

fingertips.

I love that I can get on YouTube and listen to songs that I haven't heard since I was a child. I love that somebody somewhere has taken the time to transfer an entire Communist-era Bulgarian movie from whatever its original format was (sheepskin, apparently) to a digital format and posted it to the internet for all to see. (Don't ask me how I know that this is a thing. Just take my word for it.)

And while this is useful, it has also made the world boring.

In the old days, if you didn't know what the *Whole Earth Catalog* was, you had three choices.

Choice #1: Ask everyone you know. This is basically a crap shoot. (This zine is now banned in all Texas public schools because I made a gambling reference.⁶)

Choice #2: Walk to the library and see if it's on the shelves. If not, ask a librarian. The job of a librarian is basically to know how to find out anything about everything, so this is a far better bet than choice #1, although I can't remember how they could do that before they had the internet. (Actually, I do remember: they had very well-trained minds.)

Choice #3: Wait for random chance to drop this information in your lap. This is also a crap shoot, but other, possibly more interesting or useful information may drop in your lap simply because you are paying attention.

All of these things require you to pay attention. I hate to sound all

hippy-dippy about it, but you do actually have to be in tune with someone else because whatever information you get is going to be delivered synchronously. Remember when an older relative (that's you I'm talking about Aunt Edna) would lecture you and your eyes would glaze over and they'd slap you on the side of the head³ and scream "Are you paying attention?" That's because they were trying to deliver information synchronously, and you had tuned out. If they had written the information down, it wouldn't matter, because that's asynchronous delivery. But it's silly to write something down if you're both in the same room. Just say it. And then listen.

But the internet is all asynchronous information exchange now. The only time you get synchronous information exchange is when you order something and it doesn't arrive and you have to wait to chat with "the next available customer service representative" and that's a terrible experience that everybody hates, including the next available customer service representative, but that's their life, and it's now, apparently, also yours, because before too long we'll all end up being the next available customer service representative. We used to get fifteen minutes of fame each, but the world is broken now and this is what we get instead.

We now live in a world in which anybody can find out pretty much anything. No complaints there. Just type and click. No librarians needed.

ously could not afford. Most of it could be thrown away and replaced with empty boxes and I doubt my mother would notice.

What you possess also possesses you.

On the other hand, I have been trying to rid myself of as much stuff as possible. A recent flood in a storage unit where I kept most of my things while I was in a transitory state proved to me that this is possible. A third of my book collection, numerous mementos, some dating back to my childhood, bits and bobs of former lives and loves—all gone in one fell swoop.

I did not want to say good-bye to those things. But I had to.

After all, they are merely *things*.

What you possess also possesses you.

It's true that some of these things reminded me of people I've known and loved, people I've loved and lost. Memories of better times, of better days. I can hang on to those things the same way I can hang on to those memories, but none of these things will bring those moments back. None of those things will bring those people back.

Why burden myself with *things*? The more burdened I am with things, the less able I am to carry these memories, the less able I am to focus on what is important right here, right now.

What, after all, is a human being but a walking fleshbag of memories?

The more physical things I carry with me, like one of those crabs that camouflage themselves by attaching all manner of odd things to their back, the less strength and energy I have for carrying the more important things. In some ways, modern technology has been helpful. I don't need to carry around VHS tapes of all my favorite movies, or heavy vinyl records of all my favorite music. Those things are easily converted to a digital format, and as long as I have a micro SD card of sufficient size and a device capable of playing them, I should be all right.

In the long run, even that doesn't matter, though.

That I once owned and loved a particular book or movie or album is not nearly as important as the memories I have about that particular book or movie or album. And those memories are strictly analogue. Because humans are not telepathic, other humans—future humans in particular—will need to depend on the words I use to describe those memories. At some point, the energy patterns in my brain that record those memories will cease to exist. All that will be left are my words.

Those words will fall far short of the task they have been given. But they will have to do.

So I've been giving up stuff. A lot of my stuff is now electronic, and what I can't reduce to an electronic form, I've reduced to as much of a physical form as possible. I've whittled down my book collection (and will continue to do

shirt shop. The shirt shop (which may have actually been its actual name—"The Shirt Shop"—and if it wasn't, it definitely should have been because, again, marketing is sometimes this fucking simple) had a number of different designs on the wall, and you could have them printed on any size or color shirt you wanted. It was kind of like the shirt display in FYE, but with a choice of colors.

In reality, these were just heat-transfers: designs screen-printed onto high-quality wax paper and stored in the back. You picked out a design and a shirt color and a shirt size, and the clerk grabbed that design and that shirt and put the two together in a heat transfer machine (i.e., a big press that got hot) and voila—you have a t-shirt. It was basically just a fancy version of iron-ons (remember those?), nothing fancy, just those things the zeitgeist of the time found to be cool.

I remember standing there, staring up at all the cool designs, and thinking that when I was grown up (i.e., fourteen years old or so) and had a real job, I would come in and buy most of those shirts.

The irony is that I can't remember any of those cool designs save one (which referenced two people having sex in the bushes and had the tagline "How do you spell relief? S-E-X."—a nod to the Roloids advertising campaign of the time).

(Also, ten-year-old me apparently had some pretty high hopes and aspirations for fourteen-year-old me.)

Moving on...

At the corner where this corridor met the main mall was a store called "Accent". It sold smelly¹⁸ things—soaps and candles and bath salts (and probably a lot of other items that I've forgotten about, sadly, because I like smelling things) and it was also full of glass display cases. It was *fancy* and the kind of place that would normally eject a ten-year-old boy who was there on his own and not on a leash, but the owner was an older Latina lady who was friends with my mom, and I was always welcomed with open arms (and often candy) as long as I promised to only smell things and not to touch anything. I admit, when you're ten years old and tired of being around redwood all day, it's nice to go somewhere that smells strongly of something other than redwood.

I can't remember the name of the lady who owned it, although I *think* (and this may entirely be a figment of my imagination) she had some daughters in their 20s or early 30s who positively doted on me. (That candy had to come from somewhere, after all.) I can't remember for sure, but when I think of that place, I remember being cuddled, and when you're ten years old and small and brown and your world is also small, being cuddled by someone who is under no obligation to cuddle you is a wonderful thing.

What's cool is that I can go to the mall now, and walk into a place like Bath and Body Works or the Yankee Candle store (or even the incense-filled

cultural appropriation store) and catch a whiff of a soap or lotion or candle or whatever that reminds me of that store, and for the briefest instant, I am transported back to that point in space-time, and I can remember being welcomed and cuddled and being given candy for no good reason and everything is right with the world. It's only for a split second, but sometimes that's enough to get me through my day. (Sometimes, but not often. Certainly not often enough.)

Now we need to talk about pretzels.

We had a store at Southland Mall—a *kiosk*, actually—called Hot Sam's that sold hot pretzels. As I recall, you could get them with salt or without salt (which is crazy—pretzels without salt are simply terrible) and the only accompaniments were cheese, regular mustard, or fancy mustard (which may have been Dijon mustard, or may not have even been a real thing that I am misremembering).

You can google Hot Sam's. There is a Wikipedia article which doesn't do it justice, because hot pretzels from Hot Sam's were *righteous*.

I don't remember how much those pretzels cost. I do remember begging my mother for coins to buy one, so I'm pretty sure they were under a dollar. I remember offering to bring one to her if only she would give me the money to buy two of them. I remember thinking that mustard on a hot pretzel was disgusting until I actually tried it, and at the age of nine, this was my very first OMGWTFBBQ moment.

Hot Sam's was good. And it's gone.

I've tried other hot pretzels (Target has hot pretzels on occasion, Auntie Anne's is all about the hot pretzels), but they put so much sugar in their dough that it's more like eating a pretzel-shaped doughnut, which is antithetical to the very idea of a pretzel (and also to a doughnut). Pretzels are meant to be *savory*—hence, salt and mustard.

(I could write an entire book about the human race's love affair with sweetness, which I find disgusting when it creeps up in things—like pretzels—where it has no business being, and especially about the American sub-species's taste for it, but somebody else probably has. You can google it. Let's move along. Next slide please.)

This mall was full of stores, but for now, I can only remember two others: Ben Franklin and Steketee's.

Ben Franklin was a chain store that mostly sold craft-related items. There was one in Paw Paw (the town where my mom used to work; ten miles away from my hometown) and as a child I spent a lot of time there with her in the basement looking at clothing patterns and fabrics, and being a pattern-and-fabric-fetching monkey for my mother. What I mainly remember about the Ben Franklin in Southland Mall is that my father bought me my first baseball glove there. (Details: it was on an endcap, it was made of plastic¹⁷, and it was on sale. Also, he may have been slightly inebriated at the time.) The lights in that store were