

WHITE LIES

A helping hand.

BY GRACE TANG

“Anthony, is it normal at our age not to remember parts of our lives? Parts people would consider important?”

I froze for the smallest split second, but years of acting had trained me well. In fact, there were days when I forgot that my colleague was not what he appeared to be. I willed my fork to resume its passage from my mouth back to my plate, slowly and calmly.

“Why do you ask, Darren?”

“I was talking to a student of mine who’s graduating soon. He’s very excited, naturally.”

I nodded as we both gave up pretending to care about lunch.

“Problem was, when I tried to recall my own graduation, I drew a blank.”

My heart was racing. Lisa would not be happy to hear this. While he spoke, I typed furiously but stealthily on my phone under the table. *Subject Three is catching on.*

“It gets worse. After more thought, I realized I could recall only the barest details about my time in college.”

I maintained my perfect poker face, “Hmm. I guess I don’t remember much from college either.” Fond memories of college flooded my brain.

My phone buzzed, balanced on my knee. I glanced down. *Come now.*

“Gotta go?” Darren had caught me looking at my phone.

“Uh, yeah, Lisa wants to see me.”

He’d noticed my nervousness. “The problem with collaborating with your wife, huh? Never know whether you’re in trouble because of work, or because you forgot your anniversary.”

Lisa looked much older than her 40 years as I entered her office, out of breath. “What happened?” she asked.

“It was his missing memories of graduation that triggered it.”

“Damn, those were always the hardest,” she rubbed her fingers on her temples. “It’s almost impossible to fake memories of a major life event.”

We had been in graduate school together when she’d started work on implanting information directly into the brains of rhesus macaques. Almost like magic, her monkeys knew where food was hidden in rooms they had never been in, and recognized other monkeys they’d never met.

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When she managed to impart basic mathematics to her charges with no effort on their part, her work was broadcast on every major news network in the world. Lisa should have been the happiest person in the scientific community. Instead, one evening, I found her sitting on the floor in the corner of the lab, face in her hands.

“Lisa, what’s wrong?”

She looked up and wiped the smudged mascara from her cheeks.

“The Dean of Research visited me today. He said the world hadn’t seen anything this exciting since Dolly the sheep.”

“And that’s bad because...?”

“Like cloning, it’s never going to move past animal work. They won’t let me use human subjects.”

But I knew it would take more than rules to stop Lisa. When her research assistant, a mediocre student at best, started acing every exam a few months later, I knew exactly what was going on. I still remember the night we were the last two people in lab, and I seized my chance.

“How are you doing it?”

Lisa struggled to contain her smile, as if glad that someone had finally figured it out. She checked to see no one else was around. “It wasn’t stable at first... as soon as she realized there was no way she could know all the stuff she did without having ever gone to a single class, the knowledge vanished.”

“Looks like it’s working now.”

“It was an easy fix — I figured out that unlike the macaques, humans couldn’t handle the sudden unexplained appearance of vast amounts of factual knowledge. So when I put facts and skills in her brain, I also threw in memories of having gone to lectures, studying, all that stuff.”

It was then I realized why the project had been stopped.

“Granted, autobiographical memories are much harder to implant than semantic facts. It’s very similar to hypnosis — you suggest

something to them, and their brains fill in the rest.”

“So in other words, you’re telling people very convincing lies?”

“Just white lies, Anthony...”

When I still looked unsure, she led me to her equipment room — she rarely let anyone back there. I was honoured.

“How’d you like to work on the next one with me?”

I slept on it. Half of me wanted to report this to the authorities, but it was too good an opportunity to pass up. And by then, I realized I liked Lisa for more than her intellect...

The first time Lisa brought Darren to the lab, I smelt him before I saw him. Plucked from the streets, he hadn’t had a shower in days. And yet five years later, Darren was a fellow assistant professor, about to deliver a lecture on molecular neuroscience down the hall.

Lisa paced in front of me. “I was stupid. I was depending too much on the human mind’s ability to fool itself. Just suggest to someone they were abused by their father as a child, and they’ll tell you under oath how it happened. Here I am, hard-wiring memories into his head, and he doesn’t buy it. What more can I do?”

I couldn’t keep it in any longer.

“Lisa, do you ever feel this is wrong?”

“Not this again...” she sighed. “We took a homeless, illiterate man off the streets and made him a genius. How is this wrong?”

Defeated, I left for my office. Work was taking its toll on our relationship. Deep in thought, I fiddled with my wedding ring.

The blood drained from my face. Try as I might, I could not recall a single detail of my wedding day. ■

Grace Tang is a graduate student in psychology at Stanford University. Writing short stories is one of her favourite forms of structured procrastination.

