

This is an essay I wrote for my English Seminar class. The assignment was to write about one central theme, approaching it from three seemingly unrelated angles before making the common thread apparent.

### Deer, Dendrites and Dread

Her love for her granddaughter is unconditional, but if that adorable little girl with those adorable blonde pigtails asks if they are there yet one more time she is going to toss her out of the car onto her adorable little head.

"Daddy," the girl carefully traces a heart in the condensation on the window and trains her unblinking green gaze on the front seat, "Are we there yet?"

She doesn't know how her son does it, but he manages to answer calmly. "Not yet, sweetie. Two more minutes."

Those two minutes seem infinite until the battered wooden sign appears in the haze of the evening. "Bombay Hook!" her granddaughter cheers and turns a beaming face towards her, "We're here, right, Nana?"

"We're here, darlin." She sighs and brushes a butterfly kiss on the blonde head.

The reservoir looks the same as last year, the same dearth of staff and visitors, and yet the charm endures. The twisted dirt path leads into fathomless mist and fog, and their car creeps along, as timid as the rabbits that hide by the side of the road. A deer leaps across the path, the gleam in its eyes reflected in the shine of the headlights, and the girl shrieks a little and grabs her grandmother's hand.

"Don't worry; your daddy's going slow, sweetie." She pats her granddaughter's smooth hand with her wrinkled one and gives her son a fixed stare through the rearview mirror, "Remember, they live here, this is their home."

The girl has already moved on. With a gasp she points excitedly at a pond next to the road where a long legged heron gently preens one great, extended wing.

"It's beautiful," the girl whispers, barely moving, barely breathing, as if any sudden move might frighten it away. Finally, she slowly turns her gaze from the bird to her grandmother, the wonder of youth written into the gleam of her eye and tilt of her head. "I'll remember this forever."

At this her grandmother laughs and smiles, tucking a filmy strand of hair behind the girl's ear. "Of course." she says, and the car slinks away into the darkness.

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The neuron fires, a crackle of electricity in a usually dormant section of the brain. The message is complex; it comes from a time long ago and is not yet used to being recalled. Yet the path it travels is a familiar one, and it knows the most direct way to reach its destination. Senses and emotions rush by, a whirlwind of chaos around the signal as it races on, every synapse just another bridge, just another step closer to its objective. One second.

The signal flies up the neuron, through the axon terminal, whose branches reach out like leafy vines and into the axon. The tail of the neuron is long, but it must reach the last synapse to pass the message along. It has come to the end of the axon, sparking with energy it pushes forward past the nucleus. Two seconds.

With its objective almost reached, the signal propels itself into a dendrite, crossing the last synapse to reach the cortex. There the signal finishes its long journey, recalling the message it was sent so far to retrieve. Three seconds.

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"Nana Ruth?" Those beautiful blue eyes, the ones that have become so hard to read lately, turn slowly towards me. I know I am calling her back from wherever she has been in her mind, and it will take a few minutes before she is truly focused. I stand quietly in front of her, waiting, waiting, waiting. It's been a year since I've seen her, and I watch her eyes slowly scan my face, searching, searching, searching. I hold my breath; I've been dreading this moment the entire trip down, now I'm just hoping, hoping, hoping.

"Olivia? Darlin' how are you?" All of the breath leaves my body in a rush; a tidal wave of relief cracks my face into one big grin. My name has never sounded so beautiful. Two words echo black and white in my head as all I can think is: *not yet*. My grandmother smiles and gives me a kiss, leaving a red lipstick stain on my cheek that I would usually wipe off, but not today. I sit down next to her and she pats my hand, a shadow of our old camaraderie.

"You know what I was just thinking about?" she leans close and I take in every detail of her face, from the too bright lipstick to the eyebrows drawn in black ballpoint pen. Her face is a map, and every time I see her it has to be learned all over again. "I was thinking about when you were just a little girl, and we took you to Bombay Hook for the first time. You were so excited."

Already she's drifting away, and I have to remind myself that it's no longer my world that I'm living in. It's no longer the present, and the future is a blur. Right now I'm in her world, which is far away from this couch and this apartment and this moment. But I adjust. I adjust for that one split second when she looks at me and says my name, and I think *this is what I've been praying for*. Since I know that there

will be a day when those sparkling blue eyes will look at me and not register and that elegant Southern drawl will not be able to summon my name. However, that moment is not now and that day is not today, so I put my dread aside and think *not yet*.

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There must be a mathematical equation that explains the relationship between moment and memory and a graph to show the effects of age on memory, but no matter how illuminative they are, nothing can take away the wonder. A year from now my grandmother may not remember my name or who I am, but she will still be able to conjure up the image of a little girl startled by a deer. So although I may never know what is really happening in her brain, all I have to remember is that somewhere in her mind a little girl is asking, "Are we there yet?" and in that way we will always be connected.