

The Memory Forgets

“Sometimes I feel like I don’t have a partner, sometimes I feel like my only friend, is the city I live in”

“What do you call a Tesla that was stolen?... An Edison!” The sound of laughter fills the room after Richard’s joke. I let out a noticeable chuckle while pulling up Google to figure out why I am laughing. Our new company slogan is “Family Serving Families.” Richard told us why he chose it...“I was sitting in my study and couldn’t stop thinking about the beautiful world we live in.”

Richard is charming, articulate, with a radiant smile that can hypnotize even the most skeptical. He was the former CEO of “Caring Communities” and now is the CEO of “Care From The Heart” which is the organization that I’ve been employed with for the past three years. In his office, you will see he’s highly educated by the many degrees and awards that hang on the wall behind his desk. Some of his degrees are hanging with a slight tilt to make it appear that he doesn’t care so much about his many achievements. Richard often wears his infamous tie-dye socks and

unveils them to remind us he's still a "hippie." On Fridays, he likes to substitute his collared shirt for a soft cotton T-shirt that will have an inspirational quote printed on the front. Today's quote reads, "We will all get through this together."

It feels as if I am lowering some sort of shield whenever I pull my headphones from my ears as I enter the elevator. The stainless steel doors converge, and I notice the floor is made of black marble. The marble has been infused with tiny specks of gold. The gold specks are scarce and almost completely lost in the dark abyss, but they help to reflect the artificial light, and I begin to feel a mild sense of comfort. When the elevator doors open, I step out and head toward my cubicle. I remind myself to look motivated, to do my best, and to fit in. I quickly remember the safest topics of conversation...reading, family, restaurants, and organizing. I did neither last weekend. I desperately want to tell everyone about who I am and how I spent my weekend laughing at fart prank videos on the internet, researching the Copper Scroll, searching for UFO's, and firing up a joint to George Clinton, while I waited for the "Mothership Connection" to take me in for some "light year groovin."

When I look up, he is there, ten feet in front of me...I first notice his enormous smile. "Hi, Desmond! How was your weekend?" Richard says in his giddy, high-pitched voice. He looks so

happy and relaxed. His chestnut eyes are well-rested and his smile is so bright. I already feel mentally exhausted. “Hi Richard, my weekend was great. I visited family, explored a restaurant, read a little, and organized my room.” I decide to be polite and return the question, “How was your weekend, Richard?” I ask. “It was wonderful!...Jane, and I brought our youngest daughter, Carrie, up the coast to Stanford. Carrie will embark on her newest adventure as a full-time student. Her adventure will be filled with wonderful memories and tough challenges that will make her a better leader. I’m so proud of her. What a beautiful campus too!” I decide to keep the conversation going a little longer to disguise my true feelings. “I have seen Stanford’s campus; it is beautiful. I hope Carrie enjoys it up there. I know she will.” My eyelids are getting heavier. I’ve decided that I have said enough. “Well, it’s been a blessing to run into you, but if you’ll excuse me, I have many families to serve.” I say it with a smile as I quickly race toward my desk. “Great seeing you too, Desmond! Keep up the good work!” Richard replies enthusiastically.

Karina was the last employee who dared to disagree with Richard and was awarded every mundane and unattainable task. I found out about Karina’s firing one morning when someone from Human Resources joined our team meeting to inform us that...“Karina is no longer with the company; we care about her deeply and wish her well,” followed by “please help yourself to the assortment of donuts for all the hard work that you do.” I knew the donuts were a strategy to keep us motivated. Shamefully, I grab the last strawberry-frosted donut and quickly head back to my cubicle.

Karina was brave. I'll never forget the time when she stood up in front of our entire department and demanded a raise for any employee that had served the company for a year or more. She also demanded that every employee get the same healthcare plan as upper management. I remember seeing Richard's jaw drop and the gears in his head start to turn. I could see he was thinking of something to say... "we are all exceptional workers, and we have to stay focused on our mission and the families that we serve." Afterwards, Richard felt some sort of guilt, so he talked to a few people, pulled a few strings, and the next day, we all received a \$25 gift card to use on Amazon.com. I immediately used the gift card and bought a book called "How to Make \$100,000 a Year Gambling for a Living." I planned to learn the tricks in the book and then never speak to Richard again.

The plan didn't work. I didn't have enough money to gamble, and even if I did, I wouldn't have the courage to risk losing it. I glance over at the clock on my computer screen... 4:56pm. Another day has come to an end. I exhale, gather my belongings, place my headphones over my ears, and head toward the elevator. When I reach the ground floor, the stainless steel doors open, and I notice a golden hue, from the reduced sun permeating every window in the lobby. It's so peaceful. My walk home will be peaceful.

*“I drive on her streets ‘cause she’s my companion, I walk through her hills ‘cause she knows
who I am, she sees my good deeds...”*

“BEEEEEEP!... BEEP!... BEEP!” “What the???” Startled, I quickly remove my headphones from my ears and see a familiar face inside a rusty old cherry red pickup truck...it’s my roommate, Derrick. “Hey, Des! Want a ride?” he yells through the open passenger side window. It was weird to see Derrick driving any type of motorized vehicle. Derrick was a track and field athlete in high school and is often seen jogging or riding his bicycle all over town. “Since when do you drive a vehicle?” I ask. “C’mon, get in!...I’ll explain later!” Derrick replies. I graciously accept his offer and hop in. The first thing I notice is the truck’s springy bench seat. It catapults me up and down in a continuous rhythm that I have no control over and it feels like I’m sitting on a moving trampoline. The engine shakes and rattles when Derrick applies pressure to the gas pedal. I get a sense that the truck might die at any moment. “Hey, Des, I noticed you had your headphones on...what are you listening to these days?” “I was listening to a song called ‘Under the Bridge’ by the ‘Red Hot Chili Peppers,’” I reply. “Oh, I remember that song,” Derrick acknowledges. “Speaking of bridges...do you want to go down to Lovell’s Bridge with me tomorrow after work? It will be the anniversary of my dad’s passing. Every year on his anniversary, I hike

down to his favorite spot and sit on the rocks overlooking the river. There's a very narrow trail, and it's hidden behind a few overgrown bushes. It will require a little scrambling to get down to the river, but I promise it will be worth it. In honor of my dad's wishes, I spread his ashes there. It would be nice to have some company this year. I'll even pack my bowl for us." Derrick looks at me as if he genuinely wants my company. "Sure," I reply.

When we arrive at our two-bedroom apartment, Derrick parks his truck on the street, and I get out to collect our empty recycling bins that were left at the curb. I hear the sounds of metal clashing, and I know it's Derrick, inserting his key into the worn-out lock as he wrestles with the doorknob. A few more seconds of jiggling, extracting, re-inserting, and then...wallah!...the front door opens. We enter and immediately head to our rooms without saying a word. I realize it's been three weeks since I last talked to my parents. I never enjoy talking to my family, but I feel guilty and decide to call them so that I can arrange a time to pay them a visit. The last time I saw them was about a year ago, at a family gathering in my sister's home. My brother-in-law notified our family that my sister had just received another award for her work. This award was called the "Outstanding Teaching in an Adjunct Appointment Award." I don't know what that means, but it doesn't matter. My younger brother made an announcement that his wife was pregnant and I saw tears of joy flowing down my parents' cheeks as they stood up from the table and gave everyone congratulatory hugs. I may as well have been a ghost that night. I shake my head as I call my mother. A few rings later and she finally answers... "Hello, Des," she says. "Hi, Mom, It's been a

while since I last saw you; I was thinking about coming up to—” My mother interrupts me before I can finish. “Des, I am holding your niece; she is the cutest little thing! You’ve got to see the facial expressions she is making.” I could hear the excitement in my mother’s voice. I start over, “Mom, I was wondering...” My mother interrupts again. “Did your father tell you? I signed up for Pilates! I go three times a week and already notice an improvement in my posture.”

“Mom...I’m happy for you...I was thinking maybe I could come up and...” My mother cuts me off. “Oh, Des, you really need to see this little girrrrr! She is smiling right at me and squeezing my finger too! Your niece is the most beautiful baby.” I decide to make one more attempt...

“Mom, I was thinking...” But my mother can’t help it, and she cuts me off once again. “Did your brother tell you? He just bought a new Tesla! It’s one of those electric vehicles where you don’t put gas in it. It’s very quiet, and it has a huge computer screen with all the gadgets you could ever imagine. Des, the car can even drive itself! Maybe if you are nice to your brother, he might let you take it for a test drive.” “I’ve got to go, Mom,” I reply. I hang up and make a personal vow to never call my family again. My eyes feel heavy and they start to water. I close them.

“It’s hard to believe that there’s nobody out there, it’s hard to believe that I’m all alone”

Wooooosssshhhhhh! Wooooosssshhhhhhheeee! Wooooosssshhhhhh! Wooooosssshhhhhhheeee! I slowly open my eyes and turn off my “Oceans Relaxing Surf” alarm clock. I want to lie in bed forever, but I decide to get up and do it all over again. On my walk to work, I think about all the people in my life that have disappeared around me. Some days, I wish it was me that would just disappear. I think about Derrick and our hike to Lovell’s Bridge tonight. I start to feel better.

When I reach my floor, the elevator doors open, and I see Richard standing off to my left. I hear his high-pitched voice and I try to hide by lowering my head and walking as fast as I can toward my desk. His voice travels fast like a laser beam, with pin-point accuracy, into any ear canal of his choosing. I can feel my heart beating, my eyelids getting heavier... “Hiiiiiiiiiii, Desmond!” Richard shouts. I don’t have it in me to pretend I didn’t hear him, so I collect myself, turn around, and mimic his energy. “Hi Richard, how are you?” I reply. “I’m doing great!” he says. “I just wanted to remind you of our company gathering at ‘Cheers and Beers’ this evening. I noticed you haven’t attended any of our gatherings in quite some time, and I’m hopeful that we will see you and that smiling face tonight!” I feel remorseful and reply with “sure” and then add “looking forward to it!” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back, but I could see Richard’s entire face light up, like a kid in a candy store... “Looking forward to seeing you there too!” Richard replies before walking toward his next victim. The last company event that I at-

tended was Employee Appreciation Day. Richard had asked his poet friend to write us a poem. The poem talked about how we are the “glue” that keeps the company running, how we must push through the hard times, and how we will always persevere. The words were well written and a perfect substitute instead of pay raises. Richard then stood up and gave a wonderful speech...“It’s the commitment, hard work, and values of each and every one of you that help us fulfill our mission of ‘Family Serving Families,’ and I just want to say, thank you, thank you, thank you.” Richard is truly a wonderful public speaker. After the speech, he ordered lunch for every employee—the cheapest pizza he could find and a can of soda to wash down the even cheaper words.

“I don’t ever wanna feel like I did that day, take me to the place I love, take me all the way”

As soon as I step outside of the lobby, I see Derrick in his pickup truck. He is calmly waiting in the parking lot. We make eye contact, and Derrick puts his hand up to confirm that he sees me. “I brought some flashlights just in case we get stuck walking back in the dark.” Derrick informs me. We drive for about fifteen minutes before Derrick slams on his brakes and makes a sharp right turn that takes us off the main road and into a secluded dirt lot. When the dust settles, I notice the lot’s limited space, with enough room for only four vehicles. I see Lovell’s Bridge

through the trees, and the sun is struggling to stay above it. “Over there!” Derrick says as he points toward three chest-high bushes. “The trail is just beyond those bushes,” Derrick explains. I re-tie my shoelaces, grab a flashlight, and follow Derrick as we begin the downward trek. “Hey Derrick, what was your dad like?” I ask while checking my footing on the narrow path. “He was a total asshole to me my entire life. He never understood me. I hated him so much...but now that he is gone, I can only remember how much suffering and pain he endured during those last few months in the hospital, and I can recall a few good times we had together...like the time when he bought me a new football for my thirteenth birthday. I remember partially tearing off the wrapping paper and looking up at my dad’s face, seeing his mouth half-open as he was holding his breath in anticipation.” I listen to Derrick’s story and I am unsure how to respond. “I’m sorry about your dad,” I say. Derrick immediately stops, turns around, and looks directly into my eyes. I could tell he wants to make sure I understand something...“It’s water under the bridge” he says. I shake my head up and down in agreement. Derrick turns back around, and we continue onward. I notice the trail is gradually widening, and off to my right, I can see Lovell’s Bridge in its entirety.

When we finally arrive, Derrick hops on one of the giant boulders overlooking the river and reaches into his pocket for his bowl. Derrick was right—this place is truly amazing! I’m relaxed by the tranquil sounds of the slow-flowing crystal clear water and the rustling of the trees. I can see rock boulders of all sizes; some are completely submerged, while others get to enjoy the best

of both worlds. The biggest boulders line the river's edges, like the one Derrick is sitting on.

"My dad loved this spot. He took me here a couple of times when I was a kid and taught me how to skip rocks across this river." After taking a few puffs from Derrick's bowl, we sit in silence, in awe, and watch the sun sink lower and lower until it graciously abandons us. As darkness falls, we turn on our flashlights, and Derrick leads us back up the trail. "Hey, you never told me why you got a truck?" I ask. "It was my dad's old truck; it's the only thing he left me. I decided it was time to accept it. I've been driving that truck so much...I completely stopped exercising." Derrick lets out a quick giggle before adding... "But when I'm driving in it, I feel like he is with me, watching over me."

As we make our way back up the trail, Derrick slows his pace, raises his right index finger, and points at the sky. At first, I thought he spotted a shooting star, but I can see there's something else he wants to show me... "See all these stars?" Derrick says. "Do you understand how small we are? How trivial it is? How much it matters?" He pauses for a few seconds before adding... "There's over 100 billion galaxies in the universe, and if we were to travel at the speed of light, we still wouldn't be able to exit our very own galaxy." I think about that, about how tiny I am, and about how tiny our world is. My problems and frustrations seemed to have shrunken as well.

As I look up at the sky, time seems to have stopped. I'm immersed in billions of bright sparks, like spilt silver glitter, blown across the night sky to illuminate the infinite darkness with its flickering, winking, and waving, as if trying to get my attention. The universe is holding and cradling me in all its vastness. The events that happened in my past, what's happening now, and what will happen are irrelevant. As I come back down from what seems to be an eternity, I notice out of the corner of my eye that Derrick is staring at me. I turn toward him and can see his face is glowing. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives me a gentle nod. Although we both had many thoughts that night, we didn't speak as we hiked the final stretch back to Derrick's truck. We had only been gone a few hours, but as we pull out of that small dirt lot and onto the road that will take us home, something feels different...as if a feeling of attachment...as if one of those fallen sparks had latched on...as if it were traveling with me... as if I had a partner.