

THE PERIL OF MEMORY

by Michael Ventura

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My memories are dangerous. Dangerous to myself, dangerous to others. If you have a look that jibes with one of my memories, I may like or dislike you without reason, and our lives may change because of that. One memory can stop me from an act that seems beneficial, while another goads me into trouble. My memories are both indelible and unstable. They appear unsummoned and disappear without warning. A fragrance, a color, a melody, can gladden or depress me. I can't escape my memories, but when one has departed I can rarely make it return. I can't, but a stranger's laugh can.

How much of my life is at the mercy of memories that seem forgotten, then are called up by an accident beyond my control? I get word a childhood friend has died. Haven't thought of him in 30 years, and might never have thought of him again. Yet by chance I hear he's dead, and my memory of him overwhelms me, and I am sad for a week. Where did he go, within me, all that time? What gives this memory the power to change my days so unexpectedly--I break appointments, drink too much, sit and stare out the window? But then the memory of him ignites an idea that makes an essay I'd been unable to finish (hence a paycheck I'd been unable to collect) suddenly clear, the words tumble out of me (and the rent will be paid), and all because a memory that had been hiding suddenly came out into the open.

At a party, I see a middle-aged woman patting the hair and kissing the cheek of a sleeping boy. She's drunk, her caresses are somehow inappropriate--not sexual, not really, yet they carry some sexual aura. I lean against the wall. I cannot speak. I cannot hear. A scream is deep inside me. It won't come out, but it echoes within, the echoes ricochet, strengthen, the scream inside is screaming, and I am helpless to stop it, helpless to act, and horribly silent. Someone else diverts the woman from the boy. I am shaken to my core. I suddenly hate myself more than I have ever hated. This loathing overwhelms me and won't go away. I'm a middle-aged man, I know myself, or think I do, what the devil is going on? These sensations don't abate. Days go by. Finally, I am almost taken by the hand, like a child, to a therapist. Two, three, sessions a week, for two years. Money I don't have, but spend anyway. Because that scream inside me is a memory, and my life has come to a standstill while that scream screams itself and will not stop. I learn to live with a memory that puts together the words "incest" and "mother." My God. That memory was hidden within for so long? My sexuality, my relationships, were haunted by that awful, silent, inner scream, and I didn't know?

Memory can kill, I learn during those years. Memory can kill love, kill hope, memories you don't even know you have. And one memory can change another. Both the sweet and horrid memories of my childhood mix (and must always have secretly mixed) with these hidden memories that have come forth, and now my past is different. The way I thought and spoke of it for years--I can't speak of it that way anymore, can't even say the word "mother" with the same voice anymore, I must find a new way of containing it all, even a new voice.

I'm not talking about "recovered" memory, i.e., memories suspected and searched for in some psychological probe. I wasn't searching, I didn't know there was anything to

search for. I was at a party, for chrissake. But something rose within me, drawn out by an accident, a drunk old woman, a seamy but harmless vignette at a party. And a relatively stable person (stable as far as artists go, at any rate) becomes a walking nervous breakdown for nearly four years, years that wound and shatter several bonds with lovers and friends that I once thought would last my lifetime. Because, suddenly, something was remembered.

My memories change. They contradict each other. The memory you have at 10 is not the same as the memory of the same person that you'll have at 20, at 50, at 80. At the age of 10, I had a father, but not really. Papa worked, but there wasn't any money, and then he was gone, and there really wasn't any money. There was welfare, illness, evictions, and terrible fear, and then children's homes, foster homes, Dickensian memories--some pathetic, some gruesome, some farcical, but no Papa anywhere. Well, tough luck; many could tell the same tale.

But then, years later, I am 27: A good and gentle man becomes my friend, he is my blood, he is the man I was named after, he is my father, and over the years we laugh and take drives and talk and argue, not a boy and a man, but a man and a man. As he gets older, he becomes somehow younger, and I am like his older brother, he asks me for advice, he confides in me. And the memory of that coward of my youth, a father in name only, shape-shifts with the memory of this friend of my manhood, who is the same man--but not really. Or I am not the same. Or something. But the memories eat at each other, while the man of the present sometimes changes places with the man of my past, and for moments I sometimes see the man I saw when I was 10, but then that passes and my friend returns, the same face but older. My memories collide in that face. And I can't decide which is right or wrong, which is "real," because in such situations reality is a matter of what you focus upon.

I remember my mother, so pretty when I was a boy, and how everyone laughed when I was five and promised to marry her. I remember her weeping when there was no money, I remember her sudden incandescence when she went mad, her seriousness, her humor, her brilliance. And then I am a young man, she is no longer pretty, the shock treatments and Thorazine take their toll, change her face and her heart, yet she still has those piercing dark eyes, and her fierceness now and again awakens. I still worship her. And then I am full grown and she is old, selfish, fanatic, withdrawn, a woman I have little to do with. And then a memory comes up because of that misplaced drunken caress at that party, the caress of a stranger, and all these mothers change for me, I reel from one to the other in my days, in my dreams, no memory of her stable, no memory of her bearable.

Then I speak to my brothers, I speak to my sister, of that very same woman, that very same man, our parents, and they don't know who I'm talking about. And I don't know who they're talking about. We speak and the room fills up with memories, and we can hardly see each other through those memories. The memories keep changing as the events that created them recede, and we have what? A shaky, tenuous present trying to come to terms with a past that becomes more obscure the more we compare our memories.

This memory says such-and-such happened; but if another memory is true, the first cannot have happened. Terrible family fights erupt. We stab each other with broken pieces of old mirrors, mirrors that somehow retain images from long ago, but don't retain them exactly, the images on the shards change even as we use them to lunge at one

another. What can be more frightening than this? Nobody's right, nobody's wrong, everybody's remembering--fighting to protect, or validate, or destroy, a memory. And to somehow twist the other's memory into ours. I don't speak to you because your memory of my father is different from mine. You don't speak to me because my memory of your mother is different from yours. But we are the same blood, they're the same parents.

The word "family" is a city of memory half in ruins, as though after a bombardment.

And the word "sleep" is an underground cavern of memory that no one (not Freud, not Jung, not anyone) has dependably mapped. I am afraid of sleep, and always have been. Because in my dreams my memories run about in disguise. My memories transform themselves and multiply. People and incidents from memory show up in my dreams and behave in new ways, and thus become new memories. Mama turns into a lizard, snaps at me, scurries up the wall with a hideous wriggling motion, then becomes Mama again, falls from the wall, hurts herself, begs for my help. I approach her in fear that she'll turn into a lizard again as I comfort her. On other nights there is always an alley and always a gang of boys--sometimes they are white, sometimes black, sometimes they let me pass, sometimes they chase me. Whether or not this dream is from an actual memory, I no longer remember; but the dream itself has become a memory--and it leads me down dark streets, exploring dangerous places, using my profession as an excuse, telling myself I'm a writer so I have to do this, putting my life in jeopardy in order to face my dreams.

And I think of James Baldwin's words: "My memory stammers, but my soul is a witness." Beyond these memories is something in me that watches them. It is not the "I" of these sentences. It is older, more whole. What has kept me from cracking completely is the sense that, when I crack, it does not. The word "soul" seems to describe it. A witness, Baldwin said, and a kind of guardian. It seems to want nothing but experience, to desire nothing but experience, and it seems to accept every experience with equanimity. When I can focus upon it, the contradictions of memory are not resolved but accepted, each for what it is, each for what it teaches. My soul tells me that memories are true and false, that nothing is ultimately known, but all things can be felt on their own terms, and on its terms, the fathomless and language-less inclusion of its vision. It needs no sleep, so it does not dream. It seems to wait. I don't know what it waits for, but I feel that I live in the protection of its waiting. And my soul's presence, too, becomes a memory--the only memory upon which, ultimately, I can depend.

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