Try to Remember

Virginia May was in the habit of forgetting things, much like her mother. She’d left her keys in a patient’s room a few days ago, and this morning she found Charlotte’s hair bow in the cabinet with the wine glasses. The things she forgot were small, they didn’t matter, but they were enough to make her worry as she left the hospital.

She let the radio scan as she drove away from the city and past the empty quarry, nearing her parents’ home. The clouds began to roll slowly overhead covering half of the sky with an ominous blue-grey. The other half was feathered with clean, white clouds and the bright rays of the sun. It looked as if the light was chasing the dark. Or maybe, Virginia thought, the dark was chasing the light. She could see a storm was coming. For most of her life she’d loved the crackling sound of thunder and the smell when the rain touched the warm asphalt. She’d sit with her mother and father and watch as lightning struck the emptiness of the field behind their house. But in the last few years, the noise had begun to bother her mother, so she retreated to her bedroom while her daughter and husband watched the water trickle down the windows and onto the ground.

Virginia had been let off early to be with her mother, and so she drove with a loaf of bread and a carton of soymilk in the passenger seat. The fake milk sloshed in its container as the tires rumbled over the gravel that led into her neighborhood. Her mother was lactose intolerant, but she had probably forgotten that too.

The leaves on the sugar maples had become a mass of color, tangerine shades layered with maroon and yellow, like an enormous marigold in full bloom. Virginia liked the few weeks in the fall when the leaves held onto the trees. They clung to the branches
not quite ready for winter to shake them off, but knowing the cold was inevitable. Winter never failed to arrive, and she disliked the cold more and more.

She drove for a few more miles until the voices and the music began to disappear as the static took over. She was almost at her parents’ house and ready to turn off the radio, when she heard a man say, “I’d like to alert the community…” Virginia listened for a moment. He wanted to talk about the abandoned quarry that had been filling up with water for years. She drove past it nearly every day but hardly gave it a second thought. The man sounded concerned, almost angry, but she recognized the formal tone of his voice, how he articulated and enunciated almost every syllable. It was Mr. Snow, her high school English teacher. She’d met James in that classroom, where he taught them Frankenstein and Great Expectations by Dickens. She could still hear him talk of loneliness. “Loneliness is at the heart of these stories,” he’d said with so much excitement and passion. In the few moments she heard him on the radio, Mr. Snow sounded tired. He sounded tired and lonely.

As she parked in front of the house, her phone began to buzz, a call from her mother, who was probably sitting inside.

“Hi Momma.”

There was no answer.

“Hello?” Virginia said again.

“Yes, who is this?” Her mother sounded startled

“Momma, it’s Virginia. Can’t you see my car?”

“Why, yes! Why’d you call me if you’re right outside?”
“Momma, I didn’t…” Virginia let out a sigh and then laughed. It was better to laugh. “I’ll be right in. I’ve got your milk.”

“Virginia! Did you get the bread?”

“Yes, Momma, I’ve got the bread.”

“Good. They’re hungry.”

Betsy May was seventy-three. Since leaving work she’d taken to feeding the geese and to needlepoint. She’d been an elementary school teacher for nearly thirty years and taught basic addition and subtraction to a room full of second graders. For most of her life, Virginia didn’t understand how her mother could be so patient but having Charlotte had opened her eyes to a lot of things she’d been blind to before. Her father, Bill, was a cardiac surgeon and had been happily able to retire early, right around the time her daughter was born. Virginia had liked the thought that having a granddaughter would let him slow down, but her mother had also needed help, and he was ready to put the scalpel to rest. He was a help to her, as well, though, coming by the house to bring diapers or formula when Jimmy was on the road. He had stayed the night a few times, too, while she worked late at the hospital.

He’d gotten her that job too. Sure, she’d done well in nursing school, but her father was the reason that spot was secured.

Virginia couldn’t come home as often as she wanted but after even just a few weeks without visiting, she noticed that her mother had forgotten something new: where she kept the salt, her renowned fudge pie recipe, the name of the dog. But her mind was all that seemed to change.
When her mother knew Virginia was coming, she made sure to call and request a loaf of bread. She never forgot the bread. The geese had found a temporary home in the expanse of the May’s backyard, pecking at the grass and leaving plenty of poop and feathers behind. Virginia wasn’t sure if geese could feel happiness or love, but she was sure they enjoyed her mother’s devotion. She treated them like the students she’d taught for so many years, talking to them as if they could respond with more than a honk or a squawk. She’d raised Virginia with the same kind of love and affection but without another sibling it was possible her mother loved her too much. She was a member of the PTA, had cheered as loudly as she could at every soccer game (and cried during Virginia’s first and only goal), and had woken up at 6 o’clock every morning to ensure her lunch was packed. Virginia wasn’t sure what she’d done to deserve any of this.

Her father liked to stand behind the glass door and watch as his wife and daughter went out into the field, smiling and laughing at the strange honks that came from the birds. They flocked to her almost the moment she walked onto the back porch and waddled closer as she tore up the pieces of bread and tossed it to them. It was a wonder they didn’t attack each other. Virginia had heard that geese could be terribly mean, but her mother would never have believed that.

She walked into the house with the bread and the milk but her mother was nowhere to be found. Her father sat on the sofa with his legs crossed and a cup of coffee in hand.

“She’s already outside. I’m not sure a tornado could stop her from waiting.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been home in so long. Since Charlotte started kindergarten, it’s harder to get away, and Jimmy is gone a lot…”
“You don’t have to apologize to me. I know it’s getting harder to –” He lifted a hand – the hand of a surgeon, with those long fingers, soft skin, and clean, even nails --- and then lowered it. “I wish I could come see you and Charlotte more often, but I don’t like to leave her much now.”

“I know, Daddy.”

Virginia had learned to expect her mother’s worsening condition, but there was no timetable for her, or anyone, to follow. She wished there had been instructions. A list that said “And on day 264, expect your parent or significant other to hallucinate.” But the not knowing had allowed her to be hopeful for the good days as well as the bad.

“Is Jimmy home tonight?”

“He picked up Charlotte and took her out for ice cream. He leaves for a quarry in Mooresville on Monday. They’re starting to pay him what he deserves.”

“You just let me know if you need anything.” Her father looked tired. Virginia was sure he’d been up late with her mother for the sounds of footsteps in the hallway or tapping on the window. There was no one there, her father knew that, but he checked for her every time.

She put the milk in the fridge and walked out onto the porch. Her mother was running her hands along the weathered stones of the wall in the middle of the field. There was a pond on the other side of the wall, closer to the trees, where some of the geese slept in the night. Virginia was sure the wall had once been much taller and longer once, but over the years stones had fallen from it. Moss grew along the stones, weeds sprouting in the gaps. Her mother’s hair, she noticed, was the same gray color as the wall, the white in it shimmering as the sun peered from behind the clouds. There was little blue
left in the sky and small drops of rain began to fall from the clouds. The geese wouldn’t come until the storm had cleared.

“It’s starting to rain,” Virginia said. “You’d better come inside, Momma.”

Her mother seemed dazed, but not alarmed, as Virginia took her arm and they walked back to the house. As they stepped inside she said, “Virginia, I’ve just remembered I have a conference with Richie Bradshaw’s parents. He’s been such a pain in my behind lately. Of course, I’d never tell them that, but I just can’t get him to keep his mouth shut!”

Her mother hadn’t taught, let alone been back to the school, in years. Richie Bradshaw was probably in his 20’s by now, Virginia calculated. She glanced at her father. He shook his head. *Play along,* he mouthed.

Virginia knew most of the names of the drugs but her father had spent more time in the medical field and could better understand their uses. Ten years ago, when she’d been diagnosed, it was Razadyne. It seemed to slow the memory loss but when her mother became lethargic and nearly inconsolable, they started her on Prozac. Then when it seemed she was losing motor functions, and the stitching in her needlepoint became crooked and wobbly, they chucked the Razadyne and started her on Aricept. Now she wasn’t sleeping enough and then it was…Virginia couldn’t remember what had been used to treat the insomnia.

When her mother’s short-term memory began to dwindle, their family physician had reassured them that it was just old age. Then it was mild cognitive impairment, but
the progression was slow, “nothing to be concerned about,” he said. Virginia was twenty-two at the time, getting settled into a new home with Jimmy, and the thought of raising a child hadn’t even come to her mind. She was getting ready to finish an undergraduate degree in biology at William Peace University and was looking into a career as a family nurse practitioner. Her father had wanted her to go out-of-state, but Virginia sensed that she needed to be close to home. Jimmy was the light of her life, but she wasn’t staying in rural North Carolina for him alone. It was her mother, really, and her own fear and sadness, that kept her there.

Virginia had Fridays off her senior year, and she dropped in and brought her mother lunch at school when she could. One afternoon in January, Virginia came in with two sandwiches and a bowl of soup. Her mother’s students were laughing, some of them with their little hands covering their mouths to hide the sound.

In a chorus of high-pitched voices, they called, “Hi, Miss Virginia!”

Her mother had a strange look of embarrassment on her face and her cheeks were spotted with a rosy flush.

“Miss Virginia, Miss May said she saw a funny man outside the window! She said he was wearing a yellow hat and flowery shorts!”

They giggled as Charlie McAlister pointed to the window at the back of the classroom. There was no one there. There couldn’t have been anyone there.

“Well, that’s silly! Hey guys, do you think you can be good while I talk to Miss May for a second? We’ll be right outside.”

She took her mother’s arm.
In the hall, her mother said she was certain there was a man in a yellow hat and flowered shorts standing outside the classroom window.

“I can even tell you what kind of flowers they were! They were roses. I’ve never seen a man with roses on his shorts.”

Her mother said she wasn’t afraid of the man; she didn’t wonder how he’d gotten there, or who he was. She seemed sort of bewildered, genuinely surprised, and curious. It was her childlike sort of wonder that scared Virginia. Suddenly, she felt very old. She knew there would come a day when she would have to care for her mother and her father too. Virginia suspected that every child knew that day would come. But she’d never imagined it would come so soon.

She and her father took her mother to the hospital shortly afterward, where she was formally diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Virginia felt angry that they hadn’t gotten it right the first time, but the doctors insisted this, too, would be a slow progression, too. “At least another ten years,” they said. They were fast approaching year eleven.

She had other hallucinations, more and more bizarre. Once she saw a small man on the ceiling fan in their bedroom, and four years into her diagnosis she was convinced her husband had been having an affair.

“I saw the woman, Bill. She was wearing an emerald green dress.” There wasn’t much need to talk her out of it. Every hallucination was quick. It was like she’d been caught in a brief trance and moments later she returned to reality, flipping through the channels or poking at her needlepoint.
Virginia could hear the thunder begin to rumble in the distance. There was a quiet pitter-patter on the roof that quickly grew to the sound of waves crashing in the ocean.

Her father turned to his wife and said “Sweetheart, the storm is close now.”

Virginia and her father expected her to walk back to her bedroom but instead she stood with her face very close to the glass door, watching as the rain poured and the branches thrashed together. But she wasn’t interested in the storm. Her eyes were fixed on the middle on the field. She put her palm on the glass, condensation forming around the shape of her hand.

“Bill, do you see that little girl out there?”

“No, Betsy,” he’d said. “But I’m sure you do.”

He said it in a sort of endearing way, to the woman he loved and treasured more than anything. He knew she could see that little girl. She could see her clear as day.

“Bill, she looks so kind. She’s got pretty green eyes and hair the shade of buttercups or sunshine rays. Bill she looks just like…just like our…”

Virginia’s mother had forgotten her name. She lifted her head to see her father’s sympathetic eyes. She wanted to think this was just a bad day, but she knew her mother would forget how to walk, how to eat. She would need constant attention like a newborn child. Virginia had thought about this moment expecting to be overwhelmed with sadness but that wasn’t quite what she felt. Perhaps it was because this woman did not resemble her mother anymore. She had been fading away. It was strange, Virginia thought, to not recognize her own mother.

Her mother was hardly aware of the rain. Her body was aware of the storm, slightly startled by the crack of thunder, but her mind was far from home.
“Our Virginia,” he said, and her mother had said, “Yes. Yes, our Virginia.”

After only a half hour, the clouds parted and the storm began to clear. Virginia went outside with her mother and the loaf of bread. Her father sat inside, looking through the glass door as Virginia placed an arm around her mother and guided her down the steps to the meadow. The geese had already begun to waddle towards them, making small squawks and honks. Their feathers were a mixture of white and grey and brown, with the lighter colors fading into the darker, like paints running together on a palette. The leaves of the trees and blades of grass glistened and twinkled with the leftover rain. Virginia could feel the water seep into her shoes. Her mother had left her fleece slippers on. They would probably be ruined but that didn’t seem to matter. The sunlight grazed her mother’s shoulders and the profile of her face as she ripped the bread into pieces and threw them to the geese. She looked angelic. The rays broke through the clouds with an almost holographic effect. Virginia wanted desperately to touch them, to hold the light in her hands, but as she opened her palm, they slipped through her fingers and onto the ground.