

Fifteen Seconds

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My father died twice in 1990, twelve years and three months before I was born. Two years before he met my mother, the bullet perforated his large intestine and the paramedics attempted to resuscitate his still heart. Nine years and nine months before my brother was born, while in recovery from the gunshot wound, the tip of his central IV line broke off and traveled to his heart, stopping it for the second time.

He was twenty years old when he died.

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I made a vow to myself and anyone who asked that I would never attend my parents' college. I decided this in elementary school before I knew that he had been shot there, or what it even meant to be shot. My father never hid the numerous scars over his stomach where he had been sliced open in every attempt to save his life. He never lied when asked where they came from, or why it happened. There was only so much an eight-year-old could do with the knowledge that his father had lived and died more than once.

I was adamant about never going, not because of the fear that I'd somehow meet the same fate as my father, but because the third grade was that stage of life where following in your parents' footsteps seemed conceptually like the end of the world. I had no choice but to begrudgingly give in to researching their college for my brochure assignment; I was too young to know the names of any other schools and too lazy to seek them out.

I didn't consider then that my parents' excitement about seeing me explore what their alma mater had to offer would be due to the fact that they could briefly relive their previous

lives. The repeated insertions of memories and suggestions on what to add to my project never connected the dots of their nostalgia to me. The idea that they were different people with different obligations and personalities was, frankly, pretty far-fetched. I had only known and thought of them in one way—Mom and Dad.

Those titles were dubbed to my parents by the birth of my older brother, and then extended to the addition of me. My most formative years saw me growing and changing but their roles remaining the same. They still cooked me Hamburger Helper for dinner, told me to clean my room, instructed that I do not stay out too late with my friends and then scolded me for spending too much money. When the issue of college decisions came to be, I could see the change in their roles in my life—from parents to almost friends.

And yet, Salisbury University—two and a half hours toward the Eastern Shore—occupied the very bottom of my list.

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My dad was across the street from campus at the Phoenix Nightclub—where our current football stadium was built—when he collapsed on the ground with a bullet in his side. It was a clubbing kind of night in April, and that remained true until the gunshot rang out. Fifteen seconds passed of blissful unawareness ducked behind a car before he felt the pain in his stomach.

His ten or twelve friends had been there, too. His best friend stayed at his side from beginning to end, from the time the gun was pulled to the paramedics coming to save a dead man. In that time, my soon-to-be Uncle C had just lost the person he knew as his best friend for less than five seconds.

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I originally wanted to go to school in New York. The city life seemed ideal for the kind of person I expected to become. How many stories had you heard where the aspiring author sat in a café in ‘The Big Apple’ dreaming of their first published bestseller? It seemed like the kind of place that would keep me moving and productive, things that often alluded me.

Unfortunately, I hated New York.

The skyscrapers were too tall and the busy streets too cramped. Despite the widely proclaimed highlife of Manhattan, I felt like I couldn’t breathe properly. My parents weren’t city people either, and the tuition costs were enough to put us off from the New Yorker lifestyle for good. With the failure of my first choice, the encouragement to tour Salisbury University began.

My initial impression of Salisbury the first time we passed it en route to Ocean City could be boiled down to “middle of nowhere.” I was thirteen at the time with thirteen-year-old problems, far from thinking about which college would shape me for four years. The expanse of cornfields and straight roads were as unappealing as they were endless, and I was too consumed by my own life to be attentive to the area around me once we had reached the city. From then on I only remembered Salisbury as gray. That was reason enough not to go, no matter how many colors my parents saw it in.

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I never pictured my dad as a partier, not until I got older and heard the stories. When I saw him at home he hung out in the basement a lot, working on music or watching some sports game I never found interesting. In college he spent his nights out in a different world than the one I know Salisbury to be now. The people were wilder, the campus was smaller, he was just starting to really live. He was the youngest of five, an uncle of two kids younger than ten, and a

business administration major with a concentration in marketing when he died. It was April 8th, his oldest sister, Valerie's, birthday.

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The college tour was what convinced me to go to Salisbury. It was freezing in January, as per usual for Maryland, and the campus was dead during winter semester. I hadn't had much of an inclination to visit my other two college choices in Virginia, especially because we got to stay in a nice hotel for the tour of Salisbury.

My dad's memories of his college days partially filled the two-hour commute from South Bowie to the Eastern Shore. By this point I knew my parents met when he was a senior working as a cook in the student commons, and she was a freshman who had just sworn off dating another boy. I knew what dormitories they lived in and what their majors were. I knew that the man who fought with my dad's friends in the nightclub before shooting him had been released from prison the year after I was born. And the year after that, he went to buy a car from my grandfather.

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My dad's second oldest sister, my Aunt Pat, ran into my grandparents' room between two and three in the morning, inconsolable, yelling that Timmy had just been shot. My grandfather was already out of bed with the phone in hand, pulling his pants on. My Dad's older brother, my Uncle Eddie, was still asleep downstairs. My Aunt Valerie was across the country.

I imagine in that moment that my dad was a kid again. That was who he was in the family; that was who they knew him to be. Their little boy, the second to go away for college, the first to die. There was panic. There was confusion. There was hurt. There was worry. There was urgency. There were all of the emotions you'd feel if your child and youngest brother had been shot over one hundred miles and two hours away.

My Dad spent five days up the road at what was once Peninsula General Hospital, now Peninsula Regional Medical Center. He didn't know how serious his condition would become, but he was confident he'd be out in a few days. There were a lot of visits and a lot of praying, and then the doctors discovered the infection on the side of his kidneys.

He was carried in a helicopter to Baltimore Shock Trauma. It was ironic, because he was told that he was in shock for the entire ride there, having casual conversation with the medic. Upon landing he remembered being annoyed at the sight of the five or six doctors that escorted him straight to the operating room, inconvenienced by yet another surgery. He swears he could feel the pressure of being cut open before going completely under.

There, he spent three months in recovery with four tubes in his side draining out the infection. The first few weeks are still hazy today from the drugs; the only thing he remembers about my Aunt Valerie being there was that she had just gotten new braids.

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Laundry detergent was free by the time I got to Salisbury University. My dad and his friends used to take quarter-shaped pieces of foil and insert them into the coin slots to fool the machine into thinking they'd paid. My dad was floored after finding out that the most we had to do was push a button. He had the same reaction to having cars on campus freshman year, the renovated academic buildings, the development in the surrounding area, and the Chick-fil-A in the student commons. In all the times he had come back for homecoming games, he never got to really retrace his steps.

Something my parents do well is remind me how much easier I have it here than they did. Everything is quicker, better quality, worth the money. However, in spite of the astonishment I

saw on my dad's face during the tour, the one thing he felt I would be missing out on was a campus without cameras.

My dad and his friends have no end to the stories of all the frowned upon, borderline illegal, things they had done in their time at Salisbury. Security cameras weren't there to catch them stealing laundry detergent or messing with his floor mates in ways that would be socially problematic today. They could do as they pleased, whenever they pleased, with no reason to be caught.

A security camera may have caught the guy with the gun quicker.

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It took me until writing this essay to encounter the fact that I am his age when he died. People always say we look alike, one more thing in common paralleling how different his life was then compared to mine at this point. Thirty-two years ago, my dad died with a bullet in his side. My greatest stressor recently has been an exam based on a book that I didn't read thoroughly enough to be confident I could pass.

I doubt the man who shot my father ever considered the person he'd be in two years time. He didn't think about how my father would give up drinking and smoking at parties to go home to his pregnant wife. The doctors didn't think he would be able to have kids, and the arrival of my brother made him the version of himself that could. He was no longer the guy with a bullet wound so bad that a family was off the table. I don't know if my dad thought about the person he'd be when he came out of the hospital, or the fact that it only took fifteen seconds for him to become a different version of himself. He couldn't have known what kind of husband or father he'd be, and he's only known my brother and I for twenty-two years of his life.

I've only known him as my dad. I look like him. I go to his college. I'm the youngest sibling. I am his age when his heart stopped. Childhood, adult life, recovery, and family are all different versions of him in different fractions of his time. As far as my own time goes, family life Dad is the only one that has ever existed. I do not know by what fraction of time I will be known as to others, but however I exist now is dictated by the same bullet that killed my dad twelve years before I was born.