

## **Can I Remember to Forget?**

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The blackness is cold, but I did this to myself, again. I created a life where I was living on the cusp of a void, except this time it was much more tangible.

Although I'd just stepped out of the shower and scrubbed myself in soap, I couldn't get the stench out from at least six other people's urine from underneath my nose. I didn't know if it had become embedded in my fingernails or if the smell had somehow nestled itself inside the follicles of my nostrils, but it was stuck. The smell of decay and human waste followed me everywhere and had me feeling like I was part of the living dead.

I mean, the smell of changing the elderly patients every night throughout my two-hour rounds had permanently stained my skin. I had a fear it wouldn't come off until my cells completely replenished themselves in seven years, since that's the amount of time that it takes for people to rejuvenate their cells. Either way, the desire to rip my skin off came back. I was surprised that I'd been able to focus on writing as much as I had, because the smell of human waste continued wafting in and out of the very fingertips that typed these words.

It was November of 2017 and I had been working graveyard shift at a dementia ward in a retirement home in Whittier. It was usually just me and one other caregiver, but sometimes she'd call out and I'd have to work the shift alone. She had her daughter to take care of and of course, I had no one. So, I was there practically every night, overseeing the fifteen patients who regressed at rates personalized just for them.

Walking in the brightly lit halls at odd hours of the night maintained the surreal feeling that everything was timeless, and not in a good way. Eternal doesn't feel good when you need the pain to end. The reek of pain filled the air like plants emitting CO2. It made the air so thick sometimes that I'd have to run over to the bathroom and throw up in the trashcan to reset myself again.

The screams I'd hear down the hall were haunting. "I don't want to die here!" Looking at old, sad patients in the eyes when they said this felt a knife to the heart. One patient, a woman named Dorothy with curly red hair, said this over and over again, and you could tell by the urgency of her steel blue eyes that she meant it with all her frail little heart.

Dorothy was over 103 years old with wrinkles and dark purple swelling under her eyes. Her frail limbs were all turning inward as though it was some survival method (perhaps it was) for preserving her wasting organs.

Interacting with her was a matter of flipping her back and forth and side to side to make sure no one side of her bruised from just laying down all day and night while she moaned.

"Just let me die, goddamn it."

Almost every time I changed her catheter, it was filled with blood. All the nurses could do was continue to attempt to give her medication. At this point, everything was about maintenance, as there was no longer hope for improvement. At some point, a hospice nurse took over for Dorothy, as would be the fate of all the other patients.

The brief epiphanies these human beings suffering with dementia at times were excruciating, both to them and to me. It would break my heart when one particularly lucid woman with long, matted grey hair named Helen, would come hobbling into the main room around two in the morning, sit herself at the table in the dementia ward's "living room" and set her head down to cry.

"I'm so useless," she'd sob, gripping onto my hands with her wrinkly, soft hands for support.

"My family abandoned me. My husband's dead. No one will talk to me."

Of course, I'd try to reassure her that this wasn't the case. But her words stained my soul even when I wasn't at work, and I began growing just a little less sane than I usually was. My therapist advised me to set better emotional boundaries from my work and real life. So, with that came the senseless question, to which I still had no answer, *could I remember to forget what I had seen and felt in the dementia ward?*

It was a tough task, indeed. At night, the halls at night were rampant with nonsense, which could make you go insane unless you were already there. So, for me, it just felt like company. I was twenty-five and I had numbed myself in life that my soul flickered at a vibration near death, too.

There was one patient, Dora, who was overly apologetic and always seemed to forget that she'd already dressed herself and put on make-up. To overcompensate for her embarrassment of being "naked", she put on as many as five outfits on as well as five coats of make-up.

There was another patient, Betty, who missed her dog and had cut a hole in a painting she had of her beloved pet to stuff food through it. It was encrusted with maggots, so we had to throw it away, much to her dismay. She'd retracted from everyone since then, filled with a sense of betrayal and despair. In her eyes, we've failed her. We took the single thing that had any meaning to her.

How did I find myself as a caregiver in a dementia ward in Whitter during the night shift? I'd always been a night owl, so I thought why not take a job that requires less repressions of my true self? I thought that by working here, I'd reconnect with that passionate activist in myself that I used to be as a kid, but like most things, this did not turn out as I imagined. Looking back, it was not the right decision for me already being so depressed just immersing myself in an environment where decay and deterioration was so imminent. I was growing increasingly restless from the bleakness.

Emptiness was watching TV at four in the morning with a few of the other insomniac patients who pretended to understand the infomercials. I knew for a fact they couldn't even hear the TV because they'd would leave their hearing aids on their nightstands. They'd just stare at the television at with glossed eyes and pupils overly dilated from their medication. And I'd just stare at them nervously, glossy-eyed as well, knowing that this is what I had to look forward to, too.

The television channels customized for the elderly often had infomercials selling coffins and funeral services for the elderly. I'd shake my head and change the channel or sometimes just

look at the patients' faces. They appeared unfazed. How could network television be so cruel? Sure, they were marketing towards the right audience, but jeez, how austere.

I had tremendous compassion for the pain, fear, confusion, and sadness that haunted each patient and the issue was that most times, I carried all this weight by myself. Most of the other caregivers there that I'd trained with get impatient with the fact that I attempted to engage with the patients.

"There's no point, they don't understand you or what's going on," they'd say to me. I didn't like my co-workers much for this reason. I had to believe that even if the patients couldn't really comprehend my words, the warmth I genuinely felt would permeate them like some kind of osmosis. I'd convince myself that in situations like these, where the patients didn't even recognize their family members or re-member their previous careers, there had to be a sense of purpose. They had to have purpose because I had to have purpose.

It was a selfish projection, but it was harmless. More harmful was the time spent when all the patients did sleep, and I had nothing else to do. I'd walk around the dementia ward, as vacant and confused as they were, wondering where I was going, how the fuck I ended up here, and how long I was going to be here.

If Picasso had his blue period, this was my black period. The confusion and emptiness that swarmed me was so thick that sometimes around three in the morning I felt like I was losing my mind from this pattern of self-inflicted marginalization I couldn't seem to break myself out of.

I didn't have time to go out and socialize because of this graveyard shift I stated so confidently I wanted in the interview for this job. Then I started becoming anxious that I was twenty-five and was pissing away my youth- a youth that wasn't really granted to me either.

But I was just trying jobs on. This was part of the process of weeding out. It was painful and ugly, but I tried my best to find some light within myself to warm the disoriented patients- my extended family. When I got home from work in the morning, I was a little fulfilled, a little vacant, and a little apprehensive as I torturously awaited whichever new vice or self-made purpose I'd be driven by next.