

Red Threads

HALLEY MIGLIETTA



WRITER'S COMMENT: My last quarter at UC Davis I had no choice but to take the one universally required course for graduation: UWP 101. I entered with resistance, because other than this class, I was done with college. It didn't take long for me to realize that this would be a transformative experience, for the course material shed light on a deep passion I had not known was there. For the first time, I was asked to write creatively as opposed to academically. Exploring the creative writing process was a critical contributor to the paths I have chosen to tread since. For this assignment, Professor McDonnell asked us to create the prompts. I chose the option of writing about an inanimate object. Through unexpected tragedy, my senior year was the most difficult of my life. This paper became a representation, reflecting a point in my grieving when I felt ready to voice my experience through the process of experimental writing.

—Halley Miglietta

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Halley's essay, written for UWP 101 (Advanced Composition) is an excellent study in the power of specific details to shed light on the darker corners of human experience. During the drafting process, Halley mentioned that she was concerned that the emotional weight of the stories she had to tell would make it difficult for her to write them. In lesser hands, I can imagine that such material could easily turn melodramatic or sentimental, but Halley handles it here with clarity, honesty, and grace.

—Sean McDonnell, University Writing Program

I AM NOT A LUMBERJACK. I have never caught a fish with my bare hands, and quite frankly, have never even split wood. I am also not particularly attracted to the color red. But, if you were to ask me what single object I would salvage from my burning house, I would choose my red, plaid lumberjack shirt. Hands down. In its essence, the shirt represents a link to my roots. This shirt connects me to eternal love and eternal loss, and is the glue that binds those things together. In the memories of this shirt is the story of my life.

It begins with this memory. The trouble with this memory is that although I was present at the occasion, I believe the memory is actually derived from a home video I viewed many years after the day occurred. You see, I was only three years old. This is how I recall it: my mom, dad, sister and I are at the park. The day has a certain grayness about it, and we are graced with a gift from nature that seems essential to the success of our chosen activity: the wind is whirling just for our kite. My sister is a year and a half older than I am, but at this point, we are the same size. One of us is excessively grumpy—consumed by agony, where life in its entirety seems completely unbearable. The other is blissfully entranced by the overhead spectacle, patiently anticipating her turn to clench the line. I can't quite recall which of us is doing what, for in the early memories, I often get us confused. Besides this, I remember very few details of this day, except one: my dad is wearing a red, plaid lumberjack shirt.

I imagine he wore this shirt all the time; at least that is what I tell myself now. I can't be sure of this because my memories of him are rather sparse, and possibly invented. When I envision him wearing the shirt, its red hue is of the purest kind, like that of a stop sign, and the shade of the black plaid pattern atop is as crisp as freshly laid asphalt. In the memories I have created, the shirt complements his deep olive skin and dark Italian features to perfection. It is an emblem of his bravado, a word my family often employed to describe his brusque character. In truth, I only have one real memory of him. It involves coming home early from school to kiss him goodbye before the big white van took away his lifeless body. I was four years old.

And then I have this other memory. My maternal grandfather and I are sitting on the back porch of his and my grandmother's mobile home. He is teaching me a Ukrainian folk song he learned as a young boy. We are bird watching and sharing a pair of binoculars. He is wearing that same red, plaid lumberjack shirt, one of the few articles of clothing he

inherited after my father's death. On my grandfather, the shirt doesn't appear rugged and striking as it did on my father, but rather, wholesome and warm. He liked to tell stories, and I may have been the only one who never grew tired of hearing them. When I transitioned into adulthood, other members of my family certified that his stories were most likely false. No one really knew how to differentiate between his spoken truths and embellished fictions. I wasn't particularly concerned with this matter.

When a massive stroke stole his vitality and planted him in a nearly vegetative state, my family would often visit him in the convalescent home. Before entering the building, I would take the deepest breath I could through my nostrils and make sure to only breathe through my mouth until we exited. It was the smelliest place I had ever stepped foot in. I would stand by his bed, hold his hand, and sing him our Ukrainian folk song. And although speaking at this point had utterly escaped him, something would happen when I would come: he would muster up a few words. I think he saved them just for me. When he died, I asked if I could have two things: the binoculars, and the red, plaid lumberjack shirt. I was eleven years old.

And then I have this other memory. Last September, my mom and step-dad, four of their friends, my sister, her boyfriend, my friend, and I are spending the weekend at a house on a lake. Finding ourselves lost, my sister and I viciously bicker as we travel down a dusty, beaten path trying to find our destination. Once we arrive, we are instantly remedied with one part lake, two parts wine, and one part mom, who greets us with a smile and a kiss, and tells us that it is time to stop our bickering and tune in to the presidential debate. I sit on the floor by my mom's feet, while she plays with my hair. We count how many times John McCain verifies the fact that he is *not* Ms. Congeniality. I am wearing my red, plaid lumberjack shirt. The shirt is now faded and thin and has acquired a certain softness that only develops from repeated wash and wear. Although it is inherently masculine and hangs loosely on my body, when I wear it, I feel feminine and dignified. As the evening progresses, I overhear my mom telling her friend of the shirt's origin and journey. She then, with a genuine glimmer in her eye, puts her hand on her heart and says with utmost sincerity: "isn't that special?"

Halloween weekend, one month after that perfect weekend at the lake, I got *the* call. At that point, all I knew was that something was terribly wrong with my mom. In my attempt to get home and to the hospital

as quickly as possible, I spared twenty-five seconds to change into my red, plaid lumberjack shirt. It was instinctual then, but now when I reflect on that moment, I realize that having it on my skin was the only way I could summon up the strength to get where I needed to be. When I put that shirt on, I didn't know that it would be what I was wearing the last time my mom ever saw me. When I kissed her goodbye that day and she uttered the last words I would ever hear her say, "we'll get through this," I believed her. I also didn't know when I put that shirt on that I would be home for many weeks and that the only thing I had brought for clothing was the shirt on my back. I wore that shirt a lot in those few weeks. I was twenty-two years old.

Where the shirt came from is a mystery to me, as are many aspects of my history. With no one left to ask, I have to rely on something else, my ability to remember. Sometimes my memories take time to evolve, such as the recovery of a dream hours after awaking. Other times, the memories are triggered, almost by force—by a smell, or a song, a taste, or an object. When I'm wearing my shirt, I am physically connected to my father, my grandfather, my mother, and my history. This is my story, woven together by the threads of my red, plaid lumberjack shirt.