

Present Past

Memory...memory...memory...the word echoed in Tim's mind as he sat in the waiting room, looking at the generic furniture and fake plants, and the painting of swirling colors that didn't seem to swirl into any sort of meaning. The doctor had told him he suffered because of his memories. "Well Tim, you can look at it this way," Doctor Ingram had said, "your mind has processed these memories in a certain way, to be able to deal with them, and now they can be triggered by anything that reminds you of them. That explains your workplace incident."

The workplace incident. That's what everyone called it. The night before Tim had gone to his parents' house for dinner. His mother, her face emanating a mixture of disapproval and concern (eyes squinting, blinking quickly, but still with a hint of

that softness Tim used to see in them when he was a boy) had said, “you’re looking so much better since...since the incident.”

His father had glowered at him over a half-finished plate of chicken and peas, not saying anything for his mother’s sake; but still, judgment and disapproval came in waves across the dining room table. His father saw weakness in him. Too much emotion.

A few weeks after Tim came home from Iraq, he had burst into tears out of nowhere at the dinner table. He excused himself, and as he climbed the stairs to his room he overheard his father say to his mother, “how did I raise such a weak son?”

The workplace incident was the nail in the coffin of his father’s opinion of him. His father, a Vietnam veteran, who was proud of his service, who flung it in the face of anyone who said it had been an unjust war, who went to the shooting range once a week with members of the

VFW, who had a collection of guns stashed in his basement. Who, when he had walked into Tim's place for the first time, and saw the flowerpots overflowing with geraniums on the windowsill, the record collection that covered an entire living room wall, and the paints and easel set up near the window, had shaken his head and said, "next you'll be introducing me to your boyfriend."

But when Tim brought Rachel around to meet his parents, his father immediately made a crack about her weight. "I'm sure *she'll* enjoy the dinner your mother made tonight," he said, laughing.

That night Tim's father called him. "You know you can do better than her, right?"

"Dad, you don't get it."

"Oh yeah? What could I possibly not be getting?"

"She's a very kind girl. She's had some tough times, but she's doing the best she can."

“My son goes for an overweight fixer-upper. You went from Sandra, who had it all, to this one. What happened?”

“Things didn’t work with Sandra anymore since I came back.”

“You didn’t get your balls blown off in Iraq did you? Any red-blooded man would give his right arm to be with her.”

Tim had been silent. He would never tell his father what happened. That in the early morning there had been a loud, sharp, burst of thunder; he had jumped out of bed, grabbing for his gun. When Sandra came up behind him and put her hand on his shoulder, he turned around and pushed her. When he finally regained his bearings, he had looked at her, and he had known it was over.

The door opened, and there was Doctor Ingram, smiling and beckoning him into the office. Tim stood up and followed him into the small room filled with the same sort of furniture

that was in the waiting room, that looked like it came from some nameless office store. He sat on the couch and Doctor Ingram sat across from him on the dark leather chair.

“Tim, it’s good to see you. How were things this week?”

Tim shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable. He needed a drink. Why hadn’t he ever thought to get a hip flask? He could have gone into the bathroom and taken a long sip from his flask. That was something he needed to do, look into getting a flask.

“It was OK.”

Doctor Ingram nodded. “Any more incidents?”

“No, nothing.”

“What was it like going back?”

He remembered the humiliation of reentering the factory that morning, and the tense, uncomfortable atmosphere. He had kept his head down and left right after his shift.

He shrugged. "It was fine."

"I see."

Doctor Ingram's eyes were fixed on him. Tim looked down at the floor. After a moment of silence passed away, he looked up again and said, "it felt...it was uncomfortable. But I got through the day."

"You're a man of few words, I know that about you. But could you try and describe it more?"

"I knew everyone was staring at me. They had all talked about it. My buddy never came up to me, he just stood at his station, looking away. So, yeah, it was pretty awful. But this is what it is. This is what I have to deal with." He pointed to his head. "Something short circuited in there. So, here I am. Like you said, my memory. The memories."

"I don't think that's a helpful lens to see it through, do you?"

“Hey, why not? The vet comes home, he has a screw loose, he has incidents, his own father hates him. That pretty much sums it up.” He paused. “Look, I’m a realist. I don’t need to sugar coat it in all the jargon you use here. You know, how my brain did this to protect me. That it’s a natural thing. Anyone could have it. I know that’s not true. My father saw his best friend’s

brains get blown out in Vietnam. And he never had an incident.”

“That’s true. But it seems to me he dealt with it in a different way than you do.”

“Yeah I know.”

“Look at the way he treated you. You were always weak, you always had too many emotions. You were never manly enough, never good enough.”

“Yeah, so?”

Doctor Ingram scribbled onto his pad. “Is he why you went into the army?”

“It was all he ever talked about. I wanted to study painting.

But when I told him I was applying to art school he told me I was a homosexual for sure.”

“And are you?”

He shook his head. “No. I’ve always been attracted to women.”

“So you went into the military, and now you’re dealing with this PTSD.”

Tim closed his eyes and sighed. “Please, don’t call it that OK?”

“Why not?”

“It’s weak. It’s weak to have that.”

“Would it be weak to have a broken leg? Or a broken arm?”

“You don’t get it Doctor Ingram. Those things are real. A leg gets hit hard enough it breaks. This is something else. I can’t handle what happened, so my mind does this contortion, and

here I am, having incidents and being court ordered to come to therapy.”

“You know Tim, I don’t think the root of your issues is your military service. I think your military service exacerbated a problem that was already there, that started with your father.”

Tim’s breathing quickened, he couldn’t take in a full breath, his hands balled up into fists. He felt that he had to get out of there, get as far as possible from the session. “That’s how guys like you do it. It’s normal to cry. It’s normal for a man to be weak. It’s all normal. I bet the only thing you’ve ever done is sit at a desk, and the heaviest thing you’ve ever carried is a pencil.”

Doctor Ingram scribbled on his pad. “Tim, do you think your father disapproves of you?”

“Well that’s obvious isn’t it?”

“Please, answer the question.”

“Yes of course he does.”

“Have you ever contemplated his behavior towards you?
Who *he* is as a person?”

Tim thought with resentment of the judge, who had given him that condescending look and said, “no jail time. But you young man, need to get your head right. You are to attend mental health treatment approved by the court for six months.”

Tim sat back on the couch and looked down at his hands. A vision flashed into his mind; he had been holding a grenade in his shaking hand, waiting for the order to pull the pin out and throw. The same jolt of fear he had felt that day tore through him. He closed his eyes. He had to get focused on what Doctor Ingram was saying. “What is it that you want me to think about?”

“Your father. What kind of man is he?”

“He’s a man’s man.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean, how does he view the world?”

He thought about his father and how to answer that question. Unbidden and unwanted, a memory of one of the times his father had lost it when he was a kid invaded his consciousness.

Tim had been kneeling on the floor, looking up at his father's face, at his eyes: wide and blazing with anger, blind to anything beyond his seething rage. Tim remembered—he had spilled a jar of paint on the rug. “I don't think I can do this. I would rather have been sent to jail.”

“Take some deep breaths Tim.”

He breathed in and out. Doctor Ingram wrote on his pad. Tim could imagine what he was writing: this guy is demented, no hope for him, let's call it a day. Doctor Ingram looked up. He smiled. “You did some very good work today. I'll see you next week.”

Tim lay in his darkened bedroom, an empty bottle of whiskey on the nightstand. All he remembered about the end of the session was stumbling out of the office building, jumping into his truck, and then he was home.

He had opened the front door, taken the stairs two at a time up to the bedroom, and opened the closet door. On the top shelf, tucked underneath an old patchwork quilt, was his pistol. He stood, eyeing the faded patches of green and blue for a long time. Finally, he went down to the kitchen and opened the bottle of whiskey.

And now he had drunk enough to make the feelings bearable—no longer ripping through him like shrapnel from a grenade, tearing away at his insides. He thought of Rachel, that

way she had of smiling at him as he spoke; floating on the pleasant stream of whiskey he tried to lose himself in recollections of Rachel.

They walked slowly, holding hands, past the library and onto Main Street. As they walked on, in companionable silence, Tim was able to let the memories be there, and to mingle with other good memories, like the times he had spent at his grandmother's house in the summer. The peace he would feel, eating an afternoon snack at the dining room table, looking out onto the living room: bright sunshine streaming in through the large bay window, the clock ticking on the mantle, the faded painting of pink and white flowers in a crystal vase hanging on the wall. His grandmother would come in from the garden, take

off her worn gardening gloves, and sit across from him at the table, smiling. He would tell her about how he had spent the afternoon, and she would listen; he remembered that about her, she would really listen to him.

They passed the bakery, then the thrift shop. As they continued on they walked past parking meters, one after another, one after another. As they passed each one, Tim tried to pinpoint the moment he was looking at the parking meter in the present, and at what point, when he walked past it, it became a memory. But where was the division in his consciousness from present to past? It could be boiled down even into seconds. When one second passed it was now a memory, then the next; but that wasn't how people remembered things. They remembered in blocks of time, and when the scene changed or the emotions changed, it was catalogued in the mind as a memory. But was there anything objective about it?

If he went to a party, he considered the entire time he was at the party to be in his present moment. But actually, as each moment of the party passed away, it became a memory. Two minutes ago he had been talking to Jake, ten minutes ago to Rob; but when he thought back to it, his mind recorded the entire party as one memory, a memory that was now in the past.

“Oh, by the way,” said Rachel, stopping in front of the general store window, “I saw your father the other day.”

Tim’s feeling of peace was pierced through. “Oh really? Where?”

“He came into the library.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he looked through the magazines for a while, then he stood outside the front door and started talking to a woman, tall, pretty, long blonde hair. They talked for a long time. Then she left and he came back in and checked out a book on fishing.

When I handed it to him, he gave me this super sweet smile, and said, ‘you take care now sweetheart’.”

So that was why Sandra had called him. Tim had let it go to voicemail and he hadn’t listened to her message. Rachel’s eyes were fixed on him; he could tell she was curious. “Let’s get some coffee. I’m in the mood for a pick me up.” He pulled her across the street.

They stood in front of the counter, breathing in the rich, warm coffee smell. “What do you want?” asked Tim.

She looked over the menu, blushed a little bit and said, “that caramel macchiato looks really good.”

Tim smiled. “You got it.”

He got a plain drip coffee and they sat down at a table near the window. He watched Rachel sip her drink. She really was pretty. Her big brown eyes, that had that soft look to them, her beautiful smile—he couldn’t

deny that she was a pretty girl. And he really didn't mind the weight. Sure, it would have been ideal if she were hot, but she was the only thing in his life that gave him any peace. Her kindness was his only balm. "I have something to tell you."

Rachel turned her gaze from the window. "What is it?"

"That was Sandra who dad was talking to. He..." Tim looked away and ran his hand through his hair, "he, well, he thinks I should get back together with her." Rachel put her cup down and pushed it away from her.

"She called me, but I didn't pick up. She left a message, but I didn't listen to it."

"And when were you going to tell me this?"

"I was going to tell you. But actually, the truth is, it wasn't important to me so it kind of slipped my mind."

“Oh yeah right, you expect me to believe that? The supermodel you were with called you, she wants to get back together with you, and you don’t care?”

Tim stared at her. “What are you doing?”

“What am I doing? What are you doing? Let’s stop this whole charade you have going on here, OK? She broke up with you, you began slumming it with me, now she wants you back.”

A flash flood of anxiety rushed into Tim’s chest and stomach. A memory rose up, sudden and sharp—his commanding officer getting in his face and screaming, “get it together soldier!” Tim closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. The bar was a few blocks away, only a few blocks away. He opened his eyes again. “Rachel, don’t do this. You’re wrong. I don’t want to be with her anymore.”

“I know. Everyone wants the fat girl, right?”

“I need you to stop this. You don’t know what you’re doing to me.”

“I’ll make it very easy for you, OK? I’m leaving. And don’t call me.”

She got up, grabbed her purse and left. Tim followed her out onto the sidewalk. “Rachel, wait up. You’re being irrational. You need to listen.”

She stopped and turned around. “I’m irrational. Really? I knew it was too good to be true. The tall handsome guy asked me out. And I was dumb enough to think we could have something.”

“You know what, you’re being an ass.”

“Excuse me?”

His voice rose. “You heard me. An ass. A complete and total ass.”

“You’re the one who has his supermodel ex-girlfriend calling and doesn’t tell me. Your father obviously thinks she’s much more your caliber than I am.”

“Don’t bring him up!” Tim’s voice rolled out like a thunder clap. “Do not bring up my father!”

“And don’t you yell at me. Look at yourself, screaming in the street. People are staring.”

“And look at yourself. Obsessed with looks and hating yourself because of your weight.”

Rachel turned around and stormed away. He watched her go, his fists clenched, waves of anger and sadness rolling through him. The bar. The bar was open. That was the only thing he needed to know, the only thing he needed to think about.

It took three drinks to calm down; by the fourth Tim could breathe again and begin to think about what happened. Rachel was that insecure, that all he had to do was mention his ex and she broke up with him. It was true, Rachel could stand to lose about thirty pounds, but after the first few dates he hadn't noticed anymore. She was all he had, and she had run away from him.

A few more drinks and he left the bar and began walking home. It was a cool night; though the air was still crisp it had a warm undercurrent, and he could smell the sweet, far away scent of spring. He took in a deep breath of the cool, fresh air. Maybe he could get through to Rachel somehow. He had never seen her act that way before. All he had known was a calm, levelheaded girl, and so kind. That was what impressed him on their first date. He had told her he was a veteran, he had even hinted at the

workplace incident, and she had said, “I admire you so much for your service, and I can’t imagine what it cost you. I can’t imagine what it would be like to go through what you went through.”

He turned the corner and saw the shadowy outline of someone sitting on his porch. For a second he thought it could be his father, but he didn’t go out in the evening anymore. Feeling apprehensive, he ascended the steps; it was a woman, she turned—Sandra.

“What are you doing here?”

“Hi Tim.”

In spite of the alcohol, their last moment together came back. The way she had looked at him, as though he were the most contemptible thing she had ever seen. He had a few bottles of

whiskey under the sink. He would open one of those. He took out his key and opened the door.

“Come in.”

She followed him in, and he staggered into the kitchen.

“You want a drink?”

“No, I’m good. Do you really need another? You reek of alcohol.”

He pulled the bottle out from under the sink, took down a glass from the cabinet, filled it, then went back out to the living room. “So, what are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“Why don’t you turn on a light?”

He flipped the switch; soft light settled onto Sandra. Long, pin straight blonde hair fell down past her shoulders, and there were her beautiful, wide-set hazel eyes. Her dress, covered in

red flowers, draped over her body in such a way that it outlined her slender figure, showing her narrow waist leading down to curvy hips. Tim was silent for a moment, taking her in. She turned, went into the living room and sat down. Tim followed and sat opposite her.

“How have you been?” she asked.

“OK. You?”

“OK. I missed you.”

Tim raised his eyebrows and nodded his head, then took a long sip. The last thing she had said to him was, “I can’t make a life with an alcoholic with mental issues. I’m sorry.”

“Why? Do you want me to push you down again? Because I can do that.”

“Tim, stop it.”

“Hey, I still drink too much, I still have mental issues. Or as I prefer to say, I’m still as demented as ever. Probably more.”

“Stop being so hostile.” She paused. “Look, I talked to your father.”

“About what?”

“You. He explained to me about the ptsd, about how some vets develop it, but if they get help they can live a normal life again.”

“Regardless of what dad had to say, when you see certain things, you can never unsee them. So am I ever going to be the Tim you used to know? I’m not that person anymore and I never will be.”

“OK, but what I want to know is when are you going to stop feeling sorry for yourself? You think you’re the only person

who ever went to war? It's your excuse for drinking and staying the way you are. That's what it is."

Tim gulped down more whiskey. "An excuse. Right. Just a lame excuse. Look, there's something you don't know OK? You don't understand that I was never supposed to come home."

"What does that mean?"

Tim couldn't control the tears starting to well up. "It's just an excuse to you. You don't know anything."

"Tim. Tell me."

He looked at her, at those eyes flecked with green and gold that he had looked into so many times; he tried to tell her, but he was frozen. Then the anger began its familiar, insidious rise.

"Why? You won't understand anyway. Five years together, I come back, one thing goes wrong and you leave me. You'll never understand." His voice rose. "How can I go back to what I

was? How can I ever see the world the way I used to? I can never unsee it! Do you understand that?” He put his head back and downed the rest of the drink.

Sandra stood up and took the glass from his hands. “This isn’t going to help you.”

“You’re right. The only thing that will help is the revolver in my closet.”

She stared at him. “I’m going to have to call someone if you start talking like that.”

“Perfect. It would be so perfect if you do. You know, they can come and take me away, the crazy vet, but hey, that’s war, and then my father, who already hates me, can disown me. So yeah, go ahead and call.”

Sandra sighed and took the glass into the kitchen. When she returned it contained water.

“Here, drink this.”

He took the glass and set it down on the coffee table.

“Sandra, you and I were together in a different life. I was a different man.”

“Then it’s true. It’s that girl from the library.”

“Her name is Rachel.”

“Tim, come on. You can’t possibly go for her. She’s not your type at all.”

“People change.”

“You used to make fun of that fat girl in high school. Remember? Sarah the barrel you called her.”

“I was a jerk. What can I say?”

“Look, I’m sorry about what I said, OK? I was scared. It was scary to see you like that, to see how much you’d been drinking. But I’ve missed you. What we used to have before was so great. Don’t you miss it?”

Tim took in a deep breath and let her beauty wash over him again. “Yes, I miss it. You’re so beautiful. You’ve always been so beautiful.”

There was a knock on the front door. Tim looked up and saw brown hair through the window at the top of the door. Rachel.

“Aren’t you going to get it?” asked Sandra.

Tim didn’t answer. Another knock.

“Tim there’s someone at the door.” Sandra stared at him; she cocked her head. “Ahh, I think I know. Your girlfriend right?” She strode to the door and opened it. Rachel stood there, holding a white box of what Tim assumed was cookies or cake, looking at Sandra, eyes wide.

“I...uh...I...was going to bring this to Tim. But I see now that he’s busy.”

“That’s right, he’s busy. Look, Tim and I have a long history OK? We started dating in high school. You didn’t really think you guys had something for the long term, did you?” “To be honest with you, no I didn’t.”

“Smart girl.”

Rachel looked at Tim and held out the box. “Here. You might as well have these. I certainly don’t need them.” When Tim’s eyes met hers, the longing to rush into the kitchen to get another drink left him. He stood up, took a few strides towards her and took the box. “Thanks

Rachel. Let’s step out here for a minute.” He closed the door behind him and led her onto the porch.

He set the box on the porch swing, turned and put his hands on her shoulders. “Rachel all

I want you to do right now is listen. OK? Don't say anything.

Look. I don't get what went on with you this afternoon. I really don't. Up until then I thought you were level-headed. But whatever that was, all I know is seeing you just now took away my desire to drink. Sandra showed up here and waited for me on the porch. She said I'm feeling sorry for myself and that's why I drink. But she doesn't get it. She doesn't get that I shouldn't be here. I...I wasn't meant to come back."

"What do you mean? Of course you were meant to come back."

He looked at her, something in her eyes, he didn't know what, opened him: he wasn't frozen, the words began to pour out, he imagined his thoughts traveling through the air, arriving in the safe haven of Rachel's being.

As he spoke, he was transported back to that afternoon, the scorching sun beating down on him as he and seven other soldiers were on foot patrol. They passed a bombed-out building; a child who Tim had seen before, who he had given candy to a few times, stepped out from the doorway, smiling.

“Hey buddy.” Tim held out his fist for a fist pump. The child touched his fist to Tim’s, then looked up at him with expectant eyes. Tim reached into his pocket and found a piece of peppermint hard candy. “Here you go. Now you get on home, OK?” As the child scurried away, back into the building, Tim reshouldered his gun, he took a few steps—a tremendous noise, licks of fire reaching up to the sky, the bodies of his comrades obliterated at the end of the street.

Tim lost control of his muscles, movement was impossible, he stared at the grey cloud of smoke, that now enveloped a

friend he had been talking to minutes before: “yeah, so that’s how things were for me growing up next door to grandpa, or as everyone called him, crazy Zeke,” Jimmy had said, laughing. Tim had been laughing too, then they turned the corner, and then the child, and then the IED.

In that moment, standing on the ravaged street, Tim had been plunged into hell—cast into eternal damnation. Horror had sprung up before him, and a terrible fear, such as he had never known, cast its tentacles down into the deepest part of his being, as the knowledge of arbitrary cruelty opened up in his soul. In that moment who he had been died, and a new man emerged to take his place.

There was yelling; Tim couldn’t make out what anyone was saying. He stood, staring at the dissipating cloud of smoke. The yelling intensified until someone grabbed his shoulder. His

commanding officer screamed into his face: “Get it together soldier!”

Tim told Rachel all this, his eyes locked onto the huge old oak tree in front of the porch. When he finished, a silence descended. They stood, looking at each other. A car passed on the cross street, the whirr of the engine got fainter and disappeared. A breeze came up, rustling the leaves of the oak tree. Tears filled Rachel’s eyes; one of them rolled down her cheek. “Oh Tim...”

He pulled her towards him. He buried his face in her hair as sobs rose up in him, sobs that wracked his body, that came from somewhere inside himself that he didn’t want to feel, didn’t want to acknowledge, that he wished didn’t exist. But there was nothing he could do, he sobbed and shook.

He clung to her as the memory flooded his mind. He ran his hand over her soft hair. Her soft hair, that's what he needed to think about. That was here now. Rachel was still with him, she hadn't abandoned him. Over and over he felt her hair, until his sobbing began to subside.

He took in a long breath and looked over her head at the old oak tree. The shadowy leaves rustled; he thought about how he could paint them, which colors to use to create the leaves that were enshrouded in shadow, show them to be rustling in the cool breeze, the cool breeze laced with warmth, that contained the undercurrent of spring.

He took Rachel's hand and led her back
into the house.

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