

*The Life Lucy Knew, Karma Brown*

“For in the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and, of course, its consequences.”

—Elie Wiesel, *Night*

**1**

I have a complicated relationship with my memory.

Most of us, me included, believe our memories are fairly accurate. That events happened the way we remembered them, like a video camera capturing a scene: hit the play button and you'll see the same images, the same order of events, unfold before your eyes. The quality as good as it was the first time the scene was captured.

But apparently that isn't at all how it works.

Like the bike I got when I turned eight, with the rainbow handlebar tassels I'd been coveting, and the tinny bell I insisted on ringing incessantly as I set out on a ride. I remembered waking the morning of my birthday and seeing it at the end of my bed, shiny and begging for me to ride it. But when I later recounted this memory as an adult at a family dinner, my mom told me that while yes, I did get such a bike for my birthday, it was never in my bedroom. "How would we have snuck it in there? And how on earth would you have carried it down the stairs, Lucy?" my mom had said, laughing. "It was in the living room, half-hidden by that ficus. Remember that plant? It lived forever..."

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Yet no matter how I tried to place that bike behind the mangy ficus tree my mom routinely propped up with bamboo sticks and that lived past when I left home, I could only ever see it at the foot of my bed. The giant yellow bow glittering with the morning light coming through my thin curtains, its white rubber tires pristine, the paint glossy and chip free, the handlebar streamers sparkling rainbows.

At some point my brain chose a different setting for my eighth birthday gift, and every time I had remembered that event since, it solidified the image to the point where I argued with my mom that night about the recollection. She must have remembered it wrong; her brain more aged than mine, her memory less elastic. But when Dad and my older sister, Alexis, reinforced Mom's version—my sister and I shared a room, so surely she would have remembered a clunky bike at the end of my bed—I was forced to admit I had gotten it wrong. And just like that I began to doubt myself, and the memory. How *did* I get the bike, nearly as big as I was, down the stairs? That would have been a major feat, like my mom had said. Soon enough I had to admit maybe the bike had never been where I remembered it, even if the memory felt as real to me as any other.

“Honest lying” is what the therapist I have been seeing, Dr. Amanda Kay, called it. The perfect oxymoron if I had ever heard one—how can it be “honest” if I am lying?

Apparently this recreating of the past happens all the time, to everyone, Dr. Kay explained during our first visit. In fact, each time we recall something, we aren't actually remembering the original experience; we're remembering a memory of it. Our memories are fickle things, changing imperceptibly the very next time we recall them. They are not intact the way we imagine them to be but simply a construct of the real thing. Then a construct of the construct. And on and on it goes.

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“It’s like putting a new layer of wallpaper over an existing one,” Dr. Kay explained. “Multiple layers later, all you can see is the pink pastel roses on the top and not the blue and white stripes from a few years back, but the stripes are still there. Even if now you’d swear on your life that blue is actually purple, the white stripes gray. Our memory is not as reliable as we like to believe.”

“So we’re creating a knockoff version of an event and then remembering the knockoff as the real thing?”

“Precisely,” Dr. Kay had replied. “There’s no way to guarantee accuracy in our memories. Our brains pick and choose moments from our past and stitch them together to create something that suits us best at the time.”

I’d stared at her, the reality of my situation settling into me like an unpleasant virus. “So how can we trust the things we remember, the way we remember them?” I had asked.

“Because generally they’re close enough.” She smiled then, the way she would at moments like these in our future sessions when she knew I was close to shutting down. Moments when I felt like I might never again be sure which memories I could count on and which ones were lying to me. “For the most part we get the highlights reel right and the extraneous details aren’t as important.”

Except when you wake up in a hospital bed believing you’re living a different life than the one you actually have, it tends to be the details that matter most.

Like I said, I have a complicated relationship with my memory.

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I woke to find my coworker Matt Newman beside my hospital bed. Crying, which confused me immensely. *What are you doing here?* I wanted to ask him, but my lips were numb, my tongue thick. The room was bright and unfamiliar, and my body tired in a way I'd only felt once before when I caught a bad flu that had sent me to bed for nearly two weeks.

My parents were on the other side of the bed and, unlike Matt, weren't crying but had forced, too-big smiles on their faces. "Relax, take it easy, you're in the hospital, sweetie," Mom was saying, while Dad bobbed his head up and down, like he couldn't agree more with what she was saying.

"Hey. Hey there, Lucy," Matt said, holding my hand, his thumb rubbing my skin. "Welcome back. You're okay. You're okay." It was as though he was trying to convince himself more than anyone.

"Where am I?" My voice was rough, like I'd swallowed a roll of sandpaper. I tried to clear my throat, then sucked

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greedily at the drinking straw Mom brought to my lips. The cool water felt amazing as it went down.

“You’re in the hospital, love. Mount Sinai,” Mom said, glancing at Dad with a nervous look as she put the cup of water back on the nightstand. “But you’re going to be fine.”

Matt, now leaning over me, whispered again how glad he was I was okay. *Am I okay?* I wanted to ask, because I certainly didn’t feel it. But before I could get the question out Matt shifted even closer and kissed me on the lips. On the lips!

“What are you doing?” I croaked. I would have pulled back and away from him if I could have but there was nowhere to go, and besides, I barely had the energy to keep my eyes open. I had meant, *Why are you kissing me?* But Matt seemed confused by my question, even though I felt it should have been obvious why I was asking. What was Matt Newman, my friend from work—my “work husband” as I had taken to calling him—doing kissing me on the lips?

“Did something happen at the office?” *Maybe I got hurt at work and Matt brought me to the hospital?* But that didn’t explain his tears. Or the kiss. Oh, God...*maybe I’m dying.* I had never seen Matt so emotional before, so it had to be something pretty terrible even if I couldn’t remember what had happened.

“No, sweetheart. Remember? You hit your head. But you’re okay now. Just fine,” Dad said, smiling and bobbing and smiling and bobbing.

I couldn’t remember hitting my head. I put a hand to my scalp and felt around sloppily, my fingers not finding any obvious sign of injury. I looked from Matt, to Dad, to Mom, then scanned the small room, full of balloons (so many balloons) and bouquets of flowers, a row of greeting cards lining the windowsill.

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“How long have I been here?” I asked, still feeling confused, like my brain had been removed and replaced with pillow stuffing. And even though I had barely moved, had done nothing more than lift my arm to my head, my heart thumped like I’d climbed fifteen flights of stairs. Sweat formed under my armpits and I recognized the feeling—my body was in survival mode—but still I struggled to assign context.

“A little while,” was all Mom said, which I knew based on the singsong quality of her tone meant “quite a while.” Something bad must have happened. And then, in a sudden flash, it occurred to me what—who—was missing.

*Daniel. Where’s Daniel?*

“Were we in an accident?” Daniel drove faster than I liked and had a tendency to change lanes without signaling. Maybe it had been quite serious—the accident—and things were direr than they were letting on. Daniel might be hurt (or worse!) and they weren’t telling me yet because of my own fragile condition. I let out a sob and tried to sit up, needing to get out of this bed to find him, but my body didn’t respond the way I expected and I crumpled to my side.

Matt, still close by after the kiss, quickly put a firm hand underneath my shoulder blades as I lurched, the other hand a vice grip around my upper arm to prevent me from slipping from the bed. Sharp pains stabbed through my head, piercing holes into my thoughts. With a groan I leaned heavily into him and let him lower me back to the bed as Dad said, “There, there, Lucy. Stay put, love.”

I was full-on sobbing now, my vision blurry with tears. “Please tell me. What happened?”

“There was no accident, Lucy,” Mom said, pulling a tissue out of the cuff of her sweater and dabbing at my eyes. Brushing my hair away from my face with gentle hands. “I

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promise you. A slip on some sidewalk ice. You hit your head when you fell.”

“So he’s okay,” I choked out, closing my eyes as a burst of relief filled me.

“Who’s okay?” Matt asked, sounding nearly as confused as I felt.

“Daniel,” I managed, keeping my eyes closed to avoid the swaying of the room. I must have hit my head hard.

“He’s not hurt, right?”

The room went silent. Long enough that I forced my eyes open to see what was happening. Dad’s smile faltered as he glanced at Matt, who had taken a couple of steps back from the bed and looked ill. Shocked, his face drained of color.

“Who, honey?” Mom asked as she stood over me, her hands still smoothing my hair, wiping at the corners of my eyes. Smiling, though her lips quivered slightly.

A flash of irritation moved through me. I was tired and having to repeat myself was hard work. Why couldn’t she answer the question? “Daniel, Mom. My husband. Where is he?” My tone was harsh and my mom recoiled slightly. I should have felt badly about that but my bewilderment whitewashed everything else.

Her mouth opened and closed and she looked at Dad, whose smile had now been replaced by a frown. My heart started thumping again. *Fight or flight.*

“*Where’s Daniel?*” Now I shouted it. Everyone seemed shocked, especially Matt, who looked like I’d slapped him across the face with my words.

“I d-don’t... Lucy, what do you...” Mom stammered.

Dad’s fingers came up to pinch his lips as he watched me with worried eyes.

“Excuse me,” Matt said, then bolted from the room. I heard the sounds of someone being sick outside my door.



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“Is Matt okay?” I asked, momentarily distracted as I craned my head to the side to look through the open doorway and into the hall. But I couldn’t see Matt and the movement made my head feel as though it was being drilled into. Mom kissed my forehead and said, “Shh, shh, shh.”

Dad’s too-big smile was back on as he stood behind her. “I’ll go check on him,” he said, walking quickly out of the room.

“Mom, what the hell is going on? Where is Daniel?” Why wasn’t he the one here in my hospital room, kissing me on the lips and telling me everything was going to be okay?

“We can talk about that later,” Mom said, shushing me some more. *Later? Why not now?* But before I could get another question out—my mind moving too slowly, like pushing molasses through a fine sieve on a cold winter’s day—a nurse came in. Mom shifted out of the way, crossed her arms over her chest and said, “She’s fairly, uh, confused right now.” She sounded panicky, but my mother wasn’t prone to panic and that’s when I started to think I might be in real trouble here.

*Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.* It was as though my body knew the truth but the connection to my mind was broken. I was missing something but had no idea what it was or how to figure it out.

“Oh, that’s to be expected,” the nurse replied, wrapping a blood pressure cuff around my upper arm and smiling at me. The cuff felt tight and her hands cold. My insides were jittery and I was shaking, hard. “Are you cold, Lucy?” she asked, her voice quite loud. The way you talk to a toddler, or a senior citizen with a hearing aid.

“Yes,” I replied, teeth chattering to prove it.

“I’ll get you a warm blanket in a minute.” She glanced at Mom, now seated with furrowed brow in the plastic chair by

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the bed. “Why don’t you go get something from the cafeteria, Mrs. Sparks? I’ve got a few things to do here, so Lucy won’t be alone.”

Mom pressed her lips together, seemed to hesitate, but then nodded. “I could use a cup of tea,” she said. Then she stood and bent over me, resting a hand on my cheek. “I’ll be back in a jiffy and Dad’s right outside.”

Once Mom left I focused on the nurse. “Has my husband been here?” She was reading the blood pressure monitor and her eyes briefly flicked to mine before going back to the monitor.

“I’m not sure, hon. Try to relax, okay? Your pressure’s a bit high. Deep breath. There you go.”

*Relax?* How could I relax when no one would tell me where Daniel was?

“I’m not feeling very well,” I said, my words clipped because of my chattering teeth. Anxiety crested through my body in waves and my heart continued its wild thumping.

“You keep taking deep breaths. Can you do that for me?” The nurse smiled again—wholly relaxed—then walked over to the whiteboard on the wall and wrote a few notations. It was then I saw my name at the top of the board. *Lucy Sparks.*

*Sparks?* It had been over a year since I was Lucy Sparks... “Do you know where my rings are?” My finger was bare and my hand looked lonely without them.

The nurse moved back over the bed to retrieve the blood pressure cart and her Easter-egg-purple scrubs filled my vision. “Everything you had on when they brought you in was given to your mom and dad.” She pulled up the sheet and smoothed it down on one side. “Okay, hon, let me grab you that warm blanket and—”

“Please,” I whispered, clutching at her arm with desperate fingers and pulling her toward me. My breathing wasn’t

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right—too quick, unfortunately timed to my racing heart. I tried to infuse as much urgency into my tone as I could despite the breathlessness. “Please. I need to know where my husband is.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy.” She put her cool hand over mine, shook her head and gave me a sympathetic look. “I don’t know anything about your husband.”

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