

Remember Me

by R Brent Smith

A car turns into the road leading into the cemetery. Row after row of tombstones stand in mute testimony to those who went before. Dr. Evelyn Black is looking for something. She scans left and right as she drives past the neatly manicured rows. She finds what she is looking for and stops the car. She steps out nervously. A dozen or so graves in, a man is kneeling before a tombstone. The grave is piled high with fresh flowers. The man's shoulders are drooped and heaving. The man is sobbing. Evelyn hesitates. She has heard stories of David, the man at the grave. Stories about how hard the death of his wife has affected him. He apparently comes to the grave site daily and spends several hours grieving. The caretakers of the cemetery have started referring to him as the weeping man.

Evelyn approaches the man. She finds a wispy, hollow man. There is no life in his red rimmed eyes. He has a long patchy beard and smells as if he hasn't washed since Kathy's passing. His cloths are rumpled and filthy. Shocked at his appearance, she scolds herself for being so late in meeting with him. She contemplates turning around and forgetting the whole thing, but she made a promise to his wife. That, she must keep. Dr. Black has with her a small parcel. Kneeling beside David, she says softly, "Hello David. I am Professor Evelyn Black. I knew your wife."

David turns toward the unfamiliar voice. Seeing a woman, he has never before met, he searches his memory for some clue as to who she is. He says weakly, "I don't know you. How did you know my wife?"

"When your wife learned of her illness, she decided to leave behind something to remember her by. She visited with me daily for several months in order to create this." She held the small

package out to him. “This is from Kathy. She thought it would help you in your grief, help you continue on without her.”

A bit of the old David returns to the surface now. His eyes bright with curiosity, thankful for something, anything, that can reconnect him to his wife. “Thank you,” he stammers, taking the package from Dr. Black. He handles the package as if it is made of the most delicate material, almost caressing it. “This is from Kathy?” he pleads, a touch of disbelief in his question.

Dr. Black responds quietly, holding back a crack in her voice, “Yes, she worked very hard on this and wanted you to have it to remember her by.” A tear runs down Dr. Black's face as she remembers how the dying woman had stubbornly worked to ensure that this would be right. “Open it when you get home and follow the instructions on the card. If you have any difficulties, please call me, my number is also on the card.”

At this, Dr. Black stands and slowly turns to leave. David turns back toward the tombstone, “Thank you, baby, for this, whatever it is....” Dr. Black strides away, hoping that she has not just created a huge problem for this poor man. In his state of mourning, the gift that his wife so desperately wanted him to have might not be exactly what he needs.

A week later, David's children, his son and two daughters, pay him a surprise visit. Friends and neighbours who knew David had been calling the children, describing a man in utter collapse. This ran at odds to their phone interactions with their father. He had always sounded sad but reassuring. This would set their minds at ease. When the calls continued, they decided that they had to see for themselves. Arriving on the doorstep, to their surprise and relief, their father, the man they knew as the loving husband and involved father, answers the door before they can open it themselves. A man, freshly shaven, broad smile and bright eyes meets them. The three children are shocked and confused. This is not the man who had been described to them. It

is not the stranger that they feared to meet. This is not a man deep in depression and in need of critical care and supervision. David greets them heartily, vigorous hugs all around. “Please come in, come in. I am so glad to see you all.” On his face is a look of puzzlement. Why *are* all of his children here?

The three siblings walk into the family living room, a place where they grew up, a place so familiar to them that they would notice a single item out of place. The place is neat and clean, everything in its proper place, fresh cut flowers in a vase on the coffee table. The children are confused. The oldest daughter, Mary asks, “Dad. What has happened? You, er, are your old self again.”

David turns serious, embarrassed to have lied to his children about his previous condition, “I take it you have heard about my difficulties.”

They all nod. David’s son, Bradley, responds, “Dad, people were calling us, telling us about a man gone crazy from grief.”

Emily, the youngest, is angry, “Dad how could you lie to us, telling us that you were fine when clearly you weren't?”

There is pain on David’s face. He has failed as a father at this time when his children needed to know he was okay, a time when perhaps they needed some emotional support. “I am so sorry. I owe you guys an apology. I was so deep into my own grief that I never comprehended what you must have been feeling, losing your mother.”

The siblings look at each other, a sadness in their eyes. Emily tears up. Mary responds, “It was hard dad, really hard.” The last two words are choked out through a sob. David strides over to Mary and gives her a hug. Bradley and Emily join in the hug. There are sobs from all but David, who now seems to be the backbone of stoicism.

After several seconds they separate. Bradley asks, “So dad, what happened? We heard that you were a wreck.”

David has a twinkle in his eye. “Ah, a little gift from your mother.” David pauses for effect. The siblings are puzzled. Mary asks, frustration in her voice, “What gift?”

David smiles, “In a sense, she is still with me.”

The siblings exchange glances. Maybe father is not recovered but is in some new delusional state. David sees the concern in his children's eyes. “Don't worry. I am fine. Before your mother died, she secretly worked on a little project. Something that would allow a piece of her to be here, with me.”

Bradley is thinking, “Good God, he doesn't have a wax replica, does he?”

David sees that his children still have worried looks. He calls out, as if paging his wife from another room. “Kathy, what time is it?” From the kitchen, the children hear their mother's voice respond, “It is 3:35, David.”

They are shocked and a little frightened by what they have heard. Emily, out of habit responds, “Mom?” She then looks embarrassed at her siblings who are looking back at her as if she just joined her father in his insanity.

David laughs. “She is not here but by God, doesn't it sound like she is in the next room?”

Mary walks over to the entrance to the kitchen. The kitchen looks as it always has, except for a small box sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. Beside the box is a picture frame holding a photo of their mother, in her younger years. She has a huge smile on her face and a twinkle in her eye. Bradley joins Mary, who hasn't said anything since moving to the kitchen doorway. Bradley sees the box and picture and is the first to figure it out. He questions, “This this some sort of customized computer assistant, programmed with mom's voice?”

David smiles broadly; making a clapping motion with his hands, “Yes, sort of, but much more. Your mom spent her last months participating in a project to train an artificial intelligence computer to be her. It has her memories, her emotions, her responses and her voice. It responds to me as if your mother were right there. She gifted me a machine that is able to keep her alive, keep our memories alive. The damn thing remembers events in our past lives better than I do.”

To the siblings, it seems a little strange, maybe a little crazy. Mary is the first to speak. “Dad, don’t you think this is a little creepy?”

“Absolutely,” is his surprising answer. “The first time I turned it on and realized what it was, I immediately packed it up and put it in the closet. But then I got thinking that Kathy went to a lot of trouble to do this. She was terribly sick and in a lot of pain and still she went out each day to perfect this. So, after several days, I retrieved it from the closet and gave it another try. Taken in the context that Kathy wanted me to use it, it is not so bad. You know, it has her memories, her laugh, and her way of speaking. It is almost as if she were still here.”

Bradley is thinking that his mother must not have been in her right mind to have done this. Her pain and impending demise must have clouded her judgement. Mary is dubious of the technology and of her father's claim that it has her mother's memories.

Emily catches them all by surprise by asking the thing a question, “Kathy, tell us about the time you caught Bradley making out with a girl in the living room.”

Their mother's voice is heard, laughing. “It was late at night and I heard strange sounds coming from downstairs. I thought the dog needed to go out. I snuck down so as not to wake anyone and flicked on the lights to the hallway. There in the light, in the living room, on my new couch is Bradley making out with some girl. He had her top off and had his hands all over her chest. The look on his face when he saw me standing in the hallway was priceless.” There was a

little laugh, only their mother would do. “I was so embarrassed that I flicked the light off and ran back upstairs.” There is a pause then their mother’s voice adds, “We never saw that girl again.”

Bradley is uncomfortable. “You would have to ask for that memory.”

Mary laughs. “That thing told that story exactly as mom told it every time she told it.”

Bradley is turning red. “How many times did she tell it and to whom?”

Emily replies, “Let’s see. All of the relatives, the neighbours, and oh yes, all of your girlfriends.” Bradley rolls his eyes in exasperation. Emily adds, “I think for the girlfriends it was a warning not to get caught making out in our house.”

Bradley shakes his head. “And now the frick’n machine can tell it to everyone else.”

David adds, “There are hundreds of memories like that, all told the way she told them. There are memories that I had forgotten.” David’s expression softens, “Our entire life together is in this machine.”

Bradley offers, “This thing really creeps me out but let’s order pizza and put this thing through its paces. I am curious now.”

Mary grabs her purse, “I’ll run out to get some wine and beer. Bradley, you are in charge of the pizza. Emily, set the table.”

They might have expected it from Emily, “Are you nuts? That thing is creepy beyond creepy. Now you want to spent the evening with it?”

Bradley asks the box, “Kathy, do you remember when Emily was born.”

Kathy replies through the box, “Absolutely. She was the dearest little thing, pink as anything and a huge head of black hair. She loved to be held, but only by me, no one else. She screamed bloody murder when the nurses came to take her to the nursery.” The voice is full of emotion, of what for Kathy was a precious time.

Emily immediately feels guilty for how she treated her mother as a teenager. She acquiesces. “Okay, I’ll set the table.”

Some forty minutes later, David and his kids are settled in with drinks and pizza around the gadget. For six hours they reminisce with their ‘mother’ about their lives together. They learn some things they didn’t know about their mother. There are tears of joy and sorrow. There is laughter so intense that belly muscles cry out for relief. Most important of all, the siblings learn just how strong the love between their parents was. They better understand why their mother’s death hit their father so hard and how this gadget has saved him.

For many years, ‘mother’ as the gadget comes to be known, attends family gatherings. Everyone converses with it as if it really was their mother. Their father lives another thirty years, the device is always nearby. In the end, when their father passes away, they plan to bury the device with him. It is time to say goodbye to their parents.

At the final viewing, Bradley pauses before closing the casket. He says, “Kathy, goodbye and thank you for making my father’s alone years more bearable for him.”

The device, responds, but not in Kathy’s voice. It responds in his father’s voice. “Goodbye Bradley. I will miss you all terribly but I am with your mother now.”