

THE MEMORY INDEX

a novel

JULIAN R. VACA



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Memory Index

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PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER 1986

Emilia Vanguard hadn't considered that she might die until Mr. Lear said so.

"You might die," he said conversationally, as one might remark about the turning of leaves in autumn. They walked in stride toward the massive hangar. It was dawn—the kind of cloudless, purply dawn that paints skylines in swaths of shadowy light—and Emilia thought she would very much like to avoid dying, if she could help it.

"Does that frighten you." His questions always seemed like statements, especially when he talked of life and death (which was quite often, times being what they were).

"No," Emilia answered, and her tone sounded like a shrug even though she hadn't shrugged.

"Of course not." He put a steady hand on her shoulder as they marched toward the row of cars in the hangar. "How could it. You're special."

There's that confounded word again. She rolled her eyes. *Special.*

Emilia wasn't special. She was just Emilia.

JULIAN R. VACA

And I would kindly thank you to remember that.

Now in the high-ceilinged hangar, they briskly walked toward a black '86 Audi Quattro at the center of the lineup. It was a beautiful specimen, unblemished by fingerprints or smudges of any kind; its black sheen was supremacy-like, a boastful proclamation to the rest of the sports cars that here lay—for all to behold—the Superior Vehicle.

Now that's special. Emilia clicked her tongue.

"Envelope's in the glove box," said Mr. Lear. He reached for the driver's-side door, but Emilia said thank you and opened it for herself. Once seated, she turned the key in the ignition and the vehicle growled, a great beast disturbed from hibernation and now hungry—starved, frothy at the mouth—for the road.

We'll get you there soon enough. Emilia wondered if this was how cowboys felt before mounting their stallions and riding across the desert, the sun bearing down on their leathery necks.

"You know your route, yes?"

"Yes," Emilia replied, shutting the door. She caressed the steering wheel reverently, familiarizing herself with the reins. Then she saluted Mr. Lear with two fingers, put the Quattro in drive, and shot out of the hangar and across the abandoned airfield. She watched Mr. Lear shrink in her rearview mirror until—like an extinguished afterimage—he was gone, poof, out of sight.

The sun was a half thumb at the horizon. One hour from now Emilia would reach the interstate, where her path would turn precipitous as it snaked through the mountain. There, Mr. Lear's words would finally catch up with her: *You might die.*



"She's a woman of few words," said Ashley Molaison, greeting Mr. Lear as he approached. They turned and stood, practically shoulder to shoulder, on the top floor of the empty air-traffic control tower

THE MEMORY INDEX

and watched as Emilia Vanguard sped off toward the horizon. As the sun continued its slow-burn ascent into the sky, Mr. Lear caught their reflection in the dusty glass.

He noted the streaks of gray in his brown hair, which had seemed to double since he last observed his reflection in a mirror. *I'm getting old.*

Ashley consulted her wristwatch. "The Transference is set to begin in ninety minutes."

"Yes." Mr. Lear sighed. When Emilia and her vehicle were completely out of sight, he turned from the view. *Godspeed, Special One.* "Everything's in motion."

"All we can do now is wait and pray." This would prove difficult, as Ashley did not possess a proclivity to waiting or praying.

"And drink tea." Mr. Lear flattened his tie as he walked over to the column at the center of the octagonal room. Here, beneath the hanging first-aid kit and portable defibrillator, was a small cart upon which sat an electric teakettle, two porcelain mugs, and a straight-sided glass jar containing several tea bags.

And one of those tea bags contained tiny yet effective traces of benzopint, a homemade concoction of Mr. Lear's own making.

It's for her own protection, Mr. Lear thought in a tired, desperate attempt to convince his conscience. Mr. Lear asked, his back to Ashley, "Have a cup with me, won't you?"

"I'm convinced you drink your weight in tea every day," she said in a good-natured tone, still gazing out the dirty, tinted windows of the control tower. She fingered her cognition wheel idly, tracing the tattoo on her right palm with her left pinky.

Mr. Lear prepped two cups. "There are only two basic tenets of Philip Lear, the first being: A day hasn't actually begun unless it's marked by a hot beverage. For some, that's coffee. For me, that's—"

"Lavender chamomile."

Mr. Lear joined Ashley at the windows and handed her one of the

two mugs. The other he raised toward the cigarette smoke–yellow ceiling tiles. “To Emilia Vanguard and the Transference.”

Ashley, too, raised her cup, the wispy steam dancing between them in the dawning light. “And to Joshua Cohen . . . may he receive the message and act.” *Before it’s too late*, she seemed to imply.

They both sipped their tea.

In minutes, Ashley Molaison would drift into a deep sleep. She would awake hours later to find herself in her apartment with no memory of the last twenty-four hours and only vague images in her mind of the previous two weeks. Depending on how much benzopint she had consumed, even those vague images would eventually be snuffed out, like a candle burned down to the base of its wick.

But, for now, the two continued sipping mutely.

What tragic irony, Mr. Lear reflected solemnly, that in the age of Memory Killer, I still need to take matters into my own hands and delete this poor girl’s memories.

It felt plain wrong.

The memories Mr. Lear was trying to erase from Ashley’s mind could possibly be recovered and then archived onto memory tapes for her to play back and remember. But it was a risk he *had* to take; paper trails, especially paper trails of the mind, had to be expunged where possible.

“What’s the other basic tenet of Philip Lear?” Ashley asked, clasping the warm mug at her chest.

Mr. Lear smiled, perhaps for the first time in days, and answered—knowing full well she would not recall this conversation: “That Arnold Schwarzenegger movies are the greatest of all the movies.”

She let out a soft chuckle. “I’ve not seen his movies. Where should I start?”

“He’s only starred in a few,” Mr. Lear replied, playing along, “but I’d start with *The Terminator*, a modern classic about a time-traveling soldier sent to the past to protect mankind’s only hope for salvation.”

THE MEMORY INDEX

"It sounds . . . epic. I'll have to remember to rent it," she said, hopelessly unaware she would *not* remember.

"Yes." Mr. Lear forced down the guilt that welled up in his throat and reminded himself that this was, after all, for Ashley's own protection. "You should."



Emilia clicked on the radio. "Rhymin' and Stealin'" by Beastie Boys came on.

She smiled and turned up the volume so loud that the plastic speaker encasings rattled in the car doors, the rearview mirror shook, and her bones vibrated. It was like she had her own personal earthquake inside the cab of the Quattro, looping continuously. She absorbed the noise, rapt with wonder and determination.

She needed Earthquake Loop in the sort of all-consuming, life-giving way that Fish needs water.

No, Emilia thought, *like Bird needs air.*

She sped up and passed an eighteen-wheeler on the narrow highway. On the shoulder, a sign indicated that Interstate 24W was up ahead. Two miles. Almost go time.

Stay sharp. Emilia soaked up the blaring rap music. *Be sharp.*

Emilia slammed her foot on the gas and crested the uneven onramp. Interstate 24W reached out before her—a long, concrete frontier that narrowed to its vanishing point with innumerable skyscraping trees on each side. A few cars and SUVs rode the interstate already, morning commuters. Early birds trying to get the worms, as it were.

Emilia prayed none of them would get seriously hurt.

With flagrant disregard for blinker etiquette, she swerved in front of a shuttle van and sped across two lanes toward the passing lane, inciting a barrage of angry honks. She gripped the steering

JULIAN R. VACA

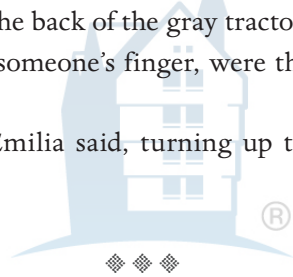
wheel, the taut leather squeaking beneath her sweaty fingers. Her eyes darted from the interstate to the rearview mirror then back to the interstate a few times, as if trying to spy some phantom pursuer.

Seventy miles per hour.

Eighty miles per hour.

At ninety, she closed in on a white Toyota 4Runner in the passing lane. The driver remained put, annoying Emilia greatly. Yet rather than honk or flash her headlights, she checked her blind spot and then jerked out of the passing lane. She flew past the SUV just as the sun appeared over the tree line, just as the faint sound of police sirens rang out in the distance, *just* as the semitruck with the red cab came into view. On the back of the gray tractor-trailer, written into the dust and grit by someone's finger, were the sloppy words, "To Forget Is to Die."

"Here we go," Emilia said, turning up the music in her cab even more.



Milo Pruitt had driven tractor-trailer trucks (without incident, he'd proudly say) his entire adult life. No parking violations. No speeding tickets. No accidents. In fact, his was a life fraught with many nos: no friends, no hobbies, a no-frills existence with no events of real importance.

That all changed that November morning.

Interstate 24W was awash in the magic glowing light of sunrise. There wasn't a cloud in the sky; the cool, crisp air legally guaranteed a fair-weather day—the kind of wonderfully perfect day that gracefully straddles summer and autumn.

Milo hunched over the wide steering wheel, adjusted his posture, then glanced at his side mirror. In the middle lane, a black Audi Quattro approached at an alarming speed.

THE MEMORY INDEX

That was Milo's cue.

He sucked in a deep breath through his nose. He pictured the briefcase of cash that had been promised to him by the Man Who Smelled Like Lavender—the man in the paisley tie who'd approached him last week. How and why he'd selected Milo was still a mystery, though Milo was willing to leave it unsolved. The sum of money awaiting him on the other side of this was . . . well . . . it was enough to make Milo Pruitt—a man plagued by nos—say yes.

He exhaled.

He winked at the Dale Earnhardt bobblehead mounted to his dash.

He pulled the steering wheel hard left and slammed on the brakes.

The lumbering semi jackknifed, sliding across all three lanes while it folded in on itself.

Rubber burned against asphalt; rancid smoke filled the cab and rose in the air outside the semi in foglike plumes.

And the black sports car deftly dodged Milo Pruitt and his tractor-trailer truck a fraction of a second before chaos ensued.

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Emilia quickly took to the left shoulder of the interstate in anticipation of the semitruck's maneuver. Whoever Mr. Lear had hired did their part with marvelous skill. In fact, the truck driver actually managed to steer the massive vehicle as it slid across the interstate.

Then the cab and tractor-trailer toppled. Cars screeched to wild halts. Horns honked. A cacophony of metallic crashes, booming collisions, and shattering glass resounded.

In total, only six seconds had elapsed.

Emilia shouted and laughed, her heart threatening to burst like an overblown balloon. She glanced at the rearview mirror: traffic was

completely stalled behind the great fallen beast. Tendrils of smoke began to rise in the blue sky.

Pedal to the floor, she accelerated, passing a sign that warned of a steep grade and another that read BEWARE FALLING ROCKS.



Miraculously, she encountered no other drivers. Twice she almost swerved out of control as she barreled around the sharp bends. But she managed to right the Quattro and maintain control each time, her tongue clamped between her front teeth.

Mere minutes after she left the semitruck behind, the helicopter came into view, swooping down near the craggy cliffside up ahead.

Nice of you to show up. Emilia allowed her body to go slightly lax. *And just in the nick of—*

Colorful, flashing lights caught her eye in the side mirror: a small fleet of highway patrol vehicles were closing in on her, as if they'd appeared out of thin air.

Emilia swore.

Wild-eyed, she kept her foot on the pedal and pushed the Quattro to its limits. The next bend in the interstate was a sharp one—nearly a switchback—but Emilia didn't slow down as she approached.

C'mon, c'mon . . .

She checked her side mirrors again: it was working. She was managing to open the gap between herself and the highway patrol. In truth, she was only buying herself seconds, but seconds were a precious commodity, and right now Emilia Vanguard was in the business of buying seconds.

Here came the hairpin.

Emilia eased off the gas at the last second and compensated with the brake, pulling back on the steering and gliding around the sharp turn. She only narrowly missed the railing on the left side and the

THE MEMORY INDEX

nightmare-inducing drop-off and the acres of treetops beyond. As Emilia came out of the bend, she exhaled—morning sunlight coloring her in a warm orange glow.

She merged right, sliding off the interstate and onto a slim shoulder, where she ground to an abrupt halt. She put the Quattro in park, yanked open the glove box, and snagged the envelope. With the car still running, she leapt out the passenger door, stuffed the message into her back pocket, and began to climb the side of the cliff—hand over hand.

A sudden, loud whirring of helicopter blades tousled Emilia's deep brown hair. She was halfway up the cliff, nearly twenty feet above the interstate, and did not look down once.

The highway patrol finally arrived, encasing the Audi Quattro in a semicircle and demanding—through loudspeakers—that the driver show themselves, put their hands on their head, and all that business.

The helicopter's loud rotor blades drew their attention upward, and the officer in charge would later describe the scene thus: A midtwenties woman in a dark T-shirt and gray pants scaled the side of the cliff toward a rope ladder that hung out of the cabin of an unmarked helicopter. The woman pushed herself off the side of the cliff and leapt toward the rope ladder, only barely catching one of the rungs, and hauled herself up as the helicopter flew toward the horizon.

Highway patrol never identified the woman, and the reason for her reckless stunt confounded them. The vehicle, purchased anonymously secondhand and unregistered, was not stolen. Nor was any contraband discovered in the trunk. So why the daring, theatrical escape?

JULIAN R. VACA

The patrolmen who filed the report had no substantial theories,
and so the event remained a mystery.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

1



FREYA IZQUIERDO



AUGUST 1987

NINE MONTHS LATER

THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798

Before, people said their biggest fear was dying. Today, we die before we're actually dead, when all our memories are consumed by Memory Killer.

Now—in this great apocalyptic now—many say their biggest fear is either forgetting or being forgotten. *To forget is to die*, some have elegantly said. *To be forgotten is to be killed*. Or, as my dad once put it, “*Olvidar es la muerte*.”

Poetic, right?

And look, I get it. I *really* do. Memory Killer is an enigmatic plague that has loomed over the globe for nearly a decade, slowly and methodically collapsing economies, crippling world governments,

poisoning society, confounding medical scientists, and so on and so forth.

Pretty scary stuff.

Even in the face of all this uncertainty, we still get to make some choices. And I've made mine: I'm not going to expend energy on being afraid.

I've got too much work to do.

Like breaking and entering.



"It's two more streets up," I tell my foster sister from the back seat of our stolen car. "Then take a right."

I should reword that: It's not *stolen*, it's *borrowed*. We *borrowed* our foster parents' car—an acid-green clunker that no one has any business driving much less borrowing or stealing. But beggars can't be choosers, so here we are.

"This is grand theft auto," Nicole says dryly. "If we get caught, we're dead." My bespectacled foster sister is a hopeless alarmist. She also has a driver's license that *isn't* revoked, so here we are. She pushes up her square glasses and eyes me through the rearview mirror disappointedly. "Not to mention we're minors, out in the city without a handler. Do permanent records mean nothing to you, Freya?"

"I've forgotten . . . what are those again?"

Nicole blinks. "That's not funny. Memory loss is *not* funny, Freya."

I was really hoping Nicole would have gotten this out of her system at the house when I initially asked her to be my driver.

A *hopelessly* persistent *alarmist*. I smile to myself wryly.

"All you have to do is circle the block five times." I grab my heavy rucksack from the floor and set it on my lap. "I'll be in and out in ten minutes, tops."

THE MEMORY INDEX

“I cannot believe I agreed to this.” She heaves a weighty sigh. “María”—one half of our foster parents, a high-energy middle-aged woman with a penchant for serious talks of the future, *fútbol*, and votive candles—“Is gonna kill us if we’re caught.”

“Which is why we *won’t* get caught,” I say breezily. “There. Pull over by that dumpster.”

After the car rolls to a stop on Fifty-Third, Nicole turns on the hazards and I clamber outside. The sun-kissed, graffitied buildings cast long shadows across the broken sidewalk. Overhead, the streetlights switch from yellow to blue, flickering two times in programmed synchronization with each other, before returning to their original warm glow.

It’s the citywide curfew warning. I set an alarm on my wristwatch as Nicole rolls down the passenger window.

“Is the paint dry?” she asks, gesturing toward my right hand. I nod and flash her my palm. I have altered my cognition wheel—a tattoo that every sixteen-year-old gets after they’re scanned by a MeReader (or memory reader)—from a two-quarter mark to a three-quarter mark. Clockwise, the first quarter is inked a beige-yellow, the second a beige-orange, the third a beige-red, and the fourth quarter is blank—leaving a quadrant of my skin visible. If a cop stops me on the street and asks to see my wheel, the fake ID should convince him or her that I’m a recollector—a blessed individual who can remember up to three-quarters of their memories and only has to use artificial recall once a day.

In other words, a privileged person who can be out past curfew without a handler.

The risk I face (or one of them, anyway) is that not many recollectors would be caught dead in this degen-infested part of Long Beach. Degenerates, or “degens,” are those who can only recall up to half of their memories on their own and need the aid of artificial recall for the rest. They’re branded with a two-quarter mark and must

be accompanied by a handler (essentially hospice workers, many of whom are sixteen- and seventeen-year-old recollectors earning community service credits) on every basic errand imaginable.

It's some pretty Orwellian stuff.

"What happens if . . ." Nicole says, trailing off. "What happens if you have another spell?"

"We can't worry about what we can't control."

Nicole deadpans, "You're so wise."

"And you're holding me up!" I lightly tap the roof of the car with my fist. "*Sal de aquí!*" She shakes her head, mumbles something about needing a pocket Spanish translator, then reluctantly puts the car in drive. As she merges back into the flow of city traffic, I fling the rucksack on my back and march forward into the crowd.

It's just around the corner. Adrenaline courses through my veins.

I only walk a few steps across the busy downtown sidewalk before pondering Nicole's words. *What happens if you have another spell?*

Here's the thing: I dream in half memories when I'm awake.

I know, I know—it sounds crazy. But these fragmentary visions from my past, these broken scenes of long-since-gone days, visit me frequently and unexpectedly. It's a nauseating experience. One second I'm walking to class or killing time in the library, minding my own business, just trying to get through another insipid day, and the next thing I know I'm blinded by some powerful headache. Then there's this flash of me on the Belmont Veterans Memorial Pier at dusk. I'm laughing hysterically, trying to stay balanced on my roller skates but having little success, awkwardly gliding through a gaggle of annoyed people and squawking seagulls. Someone—who's also laughing, their voice muffled in the throng—trails behind me in the

THE MEMORY INDEX

almost-twilight, cheering on my childlike efforts while “Lovely Day” by Bill Withers plays over the loudspeakers on the pier.

Before I can remember who I’m with on the pier, the half memory is gone, just a sloppy, unfinished painting in a gallery, and then my headache intensifies—flecks of splotchy light dancing around my periphery.

The school nurse is troubled by my “half-memory dreams.” He once told me it sounds unnatural, that it could be a strange side effect of artificial recall.

He warned me to speak of my half-memory dreams to no one.

“In a fear-based society like ours, where your inability to remember decides your fate,” he said, checking my eyes with a small flashlight, “having inexplicable flashbacks like the ones you’ve described could get you committed to the Fold.”

Great, I remember thinking, *should’ve kept my big mouth shut*. The Fold are controversial “hospitals” located all over the country that are privately funded and shrouded in mystery. The kind of places to avoid like the Bubonic Plague.

The nurse, who noticed that I started to panic, softened his face and changed the subject. “Have you found yourself misremembering things, like important dates or class assignments?”

I shook my head and told him no. Although, even if I *was* misremembering stuff, I wouldn’t tell a soul. Misremembering could be an early sign that artificial recall isn’t working anymore, and it will almost certainly land you in the Fold quicker than you can pluck a forget-me-not.

“I’m sure it’ll sort itself out, Freya,” he said, handing me two painkillers in a paper cup. “Just because I’ve never heard of half-memory dreams doesn’t mean it’s abnormal.”

But I feel abnormal, especially when those half-memory dreams turn into nightmares.

I chuckle inwardly, clutching the straps of my rucksack beneath

JULIAN R. VACA

the twinkling city lights. Nightmares don't have the same sting when you're living in one.



Dad once said that the nighttime attracts the crazies. As I shuffle through downtown Long Beach toward my destination, I see what he meant.

The streets are lined with aggressive vendors whose makeshift tents block boarded-up, vine-covered storefronts. Shuttered drug-stores, RadioShacks, and pawnshops are nothing more than an ominous, historic backdrop of a not-too-distant past.

Simpler times, like when lawn care and trash pickup were commonplace.

So many vines! I regard the untamed web of thorns and greens. The vines swallow entire sides of nearly abandoned buildings, like spider veins spread across swatches of skin. Thick weeds sprout out of cracks in the sidewalks, where so much filth and trash is strewn about you can practically see lines of toxic fumes wafting in the air. Many people wear disposable surgical masks.

It really is a jungle out here.

The street vendors peddle all kinds of wares, but the most common products are homemade, “holistic” remedies that the sellers promise will fight Memory Killer in ways that artificial recall cannot. How they manage to sell these medical cocktails, these “memory enhancers,” is a mystery for two reasons: (1) the contents inside the glass jars look like muddy water, urine, or muddy urine, and (2) most of the people on the sidewalk—the vendors’ potential clientele, who shuffle along with their handlers in tow—have their headphones on and their eyes downcast.

Which reminds me . . .

I pull my Walkman out, press the Play button, and then slip my

THE MEMORY INDEX

orange headphones over my ears. “Strong Island” by JVC Force starts to play. Perfect. This is my hype song. This is going to get me where I need to go. I return my cassette player to my back pocket and pull the hood of my sweatshirt over my jet-black hair.

A few years after the almighty, invisible enemy known as Memory Killer stormed the beaches of human consciousness, a Harvard study found that playing “mood-matching” music around the house or while doing homework or other menial tasks greatly benefits the working memories of adults—both young and old. Something about the pairing of emotional cues in songs and the “affective state” of the person listening augments their ability to recall things better.

I just take it as an excuse to listen to my Walkman more.

Naturally, classical and ambient and atmospheric genres became the popular choices for people, but I don’t need any of that.

I approach a homeless woman sitting on the curb, rocking back and forth. She fumbles with one of her memory tapes—an old videotape-looking brick with a white label and crude handwriting on it. Her Restorey (a yellow, government-issued tape player that’s slightly bigger than a Walkman) is scratched and dented. I’ll be shocked if the portable device even works. And yet, by the time I pass her, she has inserted her memory tape and affixed the small suction receivers to her temples just above her crow’s feet. Her eyes roll back as her own memories return to her.

It’s a strange feeling artificially recalling memories you didn’t know you’d forgotten. At seventeen I’m still not used to the grating sensation. The jolt of energy is knifelike at first, and then it trickles into your head in a slow burn as a particular memory reenters your consciousness. It feels like . . . How do I describe this? Like getting punctured with an infernal needle and then injected with millions of microscopic spiders that pitter-patter across the surface of your skull. And then—*poof!*—the memory is back, and you exhale.

They say you never get used to artificial recall. *Qué emocionante!*

JULIAN R. VACA

What's more? Because Memory Killer is an erratic sort of phenomenon, a real cancer of the mind that cannot be eradicated, no one knows how long artificial recall will keep memory loss at bay and preserve one's agency. One day you're plugging into your Restorey and following your artificial recall schedule, and the next you're an aimless wanderer with no recollection of your past.

And that's being let off easy.

Sometimes, Memory Killer swallows your mind and spits out something dangerous . . . something *inhuman* . . .

I absently pat my sweatshirt pocket, where I keep my own Restorey already loaded up with the evening's memory tape. My foster parents gave me the hand-me-down piece of junk when I moved in a couple of years ago. It eats up batteries like they're going out of style, but otherwise it works just fine.

I don't have to artificially recall for another two hours, long after I've grabbed what I came here to get.



The factory, or what's left of it, sits starkly against the violet sky. Even from across the street I can see its hollowed-out center . . . the caved-in ceilings . . . the blown-out windows . . . the mounds of rubble encased by graffitied walls . . . and the vines.

The deadly explosion happened over two years ago, and yet the fire-scorched site remains untouched save for the barbed-wire fence and NO TRESPASSING signs.

I waste no more time.

I pull my headphones off and hang them around my neck.

I sprint toward the fence.

I scale it quickly and hop to the other side.

I land on shaky feet and immediately pull my Sony Betamovie video camera out of my rucksack.

THE MEMORY INDEX

I cross the soot-covered ground toward the nearest busted-out window and turn on my video camera.

“Hey, Dad,” I say under my breath, climbing inside the decrepit factory, precious seconds counting down on my wristwatch. “I made it.”



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

2



FLETCHER COHEN



In the white room, the only thing more sterile than the stiff antimicrobial chair or the shiny linoleum floors was the lab technician's smile. She removed the heavy, bulky MeReader from Fletcher's head and set the helmet on its stand beside a poster of Molly Ringwald, who was exhorting folks to Never Forget: Memory Readers Save Lives!

"Anyone ever tell you that you look like Molly Ringwald?" Fletcher asked the lab tech as his chair returned to its upright sitting position. He caught his reflection in the mirror above the sink and tried to style his wavy mullet back into place with his hands.

"Molly Ringwald?" the lab tech said, plopping down on her stool and then rolling over to the sleeping machine beside the closed door. Here, she inputted a code into the keypad and the boxy computer

THE MEMORY INDEX

moaned to life, immediately setting to work imprinting one of Fletcher's at-risk memories onto a memory tape. "She's pretty."

She is pretty, Fletcher silently agreed. "Yeah, you are."

And then that sterile smile of hers filled with color.

The computer blipped and spat out Fletcher's fresh memory tape. The lab tech took it, placed it inside a plastic case, and then slipped it inside a manilla envelope along with an updated, laminated recall schedule. She handed this to Fletcher, completing his download session.

Downloading happened here once a month, at his family's county repository. First, the high-end technology in the MeReader conducted a CT head scan. Then it drew out any memory or memories he couldn't recall that hadn't been completely swallowed up by Memory Killer. Finally, it imprinted that memory or memories onto a tape.

Voilà.

After sitting in on dozens of downloads, Fletcher was still amazed by the whole process. The MeReader navigated the neural map within his brain's temporal lobe and rescued memories that he didn't actively remember but hadn't completely forgotten. It was like using a metal detector on a shoreline, sweeping the sands of his mind in search of lost trinkets that were holed up just below the surface.

From start to finish, the download took about one hour.

"You're new here, aren't you?" Fletcher asked, swinging his feet around and standing. He grabbed his denim jacket off the coatrack and put it on, glancing at the name badge clipped to her lab coat. Andie Parker.

"I just transferred from the Riverside County repository," she said, getting up from her stool. "Been trying to get out of the desert since I graduated from college."

"Well, on behalf of the city of Los Angeles, welcome, Ms. Parker," Fletcher said, bowing. Andie rolled her eyes, but not before her pretty smile deepened. She shook her head and opened the door.

JULIAN R. VACA

On his way out, Fletcher gave her a friendly side hug and added, “It’s quite a relief knowing that my memories are in good hands!” Her cheeks flushed and Fletcher winked, taking his leave.



Outside the repository, Fletcher jogged down the wide steps toward the street, where his parked Ducati awaited. Beside the black motorcycle, Denise Meyers—his girlfriend of eleven months—paced on the sidewalk.

“I got your page,” she said, stuffing her beeper inside her pocket and then tucking a strand of yellow-blond hair behind her ear. “What’s up?”

“Hop on,” he said, gesturing toward his motorcycle. “I’ll show you.”

They mounted the motorcycle together and Fletcher fired up the engine. Then he accelerated, weaving through the labyrinthine LA traffic. Overhead, the late afternoon sky had turned blood orange, thanks to the dense smog that hung above the skyscrapers.

After turning up a few streets, nearly running a red light, and passing through Little Tokyo, Fletcher rolled to a stop outside the four-story office building.

“This your idea of a date?” Denise asked, getting off the seat. Fletcher pocketed his keys, grabbed Denise’s hand, and led her up the steps toward the entrance.

“Something like that.”

Before they could reach the doors, they had to contend with a small gathering of protesters. Effusive men and women who fancied themselves Memory Ghosts and insisted they knew the truth about Memory Killer, the unethical origins of artificial recall, and damning information about its unscrupulous architect.

THE MEMORY INDEX

"Your first memory tape," said a woman with bulging eyes. "Think about your first memory tape, son!"

"*No hablo español*," Fletcher said, sidestepping past her with Denise in tow. Once inside, they approached the concierge, who was seated behind a wraparound desk and was deeply engrossed in a crossword puzzle.

"Hey, Fletcher," said the hulking man whose name Fletcher could not remember. This he did *not* chalk up to Memory Killer; the poor man had a hopelessly forgettable name. "Your dad just left."

"All good," Fletcher said, improvising. "He left his billfold in his office and sent me to pick it up for him."

The security guard's eyes fell on Denise, who blushed and looked at her bow flats. Eventually, though, he said gruffly. "Fine. Make it quick."

Fletcher led Denise down the hall, past some conference rooms, and inside an office. He flipped on the light, revealing rows of tall filing cabinets and a single computer in a corner.

"C'mon," he said, briskly walking toward the computer and turning it on.

"We're not here to grab your dad's wallet, are we?" Denise asked rhetorically, looking around the office anxiously.

A pop-up window appeared on the computer screen, prompting Fletcher to scan credentials in order to proceed. He pulled Andie Parker's name badge out of his jacket pocket, the one he secretly swiped off her lab coat earlier.

"Where did you get that?" Denise asked, coming up beside him. Fletcher ignored her, flipped the badge over, and examined the barcode. Then he slipped the badge into the square reader beside the

monitor. After a moment, pixelated words flashed across the screen, confirming admittance.

Fletcher smiled.

Quickly, without even a breath to spare, he sifted through the unlabeled folders and records on the desktop.

"Fletcher?" Denise said, her voice low, intense. "That concierge is going to come looking for us—"

"Do you know what happens if Memory Killer attacks someone's mind while they're using artificial recall?" he asked, trying his best to multitask.

"Um . . ."

It was a question Fletcher had wondered since he'd had his reading at sixteen, when everyone was first scanned by a MeReader and subsequently diagnosed a degen or recollector. Lack of public information only amplified this burning question. As far as Fletcher could tell, no one was talking about this on the news; no one was actively researching this; no one seemed to care what would happen if Memory Killer intersected with artificial recall.

Why?

"One time," Fletcher said, his fingers flying across the keyboard, "I asked a technician who was servicing my Restorey. The old woman wouldn't answer me . . . She barely looked me in the eye!"

Denise glanced over her shoulder at the office door.

"Why aren't people talking about this?" Fletcher muttered. He found a folder housing public records from a recent probing into Memory Frontier, the global conglomerate behind the Restorey and artificial recall.

Bingo. His heart fluttering, Fletcher opened the folder and entered a search command for "Memory Killer" and "artificial recall."

Unexpectedly, a new pop-up window appeared, alerting him that his credentials were restricted. He wouldn't be able to access the records—

THE MEMORY INDEX

The doorknob to the office turned, and Fletcher pulled Denise into a long kiss.

“Okay, okay,” the concierge said after Denise broke away. “You’ve had your fun. You should probably leave.”

Fletcher stood awkwardly, feigning surprise—making sure to obstruct the security guard’s view of the computer. “Oh, uh, Stanley . . . we . . . we were just leaving.”

The concierge blinked. “It’s Spencer.”

Ah. There it is!

“You were using me,” Denise said, standing beside Fletcher’s Ducati with her arms folded.

“Well, I could see why you’d say that . . .”

“And?”

“And what?”

“You trailed off,” Denise said, cocking an eyebrow, “like you had more to say.”

“Oh, no. That was it. I get why it seems like I was using you. I kind of was.”

“Kind of?”

He shrugged because it was all he could do.

“You’re *awful*.” Her tone was now decidedly indignant. “Why do you want to know *everything*? Who cares about Memory Killer and artificial recall and all that? Don’t you think the experts have that all sorted out?”

“I don’t want to know everything,” Fletcher clarified, trying to mollify his now ex-girlfriend. “I want to know the truth.”

“Well, here’s a truth,” she said, whisper-yelling: “You’re a real jerk, Fletcher Cohen. If I could choose which memories to lose, I’d choose every single one with you.”

JULIAN R. VACA

For a moment, those big blue eyes of hers grew distant and glassy. It was as if Denise was deep inside her head, rifling through the moments the two of them had shared over the past year. It was like she was taking inventory of the memories right then, standing on the sidewalk, *willing* herself to lose them to the great big void that resided in her consciousness, where memories took a forever sleep and had no chance of being awoken. Everyone had that ravenous void: Memory Killer, the bottomless ocean of the mind that consumed memories before they were stored onto tapes. And to lose one's memory to the void was to lose a part of one's makeup . . . a part of the fabric of their identity . . .

A part of one's soul, some said.

The moment passed, and Denise blinked.

"Enjoy spending senior year alone," she said. "I'm calling a cab." And then she stormed off. Fletcher watched her leave, and then he felt a sudden, unexpected pang of remorse. Denise was beautiful. An incredibly smart and gifted girl with all kinds of amazing things in her future. *Just not me*, Fletcher reflected. But she was popular and resilient. Fletcher wouldn't be surprised if she was seeing someone else by the time school started next week.

Yes, Denise would be fine. And, more importantly, so would Fletcher.



Fletcher pulled up to a red light and planted his boots on the pavement, attempting to sort through his overlapping thoughts. In the darkened sky, ephemeral lines of pink streaked west toward the coast.

His thwarted plans to investigate Memory Killer's potential impact on artificial recall only deepened his curiosity.

For months—almost an entire year, in fact—Fletcher had been on-again-off-again writing down questions and theories about

THE MEMORY INDEX

Memory Killer, the elusive enemy of the mind that had scourged mankind since he turned seven. He couldn't put his finger on *why* all of these questions nagged at him like small rashes beneath his clothes that refused to heal and demanded to be scratched. But nag at him they did. And so Fletcher, ever the dutiful Itch Scratcher, would journal about his thoughts in his Memory Killer File; he simply couldn't chance forgetting these urgent thoughts.

That was the maddening thing about memories: a society could build a robust infrastructure to keep hyper memory loss to a minimum, and yet every so often a memory slipped through one's mental fingers like a vapor, and all that remained was the faintest memory of a memory—not the memory itself.

Too often, Memory Killer devoured a scene from one's past before they ever had the opportunity to archive it.

Fletcher tightened up whenever he thought about Memory Killer. His body's protective instinct kicked in like he was bracing for an impact tantamount to a car crash. So he rolled his shoulders and loosened up as if shaking off weighty, invisible ropes.

To his right, on the street corner opposite him, an elderly man with long, wispy hair stood atop a crate. The man wore a large sign around his neck that read SLAVES TO OUR PAST, and he was vociferously preaching the Gospel of Forgetting to passersby.

Fletcher had seen his kind before; theirs was a cultish movement that embraced Memory Killer. They rejected artificial recall altogether and believed forgetting the past paved the way for an enlightened present, even at the cost of losing oneself in the future.

Fletcher was sure they would also contend the earth was flat and the moon landing was staged.

He rolled his eyes and turned away. To his immediate left, he

saw a dark-complected, middle-aged woman in the passenger seat of a white sedan. Her window was rolled down, and Fletcher could hear “Running Up That Hill” by Kate Bush faintly playing on the stereo. The woman leaned her head back against the headrest as she removed two suction receivers from her temples and set these in her lap, where Fletcher assumed her Restorey was. This meant she must have just completed artificial recall mere seconds ago.

Now, she stared unblinkingly at the evening sky. The red stop-light cast a delicate glow across her smooth face.

That was when Fletcher noticed her deep green eyes clouding over and turning solid gray, like smoke filling a beaker.

He knew what this meant.

Memory Killer was at work.

Right now, the woman had no idea her eyes had gone opaque. Her vision, in fact, was perfectly fine. But unbeknownst to her, she was in that exact moment actively losing some memory from her past—like the air from her lungs was subtly being siphoned off.

Fletcher knew what this meant because it happened to him too.

It happened to everyone, some far more than others.

He watched this woman and found he could not look away, even though he’d seen this very thing occur countless times . . . to friends . . . to teachers . . . to his parents. The bizarre phenomenon caused no discomfort. In fact, if it weren’t for the strange symptom of eye discoloration, no one would know when Memory Killer was present and silently wreaking havoc.

The woman eventually noticed Fletcher watching her.

Her gray, lifeless eyes met his.

The edges of her mouth began to twitch, flirting with a smile. The driver (her handler) was a man probably Fletcher’s age in scrubs, whose features were hidden in the evening shadows. The handler slowly brought a lit cigarette to his pursed lips, took a long drag, and

THE MEMORY INDEX

exhaled an undulating puff of white smoke. The ghostly cloud hung in the air, interplaying with the cold red glow of the traffic light.

The woman held Fletcher's stare.

The traffic light turned green. The handler flicked his cigarette out the window and drove off. Fletcher watched the car disappear into the traffic, still mesmerized by the unsettling scene.

The SUV behind him honked. He revved his engine before accelerating and then zoomed forward, wending and weaving around crawling cars. He took side streets all the way back to his house in the heart of Manhattan Beach, and the Woman Who Lost Her Memories was all Fletcher could think about the entire drive.

Being a recollector meant that Fletcher Cohen was part of the 50 to 60 percent of the world's population who could recall up to three quarters of their memories on their own. It also meant that he only had to use artificial recall once a day (in the morning, promptly at 7:00 a.m.) to fill in the gaps.

This was a short, mostly painless process: Each day, Fletcher inserted a different memory tape into his Restorey, ensured the memory was rewound and queued up, affixed the receivers to his temples, and then pressed Play. Memories materialized in his mind's eye like scenes in a movie, only it was much more than that. Regaining a moment in time that one had lived was markedly different from watching actors on TV. But the imperfect comparison was more or less adequate.

The state of California mandated that all minors recall in the presence of their parents or legal guardians. This meant that every time Fletcher recalled, either his mother or father was there, and usually they conducted their own recall as soon as he finished his. He'd sat with them countless times over the years and not once had

either of them been visited by Memory Killer *while* they were hooked up to their Restoreys.

At least . . . that he was aware of.

A person's eyes were closed during artificial recall, so he wouldn't know if their pupils or irises had turned gray.

Fletcher gripped the handlebars of his motorcycle, hoping and praying he didn't forget these thoughts before he made it home to log them in his Memory Killer File.



He turned up his street, which was flanked by lit palm trees, and then slowed down as his house came into view. It was a forest-green bungalow with a perfectly manicured lawn—the kind of annoyingly well-kept yard that landed on the cover of periodicals that no one read but stocked in waiting rooms.

Fletcher saw his father's black '87 Mercedes-Benz 420SEL in the driveway. A white SUV he didn't recognize was parked behind it, its engine running, driver at the wheel. Because Fletcher's father was a congressman, it wasn't uncommon for their house to become a meeting place of sorts. In fact, his parents often threw soirées where businessmen and socialites and changemakers from all over the state descended upon their backyard and drank too much. A variety of state and federal politicians made appearances throughout the year too; the governor had been over twice that year already.

So Fletcher cut off his engine, flicked off the headlight, and dismounted.

The front door opened.

A young woman Fletcher had never seen before, in her twenties, he guessed, stepped outside. She wore a navy business skirt and jacket, and her black hair was pulled back into a taut ponytail. His father appeared in the doorway a second later but remained in the

THE MEMORY INDEX

house just beyond the threshold. He looked uncharacteristically . . . anxious.

Fletcher was suddenly very aware of his mother's absence.

Hunched over, he walked his Ducati onto the sidewalk and stopped behind the wall of shrubs that encased his neighbors' front yard. From here, Fletcher had the perfect vantage point for viewing the front door, which was illuminated by a hanging lantern. He slouched and peered over the shrubs just as his father took off his wire-rim glasses and slowly leaned forward.

Fletcher lowered himself even more, feeling his heart pounding. It was too dark—and he was too far away—to tell if they'd kissed or if they were just talking in hushed voices.

Fletcher bet the latter was just wishful thinking.

The woman eventually headed toward the passenger side of the SUV. Fletcher quickly dipped his head so he was completely hidden behind the shrubs. He could hear the distinct clicking sound of the vehicle switching from park to reverse, and slowly the young woman's driver pulled out of the driveway.

Fletcher paused to collect himself.

Who *was* that?

And had his father arranged for them to meet in his mother's absence?

Fletcher didn't want to go too far down that rabbit trail. Not right now. He just needed to get inside and gather his thoughts. He walked his motorcycle toward their driveway . . .

. . . and found his father still standing in the doorway, shrouded in half shadows, watching him expectantly.