A Palette of Possibility

When we are born our lives are a blank canvas. We try to colour it freely, in accordance with our own wishes and desires. We try to choose the patterns, the design, and our own unique blend of colours, mixing and mixing until we find rare colours, completely distinctive to ourselves. Although, we cannot choose everything of course; factors outwith our control colour our lives too. The people we meet, the places we visit and, in fact, almost everything that takes place during our life, contributes its own subtle tone, own paint stroke and thus decorates our canvas. The colours become stronger and more vivid, building layer upon layer until the work is fully complete.

My life is now a blank canvas once more, for my past is empty space – echoing and vast. It is not dark space but light, white and glaring. In fact, it is so stark and bright that it blinds me. This clean emptiness is a constant reminder of the reality of my life; my life of which so much has been erased. It makes me feel as though there must be a little vacuum in my brain. I can even imagine my past being sucked up by it and then disintegrating, becoming lost forever as it merges with the surrounding whiteness.

Despite the bareness, there are fleeting moments when I can visualise some coloured marks on the canvas. These memories that I have not entirely forgotten come to me in smudged blotches of colour, but the colour is faint and indistinct, not clear or vibrant. Sometimes, the blurred droplets swell wider and wider, like watercolour paint on crisp paper, until eventually I can almost make out a faded outline. Whilst others, they are tiny specs made with the stroke of a pencil that has merely skimmed the page, making them barely visible.

My life is fading in and out of focus. I can only remember some of the recent past. Sometimes I struggle to remember what I did yesterday, or what I ate for breakfast this morning and even questions that have just been asked of me. I remember even less of my distant past. That is essentially every memory prior to the day I was admitted here. I do not know whether or not I will regain any more of my memory. The doctors do not know either.

Apparently it started with headaches, dizziness and nausea, but then I began to notice other, ever so slight, changes. My bright life dulled and muted as my mind began to malfunction. Gradually, I became easily confused and disorientated, and found familiar tasks at home difficult. It was discovered then that I had a brain tumour. My brain, the organ that coordinates my entire body and is responsible for my actions, thoughts, feelings and imagination, was being attacked.

What quickly followed was the surgery to remove it. I do not even remember this fully myself. I only have a vague recollection of it, but my medical records and the nurses and doctors around me have made me aware of the operation I underwent. I am guessing I was warned that there is always a risk of memory loss with brain surgery but, ironically, I cannot remember being told this. Neither can I remember signing to give my consent for the operation. What I have been left with is retrograde amnesia. This is the loss of memories before the brain trauma my operation caused. I also have partial anterograde amnesia meaning some of my new memories are not forming. I do not know how I am going to continue on with my life. I barely know who I am anymore. All I know is why I am in hospital and the condition I have. But even these things are difficult for me to figure out. I seem to be able to repeat these complex medical terms and understand what they are, but not fully link them to my own life. I still cannot remember and do simple things. It is very strange that I can understand these medical terms, because Science is a subject I have never flourished in, and have no passion for. It is as though a bit of my brain that I have never used before is suddenly doing all of my thinking. But still, my mind is slow and I cannot comprehend the fact that I have lost my past, never mind think about what is to come in the future. I am beginning to wonder what would have happened if I had refused surgery and just left the cancer to consume my brain. Perhaps my memory would have been unaffected and I would have died the same women I had been all of my life. Now, when I die, I will have less of my past within me. I will die an incomplete version of my former self.

I cannot entirely remember what happened to me when I awoke after my surgery, but what I cannot forget is the fear and isolation I felt and still feel. I do not think I knew where I was or who I was. I was completely and utterly confused, highly distressed and rocking around in the bed. I do not know what I screamed and shouted but I know that I did. I still find myself distraught that I do not recognise my own name. “Evelyn May, aged fifty-two,” they said, and it still means absolutely nothing to me. My reflection in the mirror looks at least fifty-two. My face is sunken and wizened, so I know that part is true, but it is a face I do not remember ever seeing before. The vague eyes staring back at me show how empty my mind is. Every scene that my eyes have captured in the past has evaporated. Whenever I am called by my name, I rarely respond for I keep forgetting that it is me that is being referred to. In my own mind, I am nameless.

Every day is the same here, a tightly scheduled routine. So I suppose as long as I know what is going on today, then I can remember yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that. I have wondered about it and sometimes I am convinced it is a trick, and that this is the effect the doctors and nurses are trying to achieve. But I do not think it is. If it were, it would be incredibly cruel of them to make me feel as if I am regaining memory when I am not.

There are some things that, currently, I do remember. The memory is of a man visiting me the other day. It is a weak one, blurry and soft, whimsical almost, like a vague dream or fairy-tale. But it feels real. I did not recognise the man, so I was confused that he was not a nurse or a doctor and came to my bedside during ‘Visiting Hour’ - the time when every patient on the ward is greeted with a friend or relative whom they welcome with embracing arms and a wide smile. I, unlike the rest, did not smile upon meeting my visitor. He was a stranger to me. But there was something about the way his eyes connected with mine and held my gaze that I could not help but notice. It was like a tiny spark and I suddenly saw a flash of colour. He spoke to me in a gentle, warm whisper and sympathetically, if somewhat awkwardly, asked me how I was feeling. I told him that I was fine. I was fine on the outside but not on the inside.

At the end, I tagged on, “But who are you?” This was when he confronted me with the strange words: “I’m your husband, Thomas.” Suddenly I was screaming on the inside, not with anger but despair and sorrow. I just could not believe his words. How could a stranger be my husband? But I realised how deadly serious he was, waiting in anticipation for the response he wanted - for all my memories of him to flood back. But I think he knew this was not going to happen. His face was frozen with loss and desperation. The crow’s feet at his eyes and deep lines on his forehead spoke of worry. His dark sunken eyes, with tears surfacing inside their lids, were deeply searching. He pleaded with me, “It’s me, it’s me!” as if just like that he could convince me. But it meant nothing at all. It was such an empty statement, yet he probably felt his words spoke volumes and were all that needed to be said. I did not even know myself, so how was I supposed to know him? He then told me he had visited the previous day, but of this I was completely unaware. Although, something etched into his expression told me that he had replayed this scene many times before.

I am starting to think that I can feel an internal connection with this man, and can imagine myself falling in love with him. This is why I am starting to believe him. But if I rely solely on my memory, without acknowledging my feelings and emotions, I am incapable of answering the question: is he my husband? So I keep trying hard to remember – sharpen the colours and bring him into focus.

It emerged, visit-by-visit, that Thomas knew many details about my individuality and personality; features that we do not shed as readily as memories. He had intricate and delicate knowledge that I felt only someone you had spent a lot of time with – nearly your whole life – would know. There were inevitably some stories that were unfortunately of no use in proving to me that I knew him. It was information from a past I no longer had. But there are things that you do not forget, because they still apply to your daily life – the here and now. It was surreal having a stranger list off details about me like an illusionist, but it began to make him seem more familiar, and I was beginning to see colours surrounding him that had not been there before. The most significant thing he knew about me was my love of art. I believe that you could capture my true essence without realising that art is everything to me, so at this point I fully accepted that he must have deeply understood me and therefore must have been familiar with me in my past. Even to this very day, with my brain still incomplete of memories I know that I will always be at my most content with a paintbrush in my hand. I do not need to remember that I love art because it comes from somewhere else within me.

On his next visit, Thomas handed me a perfectly carved wooden box. The deep wood was so smooth and soft it felt like velvet and the beautiful carvings on the edges were mesmerising. He did not wait for me to open it and instead just placed it in my hands, fading noiselessly out of the room. When I opened it I found a paint palette of twenty soothing colours inside. There was also a set of ten different brushes with decorative wooden handles, two blank canvasses waiting to be transformed into a unique piece of art, and a note. The note read: *Dearest Evelyn, Perhaps the pieces you create this time can be hung on the walls of our house and not sold in your gallery. Thomas. xxx.* I was filled with a strong energy of two completely contradicting emotions clashing inside me. After my surgery, I had dreamt and wished that perhaps one day in the future I would have my own studio, displaying my own artwork for sale, so I could not have been more overjoyed to find out that, in reality, I already had my own studio. But, at the same time, I could not overcome the disappointment and depression that I had not managed to remember this by myself. Regardless, I sat gazing at the inside of the box for the rest of that day, wondering what I would do first…

Grey

Grey: dull, bleak and grim. Not that soft dove-grey colour which, despite being a cold colour is actually quite comforting; the colour of beautiful stone buildings or a hazy sky after the sun has almost fully made its descent. No, not that colour. The grey I saw, and still see, is a dirty grey, full of rubbish and undesirable things. It is like I have mixed every colour on my paint palette together and all I am left with is a hideous cloudy liquid. All I want to do is pour it down a drain. Yet, almost every time I try to remember my distant past, it is the most prominent colour I see.

I decided not to apply this grey colour to my canvas.

The hospital room I have been staying in is far from the bright cheerful space I wish it were. There are hints of colour in the curtains and bedding but that is all. What brings colour to my present reality is people in the hospital, each with their different coloured uniform and badge. Visitors bring colour too, just by visiting their relatives. It makes life seem so busy, full and exciting, just as I hope mine once was. But, because I am continually forgetting things, I know I will have less of a past tomorrow than I have today - and less of a future too. Time confuses me. It structures our lives, but it takes so much away from us too.

Gentle Lilac

It was just for a fleeting moment but I spied the colour and connected with it as the nurse hurried by me. The earrings she was wearing were just tiny little pearls but their glossy translucent lilac colour resonated in the fluorescent hospital light. I had seen that exact colour before but I knew it had not been a pearl.

When the memory came to me it was a single still-life snapshot. The image was of a bouquet of flowers which were being clasped by a pair of long, elegant, tanned hands. The flowers were incredibly delicate and spindly. Foliage filled the gaps between them, as if to prop them up and keep them from drooping. Most of the freesias were lilac but there was the odd white one too. I thought it must be a wedding bouquet. I also thought there may have been a band on the ring finger but I could not be certain, and the rest of the picture was hazy.

I wondered if they were my own young hands that I saw in the picture, but I did not recognise them. If I was the person holding the gentle lilac flowers, was it at my own wedding? I found this thought incredibly distressing. It was a vague memory, just a teaser, of what might have been, but I could not – and still cannot – remember it fully. Have I had my wedding day stolen from me?

Thinking that Thomas was perhaps my husband, at first I could not contain the hurt and pain I felt, knowing my memory loss had caused my own husband, the man I must have fallen in love with many years ago, to become a stranger. But then I thought about him, how must he have felt? How must he still be feeling today? Every day he visited he must have been starting over again. I cannot imagine the challenge. He is probably stronger than me, having to cope with a wife that no longer knows him. But then, at least he has a mind full of colour and memories from our past together that I do not have.

I made the lilac by mixing the paints from my palette then allowed it to soak into the canvas.

Blood Orange

The next memory was sparked by the colour of a box of tea I was given. The gorgeous warm colour of the box and its golden prints transported me back to what seemed to be a late summer evening. In the scene, I was looking out across sweeping hills that were bathed in gold and amber sunlight. The sun was low in the sky but still glowing strongly, before tucking itself down behind fields of shimmering wheat. I remembered myself sitting somewhere that looked like a patio or balcony. In front of me was an easel, and to my left, a table with a jug of water and a paint palette. I sensed that there were people milling about around me, but it was not clear. If there were, none of them were close by and disturbing me, they were leaving me to my painting. This showed that they must know me very well. When I paint, I like to be completely alone. I love this memory so much that as I try to bring it back into focus now, I hope that many days in my life were just like it because the colours were so vibrant.

I made the orange by mixing the paints from my palette then allowed it to soak into the canvas.

Soft Yellow

The sun streaming through the window this morning was strong and full of energy. I could feel that today was going to bring something special. As the sun shone through the opaque curtain hanging on the window, every white surface in the room was transformed into the most beautiful soft yellow.

I made the yellow by mixing the paints from my palette then allowed it to soak into the canvas.

Today, the addition of yellow became the final touch to my painting. The painting has so many stunning colours in it, blended perfectly together. The colours that sparked my past memories, along with others, have been used to create the abstract piece. In some ways it depicts a rainbow, with the stripes, sweeps and swirls of colour fading into one another. Within each distinct block of colour I have created a unique pattern or design. The patterns, if you look closely enough, illustrate scenes and are more like small sketches or drawings. Each one is an event. Where there are pale yellows and greens, I have painted the events that I like to imagine have happened in my past although I cannot remember them. Whilst in the reds and purples, strong powerful colours, I have painted the events which have actually become faint memories, not just my imagination running free. Although many of my memories have been fleeting and have faded away like an intangible rainbow, they have brought colour to my blank canvas.

Perhaps I can cope with living my life based on the present and looking forward to the future, rather than being consumed by the memories I no longer have. My anterograde memory loss may even lessen. Then my brain will retain all that I do, from the point that my memory begins to improve, onwards. And if it does not, I am still me. In fact, I have begun to realise that perhaps it is not really our past that defines us and makes us who we are. I have always had a creative flare and eye for art. Although my memories have been wiped clean, I have retained this talent. Despite what has happened to my brain, my sense of character and spirit has not changed. I can feel it within me and see it in the colours of the rainbow. Each colour is at my disposal. Although our previous experiences enhance who we are and cause us to change and develop, ultimately we are the same person. I loved art before and I still love art now. Some of the most important things in our life that make us who we are, rely not on what we remember and have experienced, but a strong passion deep within us. And this is what art is to me. As I grow older, I will travel further and further away from my past anyway and journey into the future. My future is now going to be even more important in defining who I am. I intend to fill my future with spectacular colours and let it become bright and cheerful. And if it fades slightly, I will not get frustrated, because I will live in the narrow slither of life that is the present. I will let the power of my imagination re-paint what my brain cannot remember.

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