

FICTION

# The Delicate Art of Forgetting

SORAYA AUER

SEAN was used to not seeing and not being seen. If asked what he saw, he could probably describe no more than a blur of grey, black and navy uniforms. Some days were clearer than others, and on weekends the colours just changed to denim and every other colour of the rainbow. A young woman turned the corner sharply where he was sitting and bumped his knees in their cross-legged position. She muttered a surprised apology without looking at him a moment longer than she had to, her path intent on the ticket barriers ahead. Sean registered her as foreign immediately. Asians can't be Irish, he thought. He watched her, as she fumbled to find her ticket in her green jacket pockets. She carried a large ring binder, which she accidentally tapped a passer-by with while swapping hands. He smirked as the passer-by said something indignantly to the woman.

"See something interesting?" said a familiar voice behind him.

He dropped his gaze to his feet. "I ain't seen nothin' at all," he muttered while collecting his worn out MacDonald's cup and blanket. "It's the third time this week man," sighed the young Guard. "I shouldn't have to be telling yer again." Sean didn't reply to this and the uniformed patrol officer wrinkled his ginger brow, taking the silence as his cue to keep speaking. "Need I be telling yer again?" He asked, tapping Sean's shoulder.

Sean flinched under his touch. "Ye haven't said nothin' to us," he said genuinely.

"Course not." The Guard rolled his eyes. "Got a friend with yer today then?"

"She ain't me mot," snapped Sean without meaning to. "She does what she likes."

"Alright. Don't worry, I'm not here to give out to yer," said the Guard, offering his hand to help Sean off the floor.

Sean didn't take it and stood up with a small moan from the pins and needles that seized his leg. He averted his eyes from the Guard and made to leave around the corner. "Do ye need help getting to where yer going?" said the Guard, even though he didn't know how he'd help a man who'd never wanted or accepted his help before.

"Remindin' of ye's da, do I? Need to help the old man," Sean scoffed at the man. He paused a moment as his eyes glazed over, the thought of where to go next hazy in his mind. He refused to betray his uncertainty. "Not like I am headin' anywhere important anyways." He mumbled. He moved against the bustle of the crowd that had just crossed the road to enter the station.

The Guard hesitated for a moment before calling out to him. "I won't be seeing yis here again now, yeah?" Sean waved behind him dismissively and the Guard let him be for once.

He walked slowly and kept his

From that day on, he felt more responsible for her than he did for himself. He'd created a shelter behind the bins he'd found her by and spent what little he'd saved up to feed her better than he'd fed himself in a decade. She was broken, he could tell, but he needed her just as much as she needed him, though he was surprised to realise it. Her greatest accomplishment occurred once. She'd managed the impossible and had persuaded Sean to attend an afternoon free clinic for a check-up with her.

"You really should make an appointment at the hospital," said the

He didn't care if it had been a bad boyfriend, an abusive father or a drunken husband, Sallie was his to look after and he'd pummel the skanger who'd try to take her. It was all just bittersweet because in the end, Sallie had left of her own accord, in the middle of the night, while Sean's mind was adrift in dreams. His sole reason to stay sane and give a crap had slipped away from him.

As with his usual routine, Sean picked up some brew and bread with the money he'd collected that day from the local supermarket. The cashier girl's heart sank as she saw him join her aisle as he did every evening.

"You're short," said the girl as Sean tried to pick up his pack of brew.

"Count it again," he said moving away. She looked to signal at the security guard at the door but saw he was already moving this way.

"I know you're short."

"Le do thoil, Please," said Sean surprising the girl with his soft pronunciation. "I'll have the extra pennies tomorrow." He looked her straight in the face for the first time and she saw his speckled green eyes that no one appreciated. The girl was taken aback with how close he'd leaned forward to her to whisper his plea but more surprised she wasn't as put off as she thought she'd be. The security guard in his navy uniform grabbed Sean's arm.

"Everythin' alright 'ere?" he said roughly.

"Just a second." Smiling at the guard she said, "lemme count properly."

Sean didn't resist the guard's hold as she sifted the coins in her hand. Her fingers handled his judgment slowly. Never quite in control, he thought about himself. He let his mind wander to Sallie, or whatever her real name was, who would be smiling at him. She reached out her hand to stroke his cheek. Her face changed to that of his mother's warm gaze. Her green eyes laughed as she called him in for his tea. Those were the days, he thought. When he played outside all day till food was the only reason to be confined in a space. He'd feast on delicious mashed potatoes and baked fish. How he'd love to go fishing again, he thought.

"I was wrong," a voice broke Sean's sensuous thoughts.

"Eh?" said the security guard, betraying his disappointment. "Ye sure?"

"I am. Let him go." The shop girl signalled Sean to get on his way. He lingered only a moment to look at her in thanks. She probably expected him to say something but he'd just keep his word about paying her back. Or at least he thought he'd try.

Sean made his way to his shelter in the alley. Maybe Sallie will be there, he deluded himself. He turned into the narrow alleyway without looking and bumped straight into someone. He fell back slightly and looked up annoyed.

"Watch where yer going, eejit!" spat the man turning away from him. Sean paused to take in the sight of the

man. His jet-black hair with symmetrical streaks of grey was slicked back. He wore a large leather jacket and had a burning cigarette dangling from his pursed lips. His bad diet was sure to account for that belly protruding out of his trousers and Sean thought by the look of it, even he had better skin than this skanger.

"Wha'cha looking at?" said the man as he leaned back against the wall. Sean just stared at him. "Want some yokes, old man?"

"Go find a gurrier to sell yer crap to," snapped Sean as he walked past and installed himself in his shelter.

"Ah so yer do speak!" he mocked. "Please get going. I be the only one in this part of the road."

"Now yer a polite old man?" said the man, as he followed Sean around the bins. Sean's heart raced, wondering whether this was the day. The thug bent down to face Sean while his cigarette flared up as he sucked in a puff. Sean watched the man as he slowly took the cigarette from his mouth with his chubby fingers and flicked it at his face. The burning butt scorched Sean's cheek and he cried out as he raised his hands to protect his singed skin.

"Please," Sean begged. "I'm sick." "What am I supposed to do 'bout it take ye to a doctor?" The skanger sneered.

"I already 'ave," sobbed Sean quietly. "Please just leave me be." Sallie, he prayed, give me peace again. He'd never wanted to be alone as much as he did at that moment.

The man tilted his head threateningly. "But I likes ye, what if I don't want to go?"

"Then ye won't go?"

"That's right old man!" The man laughed as he reached for a broken pipe from the dump pile behind him.

Sean closed his eyes as he curled up. He felt a pang of guilt as he thought of the pennies he owed but it didn't stop him from hoping that when he woke the next day, he'd remember less and feel nothing. There had to be some justice to Alzheimer's. Confusion, irritability, mood swings, next was forgetting who he was. As he felt the first crunch against his ribs, he hoped for more than to forget. He hoped to be forgotten. He prayed for the end.

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head down. "Damn Garda and their mitching," Sean's eloquent words on the authoritarian institutions of the state had previously been heard by his only friend, Sallie. She let Sean get carried away, fantasise about a special place just for the two of them, or when it was a bad day, she'd watch over him while he had a good cry. But Sallie was a free spirit, and had gone her own way, so Sean had to get used to the silence of his own footsteps. Still hopeful, every night he'd been alone, he'd stayed in the alleyway where he'd found and lost her.

It had been years since he'd stumbled across her, slumped against a bin in a big duffle coat, her dirty blonde hair covering her gaunt face. Her legs were bare with bruises the size of tennis balls. She reminded him of all the women that he'd ignored throughout his life, but most of all, of himself at his worst moments. Not again, Sean had sworn to himself.

young doctor to Sallie as she wrote on the chart.

"Serious, eh?" Sean asked concerned Sallie would have to leave him.

"Well, we have very limited resources here. Prognosis will be hard to assess without further tests. I recommend a neuropsychological examination at least," explained the doctor. "What'll all that be for?" asked Sean suspiciously; the thought of having to leave Sallie among white coats distressed him.

"It is a common degenerative disease," Sean remained silent. "You do know where I'm going with this, don't you?" The doctor probed gently. The pity in her voice set Sean off.

"There's no problem." He snapped irritably. "She's fine!" He shouted as he dragged Sallie out with him.

Sean was not naïve enough to think he'd see Sallie again if he'd left her to the State and the white coats. They swallow ye whole, he thought.

He wasn't difficult but his smell "eh?", "how much?" and "stealing from me ye are" were uncomfortable enough on the best of days.

"Four Euros and sixty five cents," she said this time.

"Yer havin' a laugh!"

"I really am not."

Sean grumbled into his hands as he picked out several bronze coins. The cashier would've hurried him if there had been a queue to speak up for, but it seemed this particular evening, they'd thoughtfully relieved her of that excuse by standing by all the other tills. Sean looked at his purchases, then at his hand and then up at the girl.

"What?" she said.

"Nothin'," he said quickly as he dropped all the coins into her out-reached hand. She began to count; Two, Three, Three-fifty, Four, Euros... that's fine, she thought. Twenty, Thirty, Fifty, Fifty-five.

# Utterly Butterly Deceptive

MUNIZ MANZUR

IF it was possible to crave something that one has never eaten, then Shojib craved peanut butter and jam sandwiches. That light brown creaminess puzzled him somewhat. How did they get it like that? When he ate peanuts in the park, they were dark brown, or if the nut was over-roasted bitter black. The shells were wrinkly and unyielding to his prodding. He mostly managed to crack them open along the vertical edge but sometimes it broke horizontally and made him feel wretched. As if he wasn't even capable of shelling a nut.

Peanut butter wouldn't make him feel that way. He felt sure of it. The colour was consistent and, in the right temperature with the correct tool, Shojib felt confident he could get it to spread exactly the way he wanted.

Someone clanged against the iron bars. It made a hollow sound. No effort needed, no result offered.

Shojib had studied till class 8. He would have liked to continue studying but his father died, his mother got sick and he had no choice. So he quit school and took the only job offered to him. Repairing old refrigerators.

There was a science to it. First you had to know whether they could be repaired at all. If so, then how could you do it in the least amount of time and money? If you couldn't repair it, you had to know how to take it apart, obsolete piece by obsolete piece, in

such a manner that the separated parts could come in handy later. You had to be respectful to each part, unscrewing it away from its original purpose. It didn't matter if you didn't know the later purpose of a part. You simply had to believe it could be used. Matter was not meant to remain inert forever.

Stop that, someone shouted. I'm trying to sleep.

I'm innocent.

Yeah that's what they all say.

No, really I am.

Yeah? I am too. Cruel laughter.

Shojib's boss was pleased with his work and taught him how to repair Air-Conditioners next. Hot summers in Dhaka always guaranteed enough work. Service them, repair them, make them work at an optimum level so the rich could stay cool blowing hot air out their windows.

Soon enough, Shojib was accompanying his boss to the houses for minor electrical jobs. Replacing a bulb. Adjusting the fan regulator. That was how he became an electrician. In human degrees of acceptance, word of mouth, by name. When Shojib realized there was more than one way of getting a degree, he was delighted. The world was a refrigerator stocked up, waiting to be raided.

Jangle of chains. Someone shifted his weight around. Presumably, easing into a dreamless sleep. Being shackled was not the most comfortable position to be in.

He got a mobile phone because he calculated, correctly, that the initial

cost would pay off by being on call constantly. City folks were always busy. They needed things to be fixed as soon as possible. He kept the phone attached to his ear at all times. For two reasons: (1) it made him look important. (2) he could listen to the radio and further his social education on the latest music, trends and advice generously doled out by RJs with strangely accented Bangla.

A cough. A quiet prayer muttered. An uneasy truce blanketed everyone. Packed in like sardines, they had no choice.

One day, Shojib was summoned by Mr Hasan's cook. The deep-freezer wasn't working properly; memshaheb's stock of fish and meat were in danger of defrosting. Shojib needed to come right away and fix it or the cook was mince-meat.

The deep-freezer was in the dining room. Next to the tall fridge that proudly sported a keyhole and cloth covers on the door handles. The Hasans obviously took their food seriously, Shojib thought, since they felt the need to keep it under lock and key. This dining room was an electrician's delight. There was a microwave delicately covered with a pink crochet, as if it was wont to catching colds. A toaster that could serve four slices four! A blender with shiny blades, standing sentry. Across the table, on the other side of the room was a small green basin for washing hands.

The air stank of urine. Walls scribbled with angry graffiti. Someone

had written 'help'. It had its last letter rudely blackened out. Even hell couldn't be bothered to register here properly.

While tinkering with the deep-freezer's thermostat, Shojib heard the delicate clinking of glass bangles. Actually, he had smelled her a milli-second before. A heady bouquet of coconut oil, Lux soap and talcum powder. Shojib had noticed Kulsum the first time he had come to the Hasans' house but had not found an opportunity to speak to her, until now. He looked up from his work. She smiled.

"Are you able to fix it?" she asked.

"Of course," he answered. "Very few things I can't fix."

"I bet I can give you something you can't fix."

"Give then. Let's see."

With a giggle, Kulsum took a glass bangle, broke it in half and offered it to him. When their hands touched, he felt a surge of power that had nothing to do with him as an electrician.

A chorus of snores slowly built up. Someone cried out in his sleep. One pair of eyes continued staring, his breath steady.

One week later, Shojib was called again to the Hasans; this time to see why the Air-Conditioner was not working in the children's room. Kulsum was assigned to sit by the doorway to keep an eye on him. Shojib was glad to return the favour. It took him about 15 minutes to fix the problem.

"Done," he said, wiping his hands. He switched on the machine.

"Let it be on. Check it after a while. The room should be cool by then. Otherwise, call me again."

Kulsum nodded assent and led him towards the kitchen. They passed the dining room enroute.

"Do you want to wash your hands?" she asked.

Shojib hesitated, intuitively knowing the wash basin was for family use only.

"It's okay. No one is home. They won't know," she said, understanding his hesitation. "I won't tell."

Relishing a few more minutes with her, Shojib walked up to the basin. Kulsum went over to the fridge and took out two jars and a loaf of bread.

"They don't lock it when they go out?" Shojib asked her, indicating the fridge with his head as he scrubbed his hands clean.

"Not always. Memshaheb left in a hurry today. Forgot to lock this...among other things."

The man in the dark let his imagination roam free. The whiteness of fresh bread; the pink of jam; the creamy texture of peanut butter. Unblemished skin on a face so pure. Blushing cheeks. Tender flesh, soft and yielding.

Kulsum made him a peanut butter and jam sandwich and put it in one of the children's tiffin box.

"I'm sure you've never had anything like this before. Try it. You can return the box tomorrow," she said. "No one will notice it missing."

Shojib smuggled it out of the house, anticipating the joy of seeing Kulsum next day. He deliberately

saved the sandwich to relish later at night, in the privacy of his own room. But the police got to it before he did.

Mrs Hasan's jewellery was missing from her cupboard. Upon questioning the household staff, Kulsum had mentioned leaving Shojib alone for 20 minutes while she went to fetch a broom to clean up his repair mess. He must have snuck into the master bedroom then. Kulsum was reprimanded and warned not to be so foolish. She was fresh from the village and didn't know better. These city boys were not to be trusted. God only knew what else this boy had taken! She nodded her head, suitably mollified. Yes, she had been scared to admit this, but...dining-ware and tiffin boxes were missing too.

When the police broke into his room, they found one tiffin box, intact sandwich and all. The audacity of that boy! Helping himself to such food! They questioned him about the other stolen items, to no avail. But he was obviously guilty because he didn't protest when they read him the charges.

He took out the broken glass bangle and fingered it thoughtfully. Shojib was determined to eat his peanut butter and jam sandwich one day. He knew how the bread was sliced and where the jam was kept; he knew how to spread the peanut butter. One day he would get to eat it. As soon as he got out of jail.

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