

Whatâ??s in a memory? And why these â?? random, insignificant things and events â?? not the big, more important ones?

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SENIOR BEAT COLUMN



Over 30 years ago, my mother caught sight of her reflection in a shop window. â??Who is that familiar old woman?â?• she asked herself, and she smiled broadly telling me the story. â??Suddenly I realized it was me! I was so shocked I could only burst out laughing!â?•

I remember also, when she was maybe 40, that a fortune teller read her palm and predicted sheâ??d live to 75. I was a teen when she shared this, and I freaked out, but she replied firmly, â??No, no, Naomi, 75 is a good long life, thatâ??s fine with me.â?•

She died last year at 96 and, in the year without her, Iâ??ve been struck by which memories come up from my 70 years of life with her. Why do certain memories remain? Why these and not those?

I remember my father, dead nine years, telling me in anger, circa 1972, that I was the Vietnam of our family. But I also remember the beautiful ballad he wrote for me about my first boyfriend, whom Iâ??d meet on Saturdays. I was 14, 15?

He debuted â??The Ballad of the Saturday Kid, â??accompanying himself on the piano**: â??**That is why I will put in my bid, to keep hanging loose as her Saturday K-i-ii-i-d,â?• his tenor voice quavered as his hands blew up the keyboard with trilling arpeggios.

As I grow older, I am intrigued, perturbed, and puzzled by how easily unimportant memories keep popping up but not big ones, like my May 1983 graduation from Columbia University, or the 1978 June afternoon when I was finally liberated from my bed in a Santa Cruz hospital orthopedics unit after four months in traction (leg held together with pins, pulleys, and sandbags after a wreck on Highway 17). I donâ??t recall those red-letter days at all.

Donâ??t remember graduation day, but â?¦

I donâ??t remember graduation day from high school or college but do remember my mountain-top, Catholic convent school in Mexico. Iâ??m 10, the only Jewish kid for miles around, and the nuns threaten to take me to the chapel to convert me. â??La Israelita,â?• they called me. Mom stormed up the hill and put the kibosh on that.



Why do some memories pop up when others donâ??t? (All Images generated by Adobe Express)

Seven decades of breathing on earth, of growing up and growing old, of school and work and friends and lovers, so *oh why* do I remember Tadeusz, a Polish political refugee I helped resettle in 1981 when I was a caseworker with a Monterey County refugee resettlement agency? After all, I resettled hundreds of refugees.

I slept with him, risking my job (didnâ??t care) and my reputation (couldnâ??t care less). But I flirted with lots of refugee clients, and I donâ??t remember most of their names or faces.

Tadeusz was a rogue and a liar. He arrived as part of a refugee trio, with Konrad and Stanislas, in Monterey through Catholic Charities. Front page of the Monterey Peninsula Herald: locals congratulating themselves for helping these brave Polish shipyard workers.

But, I bet they lied on their asylum claim, lied that they were at the Gdansk shipyard when the Polish government declared martial law and cracked down on Solidarity. I think they were just opportunists; a good caseworker smells those kinds. But I helped lots of opportunists, with no judgment, so why do I vividly remember them?

A certain mustache

Moody, handsome Konrad, jolly chubby Stanislas, and sexy skinny, red-headed Tadeusz. I even remember where we parked in the forest in his jalopy, a junky turquoise Volvo he bought with his refugee cash assistance. Our acquaintance lasted barely a month or two, so *why* do I remember his ginger mustache and the crinkled black-and-white photo of his small son he carried in his wallet?



A Polish refugee and a Volvo jalopy.

These are the indelible memories that surface. Why these?

I took a course in tax/inheritance law to be better armed for old age: I do not remember one thing. Useless anyway, as the laws keep changing.

But I still remember the phone numbers of my friends when I attended the University of Leningrad in 1979: Kostya, 2-71-66-32. We memorized them in case our address books were confiscated at the border. Cold War, Brezhnev era.

I remember the gauntlet of customs at the Soviet border the first time I went there. That was January 1979 at Leningradâ??s Pulkovo airport: Icy, bone-chilling cold, the smell of sour cream, the baby-faced border guards (Soviet soldiers) lazily leafing through my Beatles songbook. They let me keep it. Was that even 30 minutes of my life? I went to the USSR so many times, why do I remember *that* border crossing?

My husband and I do an unintentionally comic shtick when we tell our â??how we metâ?• story. We remember that day being in different years and completely disagree on how long he took to call me after our first meeting. But we both remember who introduced us; may his memory be a blessing.

I can say the names of all my elementary school teachers, but hardly any of my college professors. Whatâ??s up with that? And I remember the worst boss I ever had, but not being fired. Mercifully blocked that out.

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Certain kisses

In my dreams, people show up whom I havenâ??t seen in decades. Why?

I gaze into my past like itâ??s going to give me answers. But if I try to conjure up a moment from one year, say, age 9 or 35 or 52, I canâ??t unless I go to a photo album.



Cuisenaire Rods are mathematics learning aids for students.

But unbidden and unwanted, so many moments that would seem unremarkable keep bobbing up, in detail and technicolor: Walking home from the bus stop in rainstorms; Cuisinaire Rods from third grade; a favorite yellow corduroy jumper; dancing the Hokey Pokey with George Bucquet in kindergarten; beloved books: â??Miss Osborne the Mop,â?• â??Bel Canto;â?• all the early Dylan lyrics; and certain kisses.

And Moscowâ??s Cosmos Hotel, with its terrifying, mirrored floor-to-ceiling elevators, drunken Finns, and red caviar on hardboiled eggs for breakfast. Chanel No. 5, my momâ??s dressed-up, going-out scent. The Brown University Class ring my father always wore: clunky gold with an amber stone. Certain kisses.

Memory house-cleaning

In my family, I am famous for remembering things others forget.

I am the only one who remembers our grandmotherâ??s address, 139-21 85th Drive, Apt. 6H, Jamaica (Queens), NY. And I remember that she was born in 1901 and died in 1984.

Iâ??ve now made my peace with the random memories; I donâ??t really have a choice. I react to these unexpected recollections with â??Hmmm. Thatâ??s interesting,â?• rather than, â??Why the hell is that coming up?â?•

More memories have already been made in my life than are going to be made. Meanwhile, I am brutally throwing out correspondence, calendars, photos, journals, the tangible evidence of those millions of memories. School reports, invoices, performance evaluations, rejection slips, and award letters. Out. Out. Out. OUT! Into the Blue Bin!

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I cast out the paper proof of my memories, hoping it will make me feel lighter. Yet, the memories still come and go in my mind, in and out like the tides: inevitable, mysterious, forever, till I am gone.

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