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The Only Memorial You Can Ever Have

I know you have questions. The most pressing of those questions must be why I did it. I did it so you don't have to feel what I feel now, and this is so you understand. This is so you know what happened. I've learned there is an important difference between knowing and remembering, and though you will never have the memories of the past seven years, my hope is knowledge will be enough.

I remember everything, and it's difficult to express precisely what that means. It's like the past is a volume. I can wade in it. I can dive down deep. With each new memory, the surface rises like a tide that never stops coming in. And there are currents, bubbling, stirring.

There is a floor, a limit to my perfect recollection, and it's the morning I woke up with the Memorial Net implant in my head. I feel it like hands cradling my mind. It does exactly what the surgeon said it would. It holds every image and sound, every sensory detail, every thought and idea, and it allows me to access any moment since the procedure at will.

At first, I thought it was a miracle. When I awoke at the surgical center, Henry was there to tell me I was okay and that everything had gone well. He kissed me in the way that I knew he was taking nothing, only giving, and then he trotted into the hall to tell someone I was awake.

I can recall every detail of that room—the burgundy curtain accordioned at the door, the discharge checklist that included peeing on my own, the name *Grace* with a smiley face drawn on a white board to identify my nurse—but the most prominent for me is that, when Henry was gone, I still felt him, still felt his lips on mine. Not a tingle like you might imagine, but a pressure, the gentle squeeze of muscle and tissue, the scrape of his front teeth.

Henry returned with the surgeon. He asked how I felt, if I was experiencing any dizziness, disorientation, or confusion. I told him, when Henry left, I still felt like he was there, and the surgeon said that could happen with memories tied to strong emotions. He said my mind would adjust in time. He said all of my memories from that morning forward would be stored on the MemNet. I asked him if my memories from before would go to the implant as well, and he told me it stored data passed through my short-term memory, so while I would still be able to access my organic long-term memories, they would remain where they were.

Later that day, Henry drove me home. My father pulled me from the passenger seat and carried me into my own house like I was still his little girl. I sensed Henry's feelings of emasculation as my father told him to hold open doors. It was in the way he looked at me with a frown even though I had returned victorious. My mother called from the kitchen that she would send Henry along with my soup soon, and the scent of onions, parsley, and celery simmering in chicken broth comes to me even now.

My father's powerful arms tensed as he carried me through doorways, protecting my bandaged head, and laid me atop white bed sheets. Daylight sliced through the blinds and striped the floor where King slept, the German shepherd too old to do more than pant in greeting. *Rest*, my father said, a plea as well as a command, and left me with the door cracked.

When his boots thundered in the kitchen and the voices of my family echoed from the other end of the house, I crept across the creaky wood floor, out into the hallway, and into the nursery, where Sarah breathed softly in her crib. I watched her, blissfully still, safe, warm, and

then I snuck back to my bed where I dreamed everything in exact detail since my husband's lips until I stood above my daughter, and there, in that moment, I could drift for eternity.



When I woke the next morning, it was with a newfound determination to fill myself with memories. I felt like a drain that collected drops of time that were good and whole and piped them into a reservoir I could sip from without end.

Days passed with my mother in a chair at the foot of my bed, her insistence that I rest the only thing holding me there. I longed to open a window, escape into the world, and soak up all of the cosmos. Under guard, I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep while I recalled: creaky floor, darkened hallway, warm nursery, Sarah's soft breathing. Each time she cried, I would jerk, instincts driving my limbs to go to her, but my mother would pin me with her gaze as Henry hurried down the hall to our daughter. So, I returned: creaky floor, darkened hallway, warm nursery, Sarah's soft breathing.

Either my mother slept when I did, or she never slept. Sometimes, she leaned back with her eyes closed and her palm over her heart, but I knew she was awake because of the slight smile and the cadence of agreeable moans in response to my chatter, as if she were humming along with the tune of my voice.

Once, with her in one of these trances, I tired of talking and gazed outside, diving: creaky floor, darkened hallway, warm nursery, Sarah's soft breathing. While I was under, my fingers searched the bandages, traced the incision beneath, brushed the stubble surrounding it, my hair lopsided as if blasted by a wind gust or the shockwave of an explosion. And when I resurfaced, my mother was staring at me hard, her eyes red and glassy, her expression severe like I had done something wrong. She asked me if I wanted it to get infected.

I didn't see my father those days I was in bed, but my mother said he came to check on me while I slept. Sometimes I heard his and Henry's voices outside, conversing in language that volunteered nothing, as they worked together to reconnect a gutter's drainpipe. I heard them in the driveway, beneath the hood of our sedan. I heard them in the hall, greasing door hinges. I heard them in the kitchen, fixing the faucet that had loosened at its base. I heard them in the basement, shimmying out creaks in the floor. Other times, I heard only the TV in the living room, usually tuned to an innocuous sitcom with a laugh track, occasionally to the news.

When my mother declared me ready to join the family for dinner, I walked out of the bedroom with Henry's grip on my forearm. It felt like we were young again, like he was escorting me to prom. I asked him how I looked, and he said I looked very punk. I said maybe I should go to the bathroom first, and he said he would take me if I wanted but that I didn't have to hide. He said everyone understood why I got the MemNet. He said they didn't have to agree but that they would accept it.

My mother had slow-cooked chicken in barbecue sauce, grilled hamburgers, and baked macaroni and cheese, a combination of all of my favorite childhood foods. As Henry helped me into my chair at the dining room table, I asked if there would be a salad, and I waited as he and my mother dashed around the kitchen to piece one together.

When my mother set down the bubbling pot of barbecue sauce and shredded chicken in the center of the table, she announced dinner was ready, and my father lumbered in from the living room, pundit chatter rattling from the TV. He was cold as he sat across from me, bowed his head in prayer, and forked meat and macaroni into his mouth.

The monitor blared with Sarah's cries. She was calling for me. My mother gripped my shoulder to keep me in my chair because I wasn't supposed to do anything strenuous. Henry went to the refrigerator and removed some of the breast milk I'd stored. I knew we were running low because I'd counted the days, and I appreciated Henry's silence as he went to feed our daughter. My mother patted my arm and smiled. I think she understood how inadequate I felt to be unable to provide for Sarah, how it made me feel I was failing at something as a mother, and how agonizing it was knowing it was because of my decision to get the MemNet, a selfish need and unnecessary risk, they had said. A child needs their mother to provide and care for them, they had said. God, they had said, memorializes us all.

Across the table, my father chewed. He breathed hot through his nose. He gazed at the side of my head.



It was a sunny, warm Sunday when my parents left. My father hefted their bags into the bed of his truck. My mother wept for the first time, I realized, that she'd allowed me to see that week. She told me she loved me. She said they both did. She said it would just take my father some time. Then he called for her from an open door, the diesel engine's growl saturating and coloring his words without burying them.

They had a long drive ahead, he said. As my mother climbed into the passenger seat, I heard my father through the lowered window. He said they should have left earlier that morning because they were sure to hit traffic. He said there was always traffic between their house and ours.

As the tires ground the gravel at the end of our driveway and gripped the road, I waved while Sarah slept in Henry's arms.



Henry and I argued about whether to put Sarah in dresses. We argued about it more than you might think. I had found a persimmon dress with underlayers of tulle at the store, and there were shoes to go with it. I had to see her in them so I could remember her in them; I had to capture these moments. It didn't matter that the outfit cost us a decent night out. I didn't want a night out. It didn't matter that Sarah could not yet walk. All that mattered was I could see my daughter in that dress.

To Henry, how the dress would affect Sarah was all that mattered. He wanted her to choose femininity in time if that was what she wanted. I wanted her to choose God in time if that was what she wanted. He flinched at that, the crucifix swinging on its chain and tapping the inside of his shirt like a quickened heartbeat.

All Sarah wanted back then was her bottle, a plastic object she could teethe or shake, and our exuberantly deranged faces twisting and contorting at her as she lay on her back. When Henry pointed that out to me, all I could do was laugh, and he laughed right along with me, and that was all that mattered.

Of all the sounds I choose to hear again, that first giggle from Sarah as she fidgeted in her crib is the sweetest.



One morning, we found Sarah had rolled over on her own. Henry and I had missed it. We went to her crib and found her on her stomach, and my first response was panic because something was

different, which meant something was not right. I held my breath as I checked for hers, my cheek beneath her nose, and there it was, soft and steady on my skin, the whistling of exhalation in my ear.

When we realized she was okay, Henry and I hushed each other into the hall where we cheered quietly and looked at each other with wide, glassy, shimmering eyes like life, itself, had ignited under our watch.

We thought we were so brilliant.



You might think Sarah's first steps would be a memory I revisit, but I rarely do. They were magnificent, and they were terrifying, and they were tragic because Henry was not there to witness them. I considered concealing them from him with the hope he would be there for her second steps and that we would call them her first. I would have given that to him.

I wished, then, that I could share the memory with my husband, but it wasn't a picture or a video. I didn't want him to feel like he'd missed something important, like he'd failed at something as a father. But I couldn't share that memory with him, and that was how he felt when I told him, and that was when I started to question the implant's worth.

First steps don't matter anyway. All that matters is she continued and that Henry not only saw her walk, but also run.



It was during this time when Sarah was just becoming something resembling a person that my parents came to visit. My mother took my daughter and Henry into the kitchen, leaving me alone with my father and talking heads on the TV. I asked him how work was, and he said it was busy. He asked me if my employer had found a way to exploit my MemNet for their gain yet, if they were paying me more, and I told him that wasn't why I'd gotten it.

You have always known my father and I spoke to each other in orbit, always circling our issues and never colliding with them. I pointed out the tattoos on his arms and that he'd allowed my mother to take me to get my ears pierced when I was far too young. I brought up the fact that I had faked written consent and gotten my nose pierced when I was sixteen, and I had gotten my tattoo on my eighteenth birthday, and he had forgiven me for those things.

He told me, if it were up to him, things would have been different, but it wasn't his forgiveness I had to seek. He said it was God's. And he told me piercings and tattoos hadn't changed the person I was, and I remember precisely how he wouldn't look at me when he said those things.



We lost King on a cold November Saturday. He wandered from the backyard into the woods. He had guarded me during my recovery. He had sniffed Sarah's crib when, in panic, Henry and I discovered her on her stomach. Ready to spring into action on aging bones, he had watched Sarah's first steps. I knew he wouldn't have left us without a reason.

I dressed Sarah like a marshmallow and hoisted her into the carrier on Henry's back. The three of us set out, calling for him through cupped hands. My boots sank into the wet earth. A breeze blew through the forest, throwing my hair and exposing the side of my head. I pulled the

hat from my coat pocket and slipped it on tight. Flurries of yellow and burnt orange leaves tumbled around us.

Henry found King beneath a tall birch tree in a bed of damp leaves and sloughed bark. He'd pawed the fallen foliage into a pile, leaving a ring of black soil around him like a landing zone or liftoff pad. There, he had curled up, tail to snout, and died.

I had always said he would die in my arms, but I've been thankful he went off and did it on his own. I think having that memory would have driven me mad years ago.



In the days and weeks after King died, I dreamed about him. They were powerful visions that didn't fade when I woke. I can recall those dreams even now.

In one, I come home from the surgery and find muddy paw prints trailing down the hall and into our bedroom. They form a circle around King at the foot of our bed, and his coat shimmers like ice. His tail is curled and relaxed like a fallen flag. Daylight slips through the blinds and slashes his still body.

In another, Sarah cries from the nursery, and when Henry and I approach, I smell rot and decay. King's desiccated remains lie in the morning glow beside our daughter's crib. Henry scoops Sarah up and holds her to me like a trophy. He says she rolled over on her own. She is screaming.

In another, Sarah takes her first steps, and King's corpse stirs and rises and arches its back. I think he is ready to pounce.

I realize now these weren't dreams. They're memories.



There is a difference between knowing and remembering.

This is what I know about the best day of my life.

It was late spring. We had driven through the mountains to a cabin by a lake. The sunlight glittered on the water, and I watched it from a chair on the porch with Sarah sitting on my lap, her feet swinging and knocking the chair's hard, wooden frame. Henry said we should go out on the boat that was tied to the dock. I acknowledged him with a deep breath and hum.

Sarah climbed down from my lap and ran out into the grass to play with her monster trucks. I said we should go for a hike in the woods, and Henry agreed. But we sat there on the porch until Sarah stood in her filthy overalls and declared it time for ice cream, and instead of rejecting that idea, Henry went into the kitchen to get the cartons of chocolate and strawberry sorbet we'd bought at the grocery store the night before. He brought three bowls with spoons. Sarah climbed into his lap, and we sat there with nothing but the sound of the wind through the trees, the water lapping the boat down at the dock, and the clang of metal against ceramic.

Afterward, we went inside to watch cartoons, but we soon dozed and fell asleep, Sarah warming my chest in a way that radiated to every inch of my body.

She woke us with a persistent finger digging into our arms, saying she was hungry and had to go to the bathroom. Henry took her hand, guided her down the hall, and praised her for waking us as I stumbled into the kitchen to reheat chicken barbecue for sandwiches.

We returned to the porch to eat them, and when Sarah finished hers, she ran back out into the grass to play. Henry told her it would be time for her bath soon. While she played, Henry and I talked more about the things we should do while we were there, but we knew we would do none of those things because we didn't have to and it was nice to not have to do anything.

Henry said we could live that way for three hundred and seventy-five days, give or take, if we quit our jobs, sold our house, and started bleeding our savings. I asked if he'd considered we wouldn't have to pay for day care, and he told me that was about a hundred more days right there. When he started talking about digging into Sarah's college fund to gain another month, I told him we were considering the consumption of our future.

Later, we watched the sun set over the water while Sarah spun and twirled sparklers in the lawn between the cabin and the lake, humming about twinkling stars, and through sheer luck, I found the only comfortable position with Henry in a chair built for one.

For dinner, I baked my mother's macaroni and cheese, and Henry grilled hamburgers. After, he cleaned up while I bathed Sarah. We read two and a half books to her before she fell asleep, and we returned to the living room to watch a mediocre movie we otherwise might have watched only on an airplane.

That night, I slept in Henry's arms for the first time in as long as I could remember, and the fact that I couldn't remember meant it had been a long time.



This is what I remember about the best day of my life. No, not yet.



I sometimes think about the time Henry and I argued about the feelings of inadequacy my father gave him. I close my eyes and remember. I say those feelings were always there, and he says he feels he has to be stronger for me and Sarah, and I say he doesn't, and he says I don't realize I won't love him if he can't be stronger, and he says I don't know how much I value the masculinity he does have, and he bursts into flames before my eyes, his skin blackening and cracking, blood and pus pouring from seams and sizzling, the flames catching the furniture and the walls and the ceiling and taking the whole house, and I know that didn't happen but I remember it that way.



The most difficult part of my father dying was having to tell Sarah, because she was old enough to understand but, I hoped, not old enough to really remember. We sat on the edge of her twin-sized bed, a blanket of stars and planets beneath us, and she asked me if she would ever see him again. I didn't think so, but I told her maybe she would. Henry would later tell her, without question, she would, and we would fight about that. She asked me why her grandfather had to die, and I told her it was just a sad thing that happens. Henry would later tell her everything happens for a reason, and Sarah would ask what kind of person would want her grandfather to die. Henry and I didn't have to fight about that.

The day of the funeral, it wasn't raining, but there was the kind of fog that accumulated on our brows as we walked down the street. As we sat in the front-right pew at Saint James's, my mother pointed out precisely where she'd stood when I was baptized, exactly where she was when she was married, and then she held my hand. I thought about how she used to hold my hand often when I was a child, even into my teenage years, as we entered grocery stores and talked about boys or as we went to the movies and sat in silence. There were gaps in my

memories before the MemNet, but a kind of intuition held them together. Even when the specifics had evaporated, a sense of how it had felt remained, and I could imagine a kind of truth in spirit. In that moment, with those memories, I found myself overcome by love, not grief.

When the priest concluded his portion of the service, he said the family wanted to speak before he would open up for anyone else. My mother had planned to mount the lectern, but when the priest stepped aside and waited for her, she didn't move, and she whispered to me that she couldn't. I told her that was okay, and I stood in her place.

I talked about how big and strong my father's heart was, that it had failed him because he had given it to everyone else. I told the story of how, when I was twelve, a scary-looking homeless man had approached us in a parking lot, asking for money. My father had told him he wouldn't give him a dime but that the man could come eat lunch with us if he wanted. I said I'd learned about my father's kindness that day. I said people who really knew him understood his kindness but that he'd hidden it well, and that elicited laughter from everyone who really knew him.

I talked about my father coaching my softball team. I talked about the years during which he was mostly absent because he worked three jobs to ensure we could keep our house, the one my mother had always dreamed of, the only one I had known growing up, and the one in which he died. I talked about him building me a small castle with plywood and lumber in the backyard, and I talked about carving an igloo with him during the biggest snowstorm of my life.

Nothing I talked about was stored on my implant.

I was okay with my father's death. Really, I was. I was sad he was gone and we hadn't closed the rift between us, but I knew he had wanted only the best for me. And when I was finished talking, I felt like I had given a sense of that to everyone who had come that day. I felt like, even though they hadn't known him as I did, I was able to share him with them.

As I stepped down, I know I glanced into his open casket. I know he was there, lying peacefully. When I remember it now, he is chewing. He is chewing and his gray, cloudy eyes are open. Those eyes search for the side of my head where my hair has grown back in but, if parted just right, reveals a curved scar smooth as wax.



My mother came to live with us. She said she couldn't stand to stay in their home. She said everything she saw, everything she touched, reminded her of my father. I told her I understood that perfectly.

One day, when I picked Sarah up from the bus stop, I could tell she had been crying. It wasn't in her eyes. She was irritable and fussy and quick to anger. She wouldn't let me hold her hand as we crossed streets, and if I took it, she would jerk it away. When we got home, she dropped her backpack by the door and ran to her room, where she stayed curled up on her bed, silent.

I gave her time, and when I felt she'd had enough, I asked her if she wanted to talk. She shook her head, and I tried to guess why she was upset. Did something happen at school? Did someone do something to her? Did someone say something to her?

She told me a teacher had said she looked like a boy. She said the teacher said she should let her hair grow and that she should ask her parents for nicer clothes for a girl. She said the teacher told her she would be such a pretty girl if she tried a little. I asked her for the teacher's name, and she wouldn't tell me, but I knew who it was anyway.

Later, I went to my mother and cried because I understood the world was making decisions for Sarah. I told my mother I was going to go to the principal's office in the morning and would set the place on fire if I had to. She told me, when I was about Sarah's age, something similar had happened to me at school, and she had to take it all the way to the board. She said it was difficult but that it was the only way things were going to change. She said it takes only one person with conviction to fix corruption, and she was glad that lesson hadn't been lost on me. She said, if corruption couldn't be fixed, it had to be removed, ripped out if necessary.

It was then that I realized we were the same kind of mother.



I used to think about the future all the time. Even before we had Sarah, Henry and I knew each day would have a tomorrow with alluring possibilities, but beyond that, it was important to plan, to peer through the present and prepare for what was coming. Sarah defined our future. It was true that we led her through her life, but she was the vanguard of ours. I was so focused on cataloguing everything that I didn't, I couldn't, consider a future without her out in front.

Perfect recollection does nothing for foresight.



This is what I remember about the best day of my life.

It must be late autumn because the brown and black leaves flurry with the wind, and many of the trees are skeletons. It is the kind of wet that makes you think, if you step onto the grass, you might sink and suffocate. We drive through the mountains to the lake, over which a dense fog has settled, and it leaves thick sheets on the windshield to be wiped away. When we find the cabin, the interior holds the kind of cold the burning wood stove can't fix no matter how much we feed it.

Sarah says she wants to play outside. I'm concerned she'll get sick, but Henry tells me she'll be fine. I have this feeling she won't, but I relent.

In the mud, Sarah plays with her monster trucks. Her overalls are stained black to her chest, and her hands and face look like those of a coal miner. She molds mounds with the earth for her trucks. I'm trembling, and I can't stop. I turn to Henry, wondering if I can somehow squeeze beside him in his chair, and I find his face and hands are blackened, too. He smiles at me, and his teeth are impossibly white. I ask if he was playing with Sarah in the mud, and he says, *hmmm?*

Henry gazes toward the water. We can barely see the bank of the lake through the fog. There is a boat tied to a dock. It is sunk, only its gunwales and outboard motor visible. He says we should take it out, and I think he must be joking. Rain begins to fall, and I ask Sarah to come back in please. She doesn't move. Henry says maybe we should go for a hike. I tell Sarah to come back in now. She shoots up and declares it time for ice cream. Henry rises to go inside. He kisses me, and his lips taste like smoke that lingers. I don't remember thinking the coffee was burned, but I am so cold I ask him to bring me a hot mug and a towel to dry Sarah off.

She runs to me. She is dripping. She wraps her arms around me, and when she pulls away, she leaves a stain, an imprint, on my jeans.

Henry returns with a towel draped over his shoulder and three bowls. Chocolate for them, and strawberry sorbet for me. I stare at the mounds that are already melting even though the cold digs deeper into my bones. The strawberry is wrong. There are bits of black like Henry

scooped it with his muddy hands, or maybe he didn't rinse the scoop after using it for the chocolate. I decide that must be it and dig in because I don't want to be rude. I grind the grit between my molars, and no matter how many times I swallow, I can't rid myself of it.

We go inside, and Henry takes Sarah to change out of her overalls. They return, and she is in a blue dress, white tulle fluttering beneath her splayed skirt. We sit to watch cartoons, but there's only one channel, and it's playing an evangelical sermon. Sarah stares at it. I ask if we can listen to the radio instead, but Henry is asleep with his arms wrapped around me, and soon, Sarah is lying on her stomach, so still I worry she's not breathing until she rolls in fitful dreams.

The storm picks up. The fog encroaches, whiting out the windows. Thunder rumbles, and I can't sleep. I can only try to find the distance from the stove that keeps me from shivering but doesn't burn.

Hours pass like moments, and Sarah is jabbing my arm. *Ow*, I say, and recoil. She doesn't respond to my expression of hurt but says she's hungry and has to go to the bathroom. Henry wakes and takes her, praising her down the hallway. I go to the kitchen and make barbecue chicken sandwiches. The meat smells wrong. I detect onions, parsley, and celery. I decide it can't be spoiled because we just cooked it last night.

We take the sandwiches outside. The rain has stopped. King emerges from the wilderness and stares at us. He bares his teeth, his maw dripping. Sarah declares he is hungry and runs beyond my reaching grasp to offer him the last bites of her sandwich. She grips it in a fist. King releases his sneer, whimpers, and licks the sandwich from her hand until it falls onto the ground, and he devours it.

After Sarah finishes sharing her meal, she says she wants to play with her dog in the mud. I protest, but Henry says it will be time for her bath soon anyway. I ask about her dress. I say it's going to get dirty. He says she chose to wear it.

Henry sighs and says we can live this way forever. I say I don't want to. I say I can't. He says it's nice to not have to do anything. I say there is no future, only the past.

Later, the gray fog becomes a black shroud as the sun sets. We decide to make dinner. As Henry ignites the grill, the flames leap to his face, and his head bursts. The blaze descends his body like a curtain until he is a pillar. Through the fire, he grins at me, and he waves with a spatula.

Sarah takes his hand, catches, and I long for their embrace.



Does it make sense to you now? You wanted the Memorial Net to preserve the memory of your little girl, every wonderful moment, but there was an accident and pain no mother should have to endure. So, I'm going back to the surgeon who put it in your head. I have asked him to remove it. I know you will have no memory of the last seven years, but the doctor has assured me everything prior to the procedure will remain intact. If after reading this you still don't understand, I want you to consider that I know I'm erasing everything I am and everything I have become. I'm doing this knowing I'm returning my body to you. Ask yourself what would drive you to do such a thing, and then you might understand.

My mother will be there when you wake. She will look older to you, but she is what became of your mother. She will tell you where Henry and Sarah and your father are, she will show you pictures and videos, and then she will take care of you as she always has.

I know you will grieve for the years you can't remember and the future you have lost, but I hope you will find some comfort in the knowledge that, even though you can't remember, you were happy for a time. In the absence of memory, I hope you find solace if you try to imagine it.

Your little girl, curls bouncing as she twirls in twilight, sparks fountaining from her hands, her face beaming toward the heavens, and Henry by your side, holding you like he will never let go because you know he never will.

Just imagine it.