

Song of Memory

Ellen Collins

“When I was younger, I could remember anything, whether it happened or not, but I’m getting old, and soon I shall remember only the latter.”

- Mark Twain

We have forgotten how to tie our shoes, how to button our sweaters, how to hold a fork. We have lost the ability to add a column of numbers, to trace a route on a map, to color inside of the lines, to sip through a straw. We no longer know the word for paper clip, toothbrush, Kleenex, pancake turner, eyelash, wrench, or tablecloth. We cannot laugh at your jokes. We cannot remember how to spread mustard on a hot dog, how to seal an envelope, how to tell time, how to light a candle, how to use toilet paper, how to walk without tripping.

We were Federal Reserve bankers, farmers plowing furrows for corn, mothers rocking feverish babies, chefs at four-star restaurants, and hash-slingers at diners. We sketched blueprints for houses and theme parks, pounded out the notes for symphonies and rock songs, handed out Kennedy Center programs and free car wash tickets. We marched silently over the bridge to Selma, picked lettuce and grapes in heat-baked California fields, smeared our fingers with late-night ink in newspaper offices, wore our smiling faces at the brass-handled doors of New York hotels, computed your taxes every April, diagnosed your diabetes and asthma and clogged arteries. We huddled in subway stations with all our possessions in broken down grocery carts, worked three jobs or no jobs, embezzled, invested, played the lottery, debated issues, signed petitions, shouted out the Jeopardy answers, shoveled sidewalks, cleaned carburetors, organized the PTA.

Locks confuse us now, and we are baffled by street sounds and folded napkins. Some of us get lost walking to the kitchen, the

bathroom, the back yard, the drugstore. We think of the Oakton Lions Christmas tree lot and know it is time to buy a tree, but the route is foggy in our heads and we don't know whether to turn left or right when we leave the house. We don't know if we drive there or walk or take a taxi or a bus. Everyplace looks the same and different at once, and the landmarks have blurred as if we are looking through rain-streaked glass. There was a barber shop here, a CVS, a shoe store, a movie theater, a Spanish bodega. Or was it over there? The barber was Hispanic or Asian or Italian or short or bald or walked with a limp or none of those. The checkbook we used just last week disappears and we ask Suntrust for new checks and then find the old ones in the refrigerator next to the broccoli. Our son/daughter/husband/wife/neighbor/best friend asks, "Why are you wearing your winter coat in June?"

In earlier days, we devoured the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, shaking our fists at the editorials, highlighting films to see or recipes for paella to try, cutting out the squares with the faces of friends who had died. It took all week to read the *Sunday Times*, and sections of it lay splayed on the dining room table until Friday when we bundled it up for recycling, saving only the book review so we could read the newest Ludlum or Patterson or Picoult. Each statistic mattered, each score, each job opportunity, each opinion, each full-page ad for sales at Macy's or Bloomingdale's or Wal-Mart.

We didn't tell you when it started, when we got lost walking around the block. We kept it a secret when we left the dog out all night and found her shaking by the back door in the morning. We didn't know what to tell her either, when she licked our fingers and wagged her tail and seemed so happy to see us. How could we have done this? We kept it to ourselves when we put the mail in the freezer under the bag of peas, when we baked the potholder, when we wrote lists we couldn't read. We hid those lists in drawers, in pockets, confused at the marks on the paper. We called the operator when our fingers hovered above the phone dial and would not land on the right number keys; we lied about the car not starting; we made up stories about what we had eaten for dinner. "Oh, it was

chicken/canned beef stew/macaroni and cheese/Waldorf salad.” Our plates had been empty because we had not known where to find the forks. How could we have told you this? Who, for God’s sake, cannot find a fork?

All these things were a portal into fear, and we were being sucked into places we could not recognize. Maybe you remember the nights we called you because we were in jail or stranded at a train station, and you tried to tell us we were safe in our beds. Maybe you were puzzled when you found the notebook with your phone number written on every tattered page. Maybe you were angry when we took all of our clothes out of the drawer, looking for that one book of stamps. We knew these things were shameful. We thought all of it would pass. We were terrified that it would not.

Memory seems like an ocean now, too big to see all at once. We grab at words (window, peach, elbow, rake) like we would grab at waves, and they wash through our fingers. We cannot keep it straight, all the coming and going, the cresting and falling, the speed of the tides. Everything makes noise, like three radios on at once, all on different stations. None of it makes sense. When our son/daughter/spouse/caregiver/neighbor says, “We’re going to walk to the park today and look at the ducks. Go to the kitchen and get some of that stale bread,” we hear, “Today we are going to bake bread.” And we start talking about the need for yeast and don’t understand when the other person says, “Mildred, just put your coat on.”

We belonged to softball teams, scout troops, and weekly gourmet groups. We were in book clubs where we read the latest edgy novels, investment clubs where we practiced with portfolios, country clubs where we swung squash and tennis rackets, bridge clubs where we struggled to learn duplicate, Toastmasters where we orated from podiums to a packed room. We were Elks and Lions and Soroptimists and Rotarians and Daughters of the American Revolution and crusaders for La Leche League. Our hands hemmed and ironed altar linens, rolled out cookies for wake services, counted collection offerings, held the chalice at

communion, welcomed strangers to Shabbat, strummed guitars, and pressed organ keys. We were the alphabet soup of AAUW, YMCA, YAF, MADD, AAW, IWW, SDS, PETA, NARW, SAS, GTC, FACS, NWHN, AA, and YCL. We looked like you and talked like you, and the changes were silent and subtle, one fragment at a time fuzzing at the edges, one splinter dissolving into dust.

And when the changes started, we learned to tell you stories, to shift the subject, to make excuses. We hid the dirty underwear in the bottom of the hamper, threw away the wet sheets, blamed the maid for breaking the candy dish we had put in the mailbox downtown. We said we needed new glasses when really the words on the page made no sense, no matter how strong the prescription. Words were not words; numbers were not numbers; all were indecipherable marks. We were afraid of what you might do if you knew. We were afraid you might not love us anymore.

Now, most afternoons in the day room of the nursing home, we stare at the aquarium and the television that sit side by side in the corner. The flash of the yellow and blue fish in the turquoise-tinted water looks much the same as the images that flicker on the screen. They are moving shapes with no names, but the constant circling, the shifting in and out of focus, brings some comfort. The rhythm of the fish is as familiar as the words of prayers we learned in childhood and cannot forget. We may not know the names of our children or how to lift a spoon to our mouths, but some things that have been lodged in our brains for 50/60/70/80 years hold as tight as the ore deep in rocks. *Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee* goldfish tails wiggle in the water, and they breathe tiny bubbles that float to the surface *blessed art thou among women and blessed is the* mouths open and close on the television where the sound has been turned low *fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary mother of God pray for us* turquoise and gold swirl and it seems as if the fish are smiling *sinner now and at the hour of our death* sometimes the watery light grows dim even when the sun is shining out in the courtyard *Amen.* ☪