

The Memory Thief

Some things are kinder to forget

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Chapter 1

Susan had been asleep for ten days. Raymond had never been happier.

He stood beside her bed with a clean towel over his arm. The dryer had warmed it nicely. He laid it across her chest and reached for the dial on her IV.

Today he would wake her. He had promised himself yesterday.

A little dried blood remained behind her ear. He dampened a cloth and worked it loose, careful not to disturb the bandages. Susan's mouth hung slightly open. Before the accident, he would have teased her about it. She would have denied it, then accused him of snoring.

He smiled. His hand returned to the dial.

For ten days, he had eaten his meals while they were hot. He had watched entire episodes of Jeopardy. Yesterday he had sat in the recliner for twenty minutes without turning on the television at all.

He looked at the incision beneath the edge of the gauze. Seven hours of surgery. A considerable trau-

ma, even for someone younger than Susan. There was no sense rushing her recovery.

He checked her pulse, straightened the towel, and stepped away.

She needed more time.

In the doorway, he remembered the towel would soon be cold. He went back and took it off her.

Chapter 2

Three months earlier, Susan had spat on her dinner.

Raymond stood beside the bed holding the tray. A little saliva glistened on the cheese of one mini pizza. The other appeared untouched.

"I'm not eating another thing from the damned microwave."

"I've drawn your bath."

"All these years and you haven't learned to cook a single thing." She turned toward the window. He had left the curtains closed again. "What do you do down there?"

"Research."

"On what?"

"You know what."

Susan pressed her palms into the mattress and shifted herself higher against the pillows. Beneath the blanket, her legs followed like luggage.

He set the tray down and reached to help.

"Leave me."

Raymond folded his hands. He had learned that almost anything he did could become the wrong thing halfway through doing it.

For years after the accident, she had called him her guardian angel. He brought her meals, bathed her, warmed the towels. When she apologized for the work, or the absence of physical intimacy, he waved it away. "It's nothing," he told her.

He hadn't known how long nothing could last.

"You don't sit with me anymore," she said.

"I can sit."

"Dammit, Ray. I want you to want to."

He pulled the chair closer. Susan watched him lower himself into it.

"I've missed half of Jeopardy," he said, hoping she would smile.

Instead, she shut her eyes.

"You should have pulled the plug."

"Don't say that."

"You glanced at your phone, drove us into a telephone pole, and now you won't even look at me."

He remembered rain against the passenger window. The pole coming toward him. His hand reaching for the dashboard.

No. The steering wheel. He had reached for the steering wheel.

Susan was crying. He offered her a tissue, but she pushed his hand away.

"Just go."

He carried the tray into the living room and took a bite from the little pizza she hadn't spat on.

On the television, a man in a red sweater was losing \$14,000.

"I'll take anatomy for \$1,000, Alex."

The Daily Double sounded. Raymond turned up the volume.

"A structure near the center of the brain essential to forming new memories."

"What is the hippocampus?"

Raymond stopped chewing.

He knew the answer, of course. He had operated on brains for thirty years. But he had been looking for the thing preventing Susan from walking. What if he should have been looking at the thing preventing her from recovering?

Every morning, she woke to the same accident. Every meal, every bath, every glance at her useless legs added to it. What if her brain was doing exactly what she had taught it to do?

He set the pizza down.

What if she could forget?

From the bedroom, Susan called, "Turn that noise off!"

Raymond switched off the television and went downstairs.

Chapter 3

Beckwood arrived the afternoon before the surgery.

Raymond had just finished unpacking the cranial mount. The delivery carton lay open in the hallway, beside a roll of gauze and the old bedside lamp.

Beckwood looked at the carton, then at him.

"You haven't answered my calls."

"We've been busy."

"May I see her?"

"She's resting."

"Then I'll wait." Beckwood took off his coat.

Raymond remained in the doorway. Behind him, Susan's television murmured through the bedroom wall.

"She's had a difficult day."

"I won't stay long."

There had been a time when Raymond would have welcomed him. He had called every specialist he knew after the accident, offered to pay for consultations, tests, anything. Beckwood had stayed involved longer than most. Eventually, though, even

he had begun saying things like “permanent” and “quality of life.”

Raymond had stopped asking his opinion.

“Come downstairs,” he said. “There’s something I’d like to show you.”

Beckwood glanced toward the bedroom but followed him to the basement steps. Raymond explained the procedure. He had rehearsed it often enough that it sounded almost routine.

Beckwood didn’t descend.

“Does she want this, Ray?”

“She needs it.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

From the bedroom came a thump. Susan had dropped something. Raymond recognized the sound of her water glass striking the rug.

“Ray?” Susan called.

Beckwood turned. Raymond moved ahead of him and stopped outside the bedroom door.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“I’d like to hear her say she understands what you’re proposing.”

“She gets confused.”

“Then we should help her understand.”

Raymond put his hand on the door. Beckwood stood close enough that he could smell the rain on his coat.

“Ask her tomorrow,” Raymond said.

“What happens tomorrow?”

He had answered too quickly. He could see Beckwood working it out.

"Nothing without her consent," he said. "You have my word."

Susan called again.

Beckwood took a card from his pocket and laid it on the hall table. "Have her call me. Tonight."

Raymond waited until the car pulled away before opening the bedroom door.

"Who was that?" Susan asked.

"Delivery guy."

He picked up her glass. "I'll get your dinner ready."

Chapter 4

Susan wanted to meet the doctor before they put her to sleep.

"Of course," Raymond said.

"You said he was coming this morning."

"He is."

The instruments were arranged beneath a clean sheet. Raymond had moved the television to make room for the monitoring equipment. Without it, Susan kept looking at the empty dresser.

"What time?"

"Soon."

He had told her an esteemed colleague was making a special trip. Someone willing to consider an approach the others had dismissed. That much was true. The approach had been dismissed. He had the emails.

"Is it Beckwood?"

"No."

"Then who?"

He checked the IV connection.

"Raymond." She caught his wrist. "Look at me."

He did.

"I want to speak to him."

Her grip was surprisingly strong. She had always had good hands. Before the accident, she used to cut his hair in the kitchen, turning his head with two fingers beneath his chin. Sometimes she would make him wait while she studied her work.

He laid his free hand over hers.

"I'm going to give you something to help you rest."

"No. Not until—"

Her fingers loosened. He held them a moment longer, then placed her hand on the blanket.

The surgery took seven hours.

He reminded himself, whenever he needed to, that she felt none of it. Losing her memories would spare her the accident, the years in bed, all that resentment. If his hypothesis proved correct, she might even walk again.

When she woke, he would introduce himself as her doctor. Later, he would show her their wedding photographs. They would take things slowly. She could fall in love with him again without having to forgive him first.

He preserved the extracted tissue in a glass container and carried it downstairs.

On his way back, he picked up Beckwood's card and put it in a drawer.

Chapter 5

On the eleventh morning, Raymond found something in the brain tissue that hadn't been there the night before.

He checked the instrument settings, cleaned the sensor, and ran the scan again. The same tiny deposits appeared among the neurons. He enlarged the image until they filled the screen.

Crystalline patterns, perfectly aligned—even with the gaps.

For ten days, electrical stimulation had kept the specimen active. Now the impulses were leaving something behind.

He spent the morning ruling out contamination. By noon, he had forgotten the potato in the microwave. By evening, he had begun to recognize patterns in the deposits—patterns that corresponded to the activity he had recorded before the extraction.

He leaned closer to the screen.

Actual memories. In particle form.

Upstairs, a monitor began to beep.

Raymond checked his watch. He had changed Susan's bag at seven. Or had that been yesterday?

He ran upstairs, replaced it, and checked her vitals. Her lips were dry. He dampened a cloth and passed it over them.

"You'll never believe what I've found."

He waited, smiling, before remembering she couldn't answer.

Downstairs, he began a list. Better imaging equipment. An updated digital interface. A way to preserve the tissue indefinitely. The numbers climbed well beyond what remained of their savings.

He turned the page and continued writing.

Chapter 6

Construction took eighteen months.

The crew excavated around the house, poured concrete, installed reinforced steel and pressurized air ducts. Raymond inspected every seam. In Susan's room, he had explained away the lack of sterility. In the laboratory, he made a contractor replace an entire section of ventilation because a joint didn't sit flush.

"This has to be right," he said.

A neighbor came. Raymond spoke to her on the porch with the door pulled nearly shut behind him.

"Is she improving?"

"We're making progress."

"I brought a casserole."

"That's very kind."

"Could I say hello?"

He shifted the dish into both hands. "We can't risk infection."

The neighbor looked past him. Raymond thanked her again and closed the door. The casserole went into the freezer beside three others.

By this point, their nest egg was gone. The instruments cost more than the facility. He wrote a program to siphon fractions from electronic transactions—amounts too small for anyone to miss, from companies large enough to absorb them.

He kept meticulous records. They would be repaid when his research became public. A man could hardly be accused of stealing if he intended to give back more than he took.

Silent investors. That was what they were.

When the laboratory was finished, he finally woke Susan.

She stared at him while he explained that she'd been in an accident. He brought her water. She thanked him, drank, and asked his name.

"Raymond."

"Are you my doctor?"

"Yes."

He sat with her for nearly an hour. She asked his name eleven times.

At first, he answered gently each time. Then he wrote it on a piece of paper and placed it on the blanket.

Chapter 7

The interface failed thirty-six times.

Raymond replaced the sensors, upgraded the software, and tested the connections until his fingers cramped. The particles produced signals. The screen remained blank.

He needed something the machine didn't have. Something living, capable of carrying the signals in a form the reader could interpret.

An optic nerve.

He stood in front of the bathroom mirror and pulled down his lower eyelid. It would be a sacrifice, certainly, but a worthwhile one. He could manage with one eye. The problem was finding someone to perform the extraction without asking why.

Carver? No. Too curious.

Beckwood? No. Too ethical.

You're too ethical, Ray. Think of how far ahead you'd be if you weren't so damn ethical.

He obtained an optic nerve from the medical college's cadaver lab. It failed. Preservatives had dam-

aged the tissue. He needed a fresh specimen, one he could oversee from extraction to connection.

Susan was reading the paper with his name on it when he entered the bedroom.

"Raymond," she said.

"Yes, dear."

"Did I write this?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

He took it from her. The page had softened where she had been folding and unfolding it.

He examined her left eye with a penlight. She followed the light obediently, then looked up at him.

"Are you my doctor?"

Does she want this, Ray?

Beckwood's voice was so clear that Raymond turned toward the door. For an instant, he remembered looking up at the man from a pillow. Beckwood leaning over him, waiting for an answer.

He rubbed his eyes. He had been working too long.

Susan touched his sleeve.

"Am I going home?"

"Soon," he said.

Chapter 8

He would stop the bleeding after he had secured the nerve.

Raymond held the container steady while the preservation unit accepted the specimen. A green light appeared. He waited for the seal to close, then looked at Susan.

Her left eye would never grant her sight again. It remained in its socket, which was something. From the other side of the bed, once the swelling went down, she might look no different.

He cleaned and bandaged the wound, checked the drip, and carried the container downstairs.

"Preparing connections," the AI announced. "Estimated time to completion: thirteen days, seven hours—"

"Fine," Raymond said.

He microwaved hamburger steak with scalloped potatoes and sat down for Jeopardy.

"The animal behaviorist who taught the world that chimpanzees were able to make tools."

"Who is Jane Goodall," he told the television.

From the bedroom came a crash.

He set his dinner on the side table. The propofol line must have come loose. He should have checked the connection again.

Susan had pulled herself upright and was unwinding the gauze.

"No, no. Leave that."

"Raymond?"

He stopped in the doorway.

"Raymond, help me."

She remembered his name.

He looked for the paper, then remembered he had taken it away, downstairs.

"What happened to me?" she asked.

"An accident."

"No." She clawed at the bandage. "What did you do?"

He hurried to the bed and caught her hands.

"Who am I?" he asked.

She stared at him.

"Tell me who I am."

"My husband. Ray, please—"

He put his hands on her shoulders but she pushed him away. A loose length of gauze caught on his sleeve, pulling the dressing from the wound. She screamed.

He pinned her shoulders while trying to reconnect the line. She fought him, fingers digging into his

forearm. He shouted at her to stop. His hand found her throat.

For several seconds, all he wanted was for her to be still.

When she finally was, he stood beside the bed, breathing hard. He checked her pulse. Twice.

Downstairs, he opened his notes and typed: Brief return of recognition following procedure.

He read it, then added: Promising.

Back upstairs, the house was quiet again.

His dinner was cold. He ate it anyway.

Jeopardy was over.

Chapter 9

Thirteen days later, Raymond sat in the basement and watched himself marry Susan through her own eye.

He was standing at the front of the church in a suit that didn't quite fit. Someone had told him to keep his hands at his sides. He kept clasping them in front of him instead.

On the screen, he smiled.

Raymond laughed aloud. He had forgotten that suit.

The memory vanished in a rush of birthday cakes, hotel rooms, rainy windows. He slowed the play-back. Their twenty-fifth anniversary trip to Europe filled the screen. There he was beside a fountain, holding two ice creams and looking annoyed.

He remembered the heat. Susan had wanted a photograph. He had wanted her to take one of the damned ice creams before it melted down his wrist.

He sat back, grinning. After all the blank screens, all the failures, there he was.

He called upstairs, "Susan!"

Then he remembered.

He returned to the birthday cake and isolated the blue candles. A few adjustments turned them red. He played the sequence again. Red candles, red wax on the icing, a little red stump pinched between someone's fingers.

He restored the original.

Blue again.

He was reaching for his notebook when the image jumped. For less than a second, a hospital ceiling filled the screen. A man leaned over him. Carver, wearing a mask.

Raymond stopped the playback.

He reversed it. The cake returned. He advanced it frame by frame. Candles. Icing. Susan's hand reaching for a knife.

No ceiling. No Carver.

He checked the source file. Perhaps one of Susan's hospital memories had been spliced into the sequence. Perhaps he had damaged something when he altered the candles.

He had seen Carver looking down at him.

At her, he corrected himself. At her.

He saved a fresh copy and shut down the display.

Chapter 10

Another problem. Without sound, he couldn't be certain of anything.

He had pictures without explanations. Susan had recognized him after the last procedure. Perhaps she had been trying to tell him something. Perhaps the answer was already in the memories, if he could only hear them.

He went upstairs and sat beside her bed.

Blood had dried in her hair. He had meant to wash it. Her head lay at an awkward angle against the pillow, reminding him of a doe he'd shot years ago with his buddy Fred.

He straightened her head.

"Only one more procedure, my dear."

For the interface he had designed, he needed tissue from deep within her right ear. He would have to remove the ear to reach it. The work took most of the day.

Halfway through, the doorbell rang.

Raymond stopped. It rang again. Then someone knocked, three firm blows.

"Ray?"

Beckwood.

He stood over Susan, an instrument in each hand. The suction hissed.

"I know you're home."

Raymond looked at the monitor. Her pulse had quickened. He waited for it to settle, but realized he was counting his own heartbeat.

He could put the instruments down. He could open the door. Beckwood would enter the room and see what had been done. There would be no explaining it away.

"Raymond."

He turned up the suction.

By the time he secured the specimen, the house was quiet again. He covered the wound and went to the front door.

Another card lay on the mat.

This time, he left it there.

Chapter 11

The first thing he heard was Susan laughing.

He had opened a memory from their anniversary trip. The fountain splashed behind him. On the screen, he held the ice creams away from his trousers.

"Take the picture," his younger self said.

"I'm trying."

"You're just standing there laughing."

"You look so pleased to be here," she said, laughing.

He remembered her smile—that teasing grin that swept away any frustration. He had forgotten how easily she used to laugh at him. How often he had deserved it.

He watched late into the night, jumping memory to memory. Their wedding. A kitchen they had rented before he finished his residency. Her parents at the dining table, her stepfather struggling to open a bottle of wine while Raymond offered advice nobody needed.

He went back further.

A hospital corridor. Susan's aunt held her against her coat. Someone said her dad hadn't suffered. Someone else asked whether there was anybody they should call.

Raymond reached for the dial, but let the memory run.

He knew the story. He had heard it often enough. He had never heard her make that sound.

Upstairs, Susan lay where he had left her.

He brought a basin and worked the dried blood from her hair. It took longer than he expected. Some had soaked into the pillowcase. He lifted her head to change it and saw the bedsore beneath her shoulder.

He set her down carefully.

The gauze came away in stiff layers. One eye stared without seeing. Where her right ear had been, the skin drew tight around his work.

He had looked at every part of her. He couldn't remember the last time he had studied her face.

Does she want this, Ray?

He sat on the edge of the bed. There was no answer he could give that he hadn't already used.

When he tried to touch her cheek, he saw the marks on her throat.

He went into the hall and picked up Beckwood's card.

The number was already saved in his phone. He didn't remember putting it there. His first call went

unanswered. He tried again and waited through the ringing until the voicemail began.

"It's Ray." His voice sounded small. He gave the address. "Susan needs help."

He looked toward the bedroom.

"I've hurt her. I thought—"

There was no way to finish that sentence.

"Please come."

He left the phone beside her and put a towel in the dryer. While it warmed, he changed the pillowcase and straightened the blanket over her legs. He would leave the dressings for Beckwood. He had done enough.

He laid the warm towel over her chest.

Downstairs, he lay on the lab table beside the morphine. Beckwood would know what to do. He would get her out of this house. Perhaps she would curse Raymond for the rest of her life. Perhaps she would remember nothing at all.

He had wanted to be her 'guardian angel' again. That was what she used to call him. He longed to hear her say it.

As the drug took hold, he remembered something he hadn't told Beckwood. He reached for the phone, but it was upstairs. He had left it with her.

Don't leave her alone, he thought.

Chapter 12

Susan stood up and switched off the bedside screen.

Raymond lay beneath a white blanket. His left eye was sightless. His right ear was gone. She loosened his fingers from the tubing and placed his hand on his chest.

On the trolley beside him, the machine finished saving its record.

She turned the dial back to the accident. The original, this time.

Rain struck the passenger window. Beside her, Raymond reached for the dashboard as she swiped a message from her lover, Dr. Carver, off her phone. The car left the pavement. The telephone pole struck Raymond's side.

She stopped before the impact. There was no reason to watch that again.

Carver would come for the equipment tonight. He knew which parts could be reused. The tissue they had taken from Raymond had served its pur-

pose, along with the memories they had removed, altered, and returned to him.

She advanced the recording.

Beckwood stood beside the bed, his coat wet from the rain. She had been explaining how little remained of Raymond's life. How much kinder it might be to let him go.

"Does he want this, Susan?"

The man had insisted on asking Raymond himself. He talked about rehabilitation, about the years they might still have together. Susan had looked at the bed and thought of emptying bags, changing sheets, and being thanked for it all. She thought of being called his 'guardian angel.' A term she despised.

Carver had understood when she said she couldn't.

She closed the file.

Her phone lit up. Two calls from Raymond. One message.

She looked at his phone on the pillow. Beckwood's name was still on the screen. Beneath it was the number she had substituted for his.

"It's Ray."

His voice came from her phone while his mouth remained open and still.

"Susan needs help."

She listened to the rest. The address was their old house, the one with the basement. He hadn't

been there in years. There had been no laboratory beneath it, no table he could climb onto. Only this room, his own drip within reach, and the memories she had given him.

"I've hurt her. I thought—"

From the corridor came the sound of a cart. Susan lowered the volume.

"Please come."

Even then, he had tried to get her help.

She deleted the message and put both phones away.

Before she went to find a nurse, she took the towel from his chest. It had gone cold.