

Return to Me

The soft, warm rain fell against the glass of Jonah's high-rise apartment. Looking down, through the condensation that was gathering, she focused in on the little dots of people below. She grew up in a farm town, where the only way to see someone was up close and full-sized. Here, they were nameless. She spent hours looking out at them, trying to focus on one. Trying to guess their life, their name, how the rain felt on their skin. Closing her eyes, she imagined she was there with them, a dot among dots. Of course, when she was down there, walking to work or coming home with an armful of groceries, she never considered herself one. The illusion was gone. A dot among dots unaware that they were a dot.

"You're always looking out that window," her boyfriend Adam said. He had just entered their small apartment, his hair slightly wet from where the hood of his jacket didn't cover.

She shrugged, turning back towards her desk, where her pages lay half-done. Recently, she had gotten back into the childhood art of coloring. Using markers, crayons, colored pencils, for most of her bereavement leave she had been doing only this. "There's a lot of people out tonight, it's weird."

Across the street on another high-rise, a bright advertisement for a sugary drink lit up their room with red and pink and orange. No matter what they did to cover the windows, the place was never dark. He stood there, illuminated, looking at her in a sad way. He had hung some of her coloring pages up on the fridge, as if she was a child, and these too were illuminated. Everything was cast in shadows.

"It's pretty cold out there, maybe it'll turn into snow," he said as he walked over to kiss her, his voice awkward. His lips were both warm and cold.

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“Probably not,” she said, “it’s never that cold. It’s just freezing rain at most.” A part of her wanted to keep kissing him, but it wasn’t desire. She wanted someone’s skin against her own. Someone’s body close to hers.

“Let’s turn some light on in here. You’ll hurt your eyes doing that in the dark.”

She realized then that there was no hesitation from him, no lingering as if he wanted more. He smelled like the rain outside, like the earth. His cheeks were flushed pink, just like the light entering the room. As he went over to turn the nearby floor lamp on, she saw a box under his arm.

“What’s that?” she asked as the light turned on, distorting the shadows slightly. Her eyes pulsed, adjusting.

“A gift,” he said.

“What for?” her eyes followed him as he set the box in front of her. She tensed, noticing that a few of her coloring pages were getting bent.

He didn’t respond and began to open it awkwardly. The box’s exterior was all red, most likely because Christmas was a few weeks away. In bold print on the top it read, *Memory Player*. “I saw this device on an advertisement--the one that shines into my office.”

“A device? Was it a lot of money?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” With an effort, he ripped off the clean, white tape that held the edges of the boxes down and pulled out another small container--this one a darker red.

“I should have had it put together already. This is killing the surprise.”

She smiled at him, reaching for her coloring pages, putting them all in one stack. There was a slight hum as the heater kicked on in the apartment. It always rumbled a bit, slow from not being used. With each passing year, the earth grew hotter and the winter months grew shorter. Jonah

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longed for those few months where the window was cold to the touch--where snow was at least a possibility, and not just a memory.

“Just tell me what it is” she said, not impatient but curious.

“Have you heard of Memory Player?”

“Is it a game?” She asked, perking up. They had gotten close years back, in college, because they played the same videogame. *Skyway*. It was a virtual reality racing game where the racetrack was in the sky, at night. Growing up, videogames had been her escape. Into other worlds she went, where she became the people on the screen.

“Sort of,” he took out a device, a sort of headset that went over the eyes. “It’s like VR but, well, it taps into your brain somehow. I’m not sure how it works. It allows you to think of a specific memory and relive it. Well, not relive it as yourself. But you’re a spectator.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” She grabbed the instruction manual but didn’t even look at the words.

“I’m not explaining it well.” He was shaking his head, as if to rattle the right words from his brain. “It’s like a game, sort of. You can replay your memories and it’s supposed to do something fancy so they’re super detailed and whatnot.”

“I barely even remember my own memories” Jonah said, looking at the device as he continued to put it together. “How do you know how to do that?”

“They showed me at the store,” he continued “I think it sort of creates or improvises based off you. It goes after brain signals, synapses, fancy words like that. I don’t know, it sounded cool. I thought it’d help with...” he trailed off, looking between her and the device, his hands motionless. She tensed up and then relaxed.

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“Oh, right.” She trailed off too, looking back out the window. It was raining heavier, the dots now blurred by the water running off the glass.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to try it. There is a free return for thirty days.”

“No, no.” she said, reaching out to place her hand over his. “Let me try. Set it up, let me try.”

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Jonah’s mother died on a Tuesday. There was no significance to Tuesdays until there was. Now, each time it occurred on her calendar it felt ominous. If the spot was blank, she had the urge to fill it in with ink. If it was filled up, she wanted to cross everything out. Move from Monday to Wednesday.

She put on the device carefully. It covered her eyes and a large portion of her face, a strange contraption that made her feel foolish.

“Now, put the earpieces in.” Adam said, reaching out for her hand to give them to her. She put them in her ears and felt the world grow more silent. “Okay, I’m turning it on.”

“Okay,” Jonah said, loudly. She listened to Adam talk to her until she couldn’t hear or see anything anymore. Suddenly, everything went dark. She blinked, reaching up to touch the device.

“Welcome to Memory Player” a voice said, as she saw a bright magenta screen. “Please focus on the dot in the middle of the screen as we do a scan. After this, you will be a registered user.”

“This is weird” Jonah called out, or at least she thought so. She felt a quick hand on hers and assumed it was Adam. She focused in on the small dot in the middle of the screen and felt

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every sensation go, except for her vision. Her feet no longer touched the ground, she no longer felt the warmth of the heater, of Adam close to her.

“Would you like to add a name?” The female voice asked.

“Jonah”

“Welcome, Jonah. To start, name a memory and think about it. As our program gets used to you, the memories will be clearer and more advanced. You won’t need to speak out loud to explore a memory.”

“Oh, that’s cool” she said, realizing how strange it was to hear her voice coming from inside this device “My 13th birthday, I guess. I don’t know why I thought that, I just did.”

There was no response, suddenly the screen shut off. It was all black, everything was. She felt stuck in a strange void, unable to place herself. Then, all at once, she could smell her mother’s potpourri. It was supposed to smell like lilacs. The ground beneath her, the pale tan linoleum that never stayed clean, stained from years of use. She looked around, trying to orient herself, aware that things were off. Her body felt like it belonged in this scene. She could feel the cool floor beneath her. She was hot, the air humid from the open window. Outside was the sound of her next-door neighbor Paul, mowing.

“Stop moving,” a voice said. She turned towards it, now fully aware of where she was--in the bathroom of her childhood home on her 13th birthday. Before her was her younger self, which was sort of foggy like in a dream. And her mother. The voice who just spoke was hers. Jonah felt warm all over, a pull in her chest.

“I can’t,” young Jonah said, squirming away from her mother’s hand where a mascara brush was. For her 13th birthday her mother had bought her a bag full of makeup and was showing her how to apply it, starting with the eyes.

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“Oh, come on. I’m not going to hurt you,” her mother said, grabbing young Jonah’s arms so she stood still. “You’ll love wearing makeup. I started when I was your age, you know. You like my makeup, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” young Jonah said, struggling to not blink as the mascara brush got close, “but I don’t like how it feels.”

“It’s not even on you yet,” her mother said, frustrated. “There we go.”

Young Jonah winced as her mother kept applying the mascara, both of their faces contorted with effort. “That tickles,” she laughed.

“It looks good, makes your eyelashes darker,” her mother sighed, dipping the brush back in the tube. “You have your father’s eyes. Pudgy eyelids, no eyelashes at all. So brown, just like his. Do you know what I used to call his eyes as a joke?”

“No,” young Jonah said, scratching at her chin.

“Butthole eyes.”

“Do I have butthole eyes,” young Jonah asked, giggling slightly.

“Not with this mascara you don’t.”

As Jonah was growing up, her mother commented often that she looked just like her father. Her wide feet, her stubby fingers, her small mouth with a slightly larger upper lip. Makeup was a way her mother made her look more like her, darkening her eyelashes with mascara, widening her bottom lip with liner. Her mother divided Jonah’s traits up: the good was because of her, and the bad because of her father. Jonah always felt like a half-person.

“I wish I had your eyes,” young Jonah said, looking up as she played with a loose thread on her dress. Jonah looked at her mother and noticed that this memory was fading. She couldn’t see her eyes; she could barely see anything. It was sensory overload: the smell of the lilac

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potpourri, the mower, the mixture of cool and warm air, the dirty linoleum floor. Her mother in this created world was not her mother but an abstract figure, like the dots on the ground outside her apartment being distorted by the rain. Suddenly, Jonah felt pressure on her hands.

“Hey, Jonah, are you okay?” Adam asked. Jonah realized he had taken the device off her, the earpieces out. She blinked, focusing on the room around her. She sunk her bare feet into their shag carpet, digging in with her toes.

“That was so weird,” Jonah said, realizing they were holding hands. Adam said something but she couldn’t listen. She was desperately trying to remember what her mother’s eyes looked like. “That was so weird,” she repeated.

“Did you like it? We can try again tomorrow. You can think of new memories to explore.”

She nodded, scratching at her arm where she’d felt her mother’s grasp.

*

Jonah only ever cried in therapy. Grabbing for a tissue, the only thing she could say was a weak apology for crying as she felt her cheeks flush red. She’d be telling her therapist about a dog she saw walking at the park or about a new coloring book she got or about something funny her boyfriend said, and all of a sudden would burst into tears, consoled only by the tissues with aloe Vera. That is what embarrassed her, the crying with no real cause.

When both she and Adam were home in the evening, she would tell him about therapy. He’d tell her how proud of her she was, for going. He would always tell her “it’ll be okay, it’ll be fine” and she’d nod and nod and let him kiss her forehead. She’d focus in on how his lips felt against her skin, sending shivers through her. But now, after her mother’s death, he kissed her forehead too much. Every time he saw her, when they went to sleep, in the middle of the night. It

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was his way of saying “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, when will you be okay again” He made dinner after the device was put aside and she went back to coloring. She rubbed at her forehead where he had just kissed her.

“Are you okay?” He asked, looking over at her from their small kitchen.

“Just a headache,” she said, taking her hand away.

“It’s probably the Memory Player. VR always gave me a headache, because of my eyesight.”

“Maybe.” She reached over to grab a colored pencil, process red.

*

The next day, before Adam left for work, Jonah tried the device again. As soon as she put the device on and focused on the dot, she was in the memory. This time, she was in the kitchen of her childhood home. The smell of her mother’s baking was overwhelming: cinnamon and vanilla and cheap flour from the store. It was autumn, decorations of pumpkins and multi-colored leaves were everywhere. Blinking orange lights lined the oak cabinets and her mother stood in front of her, with a witch’s hat covered in purple sparkles. Young Jonah, probably ten or eleven, stood by her and was smiling, her lips colored green from food dye. They had the windows open, a cool breeze blowing in and lifting the white curtains slightly, the sound of their oak trees in the backyard rustling. Her mother’s radio was on, playing a song on repeat. *Monster Mash*. Jonah smiled, remembering. Her mother came alive at holidays. There was a longing in Jonah to stay in this memory, to accept that it was real. She looked outside and saw that the leaves had changed, the air was cool.

“Okay, so we take this bowl over to the counter,” her mother said, interrupting Jonah’s thoughts, “and take some of the batter out, like this.” Young Jonah followed her as her mother

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showed her the directions of laying out the batter, rolling it with a pin, and sprinkling the flour over top. She watched as Young Jonah and her mother used the multi-colored plastic cookie cutters, in shapes of pumpkins and ghosts and witches. They pressed them into the batter, the veins in their hands popping up from the effort. Young Jonah was pressing too hard and having to start over. But her mother cut hers flawlessly and was smiling, looking up occasionally at young Jonah.

“I keep messing up. They keep sticking,” Jonah said.

“Just try again—and...” her mother ripped off a piece of the dough and put it into her mouth, “the good thing about this, is you can eat your mistakes”

Young Jonah laughed and mirrored her mother’s actions. *Monster Mash* seemed to grow louder. Jonah tried to move closer, to reach out and break a piece of the dough off for herself, to have her mother look directly at her.

“Mom,” Jonah said, but her voice was strained like in a dream, “Mom, look at me.”

They did the mash, they did the monster mash.

“Mom,” Jonah repeated and felt her heart race as the memory fell apart. She closed her eyes, trying to listen to the rustling of the trees, trying to smell the baking cookies, trying to stay.

They did the mash, they did the monster mash.

“Jonah,” a voice said.

“Mom?” she opened her eyes.

“It’s Adam,” he said, his face worried. “What did you see?”

Jonah took the device off. She shook her head and handed it back to him.

“Nothing, it didn’t work right this time.”

*

The funeral was strange. Adam kept asking her questions about her mom, trying to find the answers to this mysterious parent who, whenever mentioned, Jonah simply said “can we talk about something else.” It rained the entire drive there and the humidity made her sweat and her hair frizz so she had to pull it back into a bun. At the viewing, Jonah stood by her mother’s coffin and realized that it was the first time she’d seen her in years. The mortician had put makeup on her, but in a way she would have hated. Her lipstick was too pink, her cheeks had too much blush, and she wasn’t wearing any mascara. Her mother’s eyes and mouth, which were glued slightly to keep them shut, scared her. Jonah couldn’t bring herself to reach out and touch her.

The funeral was simple. Red roses, her mother’s favorite, lined her grave and gave the dreary scene some color. The priest led the prayers that Jonah couldn’t bring herself to say, as if her mouth was glued shut too. Adam stood close, putting his arm around her as she leaned into his warmth. Her father was there and took them out to the local diner, a place Jonah and her mother visited often. She tried to not think of it and focused on her plate of warm pancakes and eggs and greasy bacon. She couldn’t bring herself to eat, none of them could. When her parents first got divorced, back when she was in elementary school, her dad brought her there and bought her the same meal. Breakfast for dinner. This was his way with dealing with things. And just like every weekend they spent together when she was growing up, they didn’t talk about the thing that was always looming around them. They didn’t talk about her mother.

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Jonah still had a few days off for her bereavement leave and couldn’t bring herself to go outside. She felt Adam kiss her cheek when he went to work and felt him linger next to her, as if wanting to say something. But she didn’t pretend to be awake and he left. A single body in a single room. She got up and looked for the device. Without hesitation, she put it on and was back

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in her childhood home. She went from memory to memory to memory, getting more and more used to the simulation. She explored the entirety of her childhood home. Her room, with the loud A/C unit and posters of her favorite bands hung on the purple walls. The hallway closet that had a smell she could never describe that filled her lungs as she breathed. The stairs where she fell as a kid and broke her wrist. Her parents were still together, and they'd bought her a box of grape popsicles to help her feel better. The living room where her mother took a lot of naps and where she would bring her coloring books lying on the ground next to her. The record player in the same living room, where her mother would play records of Doris Day and they would dance together, laughing and swaying.

She walked into her mother's room, where she was asleep in the middle of the day, with the lights off and the curtains drawn.

"Mom?" young Jonah asked. *Leave me alone* was the response.

After taking the device off, Jonah had the urge to go to the window so she could feel the cold glass, to look out at the city below, at the advertisement that hurt her eyes so she would be distracted. Instead, she put the device down and went to their bedroom. When Adam got home later that day, he crawled into the bed next to her, with all his clothes on. She didn't say anything, and he didn't either. She focused on the sound of his breathing, of hers, of the heater blowing above them as she finally fell asleep.

*

The next time she used Memory Player, Jonah stepped into the memory flawlessly, as if turning on a game from her last save. This one was in the basement of her childhood home. The artificial tree glowed in the corner, near the stairs, and was decorated in popcorn strands she made in school. The basement was always cold in the winter and Jonah shivered, crossing her

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arms as she took in the familiar sight. Dean Martin's *Return to Me* was playing in the distance, his voice soothing and deep. Her mother loved Dean Martin and played his songs often, swaying to them and closing her eyes, returning to somewhere Jonah didn't know.

Young Jonah was playing a videogame, *Longjumper*. Jonah wanted to see the tree. As she got closer, she noticed it change ever so slightly. She wondered if this was the device improvising. This memory was vague. The program was making things up, like a videogame that hadn't fully loaded a scene. Frustrated, she moved closer, trying to look at the decorations. She tried to take in the smell of the artificial plastic, feel the fallen needles on the ground that her mother vacuumed up, desperately needing to feel *something*. She noticed Dean Martin was singing the same lyric over and over, *return to me*. It was as if everything was glitching.

"Jonah!" yelled an angry voice. Jonah and young Jonah both jumped at the same time. The door to the top of basement opened and her mother came running down the steps, her eyes wild. "What the do you think you're doing?"

"Playing Longjumper," young Jonah said weakly. Jonah moved back from her mother, frightened as if she was really there and this wasn't a part of Memory Player. Young Jonah stayed sitting, the game paused. Dean Martin continued in the distance.

"I told you to clean your room," her mother breathed in, pinching the top of her nose. "You're not going to your father's if you don't clean that fucking room!"

Young Jonah was silent, turned away from her mother "Dad says you can't do that anymore."

"What did you say?"

Young Jonah remained silent. Her mother, in a flash as quick as the blinking lights unplugged the console, ripping the cords viciously. In one motion, she threw it against the wall

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so hard it'd leave a dent they'd never fix. The console, made of cheap plastic and wiring, broke into a million pieces. Young Jonah screamed, covering her head and crying. All her progress, all her hours spent playing her games. Gone. Her screaming was so loud Jonah thought she would watch her younger self die. Her mother didn't pause, just turned and walked away. When her mother got close to Jonah, Jonah froze. She closed her eyes and hoped she wouldn't be seen. Her breathing became unsteady, her heart raced. She felt like she was burning and with an effort, she reached up and tore the device off her.

She felt a body against hers, someone holding her. Adam. Jonah had been screaming, just like her younger self. She was crying--long and breathy cries, a wail. Adam was rocking her back and forth, silent. Jonah wondered if this is how she would die.

*

Adam drew her a warm bath and left her alone, saying he'd be near if she needed him. The water was hot and turned her skin red, she welcomed the feeling. It steadied her. Made her know she was alive, that she was in this apartment. She put her foot up against the faucet, feeling the cool metal against her skin. She had her father's wide feet and could never find any women's shoes that fit her. She studied her body, all the flaws her mother pointed out, all the good things, all the traits that were her father's, her mother's, just hers. If it wasn't for Adam knocking on the door, checking on her in a nervous voice, she would have fallen asleep at peace with the fact that her body was alive. That it was hers.

*

In the middle of the night, while Adam was sleeping and the noises from the city outside were dulled, Jonah got up and used the device. She knew there was a chance for her to have the same reaction as before. She didn't care. For hours she laid in their bed, sweating from the heater

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vent above, pushing Adam off whenever he got close to her. There was an urgency in her. Once she put the device on, it was a quick transition into the memory she wanted to go to.

The world around slipped away and there she was. Her mother stood before her in their kitchen at night, a blank expression on her face. She had her nightgown on, and her hair was wet from a shower. Jonah leaned in longingly, smelling her mother's facewash. Whenever her mother tucked her in at night, these were the sensations; her wet hair grazing Jonah's skin, the smell of the facewash, the blank expression that would turn into a soft smile as she leaned in to kiss her forehead.

But this memory was not one of her tucking her in. Jonah looked down at what her mother was doing. There was the sound of buzzing, of an electric pencil sharpener. One by one, her mother was sharpening young Jonah's hundreds of colored pencils she had collected. Young Jonah was on the top steps that lead from the kitchen down into the basement. She was half-hidden, peeking at her mother.

"This was supposed to be a surprise when you woke up," her mother said, smiling slightly. "I didn't realize you weren't in bed."

"What are you doing?" Young Jonah asked.

"I just thought I'd sharpen your colored pencils. It's always fun to color when they're sharp."

Young Jonah peeked out a little more, "Do you want to color, Mom?"

Her mother took one colored pencil from the sharpener and placed it in young Jonah's plastic box.

"I'd love to. But first, let me make some hot cocoa with those little marshmallows. Do you remember liking those?"

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“Yeah, and you put peppermint sticks in it too.”

Her mother was quiet. Everything was quiet. Except for the pencil sharper buzzing, eating away.

“I’m...I’m sorry I get so angry.” Her mother said quietly.

Young Jonah played with the wooden paneling around the basement door. Etched into the sides were her heights growing up--she messed with the one at age four.

“I just...” her mother cleared her throat, pausing her pencil sharpening “I feel *stuck*.”

“Stuck?” Young Jonah asked, wiping at her eyes. She was scared her mom would still be mad. That she would break more of her things. She was also sad about her console.

“Like I can’t stop feeling this way.”

“Coloring helps me feel better,” Young Jonah said, tapping her fingers against the linoleum. She always found patterns in things. There were three stains, right by the steps, that would never come out no matter how hard they scrubbed.

“Yeah, I know it does,” her mother said, quietly.

There was silence. Young Jonah didn’t move. Jonah looked at her mother, studied her. She knew the device was improvising for her, but she still looked. Jonah closed her eyes and imagined her mother was really next to her. She smelled the facewash. She listened to the sound of her childhood home’s loud heater and the pencil sharpener. She felt the ground beneath her and the tapping of young Jonah’s fingers against the linoleum. Her mother and young Jonah existed in this space together too and for a quick moment, there was a peace and Jonah let it fill up her body.

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The next memory she went to was for one specific reason. To see snow. She was outside, in the backyard at night, the light coming from the full moon that was bright behind the snowstorm clouds. She did not turn towards her house where she knew young Jonah was looking out. She turned towards the empty backyard. In one fluid motion she fell to the ground, hitting hard against the snow that she knew was a simulation in her mind. She didn't care. She closed her eyes, letting the big flakes fall on her face. Let them bury her. She imagined them melting against her warm skin. She would die out here, she thought, covered in snow.