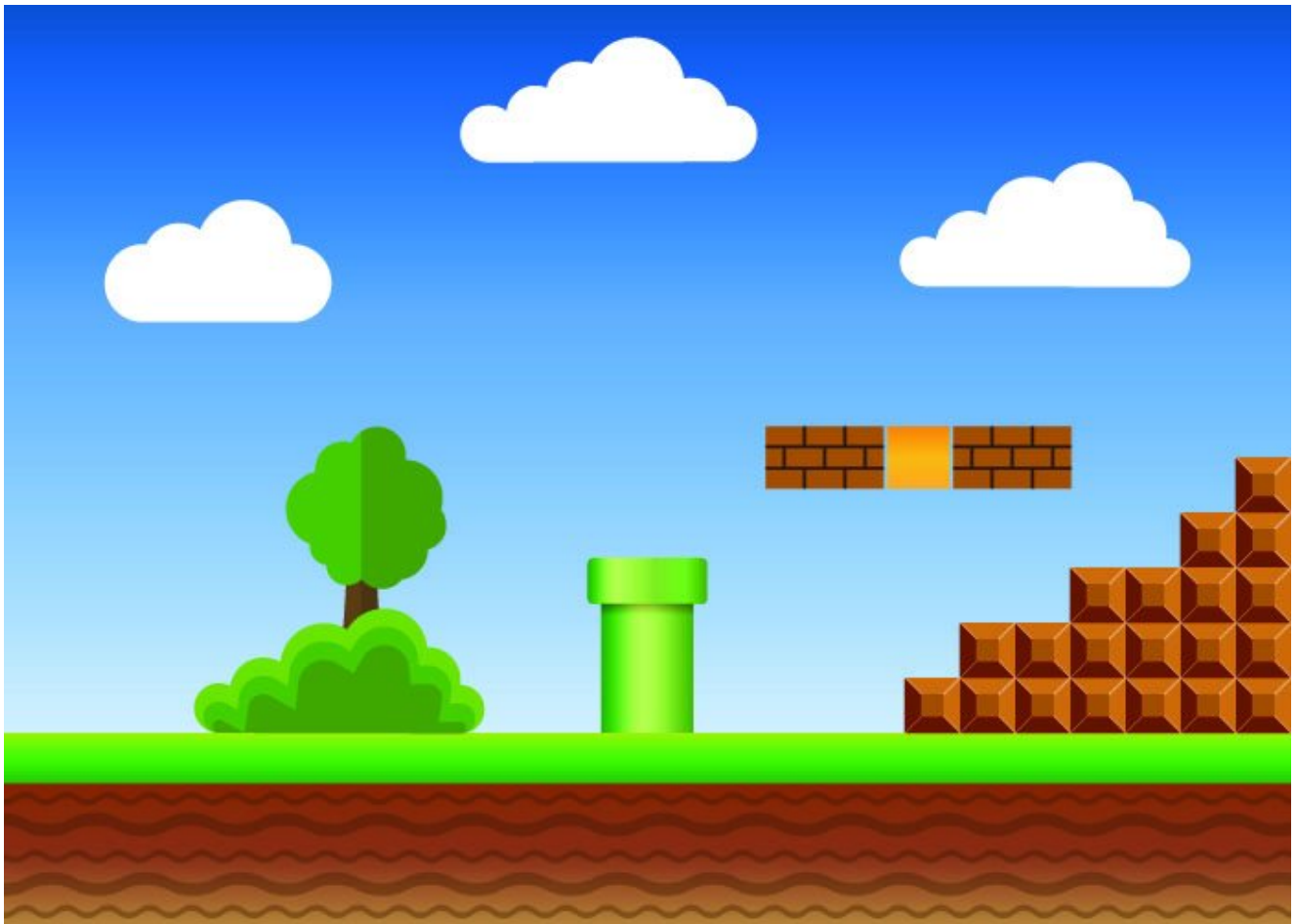


# Palimpsests

Nancy Wayson Dinan



In 1990, Jacob Mason stopped playing video games. I was in middle school, and I knew something had happened to him, but I was still more than a decade away from real empathy. I was more interested in myself, as middle schoolers are. Jacob lived down the street; his mother was a friend of my mother's, but he and I didn't know each other well yet. Something had happened and he no longer wanted to play. I took his Nintendo console and his games, including the original *Mario* and the original *Zelda*, and I was happy to have them.

That same spring in Leisurewoods in Buda, TX—my neighborhood—there was a murder-suicide. A man had killed his wife and children and then turned the gun on himself. No suicide note was found, though the murder weapon, a .38 caliber revolver, was found next to the father, Peter Joost. The lack of a suicide note was suspicious, as was the fact that none of the victims had been shot in the head, as would normally be the case. People live in that house now, a nice-ish ranch-style home on Killdeer Drive, and I think about how strange it would be to live in a house where four people died one night.

But, again, at the time, this crime was nothing more than a story to me. I was busy with my own life, fairly new to the area and having a hard time adjusting. To say my home life was hard would be an understatement, but that's a story for a different time. Let's just say that my life revolved around *Seventeen* magazine, as I tried to figure out how and what and who to be, and fantasy novels with larger-than-life heroines, and hiding whenever I heard my stepfather's car pull into the driveway. I played *Mario* first, starting at the beginning and continuing all the way through, and didn't touch *Zelda* for a couple of months.

But the rumors started, and they eventually reached me, even in my exile from the rest of the small town, because everybody whispered them. Peter Joost, who worked for the Texas Gambling Commission, had uncovered something, had been investigating something big. He never would have killed his family. And then *20/20* came to film, and they did a whole story about how this was not a triple murder-suicide but instead a quadruple murder. Joost had been investigating the Houston Turf Club, which at the time had a \$1 billion lawsuit against the Texas Gambling Commission. The Hays County sheriff at the time, Paul Hastings, said the questions raised by the Joost family and their representatives were "beating the same dead horse." He said he was convinced that the murder-suicide ruling would stand for one thousand years.

Later, at an interview in July of that year, Hastings said that the day the shootings were thought to have occurred, Peter Joost suddenly canceled plans for one of his son Eric's friends to spend the night. Hastings did not identify the boy or his family.

"I don't remember where we got that information," Hastings said, and that was that. The world moved on.

Everything I've ever written has been about how the past lies over the present but refuses to lie there quietly. Lately, I've been obsessed by the idea of a palimpsest, which occurs when something is erased and printed over. Palimpsests occur when the raw material for the thing is worth more than the thing itself.

I remember several years ago seeing a Da Vinci painting in one of the Smithsonian museums. It had been placed into its own little wall, a window cut all the way through, so that you could circle the painting and see what was on the back. On the front was a portrait that I thought looked quite similar to the *Mona Lisa*, a woman with a familiar expression and hairstyle. I walked around to the back and there was another painting. Even more interesting was the fact that historians had x-rayed the painting and found drawings made by Da Vinci before he had covered the canvas with gesso. Once I knew about these drawings, I thought I could see them through the oils on the canvas that formed other images. Just because something's underneath doesn't mean that it's hidden.

One afternoon near the end of the next school year, I finished *Mario*. I made it to the castle, and I remember it took me three times to rescue the princess. I thought about starting the game again, but instead, I put it down and never picked it up again. To this day, if I play video games, which is rare, I play them all the way through and I'm done. I never did put Jacob's former *Mario* game back into his former console, but that was okay because I still had *Zelda*.

My stepfather wasn't home that day, which was happening more often than it had in Virginia, where we lived before. We were in the homestretch of the separation, the slow withdrawal of a man who had physically and emotionally abused us for seven years. It was a relief to be in the living room on a Saturday, to be out in the open like that. I put in *Zelda*, and waited for the game to boot.

When I cycled through the options, there was a high scorer board, a black screen with block white letters. And I'll never forget this, not for the rest of my life, that dead kid's name on my television. ERIC JOOST, it said. I sat back on the couch and thought about what was leaving that house, and about what I had just brought in.

Your obsessions, a teacher once told me, are really only visible in hindsight. It took me years to recognize my obsession with palimpsests. Everything was once something else, and that past thing, whatever it was, is always present.

At my high school, for example: the road that ran in front of it, a road we called FM 1626 or, sometimes, the Old San Antonio Road. A road I found out later is older than the United States, and was built by the king of Spain more than three hundred years ago. El Camino Real. The Royal Highway. Part of a network of roads in eastern and central Texas from a time long before even Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston were born.

And: the corner of Interstate 35 and Onion Creek Road, where an Adams Extract factory once sat, all midcentury modern and sleek. Bulldozed one summer, it remained a pile of rubble for nearly two decades afterward. The slow rise of apartment buildings on the site, the neon lights of a gas station. And still, underneath, the imagined scent of vanilla extract, of almonds, of lemons. Underneath, the gray suits and thin ties of the men who had worked at the factory, the bouffants and heels and stockings of the women. Layers there, time on time on time, and all that time below bleeding through the sterile present. This whole place a palimpsest, and all the other places, too.

So you can probably guess which child was expected at the Joost house that night. All the pieces are there, and I have framed them in such a way that there are no extraneous bits that might serve as distraction, as real life would have provided us. I still see Jacob's mother and father socially, and my parents are close to them now. They have gone on cruises

together, and I have had Thanksgiving dinner at their house. But I have never asked them about that night, about what Jacob had seen or not seen, about how narrowly he may or may not have escaped something unthinkable.

My mom has told me some stories, but I don't know whether she ever asked, or if they told her voluntarily, or if things just come up over a friendship of a couple of decades. Jacob was there, in that house on Killdeer Drive. He'd spent the night the night before, and he was going to spend the night again. But something happened, and Mr. Joost sent him home. He left the house, according to my mother, about an hour before the sheriff said the murders occurred.

My television, those white letters on a black screen, that was a palimpsest, too. Eric Joost, a dead child, in my house every time I turned on *Zelda*. I could erase his name, but that wouldn't erase the fact that this was a game a child who had been murdered had once played. What came before leached into the present. Two parts to the palimpsest: erasure of the old thing, addition of the new thing.

Recently, a writer came to speak at my university. He was a child when his family lived through Pinochet's Chile. Now he writes about the disappearances on our own southern border. So many people, there but now gone. Tales, he said, of bodies being dumped from helicopters into the sea. Now, people taken by the Chihuahuan Desert, by police, by the middlemen known as *coyotes*, by cartels that slipped into gaps made by trade policies. The forty students who disappeared a drop in the bucket.

This writer claimed the word *disappearance* was a misnomer. That the people who were gone had not disappeared. Rather, he said, when a body goes missing, there's a hyper-appearance. A conspicuous sort of absence, the kind a person can never ignore. A constant reminder of what's been lost, the never-ending questions: *Where now? With whom? In pain? At peace?*

Things and people don't disappear, not until all of the things and people they belong to disappear, too. And even then, traces left in our universe, and in every universe that comes after.

I think of survivors in terms of half-lives. I was very young when my grandfather, my father's father, died. But his sons tell his stories, and they tell them to me, his granddaughter. His sons only know part of his experience and I know even less than that. I tell his stories to my children, and they, I hope, will tell their children, too.

And there's multiplicity, as well, not just division. My grandfather's stories involve other people, people I will never know. He was a sharecropper in Tennessee, tied to the land because he was paid in scrip instead of money. Money was rare in those days, it came only from the Works Progress Administration, only when they needed extra hands. There's a

story from this time that my grandfather would never forget, that his sons discuss at family barbecues and over Thanksgiving dinner, that I will never forget either. There was a storm—a flood—and coffins washed out of graves. His sons tell me the story of how my grandfather picked up a woman, partially decayed, and placed her back into her coffin. Before he closed it, he noticed the gouges on the underside of the lid. He noticed the pine splinters in the woman's fingernails and hands. He imagined he saw a look on her face, horror, shining through the tendon and bone.

And her story is part of my family's story now, but probably not part of hers. Not that her family forgot her, though they might have, she died nearly a hundred years ago. But I can't imagine that her family ever found out what had really happened to her.

Half-lives and additions, incomplete records for every party involved. A story, by virtue of being told, is refreshed and refreshed and refreshed. So many details of a life fall away, until only certain, polished images remain.

And here I am, midforties, half a lifetime on the books. My version of a half-life. And it works this way for my own story, too: tales I've told are remembered, other things are forgotten. Parts of me exist in other people's memories but not my own.

But I remember things, too, things that no longer exist: that Adams Extract factory, the original Matt's El Rancho, Les Amis and Skaggi's Pizza and houses where we imagined hobbits lived in the backyard. People, too, who were once in my life and who have not quite departed, people whose bodies I will never see again: both grandmothers, both grandfathers, and the families we were when we were together. My father, too. All of that memory, bleeding through. All of these things are mine, but, also, I am theirs. They took a part of me, too.

Here is the thing about getting older, about being halfway through a life span: half of me belongs to things that no longer exist. And this is the tipping point; this is where I slide toward ghost, the world a shimmer, all of the possibilities and all of the people, my corporeal son next to the phantom of my grandmother.

There's so much missing to the story. How did the game console come to us? Did my mother's friend say she needed to get rid of it, for her son's sake? Did my own mother say that her daughters would like it? Does Jacob know that I still think of him and his friend?

What else does Jacob know about my family, the way I know things about his? When we run across each other at those Thanksgiving dinners, does he know about my stepfather, about the most painful and humiliating moments of my life? Does he know the contours of abuse from his time in the Joost circle, or does he believe the murder-suicide story was a lie, a cover-up? Does his mother know the things done to children, and if so, what responsibility does a person have to investigate the things you hear but never see?

I know that I never finished the game, and I don't think I ever played it again. I'm not sure where everybody was in the moment I saw Eric Joost's name upon the screen, where my mother was, my stepfather, my sister, the dogs. What was cemented for me in that moment was a loneliness, a solitude that has never really been breached, not even in marriage or in motherhood.

It was that boy—Eric Joost, the dead child—and Jacob, my mom's friend's son, and me, all in that living room on Towhee Drive in the Leisurewoods neighborhood in Buda, Texas, at the end of the previous century. My stepfather and the wake he left, even then fading but never never gone. My mother, how she failed us. My father, on the road in Indiana, selling and repossessing and reselling pianos off the back of a truck. The beige carpet and beige walls and beige couch. The beige cocker spaniels, who were less than a year away from being taken to the shelter one day while I was at school, the burden of their care too much for a woman in the throes of divorce. A black screen on a cathode ray tube television, white capital letters. A feeling of something, the hope that I could be another person, but the answer to this question is no. I am. He is. He was. What he was then became what I am now. Nobody knows what happened that night, after Mr. Joost sent Jacob home. This is a story for somebody else. Not us. The Turf Club, the sheriff, the murder weapon on the floor. A family. A night. A canvas painted over. A figure—a ghost of pencil—underneath the gesso.

*Nancy Wayson Dinan's debut novel, Things You Would Know if You Grew Up around Here, is out this week.*