

Memory

The sun glared menacingly in the screened viewport. Antony watched himself throw the lever that disconnected the lower section of the rocket. His speed jumped immediately, and the great yellow ball began to grow larger. He felt the pain in his stomach and the nervousness growing. His hands shook and the sweat beaded off his forehead. The fear began to bubble up, just as he remembered, as he considered the possibility of his failure.

But it wasn't real. He felt these things as if they were an echo through time. He thought it would bring him back. Instead, he watched himself long ago, as if it were a movie. A very vivid movie, but still, just a movie.

He played the switches and dials within the craft, though Antony himself could hardly recall their uses. Each time he touched one, the feeling in the tip of his fingers would take a second to reach his mind. His visual and mental impulses weren't in sync.

Oh, God. Here it comes, he felt his thoughts echoing from more than seventy years ago. The star now filled more than half the front viewport, and Antony had to squint painfully, despite the screening.

Glancing down at the secondary computer screen, he found his mark and set the computer to hone in on the point. The craft turned quickly, the yellow and orange covering the screen entirely.

Thirty-eight people have attempted this maneuver. Twenty-three have made it back. Antony heard his own mind, but he wasn't truly thinking those thoughts. It seemed almost as if a stranger was explaining the situation to him.

A comforting black spot opened, and he felt a quick sense of relief. He punched the accelerator and the spot, surrounded now by vividly defined flames, grew in size.

Can't stay more than thirty seconds at this close range. I wonder if I'm pushing it.

The upper half of the viewport changed from painfully bright orange to black. Antony pulled back on the navigation controls and the remaining brightness disappeared into the bottom of the screen. Waiting several moments, he released the accelerator and set the secondary screen to provide a rear view. Looking back he saw the solar flare he'd just passed under.

He heard himself scream in triumph, and a moment later even felt the vibration in his throat. Thrusting his hands above him, he threw his head back--

And the sensations ended.

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Antony forced his eyes open and glanced around the area where he lay. He took a deep breath and for a moment was surprised that he felt the air rushing to his lungs immediately rather than on a delay. He sat up, picking electrodes from his forehead, and commented to the attendant, "Barely two minutes."

"One minute, fourteen seconds," corrected the woman who had set up this adventure. "Full mind recording takes an amazing amount of storage space. The file is more than a thousand times larger than a simple audio file of the same length. We had to cut it down to the most important part."

"So you're telling me all the rest is lost?" asked Antony. "The anxiety I felt before takeoff, the pressure of exiting earth's atmosphere, the return, the landing. All gone? I had almost

four hours recorded. I wanted to feel it all. I wanted to really get into it. What you showed me was like a flash of a memory. It wasn't even very vivid."

Antony stepped out of the machine and groaned.

"It's not efficient to make the sequences any longer. Computer storage space is in high demand. As you continue using this machine the experiences will become more and more real as your mind tunes itself to the impulses."

Antony nodded. "Well, thank you for the experience. I'm sure you did the best you could. I believe I have two more recordings, right? When can I see those?"

"I believe I can schedule you for sometime next week." She began typing at a computer screen. "You have two more recordings in your file," she said. "Your promotion to Admiral and your wedding. The promotion is only fifty-two seconds, but the wedding is almost four minutes. Which would you like to do?"

"The promotion."

"Okay, Thursday, same time?"

"Sure," said Antony.

She nodded. "Go home and get some rest. These things can be emotionally draining."

Antony looked at his mangled hands as he picked up his fork to eat. "It made me feel younger though," he said to the two others sitting at his table. "I was thirty when I flew that rocket under the solar flare. It didn't feel like thirty when they replayed it for me, but maybe seventy, or even sixty. But they claimed I'd feel exactly like I did when it actually happened."

The two others at the table sat quietly, nodding. Antony glanced around the dining room, seeing all the other retirees eating their dinner. He had moved into the retirement community three months earlier, shortly after his wife died. It was different than any place he'd lived before. His meals were provided, his apartment cleaned. He had nothing to do except think about the past. After recently gaining his pension, he could afford a few extra luxuries like taking trips back, on what people normally called the mind recorder.

After a long silence, Lena spoke: "Do you still think about Vienna? It's been less than half a year. You were together for sixty, right?" She paused. People didn't normally talk to Antony about his late wife, but she continued: "I've heard the flashback doesn't work as well if you have something else on your mind."

Antony waited a moment before answering. "I don't think about her anymore. That's not the problem. The mind recorder is a rip-off."

Silence again ensued and Antony realized he'd misinterpreted her question. He did think about Vienna every day. He didn't miss her was what he'd meant. He missed something though, but didn't know what. Maybe that was the problem.

"It can't be that bad," Lena said. "It works just like they said it would. The only problem is that it's not as vivid as you expected. I'm willing to believe that's a problem with your mind and not the machine." She grinned widely. "Maybe it will get better."

Standing at attention in the front of the crowd, Antony stared into the eyes of the ornately dressed hulking figure of his superior.

"Antony Milner," said the man, "for twenty-four years of faithful service to the United States military, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Admiral."

He shook hands with several officers and continued with the small ceremony. His gaze drifted toward the audience and met Vienna's. As he looked at her, his stomach knotted. Something was different. This wasn't the wife he remembered. This woman was much more lovely.

Trying to force his body to stare longer, he looked away, painfully aware of his lack of physical control. The ceremony went on. He shook a couple more hands, then left the stage.

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Antony sat up, blinking rapidly. Pausing, he reflected on what he'd just experienced. That promotion had been fifteen years into his marriage, and he hadn't remembered feeling like he had in the replay. He'd expected the promotion itself to be the focus of the memory, but instead it had been Vienna. Perhaps that was just his own mind in real time, affecting how he remembered things in the flashback.

"Everything go okay?" asked the attendant, a young bearded man.

"It worked better this time," Antony replied. "I'm not sure if everything was the same. I didn't remember it quite like that."

"Forty-five years," the attendant commented. "You'll forget things. The computer won't."

"Is it possible to experience another person's recordings?" Antony asked.

"No. The brain patterns vary too much. People's minds cannot interpret each other."

Antony nodded slowly. "I have one more left. Are there any openings tomorrow?"

"Don't you think you should wait a few days before trying another one? These can be emotionally straining. It may not seem like it now, but it may cause problems. Especially in a person as--someone like yourself."

"Someone as old as me?" asked Antony. "Don't worry. I'll be perfectly fine. My brain functions perfectly. Can I sign up for tomorrow?"

The attendant replied, "Okay, if you insist. I have an opening."

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Laying awake, Antony found himself thinking back on the sixty years of his marriage. The first twenty were blurry--except for the moment of his promotion. The last twenty didn't seem to mean much. By the end he'd started to wonder what emotions had led him to marry Vienna in the first place. He had assumed that he had loved her at some point, but for some reason couldn't be sure. Today, he'd had a glimpse of what it felt like in the early years.

He never disliked Vienna. After all those years, he didn't have a problem with living with, talking to, or being around her. But he wasn't in love with her. He knew now that he truly had been at one point. Perhaps that's what he missed.

Eventually, Antony drifted into sleep.

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People all around spoke continuously. Antony paid no attention. Somebody tried to talk to him, leaning on his shoulder, but Antony brushed him off and stood up. Staring over the crowd he saw Vienna's coffin, enshrouded with wilted flowers. He watched for a moment, then started making his way toward it. Fighting the crowd to get to the center aisle, he stumbled out and began walking. People reached out hands, trying to console him, but he slapped them away.

Approaching the black box where she lay, he looked in and saw his wife. But she wasn't the same. She looked forty years old. Like she had when he married her.

He still felt nothing. She was just a person; almost a stranger.

A glass sheet covered her body. He put his hands on it and began tapping, wondering if he could restore her to life. Noticing a sign saying, DO NOT TAP, he stopped. Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed the crowds had left.

Antony looked back and felt a pain developing in his stomach, but he felt distanced somehow, like the pain was an echo from sixty years ago.

But it continued to grow more vivid as he stared at Vienna. Realizing that he wanted her to awaken, he sank to his knees. He wanted more than anything for her to open her eyes.

He put his hands to his stomach.

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Sitting up in bed, Antony placed his hands on his stomach, feeling the pain slowly drift away. He glanced at the clock above the door. 0432 hours. Another six hours until his appointment. Strangely, he found himself looking forward to it.

He turned over and lay for a long while, but finally made it back to sleep.

Taking his place in the front of the room, Antony ran a quick hand over his tuxedo, making sure everything was placed correctly. Not understanding why, his heart began to pound. He knew that the ceremony would go smoothly, and he had no fear that Vienna would cancel. He knew that he would not back out himself. And yet he could not control the nervousness.

He stood for more than a minute, waiting, as everyone took their places. Images flashed uncontrollably through his mind. He saw the house they had just purchased. First, in its original, run down state, then, as a dream, how he imagined it would look in a year. Vienna stood next to him in jeans and a tee-shirt, her arm resting on his waist.

Antony suddenly wanted, more than anything, for her to be with him. He wanted to feel her against him. The feeling didn't surprise him.

Images of their relationship came to mind in instantaneous flashes. He understood and remembered each one as they came.

Finally, the music started, the rear double-doors opened, everyone stood, and Vienna stepped out in her long white dress. It took thirty seconds for her to walk down the aisle. Another minute of staring into her eyes while the vows were read. He didn't listen.

Antony knew when to say the words, sealing their promise. He hit the cue despite his lack of attention.

A moment later they kissed deeply, forgetting about the hundred-or-more watchers. To Antony's one-hundred eight year old mind, it was the most electrifying experience he'd felt in years. His forty-eight year old mind echoed the same. But Antony was no longer aware of his separate levels of consciousness.

The moment for the kiss passed but Antony held her for several seconds longer.

They finally released each other and backed a step away. Her hand remained on his waist. Antony stared at his wife. She cocked her head, smiled, and mouthed silently, "come back."

He looked out at the audience for a quick moment, and his entire consciousness went blank.

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Sitting up quickly, the electrodes ripped from his head and neck. The attendant looked over suddenly. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"No," Antony replied quickly. "Everything's perfectly fine. That was a very good flashback."

He fell silent, thinking of Vienna's mouthed words. Why would she say that? Certainly she hadn't the real time. Had he hallucinated it? Perhaps she tried to communicate something completely different. But it didn't feel like that. She had spoken to him and he understood.

"When's your next opening?" asked Antony.

Thirty-eight people have attempted this maneuver, thought Antony. Twenty-three have made it back. Carefully, he turned three dials, adjusting the outer shielding. His heart pumping audibly and the sweat beading off his forehead, he paused for a second, waiting to see the opening.

The black spot appeared and Antony took a deep breath, punching the accelerator. Flames from the great yellow ball seemed to lap the edge of the craft. He knew they were hundreds, perhaps thousands of kilometers away, yet he couldn't help jumping each time one leapt.

Can't stay more than thirty seconds at this close range. I wonder if I'm pushing it.

Adjusting the computer system to hone in on the center mark, the craft shifted, throwing Antony painfully to his left. He saw the hole straight ahead and threw the accelerator further.

The craft shot through the giant hole, the brightness disappearing. Antony's eyes felt immediately better, free of the stress of shielding the brightness.

Releasing the computer control, Antony clutched the navigation controls and pulled the craft away from the sun, feeling his internal organs shifting with the gravitation. Despite the stress of the added pull, the change came as an amazing relief.

Fighting the pull, he waited several seconds and eased the accelerator down. He clicked the secondary screen to rear view and looked back at the massive solar flare and the smaller opening he'd passed through.

He screamed hard enough for his throat to ache. Thrusting his hands above him, he threw his head back, the feeling of success encompassing him.

"You went back again?" Lena asked. "Is this your fourth time already? I don't want to preach to you but I've heard of people getting too into the flashbacks. I've heard of people going crazy. Maybe you should give it a rest, Antony."

"I'm seeing her again in two days," Antony replied. "They wouldn't schedule me for anything sooner than that. Maybe that's a good thing. I'm not worried." Pausing, he took another bite of his sandwich. "I'm going to be perfectly fine. A few more times and I'll be bored with these memories."

"Well, if you feel yourself becoming addicted, please Antony, tell someone."

"Don't worry, I will." He smiled, internally laughing at her foolish paranoia. She reminded him a little of Vienna in her later years. Annoyingly patronizing.

He looked at Lena, imagining Vienna. I don't want her back, he thought. But his mind drifted to the Vienna he saw in the flashback sessions, seeming like a dream. That was certainly in another world. He knew he could only view that world from a distance.

Touching her waist with one hand and pulling her veil with the other, he drew her close and they kissed, sensations running down his body. Antony felt her body pressed softly against his and pulled her closer.

They finally released each other, painfully aware of the time limit set by the ceremony. Leaving an arm resting on her waist, he leaned back and looked into her eyes. Vienna turned her head in a shy smile.

Antony glanced out at the audience, intending to look immediately back.

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He opened his eyes and jumped. He was in a huge white room with instruments and machines everywhere. Sitting up, he felt little pads pulling away from his neck and head.

His mouth dropped open. Where am I? he thought. Where's my wife--

And he remembered. He sat, blinking rapidly. A long moment later he remembered that Vienna hadn't mouthed anything to him. How could the flashbacks be different like that? He must have felt a present-mind intrusion the first time, causing the hallucination.

The flashbacks were becoming more effective.

Stepping through the well-cut grass, Antony found the two headstones, one unmarked, the other labeled, VIENNA MILNER, 2114-2215.

He thought back to the funeral three months ago, remembering its lack of effect over him. At the time it seemed like nothing more than a change in venue. He never felt terribly upset that she'd died, and he hadn't returned to this spot since then.

Antony missed something though, and he now knew that it was something inside himself. It wasn't lost with Vienna, but had left many years before.

Words appeared on the second headstone, and before he registered the shock of the hallucination, he read them. ANTONY MILNER, 2215-2155. For a moment he considered the significance of the backward numbers, then jumped, blinking quickly. The words disappeared. Staring hard at the stone, he ran a finger across the space where the words had been.

Taking a step back, he wondered if his age influenced the vision, or if the warnings of Lena and others were more well-founded than he'd thought. He had another flashback appointment tomorrow.

Feeling the new life starting, he clutched Vienna, drawing her close. As their lips touched, he opened his mouth slightly. Forever he would have her by his side. He felt as sure of this as he had of anything in his life.

They held each other for half a minute and finally released. He mouthed the words, "I love you,"

She smiled, and cocked her head, with a look of hopeful longing.

Wrapping an arm around his love, he looked out at the audience, feeling like an entirely new person.

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Antony lurched up, opening his eyes, his stomach collapsing. The electrodes ripped off as he fell to the floor.

"What is this?" he shouted. "Where am I?" He looked around the room, searching for Vienna. Spinning repeatedly, he could not find her. Instead, the only person stood before a screen, staring at Antony. "Who are you?" Antony shouted, stopping.

When the man didn't answer, Antony crawled frantically to his feet and shuffled quickly toward him. "What have you done with her? Where is my wife?" He threw an arm at the man, but he blocked. Antony thrust both hands at the man's neck, but did not connect. The man easily overpowered Antony, holding his arms at a distance.

"What have you done?" shouted Antony, kicking wildly.

"Please, sir," said the attendant. "Calm yourself. Everything is okay. You have been over-influenced by the flashback sequence."

Slowly coming to his realization, Antony relaxed his arms and ceased his attack. He fell backward, against the wall and curled up. Tears began to fall, dripping onto his shirt. His arm spasmed uncontrollably in anger, pounding against the wall. "She's gone," he said.

Antony looked up after several long moments, his face painfully hot.

She was so close now. He could almost see her. There was only one way to go back and Antony could no longer consider the dangers.

"When is your next opening? I'd like to make an appointment."

The attendant stared back for a painfully long time and finally shook his head. "I won't do that. You're not handling this well. I'm sorry, but I think you need a rest."

"I want in on your next opening. I'm a rational adult. You don't have the authority to deny me service. I'm a paying customer. If you won't sign me up then let me talk to your boss." Antony's lip twitched as he fought back tears of frustration.

The attendant waited a long moment before answering, "You're sure you want to do this?"

"Yes. I am aware of the risks. I have signed the waiver. Please, just do as I ask."

"I strongly recommend against this, but if you truly want this then I can get you an appointment, only because company policy is to not refuse service to anyone. If you went to my boss, he'd sign you up. I still have a problem with this." The attendant turned to the screen and Antony stood up and watched as a grid appeared with names entered in each cell except one.

"There," Antony pointed as the attendant tried to scroll down to a later date. "There's an opening right there."

"Sir, that's in four hours," replied the attendant. "I don't believe you're serious."

"Yes," Antony nodded. "Don't worry. This is what I want."

"This will permanently affect your mind."

"I know."

The attendant reluctantly typed in the name.

Staring deep into her eyes, Antony subconsciously heard the question, and answered, "I do."

Several long moments later they were officially married and they pulled each other close and kissed. The ceremony called for it, but they thought nothing of the formality aspect.

After a painfully short time, they released and looked at each other. Antony admired her beautifully clean smile. Time seemed to stand still as he stared, until he chose to move to the next moment, looked out on the crowd,--

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--and put a hand on her hip.

Vienna stepped closer and whispered in his ear, "I knew you'd return to me." She touched his face and turned his gaze toward her. They kissed again, somehow with more passion than the first time, ignoring their guests, and ignoring the rest of the world.