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Loretta Ellsworth



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Twelve Years Ago

It's a warm spring day when Mom takes me to the playground near our apartment. I jump on the swings and kick my three-year-old legs and soar as high as I can, until I think I'm going to flip over the top and come back down the other side.

"Don't go so high," Mom calls. She looks small from up here. I'm big and not afraid. I puff out my chest and let go of one side of the swings to wave at her. *See? I'm fine.*

But in that instant I lose my grip and slip backward. It happens so fast I don't have time to react. I fall and land on my head in the indentation of dirt and sand under the swing. When I wake up I'm surrounded by Mom and a bunch of other people. In the distance the sound of a siren closes in. I'm scared and embarrassed, but I'm told I only suffered a minor concussion and don't even have to stay in the hospital overnight.

Mom tells me all this later because I don't remember anything about the accident. I don't remember much before that, either. But something happened that day, because soon after, I started experiencing voices in unusual ways, like Mrs. Wheeler next door who sounded like bacon sizzling, or Halle Phillips, my best friend from kindergarten, who sounded like yellow daffodils, or my dad, who sounded like a quiet stream.

And something else happened, too, because ever since that day I've remembered *everything*, as though my memory somehow got stuck in the "on" position. I remember the starchy scrambled eggs I ate for breakfast three weeks later, and the contents listed on the back of a cereal box that I read five years after that. I remember the pain from gashing my hand on a piece of broken glass when I was four and having stitches. I remember Halle and how she cried on September 23 because she'd just lost her front tooth, and how I told her she was pretty. I remember how she hated tater tots and I said I did, too.

I remember my dad helping me ride a two-wheeled bike when I was three and a half, how he adjusted the training wheels when it leaned to the left, and how afterward it leaned to the right. I remember two months after that, how Mom sat me down on the plaid sofa, how she ran her finger along the pattern as she tried to find a way to tell me that Dad had been in an accident. I remember feeling my heart stop in that instant when she said he was dead, as if I'd died, too, but then it started beating again, even though it hurt and I had to put my hand on it to ease the pain.

That same feeling washes over me whenever the memory of it pops uncontrollably into my head, maybe during a movie or

a stroll on the beach, or in the middle of math class. And I'm back there, experiencing it all over again, and I put my hand on my heart and feel it break a little bit more each time.

I'm lucky in a way. I have four months of memories of my dad. I can still recall the scent of his aftershave all these years later; I can see his greenish-blue eyes and his quiet smile. I can remember Halle, even though she moved away after kindergarten. I remember her daffodil voice and her pigtails pulled so tight that it looked like her face hurt.

I've never misplaced a shoe, lost a library book, or forgotten a homework assignment. But there's a downside. Not all memories are good. That's why last month when I blew out the candles on my cake for my fifteenth birthday, I only had one wish. I wished I could forget.

How We End Up in Minnesota

Imagine remembering every day of your life as though it just happened. Halle is as fresh in my mind today as she was ten years ago. I kissed her three days before she moved. We were on the playground in the middle of the monkey bars; Halle was hanging across from me by her arms and I caught her off guard. I grabbed her shoulders and planted a big kiss on her lips when she was looking the other way. She almost fell, then she wiped her mouth off and climbed up the bars away from me. She tasted like milk and Oreo cookies, our snack that day.

And now I'm here at her school and even though we haven't seen each other since kindergarten I can't picture her looking like any of the girls I see in the hallway. They smell like hair-spray and perfume and cigarettes and they wear low-cut tops that show off their curvy figures. Of course Halle must have changed. I know that. But I haven't looked her up yet because

I'm a gutless coward. What if I've walked past her ten times already? How would I know? My heart does one of those little flip-flop things just thinking about it.

Mr. Shaw places the quiz facedown on my desk. I turn over the top corner and peek at it, expecting a B. I inhale a short breath when I see a red C-minus, with a note next to it: *Talk to me after class.*

Brad Soberg hoots when he gets his quiz. He's a farm kid twice my size, but he's 90 percent muscle from moving hay bales around his barn and lining up dairy cows for milking. He pumps a solid fist in the air next to me. "B-plus!"

Mr. Shaw nods from across the room. "Don't get too excited. I always grade easy on the first quiz."

Brad looks over at me. He has a better chance of getting milk out of me than seeing my score. C-minus! Is anyone else looking? I feel as if the grade is written on my forehead in red ink. It's the lowest grade I've ever gotten. Of course, I haven't been in a regular school for three years, either. I crumple the test into my backpack and look out the window. Mr. Shaw's room faces the parking lot of Madison High. It's 2:36, four minutes before the bell is supposed to ring. A row of twelve buses is already lined up outside in a diagonal pattern, like yellow dominoes waiting to be tipped over. My bus is number thirty-three and it's the second bus from the right. Three years ago I rode bus number four and the year before that I rode bus number two. In kindergarten I rode bus number fourteen and I always sat in the fifth seat from the front on the left-hand side.

Mr. Shaw's voice brings me back to the stuffy classroom. Even with the window open, a stagnant odor of sweat and old

books fills the room. That triggers memories of my fifth-grade track-and-field day when I placed fifth in the long jump and Kent Herzog placed fourth, and Stevie Kessler placed third, and . . .

Gotta stop this. Dr. Anderson thinks the wiring in my brain changed when I fell off the swing all those years ago. That's the only explanation he can come up with for the free-floating memories that crowd my head. I concentrate on my watch, an atomic solar quartz wristwatch, and soon the memory eases and I'm thinking of Halle again, who's the reason I'm in Minnesota. At least part of the reason.

"Your assignment is to read the first three chapters of *The Great Gatsby* for tomorrow," Mr. Shaw announces. "And don't be surprised if there's another pop quiz."

I'm not used to this place, to the swarm of bodies and books in the hallways. My head swirls and I try to stay focused and in the present. It's hard with the memories pressing in, triggered by random thoughts and smells and sounds. There's a constant battle in my head over past and present. Too often, the past wins.

For most people, memory is like sand. It shifts and settles over the open spaces of the mind, piling memory on top of memory until what's left is a fragile sand castle in the brain, one that will crack and leak out all the old memories when the flood of new ones pours in. But my memory is like stone. It's hard and permanent, and most of all, it's always present, a living monument to my own history.

The bell rings and I wait until everyone else has left before

I approach Mr. Shaw's desk. He looks up and hands me a piece of yellow paper with writing on it.

"Since you're new this year, Baxter, I've arranged for a student to be your study buddy the first couple of months."

Mr. Shaw's voice is a tall pine, deep and woody.

"Are you talking about a tutor?" I croak. "I had an off day. I can do better."

"This isn't a punishment, Baxter. I think it's nice to start off ninth grade with a friend to help you study. Are you open to that?"

"Uh, sure." What can I say? That I got carried away marking the letter C on my exam? I take the note and stick it inside my copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

Mr. Shaw flashes an easy smile. He's one of those teachers who wears blue jeans and a T-shirt to school. His beard is long and thick. He could be mistaken for the janitor except for the lanyard around his neck that all the teachers wear. "So how do you like Minnesota so far?"

I consider how to answer that. Wellington is two hundred miles north of Minneapolis, and it feels isolated up here, as though you're in a different country altogether. The roads cut through forests of pines and lakes and man-made hills of reddish dirt, full of deer flies and mosquitoes. The woman who rented us our house bragged about the new Dairy Queen in town. "It's warmer than I thought it would be for a town with a sign advertising Polar Bear Days," I say.

He lets out a low whistle. "Wait a couple weeks. This is about as far away from Southern California as you can get."

That was the plan. Get as far away from Dink as possible. He's the main reason we moved here. My mind flits back to three years ago, when I testified against him. Now he's out of prison. Moving all the way to northern Minnesota may have gotten him out of sight, but he's never out of my mind. I shiver just thinking about him.

"I'll let you go so you don't miss your bus," Mr. Shaw says. "If you have any questions or problems, feel free to talk to me."

"Thanks." I'd rather face the deer flies. I hurry to catch the bus and sit alone.

I should be enjoying this, being in school again, but Dink ruins it. He's like the Boogeyman that I was afraid of when I was little, but back then he didn't have a face and I didn't know his name was Dink. Mom said that he'll be on probation for a long time and can't leave California. He doesn't know where we moved, and there's a restraining order. But a restraining order doesn't stop the Boogeyman.

So I can't help but look over my shoulder on the walk home from the bus stop. The two sophomore girls walking behind me think I'm checking them out because I keep looking back. They giggle and whisper, so I focus on the street in front of me until I reach our townhouse, then jog up the driveway. I flash a quick look at the street before I open the door. The two girls both burst into laughter.

I plop my backpack on the kitchen table. There's a note on the fridge under a red magnet that says, *Frozen pizza. Be home at seven.*

The nice thing to do would be to wait for Mom, but I'm starved, so I turn on the oven and find the pizza pan. Unpacked

boxes line the wall. One of them holds the spice rack, but Mom packed the kitchen and I don't know which box it's in. I'm too lazy to search for it now, so I'll have to eat my pizza without chives.

While the oven is preheating, I pour a glass of juice, open my backpack, and take out the Gatsby book. The yellow note sticks out the top. Mr. Shaw's handwriting is fast and messy but the name pops out at me: Halle Phillips! My heart skips a beat, and I'm back in kindergarten. It's Monday, February 23. Halle drew a horse with two heads. I told her that if a horse had two heads, it would die. That made her cry. A month later she told me she was moving. That made me cry.

Mom thinks we moved to Wellington on a whim. It was 5:47 p.m. on August 14. She'd closed her eyes and poked her index finger at a spot on the map of the US that I held in front of her. But I moved the map right before she put her finger down. I remembered that Halle had moved to Wellington, Minnesota. I didn't know if she was still there, but I liked the thought of finding out. Besides, Mom's finger was pointing toward North Dakota, and I figured Minnesota had to be better. Mom let out a shriek of delight. "I've always wanted to see snow," she said, and three weeks later we're renting this townhouse and I'm enrolled at Madison High School.

My life is moving so fast it makes my head spin. Mom already has a job as a waitress at the Tin Cup Restaurant—not her ideal job by any means, but it's a job. And we're far away from Dink.

What are the odds that on the second day of school you're assigned the girl of your dreams—well, the kindergarten

version of the girl of your dreams—as a tutor before you’ve even had a chance to look her up? And what if she’s not the girl I remember? What if she’s changed into someone completely different from the girl from Pascal Elementary who confessed that her favorite color was yellow because I wore a yellow shirt to school that day?

She might not even remember my name. As hard as I find that concept to be, most people don’t remember their classmates throughout the years. I’m counting on that. Because the last thing I want is for Halle Phillips to remember Baxter Green, The Memory Boy.