

## Pink Cathedrals

Seven months was not enough time to forget.

It was an unfortunate coincidence that the day of his sister's accident was also the day Adeline left. He knew that Emily's pain should eclipse his own, that on the spectrum of hurting, losing a child was surely worse than losing a wife.

"I'm going to take the pill," Emily said as they walked. Across the river MIT squatted like khaki temples of intellect over Cambridge. Ethan stared at rowers gliding by so he wouldn't have to look at Emily. When he did, he saw tight concern, as if even her face had lost the possibility of release.

"Good for you," Ethan said, relieved to be talking about someone else's pain.

The walks had grown out of these lonely months when they each had their own reasons for avoiding Sunday afternoons. When Emily's son was still alive, it had been a day of pancakes and pajamas, the one time in the week when life didn't interrupt. For Ethan, it was mint iced tea on the porch and afternoons in bed.

"You don't approve," Emily said.

"I never said that."

"You know how upset I was when Mark got the prescription without asking me." They sidestepped a toddler riding a push bike and Emily turned her head like a drooping sunflower. "But it actually worked. Mark isn't depressed anymore. He stopped having nightmares. He's fine."

Ethan walked beside his sister. “Fine” was a word for someone else’s life. He should feel glad for Mark and Emily. Between the two of them, they’d tried three antidepressants and four therapists in an attempt to blot out what they’d seen when a semi T-boned their sedan and severed their son from life. Traffic had been light, the roads dry, seatbelts buckled. The truck driver had been fishing for a CD. It was shocking how one thing not controlled could destroy everything. If there was a way to reconstruct life from loss, Ethan should feel grateful—for Mark and Emily’s sake if not his own. But when he reached for the helpful, useful emotions, he retrieved only the ones he’d like to forget.

Which was the point of the pill. Emily had often said so when she’d tried to talk herself into—or out of—taking it. It erased the painful parts of a memory, but not the memory itself.

Ethan thought it was the stuff of science fiction when she’d first told him about the pill. A hologram of hope that would leave Emily and Mark worse off than when they’d held the pieces of their son the day he died. But that night Ethan had gone home and scoured medical journals the way he’d searched for Adeline after she’d gone, as if each advance in research might be another clue to bring her back.

The breakthrough came when a lone scientist realized that all of the common assumptions about memory were wrong. Memories weren’t made like a video camera on record, in full color and ready to be replayed at will. Memories were rerecorded and distorted every time they were remembered, altered in light of the present moment.

Ethan found a study of September 11 survivors who had been surveyed about the day of the attacks. Just one year later, 37% of the details “remembered” from that day had changed. Three years later 50% had. Some of the most significant anecdotes had been altered completely. The man who had been in the bathroom when the first plane hit now recalled looking out the window,

watching its approach. The silver-haired man in the pinstripe suit who had jumped was now a young man with eyes and hair dark as sin. None of the study's participants were aware of these distortions; they believed that their memories were perfectly preserved, unchanged.

Ethan thought about the first time he'd kissed Adeline, sitting on a dock along the Charles, when they were just kids in college. Perhaps it was only in his transformed memory that she smelled like sunshine and hope, her mouth the breath of some exotic flower. Had she really whispered, her lips tickling his ear, that she could never love anyone else? In his memory her hair was cut short, black and silky. She was wearing cut-offs and a white halter top with no bra. He was sure about that part. At least he thought he was sure. These days he found himself questioning even the most reliable memories.

"Ethan, I worry about you," Emily started. When Ethan looked over she had the same pinched look of sympathy that everyone had when they heard about what Adeline had done. "Are you even writing?"

"I'll write when I'm ready," he lied, and then thought better of it. "Or maybe I'm done with all of that."

"She's not coming back, Ethan."

"You don't know that."

"We all know that."



It was cherry blossom season in Japan. *Sakura*, they were called. Like all of their trips together, it was Adeline's idea, a whim that would deplete their savings for another few months. It

was always worth it to see her open up like a bed sheet unfolding, to remember what they'd been. Adeline never tired of possibility, of places and lives that were not her own.

They flew into a gray, bleary-eyed Tokyo the second week of April and took the train south. Ethan was more impressed with the easy, otherworldly speed of the bullet train—*Shinkansen*, Adeline had corrected him. *No one calls it the bullet train*—than with Tokyo.

“There will be blossoms when we return,” she promised as they surged through wooded Japanese countryside and perfectly ordered towns. They took the train all the way to Beppu, where they soaked in steaming medicinal springs and ate dinner cross-legged in *tatami*-matted *Ryoken* rooms. She was right. Pale pink flowers flaked every tree branch like a child's dream of snow. Each stop they made was another place where spring had sprung in all of its impossible glory.

The plan was to spend three weeks following the blossoms north until they reached Tokyo. Adeline had a distant aunt in Kyoto and friends in Hiroshima and Nara. They'd stay in love hotels in the places where they didn't know anyone. She'd introduce herself not as Adeline, the optimistic gift of immigrant parents, but as Harumi, a salute to the old country. Her parents had also bestowed upon her their flawless, unsoiled Japanese. No one suspected she was a foreigner until they saw Ethan.

They took a thousand pictures under those ephemeral pink blooms. They picnicked with sake and sushi and rice balls from 7-11. Ethan kissed her neck and only stopped when she said that people were watching. In Miyajima they stood out under the towering orange Torii where the water had receded with the tide. It was sunset and Adeline reached for his hand.

“If we'd come here at a different time we would be underwater,” she said. “The tourists call it the floating gate, but it's a Torii, not a gate.”

“I’m glad we came when we did.”

She dropped his hand. She pulled from her pocket a five-yen coin, looked through its hole, and then placed it with the thousands of other wishes in the cracks and barnacles on the Torii’s cement legs.

“I wish we could stay here forever,” she said. “I wish we never had to go home.”



Emily had heard about the drug from a worn out military friend tormented by nightmares of Iraqi suicide missions and fear-soaked desert nights. One little pill had done what ten years of critical incident stress debriefing never did: it gave him back his sleep.

The day after Emily decided to take the pill, she came by Ethan’s apartment. He was already out of his work clothes, and stood in his doorway in sweatpants and a T-shirt, hoping he wouldn’t have to invite her in.

It was a simple matter of tweaking a simple chemical reaction, Emily explained, as if science were a hobby for her. All the pill did was block protein synthesis, which in turn stopped memory recall. Ethan imagined the proteins that made up his memory as liquid color, teardrops of yellow and blue narrowly missing the chance to become the first leaves of spring or the swish of her emerald dress.

“There are three of them in there,” Emily said, handing him a pill bottle. “I have more if you need them.”

“I’m not taking them,” he said. “I’ll deal with this the same way I always have. I’ll give it time.”

Emily stood on his front porch, her shoulders crumpling. It took Ethan a moment to realize that she was crying. He wrapped his arms around her and felt the wetness of her face through his shirt. He had adored his nephew, had taken him to games at Fenway and given him his old baseball cards. He envied Emily's easy tears.

"You're judging me," she said, pulling away. "You think I'm taking the easy way."

"I don't think there is an easy way," he said. "You have PTSD. It's different for me. I don't want to forget her."

"Mark still remembers the accident, but it doesn't hurt anymore." She paused. Ethan knew what was coming.

"She abandoned you," Emily said. "She left you in a country where you didn't even know the language."

"I remember," he said tersely.

"Wouldn't you rather not?"

"It's all I have left of her."

"She was a sinking ship, Ethan. You don't have to drown with her."

"I'm choosing to."

But that night he pulled out the pill bottle and felt its plastic clatter in his palm. If he'd been a drinking man, he would've had a glass of bourbon or Scotch. But it had been better for Adeline that he'd given that up. She lacked an enzyme that was needed to process alcohol. Asians were just lightweights, she'd told him. He'd thought she was kidding until he saw her with a drink.

He could still see her sitting on their front porch, sipping a watery gin and tonic as she watched the commuters pass through Jamaica Plain on their way home from work. Every few minutes the well-worn rails of the T rattled from a half mile away or a horn honked, details Ethan only noticed after she was gone. Back then he only saw the flush on her face and chest, the place where the cords of her neck strained when she ranted about the things they never did and the color of her disappointment. She'd only had half of her drink but was already drunk.

“I want to go back to Japan,” she'd said. “I want to lose myself there for a while.”

It was the kind of thing she often said, and Ethan had learned not to put much stock in it. It had been naïve of him to suggest that they go together, to think that it would solve anything. But at the time it had been his answer to the question of how to close the gap that had widened between them in the five years they'd been together. Perhaps she had been too surprised to object, or maybe she'd realized that leaving him in another country meant that she could run even from her own conscience, cloak herself in cultural camouflage, and pretend that she had never loved him or promised to spend a life with him.



They'd been there for three days, staying with her aunt, a surprisingly warm woman who showed no signs of resentment over letting them sleep in her bed while she slept on the couch. Everything—even Adeline's aunt—was compact and efficient, with no space for extraneous beauty or comfort.

They rented bicycles and saw a dozen or more temples. Ethan couldn't remember the names of any of them, but soon understood that they were simply one more excuse to see the *sakura*. Even the locals took pictures with their cell phones, picnicking on blankets over their lunch breaks. A

spell had been cast over this country where clocks were all in sync and trains were never late; time was suspended with the petals that clung to branches and lined every sidewalk.

“We’re all just worshipping in pink cathedrals,” Adeline said when they’d wandered down a side street and come upon a canal dusted with blooms, like stumbling into a Monet. “Who needs God when you have this?”

“And I thought Japan was a country without religion,” Ethan said, and Adeline smiled.

“It’s the only time of year when people are this happy. These blossoms will last for a week, maybe two. Then the leaves will be gone, too. These trees are dark skeletons for most of the year.”

“But they’re everywhere,” Ethan protested. “Why not plant a tree that is beautiful year-round?”

“They’re beautiful now,” she said. “Isn’t that enough?”



At work—at the job Adeline had convinced him to take—Ethan was supposed to be editing English from an instruction manual. Instead he read an article about rats conditioned to fear a loud noise they associated with an electric shock. Even when the shock wasn’t paired with the noise, the rats would freeze in fear, waiting. Then they were given an early version of Emily’s pills; the usual noise sounded, but this time the rats were relaxed. They’d forgotten.

Ethan wondered when life had stopped being about living, and instead become about avoiding pain.

To strangers and acquaintances, Adeline had been sunlight and beauty, nothing not to like. But to say that he’d fallen in love only with this side of her was not quite right. Even in the early



days Ethan had gotten glimpses of her dusky side, that underground river of discontent. There were tears the day after their wedding, nights when she went out with friends and wouldn't answer her phone, even a few times when she disappeared—but he had been patient and steady enough to weather it all. She'd always come back apologizing, saying she didn't know why she had to run. Ethan knew it wouldn't stop her from doing it again.

And yet there was something addictive about the way she needed him to forgive her. Most of the time life was good, and so it was easy to forget about the inevitable storms ahead. He'd never seriously considered that her behavior would lead to anything worse than a few sleepless nights or unanswered calls.

When they'd been dating for a year, he'd found her on his front porch.

"It's over," she'd said.

He'd stood there, too stunned to be sure that he understood her meaning.

"I know now that I could never make you happy," she'd said. "You want this nice, settled life, and I want—I don't know what I want."

He sat beside her, not touching her, sensing that this was what she wanted. There was something in the ring of her laments that made him think she enjoyed this, that the drama was all part of it.

"You never really *feel* anything."

"That's ridiculous," he said.

"It's true. Even now, you aren't devastated. You never cry."

“Of course I’m devastated,” he said.

Her body folded into itself like the collapse of a dream.

That night she got in her car and disappeared for a week. Her phone went straight to voice mail when he called. Her roommates said she’d mentioned going out of town, but hadn’t said where. In true Adeline style, she’d even given them several papers to turn into professors and asked them to take notes for her while she was gone. Her actions always seemed impulsive, but later impressively premeditated. And yet Ethan could never quite believe that she’d thought through the ways that she would hurt him.

Then she was on his front porch again, her dripping eyes and wet lips so oddly picturesque that he wondered if they were practiced. He’d been overwhelmed by her capacity for sorrow, amazed at the seemingly endless tears and her inability to explain. He’d put his arms around her but had no words worth speaking. He wanted to feel sad or perhaps relieved, but what he felt was not something he could tell her about. He felt weightless, thoughtless, like an actor who couldn’t remember his lines. When at last her breathing had calmed and she was able to speak clearly, she looked up at him and nodded as if this was what she’d expected.

“You’re the only truly good thing in my life, Ethan.”

After that there was talk only of the future.



The drug was what scientists called a PKMzeta inhibitor, but on the street it was just the forgetting pill. It was expensive, but already more than ten thousand patients had undergone selective memory erasure, or SME. So far there had been no unpleasant side effects, just thousands of people happily wandering around with pieces of their pain snuffed out.

It seemed too easy. You take the pill, focus on a single memory, and then allow yourself to drift off to sleep. When you awake, the memory will still be there, but any painful feelings associated with it will be gone.

“Shouldn’t I be under a doctor’s supervision?” Ethan asked even though he wasn’t planning on taking the pill.

“My doctor said you can do it at home,” Emily said. “I promise it’ll make things better.”

“And you?” he said, daring at last to ask the question he’d wanted to all along. “Has it made everything better?”

Emily flinched, but made a good effort at a smile. “Not everything,” she said.

“It didn’t bring him back.”

“No,” she looked away. “It didn’t.”

“But it helps.”

“It helps,” she said.

“Emily? Do you think that I don’t feel things?”

“Oh, Ethan,” she said, and then squeezed his shoulder.

That was Tuesday, when Emily had come by to apologize for getting angry the night before. Today was Friday, but it didn’t bring the relief it used to. Friday meant a weekend to fill, distractions to keep him from dwelling on the things he would say to her if he had the chance. Time was a decrepit shuffler who wouldn’t be rushed.

He wasn't ready to erase her. He sat on the front porch, the pill bottle next to his glass of iced tea. It was autumn in New England—the best time of year. Japan had its adolescent perfection, its intoxicating pink champagne-tinted *sakura*; New England had this: leaves of fire and sun and gold dying into amber. Adeline had loved this season, had said it was the reason she'd picked Boston over all of the other cities she might have called home.

Three pills rattled inside the bottle. Three memories he could anesthetize. Three times that she had hurt him or made him feel small. Emily would tell him to erase the day that Adeline left. But he wasn't ready to part with that one—not before he understood why she'd done it.



They never made it back to Tokyo. The last time he saw her was in Kyoto. It was Sunday. They were at a taxi stand, their luggage at their feet, when she told him she was leaving him.

“You can take a taxi to the train. You can take the train back to Tokyo.”

“Adeline, why are you doing this?” But she was already turning away. He tried a different approach. “Where are you going?”

“I found a place where the rent isn't bad,” she said, as if finding an apartment across the world were no different from staying at a friend's house for a night or two. “I'd rather not say where.”

“Does your aunt know?”

She bent over and rifled through her backpack. “Please don't bring her into this,” she said without looking up.

“I know you haven't been happy lately, but tell me what to do and I'll do it.”

“I’m tired of telling you what to do,” she said. Her face and body were a sculpture of hard lines: set jaw, squared shoulders, feet pointed away from him. “It never makes a difference.”

“Whatever it is, we can work it out. We promised that, remember?”

“I didn’t know what I was promising,” she said.

“Adeline, listen.” But when he saw in her face that grief had cemented itself like a hand print you couldn’t take back, he forgot what he’d intended to say. “Listen.”

She hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders, wordlessly reminding him how strong she was under its obvious weight. “I regret it. All of it.”

But then she’d kissed him like she didn’t regret anything, and he’d let her. She’d pressed her body against his just long enough for him to be sure that he could never forget the way she felt in his arms. She didn’t cry or yell or give him a chance to talk her out of anything. She simply pulled away, hailed a cab, and got inside. She was beautiful, and then she was gone.



He wanted to go back to the source, to the place where Adeline first began to think about leaving him. He traced his memories, conscious even as he recalled them that a network of neurons was shifting, weaving together more tightly within the electrical fabric of his mind.

He allowed himself for the first time in months to open her closet in hopes that the things she’d deemed unimportant would call to mind some forgotten detail, some clue to his present misery. Scuffed silver flats, a black leather purse with a broken strap, jeans in the saddest shades of blue, an empty tube of lipstick that for some reason she would never throw away. Perhaps there was a story there, but he wasn’t getting it. What he remembered today was that there was a listless

longing even to the way Adeline dressed. Maybe he could've predicted all of this if he'd paid better attention to the resigned shirt stains, the restless fraying hems.

They had been happy, mostly. There had been years when they had roamed the city arm in arm, talking about the places they would go and what they would do once they were married. They would live in Croatia, South Africa, Malaysia. If she'd been less supportive of his writing than Ethan had once hoped, she'd made up for it by filling his head with enough dreams to write a thousand books. Small comfort they were now, those painted glass bulbs that had crashed like ornaments from a tree when she'd left.

When they had been married for a little over a year, he'd found Adeline kissing another man at a work party, back when Ethan was writing for the newspaper. He'd been talking to a coworker for no more than ten minutes when he realized she was gone. He'd found her with a sloppy bearded guy, some friend of the party's host. Adeline was clearly drunk, and had seemed pleased when Ethan threw the guy onto the floor like a piece of cheap furniture. At home they had gone to bed in silence. Ethan had listened to her crying in the dark, his back to her, but was too tired to fight. She'd accused him of not caring and then stormed out of the apartment, taking only her purse and a thin jacket. Ethan had thought she needed space, but the next morning she wasn't back. By the afternoon he began to worry. That evening he called the police.

The following morning he pulled himself from sleep and she was beside him. She was still wearing the clothes from two days before, but smelled only of soft comfort, like a well-loved doll. She wouldn't say where she'd gone the day before. She said nothing about the fight they hadn't had. She made promises to be better and kissed him again and again. Ethan believed her.



His glass was empty so he went inside. It was another night alone of watching the light seep out of the sky, and the couples passing by on their way to dinner only made him feel worse. The pill bottle was in his pocket. He headed for the kitchen but sank down on the living room couch instead.

He closed his eyes. Imagined their hands folded together, an origami of tenderness. Adeline's dark head on his shoulder while she made promises she couldn't keep. There was a cruel memory lurking in the dark shadows of his mind, but he ignored it. For all of the yearning to forget, they were all just looking for a way to be remembered.

A sharp rapping on the front door startled him from sleep. He was surprised when his watch told him Friday night had come and gone. He moved to the door as in a dream. All at once he knew which memory he wanted to erase—if he were going to take the pill.

He opened the door to his sister standing there in the dark.

"I'm sorry," she said, pushing past him and sitting down on the couch. A gust of brittle, chilly air entered with her, the first whispers of winter. It was a bitter surprise after a day as rich in color as an oil painting. "I tried to sleep but I had to talk to you."

"It's two in the morning," Ethan said, but sat beside her. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry I pushed you," she said, her voice wobbling. "Mark was so sure, and I thought maybe he was right. But now—"

"Slow down," Ethan said. He put his arm around her shoulder and she leaned into him. "Tell me what's wrong. Start at the beginning."

She nodded, her mouth open as she inhaled. “I took the pill just like I said I would. The first time it seemed fine. The second time I felt like I was maybe going to get better after all. Mark and I had a conversation about having another child—can you imagine?”

“That’s incredible,” Ethan said, but he felt like something inside was breaking.

“But then I took the third pill, and I woke up as usual afterward and—I missed it.”

“You mean you missed *him*?”

Emily shook her head and trembled. “I wanted to remember what he felt like in my arms the day he died, but it’s gone. I think about the semi coming toward us, but then there’s nothing. I know what happened. But I miss the memory. I know it’s ridiculous, but now that it’s not there I think maybe there is something terribly wrong with not being able to cry when I think about my son dying. I miss the pain.”

Ethan tried to speak, but his words were crumbling. All he could think about was the memory that had come to him when Emily’s knocking had awoken him. He held his sister and closed his eyes.

It was their second wedding anniversary and they were supposed to be celebrating, but Adeline was obsessing over the price of the meal. It had taken Ethan until dessert to realize that she was angry that he’d quit his technical writing job. At home Ethan had offered a foot massage and she had sat on the couch beside him with her feet in his lap.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she’d said at last.

“I didn’t want to talk about work,” he’d said.

“Not that. Something happened. You’re upset.”



“I’m not upset.”

She could always tell.

“It’s nothing,” he’d said, and then changed his mind. “No one wants to publish my book. My agent called today.”

Sometimes, when he recalled the memory, he imagined her reaching for him. He felt the cool silk touch of her palms on his face. He could almost hear her say, like a mother to her boy, that she believed in him.

Instead she’d drawn her hands together in her lap and frowned at her perfectly manicured fingernails. She’d waited a long time to say what she was thinking.

“Some people see their failures as a sign that it’s time to move on.”

Now, with Emily sitting beside him and talking of the pain she wanted back, Ethan tried to remember what had happened next.

He opened the bottle of pills and poured them onto his palm. He knew without looking that they were yellow. Emily shuddered.

“You didn’t,” she gasped.

“Not yet,” he said. “But I think I’m ready now.”

“It’s not what you think it will be,” Emily said, reaching for the hand that held the pills. “I’m sorry I ever gave them to you.”

He tried again to remember what Adeline had said next, how she'd told him she didn't think he had talent, perhaps? That he was lacking something essential, a feeling or a certain brand of intuition? Whatever it was, it had been enough to make him consider, just for a moment, leaving her.

"Please, Ethan," Emily said, and then at last pulled her hand away.

He looked down at his hand, still trying to draw forth the forgotten memory. And then he wasn't thinking about the memory, but about what he was seeing. There in his palm were not three pills, but two.