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Nostalgia
from the short story collection *Thunder Can't Hurt You*
by Wyatt Westfall

Soledad felt his pulse rushing through his wrists as Times Square erupted in flames. He felt his heart quicken as concrete and glass folded into the forest and shrubbery of home. Knowing where he was now, Soledad closed his eyes, hiding from the image awaiting him. In time he ventured to unlock his eyes, revealing a frenzy of sparks swirling in half-time, like a swarm of fireflies. A flaming slice of wood tumbled down and burst open in front of him, unleashing an explosion of tiny sparks, briefly igniting the ground below before flickering to a stop. A boy's swing fell to the grass, its rope seared by the flames. Soledad glanced around, taking in the fire that engulfed his backyard, tearing apart his former home.

He clenched his fists and blinked hard. Soledad wavered dizzily as he found he was once again within the crowd of New York. He pinballed between a few businessmen before regaining his balance, each man mumbling curses. He panted heavily and deeply and felt the vertigo drain from his body. With a final exhale he ventured on, stepping carefully to avoid any further collisions. Soledad swerved through alleyways and side streets as the crowd around him faded into a few sour-smelling individuals scattered randomly along the pavement, huddled in balls, occasionally sprawling themselves on the ammonia encrusted road.

Soledad slowed his pace; his breath quickened. A siren sounded in the distance, gently morphing into the crash of the tide, pounding against the white sand. His head and his heart both pounding, he staggered and fell against a dumpster, slimy and rusted, the smell of excrement and mold forcing a gag reflex. Soledad cringed and closed his eyes, breathing through his mouth, transferring the pungent smell to a taste. Beneath his fingers he felt the rough road crumble to sand, tumbling through his fingers. He leaned his head back against the dumpster and watched the ocean, hypnotically curling and crashing before him.

The tide approached, slowly crawling towards Soledad's relaxed toes, until one wave sprinkled cool water on his feet. Gradually, the waves grew closer, until they all fell over his legs, tiny droplets flying up and showering his face. One wave enveloped Soledad completely, then another, and another. Soon each punch the ocean threw at him was putting him under, filling his open mouth with salt. The tide continued to rise, until Soledad was almost fully submerged, gasping and fighting for air in the brief moments he could reach it. His arms flailed and his legs tensed as the ocean swallowed him completely, rumbling and swirling above.

Soledad awoke gasping, sharply sucking the air around him in and exhaling raggedly, his lips quivering, moist with the syrupy sweat that laced his body, holding his shirt to him like a toddler holds its mother's hand. He rolled over and off of the now-empty queen bed, thumping sharply onto the floor. He heard a muffled "argh!" from his recently awakened downstairs neighbor. He mumbled an apology, though it was apparent his expression of regret would not reach its intended recipient. Soledad pushed himself to his feet, careful not to disturb his disgruntled friend below. He winced as his eyes were forced shut by the brilliance of light he had flicked on. He tiptoed to the kitchen, nodding indifferently upon finding he had no coffee remaining in the apartment. Soledad swallowed dryly and marched to his desk, peering out at the towering skyline of Manhattan beyond. Wearing a slight cringe and habitually dreading the task ahead, he sat down to write.

To my little buddy,

I've come to know that while I reside in New York City, it cannot become my home. I see Colombia everywhere. It is haunting me in my dreams. My dreams have ingrained in my brain that not a day can go by without remembering home, you, and leaving the

place I value the most. Though I am living a stable and comfortable life in the city, not a day goes by without heartache. This internal frustration eats away at me a little more as each second passes. I deserve it. I left you to fend for yourself and though I have gained much knowledge, I doubt it was worth the scars that I've presented you. I contemplate this every day and hope you understand. Understand why I made this choice and that I have to stick to it. My heart will always have open wounds from the sword of regret. I hope the world is treating you well my friend.

With deep regret and love, Dad

He capped his pen and neatly placed it in the drawer before him. As he unclenched his jaw and massaged the furrowed scowl on his forehead, he chomped down hard on his chapped lips in frustration. A little too hard. Blood seeped into his mouth, dripping like the leaky faucet in his bathroom that never ceased. He folded the letter evenly in thirds. Lightly salted water polka-dotted the page, having splashed against it, leaving a series of scattered uneven circles over the paper. He enveloped the letter, labeled it simply, Antonio, and tucked it into the drawer next to his pencil. Soledad leaned forward slightly and opened a third drawer. The dry wood inside was barren with the exception of a single uneven rectangle, ripped out of notebook paper. He scraped his nails over the wood, peeling off the worn and yellowing paper.

The ten digits had become all too familiar to him, though his eyes still raced back and forth across the paper, driving its contents into his brain, as though there was something to find beneath the numbers. He held the paper tightly in his right hand, cell phone in the left, as though he was considering making the call. Soledad knew, though, that tonight would be similar to the hundreds that had preceded it, consisting of a painfully long stare down of the paper and eventually a frustrated release of it back into the drawer. He was right to know that he wouldn't really be ringing his family's phone tonight. He knew he was too afraid. Too anxious to try to make up for the years of time lost without a call. Too proud to apologize for not calling before. Too kind to give his boy a false excuse and too cruel to tell the truth.

Soledad returned from the hospital that day, feeling properly exhausted. The job of preparing dinner had become a dull chore. His food had become as bland as his days. He had even begun missing the chicharron of home. When he wasn't awakened by troubled dreams, Soledad's rest was bothered by the blazing horns of the yellow cabs, the shouts of drunken friends or outraged drivers, the bass-heavy music from the nightclub across the street. It was a rare occasion when he was able to fall asleep

before midnight, though he didn't mind this. He usually preferred to hide from the troublesome dreams, at times consciously focusing on remaining awake. Inevitably his tired body would get the best of him, leaving his mind to play games with him while his body recharged.

He flicked on the TV, intent on catching up on the news of the past day. His eyes stung at the brightness of the television, milking another drop of saline down his cheek. Soledad was surprised to find that the program on the set was an uncomfortable children's show. In the show, a booming unseen voice was asking questions of brightly-dressed kids, who would take turns answering the questions.

Hey kids! What do you want to be when you grow up?

I'll be a baseball player!

I can be a doctor!

I might be a fireman!

Then a boy considerably smaller than the others took the screen, wearing tousled black hair and dark eyes to match. He did not immediately answer the strange voice's question. Instead he stared curiously at the camera. Eyebrows scrunched, eyes screaming, the boy stared at Soledad. Soledad stared back, his lips slightly parted. The boy continued to look at the camera, at Soledad for another half-minute. Suddenly, the screen flashed to a luminous white and then to an uncontrolled static, the scratching sound it provided hurting Soledad's inner-ear. The television turned itself off, and Soledad packed his bag for work.

As Soledad headed off to work the following morning, his tired body slouched onto the subway seat closest to the door. Though he had achieved a rare six hours of sleep, his head lay pressed against the browned, sticky glass. He was disgusted at this but unable to muster the strength to remove his aching crown. He emerged from his stop, and proceeded along his four minute walk to work. As he strolled past the gum blobs and quarters cemented to the filthy concrete sidewalk, he thought about the day ahead. Though it was packed full of painfully long meetings and a mindless handling of papers,

the optimistic air of the city uplifted his spirits. He flared his nostrils to inhale, and was met unkindly by the stench of the underground. As he approached his hospital, a small procession had formed outside of the push door. He gazed through the glass, seeing that the hardwood had been replaced oddly by a deep purple shag carpet. Raising an eyebrow at the poorly thought out interior decorations, he reached forward to push the revolving door, bracing himself one last time for work. The door didn't budge.

He pushed again, slightly harder this time, but to no avail. He threw his rucksack to the floor in frustration and slowly walked backward. With a considerable amount of force he charged at the translucent barrier that was keeping him from his morning coffee. The door stood strong. Soledad kicked out at it, afraid for a second that he might shatter the glass, though all he did this time was hyperextend his knee. He now realized he was holding up his patrons trying to enter and exit the building. His upper arm and shoulder were sore from his failed attempts.

Soledad leaned against the glass with his forehead, grudgingly thinking he would now be late to work for a third straight day. His boss' patience had begun wearing thin with his tardiness. Soledad erected his posture and turned to march towards the side entrance, running himself headfirst into another transparent wall. Bewildered, he ran in the opposite direction and bloodied his nose along another pane of glass, knocking him to the floor. He rose to his hands and knees, then to a crouch, and finally upright, where he realized the magnitude of his situation. Soledad was now trapped between four perfectly polished doors, stained only by the smear of red where his nose had connected. He looked around in frustration and embarrassment, the crowd now taking notes on small clipboards, boredom etched across their faces. Several minutes passed, he took off his jacket in frustration. No one moved.

Everyone stared. He vigorously searched through his bag to try and find an object hard enough to break the walls of his current jail cell. Though in no immediate danger, worry was increasingly etched into his face as the crowd began checking boxes. He gave up sifting through his bag and proceeded to take off his shoe and start barbarically beating the glass, hoping with all his might that the adrenaline coursing through him would strengthen him to the point of success. As he repetitively wacked the glass, screaming until his voice broke and his throat was strained beyond function, more and more people surrounded him, marking their own boards and whispering about him like he was a zoo

animal on display. He fell back to his knees, scraping them on the concrete, wearing his shoes over his fingers like sock puppets. Now he jumped up, his knees seared by the sudden heat radiating from the sidewalk. Startled now, he jumped to his feet, hopping from foot to foot, wincing every time his feet contacted the ground. As the crowd grew outside his enclosure, the temperature skyrocketed inside.

His panic rose to unfamiliar levels as he found the sweltering air difficult to force down his throat. Larger and larger beads of sweat were congregating at his hairline, droplets emerged across his arms, the sweat dripping into his eyes and mouth. The bottoms of his shoeless feet started to burn despite his vain efforts to keep them away from the floor. Though he had made a small crack by banging the heel on his shoe against the glass, he had more pressing issues to deal with; he could feel the immense heat separating the skin from his flesh. Flames erupted along the sides of the casing, torturously inching towards his quivering legs.

“Help! Can anyone hear me? I’m burning alive in here, someone call 911.”

“Sorry, dad. I’m not sure I can do that.” The voice seemed to surround Soledad, young and high-pitched yet strangely resounding.

“Antonio? Is that you?”

“You left me, dad. You walked away from me when I needed you the most, you knew what you were putting me through, putting mom through, putting yourself through, yet you still left me.”

“Antonio I’m sorry, I really am. God, I’m running out of oxygen. I think about you every day.” Soledad could no longer tell his sweat from his tears.

“Was it worth it? Letting me go, letting me grow up alone, all for your own wealth? I taught myself to swim, to ride a bike. I’ve cried as often as you because you left.”

“Someone, please call 911. God, Antonio I’m sorry. I regret it. You know I do. I can’t do anything about it now, but that awful choice still haunts me, it consumes me.”

“Just like this fire will consume you. Call me, dad.”

As flames continued emerging from the concrete, the drastic difference in temperature forced condensation to cover the inside of the glass, creating a stuffy greenhouse environment. Soledad felt himself grow light headed, the flames licking away at his dwindling oxygen supply. The thick air and the fire’s hunger buckled his knees, throwing him to the ground. As the flames engulfed his body, his skin started melting off like a popsicle left out in the sun. Though he wailed in pain and anguish, the people surrounding the door watched in silence, carefully documenting the horrific moment. Soledad’s flesh had been roasted to a tender medium rare when suddenly, the flames disappeared.

He lay on the smoking and smoldering pathway, watching as the glass crystallized, fragmented, and fell away from him, disappearing into the ground. He couldn’t hear anything apart from a gentle ringing deep within his ears. He felt every piece of burnt flesh dangling off his obscured body. The people surrounding him needed to get to work, and without a second glance they walked over him, through the now normally functioning door. As they trickled inside, what remained of his body melted away into the ground. The sun's rays pierced through Soledad’s semi-translucent window curtains, gently waking his body. Thrilled to have emerged safely from his corrupted dream, he brushed, cleaned, and dressed, shoving down the images of the horrid dream.

Soledad returned again from his day of work, having performed his average routine of check-ups and overpriced evaluations. On a number of occasions, his boss had encouraged him to go home, seeing as he was clearly distracted and struggling to feign interest or carefulness in his work. He had always said no. He stayed through the day, not even taking his lunch break. He had even remained at the hospital late, reorganizing his desk, though that was unnecessary.

Now, though, Soledad could no longer fight his upcoming task. He fumbled briefly with his keys, swinging open his door and pacing purposefully over to the drawer with his old phone number. The numbers dance and swirl around the page, gleefully teasing Soledad, daring him to proceed. He read off the numbers as he dialed them into his cell phone, though they had long since been memorized. Eyes freshly watering, Soledad

pressed call, and brought the phone to his ear, desperately awaiting the sound of the voice on the other end.

We're sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.

A smile played at the corners of Soledad's mouth, flickering to life before being stifled and pushed back. Soledad clicked his phone off, pressing his teeth and eyebrows together. He gazed out of his window, taking in the glory of the tremendous skyline of home.