

A Memory This Size

Elnathan John

Some days when I want to forget, an overwhelming guilt envelops me and, as if punishing me for daring to, comes back, fresh, clear – every painful detail. I just read an essay by Marion Winik, who wrote that she has let her stillborn son, Peewee, go because she could not hold on to a sadness that size for very long. It makes sense to me. I read the line over and over again. It sounds clever and practical and I try to say it to myself, to justify letting this memory go without feeling so guilty: I cannot hold on to a sadness this size for very long. It feels dirty when I say it.

I have held on to it for 10 years now. Sometimes I find myself feeling entitled to a greater sadness than anyone, including our parents. My mind lays out the reasons:

I was there when it happened. I pulled him out of the deep end of the Olympic-sized pool onto the tiled floor and put my ear to his chest and then my mouth to his mouth. Everything I had read or watched about mouth-to-mouth resuscitation came back to me, clear as day. I blew air and pumped. I rested his head against my chest and stared into his half-open eyes, pressing his cold body against mine as we raced to the hospital, willing him to live, to breathe, to smile and say ‘ha! I fooled you’.

I knew him better than anyone else. He shared with me secrets he would never dare tell dad or mum, fears he would be too shy to admit to his friends, troubles he would be too

scared to voice to anyone but me, the older brother he thought was wiser.

We shared things. We shared resentments against our parents. I agreed with him when he told me I was being a hypocrite because I listened to both mum and dad each time any of them wanted to complain about the other. Neither of us could wait to leave the house. We shared a love for water – river or pool, it didn't matter. It didn't matter that we had been forbidden from going near any body of water.

My family never talks about him. There is a silent agreement to erase his name from our lips, his life from our conversations. When someone mentions his name by mistake everyone goes quiet. It annoys me. It annoys me that we are rewriting our history without him, without the things that he did or said. Some days I say his name over and over in my head.

Azan.

Azan.

Azan.

His grave is unmarked and I can't find it when I go back. All I see is mounds of earth. It is not our tradition to mark graves but it hurts not to be able to tell which is his.

Apart from his photo album, all I have of him is this memory. And I am afraid to lose that. These days I try to give him a moustache and more flesh, to bring him into my present. He would have qualified as an electrical/electronics engineer and, if I knew him, he would have loved to practise his profession. I think our television was the only piece of equipment he didn't take apart. Things with little parts confuse me and make my head spin. I avoid screws like flies avoid kerosene. It always amazed me how he would take apart a piece of electronic equipment, take out what seemed like a hundred screws and parts and still remember where

each one went. I think my problem is memory. I forget things easily. I always have. In the fourth year of primary school I was humiliated because I couldn't remember the words during a spelling bee. In junior secondary school, although I was among the best readers of French, I was dropped from a major role in the national French drama competition because I couldn't remember my lines and my short-tempered teacher didn't want anyone reading from a paper.

I am afraid of losing little bits of his memory – phrases he uttered, places we went, clothes he wore, his body: pronounced cheekbones, long limbs, flat forehead, big cone-shaped navel, flat tummy that he was trying to work into a six pack before he died. So I keep his photos close and do not fight the sadness. I let fresh tears drop, 10 years after.

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We are both in secondary school. The same height, even though I am three years older. Everyone thinks we are twins but we can never see the resemblance. His name, Azan, sounds like Hassan, the Hausa name for a twin. So this worsens the situation. We have stopped telling people that we are not twins. I think we both secretly wish we were. Everyone treats twins like members of an exotic race. I walk into the living room and he is on the landline to his friend Michael. He has taken my little book and is excitedly reading my poems to his friend. I don't like my work half as much as he does. He says, 'I hate poetry but I love your poems.' He refuses to read any other poems I recommend to him. Whatever I write, he reads, religiously. I love this faithful one-man fan club.

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We have both finished secondary school, him two years after me. I have accepted the painful fact that he is several inches

taller than me and will probably be all-round bigger and stronger. I guess I saw it coming from the last time we fought as kids. I still ended up beating him but it was harder than any other fight we had. I knew I had to stop or soon face total humiliation. Sometimes we recall the days we used to fight and we laugh. He is a wild one, his temper worse than mine. The slightest things make him angry all day. Passing his food under sunlight, for example. In our old low-cost house all the rooms were separate and opened into a courtyard, so that to get to the kitchen you would have to come out into the open courtyard. He would shield his food from the sun with his body. 'When sun touches oil, it changes the taste. I hate the taste of sun on oil.' And somehow, even when he wasn't there, he knew when the sun had touched his food.

He hates the smell of matches and will not strike a match unless he absolutely has to. He washes his hands thoroughly when he does.

Dad has bought a lot of food items. We need to offload them from the trunk of his old Mercedes into the kitchen. I am expected as firstborn to carry the heaviest item – the 50kg bag of rice. I breathe, lift one end and drag. I lose my grip on the bag and almost fall. I try again. My father watches as I struggle. Azan leaves his yams and takes the bag of rice. He heaves and in one attempt his long strong arms lift the bag. He runs with it into the kitchen, taking care to avoid the sharp thorns and branches of the dried-out orange tree before turning into the doorway. I feel shame. I look away from dad's irritated face. I feel the heavy judgement of his eyes: you can't lift an ordinary bag of rice, look how easy it was for your younger brother. Azan doesn't rub it in. He worships me, hangs onto my every word, trusts me. He thinks I am better than any goddamn poet. How can I feel any resentment toward him?

We had moved into our new house in the south of the state to escape the riots and be on the safe side. In Kaduna, as in many parts of northern Nigeria, where you live can determine whether you live or die when Christians and Muslims start killing each other. We had escaped death once and, even though our house was not yet completed, we moved in, with a mobile police escort and all our property fitting into the longest UN truck I'd ever seen.

The first time I am really scared for my brother, when I am really sure I love him to bits, is only a few months after we come here to this house where the flush doors do this scary thing of opening and closing by themselves. We sometimes make jokes about spirits invading the house. Mum says, well, there is no use running if they really are spirits. 'When they come, just dialogue with them,' she jokes, 'ask them what they want.' My brother is running, being chased by my sister after playing pranks on her. I am outside in the compound that is green with trees: orange, mango, lemon and paw-paw. The main entrance has a clear glass sliding door. Sometimes, at night especially when everywhere is lit, it is hard to know if the door is open or shut. I see him run right through the glass. It feels like someone has stabbed me in the stomach. I run to where he is. He is cut in several places. I scan his body, worried about his face and stomach. His eyes especially. Thankfully, just his arms and legs are cut. He gets up to walk and falls down. 'I can't see,' he says, 'I am dizzy.' We have a neighbour who is a nurse and has a little drug store in front of her house. We take him there for her to do something about the bleeding. I can see his veins. She stitches him up fine. We don't need to drive him to the hospital that night.

He is nine or so when he starts stealing. Money. I am not

sure why. He would sneak into mum's room and take his pick from her bag or purse. Mum is traumatized. When she finds out he is the one, she and dad sit him down and talk to him for hours. They need to know what the problem is. They probe and prod and threaten and cajole but he doesn't budge. They use the Bible and worldly wisdom. He doesn't speak. I wonder if someone is bullying him and forcing him to take money. This kind of bullying is common. I am scared that he will become a thief. But after a few months it stops the same way it started, without ceremony or explanation. He never steals again.

I am six years older than my sister and almost 10 years older than David, the last born. My relationship with these two is not like my relationship with Azan. Some days I think they don't like me half as much as they like him. They adore him. Even though he is tougher on them than I am, they obey him without grumbling. I can barely get any of them to get me water from the kitchen. They think I like to assert my authority as firstborn too much. So I devise a way of reducing the confrontation. I ask him to do things for me, and he in turn sends them. As long as the job is done, I don't mind that he is closer to them than I am.

We are in our old house and Azan walks in with a sick-looking black mongrel with brown patches above its eyes. It might have looked cute if it weren't so tiny and malnourished. It is so small he can't put a leash around its neck. He drops it at the far left of the courtyard between the tall tree with dark green guavas and the toilet. He makes a rope by tearing a thin strip of cloth from an old wrapper and ties the puppy to an iron pillar. Its bark is fierce but feeble. I am angry but

Azan is determined. It is impossible to convince him to take this puppy back to godknowswhere. This is the first dog we will have. He will be the only believer in this dog. He will name it Shanny and raise it to become a beautiful, wild dog that will terrorize the neighbours. It will outlive all but one of its own puppies. It will outlive the only one who had faith in it, who didn't let it die.

The one thing that is sure to make us quarrel is table tennis. One of our neighbours owns a table-tennis board and lets people pay to play. After we return from school we take off our school uniforms – sometimes just our shirts – and head off to Emmanu's house. I always win and he always gets mad because I rub it in. Typically he flings the bat and goes home as I laugh derisively. Sometimes, during the dry season, when the water is clear and the rocks are still visible above the water, we sneak off to the river to swim with mostly rough Hausa boys. There are few sins in my house greater than going to the river just two streets away. My mother would have a heart attack if she knew how often we swam in this filthy, dangerous, crowded river. Once a boy plunged headfirst onto the rocks and cracked his skull open. We take Vaseline in little cellophane wraps because our faces will look whitish afterward. We can't do anything about our red eyes. Our parents never catch us.

Sometimes I wish I could challenge or directly disobey my parents the way he does. I wish I had the heart to steal my father's car – he is too paranoid to let his over-18 child drive. I wish I could say no the way Azan sometimes does. I wonder what goes through his mind when he does this. I have too much fear in my heart. It annoys me.

The first time I discover death, I do it alone. I am 14 and I hear that a boy who hanged himself in the huge gully that has mango trees is to be buried in the Christian burial ground opposite my house. I have never been to the gully but, from the descriptions of Mercy, our housemaid, who knows everything about everyone, I must have passed by the place before. It is mango season and I wonder if the boy saw a ripe mango as he tied the rope, first to a strong branch and then in a noose around his neck; if perhaps he had some before he died – a last meal. He used the rope his family fetch water with from their deep well. He untied it from the metal bowl – a gas canister cut in half. Mercy tells me the details as if the suicide was her idea. My mind goes through all the processes, starting with choosing the site, a lonely gully. Would he have gone to more than one site? Did he think of another way? Swallowing something, perhaps? The gully was not too close to his house and I wonder if this means he carefully planned it so that he would have been perfectly dead by the time anyone even thought of looking for him. What went through his mind when he loosened the tight rope around the half gas canister by the well, when he folded the long rope, put it around his waist or in his pocket or in a little knapsack? Did he know how to swim, was that why he didn't just jump into the well? I wanted to see his face, look for the burn signs around his neck, look at his eyes – as shut as they may be, look at his face. For answers.

I decide to attend the funeral.

I discover my fascination with the burial ground, hurriedly built coffins, and sombre sermons struggling to rise above crying relatives. From the window of our small living room, I can see, through metal window bars, the street that separates our identical block of low-cost housing from the Christian part of the open burial ground. A burial usually starts with two or three men early in the morning with daggers, shovels

and machetes. There is no readable expression on their creased faces except, after a while, tiredness, by which time their entire bodies are gleaming with sweat. They are just rounding up when the first people, usually relatives, begin to arrive, arms folded, mouth hanging down, eyes staring beyond their gaze, heaving and sighing. The first ones apart from the gravediggers come to check if the grave is the right size, if they need to increase the width or depth of the grave.

The women's arrival is my signal that I need to prepare before it becomes harder to penetrate the crowd, to see the grave, freshly dug, to see the coffin, and smell the fresh wood varnish.

Today, the diggers come and the inspectors come and the women come and the pickup truck comes and all the other cars that make our street temporarily difficult to pass. I am there before the truck but after the women. It is 4pm and dad is not due home for another two hours. I do not come in through the gate of the burial ground, but through a gap in the barbed wire fence, the point closest to our house. All the shrubs from this point on are familiar – I was here only two days ago for another burial. A child in a small coffin. Azan doesn't know. He is off playing with his friends.

The brothers look upset. They are angry, not sad. They do not nod when the pastor, preaching in Hausa, says: 'For everything under heaven there is a time. A time to be born and a time to die.' They do not hum amen when the pastor, with veins bulging on his neck, prays that God will ferry him straight to heaven. They seem not to agree with the pastor that he is in a better place. One of the brothers turns. Our eyes meet. I had been staring at him for many minutes. I see in his eyes a need to punch someone. To drag his brother out of the coffin and slap him for dying.

I do not know the words of the hymn they are singing but I recognize it from the other funerals.

I do not feel like crying. That is, until the pastor asks the family, starting with his parents, to pour the sand on the

coffin. His mother fetches a handful of the damp, red laterite. Two plump women are holding her by the arm. She is sobbing as she moves forward to throw the sand into the hole. The women let go of her and, just as they do, she screams and makes to jump into the grave. The women, faster than her, catch her just as she begins sliding down the heap of laterite by the side of the grave. There is a commotion and she is carried away.

As they drag her away, my nose begins to tremble and hurt. I am fighting back the tears because I know that, once that first one rolls down, I will break down and sob like I am being whipped with a cane of thorns. Holding back that first tear is important.

I turn to leave before it starts to get rowdy. I push my way through the crowd, jog along the bushy path, kicking the broad leaves of the bright green shrubs, run past the ambulance and across the road until I reach our gate. I still have a few more minutes until my father returns. He is so predictable, my father. I lock myself in the bathroom and feel my chest swelling, about to explode. I wonder what it feels like to die – what eternal non-existence is, what it feels like. I close my eyes and try to conjure eternity. My mind travels through dark tunnels of space and time until I start to get dizzy and scared and I open my eyes. I wonder what it means when they say God has no beginning and has no end. Again, I try to imagine having no beginning and it gives me the same dizzy feeling.

Why do we have to die? This is what makes me finally break down. I cry hot, painful tears. I think of all the things that my father taught me about God and His right to rule and Adam and Eve blowing our chances at eternity just because of some fruit. I do not know if God made the right decision, letting billions of people suffer for the sins of one greedy couple. I know the answers in my head, but not in my heart. I cry for a suicidal stranger and for what I will share with that stranger one day.

I hear my brother Azan's voice and then my father's. I quickly take off my clothes, open the shower and let the water rush over my face.

My fascination with death and burial grounds dies when Azan dies.

We are back home because university lecturers across the country are on strike. I was unable to get into university for two years so we are both about to finish our first year, he in Bauchi, me in Zaria. This is the first time we have been away from each other for that long. He has grown leaner, taller. His eyes have sunk deeper. But he is still a boy. He is more temperamental, wilder, livelier. I have become more introspective, morose. I have had my first sexual experience and am struggling with religion and God and the unwieldy heaviness of a guilty conscience. He has found new friends. We are more different than we have ever been. I want quiet. He likes the loud, explicit music of Eminem. He is out more often. Once I try to walk with his friends but I find we have nothing in common.

We get into an altercation about his music. The way the house is built you can hear everything going on two rooms away. I tell him to turn down the volume again and again until he gets angry and turns it back up. It gets really heated and for the first time he threatens me. 'I will kill you!' he says. I see in his eyes someone I don't know. I am afraid but I try not to show it. I report him to our father who instantly sides with me at the mention of angry rap music. Azan and I don't talk for a month after that.

I am angry but I miss him. He doesn't want to talk to me. He is acting all tough but I can see through it a boy wanting

to become a man. One day I realize he wants to go out but is broke. I split my cash in two and walk into his room. I ask him if he wants some money. He looks away and doesn't answer. I see him struggling not to talk to me. I leave the money on his table and go. When I notice he has dressed up and is on his way out I look in his room and see that he has taken the money. I smile. I have broken him. We talk later that night. I apologize. He tells me that, for the first time, I let him down. 'There is nobody I look up to like you,' he says, 'but you just disappointed me.' I swear that I will never let him down again. Then he confides in me. He tells me of some trouble at University. I feel bad that I could not see that all of it was a cry for help – the aggression, the rap songs, the fighting. I tell him we will work something out. I will travel back with him to his university if I have to.

Some of the guys in the area are going out in a few days to swim in the largest public pool in Kaduna. We plan our own trip before theirs so that we can have a chance to talk about his problems and also because we are really fed up with them. Azan is swimming at the deep end and diving from the diving board around some other boys I have never seen before. Come and dive, he shouts excitedly. I refuse. You fear too much, he teases, and dives.

A few minutes pass and although I am not looking in his direction I realize I have not been hearing his voice. I turn and I can't find him. None of the others have seen him. I put on my clothes and go out of the pool area to look for him – perhaps he went out to buy something. I am tired of swimming, and it is getting cooler. As the seconds become minutes I am increasingly afraid. He is nowhere. My heart starts to race and I take off my clothes and dive into the deep end. I search with my eyes under the water. I do not come up for air until I feel my lungs about to burst.

After coming up twice, I find him about 10 feet below the surface. With the help of the lifeguard who has just come, I pull him out. His lifeless body shows no sign of injury. His

head isn't swollen and neither is his stomach. I hold his body. Put my ears to his chest. Do mouth-to-mouth. Beg God for one breath.

Just one breath. Please God, don't let him die. Don't let this happen. I can't. I won't know how to handle it.

No word from God. Just a cold confirmation of death from an impersonal doctor more concerned about a text message he is sending than the trembling young man in front of him. My father comes running into the hospital ward. I am shocked to see him. I am not sure how he has heard. He glowers at me as he walks past. A few minutes later he walks out, having also confirmed that his son is dead. He is trembling as he walks toward me.

'You are happy now, abi? You are happy? You have gone and killed yourselves. When we say don't do this, you think we don't know what we are saying. Look at it now. Look at it now.'

His voice floats over my head. I am sitting on the concrete floor, my back against a cold stone wall, too shocked to cry. I have no idea what has hit me. This dream is too long, too real. A few hours later I arrive home. I am clutching Azan's clothes. My head is about to burst. I sit outside by the water pump and hold the only thing I have left of him: a brown beach shirt, brown chinos, grey shoes that looked somewhere in between sneakers and formal shoes. Throughout that evening and the many days after, people come to the house and want to pray with us. I am tired of the prayers. I just want to block out the world with my earpiece, listen to sad songs as loudly as I can and cry.

My brother David, who is only 11, is the only one who isn't crying. 'It's ok,' he comforts my sister and mother, hugging them. I envy him.

A few months later, University resumes. The world does not end. People forget. My chest still hurts from crying. I am stuck in a dizzying loop of thoughts. I wonder sometimes what would have happened if I had not suggested we go to the

pool. If I had been swimming with him at the deep end. If we had gone to the park instead.

I am irritating my father a lot. When I am home during breaks from University, I am unhelpful and short-tempered. I come home late and don't talk to anyone. My siblings complain to my parents about my aggression. My participation in religious activities is half-hearted. I do not hide my boredom. When my father asks me to pray after reading the day's Bible text in the morning, I mumble words they can hardly hear and end very quickly. One day, dad breaks and screams at me: 'When your brother was alive, we didn't feel the pain of your bad behaviour so much. He was a cushion...'

My entire body is hit with the same dull pain I felt the evening Azan died. Dad has peeled open the wound we had managed to keep covered, the wound we all have. It feels like he is angry that I am mourning too much, taking too much of the memory, hurting others. I walk out of the house and sit on the floor by the borehole handpump – the same place I sat because I could not take his clothes back into the house. It is cold and I am not wearing a shirt. My chest hurts. I want to go back in and say: 'When my brother was alive, I didn't feel the pain of your constant fighting with mum so much. He was a cushion.' I just shiver and cry.

On the seventh anniversary of Azan's death, I post a tribute to my brother on Facebook. Albert, who barely knows me, asks me to let go of the memories already and move on. I ignore his comment but what I really want to do is type: Albert, fuck you! What do you know about this?

I have gotten used to moving around with this weight and it balances me more than it pulls me down. It steadies me.

These days I find myself in all sorts of cluttering relationships. I think I am looking for something, only I have no clue what I am looking for. I am mostly numb and self-indulgent and end up hurting the people who are drawn to my elaborate façades. The only things I am sure about are things I have lost. Maybe I am looking for water in a store full of juice packs. Sometimes I wonder if it was really that great, what we had together. Or if I am making up this single source of joy I had for many years. At those times I stop and try to think of specific joyful events, specific bonding moments. Then it seems less likely that I am inventing things.

I no longer go home as I used to, even though I am now mostly self-employed and free to make the three-hour trip from Abuja to Kaduna. Dad sends me a text about how disappointed he is that I have abandoned the faith. Every bottled-up resentment comes back – the bitter words, the daily altercations, the second burial of Azan, of which we are all guilty by our silence. I send back several angry texts saying everything I have wanted to say for 10 years. Everything from the things Azan and I talked about to the numbness I now feel. About family. About God. About religion. Especially religion. I am tired of pretending around him that I can continue practising it. He tries to call me. I do not pick up. He replies. He says he knows, or at least imagined that all those years of anger must have been traumatizing. I do not know if this is enough, if I will go back home, any time soon.

When I am tempted to let go, I ask myself, not if I want to but if I can afford to. I don't know how to compartmentalize, to remember Azan and not be sad, to think only happy thoughts. I write Azan a long letter every April 1st to mark the day I pulled his lifeless 18-year-old body from the deep

end of a pool. I tell him what's going on in my life. I laugh. I tell him who is making me smile, which relatives are married or dead or being total assholes. I cry. I used to tell myself: one day I will write a nice witty story about my dear brother, about the intensity of his life and some philosophical interpretation about how a life lived so intensely was bound to be short. Crap like that. I have since killed the thought. I hold on to this big, sad-and-happy memory because I cannot afford to let a memory this size disappear.

Elnathan John is a full-time writer who trained as a lawyer in Nigeria. His writing has been published in *Per Contra*, *ZAM Magazine*, *Evergreen Review*, *Sentinel Nigeria* and Chimurenga's *The Chronicle*. He writes political satire for a Nigerian newspaper and his blog for which he hopes someday to get arrested and famous. He has tried hard, but has never won anything.