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Called "one of the up-and-coming masters of SF short fiction," by *Locus*, Ray published his first science fiction story, "Mutability," in *Asimov's* in 2015. His latest tale, inspired by a mondegreen—a mishearing of a song lyric—that his daughter brought home with her from preschool, is . . .

CATCH A TIGER IN THE SNOW

Ray Nayler

I met a woman whose job is to help you forget.

Erasing your memories seems like something no one would trust a stranger with, I know. But then—therapy, right? We trust strangers with that. Maybe we think strangers have no reason to hurt us.

No personal reason, anyway.

When you overhear someone talking about "my therapist," you can be pretty sure they don't know where that person lives. They tell their therapist about all their most intimate dreams and fantasies, their imagined revenges. But if they showed up on their therapist's doorstep, this person they trust with all their secrets might call the cops.

Whenever you use a word, there's another word you are not using. When you use the word "therapist," the word you are not using is "friend."

Try not to think of the word they're not using when they say "client."

I met the woman whose job is to help you forget in a café. It was one of the cafés I visited to look for misplaced sunglasses.

I never buy sunglasses. I just walk into a café and go to the front counter.

"I think I left my sunglasses here."

"What did they look like?"

"They were tortoiseshell. I can't remember the brand–they were a gift. They were my favorite sunglasses, too. I'm always forgetting things, it's the worst."

When people ask you for details, be vulnerable instead.

"I know what you mean. My mom always said I would forget my head if it wasn't attached to my shoulders."

Someone should try to estimate how many moms have said this to their children. I think it's several armies of moms. That's my best estimate.

My mom certainly said it to me. I used to imagine it: I get up for school, get dressed, and go to walk out the door.

"Are you forgetting something?"

I run into my bedroom. There is my head, its hair mussed, a little sleep-sweaty, on the pillow with its eyes closed.

I see all this, of course, even though I don't have a head on my shoulders. Which makes no sense unless you are five years old.

I pick up my head. But I don't put it on—I just stick it in my backpack. I don't want to wake my head up—it looks so peaceful. Maybe it's having a wonderful dream it will tell me about later.

The clerk rummages through a box and comes up with the perfect sunglasses. I can tell as soon as I see them that they are the ones: I'm going to look like Steve McQueen as a girl.

"You are a lifesaver."

Want to build trust? Make people feel important.

I put the sunglasses on. They fit, of course. I have the kind of face that almost all hats and sunglasses look good on. A useful kind of face.

I buy a coffee. I tip really well.

On my way out, a woman says to me, "That was nicely done."

I sit down at her table without being invited. Breaking boundaries makes people feel like anything could happen. Do something unexpected.

It's also an intimidation tactic.

"Do you think so?"

Of course, only the rich can afford someone to help them forget. If you are struggling to keep your studio apartment, working three part-time jobs and fitting side hustles in wherever you can, forgetting it isn't something you can afford. The poor are left with their real, haphazard recollections of events, as disordered as their lives.

If you speak dismissively about people as a group, like I just did about "the poor," you can pretend you aren't one of them. The illusion only lasts a few moments, but it's worth it. It's like a miniature vacation from the truth.

"Do you do this with anything besides sunglasses?"

"I collect gloves and scarves in the winter."

"Is it for fun, or profit?"

"A bit of both."

It's true. It's always a thrill—as if there is a magic drawer under the counter of every café that can produce exactly what you want. I mean, as long as it's something small and easy to use. I swear sometimes that I say, "they were leather gloves, light brown" and they materialize in the drawer just as the clerk is reaching to open it. They grow there, just for me.

But also, I can much more easily afford a cup of coffee than a pair of new gloves.

I turn the conversation to her.

She's just finished a commission, and she's excited to talk about it. Not in detail, but in generalities and hints. Her shop is down the street from here. She's excited to show off her work, but confidentiality means she can't. She's like a designer who can only show you a bit of lace from a collar, a bangled strap, and has to let you guess the rest.

Her name is spelled Elena but it's pronounced Alona. English never did learn to

spell. Instead of learning to spell, English just gaslights everyone into thinking there's something wrong with them. It's that kind of language.

Her shop is like a beauty salon, but with a lot more wires and screens. The wires have been hidden as discreetly as possible. The word that comes to mind is "camouflaged." Like a polar bear covering the silly black nose nature left her with, so the seals don't see it bobbing around in the air like a stray punctuation mark. A really murderous period, maybe. (Although personally, I think if there is a punctuation mark that has murder on its mind it's the semicolon).

"They call it bespoke forgetting, but it's not really about forgetting," she says to me. "You don't just *erase* memories. You can't just leave them with a whole section of their life that is just a blank. They would panic. They would lose their sense of themselves. Of where they are in the world.

"So we call ourselves 'memory tailors,'" she says. "Because what we do is create what we call 'fitted memories,' and that is a real art."

The problem is, Elena explains, people don't remember real events. The memories they have aren't lies, exactly—they are more like versions. These versions are similar to real events, but with the rough edges smoothed off. "The way I would put it," she says, "is that memories are sanded down. The mind doesn't like those little places where your idea about who you are might get snagged."

A memory isn't something that happened, Elena explains. It's a *story* about you. It's what you tell yourself about where you've been, who you are right now, where you are going. What's important when you are tailoring memories is to make sure they fit the person correctly. But not the real person—seeing something like their real self, as they actually are in the world, would freak the client out. You have to tailor the memories to the person they've *convinced* themselves they are.

"Do you memory tailors ever experiment on yourselves?" I ask.

"On ourselves, on each other. It's part of learning. Like tattoo artists, covering their own thighs with bad tattoos. But if we really mess up, we can always revert to the back-up."

That's why they are required to store their clients' real memories, she explains. Everything they take out, they have to hold onto for a decade.

That's the main cost of the business—paying for memory storage.

It may be a big expense, but you can tell she's not doing poorly for herself. Everything about her memory salon says high class.

Forgetting is a growth industry.

Back at her apartment, Elena walks me through her vinyl collection, played through a system that proudly displays the candles of its exposed vacuum tubes.

Her apartment floats high above the city's nocturnal body, with the streets flowing below like blood in a coronary angiogram.

"The audiophiles will tell you analog is about sound quality," she says, putting on a record. "But it's not about that at all. It's about surface hiss. That's what keeps you coming back. Noise in the delivery system. The ghost of time."

Months later, on a walk through the snow, Elena tells me the hardest parts to fill in are the gaps. The things people don't have a memory for at all. Sometimes, memory tailors have to create memories to fill a particularly suspicious gap.

I struggle to find what would be suspicious about a gap in memory—"I mean, in an average week, I can't remember what I did last Tuesday."

But that's not a suspicious gap, Elena explains. Suspicious gaps are narrative—like, how did you get from one thing to another. Not a forgotten average day, but a whole lost sequence. Something important, like how a relationship was formed. Or when it started to go wrong.

"How do you do that?"

Displacement is the answer—you have to try to "sum up" the gapped area with a displaced feeling—the feeling of what is missing, without the content.

We've taken our gloves off to hold hands. The backs of my hands are cold. Her fingers are like warm stripes across them. Her hands are always warm.

What the mind wants is coherence. Coherence doesn't have to be about the plot—it can also be about something as simple as emotional tone.

It's like when your mind puts together words to a song. You mishear the words, and maybe the ones that you make up don't make sense, but they work for you—they fit what you *imagine* the song to be about.

When Elena was a little kid, she had an auditory disorder. She sat near the back of the class, and when the kids sang "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" she head it as "Crinkle, Crinkle, Little Tar." She didn't know what the Tar was, up above the world so high, but it went into her pantheon with the trolls, the fairies, the talking dolls, the giants. The Tar, sitting on its throne in the dark sky, crinkling as it shifted in its ill-fitting, noisy clothes.

They aren't allowed to do childhood memories, Elena said. But if they could, it would be so fun. Children remember the wildest things.

She taught the song "Crinkle, Crinkle, Little Tar" to her brother, and he taught it to his friends. Pretty soon, it was the standard in their neighborhood. They found out it was wrong, but they kept singing it anyway. Their Tar was not like her Tar. They decided a "Tar" was something like a glowing smiley face, with one eye. It sped around above the world in a flying saucer, fighting crime.

My mishearing was "catch a tiger in the snow" instead of "catch a tiger by the toe."

When you think about it, Elena points out, that makes more sense.

I ask her if rich people ever ask for really weird memories. Anything perverted or totally out there. It turns out they aren't allowed to ask for anything at all. This is a regulation, too. All they can do is tell the memory tailor what they want to have removed.

But memory tailors have reputations, Elena says. And of course the ones with the kinky reputations never have trouble getting clients.

I want to know what counts as kinky, but she says it's nothing really serious. The regulations would forbid it. Memories are mostly about real people, and that kind of thing could get everyone into trouble.

"Plus," Elena says, "memories can instigate behavior. They can move people to do all sorts of terrible things. We don't want to make monsters."

"Is that what you would be into?" Elena asks me. "Something with a bit of kink to it?"

"No," I say. "What I would want is something totally unexpected. Something fantastic, that couldn't possibly be real."

The problem with that, she explains, is that then the client would know the memory was implanted.

But that's the point, I say—I would want to know.

I realize that what frightens me the most is the idea of not knowing whether what I remember is real or not. What I would want is to have some kind of marker. Then I would be able to relax into the implanted memories. Watch them like a movie, rather than worrying about what is real, what my mind itself got wrong, and what someone else has gone in and changed.

"So you're saying what I do scares you," Elena says in the dark. We're having this conversation while watching the colors on her bedroom ceiling change—there is a building across the street from her lit up for Christmas, and the colors go from red to green to white to blue and back again. Nobody thinks of blue as a Christmas color, but it's almost always there.

"No—what I am saying is that memory scares me. Doesn't it scare you?"

What I should understand about memory, Elena tells me, is that it isn't there to record things. Memory is there to *do* something, the same way an organ or a limb does something. It's active. It was formed by evolution for a purpose, the way the heart was formed to pump blood.

"Okay," I say. "In that case, what you do does scare me."

"I guess it should," she says. "I mean . . . it scares me. And that's healthy, right? Shouldn't a surgeon be scared of what she can do with a slip of the knife? Fear means she's paying attention."

It all falls apart around money.

It isn't anyone's fault. She is one of those people with that rarest of things—a *career*. It seems like a magical word. And she worked for it, sure—but she was also tailored to it. A career was an expectation her parents had for her from the start. They knew she was going to do something amazing with her life. Everything she remembers about her childhood says, "you are going to be someone." Her parents are always there, helping her along. They know she has a great future, even if they don't know what it is.

Whatever my parents knew about me, it wasn't that. My parents were just trying to survive their own lives. What I did with mine was my business. I mean—they cared about me, but the future is very far off when you have to think about whether you will be able to afford groceries next week.

I didn't understand my parents until I grew up into my own generation's version of the precarious life my parents lived. It turns out, surviving is something most people have been doing for longer than any of us can remember.

Elena talked about an island trip we would take together—two weeks, coral atolls, fish like underwater rainbows.

I told her I couldn't afford it.

She told me she would pay—it didn't mean anything, the money. It wouldn't unbalance anything.

I told her I couldn't afford that, either. Not to worry about it, I meant. I couldn't think like that. In my world, there was always a balance sheet. Someone always owed. Someone was always owed.

In my world, you broke things up into payments and spread them out over time. You couldn't afford to live, otherwise. But the payments overwhelmed you anyway. You paid for that new coat for months, and every time you wore it, you thought about what you might be doing to your credit rating.

"I don't want to go on vacation," she said, "If I can't go with you."

"I don't want to go on vacation," I said, "If I can't be there the way you are there."

I remember this as the conversation that broke us up. We were still together for months afterward, but this was the crack.

It's like anything—there is a moment of failure, but that comes much later. What is more important is the moment where the thing *begins* to fail. The moment when it feels like it could still have been fixed. If you could go back and unsay what was said.

But that is wrong—this wasn't the moment when we began to lose one another. That moment came long before we even met. It was buried somewhere in our childhoods. It happened when she began to form one way—into a confident, serene person with a hand that could hold the metaphorical scalpel over a mind and select what to cut away without a tremor. It happened when I started becoming who I am—the kind of person who steals other people's lost sunglasses. Not because it's fun. Because I can't afford my own, I tell myself it's fun. Then I make myself remember it as fun.

This is what I learned from her—and sometimes I wish I had not. Memory is there in us to *do* something. Sometimes, maybe most of the time, it's there to lie to us. Not out of malice, but to help us hold ourselves together.

We keep our last date light. We know this is it. We are trying to be very careful with one another. I don't want her to feel guilty for who she is—she is no more responsible for the privilege she was born into than I am for the chaos of my childhood.

And she doesn't want me to feel inferior to her. She doesn't want me to feel messy and unmade, the kind of person who could never afford her services. Could never afford to put a self together that has a clear story to it. A direction. A self with a kind of *career*, I guess—a clear idea of where you are, where you are going, and even your retirement plan for after you get there.

It is late March, and still cold. As we start out on our walk along the river, the sky has that snow feeling to it—the clouds that seem to bring night on sooner, a feeling in the air of the moisture being gathered. I have been hoping for snow. What is on the ground has gone ugly and brown. There is a dirty scum of ice in the gutters.

"Maybe it's because of my job," she says, "but what I really want, most of all, is to be remembered well. Sometimes, it seems as if the relationship isn't what matters at all. What matters is the way it is remembered afterward. I want to be remembered as a part of you. As someone that got you to a better place. I would like to be that for you."

In the middle of this, the snow begins to fall. It falls in those heavy, leaf-like clumps of late winter, as if the snow is a reference to leaves about to appear. It falls heavy and straight down.

"You are that, for me. That's how I will remember you. I promise."

And then I see it.

A wind has come up, the snow swirls and breaks apart.

It is moving in toward us, its muscles like waves breaking over its shoulders. The snow clings to its whiskers as it sidles up to me.

It nuzzles against me, nearly knocks me over, but I am not afraid. I run a hand over its wet back, where the snow has been melted by its living heat. It walks a curve around us and then sits down next to her.

She places a loving hand on its striped head. I get down on my knees. I press my face into the face of my tiger, forehead against forehead. I sink my fingers into the folds of its skin.

I feel the snow falling on my skin, settling in my hair, melting on my scalp. I smell the tiger, like no other smell. I feel my knees growing cold as the wet snow melts through my jeans.

It's all perfect. And it is mine, forever. My tiger. Mine, to return to whenever I need her. ❍

Almost Immortal

The weight of millennia
on her ancient bones.
Loneliness, an echo
in each and every breath.

—Bruce Boston