



BOOKMARK

John Marshall

THE BOOK FALLS OPEN EASILY, insistently, as if he had closed it just seconds ago. There I am, staring out from between its yellowed pages, half-standing, half-hanging over the metal bar of a small trampoline, a messy center parting on my head. I know that jacket—red and black, thick and fitted. I can feel its fabric; I can feel the elastic cuffs against my skin. I’m seven years old, give or take. I lift the photo to the light. A white collar peeks out from between the jacket’s thick red lapels. I am smiling, close-mouthed, from ear to ear, my gloved

fingers loosely, awkwardly intertwined. Behind me, leafless trees climb a chain-wire fence.

The photograph is just out of focus, it is uncarefully composed and slightly saturated. The expression sitting beneath and between the time-bleached forehead, cheeks, and nose is utterly content. The location is lost. I don’t know who is holding the camera or why we had it with us. I don’t know if there is anyone to my left or to my right. I don’t know where we had just come from or where we were headed.

He rarely left a book unfinished, and the photograph—the bookmark—sits almost in its middle. I know the gesture well—it rises from a dark bed of memory like sand disturbed in the shallows of the sea; with the last page read and the bookmark beginning to slip from between the final page and the endsheets, it is fitted in a central seam. The book is closed. The book is opened. I turn back and forth from this moment to that, leafing through the decades in my hands.

That there are still things in that house that have not been held since he last held them, that have not been seen since he last saw them, is a warm and reassuring thing. It is as if I have spoken with him directly and quietly about nothing at all, free from the noisy grief that has filled the intervening years.

I smell the nook in which the photo slept. The soft pages greet my nose. They brush my cheekbones, my eyebrows, my temple. It only smells of paper, of course, and barely even that. I feel foolish. I wonder what I was expecting. His skin? His breath? The soap he used to shave?



I return the photo to its paper home and place the novel on the pile of books I've collected. I return the cardboard box to the tower of cardboard boxes. Descending the stairs I tell my mum and my siblings about the photograph, about how I pressed my fingers against his own through the thick film of the Kodak print, through the fine and sandy pages of *The Salesman*. I tell them about the moment I observed, the look he gave to the photo in his hand, to his smiling son on the trampoline. I tell them how he tucked the photo away, how he stood from his armchair, from a deckchair, from a beach towel, how he turned off the light and went to sleep. But the scene begins to blister. Mum says *oh yes, yes I remember, I think that bookmark was mine*. Jo says *The Salesman? O'Connor? Yeah I borrowed that last year. I enjoyed it well enough*. Seb tells me he discovered the same sensation the day he took Dad's clubs to the range and shares an experience quite different to my own.

In the kitchen Mum asks if I've found everything I was looking for. I tell her yes, it'll be nice to read some things he read. ♦