The wind batters against the windows, catching the branches of the trees and filling the air with the rustle of thousands of leaves brushing together. A breeze snakes into the fireplace, disturbing the ash settled there. The scent that billows out is an accumulation of all of the campfires we’ve had. An accumulation of all the times I’ve sat wrapped up in blankets while eating s’mores or telling stories with family, surrounded by the sounds of the wildlife that is shrouded in the darkness that blankets the world, only pierced by the occasional flashlight or fires from other campers. It’s the smell that tails us home, that settles into the weave of the fabric that makes up the clothes and blankets we wore around the fire, that lingers for weeks. One breath of the stirred up ash draws forward these memories and with them comes the feeling of longing for the times that are long since passed.

What does it mean to be swept up in memory? Does it mean yearning for the past, desperate to retain the way we feel when re-experiencing those memories that linger with us? Or is it being stuck in what once was, missing the good old days? Does it inhibit us from living our lives to the fullest, in the moment, when we remember the times we long for? Is it the unending comparison of our lives to memories and feelings we may never achieve again?

Fall shows itself by touching the leaves, setting the world on fire as they turn from green to warm reds and browns and vibrant oranges. The air turns biting, the chill stinging exposed cheeks and nipping at pink noses. With it comes holidays and spices and cozy sweaters and fireplaces. For me, one of the first ways to evoke the memories I have of fall, is to drink something chai flavored. Usually, I take to Starbucks for a Chai Tea frappuccino. It tastes like fall. The mix of creamy and spices is my grandmother’s pumpkin pie, the smell of her house as we gather for Thanksgiving. It brings back the way I was fascinated with the dimmer on the dining room light, al-
ways lowering it into a dim glow to make the space feel even warmer. It pulls images of the road to my grandparents, the trees lining both sides covered in scraps of gold for those short weeks before the leaves fall, and the crunch of them underfoot when they do.

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Nostalgia was once a state to be avoided, something thought to have made life harder to live, that made it more difficult to focus on living in the present. According to Tim Adams, a staff writer for The Guardian newspaper, nostalgia was seen as “a state of mind that made life in the here and now a debilitating process of yearning for that which had been lost.” Nostalgia was considered a disorder, one that was diagnosed in soldiers and even has a death toll attributed to it. The soldiers exhibited signs of depression and anxiety, but more telling was their unending longing for home, their desire for what they no longer had. The diagnosis centered on their fixation on the past.

If this longing for our past is so distressing, and all it takes is a sound, or a scent, or a taste to make you lapse into memories, why do we not fight harder to avoid it?

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It’s been years since my grandpa passed away, yet even small, silly things bring back the fond memories I have of him. Just seeing a kernal of candy corn makes me smile, makes me feel like a small child sitting on the rough carpet of my living room while he sits in the rocking chair in front of me. He’s teased me and my cousins for years with his dentures, popping them out to make us laugh or squeal out a chorus of “eww’s” as we scrambled to move away from him. Now, he pretends to pull something out of his mouth, extending his hand with that small triangle of orange, yellow, and white in his palm.

“Ew, that’s gross, papa,” I say, letting out a giggle as he moves his hand closer and I lean back.

“This is what happens when you eat too much candy. Your teeth turn into it!” He pops the sweet into his mouth, letting out an exaggerated hum of appreciation as he chews and swallows and I laugh again. Then, he repeats the process and extends another piece. “Here. They’re good!”

Reluctantly, I put it in my mouth and start to chew. The flavor, bordering on too sweet, floods my mouth, and I give him a huge grin.

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Over the years, our understanding of nostalgia has changed. It is no longer seen as a disorder, and while sometimes it brings for-
ward memories that are not entirely happy, it is no longer consid-
ered the harbinger of negative emotions and, as Adams writes, can
even be seen as “a kind of inbuilt neurological defence mechanism,
which can be marshalled to protect us against negative thoughts
and situations.” Logic would dictate that recalling good times when
we are sad would make us feel worse, that remembering a time filled
with happiness would only invite the reminder that those times are
long passed or cause us to compare our past to our present.

Instead, recalling these good times can provide us the remind-
er that we have a purpose: there are people who care for us, there
were and will be times that we feel happy, that our current circum-
stance is not a permanent state. These times of transition in our
lives can herald bouts of nostalgia- after all, how better to help set-
tle us into new situations than by recalling familiar ones? Though
bittersweet, we also utilize nostalgia to keep alive those who we
hold dear to us, whether they have passed away or are far from us.
These reminders of our past help to enrich our present and prepare
us for our future.

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Anything Star Trek is also immediately associated with my
grandpa, and one specific Christmas ornament that my mother
has reminds me of all the times he showed it to me. It’s a scene of
the transporters - known for the line ‘Beam me up, Scotty!’ which
is, surprisingly, never actually said in the show - and it has Spock,
Kirk and another crew member standing there. I remember that my
grandpa had a shelf in his office room in his house that was dedicat-
ed to Star Trek and on it was a few Christmas ornaments. This one
was my favorite, and he loved to show it to me. We would go into
the room, close the blinds and shut off the lights so it was complete-
ly dark. Then, with the push of the button, the ornament would
light up and begin the noises that the teleporters made and in the
darkness of the room, it was magical. The lights would shift until
they blinked out, plunging us into darkness again, and the figures
seemed to have disappeared. Then, it started again to reverse the
process. It’s such a simple illusion and yet I always wanted to see it
and my grandpa would always oblige with a smile.

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Right after my grandpa passed, I found those triggers every-
where, even in things that were only loosely related to memories
I had of him. While happy to have the moment of connection to
him again, I was also left feeling a little sad. Even years later, the
reminder that he is gone is painful but it is accompanied by the
reminder that I loved him. Dr. Tim Wildschut, a senior researcher
from the Netherlands, says that nostalgia “is always related to intimacy maintenance: I want to remind myself of the people who are no longer here and what they meant for me. It serves to remind you of what intimacy you have achieved and therefore what you are capable of.” These memories and feelings helped me through my grief and continue to help me today in keeping my grandpa close.

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I settle into a recliner and pop up the footrest and I’m suddenly seven years old. My dad is playing on the computer and I am enthralled, more than happy to watch to brightly colored characters run across the screen. I go over to the beat up silver recliner and begin the struggle of moving it over next to my dad. Seven-year-old me has some trouble: I can’t just lift the chair, it’s too large for that, and it’s too heavy to just slide. Instead, I make it do the awkward walk across the floor, shifting the weight back and forth until the chair rests beside my father’s. By this time, I have the process perfected - muscle memory kicks in. Then, I grab a blanket, pull the lever for the footrest, tip the seat back as far as I can, and curl up. Despite the fight I put up to keep my eyes open as long as possible, I fall asleep to the sounds of adventure music and his laughter as he talks to his friends.

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When in search of comfort, slipping into the past to draw on our memories is effective and healthy, to an extent. All it takes is a familiar location or significant object, a well loved song or comforting smell, a welcoming flavor or even a common ritual to trigger these memories, and it is easy enough to seek them out. The fear that we can waste our lives agonizing over what once was is valid because, like all things, moderation is necessary when it comes to nostalgia. Remembering can activate the locations of the brain responsible for rewarding us, and this causes the positive, pleasant feelings we get during bouts of nostalgia. This is why focusing on the past can become addicting, especially when in response to negative emotions or strenuous situations.

How do we balance appreciating and living our lives in the present with the rush of memories we can so suddenly be overwhelmed with? Especially during troubling times, how can we avoid simply slipping into our memories and hiding out there?

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I unwrap the crinkling plastic around a roll of Smarties candy, smiling at the familiar mixture of tart and sweet as I pop one into my mouth. This was the candy of choice whenever my dad and I had camp outs. When we could (meaning: when Washington weather
would allow,) we would set up the tent in the backyard, keeping the fly cover off to provide us an uninhibited view of the sky in the hopes of seeing the stars. On nights that it was raining, or too cold, the campground became our living room. We set up the tent, filled it with blankets and pillows, grabbed some Smarties and Tootsie pops, and settled in. The night was filled with movies or TV shows and we would stay awake until we couldn’t keep our eyes open any longer.

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“I never wished to be back as bad in my life. How memory recalls every little spot, and how vividly every little scene flashes before my mind. Oh! If there is one place dear to me it is home sweet home. How many joys cluster there. To join once more the family circle (I mean you all) and talk of times gone by would be more to me than all else besides.”

-Richard Simpson, one of the soldiers in the Third South Carolina Volunteers, in a letter to his aunt, 1861

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I wonder if those soldiers at the time knew that it wasn’t their happy memories that were making them ill. Did they feel the memories of their loved ones, of their homes, fighting to protect them from the difficult, sad situations they were in? Or did they just rely on those memories to the point of making them worse?

There’s a chance that I’ll never find that perfect balance between just falling into memory and fighting off any reminder of my past, but recognizing that my past is trying to help rather than hinder is an important step. How to not use this as a crutch is something I have to work on as I find myself eagerly searching for those songs or movies or foods that transport me to the back to happier, easier times. Nostalgia is unavoidable in a world filled with as many possible triggers as there are, and the best we can do is look upon it as an opportunity to give ourselves a new perspective, to remember those close to us, and to acknowledge how crucial all these memories are to who we are today.