

Memories Remade

— AN ESSAY BY —

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I am obsessed with memory. Perhaps the fixation began when my mother survived a sudden, seemingly undiagnosable fever that made her brain swell and scar and transform itself. She returned from the hospital the same in some ways, but changed in others. One of the things she had lost during the illness was much of her memory, something she talked about frequently over the years, sometimes with resignation, sometimes with humor, with sadness, with self-deprecation, and (rarely) with anger.

Despite this obsession, I have a terrible memory myself. As a result, I take pictures constantly. When I was in college, I spent long hours in the darkroom, developing film and printing images in the murky red light. Photographs are often associated with evidence, with documentation, with an accessibility to people and places and moments long since passed. They also can bring the dead to life; they collapse time and place; they trigger associations. They are subjective even when they claim objectivity. They are private and shared—not so different from how we experience memory.

After my mother returned from the hospital, we looked at photo albums together. She asked: Who is this, when was that? Selfishly, I thought, *There go my high school years. There go our summer vacations. There goes me.* I began to realize how much we rely on others to confirm our own past.

Many years after my mother's illness, I started writing *Remind Me Again What Happened*. I set out to write about the complexities of memory loss, the anger and resentment that come with it, the disorientation, the excitement of new (and renewed) discoveries, the self-doubt alongside the self-assertion. The result is not a novel about my mother's life, but it is a book that came from many of the conversations I had with her about her memory's "black hole," about the way photographs stood in for memories she no longer

possessed, about the way memories confirm or refute our sense of self, our identities over time.

In the novel, Claire's story echoes some of my mother's experiences, as Claire grapples with her own "black hole" and as she relies on others to know her past while simultaneously distrusting them with her history. Claire reflects many of the traits I admired in my mother — her determination, her stubborn resilience, her capacity for kindness and generosity, her intelligence, her dedication to her career. Like my mother and me, Claire fixates on photographs, taken and found, that she uses as proof of her own history. I layered photographs within Claire's chapters to emphasize the way she relies on them as evidence. She senses that her husband (Charlie), her best friend (Rachel), and her doctors often distrust her version of past events, so she sets out to create her own documentary archive.

Charlie and Rachel get turns telling their versions of the past and present too. Through their chapters, I tried to get at the frustration and sadness and loss that come when your memories cannot be confirmed. We know each other, in part, through the lenses of others, who reflect our experiences back at us through their own, subjective interpretations. When pieces go missing, we suddenly feel we are on shakier, less substantial ground. How can we blame someone for a past injury when she doesn't remember her own complicity? How can we prove someone once loved us when she can't remember a first kiss? How can we prove a betrayal? What are we hoping for when we ask someone to remember? Questions like these are at the heart of *Remind Me Again What Happened*. Did Charlie and Rachel betray Claire, or did she betray them? Can Claire's memory fog be trusted, or is she protecting herself from guilt and culpability, as Charlie believes? Whose version of the past can we trust?

My mother passed away seven years ago. Today, when I visit my father, we often sit over old photo albums that he has inherited from his parents and my mother's relatives. The albums are disorganized, and loose photos are always falling out of the pages. My father identifies the people and places; he constructs stories out of the images. His is the only voice in the room, and it is a confident voice, even when it grows quiet with nostalgia or sadness. There is no one else to confirm his narratives except the pictures themselves. Part fiction, part fact, part imagination, part interpretation. I trust that he

is telling me the truest version he knows. I trust that when he elaborates, or even makes things up, I am learning something about our family and about him and about myself. Through his stories, my mother is brought back into the room. His memories are absorbed into my own. They are always faulty, always unreliable, always subjective and fragmented. But the stories fuse, create layers, and grow more substantial, becoming something that can feel, at times, whole.