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Magic of MEMORY

MEMENTO NORA

a short story
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illustrated by
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The body falls like a leaf in a rain of stinging ash. Mother covers my eyes, but I still hear it hit the pavement. Gray covers everything.

I wipe and wipe but nothing comes clean. I'm so not glossy. Someone tussles my hair.

"Nora, wake up," Mom says quietly. "It's just a dream."

I shake my head. It was real.

Mom sighs. "Go back to sleep," she tells me. "That memory will be gone by lunch." She adds, with a glossy smile, "And then we'll go shopping."

I can't get back to sleep, though. The memory won't let go. Everything in that moment is flash-frozen in my brain. Every little detail.

At breakfast, I pick at my egg.

"My little girl is making her first visit to TFC," father says, bounding down the stairs in his usual hurry. He pecks me on the cheek and then mother. She flinches.

"You should be more careful," he tells her, a thin, little smile on his lips.

She dabs makeup on her right cheekbone after he leaves.

We take the bus downtown. The windows are armored outside, covered with ads on the inside. Mine says "Forget your cares at TFC." The letters float like clouds over a flock of sheep grazing in a lush green field. Fifteen new locations opening soon.

At our stop, a cop scans the identity chips embedded in the palms of our right hands. He warns us a bomb just exploded down the block. Mom says we'll go to the mall afterwards. You need a high security rating just to get in.

Her usual TFC is sandwiched between a frozen yogurt and a coffee shop. The coffee place is boarded up, but rubble still clogs the sidewalk. Someone has spray-painted a word across the plywood. Memento.

"I've got enough points for sundaes."

Mom flashes her TFC card in my face.

As we tiptoe through the debris, she rattles off how many points you need for T-shirts. Security bots. Blue eyes. Her chatter, however, doesn't drown out that dreary body-on-asphalt sound echoing inside my head.

My hand trembles as I push open the door. The white letters on the glass say Therapeutic Forgetting Clinic No. 23. Inside, the air is cool, the music soft, and the colors bright. I feel glossier already. Mom heads straight for the counter and swipes her card. Number 174 prints out. The now-serving sign blinks 129.

Mom clears her throat. "It's her first time," she says.

A frizzy head pops up from behind the counter. The lady it belongs to goes all sad and smiley at me. She takes my hand and then flattens it out hard, palm up, on the counter. She runs her scan gun over my chip.

"Welcome to TFC, Nora James." She hands me a shiny plastic card and the number 175. "Watch the orientation," she calls after me as I follow Mom to a table by the door.

I play the orientation on my screen; Mom watches a romance on hers. Mine drones on about how powerful emotion, along with adrenaline, can etch a memory into your brain, making it hard to function productively. Doctors used to call it post-traumatic stress disorder. Back then, you had to put up with the nightmares and the panic attacks. Now you just pop a pill and go on like nothing ever happened.

The video ends. I scroll through the games menu while the now-serving number creeps slowly up. I decide to play my own game, though. Guess the trauma. Those four are easy. Soldiers. They've

probably seen someone killed, or worse. That girl staring at cartoons saw a bombing. So did that guy with the ugly glasses. OK. This game isn't exactly hard. Something blows up in the city all the time. Fifty people are here on a Tuesday morning. They go into that door dreary. They come out glossy.

I notice this boy, maybe 14, watching me. He has stitches over his right eye and a broken arm. He angles his cast so I can read something written on it. That word again. Memento.

Another number is called, and his mother drags him toward the treatment room door.

I look up that word on my screen. A memento is a reminder of the past.

Ten minutes later the kid comes out, trailing his mother. She hurries out the door. He sticks his tongue out at me. Moron, I think, until I see the white pill sitting on his pink tongue. He coughs into his hand. He taps his cast and then tosses something into the trashcan.

I watch him leave. He's not glossy. He's not dreary either. He's something else. He's all there.

Our numbers are called.

"Please describe the event you wish to erase, Mrs. James," the chubby doctor tells Mom. "This will activate the memory so the drug will work appropriately," he says. Mom looks at me, but the doctor reassures her I won't remember what she says.

She starts talking. I brace myself to hear the gruesome details. The explosion. The body. The ash. Instead, Mom says something about father. He called her a stupid cow and slammed her face into the doorframe.

Mom is gray. I feel ashen. She washes down the pill the doctor hands her with greedy gulps of water. Her face goes slack. Glossy. Not all there.

Then the doctor turns to me. I tell him about the body falling and the ash covering everything, but all the time I'm thinking about Mom. She comes to the clinic at least once a week. Now I know why. Would she put up with her life if she remembered? Would anybody? Would I?

I stare at the white pill in the doctor's fat, pink hand.

"It doesn't hurt, Nora," Mom says. Her thin, little smile tells me I'm not getting out of here without taking it.

I put it into my mouth, but I'm not glossy.

On my way out, I spit the pill in the trashcan. ☹

Angie Smibert worked for NASA's Kennedy Space Center for over a decade, before turning to writing full time. Her work has also appeared in numerous other magazines, including *Pedestal*, *Alien Skin*, and *Bewildering Stories*.



I WATCH HIM LEAVE. HE'S NOT GLOSSY. HE'S NOT DREARY.



NEARLY EITHER. HE'S SOMETHING ELSE. HE'S ALL THERE.