

Erasures

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“Do you remember much about Del?” My grandma asks, her green eyes scanning my face. A glitch in facial recognition software. Or maybe in internal storage. I glance at my mother and aunt in the kitchen, too deep in conversation to hear their mother’s confusion.

Dad tells me that when he was in high school he took his grandmother to the hairdresser. When he came to pick her up, she squinted at him.

“Are you the same young man who brought me here?”

Young man. Not “Mike.” Not “my grandson.” A lost connection.

Sometimes archived memories appear out of nowhere.

“We’ve got to pack the lunches, head to the track,” my grandpa insists to my grandma in a moment of mental time travel.

He’s back to my father’s days throwing discus in high school. The previous day, we visited him in the nursing home. Dad had told him that my brother and I had just finished track practice, that we are distance runners. Grandpa is running diagnostics, unable to fix the problem of forgetting and remembering, remembering and forgetting.

“When I was younger, there wasn’t a word for it,” my dad says, “it was just ‘old age.’” Now, these losses have names. My dad’s dad? Alzheimer’s. My mom’s mom? Dementia.

When my grandmother turns to me, asks me if I remember much about my grandfather, “Del,” I’m at a loss for words as her memory blows a fuse. I don’t know how to say he died fifteen years before I was born. How to say I never met him. How to say all I know are pictures and stories. As her gaze traces my face, I wonder if she even knows who she is talking to. I wonder how the family tree’s branches have

tangled in her mind. How the wires – the tau tangles in her brain – cross, short circuiting.

Will my own memory eventually crash? Will it buffer beyond febrile seizure blackouts, anxiety-induced forgetfulness, repressed memories? Will my mental RAM wear with age? Will it be too late to restart to retrieve data I've stored: words, images, sounds, emotions? Will I feel frustrated by forgetting or will I be too confused to feel frustrated – have my grandparents felt this way? Maybe pictures, written accounts will be enough to remind me – maybe they won't – their contexts blurring, my brain becoming a blue screen of death.

Maybe memories are the only things we truly own. But there is no flash drive we can save them on. No IT department to fix the issue. Both too confused to know they're confused, I've watched my grandparents look through empty files. Content: Erased.