the only air-conditioned building you didn't have to spend money to be in. I cleaned my house the way houses have been cleaned in my family for three generations. I watched the final season of *Lost* and all the seasons of *Mad Men*. I went home to Ohio. I went to the Cape for the first time ever. I memorized the Gettysburg Address. I ran Jamaica Pond every day.

June

While I was about the Pond, I listened to music sometimes or old episodes of *This American Life*, but I don't like books on tape. A lot of the time I talked to my sister, who still lives in Ohio. We talked about all the sorts of things you'd imagine, but we spent a good portion of our time talking about our mother. She has Alzheimer's.

One thing we sometimes talked about, morosely, is stuff we would have talked about with my mother, if she could still talk. Perhaps it's not morose, perhaps it's just a normal thing to do, but it strikes me as odd because I didn't talk to my mother all that much *until* she got sick and not really about important things. We talked a lot about TV, as a matter of fact. But then, as her illness progressed, we were afraid to call her because she'd forget to hang up the phone. It was kind of funny until my sister had to drive forty minutes to her house to hang up.

Before that point though, in the twilight moments when my mother was more coherent than not, the television program *Lost* premiered. My mother started



The glamorous Jean Zanzano Torda

to watch the show out of a deep and abiding crush on the lead actor who played the doctor—I can't remember his name on the show, but he used to play Charlie on the TV show *Party of Five*. That's how I know any actor, never by the role I mean to reference but by a role they've played in the past. When I

get Alzheimer's I will no longer be able to tell you who any movie star is, and that will be a considerable loss to me because I love to talk about movies.

I did not watch *Lost* at the time, but I would ask my mother, in one of our phone calls, how it was going. We had this same conversation:

"I'm so excited."

"Why?"

"*Lost* is on tonight."

"I think it's on on Wednesday, Ma."

"Uh-huh."

"Today's Tuesday."

"Well, whenever it's on." My mother was often exasperated by my need for precision that way.

A version of the *Lost* conversation has become a kind of shorthand for my sister and me. "I'm so excited," one of us will say, "*Lost* is on tonight." And the other of us will know that we are confused about something. It's just general code for that floating sort of uncertainty that everyone feels sometimes and some know excruciatingly well.

When I watched the show this summer I wondered what my Mother and, more specifically, my mother's ailing brain, made of it. She had no ability anymore to try to figure the way some bit of plot from two seasons ago made sense. I guess all she could do was plow forward with the plot left ahead of her.

The irony of a woman addled by Alzheimer's enjoying *Lost* cannot possibly escape anyone. We made any number of inappropriate jokes about Jean (our mother) watching *Lost* because that is just the kind of people we are, though we try to avoid obvious jokes around people with lesser senses of humor and a greater penchant for tragedy. Sometimes, though, while I'd be running or walking around the pond, putting one foot in front of another, some joke would make me laugh out loud.



Jamaica Pond at dusk, July 2011 (Photo by author).

July

Sometimes when I am not talking about my mother to my sister, I am thinking about her while I run. I don't think just about her. I think about teaching, bills, what I'm reading, what to wear. People who run know that that's the sort of thing you do while running: whole miles will pass, and you won't even realize it because you are thinking harder than you are running. The decision to memorize "The Gettysburg Address" happened that way.

One of the books I read this summer was *The Killer Angels*, a fictionalized account of the battle of Gettysburg. So I thought, while I ran, I would try to commit the whole of the address to memory and then recite it to my students come Presidents' Day. Memorization is a very old and old-fashioned

form of pedagogy that probably a great many modern experts on the subject have no use for, but I have an excellent memory, and I welcomed, when I was a student, assignments that required use of my talents—state capitals, the year of the Norman Invasion (1066—also very nearly my Aunt Phil's mailing address), the lobes of the brain. I can still recite Frost's "Stopping By the Woods on A Snowy Evening."

There is some research that suggests that the more active you are with your brain the longer you can stave off a disease like Alzheimer's (though less so with early onset, which is what my mother has). So we will see, long term, what memorizing Abe's well-spoken 289 will do for me, but, come the day after Presidents' Day next year, I've got an excellent class planned for my students. Other research says that people who make a living using

their brains can hold off the disease for a long time, but when it hits, it hits hard. An individual spirals downward, away from herself and her memories, at great speed. I think that this straight and direct line to oblivion is the option for me.

Some days this summer I lost track of time and arrived too late at the pond. On those nights I tried to beat sunset. Most of the path is fairly bright and usually populated by other runners, dogs, their owners. But there is one stretch well canopied by trees. The cars race by high above you, the beams of headlights not even denting the foliage. I feel a pronounced disorientation in this section of the park.

An athlete friend of mine once told me I have no kinesthetic sense. This I take to mean that I never accurately assess where and how my body is moving

through space—Alzheimer’s patients suffer from this too. So when I find myself in this space I am unsure of where the path is (I can’t swim or run in a straight line). I don’t know if uneven terrain will send me tumbling down the incline into the lake. It scares me when people or animals loom up out of the darkness. The path clears eventually as I near the well-lit spot where the boat house is and the path is closest to Jamaica Way. If I had to run like that, in the dark, all the time—and some people do, I see people running at night all the time—there’s no way I’d see it through.

It is at these times that I most often think of my mother. Because, with Alzheimer’s, I have no real way of knowing what it is actually like so I find myself imagining what it might be like. And I imagine this: not being able to comprehend how things are supposed to unfold. I think this is terrifying. It’s not the past I will regret losing. It’s a feeling for the present that I will mourn.

August

In addition to *Lost*, my mother and I used to talk about *General Hospital*. When I was a little girl, my mother would go with her sisters to clean my grandfather’s house, iron his shirts, and cook his meals. In summer, I would go too. This is how I learned how to do those things myself. None of my aunts, much older than my mother, could provide me with a single cousin to play with so I would watch *General Hospital* with my grandfather, who did not understand English. Then I would report to my mother and aunts about what was going on. I’ve watched it ever since. While I was home this summer, I sat with my mother and told her what was happening on *GH* (Brenda is back, Ma. You’d have liked her wedding dress). I did it to fill the room with the sound of something familiar.

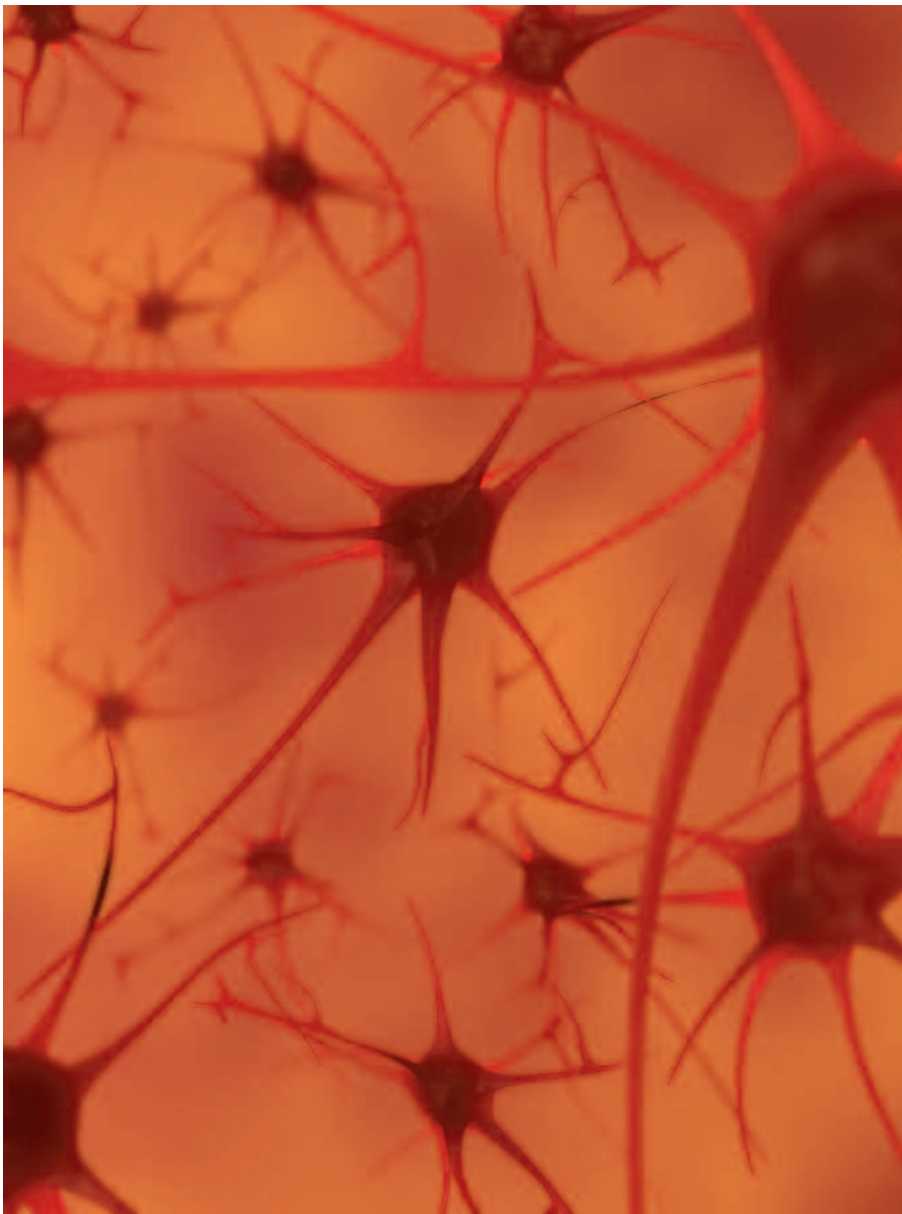
I would have liked to have talked to my mother about *Mad Men*. One of the episodes had a story line that resulted in

the office knowing the real age of the zaftig office administrator, Joan. It turns out that she is over thirty, and, the audience is to understand, a bit less desirable, a bit less powerful than she was when people didn’t know this. The character’s date of birth is given as 1931, just two years older than my mother. Like Joan, she was a secretary from the time she graduated high school until she married my father—when she was 35. No one thought my mother would marry, let alone have children.

In truth, I know so little about my mother. She was an intensely private person and anything I do know about her I know from stories other people, mostly her sisters, have told me. So, not to put too fine a point on it, I learned a great deal about my mother by watching this television show. Or I made up a great deal about her. But either way, it’s what I’ve got to work with. I would have liked to have checked my facts with her.



Cape Cod. Truro, August 2011 (Photo by author).



3-D Illustration of neurons in the brain.

At the end of the summer, after I returned from visiting my sister and my mother, I visited the Cape for, really, the first time since moving to Massachusetts twelve years ago. I feel fairly certain that my mother would have hated the place where I stayed in Truro. It was musty and old and there was nothing clean enough about it, but she would have loved to eat out every night. She loved lobster, which is not often on the plates of Ohioans. When I lived in Maine she

visited me and, I remember, ate lobster every day for a week. I couldn't believe she didn't get sick.

This house in Truro had exactly the number and kind of musty books I thought a house on the Cape should have. It had Emerson and a lot of Walt Whitman. There was also a set of *Time: The Year in Review*, annuals that collected bits and stuff printed the year before in the magazine. They were the worse for mold and inattention. I couldn't resist pulling down issues—the year I was born, my sister, my father. In the year

my mother was born, a man, described by newspaper reports as “anxious and intelligent-looking,” walked into a jail in Pasadena, California claiming he could remember nothing of who he was. He held his hands out to surrender to whoever was in charge, though he had committed no crime that he or anyone else knew of. He asked the men to lock him up until his memory returned. There the man sat until one night he saw a picture of himself in a newspaper. He yelled to the officers that he was the man in the picture. I could find no further stories on Mr. X, nothing that could tell me how life went on for him, if he ever recovered his memory or if he had always to rely on the facts that others delivered about his life in order to know it.

The last time I was home this summer, while I sat with my mother and told her about *General Hospital*, I noticed her rubbing the tips of her pointer and middle fingers together with her thumb. She never stopped unless I held her hand. The second I released it, she was back to rubbing. It was as if she were trying to tell me that someone had spent an inordinate amount of money on something or that she was searching for a word—the precise description, maybe, of a flavor in a dish. Whatever it was, it was on the tip of her tongue and there it will remain.



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