The Art of Forgetting

By Hannah Liberman

As I lay in bed I realize there is something dripping somewhere in the house. In the living room my wife has fallen asleep on the couch in front of the television; her soft snores mixing and mingling with the sounds of the people that live inside the TV. Sam’s door is closed, it seems to always be closed. I can’t tell if he is sleeping or awake, for the quiet blankness that has enveloped him is seeping from his room; like always. It’s the kind of quiet you can’t help but notice. The sound of the TV, the dripping something, and my wife’s dainty snores are enough to make me feel a bit better. This is usually the time of night when my nostalgia kicks in. On some nights it is worse than others. Some nights I just remember and that is all - I think of the life I have lived and I am content. However, on others, the beauty and pain that are laced into these moments, that have inevitably become memories, are enough to bring me to tears. But the doctor says that my condition is very special and he is very clear that I must remember while I can. So I close my eyes and wait for all the lost places and people to touch my soul, to walk through my head, bringing with them my memories, bringing me stories of my past.

*I am running through a field. Frosting is on my face, and the taste of the cake is still on my lips. See, my older brothers do this thing every year on my birthday where they push my face into the cake. Last year it was funny and we all laughed, but this year something was different. I guess turning eight really changes your outlook on life because I just wanted to enjoy my cake, that’s all. My whole family laughed and I just sat there, smiling a fake smile and pretending I still thought it was funny. Incidentally, this birthday was very ordinary. We sat in the middle of our small kitchen, Pops gave me a slinky, and Mama gave me yet another knitted sweater. I lost a tooth, my brothers fought over something or another, and Mama and Pops discussed something about a war. I was born the year this war started, 1939. But besides that, I don’t know too much about it. Well, anyhow, the pure ordinariness of this birthday was too much for me to handle and after sitting around all day, I left the house and just ran. I don’t think anyone noticed I was gone, but they never do. It’s okay though, because sometimes people are just too busy in their own lives to worry about yours all the time, and I know it’s hard, but you can’t be angry about it. It’s just something you have to understand. So I ran, and it is the first time I have felt free in a long while. There are birds flying overhead. They are in a V. I find it peculiar how organized these birds are, but it’s also very impressive. So I run on, imagining I am a bird, swimming and dancing through the clouds. Tall green grass sweeps around my legs, tickling my ankles and causing me to giggle. Crickets are chirping, and I skip to the music of their small orchestra. I come to the top of my hill, and I have to stop running for I wouldn’t want to topple down the hill. So I decide to sit down because I have been running for a while and I am quite tired. It’s the time of evening where the day is just ending and the night is just beginning, and the sky is painted beautiful colors. This is my favorite time of the day because, on this spot on my hill, I have a perfect view of the sun kissing the top of the earth before she makes her way to bed. And then I get to watch the stars pop up, one by one, and it is absolutely spectacular. My mouth tastes salty and it takes me a second to realize that my cheeks are wet. I am crying. However, the tears I am letting loose, they are not tears of sadness. I am not sure if they are tears of joy either. All I know is that sometimes the beauty of life is too much for me to take in; it awes me, and leaves me shaken. I am only eight, so I don’t know too much about life, but I think I know enough. However I definitely know that life is a very precious, wondrous thing. Who knows, maybe this is why I’m crying.*

*Creeeak,* the door swings open and I quickly open my eyes. For some reason there are tears gently running down my face. Beads of sweat are sitting on my forehead, like raindrops on a window after a storm. I can’t seem to recollect what I was dreaming about, or if I was dreaming at all, but a sense of deja vú is upon me; Familiarity is sitting on my headboard. My door swings closed; the woman must have been checking on me, and seeing if I was asleep. I look at the clock, 1:02 it reads. My eyelids are still heavy, drooping, and full of sleep. A yawn escapes my lips. I guess I should get back to sleep, for it would be a shame to be tired the next day. Doctor probably wouldn’t like it either. So again, I let my eyelids drift closed and wait for the darkness to seep into me, and for sleep to pull me in to its grasp.

*This is the stillest and quietest I have ever been. You know how when you’re younger and playing hide and seek, and trying not to be found; every sound or movement you make seems one hundred times more noticeable than it actually is. That’s how it is now. But trust me, it’s a lot easier to be still and silent when your life depends on it; I’ve come to notice that. Little Timmy is crouched next to me. We call him Little Timmy because he is just eighteen, tall, and skinny, and that kind of awkward that can only describe a teenager. He likes to act brave, but we all do. However, I think we all know in our hearts that we are scared. Maybe we are scared that we won’t ever get to see the worried faces of our families again. Maybe we are scared that we will never get to live the lives we want to live. And maybe we are just scared that our bodies will be left, shot and dead, in this foreign land. Maybe that’s it; maybe we are scared that no one will care if we are left here to rot.*

*“Phewww” the sound of a bullet rushing through the air interrupts my thoughts. Just like that, a dozen more leap through the sky. It’s funny how quickly the world can turn to chaos. Now, people are running around and land mines are exploding every ten seconds or so. I imagine that if you didn’t know what was going on, and didn’t see the people falling to the ground, taking their last breaths, war would be a very beautiful thing. The bullets parading through the air, a mysterious edge to them and then the explosions, like all-powerful fire, dancing and twisting in the wind. But, I have been here for almost a year now, and I know the truth. War is not beautiful; it is not some noble fight, as all those politicians like to preach. It is evil, and that’s the truth. Soon, my muscles start to ache from being so still, so I look over at Little Timmy. The look on his face is not his usual one of bravery. It makes me very sad, and reminds me of home. It reminds me of Mama and Pops, and all those annoying older brothers that I love so dearly. Little Timmy is crying, and he looks like a little boy who has just learned how awful this world can be. His cheeks are red, and his big brown eyes ache of homesickness and fright. I remember him telling me once how he comes from a little town in Colorado, and how his parents are both dead. He has a little sister who is ten. Her name’s Grace, and he’s taken care of her for five years now. He told me how he worries about her everyday, and how she is staying with his cousin Fred while he fights here. I smile at Little Timmy and then look away, because I really need to focus right now.*

Woah, I jump up out of bed. The sound of a gunshot is lingering in my ears. Old age must really be getting to me because the world is still, quiet, and covered in night. I’m probably just imagining things again.

*Thirty seconds have passed and nothing has changed really, so I look over at Little Timmy again. He is lying on the ground, a red stain covering the majority of his tattered uniform. I’ve never been religious. I don’t know if I believe in God or not. But in this moment, I swear it is as if two hands are reaching down from the sky and so very delicately and softly, taking Timmy’s soul away with them. For a second or two I don’t notice the bullets or bombs or the smell of death in the air; for a moment the world is okay. But then the sounds of the bombs, and screams of the dying soldiers, are there again, and Little Timmy is just dead. He looks so out of place right there, lying dead in the dirt, with land mines exploding and bullets flying around him. I decide to wriggle my way over to him, and close each one of his eyes, because I can’t bear to look at them, all glossy and vacant. With his eyes closed he appears so young and peaceful. I can’t help but think of his sister who is waiting for her brother to come home. I put my head down, and I cry. I cry for Little Timmy, and I cry for his sister, and I cry for his parents. I cry because he wasn’t supposed to have his life taken from him, not here in Vietnam, at the age of eighteen anyway. I cry because his sister shouldn’t have had her brother stolen from her like this. I cry because there are countless others like Timmy who are getting their lives taken here everyday, and I wonder if it’s worth it. I don’t think it is. I don’t want my life to be snatched away like this. I cry because Timmy had no bad intentions, he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I cry because he was just a boy who got caught up in a fight that wasn’t his. And finally, I cry because I am the only one here who will cry for him; who will care that he is gone. I cannot just lay here in the dirt and cry though. I am here for a reason and I have a job to do. So I go back to my spot and crouch down again. With tears streaming down my cheeks I fire my gun towards the area where the bullet that stole Timmy’s life came from. Then, the world seems to shake, and with a bright flash, this world is gone.*

*The music slides off of the keys, glittering in the air and then descending into the ears of the audience. I like to think of the audience, all those people down there, with all their own stories. They watch me, breathing in the music I play. They are here for me, but I am also here for them. I know that most people play music and perform so that they can be heard, have a voice in the world, have people take in their music and have people like it. However, I have a different purpose. I play because there are all these feelings inside me; building up, bouncing around, and begging to be released. And it seems the only way I can let all these feelings go is through music. It’s like I came into this world with all these songs packaged up in my soul and I have to let them out. I have to give them to others and hope it will affect them. And if nothing more, make them feel something. I play music, because I need to, because it allows me to feel and to let others feel something too. It’s scary, sharing these pieces of me with others, and not knowing what they will think. But, the fact that they are absorbing my music is enough…I’d rather have them hate it than not care. So I close my eyes and continue on with the song I am playing. As my fingers touch the keys and release my song, it is as if hundreds of butterflies are whirling around in my stomach. They fly out of my lips as I sing and escape into the arms of the world. My fingers glide up and down this unfamiliar piano, and trace the steps to a dance they have known for years. I tilt my head back and revel in the beauty and liberty of this moment. I sway to the beautiful rhythm that has lived in my head for years and is now being given to the world. I fly and twirl as my song embeds itself in the heads of the audience. Now it is coming to the end of the song and as the melody retards and my voice lingers on the edge of a whisper, I lean over the piano, and let the last breaths of the song engulf me. I let myself feel all the fear, hurt, pain and loss I felt when I wrote this song. A feeling of vertigo falls onto my hands, and spreads through me. Then it is over, and the crowd of life-goers are on their feet, erupting in applause. The sound of their praise echoes through me, and I thank them, walking away; leaving an empty, black stage, brimming with ancient finesse and potential wonder.*

I slowly open my eyes, and turn onto my side. This bed I lay in is so damn uncomfortable. I really need to talk to the woman about getting me a new mattress. However, lying here I can see through the window that the world outside is still dark; it must still be night, or very early morning. Either way I am still tired and want to go back to sleep. There is this song stuck in my head though. I’m not sure where I have heard it; maybe on the radio station that the boy likes to play in his room. For some reason this song makes me want to remember, if only there was something I could remember. Well, I do want to go back to sleep. It would be much easier if this song wasn’t stuck in my head though. It wanders through my mind like a ghost. Oh well.

*Sand squeezes between my toes, and brushes the bottom of my rolled up, old jeans. Waves crash, heart-brokenly, and longingly against this barren infinite shore, an everlasting reminder of how small and unimportant I truly am. The moon bleaches everything with a white glow and I can feel the wind teasing my shaggy hair, beckoning the scarf around my neck to fly away with it. I like the beach. At least here I don’t notice the way my clothes and breath reek of whiskey. Here I am numb to the heroin still coursing through my veins. I walk on, the world spinning around me, everything a blur; the damp evening air suffocating me, chilling me from the inside out. Giggles stifle the empty serenity that I was getting used to and, what looks like, a group of young women stumbles into my sight. As they get closer I can tell there are four of them, however I only notice one. She has long wavy dark hair that she wears down, brushing along her back as she walks in the moonlight. Even from here, I can see the green of her eyes and the freckles scattered, like stars on a clear night, across her nose and cheeks. She opens her lips and in a heavy accent she says to her companions, “Do you see that man there? Does he look okay? I think he needs help.” I look around confused and in awe. It takes me almost a minute to realize that the man she is talking about is me. As I realize this, the stars start to spin and dance in the night sky, running in circles around the moon and planets. Water brushes my toes, and I lay down in the soft sand, just letting everything be. The salty water begins to inhale me, grabbing at my clothing and begging me to float into its depths. Drums are pounding around me, like footsteps, and suddenly there are faces above me.*

*“Is that?”*

*“Holy shit! It is.”*

*“It’s David Edwards!”*

*“I have all of his albums back at home.”*

*“Angela and I went to one of his concerts in San Francisco last year.”*

*“Wow, he’s even more handsome in person.”*

*“He looks a mess though.”*

*“Call 911.”*

*“Let’s just bring him home, haha, there’s a lot I would do to him.”*

*“Ew, come on Cathy.”*

*Again, the world starts to spin like, for once, it is revolving around me and only me. Black storms into my eyes like rain clouds on a summer day, and all I can see as the black grows and grows are two big green eyes staring down at me; a sea of stars scattered in between the yawning abyss of those captivating green eyes. And then there is the voice spinning and swelling in my head, “You are going to be okay.”*

“What?” I whisper into the darkness, trying to make sense of the voices echoing in my head, trying to untangle the mess that has become my mind. I have not slept well this night. What is this, the fourth time I’ve awoken? It must be this bed, it is very uncomfortable. I really need to talk to the woman about getting me a new mattress. The clock reads 4:17. I still have a couple hours of sleep.

*“Oh,” I whisper softly.*

*“Dad? Daddy, what is it?” Sam says.*

*“Just the rain in the sky son, just the rain.”*

*“What about the rain?”*

*“It is beautiful.”*

*“What does the rain look like?”*

*I smile and look down at Sam, my little seven-year-old boy. His eyes are closed; he likes to have his eyes closed. He says that no one can see with their eyes closed, no one. So if he closes his eyes then he can’t see simply because his eyes are shut to the world, not because he is blind.*

*“You want to know what the rain looks like?”*

*“Yes Daddy, please tell me.”*

*“Anything for you son, anything.”*

*“You know what drums sound like, right son?”*

*“Of course daddy, they sound like a thousand feet dancing, or a snake rattling, and sometimes the pitter patter of the sink dripping.”*

*“Very good son, so imagine all those sounds now. You have them in your head?”*

*“Yes daddy.”*

*“Good, now that is the sound of rain.”*

*“You know what it feels like in the shower, son?”*

*“Of course daddy, it feels like tears running down my face, or sweat on my back after gym class, or like how mommy splashes me sometimes when we go swimming.”*

*“Perfect. Now think of tears of joy running down your face while mommy’s splashing you in the swimming pool.”*

*“Okay daddy.”*

*“Good son, now that is what rain feels like.”*

*“You know what water smells like son?”*

*“No daddy, haha you’re silly, water doesn’t have a smell.”*

*“Maybe not, but rain does.”*

*“What does rain smell like daddy?”*

*“It smells like the earth, the dirt, the grass, the trees. It smells like clean slates, and new beginnings.”*

*“Really dad?”*

*“Really son.”*

*“And do you know what water tastes like son?”*

*“Of course!”*

*“Haha that’s what I thought son. Now picture water falling from the sky and catching the water on your tongue and you are free and happy. ”*

*“I am imagining it daddy.”*

*“That’s what the rain tastes like son.”*

*“It tastes like freedom and happiness?”*

*“It does.”*

*“But daddy I already knew most of this. I want to know what the rain looks like.”*

*“Son, the rain looks like the sound of drums. It looks likes the taste of freedom and happiness. It looks like the smell of the earth and the sky and new beginnings. And it looks like how it feels to be splashed in the swimming pool, it looks like tears running down your face.”*

*“I still don’t understand daddy.”*

*“Son, there are many beautiful things in life.”*

*“Beautiful looking things?”*

*“Sure, but there are also beautiful sounding things, beautiful smelling things, beautiful tasting things, and beautiful feeling things.”*

*“So what does this have to do with the rain daddy?”*

*“The rain is beautiful. But, if you take away the tapping beat of the rain, the smell of a fresh world that it brings, the taste of freedom and happiness on your tongue, and the feeling of water splashing on your head…rain is nothing more than water in the sky.”*

*“Water in the sky that I will never be able to see.”*

*“Sure, you can’t literally see the beauty of things son, but you can feel it, you can smell it, you can hear it, and you can taste it. Through these things you’re able to see the beauty that lies in the world. Do you know what I mean son?”*

*“Yes daddy. I think you mean that just cause I am blind, it does not mean I can’t see.”*

*“Exactly, son.”*

*I look down at Sam. His eyes are open. For the first time in three years, his eyes are open. “I’m done with being blind to the world, daddy.” he whispers. “Good son, good.” I know Sam can’t see, but I think he knows that I am smiling.*

I open my eyes. I can feel a smile perched on my lips; though from what, I have no idea. My back hurts. I really need to talk to the woman about getting me a new mattress. The patch of the world I can see through my window is filled with rain and clouds. Thunder bangs on my roof and lightning showers everything in light before leaving it dark and damp. *Creaaak,* my door opens, and the woman walks into my room. She has very green eyes, the kind of eyes you sort of fall into and can’t help but get lost in. She looks very old, probably in her early seventies, around the same age as me. Even with her old age though, the freckles scattered over her cheeks and nose are still apparent. You can tell she was beautiful as a young woman…she still carries some of that beauty with her. “Good morning, how’d you sleep last night?” she asks in a heavily accented voice.

“I can’t really remember, I need a new mattress though, this one hurts my back,” I reply.

“I know, you’ve told me about the mattress every day this week.” she says in the same accented voice.

“Oh sorry, I don’t remember that. May I ask, where you are from? Your accent is very interesting.” I can’t help but ask.

“You don’t remember?” she replies, seeming disappointed.

That’s when I notice the gold band on her left ring finger. It sits there, a reminder of everything I can’t remember. It’s funny cause the same reminder sits on my own left ring finger…what a coincidence. There is a sad look on her face, but I can tell she’s trying to hide it. I know her eyes well though, and they carry a despondent look that is waiting to pour out.

“I’m sorry, should I?”

“No, of course not, just history you know. I’m from Portugal actually, we met when I was attending university here.”

“Oh, fascinating. I really would like to visit Portugal someday.”

“Ha, you have.”

I try to recall what she’s talking about but can’t seem to. All I can say is, “Excuse me? ”

“Never mind,” she breathes, “I better be going to get your breakfast and check on Sam, he hasn’t been doing well lately.”

“Who’s Sam?” I inquire, sifting through my head for a clue to who he may be.

“Oh sorry, of course…he’s the boy, or man I should say.” she whispers, “He has been very sad lately.”

“Oh, of course, the boy. Tell him I hope he feels better soon.” I truly do hope he feels better, it must be hard not being able to see, and the boy has always been very kind to me.

“I will. In the meantime, Dr. Johns is going to come see you I will be back soon with your breakfast,” she says as she breezes out of my room.

“Hello David,” Dr. Johns rushes into the room with the machine.

“Hi doctor, how are you today?”

“I am very good, thanks for asking.”

“Of course.”

“So David, did you dream last night?”

“I think so, but I can’t remember doctor.”

“David, you know how special your condition is. You should be paying closer attention, journaling even. I’ve been telling you the same thing everyday, and you never listen.” I can tell that Doctor is disappointed, angry even.

“I do listen Doctor, I just forget. I am sorry, can you please repeat it again?”

“David, your case…your mind, it could lead to finding the cure.”

“I am sorry Doctor I can’t be of more help this morning. I just can’t remember what I dreamed about last night, if I dreamed at all.”

“Come on David, don’t be silly. Of course you dreamed.”

“You’re right, I just can’t seem to place what about.”

“Don’t you want to know your past, your history? Don’t you want to remember your wife, your kids?”

I close my eyes. This is always the hardest part, knowing that I had a life before my mind unwound itself, before my memories disappeared.

“I do Doctor, but I can’t.”

“You can. If you could just remember your dreams, than you could David.”

“I’m sorry Doctor but I don’t know what you are talking about, could you please explain again?”

“David, like I have said a million times, your condition is very special, hell I’ve never seen anything like it. Yes, you do have Alzheimer’s. However, when you dream, when you fall asleep, you are transported back, so to say. In your dreams all of your memories come flying back, it is like you are reliving all these moments that you can’t remember when you are awake. In your dreams, you can remember.”

What he says fascinates me, it confuses me, and it gives me hope. Before I can say anything though, Dr. Johns is plugging me into the machine. It shines and teases me with the power it holds over me. Buttons and cords litter its surface, making any chance of discovering how it works, completely impossible. Yet, it just sits there, this horrible monster that invades my everyday life, waiting to suck my memories away. To collect my memories for all those doctors to sift through, mistaking my life for some kind of experiment they can toy around with.

“I am sorry David, but this must be done, you know the drill. Don’t worry, you should be remembering again by tonight though. I truly am sorry.”

Blackness fills my mind, and before it eats me up completely I remember. I remember who the woman with the green eyes and accent is and why we have the same gold rings on our fingers. I remember the boy, Sam. My boy, and I remember the time when I taught him to see the world. I remember my mama, and daddy, and my brothers. I remember the places I have been, the people I have loved, the friends I have had, the tears I have cried, and the smiles that have lived on my face. My mind is clear and I can remember. But then, the moment is gone and all I can see, and hear, and feel is numbness. These moments fall away and everything is gone. My mind is a black hole.