

# THE FLOOD THAT DOES NOT FLOW

KYLIE LADD

*Where have you gone? The tide is over you,  
The turn of midnight water's over you,  
As time is over you, and mystery,  
And memory, the flood that does not flow.  
— Kenneth Slessor, Five Bells*

I work in a memory clinic. The Cognitive, Dementia and Memory Service, to be precise, but no-one ever calls it that. People come in to see me, and I can hear them at the reception area just outside my office, voices wavering, anxious, 'I have an appointment with the memory doctor.'

The memory doctor. It's a misnomer, because whatever I might be able to do, I can't fix memory. No-one can. Bones re-grow, cuts heal, but memory—once lost—is gone forever. It's one of God's cruellest tricks, if indeed you believe in God, an inexplicable evolutionary flaw. We are essentially born with all the neurons we will ever possess—unlike almost every other form of cell, those in the brain do not replicate or reproduce. Drown them in alcohol, sever them in concussions or car accidents, use them up one by one in the everyday bumps and blows that flesh is heir to ... bad luck. They're not coming back.

Working in the field I do, this vulnerability of the very thing that contains our essence horrifies me. In reality it's not so literal, but every time I watch

football players knock skulls I think, 'There goes Christmas 1973' ... or a first date, or a brother-in-law's address, or the day in grade four when the teacher punished you for copying Peter's work, only you knew it was the other way round. The strands of identity fraying at the edges, fading with every jostle or jolt, eventually gone for good.

I saw an elderly couple the other day. Well, really I was seeing the wife, a seventy-five-year-old woman I diagnosed as being in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. The history was typical: repetitive questioning, increasing disorganisation, word-finding difficulty, functional deterioration. She had started to leave the stove on after cooking dinner; frequently forgot if she had taken her tablets and ended up with a double dose or none at all. Frank personality change is rare in the first years of the disease, but to be thorough I asked her husband if she seemed altered at all. 'Oh, I don't know,' he replied, exhaling so hard his nose hair rustled. 'The first fifty years were wonderful, but it hasn't been the same since then.'

I would have laughed if what he said wasn't so sad. Memory defines us. It wasn't the dementia itself that was changing his wife, the relentless dieback of neurons. It was the memory loss. With her memory failing, his wife had become a different person: less confident, suddenly suspicious, prone to blame and argument and the tedium of the same question asked over and over again. Worse, she wasn't much company. In conversation she forgot anecdotes; could not recall enough from the news to join in discussion. Eventually I knew she would forget her partner of over half a century, their children, their sayings and everything they had shared. Then she would forget herself, the visage in the mirror suddenly frightening rather than familiar. And when that happened she would be dead, though she continued to breathe, eat, soil herself. Memory defines us.

People often think that those with Alzheimer's or memory loss are calm and content, because they have forgotten that they are forgetting. I disagree. In my experience, people losing their memories are anxious, frustrated, angry. They become paranoid, believing others are hiding or even stealing

their belongings, anything rather than accept it is their own brain that is failing them. They know that they are losing their grip. They neglect to pay bills, or forget where they've parked their car at shopping centres, and that's annoying, but it can always be chalked up to old age. What really rattles them though is when the personal stuff starts to slip. Did I go to bowls last Wednesday? Why is that woman smiling and waving at me- do I know her? How many grandchildren *do* I have? All of a sudden, their personal narrative, that stream of consciousness we all take for granted, feels tenuous, is threatened.

Carl Jung understood this when he wrote, 'The story of a life begins somewhere. At some particular point we happen to remember ...' Ah ha. For every individual, the story only starts when the memories do. The story is not just held in memory; it is defined by it, exists only as long as the memory does. Is a person really alive—any more than a tree or a tortoise is alive—in those months and years before memory starts and after it stops?

I am reminded of a patient I assessed as a student. His was not an unusual case, but it was the first of its type I had seen, and it has stayed with me. David was a young man in his twenties when he had a bad motorcycle accident, suffered a head injury and remained in a coma for four days. I was first sent to see him three days after he had regained consciousness. Given the extent of his injuries he was surprisingly alert, and before I started my formal tests we chatted for a bit. He found out that I followed the same struggling team that he did, and asked, 'How are they going anyway? I don't think I've seen a paper since I came in here.' I told him, and he expressed delight at an unexpected five-game winning streak and finals tilt. Then he started to cough, so I poured him a cup of water. He took a swallow and said, 'What were you saying?' 'Football,' I replied. 'Your team, the Blues.' 'Oh,' he said thoughtfully, 'How are they going anyway? I don't think I've seen a paper since I came in here.' I had told him less than two minutes previously.

I visited David again the next day, and the next. He didn't recognise me either time, and I found that anything I said would be lost thirty seconds or so later. Yet not all memory was gone—he knew who he was, his parents' faces, where he lived, the name of his dog and his favourite beer. It was new memories that stymied him ... since the accident it seemed he simply couldn't make them stick. My initial impression of him as perfectly normal faltered. He still *was* perfectly normal in many ways ... and yet, and yet there was something disconcerting about a man with whom I could have an engaged and interesting conversation, go to answer my pager, then return five minutes later to find I was once again a complete stranger to. David, I started to feel—perhaps unfairly—was only half a person. He was trapped in some sort of neurological loop, with a complete past but an uncertain, endlessly repeating present. His pause button was jammed.

Only thankfully for him, it wasn't. On the fourth day I went in to see him David remembered who I was, and, more importantly, which team I barracked for. From then on his memory worked essentially normally, apart from a total gap of two weeks before the accident and the fortnight of coma and reiteration afterwards. 'Retrograde and anterograde amnesia,' my supervisor told me. 'Not at all uncommon. He'll never get that time back.'

Improbably, I bumped into David ten years later when he accompanied his father to the clinic I was then working in. Rudely ignoring the real patient, I pumped him for information. 'How was he?' I asked. 'How was his memory?' 'Fine, all fine,' he said, spontaneously recalling our mutual team and the tests I'd put him through. 'What about those weeks?' I continued, though I knew the likely answer. 'Gone for good,' he responded cheerfully. Then he paused, suddenly reflective. 'You know, I sometimes think about it, and it gives me the shivers. It's like I was dead, isn't it? I mean, to Mum and Dad, to all of you in white coats I clearly wasn't, but to *me* I was, even though I was eating and talking and walking around. I might as well have been, because it's just a blank, totally obliterated. And that frightens me a little, you know? That I was dead in the middle of my life.'

Neuroanatomically, the regions of our brain that deal with memory are paleocortex, literally *the old layer*. These are deep and ancient structures, present in our ancestors for millennia before being buried under the more recently-evolved neocortex, the grey mater that gives our brain the shape we recognise today. I always find it ironic then that patients in the early stages of dementia invariably retain their oldest memories; that the events of sixty years ago—first jobs, first dances, first days at school—become increasingly more real to them than the dinner they attended yesterday. Before it is erased, the story is abridged, condensed. Chapter after chapter is lost along what we call a temporal gradient, as if someone is systematically ripping out pages starting from the back of the book.

Of course, it's worth noting that memory, even in an intact brain, is both fallible and subjective. My husband and I met on jury service many years ago, when I was just eighteen. We agree on that. We don't agree however on what I was wearing or the weather that day or even if we had lunch. Does that matter? The central element is true—we did, in fact, meet, and our children are proof of that. But does it diminish that central truth if the ancillary truths, the supporting details are not agreed on, are false in at least one account, if not both? Does memory have to be perfect to be valid?

Well, yes, when what's at stake is someone's alibi in a murder case; no, if it's who brought the pickled onions to the last school pot-luck dinner. Still, we expect memory to be perfect, because we can't trust it otherwise. We assume that our memories are true, because if they aren't then who are we?

I pride myself on my memory; take a perverse pleasure in a nickname—*The Memory Stick*—bestowed on me by a close friend on account of my physique and powers of recall. My memories are by no means uniformly pleasant, but I would not voluntarily give up a one of them. They are who I am, all I have really that marks me as me. I shudder, at my job, at how fragile it all is, at the possibility of being dead in the middle of my life. A

small blood clot in the wrong spot, an accident, a tumour, some bad drugs or rogue bacteria and memory becomes, as Slessor wrote in his iconic poem 'Five Bells,' 'the flood that does not flow'.

As a result, I find that I am always watching myself and those I love for the first signs of the end ... the misplaced glasses, the missed appointment. It is wearing at times, but I cannot seem to help it, aware, as I am, of the void that opens up beneath each of us should our memory falter. First we lose our car keys, then we lose ourselves.

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