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Don't Try This At Home

by Joe Ferullo

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It was an experiment in nostalgia that backfired, badly -- and I'm still trying to recover.

Many years ago, I thought it would be fun to save my annual employee photo identification cards, and keep them in a neat stack. In my much younger mind, I imagined a day far off in the future when I would happen upon them in surprise and delight, shaking my head at the flood of happy memories each year brought forth.

Not so much.

Instead, here's what happened: about two weeks ago, we moved into our new house and began the slow process of unboxing the things we hold near and dear. This was a daunting task, because we were surrounded by these crazy cartons -- all of them marked with vague tags, such as: "For storage." On top of that, we did fine without any of this for more than a year while we lived in an apartment and shoved these other items away in a storage facility filled to brim -- like that scene near the end of "Citizen Kane."

Still, I was intrigued. In there, perhaps, was my "Rosebud" -- some item wrapped and packed that I had long forgotten but that (once found) would instantly transport me to another time and place.

And so the work started: out came ceramic platters and china plates not seen since our wedding 20 years ago; children's books with pages torn and yellowed; awards for achievements only partially recalled. In another box, tax documents from 1994 that for some unknowable reason I felt the need to keep near. Many of these things I happily chucked into a corner pile of the front driveway marked "Garage Sale."

Then I hit upon it: a simple box, marked only "Joe's Stuff." A couple of high school yearbooks lay in there, next to an old Rolling Stone marking the death of John Lennon, and my eighth grade diploma from

Immaculate Conception on Gun Hill Road in the Bronx. All brought smiles and memories.

Until the ID cards tumbled out. Uh-oh. This was different. This was no long and winding road trip down memory lane -- this was a straight shot into the heart of the aging process. Here was a gym ID card from 1982. And there, CBS in New York -- 1985. Then CBS Los Angeles, 1987. Then NBC News: 1994, 1995, 1996 ... and on and on and on and on. Years of aging and changing and shifting and listing -- laid end-to-end with incontrovertible clarity.

Now, sure, look -- like most humans, I take a terrible ID photo, and, yes, trust me, I rationalized a good chunk of my horror to that: these were not just pictures of my getting older. These were intentionally grotesque pictures of me getting older.

Still, I felt myself tumble down a black hole of vanity and despair with a velocity I was certain nothing could stop. I slammed the box of "Joe's Stuff" shut and, trying to distract myself, opened another box -- this one unhelpfully marked "Misc."

And in there, I uncovered the antidote: more photos. But these were of me, my wife, and our kids. Starting when our oldest was just born -- random snapshots and duplicate pictures that didn't make it into our albums and frames. In these photos, the years rolled in one-by-one as well, but told a far kinder tale: the story of family building a history while moving forward -- Christmas-after-Christmas on the department store Santa's lap; Easter-after-Easter of faces covered in chocolate; aunt, uncles and cousins dipping in and out and yet somehow always there.

That was much better and I sighed with deep relief. But now I don't know what to do with the ID cards -- what if I put them back in their bag, and tucked them away once again? Then what? Would I find them when I was eighty or ninety and have a coronary right there on the spot? Or would I just be happy to have lived long enough to uncover them once again?

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I know -- I'll put them back in the same bag as the random family photos, a nicer, gentler mix.

That will be something I'll look forward to finding. I hope.

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