

Forget Me Not

“Annie, honey, it’s not your fault she doesn’t recognize you. She’s having a bad day, that’s all. Maybe next time will be better.” I looked at her in the rearview mirror and tried my best to smile, but it was awkward and forced. She put on her pouty face and glared through me.

“But daddy, why? Every day’s a bad day!”

“I’ve told you before, your mommy is sick. It’s affecting her brain. Now, please, *shhh*. Daddy needs to think for a little bit.”

Annie put on her headphones. She stared blankly at whatever Disney movie I grabbed on the way out. I just needed some time to clear my head. We were at a time in our lives when nothing was going our way.

I rubbed my forehead the way I always do when I get emotional. It’s that or tears. At six years old she couldn’t fully grasp the situation and, honestly, I’m not sure if I did either. I couldn’t get over the past. I longed for my wife. I missed how in college we would sneak onto the football field to watch the stars. I missed staying in bed on the weekends for movie marathons. What I missed the most was our normal life together.

It was eleven years earlier when Miranda and I met in college. Our love story began the way books and movies do. Boy and girl lock eyes during boring lecture. Boy sums up the courage to ask girl out. Boy and girl fall in love. Boy and girl get married. Unfortunately, that’s when our story changed drastically.

We had a few bumps in the road on the way to “happily ever after” but none as bad as when Miranda’s memory began to fade. She had always been one to forget the little stuff.

Homework, parking spots, dinner reservations. Those kinds of things. But after she gave birth to Annie those little things grew into big things.

The first major instance that I can remember was when we needed to get diapers late one night. I didn't notice how big of a deal it was at that time, but when we went to CVS, she lost Annie. I went to use the bathroom and when I came out she was staring blankly at potato chips and the like. Annie wasn't with her.

I panicked. "Miranda, where's Annie?"

"What? Annie?"

"Excuse me." The cashier walked over pushing a shopping cart with our child lying in it, her smiling face looking at all of ours. "Your baby?"

"Oh, god. Thank you," I said. The cashier walked away with a concerned look. Miranda came back to her senses. Even though she had similar episodes afterwards, I never took it seriously until a couple years later.

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I emptied my pockets as soon as we got home and wandered into the kitchen. "Do you have any homework due tomorrow?" Annie nodded. "What do you have to do?"

"Times tables."

"Alright, go get it done. Let me know if you need help." I didn't know at that time how bad of a father I was. I think Annie knew. I didn't behave like all of the other fathers she knew. I was mopey and didn't spend enough time with my daughter.

I always poured myself a glass of scotch after seeing Miranda. For an hour or so I stood at the island nursing it while reading the Sunday paper and watching Annie do her homework

and then play with her dolls. I wasn't really reading. Just glancing at the words in an unfocused manner.

The following day I dropped Annie off at school and drove down the street to my school. I teach 12th grade English at the best private school in Maine. Going there every day was a reprieve. I could get lost in the works of Doyle, Chekhov, and O'Connor.

However, sometimes during class I would let my mind wander to a separate world, a fictional time where Miranda was fine and the three of us lived a normal life. She would still be teaching 11th grade pre-calculus a few doors down from my room. After school, the three of us would go home. She would cook while I helped Annie with her homework. We would live a simple life. Maybe even bring one more child into it.

But the reality was that my students needed to take a test on that week's readings. I tried to be a "fun" teacher, like Miranda, and give my students interesting stories to read. My supervisors let me insert a short Sherlock Holmes unit into the curriculum, which the kids were being tested on.

Test days gave me time to reflect on the past. Too much time, really.

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I began to worry about Miranda on Annie's third birthday. We had been planning a special birthday occasion for Annie and her preschool friends. Really, it was just an excuse for us to chill out for a couple of hours while some of the more enthusiastic parents entertained the kids. We provided the drinks and food so the least they could do was babysit.

Miranda had been in the kitchen putting a snack platter together while I chatted with some other dads. We talked of football and how easy girls are to raise. One of their wives was leading a game of Simon Says.

I recall Miranda wandering onto our porch and into the backyard, her face full of confusion and fright.

“Thomas, who are these people?” she asked me. She looked at all of the parents’ faces and to Annie’s. The confusion didn’t go away. “I—I don’t know who these people are. Why are they here? Get out of my house!”

I didn’t know what to say. “Dear, these are our friends. It’s Annie’s birthday party.” My voice shook as I spoke.

“Thomas, what is going on? I need to finish my calculus homework...” He voice trailed off.

I quickly rushed her upstairs and into our bedroom. “Miranda, remember, it’s Annie’s birthday. She’s three. Remember, we got her that new princess movie? And the doll that goes with it? Princess themed party?” As I spoke, Miranda’s face didn’t change at all. “Honey, why don’t you lay down and rest. You’re really tired.”

She listened and lay down with the same look on her face. I stayed with her until she drifted off. As I sat I thought of all the signs. Miranda had had similar incidences between CVS and Annie’s birthday. I felt like the biggest moron on the planet. How could I not notice what was happening to my wife? I had told myself she just had a bad memory, that it was nothing to worry about, but I think I just didn’t want to face the reality. I could not – would not – admit that something was seriously wrong with my wife. I wasn’t ready to.

We went to see a doctor a short while after. He told us that Miranda was in the beginning stages of early-onset Alzheimer’s. He prescribed some pills and they worked for a little while. Eventually I realized that Miranda couldn’t live with us anymore. She required round-the-clock care. She needed help I couldn’t provide.

This realization happened a few months after Annie's birthday. Things were going slightly okay. The medication Miranda was taking helped with simple day to day tasks but Miranda's memory was rapidly deteriorating. She could still remember to dress herself, feed herself – simple things like that. But she would easily forget people. Our neighbors across the street, who had brought their daughters to Annie's party, weren't remembered.

Obviously, she had to leave her job at the school. Sometimes I would take her there to try to jog her memory but it was futile. The teachers Miranda had worked next to for the past several years had escaped her mind.

One day, during winter break, I understood just how terrible Miranda's disease was getting. I got home from the store while Annie was playing in the snow with her friends next door. I walked into our house and started putting the groceries away.

“Thomas?”

I turned to see Miranda coming down the stairs. Time paused for a moment to allow me to admire her beauty. Even though she looked tired and scared, I could still see the twenty-one year old face I fell in love with. Her chestnut brown hair rested gracefully on her shoulders. Her hazel eyes contrasted wonderfully with her naturally bright red lips. She had a tiny scar on her nose from an accident involving a fishing hook and me not paying attention.

“Yes, my love?”

“What the hell are you doing here? What the fuck, Thomas?” Her face contorted with rage.

“Honey, what's wrong?”

“I told you to fucking leave. You can’t just go sleeping around and expect me to take you back in when you’re done. No! Fuck you!” She reached the bottom of the steps and crossed her arms defiantly.

She was back in the past. About a year and a half into our relationship I cheated. We were fighting a lot and I was drunk and stupid. By the grace of god she decided to forgive me a week after I told her of my mistake. It took a few months but eventually we found a happy place again.

Her mind was back in the past. She was twenty-two again. Her boyfriend had just cheated on her.

“No, no Miranda, that was years ago. Miranda, we’re not in college any—”

“Shut up! Shut up! Get out of here!” She grabbed a nearby glass lamp and threw it my way. She began grabbing everything around her to throw at me. “You cheating bastard!”

I navigated toward her as she wandered around the living room throwing books, couch cushions, bowls, and vases at me. I eventually reached her and grabbed her shoulders. “Miranda, honey, calm down. That was almost a decade ago. You forgave me. We’re married now. We have a daughter, Annie.”

“I hate you for what you for what did! Get the hell out of here!” She continuously pounded on my chest until I lost control of myself.

“No Miranda! I’m tired of this!” My fingertips dug into her. “Remember me! Remember Annie! Remember, damnit!”

“Remember what? Remember how you cheated? Is that what you want me to remember? Because I fucking remember!”

I pushed off from her and backed away, palms out. I paced around, my hand wiping my face, rubbing my forehead. I could feel her glare upon me. “I just – I don’t know, Miranda. I love

you – you’re my wife – but,” I could feel all the emotion stirring in me. The sadness. The pain. The anger – at myself and the situation. “But I hate this. I hate waking up not knowing if my wife will remember me. I have needs, Miranda! I need you to be my wife. Annie needs you too. She needs a mother! We need you, Miranda. Please, come back to me.”

“Needs, Thomas? You have needs? What, I didn’t satisfy you enough so you had to go and fuck someone else? Is that what you *need*?”

“No, Miranda, please –”

“Goddamnit, Thomas, I want you out of my life!” She started to tear up but remained composed with anger.

We stood in silence for a short time. I slowly calmed down, but she still stood distant from me, arms crossed, anger painted on her face. I walked toward her and gently placed my hands on her arms. “I love you,” I said.

“Cheating. Bastard.” She could barely get the words out before she broke down, face firmly pressed against my chest. I rested my chin on the top of her head. Eventually, the police came. A concerned neighbor had called 9-1-1 once the yelling began and glass started shattering. I stroked Miranda’s hair and explained the situation to the officers. After they left, twenty-two year old Miranda’s anger started to dissipate and we discussed my transgression. I begged her to forgive me.

Again.

I was grateful that our neighbor took Annie inside once the yelling began and the police showed up. Annie didn’t notice that anything had happened. At least, I hope she didn’t.

The next day I called and made arrangements for Miranda to be put into the nursing home. She had become dangerous and I was afraid that Annie might get hurt. It was what was best for our family.

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I received a phone call while my students were testing. It was the nursing home. Miranda had fallen down stairs and was seizing. Another teacher watched over my class as I sped to the hospital.

I was prepared to curse out each and every employee at the nursing home for not taking better care of Miranda. But when I saw my wife lying in a hospital bed with a nurse stitching up her head my rage subsided and I could only think of how vulnerable my wife was. Because Miranda had fallen down stairs and hit her head she needed to be scanned. The doctors were worried that she might have a brain bleed. They assured me that the most likely cause of the seizure was just the trauma to her head and nothing major. I was told that the scans would take a while and afterward they would keep her overnight for observation. It was nearing the end of the school day and I decided to leave to pick Annie up and take her to the hospital with me to see her mother.

I stood in the area where all the parents gather to round up their kids and take them home. Annie was gleaming as she ran towards me. "Daddy, daddy! LookatwhatImade!"

Annie was holding a drawing she created. She shoved it in my face so I could get a good look at it. It was a vibrant crayon piece from Anastasia Bennett, circa 2014. Depicted in various shades of blue, red, yellow, and every other color of the rainbow was herself, her mother, and myself. We were all holding hands standing in the courtyard of the nursing home. It pained me that the only memories Annie had of her mother were at that home.

“That’s a beautiful picture you have there, my love.” We started walking to my car. I took her hand and with the other vigorously rubbed my forehead. “Hey, how about you and me go show mommy your picture right now? Do you think she’d like that?”

After we left the school parking lot I needed to tell my daughter what had happened to her mother. When I talked to Annie about Miranda, I did my best to sugarcoat everything in an attempt not to scare her. I didn’t know how to sugarcoat that day.

“Annie, honey, you’re mom isn’t at her home today.” I made eye contact with her in the rearview mirror. “She’s at the hospital right now. She fell and hit her head, but the doctors say she’ll be fine and she’ll be going back to her home tomorrow.”

“She’s not going to die, is she?”

“No, no, sweetie, she’s not going to die. She just hit her head, that’s all. She’s going to be fine. Don’t worry.”

“Well Joey said his daddy got hit in the head and then his daddy died.”

I didn’t remember anything about a Joey or his dad dying. “When did that happen?”

“At the end of last year. Joey said his daddy got in a car accident and hurt his head and then he died and then Joey didn’t go to school anymore.”

I didn’t remember being told about that or any of the other parents talking about it. Annie most likely told me and I wasn’t paying enough attention to retain it. “Annie, she’ll be fine. Mommy will be fine.”

“Okay. Do you think mommy will remember us today?”

“She might, maybe.”

* * *

I think Miranda remembered us a little bit when Annie showed her the drawing. I saw Miranda smile slightly. Maybe she understood a little of what the drawing was. She touched the nursing home and then moved her frail fingers to the blue and yellow Annie. She looked up from the picture and roped Annie in for a one armed hug. Annie told her mother that she could keep the drawing. I swear that I heard Miranda whisper “Thank you, Annie.”

The following day, Miranda was released from the hospital and went back to the nursing home. She was in good health and the doctors said the seizure was a one-time thing. Nothing was bleeding in her brain. They sent her home.

For a little while afterwards, I felt like Annie was more cheerful than usual. I think I was too. I played with Annie more, read her stories. I think we were both somewhat rejuvenated after the visit with Miranda at the hospital. It wasn't the first time that Miranda seemed to know us or actually did remember us. But it was the first time that we were scared of losing her.

We settled back into our lives after the scare. We made sure to visit Miranda every day after school. Each visit played out like all the others. Annie and I would sit with Miranda and tell her about how our days were, what was happening at work, how Annie was doing at school. Miranda politely smiled and nodded.

On a Friday, I left Annie to color or read in Miranda's room with a nurse watching over her. I enjoyed taking Miranda for walks before we parted. After Miranda's fall, I would stop at a flower shop before visiting her. Miranda's favorite flowers were forget-me-nots. She loved the little blue ones, always five petals with a yellow eye in the center.

On our walks, our path would take us around the home and through the courtyard. Each time I liked to recite to her memories from our life together. I would tell her about our first date

when at dinner I spilled soda on myself and didn't realize it. Or how I proposed at the beach and we both slipped in the water. I'm not sure if I did this for her or for myself.

My favorite story to tell her was that of our wedding day. I told her about it almost once a week. I always started with the location. We chose to get married at the beach I proposed on. She wanted to make that beach a special place. To create many memories there for us.

Then I would tell her about who came to our wedding. It was a small ceremony, our intention. Only our parents, her two brothers, our neighbors, and some of the teachers from our school that we were close with were invited. My favorite memory from our wedding was when I watched her walk down the aisle.

"I loved standing there watching you. You were so happy walking next to your father. Miranda, your dress was the most beautiful I have ever seen. It was long, but not obnoxiously so. It was so smooth, not annoyingly fluffy. And while most dresses are sleeveless, yours had —"

"Three quarter lace sleeves." We stopped walking. Miranda wrapped her arm around mine and gave me a slight smile, looking up at me. "I wanted my dress to be different. Also, no veil. Because they're so tacky."

"Yeah, sleeves and no veil. My god, Miranda, you were so wonderful that day."

"I know. I remember."

For as long as it lasted, I cherished the moment. Her memory had returned to her every now and then in the past for short stretches and each time I would foolishly hope it would return forever and each time Miranda would fade away from me. I had to enjoy the moments while they lasted.

It was always hard on Annie when Miranda came back. She would get too excited and expect her mother to stay lucid. After we got back from our walk, Annie and her mother spoke.

Annie told Miranda about everything that was important in the life of a six year old: school, the annoying boy in her class, what books she was starting to read on her own. Miranda told Annie about what school was like for her growing up. They laughed and joked and for a few fleeting moments we were a real family. We weren't a family composed of a father hoping for the impossible, a mother stuck either in the past or in a haze, and a daughter longing for her parents.

We were a real, normal family.

About an hour in, I could tell Miranda was leaving us. Her expression turned blank and her mind was lost. She was too polite to tell Annie to stop talking and leave. While I still could, I mouthed "I love you" across the room to Miranda.

When Annie hugged Miranda goodbye, Miranda smiled and hugged her back. She said I love you too.

Annie hadn't heard that from her mother in a long time.

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A few days later Miranda died.

I was later told by doctors that when she fell and injured her head, a small hemorrhage occurred. It was so small that the doctors missed it when looking at her scans. Afterwards, when she was at the nursing home without supervision, she hit her head again, which worsened the bleed. It caused Miranda to have a stroke, which took her life.

After the funeral, my days were filled with anxiety. I stopped sending Annie to school for a week and I was given a leave of absence from teaching, only to spend each day worrying about something concerning Miranda – Did she think of me before she fell? Did she think of Annie? What was the last memory she had of us? Did she look at the flowers before she passed? Was she in pain? Did she know what was going on? Every time I saw a photo of us I wondered if Miranda

ever thought of that moment. The wedding pictures, baby photos of Annie. Memories I took for granted.

I slept in most days after crying myself through the night and then passing out at four in the morning, a drink resting on the nightstand. One morning, I awoke to the sound of something breaking on the floor.

I walked out to find Annie trying to clean up a broken bowl, its contents covering the kitchen tile. “Let me clean that up,” I said. Annie took a seat at the dining room table while I grabbed a new bowl and poured her cereal and milk, ignoring the puddle I was stepping in. “How are you, kiddo?” I said. *Kiddo?* I don’t think I ever called Annie *kiddo* before that moment. It was as if I forgot how to talk to my daughter.

“Fine.” She paused to swirl Lucky Charms around. “I miss mommy.”

“I know, Annie. I do too. It’s unfair what happened to her, to us.”

“Where’s Mommy?” Annie asked, looking up at me.

I didn’t know how to answer. Neither Miranda nor I had ever been very religious. “She’s in a better place.”

“That’s what everyone says,” Annie pouted to her cereal.

“I’m sorry. No one really has an answer to that question. We’re left to guess and say things that make us feel better about the situation. But I do believe that your mommy is in a better place.” We sat in silence for a bit. I checked the clock. “Hey, why don’t you go get ready? We have your doctor’s appointment soon.”

While worrying about what Miranda’s last moments were like, I also thought about Annie. Could she develop Alzheimer’s sometime in her life? I did some research about the

disease and found out that some cases of early-onset are inherited, known as familial Alzheimer's disease, caused by mutations to certain chromosomes.

Miranda's mother died shortly after having Miranda; she didn't really have the chance to develop the disease. Miranda's father was healthy, so far.

But what about Annie? Could she inherit the disease? I read up about familial Alzheimer's disease and discovered that genetic testing was available that could find out if she had the genetic mutation or not.

The neurologist said that the test couldn't predict with 100 percent accuracy. There are a number of factors that influence the development of Alzheimer's. I didn't care. I needed to know if Annie would suffer the same fate as Miranda.

Annie had her blood drawn and I scheduled a follow-up appointment for two weeks later. I told her that she'd be able to miss school that day, which made up for the fact that she had to get prodded with a needle. I assured her that the test was to make sure she didn't have cooties. When the nurse slid the needle into Annie, she burst out in tears, the first real emotion I had seen from her since she sobbed at her mother's funeral.

The two-week waiting period made me worry even more. Annie went back to school and I went back to work, but while teaching I had two trains of thought running through my mind. One was the lesson and the other was anxiety over my daughter's future. I had constant thoughts about the possibility that Annie would develop early-onset Alzheimer's. She had a fifty percent chance. Would she become unlucky like her mother?

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My leg bounced up and down while we sat in the waiting room. My forehead became red and sore. I had a magazine lying on my lap but couldn't focus. Annie sat next to me, calm as could be, enthralled by her coloring book.

"Bennett, Anastasia?" a nurse called.

We walked down a long hallway stopping at Dr. Lawson's office. The nurse went inside with Annie and helped her color. The doctor stepped out into the hallway to speak with me, shutting the door behind him.

He said, "Mr. Bennett, I'm sorry."

I went blank after that. I couldn't listen, couldn't handle the words he was saying.

Instead, I thought about Miranda in the hospital. Not when she fell, but after she gave birth to Annie. Miranda gently held Annie in her tired arms. Annie slept gracefully. I rested one hand on Miranda's shoulder and with the other stroked our baby's beautiful head.

Miranda had turned her head to look at me. She said, "Let's never forget this moment."