

## It's Just a Burning Memory

**Veronika Linstrom**

When people ask me how good my memory is, I tell them it's terrible. I'm an honorary goldfish, unable to remember where we parked or what was on the grocery list.

That's a lie.

In truth I have a sharp memory, but I cannot wield that sharpness. The details I recall aren't out of my own personal will, they're out of their own volition.

For example, the day she died.

The day she died, it was cold—not yet the famous nipping, lethal cold of North Dakota, but cold enough to know what was coming. Those first red flags to a bitter winter, so to speak. I wore my two-sizes-too-large, fraying, black-button jacket then—the one with a button missing in the most inconvenient place ever—as I headed off to work. As ugly as the jacket was, it hid the even uglier waitressing uniform underneath: that damned red collared shirt with its terrible material and embroidered logo. I hated the font as much as I hated the restaurant.

The restaurant itself seemed to stand still that day despite the liveliness of the autumn breeze blowing aspen leaves across the cracked pavement. Stepping inside, I was greeted by the familiar hum of the vending machines and musk of cheap coffee. My feet dragged against the ragged and stained patterned carpet as I walked further in. I remem-

ber the gnawing, urgent clawing of anxiety bubbling in my chest as if something wasn't quite right. I tried to shake it off, chalking it up to the unease I'd get every time I came to work, but it wouldn't stop. It persisted through my daily tasks, and it persisted even stronger as I served the only customer in the restaurant at the time: an older white man who was after the simple pleasures of a cup of coffee.

My best friend, who would often come and keep me company during slow shifts, must've known something was wrong too. As I paced to and fro trying to keep myself busy, he was there in a booth doing an assignment for a world history class. He'd stop me every few paces to check in on the anxiety.

"Still there," I'd tell him, mildly irritated at how quickly it was growing and how insistent it seemed to be on staying.

I remember the easy-going, calm expression he always wore falling from his face as I passed by for the thirteenth time. It made me stop in my tracks, dumbfounded. Looking down at his phone and then up at me, he said, "Vi, you should call your dad."

Dread.

There was an instant rush of ice through my veins. I felt my stomach sink into the floor as my hands fumbled into my pockets, grasping around for my phone. As I pulled it out my guts twisted themselves into knots, every bad scenario on replay in my mind. As I clicked on the screen of my barely charged phone, I saw several missed calls and messages. Most of them were from my dad, but a select few were from my stepmom and sister, all saying the same thing: "Call. Now."

I hovered over my dad's contact, frozen in the middle of the restaurant. I couldn't see anything else but his number, couldn't feel anything else except the sweatiness of my palms and the way my arms were vehemently shaking as my fingers struggled to press the call button.

"Dad? H-hello?"

Silence. Hellish, pressing silence. And then a shaky inhale from the other side of the line.

"Hey, kid. I've, uhm, got some news."

I had never heard my dad so void and defeated in my life. My dad, ever the smiling and joking man, never sounded anything but confident. A part of me couldn't believe this was him. The other part of me knew better, knew immediately what this meant.

"Grandma," he started, another shaky breath following as he con-

tinued, “she’s, she’s not doing well.”

“Is she—”

“She’s dead, Bean. It killed her. COVID killed her. She’s gone.”

There it was. All the anxiety, dread—all of it wrapped up in this. My body wasn’t trying to deter me, it was trying to warn me. It knew hours before me and yet I couldn’t accept it, couldn’t acknowledge it until it was too late. The sickness killed her. A preventable sickness—one that could have been avoided if people followed protocol—stole my grandma from me.

I didn’t say anything. Didn’t breathe a sound, not that there was any word in the English dictionary that could’ve filled that morbid, hopeless silence. I never used to believe in air being knocked from someone’s lungs until that moment. My dad didn’t say much of anything either; he just choked back a sob, told me he loved me, and quietly hung up. A piece of me fell onto that stained, ugly carpet of the restaurant that day—a piece of me that I will never, ever get back.

So when people ask me if I have a good memory, I tell them no. I tell them no because that’s the short answer, because it’s easier to lie than to explain the million different things I lost from that one phone call. I don’t have to recount, then, the ways in which everything I had ever known crumbled in front of my very eyes. I just let the memory roll around in my head like an aimless marble. A burning memory.

I don’t have a good memory.

*I wish I didn’t.*

“I myself am strange and unusual” is the life motto **Veronika Linstrom** swears by. As a current junior at UND, Vern is pursuing their bachelor’s in English, as well as certificates in creative writing and writing, editing, and publishing. When not stressing over their work, Vern can be found either with their nose in a book, hyperfocused on their art, or cuddled up on their futon with their cat, Cosimia, and their fiancé, Alex.