

Essay

The Memory Thief

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The act of remembering is not a simple retrieval of facts but a complex reconstruction of past events, influenced by our current beliefs, emotions, and expectations (Rață). This reconstructive nature of memory makes it susceptible to distortion, manipulation, and even complete fabrication, raising profound questions about the reliability of our recollections and the stability of our sense of self (Rață).

In an age where memories could be digitized and traded, the boundaries between reality and simulation had all but vanished. People drifted through neon-lit cities, their eyes fixed on glowing screens that offered curated slices of emotion, joy, love, and fear packaged for instant consumption.

Eliot lived on the fringes of this society. A struggling artist, his studio smelled of turpentine and longing. Dust-covered canvases surrounded him, each one an abandoned attempt to capture something real in a world that no longer valued authenticity. Machines now painted better than humans or so people claimed.

Outside, memory kiosks buzzed with life, offering fragments of experiences for sale. Inside, Eliot stared at his reflection in the window, wondering when he had last created something that was truly his own.

One afternoon, Eliot wandered into a local memory exchange out of curiosity or perhaps desperation. Rows of digital displays showcased pre-recorded experiences: a first kiss, a mountain sunrise, and a final goodbye. A synthetic voice promised transformation.

He turned to leave but was stopped by an old man with time-worn eyes.

"You're not here for illusions, are you?" -

Eliot paused. "I don't know what I'm looking for."

The man handed him a torn slip of paper with an address.

“There’s a place for those who want more than curated joy. It’s not safe. But it’s real.”

That night, Eliot followed the address to a derelict alleyway. An unmarked door creaked open, revealing a dimly lit room filled with people like him, artists, seekers, and the broken.-

Mira, the so-called guardian of memory, welcomed him. “Here, we don’t sell fantasies. We exchange truths. But be warned these memories will change you.”

Eliot offered his own memories: a childhood summer, the scent of rain, his first heartbreak. In return, he received fragments of others’ lives raw, vivid, and unfiltered.

For the first time in years, Eliot felt something stir. He felt alive.

Eliot plunged into the lives of strangers feeling their joy, their sorrow, and their quiet moments of hope. He painted again, each brushstroke pulsing with emotion. But something was off. The faces he painted were unfamiliar. The feelings, borrowed.

As his work gained attention, Eliot felt himself drifting. He could no longer distinguish his thoughts from those he’d absorbed. The memories had given him inspiration, but they had also blurred his sense of self.

One evening, he accessed a memory titled *The Last Breath*. He found himself in a hospital room, clutching the hand of a dying loved one. The sorrow was suffocating.

When he returned, Eliot was in tears. That experience hadn’t just moved him, it had unmade him.

He approached Mira. “These memories... they’re dangerous.”

She nodded. “They remind us of what we’ve lost. People come here looking for something missing in their own lives. Sometimes, they forget who they are in the process.”

Shaken but awakened, Eliot began painting his truth. He stopped borrowing. Instead, he turned inward, embracing the rawness of his own experiences. His art, imperfect but sincere, resonated.

He hosted workshops, inviting others to share and transform their own memories into expressions of healing. Slowly, a movement took root. People remembered how to feel—without filters, without fabrication.

Temptation lingered.

One night, Eliot stood once again before the unmarked door. Mira greeted him.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

“I know,” Eliot replied. “But it’s still hard to resist.”

She smiled. “It always is.”

He turned and walked away.

Back in his studio, sunlight spilled across the floor. Eliot dipped his brush into paint and began to work not from memory, but from the present.

The Memory Thief was no longer a cautionary tale. It was a promise. A testament to what remains when all else fades:

The self.

Works Cited

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