

Memories

by Julia Smillie

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I don't remember. Whatever it is, I don't remember.

That's not entirely true. My mind is the strangest place. There are certain scenes from my childhood, certain memories burned so strongly in my mind that I can play them on the insides of my eyelids like movies. Every detail resonates – the wallpaper behind my mother as she stands ironing my father's shirt; the slightly chemical but comforting smell of the plaid travel blanket on the backseat of my grandfather's Morris Minor; the dark blue bathrobe my father wore the morning we found out we were leaving Boston.

Then there is the food. I always remember the food – my grandmother's birthday cake confections, wrapped around with ribbon and topped with tiny silver balls that matched those in her hair net. The sweet, heady smell of the carrots and bay leaves in my mother's stew. The unparalleled sweetness of a giant strawberry, warm from the sun, stolen from under the protective netting in a walled garden in Ireland. My childhood is a connection of sensory recollections, most of them joining my heart and my stomach, reflecting my lifelong pleasure-seeking in food, my earliest attempts to fill, to placate, to consume.

But I don't know your phone number. No matter how many times I've dialed it, I still have to look at the cheat sheet on my fridge or rely on that godsend, memory dial. It's not just the numbers, though. That's not what started scaring me the most. The numbers are everywhere in strange sequences and combinations representing credit cards, phone numbers, addresses and passwords. Surely no one can be expected to process and store them all.

It's the facts. That's what scares me. The way they've slipped away somehow, things I know I once knew but when I reach into my mind for them, all I see is a hazy shadow, the looming and depressing spectre of lost knowledge. It's far worse to lose a fact once known than simply never to have known it in the first place. It's a disappointment somehow, a mark of something wrong, a haunting sensation that the very worst thing is happening – that the mind is failing.

The facts started slipping, perhaps, when I drank. My brain was afloat, cells were being destroyed in masses and information simply flowed out of me. Geography went, along with historical facts – both American and British, conflicting dates from international schooling – and mathematical equations, entire philosophical movements and, worst of all, book after book after book. New information instantly became haze and vanished. It's difficult to remember things you were not actually present for. (That said, the brain is not kind enough to let you forget the worst things; no, those are permanent, no matter how drunk, no matter how sorry.)

What I don't understand is this: how could I lose all those facts about history, struggle to name the wives of Henry VIII but still be left with all the words to the Facts of Life theme song? Why

am I a great asset to your trivial pursuit team when the questions are old sitcoms or TV commercials, yet a liability for historical facts and dates?

Someone said once: it's hard to remember something you weren't paying attention to in the first place. Now I try to focus and concentrate, but that doesn't come easily for me either. I can read a book and tell you if I liked it, but a month later struggle to recall the plot or the name of the lead character. I'm frightened a lot by the way the information seeps out now, the way it's edged out by too many magazines, pop lyrics, conversations, web sites.

I'm told there are many reasons my brain cannot hold on to information the way it once did – depression, grief, the distraction of chronic pain. These things make it difficult to concentrate, to focus, to seize and retain. But I think it's getting worse sometimes. I struggle to name common things, to find the words to complete a simple sentence. My husband knows this – he rushes to my aid, to finish my thought, to understand what I mean when I get frustrated and say, “You know, the *thing*. Get the *thing*.”

I suspect that so much more would be preserved if I could simply slow down, stop rushing to consume information and experiences as though a timer were running out. If I didn't read so many different things in one day, if I weren't skimming the surface of so much information and trying in vain to absorb any of it at all. If I didn't read the news online with NPR going in the background. If I didn't watch TV while reading a magazine. If I just stopped for a minute and did one thing, just one thing.

Maybe then it would all sink in. Maybe some of the old things would come rushing back, even. But I haven't tried much and mostly for one reason. Mostly because I'm terrified of this: maybe not.