
Why the Egg Matters

A MEDITATION ON REMEMBRANCE, FAMILY, AND TIME

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LATELY I’VE NOTICED MY MEMORY glitching more than usual, not that it was stellar to start with. I’m constantly forgetting grocery items—the vital eggs, say, for my daughter Celia’s birthday brownies. Or I mislay the phone 1.5 seconds after I put it down, or wander into the basement for clean jeans for myself and my husband, only to emerge a half hour later with just a flashlight clutched in my fist.

Then there are names, which float away from my awareness like dust motes mere moments after I hear them. Faces, too, have always been tricky, especially when attached to humans who’ve stepped outside their usual context. As when I’m minding my business at the drugstore, and who should appear but a friend of a friend or a newish work colleague. Of course this person approaches me in the Digestive Health aisle, where I’m waffling between the Pepto-Bismol or its generic equivalent, and they’re all, “Well, hi there! I haven’t seen you around in ages!” (*Um, around where exactly?*) Or, “Well, hi there! Have you thought more about that thing we discussed?” (*Er, nope.*)

I blame some of these memory malfunctions on my hard-fought, only recently acknowledged ascendance into middle age. That’s when, among other bodily indignities, women’s hormones surge and recede like the tides, and we spend our days shuffling through brain fogs thick as split pea-soupers.

As part of my own miasma, I’ve begun misplacing words when I really, really need

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them, when I was *planning* on using them mere milliseconds later. Take *plethora*, for example. It's a positive word, at least in my head, so I'd never use it to describe the number of (dreaded) student lit essays deluging my inbox. Instead, it's a showoff-y word indicating a quantity of something pleasant. I like it. I also like to show off occasionally, though I'm kind of embarrassed by this trait in myself.

But nowadays, I'll see a word I want—p-l-e-t-h-o-r-a—spelled out behind my eyes; I'll taste it on my tongue, it's that close. But when I go to speak it, say in response to Nameless-Colleague-Loitering-by-the-Pepto-Bismol, when she asks how many student memoirs (fun!) I have to read this weekend, what comes out is ... nothing. Empty air. Or sadder yet:

"Oh ... yes. I've got a ... I mean, lots. But not 'lots.' Better. What's that word? With more syllables?"

It gets worse. Sometimes, I misplace entire trains of thought, leaving myself derailed in the middle of sentences. Like a few days ago at my local Kroger's. The teenager working the cash register—Juliet, said her nametag—finished scanning my items. *Zip zip*, she was fast. Then together we cooled our heels, watching the bag boy and the bag boy in training attempt to load groceries into my reusable shopping sacks.

"Soooo," said Juliet, stretching out the word while shaking her awesome curls. "Did you find everything you needed?"

"Yep," I said. Then, "Or no. Now ..."

"Now what?" asked Juliet when, apparently, I hadn't spoken for a while.

"Um? Now that I think about something?"

She took charge then. "Something you forgot, maybe?"

"Okay," I said.

"And that was?" her eyes were glazing over.

I shrugged. "Can't remember." We turned together to check out the bagger boys, who slowed even further under our scrutiny. At last they finished with the final sack, carefully placing the ripe plums beneath cans of low-fat soup and my CarbMaster milk and setting the giant Hershey's bar on top like the bow on a present. *Juliet*—I checked the nametag again—gratefully moved on to the person behind me in line, and I wheeled my haul toward the store's exit. Only then did the missing item arrive with a hard thud in my brain.

"Eggs," I yelled in Juliet's direction. "It was eggs. I remember that I needed them for my daughter's brownies. But I never got them, and now I have to come back."

Juliet, clearly done with me, didn't bother turning around, but everyone else did.

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DURING A VISIT TO MY GYNECOLOGIST, I happen to mention my problematic memory. Dr. Y. is my age, maybe a little younger or older. After I explain my concerns, she cants



her head to the side, tips her pretty hair over her shoulder.

“You’re normal enough,” she says. Whatever that means. Then she confirms what I’ve already guessed, that I’m in the throes of the hormonal brouhaha that comes with being *a woman of a certain age*. That’s when, apparently, it’s commonplace to go mute or incomprehensible, to meander off topic at any given moment. To be fretting about brownies one minute, then remembering the appointment I’d set out for in the first place—before stopping at a 7-Eleven for those damn eggs, which I forgot again—and then having to run to arrive at the doctor’s office 10 minutes late. In other words, to crack up. Like Humpty Dumpty after he tipped off his wall.

I mention all this to Dr. Y.

“At least your moods seem stable,” she says. I scowl in response. “In any case, it’ll pass eventually. Come see me then for estrogen replacement.”

“But how do I get anything accomplished in the meantime?”

She shrugs. “I’m right there with you, along with half my patients. In my clinical opinion, someone should give us medals for tenacity in the face of extreme aggravation.”

If that happens, I want my medal to have an egg carved into it.

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EGGS ARE A MARVEL. Chicken’s eggs, for instance, are said to be a perfect food. High in protein and healthy fats (great for brain fitness!), they also contain antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals galore. They’re easy enough to gather (minus the fretting, pecking mother hens), to prepare in multiple delicious ways, to digest.

But there’s more: eggs from all species are the most accomplished of vessels, each coming complete with a mission and the intrinsic know-how, not to mention onboard supplies, to carry it out.

Or consider human eggs, those petite planets: largest cells in the body, visible to the naked eye. They’re jam-packed with goodies such as DNA, ooplasm (formative and nutritive yoke), and a plethora of mitochondria, tiny energy factories churning night and day for the life of the cell.

Don’t get fooled by the egg’s apparent apathy. For all that it floats around the fallopian tubes twiddling its thumbs, waiting on the arrival of sperm to hook up with, some scientists now postulate that the human egg cherry-picks the precise sperm it wants—that it lures, captures, pulls inside itself the gamete of choice, thus maintaining its perfect self-containment, its flawless totality.

Even as it goes on to divide like gangbusters, until it becomes a whole person, bloody and new, blinking on your chest in the delivery room. And mere moments after that, the wriggling creature swaddled and pressed like a birthday gift into your arms. Like a bombshell, that moment—a revelation that comes to you in the flesh, in a flash, in its entirety. So you know it’s essential to your existence.

Like a memory, perhaps, an ancient one you can’t shake, floating somewhere in the dark.

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I’M YOUNG, MAYBE FIVE, and I’m tiptoeing behind Jenny, a teenager who’s been hired to look after me for the night. We make our slow way down the dark street, hiding behind trees when cars pass or adults open and close their doors.

I’m also shivering a little—because, though Jenny’s wearing her puffy, Pepto-Bismol-pink jacket, she’s forgotten to put me in my own coat. I don’t complain, however, not wanting to ruin her good opinion of me. I think Jenny is cool. *Cool*, I whisper under my breath, for the round feel of the word in my mouth.

I cross my arms and clutch my shoulders to create warmth on this chilly night,

which smells of jack-o'-lanterns, dried leaves, and something burning. I imagine secret things moving beneath the dusk all around me—bats maybe, or ghosts. Because it's the night before Halloween, what we inhabitants of southeast Michigan call Devil's Night, though only Detroit suffers the fires and break-ins and worse. Here in the suburbs, the most that happens is toilet paper strewn through tree branches, or a few eggs lobbed at cars or houses.

"Hurry now," says pale-haired Jenny. She tugs my hand, and I trot to keep up. She stops where Poppleton Park opens onto Wimbledon Drive. Suddenly a pack of teenagers appears like smoke from behind naked shrubs and shut gates. They're older, taller

than Jenny. Some carry flashlights, the beams dipping and weaving such that I catch snapshots of faces, more puffy coats, and scarves wrapped around necks. Jenny drops my hand, starts talking to a girl beside her, but I can't hear their words.

"Let me," I say, reaching for Jenny and trying to snuggle close.

"No, get back."

I understand she wants to ignore me,

that I'm extremely uncool with my stubby legs and frizzy tangle of hair. At least I'm wearing my red turtleneck, as opposed to the hated dashiki my mother got me at one of her consciousness-raising groups.

"What've you got there?" asks a boy who's now standing with Jenny.

"Just this girl I have to watch." Jenny notices me looking, pulls me closer, and flips her Marcia Brady hair. "She's okay, I guess."

"All right!" says the boy to the crowd of teens all around. "Are we ready to wave our freak flags?" I look around for flags.

"Hell yeah!" someone whisper-shouts. And, "What a gas!" A *gas*?

The boy crouches to my level. I notice his freckled nose, the fringe of dark bangs beneath a ski cap. "Hold this, okay?" He opens the clenched fingers of my right hand, places an egg in my palm, then closes my fingers gently around it. The boy looks into my eyes, his black to my blue, and for a moment I am suffused with love, so I feel its song moving under my skin. "Careful of that now," he says, referring to the egg. "Use it when you're ready." *Ready for what?*

The egg's shell is velvety soft, smooth as new paper. It warms to my touch, so even as the wind kicks at my back, I feel this heat against my skin and squeeze it almost immediately, the better to enjoy it.

The boy: "Ew! That's a drag, little flake."

And Jenny. "What's wrong with you?"

Some scientists now postulate that the human egg cherry-picks the precise sperm it wants—that it lures, captures, pulls inside itself the gamete of choice, maintaining its flawless totality.

“Hey, ease up,” the boy says to Jenny. “Anyway, we gotta split. Either stay with the kid or come on.”

I stand there, my open hand drenched in the viscous wetness, cold now from the chill air. With the pointer finger of my left hand, I poke the slimy, slightly bouncy yoke, watch it break into smaller blobs. Meanwhile, the kids prowl away.

Is Jenny with her bright jacket among them? Or did she give up her night of adventure to take me home?

I don’t remember. There’s just this: the goop dripping from my fingers onto my tennis shoes, the broken bits of shell that dig into my palm, the twinge of love in my chest, so decades later I still feel that bite.

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WHY DID I HOLD ON TO this memory: the egg in my palm, the shell both whole and shattered? The solidity of it as I squeezed, the soft *pop* as it gave. The wet.

Why do I remember this event so meticulously when I’ve forgotten so many other aspects of my past? When just yesterday I neglected to press Start on the dryer, so my wet jeans moldered in the dark machine? When I can barely recall my phone number or where I park my car half the time?

The answer is, I don’t have a clue. Memory is slippery, after all. It shimmies like a water snake; it’s as capricious as a hummingbird’s flight path. You shouldn’t trust it to save your life.

I consider its nature: how memory is a viscous thing, dense and bright in some places, thin and colorless in others. How it takes on the shape of whatever surrounds it at the moment—the shell of the time, place, mood where it commenced, and where it’s being remembered. How it all comes down to context.

This is especially true of our oldest memories, the ones circulated again and again like well-loved jeans run innumerable times through wash and dry cycles until they soften and fade and become entirely transformed. In this way, what we currently remember of an event isn’t the experience that first sparked the memory, but the memory of the most recent memory, and that of the ones before it. Until the original breaks apart and slides between our fingers, until we can’t say for sure what happened in the first place.

And maybe that’s the point.

Maybe the provable reality of some event matters less than what we’ve chosen to carry of it. Because as it is now, my Devil’s Night recollection *feels* authentic and whole as an egg, containing within it a beginning, a middle, and an end. Because after all this

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time, it's become one of many memory eggs that, when gathered together, add up to me.

Among that heap find my red turtleneck, a nameless boy who bothered to notice me, the gift in my hands. There are years and decades of events, countless students and endless classes, old lovers and best friends. There are my husband's palms pressed to my belly, the jolt of a kick from within. And of course there's Celia, her squirming body on my chest. Love and love and love.

Celia, who came into the world complete and perfect. So I had no words, yet couldn't remain silent.

"Oh, oh, oh," I vocalized, so I can hear it still—echoing in the delivery room, and in my head. This sound, round and unbroken, containing all that came before, remembered or not. Everything that counted in my world.

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THE EGG: FUNDAMENTAL INGREDIENT of brownies. Without it, there'd be nothing but a muddle of sugar, chocolate, flour, water, hunkering in the mixing bowl, each element minding its own business. No cohesion, no blending to make something new and important.

Without eggs, there'd be no richness.

My middle-aged life is rich, never mind the superfluous details I'm constantly misplacing. I carry with me everything that's important: the family I made, my husband's and daughter's faces, the primal song of Celia's birth, and a collage of her various selves leading to this instant.

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CELIA IN HER FLOWERY DRESS hunches over her birthday brownies while her father snaps photos to post on Facebook. Celia flips her corkscrew curls off her forehead, blows out all 19 candles, and makes her wishes. Her eyes are half shut in concentration, her nose scrunched, her mouth pursed into a pretty bow. All these details are fixed, etched into the walls of my brain. There's the paper bright on the gifts beside her, the twists of candle smoke climbing the air, the sound of a fan whirring, so we've all got goose bumps and I catch myself shivering a little.

But that's all right. Any second now, one of us will get up to flip the switch, and I'll stop shivering. Celia will tear into her presents, then we'll lug the dessert dishes to the sink, the wrapping scraps to the recycling bin, and Celia will take off with her friends. Later today, I'll probably forget the cats' treats until they howl their dismay, or spend an hour searching for the glasses perched atop my head.

For now, there's just this: the sun bright through the window, setting the dust motes on fire; the three of us floating in that perfect shine, outside of time. Celebrating everything that really matters. ●