

*The opening pages of a longer piece titled:*

A Condensed, Comprehensive Look at My Life with Jason

Bridget Brown

I squinted my eyes, peering across the street and side to side, attempting to pinpoint what exactly had changed since the last time I was home. It looked like the Breed's got a new car. Mr. Tilly repainted his trim. And the Warren's got one of those mailboxes that looks like a tiny house on a post. But that wasn't it. There was something greater, more overarching, which lent an aura of difference. Maybe it was nothing more than the height of the trees. The subtle growth year after year, sneaking ever upward until one day it towers over your home.

Directly across from my house stood Mrs. Hunt's home, the front yard adorned with a single Paperbark Maple. I remember when she planted it—mid October of our first year here. My mom watched her from the window, watched Mrs. Hunt digging that big hole and lugging and lifting the bucket using her back, not her legs.

“I don't know why she's doing that right now. Don't plant in the fall—what is that woman thinking? You watch, Meghan, that tree will be dead by Christmas.”

The maple didn't die, though, and it seemed Mrs. Hunt planted it with another holiday in mind. Two weeks after she got it into the ground, she threw a red-stained sheet over the tiny tree, creating a ghost for Halloween more terrifying than any I had seen before. The branches poking out at odd angles, the wind fluttering the edges, yet the tree never let the sheet fly away. Mrs. Hunt kept throwing the sheet over year after year until the tree got too tall. The sheet was gone by my last year trick-or-treating; I remember feeling the absence and wondering why it had ever scared me.

We didn't trick-or-treat at Jason Nivera's that last fall. Too soon, mom said. Even though two months passed. Even though, looking back, Mrs. Nivera probably needed a carefree night. A night to see familiar faces. Besides, she always made caramel apples special for us. And I saw some in her trash on the curb the next collection day.

But two months was too soon at the time. And an endless wave of random children knocking on the door must have hurt less than seeing a familiar group with one less face than there should be. Jason loved Halloween, too. Somehow, even though we went to the same houses on the same route at the same time, he always had a bigger haul than me. Bigger and better. I seemed to end up with a bag full of those gross Chinese white rabbit taffy nonsense candies. Then I'd look over to see Jason pulling out King Size Butterfingers and triple pack Reese's from his blue pillowcase.

"Where did you find those?"

Jason smiled and shrugged, snapping off a piece of an Oh Henry! with his crooked front teeth.

I guess, in a way, it was fitting that Jason . . . left before Halloween. In August, an argument regarding the right age to gracefully bow out of the childhood tradition bloomed.

"We're already too old," Jason said, a sad smile on his face, "Too far into high school to still be snagging candy once a year."

"Maybe. But we're not allowed to do something for the last time without knowing it's the last time. Especially if we can help it."

"Who says?"

"People with regrets."

Jason shrugged. “I’ll consider it if you come up with something incredible. We can’t justify our age if we don’t go all out.”

A week and a half after that deal, inspiration found me. I woke up and ran downstairs. I veered into the kitchen, excited to tell my mom that I knew exactly who we could go as.

“Mom! Best idea ever! There’s no way Jason can not—”

She turned around with her eyes all puffy and her mouth in a straight line. Too controlled. Before she spoke I knew it finally happened.

“Please.”

“I’m so sorry, honey.”

I still went, though. With a few other friends from school. We dressed up as characters from Clue, but after a few houses we called it a night. Halloween suddenly felt childish. Under every sheet was a tree, nothing of substance. The day didn’t feel important or necessary. Nothing for the next chunk of time felt important. I think that feeling—first of unimaginable sadness and then a lack of control and then emptiness—that feeling was important. For once we all understood how Jason felt most of his life.

I met Jason in Mrs. Davis’ first grade class at Adams Elementary. She sat us alphabetically on that first day, and I still credit her for finally helping me nail down which came first, m or n. Meagars sat in front of Nivera. M before N. I still say that to myself, double-checking. It’s a nice reminder.

Jason and I decided to be friends that first day. He liked to play soccer and I liked to try new things. Recess rolled around and he gave me a quick overview of how exactly two-touch works. Jason let me win until I got the hang of smashing the soccer ball against the pockmarked brick wall, then he didn’t hold back. When the weather stayed warm—or at least stopped

raining—recess came three times a day. We played two-touch and he would always win but then when we moved to the jungle gym and the uneven bars I outraced and out-twirled Jason every time. Swings were an even match. And in first grade we never bothered to feel embarrassed when our swings found each other in perfect harmony and the other kids yelled out that it meant we were married. By fifth grade I feigned embarrassment because, for some reason, in those few short years boys went from being the same as everyone else to fundamentally different from girls so I was expected to giggle and blush or overreact and swat someone if they insinuated that I, heaven forbid, had a crush on Jason.

I like to think that Jason's blushing and soft punches were just a show, too. That we were both on the same page. I already knew, from the first day of two-touch, that he was my best friend. So sure, in that way I loved him, but I wasn't in love with him.

Now, when a Jason memory enters the conversation, people have a hard time understanding that. Especially guys. My first boyfriend in college broke up with me because, well, honestly, because he was a little melodramatic.

“Look, I get that he died and that, like, seriously sucks and everything, but I just don't think I can be with someone who only ever thinks about some other guy. I can't compete with your idealized dead boyfriend.”

I know that I tell just as many stories about my best girl friends, yet no one's ended a relationship with me because they think these stories mean I'm secretly a lesbian.

After unnamed college boyfriend/douchebag #1 broke it off, I shut up about Jason. People don't get it, anyway. They never do about anyone. “Back home friends,” “this girl from my dorm,” “my first boss,”—they're all just a conglomerate of stories and key identifiers.

“The Russian one?”

“The pot dealer?”

“The one who fired you or the close-talker with bad breath?”

Without meeting the characters of these stories—of my stories—firsthand, my friends and family members and coworkers and acquaintances can never fully understand, fully comprehend one another. So having Jason gone made it that much harder. No one could ever meet him after that August, could never put a face and a handshake to a string of relayed instances. If I did bring up Jason, it was only ever to our mutual friends from school. Sometimes my parents, too. Well, sometimes my mom. And it made her too sad. And I can’t stand to see those eyes grow puffy and that mouth clamp shut because when I do I start to smell burnt toast and orange juice and I see sun piercing through the old blue and white toile curtains we don’t have any more and I should still be in pajamas thinking about how great Halloween is going to be this year.

“How much?”

I snapped back to the neighborhood, to my front lawn, to the piles and piles of knick-knacks, clothes, old gadgets, and general clutter that filled my view.

“How much?” a woman repeated, standing directly in front of me.

The woman held up a bunny, clutching with a meaty hand at its throat, strangling the stuffed, fuzzy features in a such a manner that screamed she didn’t, would never, appreciate and love the little floppy-eared friend I once had watching over and adorning my bed selflessly for so many years.

“What’s your best offer?” I asked, forcing my gaze to jolt from the pleading black beads to the soulless blue eyes of the woman before me.

The blue eyes narrowed, “What’s yours?”

“How about you tell me your best, I’ll say how low I would go, and then we split the difference?”

She squinted ever more, smooshing her eyes to all but disappear into slits. “How do I know you won’t lie about your bottom line?”

“Listen, lady,” I pushed up my sunglasses. I wasn’t sure why I still had them on. The afternoon sun dipped below the roof a while ago, casting a shadow over half the table-littered driveway. “This is my life, yeah? This is everything. I mentally priced it all fairly, and then tacked on a sentimentality tax. You look like a professional sailor to me, so I know you know how to lowball. Together, we’ll hit the right price.”

Somehow, her eyes were able to widen when she smiled. Smiling, I think, at being called a professional.

“I’ll give you three dollars, flat.”

My mind turned, just a smidge. I was hoping for twenty-five cents. In fact, early that morning I pulled the bunny out of a box aptly labeled “25¢.” A box I then shoved under the very table this woman presumably snagged the animal from. I craned my head to the left, straining to see around her too-curly grey hair. There it was. 25¢.

“I was going to ask for five.”

“For this?” Disgust slid over her features—mouth turned down, nose crinkling, eyebrows raised and furrowed. The go-to move for pretending you didn’t care for what you just intimated you were willing to pay for.

Shrugging, I answered, “Like I said, sentimentality.”

“How about three-twenty-five?”

“Four.”

“Three-fifty.”

“Sold.”

The woman smiled and handed over the money, all in quarters. Thirteen more than I thought I'd get. She declined a bag, instead walking to her car still holding the poor thing by the neck. Not by a wanton ear as a child would, or under the arms and around the waist as a mother would, but around the throat, clutching tighter and tighter with every step.

“Strange,” I muttered, tossing the quarters into a metal money box.

The day had gone well, a little over half my belongings were nowhere to be seen, waltzed off for a couple bucks I grabbed at greedily, officially becoming someone else's. My bigger items flew fast. I suspect I undervalued them. Mattress, iron bedframe, two dressers, two bookshelves, a vanity, two desks, and two office chairs. Everything from my childhood bedroom and my college apartments, from those days when I wasn't aware you could rent fully-furnished homes or simply rent furniture. Back when I still thought identity had something to do with ownership, what you hold on to. The kitchen supplies went fast, too. Muffin tins, blenders, mixers, a food processor I'd never even taken out of the box. My artwork trickled away at an even pace, gone by noon. I kept lying when people asked if I knew who painted them.

“No. Honestly, I can't remember where I found them.”

“Huh. Well. I'll give you twelve for this one.”

Despite painstaking hours spent and costly supplies bought to create each piece, it still felt good to sell my own art. But you can't tell people, even garage sailors, that you're willing to sell your own painting for a meagre price, because then they know. They know you must be a hack.

I watched the landscapes and various flowers in bloom or kids on swing sets trot away and I didn't feel sad. I didn't feel happy, either, but there was not sorrow to be found. The sentimentality I preached lodged itself away, hidden in some back corner, too far to grasp.

By four I could tell I wouldn't sell much more. Virtually all that was left was a table full of clothes and various piles of play jewelry, stuffed animals, and old toys that were nothing compared to the technologically enhanced entertainment capsules sold to children today.

A few nostalgia ridden couples strolled through and found Bop-Its and Simon-Says and Operation too tantalizing to pass up.

Mr. Nivera—Jason's dad—was right. The professionals sweep in first, lowball every offer, but buy a multitude of objects. A few were even pacing on my parent's lawn before I was set to open, chomping at the bit to ceremoniously pick away at my life, decide what was worth retaining, what should be left behind.

The big spenders were gone by ten. After that, I only saw college kids looking to furnish their first rented homes, newlyweds trying to find what they forgot to register for but couldn't afford because they just *had* to have both a photographer and a photo booth at their receptions, and folks just out for a walk on a beautiful, Memorial Day Weekend stroll. They'd buy one or two items at best. I thought it would hurt more when their eyes jumped over a keepsake or they tossed away a book that saw me through freshman year. But it didn't. It was just inventory now.

My first garage sale was with Jason. Mom dropped me off at the Nivera's for our playdate on a lazy, fall Saturday. Mrs. Nivera had left her husband in charge while she went to grab groceries. Knowing how much trouble he'd be in if he left two six-year-olds to their own devices, and itching to find out how bountiful the sales boasted in the classifieds truly were, Ramón tucked us into the back seat of his green Ford Grenada and off we went.

Stepping out, well, thanks to my short legs, gracefully falling out, of the car at the first stop of what was to be a long, fruitful day, my eyes widened in surprise. I'm not sure how I had missed them, all those years, how I had never driven or walked past them with my parents, but somehow I hadn't seen a sale before. This one, as they all do, looked like the house behind threw up, spewing its contents on the concrete before it. Looking at Jason, it was clear he had been to these before as, with his hands clasped behind his back, the miniature mirror-image of his father, he began to strut through the makeshift aisles. I followed in suit, not knowing what else to do.

Mr. Nivera made a beeline for boxes of notes and postcards. How he saw them hidden away behind a shower curtain and three broken plungers I haven't a clue. But he dragged the box over to the curb and started sifting through. Likewise, Jason found two plastic tubs of toys which he recruited me in helping search.

“Just let me know if you find any hot wheels. There are still a few I don't have.”

There didn't seem to be any collectors at my garage sale today. Either that, or I hadn't owned anything worth collecting. That seemed the more likely reality.

When my watch said five, I reached under my chair, my home for the past ten hours, and grabbed a large sign reading “FREE.” If anything was still left the next morning, I'd just dump it at Goodwill. Maybe they would have better luck than I convincing strangers that my life's accumulations had worth. Swinging my quarter-clanking money box in my right hand, I walked up the familiar porch steps for the last time and went inside.