

God of All Time

The first thing Milk could seem to remember went back to being a little, little kid. He barely even had a grasp on the words. It was a little hard to get to in his head, but when he could work up the stamina to get back to it — or it could work up the stamina to get back to him — it was really something else. It was something he could feel in his bones was at the base of everything he knew about anything — and it was barely a memory.

It wasn't even a fun story that you could carry around with you, it was just a little happening.

Right around when he got the trick of standing, he was walking through the city with his mom and his dad. It had been a while of going about — introducing Milk to the things that were around and enjoying them in equal measure — and when it was getting to be a little too much for the folks with more experience and less ability in running about they stopped in a park for a bit and let little Milk do some playing in the grass.

He was hanging over a pond, looking in at the fish and the ducks with one eye and his own reflection with the other. He thought it was quite the thing to be able to sit next to. His parents — old, artistic souls they were — must have thought the same, judging by the sound of the camera's click.

He was confused. "It's a camera. It stores what you see so you can come back to it later."

He wondered why. "You are what you are, but you become what you take with you."

He wanted to become a photographer when he grew up. A very good one at that.

Milk was also young when he first realized that other people couldn't see what he could.

Not so still young as to not understand, but young enough that it was something that made him feel embarrassed. About the same age when the meaning of a name became evident. You know the age — the one after intentless foolishness and before the creation of empathy — yeah, right there.

It might have been the worst possible time to find it out. Because instead of thinking about the joy of having a gift, he only wondered what it would be like to close his eyes and turn off the lights and see absolutely nothing at all. Sometimes he even pretended to 'see' the dark when the blinds were closed and the lights turned down. He thought it must have been very nice.

In the place of nothing, he saw time. And not some foreign, strange notion of time cooked up for the sake of fiction, it was the real thing. When Milk closed his eyes he could see any honest moment in history that he decided to think about, which was helpful mostly in history class.

Conceivably, he could go anywhere he wanted to anytime he wanted to with the same effort as taking a nap. He took a while to appreciate that since he was still growing a brain.

By grade nine, Milk was a great student and a rather creative one at that. He'd picked up reading techniques from 1000 years ahead and he worked weeks ahead of the class. Hell, he even studied public speaking in his sleep. People just wrote him off as a sharp kid, which was almost right.

He looked into the future and knew that he would live a good life. He was a bit depressed by the way everything ended, but by the time he was going off to college, it all seemed to have been resolved.

He gave it some thought — he had nothing but time after all — and reasoned that perfection had to be his reality, no matter what shape that takes. There was something to appreciate in the peace of having everything decided but being so intuitively free. He'd fought off the fear that he was pointless and resolved to enjoy his life because that was— well it was rather poignant.

He survived on little bits of philosophy and slices of the future and the past. There were no problems with remembering anything he needed to, he could pick out the right thing to do as if he knew it, and he carried a childlike spirit by really becoming a child sometimes. It was around here that he picked up a knack for storytelling. The reference he had made it easier, of course.

Milk was particularly fond of a certain few moments — these were the ones he would pull out on those days where he needed a pick-up from the dregs of burnout — and a good deal of his daydreams and nightdreams were spent on them.

His favorite of all time was this once when he was back home around the age of an elementary schooler: it was before he even had a concept of himself, and he was sitting in the spring grass as his dad and mom were out working on the edges of the yard, keeping it all nice just because they wanted to. The colors were so nice, and he was sitting down after playing with his old dog, Sock.

There was a soft breeze that seemed to give the world a shade of fresh blue in the late afternoon, and it brought with it a faint smell of apple pie so well-made that the air itself made him taste something sweet.

A close second was the meal that day — chicken soup, fresh bread, followed by fresh apple pie.

He would just sit there for a while when he needed to. Just taking five until he had to get back into being a real person who had to do things. When he came out of that, things would just seem fresher.

He was happy, really happy at that. He was doing well, and in a few years, he would come out of college with a degree and be ready to get whatever job he wanted. He might even get married to a boy that he had been having a damn good time with because every time he looked into his coffee eyes he saw a deep powerful void that just kept pulling him in with what he could only describe as the purest of love.

At 22 he realized he was a degenerate.

It was a clear night in his little college city that he handpicked for himself and Milk was thinking out loud to the tune of some country-roads-ass Bob Dylan song. Shooting the bull and all that with the folks around him outside the bar. The stars were out there. And every time he blinked he was looking into Michael's eyes.

"I love— fucking— Oscar Wilde so much."

"The— the importance of being earnest is so good!"

"Changed my life"

And just there, right there, between the 'y' and the 'I' Milk just grasped it somehow. That he had so much talent — power — that he could be using but he was just leaving it behind.

There wasn't a future where he seemed to make a difference.

That thought didn't go away.

Honestly, what was he doing getting drunk every night when he had the potential to be changing the world? What was he fucking doing?

It took a bit less to get over that idea this time, and by the end of his last fall semester, he was about back to a functioning person. It was certainly helpful to be able to go back and see that he could be happy and to see how he recovered the last time.

There was one time: the first time he met Michael, that kept him going. It wasn't very important to him when it happened, and he was sure he didn't remember it until he went back to it.

He was sitting in the university yard, reading on the grass, maybe even drifting off to watch the birth and death and rebirth of the universe, bathing in the primordial soup when the kid just plopped down next to him and told him:

"You're either crazy or an English major, and I'm not sure there's a difference..." thought for a moment and followed "and so I really, really want to talk to you."

And that foresaw a nice conversation about East of Eden that Milk didn't need to hear again, but the part he wanted to see every time was the look in Michael's eyes. There was a wonder there, true fascination, and it felt like it got more real every time he went back to see it.

There was a feeling deep inside his heart every time he went back to the moment — an expectation, a longing that he couldn't get enough of. His breaths came out from the Earth itself the whole time he was there. God, what a moment, and he would come out of it not needing to think about his place in the world. Everything was secure then.

He rationed that even if he could be important, it probably wasn't all it was chalked up to be in his head — he had a way of being unrealistic.

He would go back to visit his graduation so much in the coming years.

He would visit his engagement, too.

He would find out that he would never visit his marriage on one bitter day in September.

He didn't want spoilers for it, so he never really checked before — he thought it would be more interesting that way. That made it so much worse.

See, Milk thought that all he needed to do was to do everything right. Michael thought it was all a little too much for him to live up to. He felt bad like he was a child. Michael couldn't see a good life for himself with someone who gave so much. It ended there.

He lived off of little memories of talks with his mother when he was a teenager. He called her after he remembered it every time, and she always seemed happy to hear his voice and to be his shoulder for a while. The talk he liked to most is when she sat down to help him get his cleats on for a little-league game he asked how loud she would cheer when he hit the ball and she said

"They'll hear me over the ocean."

In retrospect, Milk was pretty sure she genuinely meant that. It always made him smile.

Of course, he went back to his time with Michael a lot. It was hard to avoid it, really. It was hard to stop thinking about him whenever he blinked. But somehow he kept on going like that for a while.

But much too late realized those eyes in his favorite memories were never his at all, and if he'd paid just a bit more attention to that memory that he'd seen so many times he'd have thought that he met Michael in class and that he'd always liked to read indoors.

He wanted to vomit for a few weeks straight as he played everything back over and over.

All at once, his world kind of fell in on itself then: what exactly could he trust beyond exactly what was happening at the moment? He wasn't sure if he could even trust that he was awake when he splashed the cool water on his face each morning.

This was something of a new kind of fear.

Milk had never been so uncertain before, but he worked out that he would just trust what he thought he knew and take everything else as nothing but information on or about his life. It was nothing more than that.

He had a dull little instinct for it, too. One that he could temper. There was a little line between the memories that were his and the memories that weren't and it was a deep-rooted sense of familiarity that softened the edges of everything.

There were, however, cases where this would seem to fall out. See, some things that he looked back on were so strong — or so familiar that he couldn't get a sense for them at all. The old memory with his dog, for example: it was rather vivid, rather potent, and he knew it so well it was deeply ingrained in him, but he just didn't have anything else to remember about Sock, and he never knew his parents to be much the type for yard work.

He remembered his mom lying dead on her bedroom floor as well as he remembered her funeral the next year. And for a while after that, he wasn't sure if he even remembered having a dog or having a childhood or even living at all.

For all that he knew he could have hit his head at fourteen and built a new life right from there. None of it needed to be true at all. And he had no idea what to do.

He took some time to sort it all out.

For a while, Milk sat alone in a dark room filing through old pictures and VHS tapes at his dad's house. The tapes were his favorite because he could hear them. They clicked into the player nicely, and there was a little buzzing sound that he got to be very intimate with.

There was this one video where his dad was learning how to work the camera, and he made all of these jokes with her as he got all the settings figured out just so she could get cut off right in the middle of singing moon river.

Milk laughed with them a lot, then.

He made dinner for his dad one night. He didn't need to know the recipe was his when he sat down with a nice hot bowl of chicken soup and fresh bread and — and mind you it took a lot of sitting alone in a dark room, tossing the images back and forth between the screen and the sides of his skull to be able to do this — asked if he was okay— how he felt about everything.

"Yeah— yeah. You know, I— I've been through a lot, and... and I've made it out the other side, you know?"

And Milk closed his eyes and took a deep breath to say "Yeah, I know."

Once he finally believed that, he packed up his stuff, took one last look at the old tapes, and went to start back up at his job. He left a note on the dining room table that said to call him if he ever needed anything. It read: "You are what you are, and you become what you leave behind". And he knew that made his dad smile until he cried just the right amount.