

Regaining Memories

A Study of Repressed Memories in Fiction

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11 February 2013

9068 words

Bachelor Thesis on Creative Writing

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Introduction

The details of subjects authors write about may go well beyond their expertise. Gaining additional information on these subjects is necessary in order to make the world they portray in their story seem real, consistent and reliable. In a world where the internet is a gateway to bring in-depth knowledge to the masses, authors are forced to attempt to gain information on the details of their story. Dr. Carolyn Kaufman, clinical psychologist and writer and writing coach, aims to aid writers in reclaiming¹ accuracy in *The Writer's Guide to Psychology*: “Readers and viewers are becoming savvier about what is realistic and are less tolerant of mistakes. By incorporating accurate psychological information into your writing you will make your work more authentic and appealing to today’s increasingly knowledgeable and critical audiences” (Kaufman, 1).

Mistakes will damage the reliability of the complete work of fiction, keeping aside deliberate or contrived deviations from the truth. Authors must keep true to the world they intend to portray. If, for example, a complete lack of animals, as in Amos Oz’ *Suddenly in the Depths of the Forest*, is a part of that world, this is indeed acceptable, when used consistently. The same goes for psychological or physical disorders. If in the early chapters of a novel the main character is portrayed as lactose intolerant, it would be disconcerting if, in chapter seventeen, she is contemplating her relationship over a large milkshake.

This study will firstly investigate the psychological background of repressed memories, including terminology, overlap with other disorders and symptoms that may be included in describing the character’s problems. This information will subsequently be used to critically examine *The Memory Game* by Nicci French, in which the main character is trying to regain the repressed memory of witnessing a murder. A new piece of fiction, the plot

of which revolves around the repression of a traumatic memory, will then be offered, in which both the research on psychology and the manner in which French portrays the retrieval of repressed memories will be kept in mind. Finally, a reflection on the original work of fiction will be provided, explaining the influences of this study in the piece of the story presented.

Part 1. Psychology on Memory Repression

Defence Mechanisms

When a child goes through a traumatic experience, such as the death of a family member, (sexual) abuse, war, a natural disaster or witnessing a murder, his/her mind will need to activate mechanisms in order to cope with an experience that the child is emotionally not yet prepared to deal with². In *Sleeping Dogs? Wake them!*³, developmental psychologist Arianne Struik argues that, similarly to animals, we humans live by systems of action that preserve our own existence and the existence of our species (28). These systems can be divided into two main categories. The first is the everyday life system of action, that includes reproduction, sexuality, energy management (sleeping/eating) and caring for others (Struik, 29). The second is the system of defence, including panic, fear, freeze, fight, flee and submission, which attempts to protect the child by reacting to the danger he faces through instinctive responses (Struik, 29). This system will only be activated once a child's *window of tolerance* is exceeded. The window of tolerance indicates the level of stress that the child is able to endure. An experience with a level of stress that falls within this window is tolerable enough for the child to process. Outside the window of tolerance however, the child needs to activate his biological survival programs such as fight, flee, active or passive freeze and submission. Apart from this, psychological survival mechanisms may also be activated (Struik, 30-32).

The main psychological survival mechanism discussed in this study is repression. Avoidance and repression allow a child to shield himself from what happened. A child may refuse to talk about the event, pretend it did not happen, or even forget the trauma ever occurred. The emotional consequences of the event could be so great for the child, that the mind blocks the ability to revive the memory at any given time, causing *repressed memories* or *dissociative amnesia*.

Definition & terminology

Repressed memories and dissociative amnesia are terms that overlap slightly, but also differ. *Dissociation* is a widely used term originally mainly associated with *dissociative personality disorders*. One state of dissociation often confused with and subsumed under the term dissociative amnesia is *dissociative fugue*. This rare type of dissociative amnesia is very popular in works of fiction, because of the mystery it creates. Following a major trauma or stress, the patient will be confused about his identity, possibly assume a new name or start to travel in order to escape the trauma or stress. The patient is unaware of his memory loss. This state of being can end as suddenly as it began. This extreme type of dissociative amnesia, however, lies outside the scope of this study. The more widely used sense of dissociative amnesia shows similarities with repression. Differences between the terms will be specified later.

A child subconsciously dissociates himself emotionally from the reality of the trauma, in one of two ways: firstly, because of the intensity of the experience, the child is unable to integrate the event (Struik, 38). While experiencing the event, the child will disconnect the images from his everyday consciousness; the child dissociates from the event completely. After the event, the child returns to his normal state and has, completely or in part, forgotten what happened. Because the event has not integrated, the child can pretend it did not happen (Struik, 38). Struik also describes a second form of dissociation during a trauma: *partial dissociation*, which also occurs during the event. The child does experience the event, but does not register emotions or bodily sensations and sees himself from a distance. The child only has an objective account of what happened, the amnesia is limited to the emotions and sensations that would normally have occurred during the event. He does remember what happened factually. This could lead to the false assumption that the child has processed the trauma (Struik, 38).⁴ These kinds of dissociation can even lead to a dissociative personality

disorder.⁵ However, a third type of amnesia, not mentioned by Struik, is relevant here. A child fully experiences the event, but is unable to deal with it. Afterwards, he will shut down the memory of the event and repress it completely. Along with *dissociative fugue*, this type of *dissociative amnesia* may be integrated into works of fiction easily, due to the child's complete awareness at the time of the trauma and therefore the option of total recollection later on in his life. As explained by Leonore Terr, a child psychiatrist, this thought process is more active, though subconscious, because the mind needs to keep attacking the memory's existence (31). This is why in this study the focus will lie on the term *repression* rather than *dissociative amnesia*. However, it is important to note that the *repression* will refer to a subconscious state that allows the memory to be completely buried and forgotten, not simply *suppressed* by choice. To clarify, the difference between suppressing and repressing a traumatic memory may be considered as follows:

- a) Suppressing a traumatic memory means the event is not forgotten, but the child chooses not to talk about what happened or not to deal with it.
- b) Repressing a traumatic memory means that the event has been suppressed thoroughly enough for the memory of the event to be forgotten completely (Terr, 38).

One could call this type of repression *repressed memory amnesia*, due to the total absence of the memory from the accessible mind.

Processes of memory

Terr argues that an experience goes through three processes of memory: observation, storage and revival (Terr, 74). Firstly, the event is observed by the child. This includes observations perceived through the senses, emotional observations and associations the child makes, for as far as he understood what was going on. The experience will immediately be transferred to the short term memory, and subsequently to the long term memory, in this case the episodic

memory, which contains all the episodes the child has experienced, from ecstatic to happy to sad or terrifying or simply everyday occurrences. This transfer to the long term memory, Terr argues, will activate several associative paths. The child will apply his knowledge of death or sex to the experience, and will realise to the extent of his knowledge what the event means for himself, his family or the people involved. At this stage, the subconscious psychological defence mechanism of repression might be applied to the memory of the event in order to keep it from revival (Terr, 74). A child who has experienced a traumatic event that includes important members of his family would be more likely to repress the event, because of the clear ramifications it would have for the child's future. Examples throughout this essay will refer to the traumatic event in the work of fiction in part 3 of this study, but will be based on facts found in case studies and research on repressed memories. In this work of fiction, the child has witnessed the murder of his sister, committed by his father. Revival of the memory would cause hatred and fear of the father, someone who is supposed to love and protect his child. The father's change in character after the murder, his more friendly and cooperative attitude and the lack of abuse in the child's surroundings after the event contribute to the subconscious decision to keep the memory locked up. The child is desperately wishing for a trustworthy and admirable parent, and will subconsciously force his mind to believe this possibility and cling to the love he has for his father. This may include disturbing past events, in this case witnessing the abuse of his mother. The child has been actively suppressing shocking events his entire life in order to survive, and will therefore have subconsciously perfected the defence mechanism of repression. This will allow his mind to activate the mechanism after the major traumatic experience when it is most needed, to the extent of forgetting the event ever occurred.

Symptoms of trauma

The psychological trauma may cause physical symptoms such as pain, insomnia and night terrors. The child may also experience behavioural problems; he can become irritable, aggressive, fearful or on the other hand, he may show withdrawn, apathetic behaviour. (...) In addition, the child may develop a Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, which may include reliving emotions that are connected to the traumatic experience, becoming emotionally weak or the avoidance of triggers (Dutch Knowledge Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry).

A traumatised child may be confronted with a *trigger*; “a signal that in itself is not particularly dangerous, but that reminds the child of a situation that traumatised him in the past” (Struik, 33). The trigger could be anything, from loud noises, people who raise their voice, being touched without warning, to locations where the trauma occurred or even tokens such as a shirt similar to the one the child’s attacker was wearing.

A child who has repressed a traumatic event may experience symptoms stemming from his trauma. However, it is not clear what symptoms can be linked to the major trauma it has repressed and what symptoms may be caused by earlier experiences that have allowed the child’s repression defence mechanism to become skilled enough to repress the major trauma. Terr speaks of a case where symptoms occur right after the traumatic event until late in the victim’s adulthood. A child pulled out her own hair until it bled, possibly to recreate the wound she had seen on her dying friend’s head. A woman with a repressed trauma continually takes a lone child on the street home with her, because that is how her father had targeted his victim, a murder she was a witness to (Terr, 61). “Someone who is truly traumatised cannot stop this kind of behaviour. The behaviour is compulsive. They may not be aware that the behaviour is linked to the trauma. But it exists and must be repeated” (Terr, 80).

The symptoms of a child with a repressed trauma may be even more pervasive, because the trauma is not dealt with. The conscious mind has forgotten the trauma, but the subconscious mind is actively forcing it back into oblivion, with all kinds of possible consequences.

Memory Resurfacing

Terr argues that once a child has repressed a memory, the memory will only resurface under the right circumstances. A traumatic memory is more likely to resurface after a child has, for example, moved out of the home where the trauma occurred or has broken off contact with the people involved in the trauma. When adults have children of their own, they become more in touch with memories of their own childhood, which could raise questions or cause triggers (Terr, 34). Repression is such an active process that the mind needs to be at ease for the defence mechanism to withdraw. This also means, because the process is active, that a child may repress the same memory more than once. When a child with a repressed memory is confronted with a trigger, his skilled repression mechanism could repress the response the trigger would usually cause in traumatised children, and therefore repress the experience again (Terr, 31). However, when the mind has let its defence down and a trigger occurs, the memory may resurface. A study by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Rita Fisler investigated (partial) amnesia in victims of traumatic experiences:

Affect seems to be a critical cue for the retrieval of information along these associative pathways. The affective valence of any particular experience plays a major role in determining what cognitive schemes will be activated. In this regard, it is relevant that many people with trauma histories, such as rape, spouse battering and child abuse, seem to function quite well as long as feelings related to traumatic memories are not stirred up.

This shows that the defence mechanism of repression allows the victim to function very well while the event is repressed, because he does not address the trauma. The psychological protection realises a child cannot deal with the major trauma and intends to keep the child safe until he is able to cope. However, some symptoms and other disturbing memories might still be present and harmful.

Conclusion

After a child goes through a major trauma, he may be forced to protect himself from the consequences to his life if he were to accept the occurrence of the event. At this stage, the mind may repress the experience to the point of amnesia, which can occur in several different forms. Even though the child has repressed the trauma, its effect may still be revealed through either psychological, physical or behavioural symptoms. When the memory is triggered later on in the child's life, the memory may be partially or completely revived, or repressed once again.

Part 2. Which Memories are True?

Over the last few decades there has been much controversy on the subject of repressed memories⁶. Professionals who treat patients who have suffered through trauma, either before or after they can remember the event, tend to support either the *repressed memory view* or the *false memory view*. Surprisingly few authors have written fiction on this particular subject, possibly because of the lack of certainty of whether or not regained memories may be considered reliable. Right during the time when the debate on repressed memory had reached its peak, in 1997, Nicci French, a writing couple consisting of Nicci Gerard and Sean French, published their first novel: *The Memory Game*. At first, the novel appears to revolve around the revival of a repressed memory through therapy. However, it is revealed at the very end of the story, that hypnosis had been used without the patient's knowledge, and the regained memory turned out to be false. However, writing on a subject that is bound to cause controversy, is more likely to attract attention and make people wonder about the science behind the subject. *The Memory Game* might even have convinced readers, unschooled in the literature of psychology, that the false memory view is the valid view. Because readers generally lack knowledge on these subjects, supporting a theory or transferring the wrong kind of information in the novel could influence the point of view of more people than one might think.

One of the details that shows the memory of Jane, the protagonist of *The Memory Game*, to be dubious, is that she has not exhibited any symptoms since the trauma occurred. Before the novel's plot commences, she had lived a normal, happy life, with a loving family that, despite its small bumps in the road, seemed to be functioning well. If Jane had actually witnessed a murder, it would be improbable for her to forget it, as repression is less likely to occur as the age of the child in question rises. "The consequences of chronic traumatisation at

a young age, when the brain is still in the process of development, would be more drastic than the occurrence of trauma at a later or adult age, when the brain had already grown properly before the traumatic event occurred” (Struik, 36). This would mean the defence mechanisms occurring would be more realistic in older children and adults, because according to Struik, a young child’s brain is more basic, more instinctual⁷. Jane’s past did not indicate recurring traumatic experiences, which would make it less likely for her to repress a single traumatic event. If her mind had never needed to suppress before, the act of repression to the extent of amnesia would be extreme.

Jane’s therapist convincingly draws Jane into the belief that she is repressing an important memory about the death of her childhood friend, Natalie, whose body had recently been discovered. “But then he went back yet again to my memories, or non-memories, of the river bank on the afternoon when Natalie was last seen. This time I actually showed some impatience. He was insistent” (French, 127). In research on the questionable techniques of hypnotherapists, it is often argued that the therapist puts the idea of the repressed memory in the patient’s head, because the therapist believes he is seeing symptoms of it. Jane simply feels that she could benefit from therapy because her life has become very hectic after recent events such as her divorce and the discovery of the body. The idea of subconsciously knowing more about Natalie’s death than she is letting on is enforced by her therapist, because he believes she is hinting at a repressed memory: “Something you said to me very early on interested me. You said, “I was there”” (French, 127). By the time he is certain of the hidden secret of Jane’s mind, he convinces her by asking her personal questions and seemingly concluding what he wants to believe. “It has been said that if you answer positively to more than half a dozen or so of the questions I put to you, then this may be evidence of a submerged trauma” (French, 153). The questionnaire seems dubious and not very scientific. Jane does not ask about it and her therapist does not explain its reliability further. Jane was a

rather dark and insecure person, which had been misinterpreted by her therapist, partly through the questions in the questionnaire, as having a secret buried in her subconscious. If the repressed memory had turned out to be true, this would have devalued French's research on the subject somewhat, since the lost memories of people who have regained their memories through therapy, specifically hypnotherapy, have been proven to be less reliable than memories regained through natural triggers. Methods of these therapists are often questioned, because of their suggestive nature. As French also explains, memories can to some extent be influenced during hypnotherapy by current events or problems in the patient's life, and can even be shaped by the hypnotherapist. Indeed, a study on repressed memory by Geraerts et al. shows that cases of spontaneous revival of repressed memories are less likely to be false than memories regained through therapy. None of the memories of the 16 patients who had undergone therapy could be supported by independent evidence. On the other hand, 15 of the 41 cases of spontaneously revived memories could be connected to supporting evidence (Geraerts et al.).

The description of Jane's revived memory of Natalie's murder, concurs with the aforementioned psychological processes. When the vision of the murder first appears, it is immediately very clear and detailed:

For the first moment I could see nothing with the sun burning my eyes, nothing but speckled gold explosions. I narrowed my gaze and forced myself to look. It was clear. Simultaneous perceptions: A girl lying on the grass. Screaming and screaming. Natalie. Dark hair, flaming eyes. Held down. Above her was a man, his hands about her throat. Her arms and legs flapped uselessly, then slowed and stopped. I tried to shout but it was as if my mouth was stopped with ashes. I tried to run, but my feet were stone blocks. The girl was let fall and lay still. The man had his back to me. He

was dark haired, not grey. He was slim not stout. He was clean-shaven, not bearded.

But there was no doubt. It was Alan (French, 212).

Jane describes the state of her body as being consistent with *active freeze*, one of the responses consistent with the child's biological survival system⁸. The psychological survival system of repression could logically have occurred afterwards, partly validating the trauma amnesia. Even though this memory turns out to be false, the therapist in the novel does make legitimate points about the possibility of repressed memories, in which he wholeheartedly believes. "We're starting to discover that the mind is capable of a self-protective amnesia. But the hidden memories are not lost. They are like files in a computer which can be recovered with the right triggers" (French, 231).

One small detail in the novel might be considered a hint of the false nature of the memories the therapist's other patients have regained. One of these women, Melanie, says: "We're used to being disbelieved and undermined. That's why we suppressed these traumas" (French, 261). Firstly, the word suppressed rather than repressed, as indicated earlier, is not used correctly, as the memories of these women have been regained by therapy, and had earlier been lost, not simply suppressed. Being disbelieved and undermined would be a reason for suppression, indeed. The child would rather not think or talk about the event, in fear of reactions the truth would provoke. The terror of a child who represses a trauma to the extent of amnesia, however, must be greater than the fear of being disbelieved and undermined. The extreme defence mechanism of repression is only put to work when it is necessary for the child's survival.

The views portrayed in a work of fiction may influence the reader's assessment of a controversial topic such as memory repression. The protagonist of *The Memory Game* would not be likely to have repressed an event so traumatic, considering her family history. She had been pushed to create a false memory through hypnotherapy. This kind of therapy has been

undermined because of its suggestive nature. Yet, because the memory that had been created in the novel could have fitted perfectly into the story and partly psychologically as well, French also shows just how easily these memories can be mistakenly regarded as true. The manner in which she integrates the false memory view into the story makes it intriguing for readers both with and without psychological knowledge.

Part 3. Happily Ever Before

We have reached an impasse.

I look at her. Blond hair covering half her face, the other half lit by the faint light of the fire, her features transcending their initial innocence through a facial expression of pure concentration and those eyes intensely focussed on her reading. The couch on which she has sat herself down in the corner could never look more like an invitation to snuggle up against her, her legs bare to one side of her body, my shirt hanging loosely around her. It is too easy. I fall in love with her far too quickly. I have not prepared myself. I have not prepared my loyalties to change, to fade.

“My brother said if we like it we should move quickly, there are lots of buyers for something like this. He can meet us tomorrow and get everything in order, check out the place?” She looks at me, expecting some sort of an answer, as if she’s hoping I will be able to tell her it is going to work out this time. I smile at her and squint kindly while placing my warm glove on her thick winter coat, caressing it gently.

“Ooh, phantom touch,” she says, laughing at the gesture. After the car has pulled up, we stay put for a minute or two to browse the exterior. The matte orange shade of the stone seems fierce in the snowy, cold surroundings. Hundreds of bricks, cut off from one another by dark brown cement, slightly calming their brightness. Even more illuminating orange spots had been left behind when the window’s shutters were removed, seemingly not too long ago. The white window panes had been abandoned to the exposure of winter, creating several darker spots among the white. A grey gate, open to invite us in, to lead guests onto a faded salmon coloured pathway, the stone of which had been laid down with careless precision, once upon a time. At the end of it, three steps and a porch, unknowingly denying the visitor’s

ability to turn around and walk away. The garden, unmanned and unharmed, shows an extravagance of green. No plants particularly, just green.

We gather ourselves and jump out into the freezing air. She grasps my arm tightly while we walk up to the door. I ring the doorbell. It sounds like a sick goose. I know, I visited a geese farm once. Joseph opens the door for us within seconds. His “Welcome” sounds more and more robotic every time he shows us a house. I move my jaw around a bit to keep it from mirroring Joseph’s tight smile. We walk past him into the house and wait for his inevitable speech. I usually try not to listen and start to wander around on my own after having spent a few seconds pretending to worry as much about asbestos’ general existence in the world as Joseph does. To continue my cycle, I start in the kitchen. It seems to have been remodelled not too long ago. The steel drawers have no scratches on them whatsoever, the inside of the fridge is whiter than the whitest of piano keys and the skirting on the junction of the floor and the wall is still in position. I think about it for a second. I come to the conclusion that I have never seen a room where the plinths actually take their job seriously. I lean on the counter and look around. My hand wipes imaginary bread crumbs off the surface while my mind has drifted off to us having lunch in this kitchen. I probably should have eaten before we left.

I walk past Joseph and Jillz, their hands dramatically gesturing at the chimney in the centre of the room and each other. I drown out their voices and walk back into the corridor, up the stairs and to the left. I stop, turn, and go right instead. A small piece of the door I am facing has faded. I stare at it and make out a few letters. AN. Anna, I gather. It must have been a little girl’s room.

My hand on the doorknob, a chill comes over me. I silently curse estate agents for not heating the places they show to potential buyers. I turn the knob and walk into a room exactly like the one I had once spent so much time in. Sleeping, mainly. At the age of seven, my room, up in the attic, had turned against me. The wind blew the trees against my window,

causing a screech or a howl or a whistle I could never place. I had run down to my parents countless times, telling them I couldn't sleep when in fact I was simply terrified. For months, I would clean up my room to make sure nothing looked like anything that might resemble anything monstrous at night. When, finally, my father couldn't take my nightly whining anymore and told me to get back to my room, I blurted out: "I can't go back to sleep I'm too scared." I cried and ran to my mother, hugging her tight and hoping it would soften his mood. He never could stand it when we cried. He walked up the stairs, ordering me to follow him. He made me open the doors before him as he carried my mattress to my sister's room. It was a large room, and she was only four years old. She liked having me sleep over every night. I liked not being alone, pretending to accept the night light for her benefit instead of appreciating it for my own.

It looks exactly the same. I can just place the blue polka dot wall paper on the white, now rather rough walls. I walk over to the window and rub the cold dew off with my sleeve. The view is slightly different. I am not sure how many houses down the road our old house stood exactly. I open the window to let in some fresh air. The house must have been empty for too long, the air has become so oppressive. I take a deep breath and turn around. The wind causes the door to sway an inch.

There's blood on the side.

I instantly turn around and grab the windowsill. I lean on it and take a few more excessive inhalations of the cold. I close my eyes but can only see the door again. Blood, right on the side of the door, beneath the latch. I can hear a loud bang and turn around again. Just a few feet over, a large hand grips something, something small.

A loud wail.

Blond hair swings back and forward, back again. The grip gets tighter, the wailing louder, the strands of hair have become a haze of yellow.

“Stop crying! Stop it, stop crying! You stop! Now!” a far away voice calls out. I am holding my breath, unable to do anything. Unable to move, talk, shout as I should. Unable to breathe, so much it hurts. My left hand is wrapped around a wooden bar so hard I can feel a large splinter has crept into it. I want to close my eyes, but can't. I am forced to watch all the blond being thrust against the door. I hear the loud bang again, and see her small head open up. The blond colour is raped by the red, all the red, in the split second it takes her to fall those few inches to the floor. The purple dress takes longer to reach the ground and needs a moment to settle around the small body. Underneath her hair, I can only see an eye and her nose. The eye seems to stare at something beside me, I flinch and for a moment it seems to look right at me, until it doesn't. It doesn't look at anything anymore. The red slowly wrecks her remaining innocence, as the drops creep over her nose and drape beside her eye, like tears of anger. The red spreads further out onto the carpet.

The large figure falls down beside her and holds his shaking hands a few inches from her face. He doesn't touch her. He doesn't touch her anymore. I blink forcefully and walk towards the spot where she had fallen. I touch the ground with my left hand and look at the small scar between my thumb and index finger. The carpet feels warm for a second, but immediately turns cold, so cold. The hairs in my neck stand up from the icy draft I've let in. The blood has gone. My stomach hurls, I throw up on the exact spot where her body would have been, almost twenty-seven years ago.

Hey kiddo, where have you been? Listen. Your mum came by, she took Sheila with her. We talked about it and from now on it's just gonna be me and you, okay little fella? We're gonna get out of here and have a great adventure, just the two of us. How's that sound? What's that what happened to your hand, it's bleeding. Here, let's have a look at that.

The blur of words didn't actually mean anything. The calm tone of his voice helped. Somehow, it helped James believe nothing actually happened. Nothing bad.

He let his father promote Sheila's absence, their trip, the good times they would have. At first he would still think of her, and hurt. Then, more often than not, he would stop thinking about her, to stop the hurt. It was easier to believe, to follow the adventure. To trust. His mind started to become blank, ready for all the new. All the better.

"James? James, where are you going?" her voice echoed in the background. I take the car straight to the airport. The first flight to France takes me to Paris, with a four hour drive still to go. It'll do. It will have to. Jillz keeps calling me, I keep ignoring her. I need to talk to him first. I need my ridiculous memory denied. I need it to be yesterday.

Marc leGuillet was the closest thing to a friend my father has ever had. Back then, Marc was a rugged man in his late forties, known for his solitary lifestyle. He didn't get out often, bound by his long lost love, Eloise. They had married when they were still teens, drunk on the promise of a long life together. Their first mistake; miscalculations of reality, fogged by fairies, satyrs and unicorns surrounding their every move, pretending to exist. This must be what happens between people constantly. Plans are made, carried out badly or unable to be carried out due to unforeseen forces of misfortune. Eloise died when she was twenty-two, together with their newborn son. Ever since, the pedestal Marc had placed her on had grown taller. He was drowning in his own reality, Eloise being the only one with a breath to give, yet

unable to deliver. After Marc and my father had become friendly, he spent most of his time at our share of the adjoined house. An alternate reality where it had still happened, but there was no need to hide it. He'd tell me about her every chance he got, which I absolutely loved. In my head, it sounded like a fairytale, like the ones mum used to read to me. A man and a woman fall in love, but before they can live happily ever after, he must prove his love and devotion to her and conquer the great big threat that lies before them. The threat of their happiness being snagged away, grasped in the magnificent claws of death.

They spoke of nothing but their lost loves, together. Dad always made it sound like their stories were similar, which I thought they were. She had left us, but we loved her very much. Even though in our case, she chose to leave us, it didn't make it any less painful. They could talk about it for hours, what they loved about them, what they would do for them – do differently, if they would be here again. They spoke of different things, things I could not understand or things they didn't want me to understand. There always seemed to be some large void, a hidden abyss that my father would not let me, or even Marc, be a part of. It wouldn't have mattered, not then. I didn't try to understand then because I didn't need to change anything.

I hide out at the hotel for a few days before I've gathered the nerve to face Marc. As I am sitting there, just sitting there on the bed, the images keep rewinding in my head.

After sitting next to her for a while, my father lifted her up and took her away. I'd never known where he'd taken her. I'd never known. Full stop. I'd never remembered before. I stayed put for a minute, an hour, three hours, it could have been anything. My hand was bleeding. I went up to the attic and sat on the guest bed, which we never used. I made sure not to make any sounds, I didn't want to be found. I didn't want to have to speak. In spite of it all,

the memory never seemed real. The trust I had in my father placed a large shadow over its credibility.

When I heard his footsteps on the stairs I wanted to leave. I stayed put. When he asked me about my hand I wanted to speak. I remained silent. When he told me to come with him, we needed to go now, I obeyed.

The house looks exactly like it did before. I'd been seventeen when we'd stayed here, right before my father had died. The stables in the back, just around the stone gateway, were where I'd had my first kiss. Alizé lived with her parents, just a few blocks from our house. We had met when my dad was ill for about a week, and I started walking around on my own more than usually. I noticed her because she was so unnoticeable. She was browsing through magazines at the local shop. She didn't make a sound, she could even turn the page and no one would notice. Her hair was a faded brown that had nothing particularly interesting about it. The only colour I could find on her were her rosy cheeks. Her lips weren't noticeably coloured, her eyes were brown and even her clothes lacked brightness. Only those cheeks. I stood and looked at her for a couple of seconds, simply wondering about what I had found. When she turned and looked back at me, the pink cheeks turned into a reddened blush.

The days after, while my father was still sick, I had spent every single moment with her. I loved the fact that no one else would be able to find colour in her, that she was all mine. No one would bother taking her away. She wouldn't matter enough.

I was very surprised when I kissed her. I hadn't planned to, I hadn't dared to, I hadn't even known I wanted to.

The only time I'd minded going back to England, the only time we'd stayed in one spot for almost a year. The only time I had met someone of my own.

“Well that didn’t take long,” he says as he opens the door. He doesn’t exude warmth. Not exactly. I shrug evasively and walk past him through the door. He’d think I was seventeen again.

I start pacing around the room, avoiding the figure, now standing tall in the doorway. After a minute, he sighs.

“I’ll go make us some tea.” He looks at me, my eyes red and my brow tight to conceal my desire to cry.

“Something,” he adds.

It takes a bit too long for him to return, but I don’t mind. When he does, he is carrying two glasses filled with a transparent substance. He hands me one and orders me to sit. I take a large gulp without asking what it is and sit down, ever so obediently. Neither of us decides to speak. Our glasses are slowly drained, our faces grow worn. The pink elephant was a murdered little girl.

“He always talked as if she’d left with her. I wondered why she wouldn’t have taken you, too, but why would I have ever considered *this*? Who could ever think of something like this? I told him to leave. I threatened to turn him in, but he was all you had, I simply couldn’t. When I found out he’d died, suicide was it? I couldn’t do that to you. I should have told you, I know that, but you were just a kid. You were better off not knowing. I thought him dying would be the end of it. But then you showed up a few months ago, and I thought you must know, you must have found out. But you didn’t say anything so I didn’t say anything and I thought it was alright. Your behaviour was a bit off but then you were following your father’s route, your route, you were remembering everything a lot better than it actually was. Kind of like me and Eloise. It makes me happier to remember the good, I choose not to remember the bad. I wanted to give you that.” He looks at me intensely.

The glass of vodka in my hand, barring the vodka, is shaking. My eyes are focussed on the bookcase behind Marc. I am trying to think about why a man would have a copy of *Wuthering Heights*, but fail. The memory was real. It was the guilt. That's why he had left me, the guilt. Marc's outburst had been the end of him. He couldn't live with the guilt anymore. Needed to eliminate himself from the mix. I open my mouth to speak and, to my surprise, am actually able to.

“What did he tell you happened, exactly?”

Marc puts down his glass and turns to face me. I turn away slightly in response, not really knowing why.

“We were talking about Eloise, at first, and your mum. I was mad at Eloise for no reason, just mad at her for being gone I suppose, and your father could relate a bit too well. He told me how your mum had never been faithful to him, how she'd stay away for days. He never knew who she was with, one guy or different ones. He'd only ever known for sure when she left him for another man. A man she had been seeing for quite some time. He told me about how they would fight and he'd hurt her and, sure he didn't mean it, but it wasn't all him. And how after she'd left he'd been so angry, just so very angry, that one day he couldn't get Sheila to stop crying, tried it all he had, but she just wouldn't stop crying. He got so angry, that, just for a second, he thought it was your mum's doing all over again and he hurt her, badly.”

His eyes were wet with tears, though none had reached his cheeks. His gaze had wandered off completely.

“He took her to the yard and buried her, no one would see it, you remember how that yard used to look? With all those pets you'd collected and parted with over the years. He'd left notes for neighbours and your school and such, explaining your departure, yours and your

sister's, with some family emergency. He took you away and people would just assume you'd both left with him."

All I wanted was to run back to Jillz, run back to the night we had met and not worry about anything else. Ignorance was bliss, and right now, all I could ever hope for was bliss. She could be bliss, even for a second. This memory needed some bliss shoved back into it. At least I knew where to start. I would start. Slowly.

"No daddy it's your turn, you have to deliver the mail this time." I hand him the toy lady bird, opening its wings to help him get going.

"Alright, let's see then. How many letters do you think you'll get?"

"I think five!"

"Five, really? That's a lot of people writing to you, isn't it?"

"Yes. Did you write to me too?"

"Well, I don't need to, I'm always right here, I think they'll be from all your other friends. Like Pete, remember? Alright, let's see." He puts some of the candy wrappers underneath the ladybug's wings.

"Ding-dong. Mail delivery!"

"Oh yes it must be for me, thank you mister postman." He opens the wings and lets the letters fall onto his lap.

"One, two, three, four, five... Six. Daddy I got *six* letters! That's many, isn't it?"

"Pffff six letters, I can't remember ever getting that many. Let's see how many I get, now."

"Yes but don't look, you have to guess, okay."

As his inexperienced fine locomotion skills struggle to stuff a couple of candy wrappers under the wings, his father's gaze wanders off towards the surroundings. They have

travelled to a lowly populated part of Austria. All there is to see outside that window is trees, mountains, fields, and a small cottage or train station every now and then, hints of the grand architecture this country has to offer. His father did not see any of that, he was someplace else entirely. He'd get like that sometimes, never telling his son why exactly, never making him worry. He would pretend everything was just great, put a big smile on his face to make sure his child's worries went away. Worries the size of 'there's a piranha under my bed and it wants to eat my toe' or 'there's a splinter in my toe no you can't use a needle it will hurt,' not to mention catastrophes like 'I left Santa seven cookies but he only ate three, do you think he didn't like them? What if I never get presents anymore!' He looks at his son, unable to suppress a half-smile.

“Ding-dong! Mail delivery!”

Reflection

In the excerpt of the story the exact moment where the repressed memories are regained is described. Several aspects of the preceding study have been integrated into the manner in which the memory is regained.

James has grown up and is looking for a house with his girlfriend, Jillz⁹. The death of his father has created a distance between him and his father. He is desperate to feel closer to him again, and tries to revive their life together by travelling to all the places they had been to together. Finally, he gives up¹⁰ and decides to slow down and be with Jillz. He starts to feel at ease, a necessary factor for overcoming repression. Repression is a very active process, as discussed in part 1. James feels calmer and safer because of the change of surroundings. He quits travelling and his father is gone. The world that replaced the reality of his sister being gone has completely changed. He is in love with someone who offers a world of calm that puts him at ease, as well. However, he still loves his father and has good memories of where he grew up, which is why he wants to move into a house in the same neighbourhood. He enters a room similar to the room the murder had occurred in, a few houses down the street. His new mindset, in combination with the slight movement of the door, causes the trigger for the memory's revival.

His father does not know James has witnessed the murder, and tries to convince him his mother has taken Sheila away. James starts to suppress the memory because it hurts too much, because he needs to be able to trust his father. The suppression turns into repression, which eventually causes him to have forgotten the event completely.

Following the recollection of the murder, Marc leGuillet is introduced. The murder is confirmed by someone who had nothing to do with it in the first place. By creating a setting where the murder is confirmed, the memory is confirmed, as well. This would mean that the

existence of repressed memories is found to be true in the story. By allowing the memory to be regained through natural causes instead of through therapy, the memory itself and the possible symptoms that may have occurred elsewhere in the story are not undermined.

Marc's recollection of the abuse of James' mother would make it more likely for James to have such a thoroughly developed defence mechanism that it could cause the memory to be repressed. His mind has repressed before, because the reality is too difficult to deal with.

The ending of this piece of the story shows the father in a different light. The story revolves around the father's moment of weakness, his actions, yet the last scene shows him to be a kind, loving father. In showing that someone who has done something terrible will not be terrible at all times, a subject for a possible follow-up study is given: *How would James' father have been able to get to the point of murdering his own daughter of only five years?* Several pieces of the story are based on his father's difficult character. The murder of Sheila and James' endearment for Alizé, for example. James' father murders his daughter because his daughter looks like her mother. When she starts screaming and crying, his mind goes back to every fight he has ever had with his wife and the betrayal of her departure and the years before. He loses his grip on reality for only a second and takes it out on Sheila. In the following years, James and his father travel to many places, but the only lasting relationship James' father is able to attain is a friendship with a man. He no longer trusts women and this is reflected onto his son. When James starts to pay attention to a girl, he feels grateful for her dull exterior. His mother had left him and his father has never trusted a woman to come into their life again, causing James to hold on to someone who would, in his mind, not easily walk away or be taken away. This makes him feel more in control, it makes him feel like he owns Alizé. His fear of her being taken away may subconsciously be caused by his sister's death.

The final sentences of the story contain the word *suppress*, intended as a small pun towards this study.

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¹ Kaufman explains how writers often use psychological terminology without realising that the popular image for the term is not necessarily correct.

Writers, directors, and producers rarely consult experts about psychological problems, but since most of us assume they do, myths are inadvertently perpetuated, one storyteller to the next. In other words, most writers believe they have a good understanding of psychology, even as they rely on outdated and inaccurate stereotypes, many of which were generated by their equally uninformed peers (Kaufman, 1).

² For convenience sake the child will from this point onward be referred to as a male, in part because the protagonist of the story included in this study is also male.

³ *Sleeping Dogs? Wake them!*, is a book by Arianne Struik that describes cases of slumbering trauma and provides theoretical information on the subject of trauma. In order to help traumatised children in a safe and structured manner, Struik has developed a method that stabilises the child until he is ready to deal with his trauma. Every paraphrase or quote used in this study has been my own translation of Struik's Dutch words.

⁴ For a more detailed theoretical account on dissociation during trauma and ways in which a child may deal with a trauma (when he is forced outside his window of tolerance), I recommend a further reading of *Sleeping Dogs? Wake them!*

⁵ Children may originally be more inclined to dissociate. The trauma caused the dissociation to occur for the first time. Once the brain has become used to dissociation, this will continue to be the preferred technique. These children will dissociate themselves from events that we would consider to be unimportant, because they have never learned how to deal with emotions or excitement. When children are forced to dissociate at a very young age in order to survive, this could disrupt the integrated functions to the point of *structural dissociation* of the *personality*. The personality and the subconscious will be divided into one or more parts (Struik, 2011). *Sybil* by Flora Rheta Schreiber is an example of a novel on dissociative personality disorder, based on a true story.

⁶ Since including *The Memory Wars* (the battle between the false memory view and the repressed memory view) would make my research too extensive, I have severely limited the inclusion of studies on this controversy. If the readers are interested in this subject, they might look at the work of Elizabeth Loftus, a firm believer in the false memory view. However, as Terr also notes, the studies Loftus conducts take place in a clinical setting, which is not to be compared to the extreme settings trauma-victims have been forced in. The way our mind works in extraordinary situations is difficult, if not impossible, to simulate.

Another, in my opinion rather subjective, article on false memories is "Dispelling Confusion About Traumatic Dissociative Amnesia" by Richard McNally.

Finally, I would like to refer to the article by Geraerts et al., whose approach on the subject seems more objective.

⁷ See *Sleeping Dogs? Wake them!* for a more detailed account on different 'kinds of brains' that lie at the very base of a child's development.

⁸ *Active freeze*, as Struik explains, is different from *passive freeze* (numbing the body) and *submission*, even though these are often confused with one another and subsumed under the term *freeze*. Active freeze means the victim keeps himself completely silent to avoid the predator from attacking.

⁹ The name *Jillz* refers to a kind of cider. The complete story shows the significance to both the name *Jilly* and the drink, combined by James into a nickname for her after they first met.

¹⁰ The manner in which James decides to travel and act like his father also has to do with triggers and symptoms consistent with repression. However, the complete storyline would be too extensive to include in this study.