

## It Was a Dark and Stormy Night

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C h r i s t i n a   B a l d w i n

I remember October 1962 because suddenly I understood that my story and history were inextricably linked. What happened to the world would happen to me. The Cuban Missile Crisis occurred just at a moment in my life when I was ready to start waking up. Poised at the garage door, I struggled to carry a garden shovel in one hand and a square green metal box in the other. Not wanting to explain to my mother what I was doing, and not wanting to be questioned by that rambunctious passel of boys who ran with my brother from yard to yard along the dead-end gravel road of our neighborhood, I waited until dusk. In the fading light I looked furtively both ways, then made my dash across our back lawn to the edge of the woods and over the rise, disappearing down the slope that extended a quarter of a mile through stands of oak toward a swamp below. I leaned up against a tree and caught my breath.

I had found this file box in our basement, full of my parents' old tax records. Considering that death might come before taxes came again, I stashed their papers and replaced them with my own contents: a recent issue of Life magazine, photos of myself and my family, a map, a copy of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (at that time, required reading in eighth grade English), my own diary, a small Bible, and a brief, dramatic note. "Dear future, if there is one, this is who I was before the Bomb. This is what life looked like. Here are the faces of those I loved. Here is the girl who inspired me to write. Here is the basis for a religion we did not follow. Remember me."

I chose a large tree, scraped away enough dirt to create a shallow hole, popped the box into its makeshift grave, and marked the site by chipping an X on the bark with the shovel blade. I climbed up the hill, arms emptied of my life treasures, dragging the shovel and myself reluctantly back to the family's evening routines.

My mother looked up as I eased in the side door. "Where have you been?" It was a rhetorical question; she didn't expect an answer. "Set the table, please, your father will be home soon." Opening the silverware drawer, I resigned myself to acting normally while the back of my mind zinged with unthinkable possibilities.

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Something is happening in this moment. Something is happening to our story and we don't yet know it. We are just in it. We live in story like a fish lives in water. We swim through words and images siphoning story through our minds the way a fish siphons water through its gills. We cannot think without language, we cannot process experience without story.

We are the story-making creatures. We are the species that has evolved a language that leads to self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is based on the ability of the mind to take one step back from experience, to filter and interpret and reflect. This is our great and sometimes lonely differentiation from the rest of the animal realm: that step back, the mental requirement that we run everything through the brain's word processor before we know what's happening.

Sometimes I get a little jealous of the rest of nature, which seems unburdened by this need to interpret and understand and find pattern. I'm jealous that the rest of nature does-

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n't have to spend time trying to explain, justify, forgive, accept, and go on. A cat is not confused about the meaning of life, and you never see a dog limping down the street howling, "Why me? Where did that car come from? What is the lesson in this?" These are human questions and concerns. Everything else around us just is; we are the ones who struggle to be. And this is who we are: we are human beings.

"We live in story like a fish lives in water."

And what a world we have created through language and consciousness — songs and stories, art and culture, myths and traditions and religions, astounding bodies of knowledge, theories about the nature of the entire universe, science and philosophy, and promises about what we might become. So we might as well leave the cat purring on the windowsill, pat the dog on the head, and carry our consciousness as cheerfully as we can.

There are many tools we humans have developed for molding and influencing our journey on the earth, many technologies and social experiments: story is the oldest and the most consistent survivor of all these tools. Story is the mother of us all, for we become who we say we are.

Individually, we first put our lives into language, and then we act upon what we have said and how we have defined ourselves. Our stories about ourselves become the basis for our identity and the way we hold each other accountable for our individual actions. A man who proclaims himself "a good father" should not be beating his children.

Collectively, the community, tribe, or nation first creates a mythic self-image and history and then acts to fulfill this declaration of place and promise in the world. A nation that declares peaceful intent should not be running over borders with an army.

When story and behavior are consistent, we relax; when story and behavior are inconsistent, we get tense. We have a deep psychological desire for our stories and behaviors to be consistent. We need to be able to trust the story, because it's the lens through which we see reality. We will go to great lengths in the attempt to make a story that explains an action and supports or restores consistency. If we cannot make story and action fit, we either have to make a new story or change the action. Eventually, the good man either has to change his story of self-proclaimed goodness or stop beating his children; eventually the peace-loving nation either has to admit what it's up to or stop invading other countries. However, language can be cleverly used to befuddle and confuse and spread falsehood. The good man may find a way to include brutality in his story and self-definition, and the peace-loving nation may find a way to explain aggression as a peaceful, even altruistic, intervention.

"When story and behavior are consistent, we relax."

The drive for consistency and the ability to redefine abhorrent action so it fits the story are very complex issues. We have a huge ability to continue believing stories we are told are true in order to stay comfortable with actions we don't want to change, or don't feel capable of changing. Individually and collectively we maintain areas of prescribed silence, a sort of "don't ask, don't tell" complacency so that we don't have to live with the tension of inconsistency.

In October 1962, we were living in a collective moment where all these forces were in play—silence and breaking silence, consistency and inconsistency, threat to the status quo, and huge psychological disorientation as we struggled to understand the story we found ourselves acting out in the world.

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