

That What We Can't Put Down:
AKA
Five Stories About The Things We Carry
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44 MINUTES

"Please, wake up. Please... Please, Sarah..." The words tore from my throat as her blue eyes finally opened. The first time I had seen them outside of photographs for the last decade. Relief crashed through me, followed by an intense mix of joy and sadness. I had to grip the iron rail of her hospital bed so I would stay standing.

"Hey...Jane." Sarah meekly stated. Her voice was scratchy. "What happened? Why are you crying?"

I dodged the question. We didn't have much time left, after all. I wanted to spend these last few minutes in joy.

"Sarah...I. I bought something." My hands shook, unwrapping the greasy sandwich. Olive, cheese, basil, pickles and mustard. The smell of it instantly filled the previously sterile room.

"You remember our fourth date, Sarah? We shared one of these. I had mustard on my nose for twenty minutes before you even told me."

Her laugh was weak but still, just as I remembered.

"Well, Jane, you were a cool biker back then. So confident, I didn't want to ruin the moment, you know?"

"No, I looked ridiculous. You were picking on me."

"Maybe. But you looked happy."

She reached for my hand.

"You always made me happy."

The heart monitor beeped steadily.

Rain clattered against the windows.

Everything was exactly as it should have been ten years ago.

I'm here this time. I'm not on the other side of the world, rediscovering myself.

I could finally tell her what I've always wanted to tell her.

The only thing that could've made this better is if she could actually live this time.

But the magic of this moment shattered when I looked behind me.

The unnatural floating white door into this hospital room shimmered. More and more visual glitches started to happen just outside my peripheral vision. The sandwich ingredient spawned in and out of existence as everything became less stable. It eventually disappeared.

"Jane? What are you looking at? What's wrong? Aren't we going to share this sandwich?"

I turned to her, clutching her hand tighter. Out of desperation, I tried to memorize every detail. The freckles. The way her blonde hair fell across the pillow, just as I remembered. I started stammering: "It's...it's ...I never stopped loving you. I wasn't there, on this day, 10 years ago."

"You're here now." She spoke softly, even though clearly confused and concerned. "Isn't that what really matters?"

Before I could answer, a red light filled my peripheral vision. Sweat formed on my forehead. I had to look at the door again.

Red bold letters flashed above it: **TIME ALMOST EXCEEDED. NEURAL LOCK IMMINENT.**

Adrenaline shot through me. I had to leave now. The technician warned me. In these brand new VR simulations powered by the grief of not being there for a loved one's final moments, 44 minutes was the maximum. Any longer, and my brain

could never interpret reality anymore. My already 10-year-old body would just wither in the real world while my consciousness lived in this moment forever.

But Sarah was actually smiling at me. Not the Sarah from photo books. Not the Sarah from her memorial Facebook page. But Sarah as she could have been if I actually was there. If I'd answered that call that day instead of silencing it when I was "finding myself" in Thailand.

I still had 10 more seconds.

The door glitched in and out of existence. I could hear an alarm blaring, technicians screaming at me to get through the door. But through all that noise, only one voice really mattered.

"Please, stay with me." Sarah begged.

I nodded and clutched her hands tighter.

I stared into her eyes. But behind me, I heard the alarms and technicians suddenly stop. I looked back.

I watched the door close, knowing it would never open for me again.

A Waltz For No Fox's Land

The air in the trenches tasted of mud, sweat, and gunpowder. The young private polar fox Einar, 4th infantry, tried to light a match against the soles of his boots. The flare illuminates the grime and mud on his once-beautiful, pristine white fur coat. He deeply inhaled the cigar smoke, letting it coat his long tongue. He hoped that the cheap tobacco could mask the flavor of his MRE. Mice meat, for the hundredth day in a row. It didn't even taste like the mice meat his mother used to make for him years ago, more like a gelatinous lump of salt and boiled leather.

Einar leaned back against the sandbags, trying not to get his pointy ears or bushy tail stuck in the barbed wire. There was a, compared to gunfire, relative silence of banter. His fellow infantrymen were betting and playing cards, talking about their lives once they'd get home. His mind had never been so loud, though. He thought of years ago, when he went to school and learned about "the enemy." The Tibetan Foxes. The "squarejaws". They were even lower than mice, even rats. At least very few rodents struggled against their fate as food for a superior species. Tibetan Foxes swore they were sophisticated, but as Einar's teacher put it, in reality, they were flat-faced troglodytes with weak minds. Incapable of culture or grace.

But the lie his education fed him died yesterday.

Einar had been out on a scouting detail near the ruins of a soon-to-be-conquered Tibetan Fox rural town, Saint-Renard. The fog was thick enough to cut with a bayonet. Through the mist, he entered a farmhouse, hoping to gain intel,

though a part of his brain hoped to find something delicious the fleeing citizens had left behind. Berries, eggs, or venison. But there was something else there.

A young Tibetan Fox woman. Her coat was a dusty gold that seemed to hold the light of a sun Einar hadn't seen since childhood. She wore a beautiful emerald gown that reminded Einar of the first days of spring. She was dancing next to a gramophone, its brass horn gleaming in the hay and dust of the farmhouse. A scratchy, melancholic waltz drifted through the air. It must have been at least a year since Einar last heard proper music like this.

Her dance was not the lumbering movement of a brute. It was fluid, ethereal. Her eyes were closed, one paw raised as if it was resting on an invisible dance partner's shoulder. Her face was definitely angular, but it had a haunting beauty that stopped Einar's breath in his throat. It almost felt like she was dancing to honor her dead brethren.

While in reality, Einar fled after their eyes met, not even waiting to see her full reaction, he couldn't get the scene out of his mind. And instead of running away, in his mind, Einar would extend his paw, and in an over-the-top theatrical voice, say, "Young lady, may I have this dance?" And they would dance. He would wear a suit, they'd dance a waltz, and the world would finally smell of beautiful things again, like vanilla and, lavender instead of metal and gunpowder. They wouldn't dance in a farmhouse, but in a beautiful marble hall. Then, at the end, they'd ki-

A sharp whistle snapped Einar out of his daydream. "Stand to!" "Stand to, you lazy, rabies-infected lot! The Tibs are attacking! Prepare to make a coat of their fur!" The sergeant shouted.

The reality crashed down with the weight of a collapsed tunnel. The marble floor was back to being a brown sludge. Einar let go of his cigar and half-eaten MRE. He quickly grabbed his bolt-action rifle, the familiar cold wood pressed against his paws.

He never felt so demotivated to fight, but so motivated to survive. Old men in war rooms signed war papers, and he might have to shoot her. Or the tods that are her beloved, like a father or brother. The thing that kept Einar hopeful was the idea that they both might survive and finally dance a waltz together. While his rational brain told him it was just the delirium of not having seen any young women for so long, his heart didn't care. It gave him a reason to survive.

"Here they come, dogs!" The sergeant shouted. Einar mounted the fire step, staring into the fog. Praying that the sound of music would win over the sound of gunfire.

Eulogy For A Lion

When I got there, they were burying that dead lion in the backyard again.

My elderly father, Thomas. Soon to be a hundred. His wrinkled hands were shaking heavily while holding a large shovel, his face showing deep, confused concern. Next him was my sister, Esther, who was awkwardly holding a trowel. When I approached them, she looked at me with a mix of annoyance and sadness. This was the third time this month we'd had to entertain this exact scenario. Sultan, the supposed former pet lion of my parents lied there, in the yard. Before I was born, he had to be put to sleep. It was because the neighbors snitched to the police that my parents had a pet tiger in their backyard. My first memory is a taxidermist coming over and stuffing Sultan's corpse. I told my classmates for years that that would happen to us as well if we died, becoming weird, filled, zombie-like trophies forever. I guess tall tales run in the family.

"What are you guys doing..." I murmured, hoping to break this thing up before we'd have to do the entire ritual again. Esther approached me. "Let's play along. He thinks Sultan died just now." Dad started stammering: "He...he...We found him right here when he was a small cub. A good cat. Killed more mice than any ordinary house cat. He became so big from all the milk we fed him." This was just of the many "origin stories" for Sultan. He would sometimes say that they got him from the circus, or from a trip to Sweden, (a country famously filled with wild lions...) And sometimes it would be that the circus was Swedish.

I gave up. I took the shovel from Dad's trembling hands. "Let me help," I said softly. Esther shot me a grateful look as she guided him to sit on the porch steps.

We'd been through this routine enough times to know resistance only made it worse. The hole didn't need to be deep—just deep enough to satisfy whatever compulsion drove him to this ritual. As I dug, I watched Dad on the porch, his lips moving in what looked like a stunted prayer, and I felt an ache of watching someone disappear in increments as we threw dirt on Sultan's body.

Esther and me decided to stay over that night. We were always curious how and why Dad would dig up Sultan again. And at midnight, we heard noise from the garage. We saw dad once we arrived there, heavily shaking as he dragged Sultan's dirt-covered body into the garage. Just how strong was this man still?

He slightly tilted his head, never meeting us in the eyes. He spoke with a clarity we hadn't heard from him in years. "Your mother never liked that we kept him. She insisted it was disturbing, you know. Taxidermy's a mockery of the dead, she said. We fought like hell over it. I used to be an exotic hunter, a great one. This was the final animal I ever shot. My love for her made me stop." "I shot him in Kenya, not Sweden," he said quietly, still not looking at us. "1970. He was drinking from a watering hole at dawn. Most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." His voice cracked. "I pulled the trigger before I even thought about it. That's what a hunter does. That's what I was." "Every time I see him, it's like I just pulled that trigger. Like I'm standing there again, watching him fall, pride for something my beloved hated about me. So I bury him. I bury what I did. Hope that my fading mind just erases that guilt." He looked down at his trembling hands. "Then I forget. Then I think about her, and it all comes back again. The shot. Your mother's disappointment that I never even got rid of Sultan's body to give him a proper end. And then, she died. Before I listened to her, " He started to weep a bit.

"I dig him up because some part of me knows I don't deserve to just forget. That I need to keep trying to make it right somehow." A tear ran down his weathered cheek. "But I can never make it right. He's still a piece of furniture after five decades. She's still gone. I turned it into a joke about a circus to my kids. And I'm still the man who killed something that beautiful."

The garage fell silent except for the sound of Dad's labored breathing. Esther knelt beside him, placing her hand over his.

"Maybe," she said softly, "it's time to let him rest. And let yourself rest too."

That morning, we drove to an animal cremation center. It was unusual to cremate a taxidermic animal, but they'd comply after we told them the story. We all said a prayer for Sultan, even Dad, who would never be as lucid again as that fateful night. But something in my father seemed to finally let go. At least he wouldn't need to bury a lion ever again.

Participation Trophy

I stood there at terminal C. There was a lot of noise. A young couple were talking excitedly but also stressfully about their upcoming trip. A middle-aged woman tried to comfort a wailing toddler with weird animated kid videos. A group of Japanese businessmen were all typing furiously on their phones and laughing about something I couldn't understand. I was jet-lagged out of my mind, and these contrasting noises combined with the smell of my extra strong hazelnut syrup coffee to form this dream-like wall of experiences. But deep down, all I could do was think.

Think of the weight in my bag. Not my clothes, or tablet. But the thing I'd finally show to my father. The thing that started all my troubles and trauma. The 4th place "trophy" for the Chicago Debate Championships of 2002. It had been almost twenty-four years since dad sarcastically shook my hand at the ceremony and said the words that would calcify in my heart, mind and soul like a tumor.

"Well, you tried Marcus. Not everybody's cut out to be the best."

No pride. Just acknowledgment of participation. This single event played in my memory over and over, like a broken cassette tape. Dad must have been so disappointed. He won the Chicago Debate Championship back in the late 80's and became a famous local politician. The golden trophy always stood there, polished on the hearth.

"Sir, could you put your bag on the belt and..."

As a kid, I wanted to do nothing more but to follow in his footsteps. Like a general planning out a siege, I made a plan to win. I read every law book I could, debated furiously on online chatrooms. All for fucking nothing! All for my dad to be disappointed in his only son.

"Sir! Snap out of it! People are waiting for you. Put your bag on the belt!"

The annoyed TSA Agent put me out of my horrible daydream.

I gently put the bag on the conveyer belt after removing all electronics. The cheap, plastic trophy had been damaged heavily in the two decades since that day. Ugh. Why did I have to bring it? But maybe my psychologist was right. This was the only way to heal my trauma. To give it back to him, and tell him how it made me feel. After years of only imagining either finally pleasing him, going to Law School at Harvard, I would finally take a plane from Massachusetts back to Illinois and see him again after all this time.

Why? Why did I want to impress a man I still barely spoke to? Why couldn't I get that day out of my head? Why were all my professional goals rooted in that single moment? These thoughts filled my head in the airplane, as I stared at the screen of the woman next to me playing digital Scrabble for three hours. I was determined to shove the trophy in his face and tell him how much his words struck me.

Would he even remember what he did, I wonder.

The baggage claim at O'Hare was the same industrial hell it had always been. Carousel 7. I watched bags circle. Black roller bags, hiking backpacks, a child's bright pink suitcase covered in unicorn stickers. The Japanese businessmen from terminal C grabbed their luggage efficiently and disappeared. The young couple argued about whether they'd checked the right carousel. The toddler from earlier slept peacefully in a stroller. The middle-aged woman seemed relieved.

But my bag didn't come.

I watched the carousel for ten minutes. Twenty. The crowd thinned. Just me and an elderly man who kept checking his phone and swearing in Polish. Finally, the belt stopped moving. Empty.

"Lost luggage is downstairs," a tired airport employee said, while walking away. The line at the lost luggage counter stretched forever. I filled out forms. The woman behind the desk had the dead eyes of someone who'd heard every complaint a thousand times. "We'll call you when it turns up. Usually forty-eight to seventy-two hours. Here's your reference number and a toiletries voucher."

"There's something important in there," I said. "Really, really important!"

She looked at me with the expression of someone who'd heard that one before too. "Yeah. We'll do our best, sir."

I stood in the parking garage, fiddling and crumpling the paper with the reference number. I could feel that my eye was twitching from the stress. I didn't care about my tablet, my electronic toothbrush. I needed that fucking trophy. I sighed deeply. And called him.

"Marcus?" His voice sounded older on the phone. Rougher. "You in town?"

"Yeah. Just landed here for....business...I was thinking... maybe we could grab dinner? If you're free."

"Sure, sure. How about Denny's on Route 38? The one near where you went to high school?"

"That place is still open?"

"Somehow. Six o'clock work?"

"Yeah. That works."

The Denny's looked exactly the same. The same peeling paint on the sign. Same smell of fryer grease. Dad was already in a booth, reading something on his phone. He looked smaller than I remembered. Thinner. The hair was mostly gone on top, but he was still very presentable and well-groomed, as you would expect from a politician.

“Ehe...Marcus! My boy...” He stood up, awkward, and we did that half-hug thing older men do when they're not sure what's appropriate.

We sat. A sarcastic young woman with piercings, pride and pronoun pins took our order. I guess at least, the youth culture here did change a lot since the 2000's.

"Coffee?" she asked.

We talked about my flight and lost bag. The weather. He asked about my firm, and I gave him the condensed version, mostly corporate litigation, long hours but good work. He told me about local politics, some scandal involving the school board that I couldn't follow because I didn't know any of the people involved anymore.

When the food came, an awkward silence hit. We cut into our rubbery eggs with just a bit too much vigor.

"I'm sorry I don't call more," I finally said.

He waved it off. "You're busy. I get it."

"No, I mean... I should call more."

He nodded, chewing bacon. "I should too. Goes both ways."

“Though I have to say, your mother cried when you didn’t show for thanksgiving again this year. She really misses you.”

This stung deep in my heart.

We ate in silence for a while. Someone played "Livin' on a Prayer" on the jukebox. Dad smiled a little. "Remember when you went through that Bon Jovi phase in middle school?"

I genuinely laughed.

"God, don't remind me."

"You wore that bandana for... like six months straight."

"I looked cool."

"You looked damn ridiculous." But Dad was smiling when he said it.

Not once did I mention the trophy. I didn't launch into the speech I prepared with my psychologist about how one comment twenty-four years ago had shaped my entire life. I didn't cry or yell or demand acknowledgment like I wanted.

We just ate mediocre breakfast food for dinner and made small talk like two people who barely knew each other. Because that's what we were...

"You seeing anyone?" he asked eventually.

"Not right now. I was, but... work got in the way."

He nodded. "Your mother used to say I married my career. She wasn't wrong!"

It was the closest he'd come to anything personal all night.

"Yeah," I said. "I think I might have that same problem."

We split the check. Stood in the parking lot under the fluorescent lights.

"You staying at a hotel?" he asked.

"Yeah, the Hampton Inn by the airport." I lied. I was heading home in a few hours.

"Well. It was good to see you. Don't be a stranger. Please come by for Thanksgiving again"

"I will. Say hi to mom."

Another awkward hug. He drove off in a car I'd never seen before.

I sat in my rental car for a long time, engine off, watching moths circle the Denny's sign. Tears welled in my face and I started to slam the wheel out of frustration.

Why did I say nothing?

After an eventful flight back. I opened the door to my apartment. My husband was sitting inside, watching a chick flick movie.

I fell into his arms. "So, how did it go with work?" He asked.

"It...it didn't go as expected." And I wailed.

Shedding Skin

I have finally found what I was looking for all this time. I read on a paranormal forum that this shop would be here. Only on Tuesdays, on full moons, wedged between the Chinese Takeout shop and the forever-closed laundromat. I must have crossed this street at least a thousand times, but never seen it. The building was impossibly thin and tall. A flickering neon sign read, vertically, and with small letters: MEMORIES BOUGHT & SOLD.

When I entered, the interior seemed antiquated, wooden, and dark. The walls had shelves lined with transparent glass vials, each in a different color that I had never seen before, all humming with a distinct sound. An amber-grey vial hummed the noise of a child's funeral. A Violet-green vial hummed with the sound of heartbreak. A hoarse, fancily dressed old lady sat in the back. She was mystifying, her eyes dark like a crow's. She smelled strongly of a rosewater perfume. She hastily turned around when the shop's bell rang.

"Young lady. Welcome, first time?" She asked. Her voice reminded me of an old record player that had to warm up.

I was shy. "Oh...yeah, that's obvious, huh?"

She smiled without showing her teeth. "Hehehe, it's a joke in my trade. Nobody will remember visiting here. It's always the first time. For the customer, anyway." She chuckled. To be honest, it just made me nervous.

I approached the counter, my plastic sneakers squeaking on the wooden floor. “Eh, so how does your store work?”

Her face turned kind. “A simple transaction. You sell me memories you don’t want. In return, I could give you memories from my collection.” She gestured to the vials behind me with her wrinkled, ring-endowed hand. “Most people will do a bit of both, dearie.”

I was in the right place and became excited. “Can I trade any kind of memories?”

“Any kind, dearie. First kiss, last words. Acing a math test. The smell of your grandmother’s cooking. Doomscrolling on your phone for five hours. Going on a date with Marilyn Monroe.” Her face turned more serious. “The ones with celebrities cost extra!”

“I don’t just want to sell a few memories, ma’am,” I said, my voice trembling but determined. “I want to sell almost all of them. Everything from the day I was born until... well, until I transitioned. I want a complete swap.”

The sound from the vials in the room seemed to drop an octave, to a low, buzzing vibration that I felt in my teeth. She turned her head slowly, her dark, beady eyes narrowing as they searched my face. For the first time, the professional mask of the shopkeeper slipped, revealing a flicker of genuine shock.

“Almost total clearance?” She was clearly flabbergasted. “Dearie, I’ve been in this trade since the moon was the size of a tennis ball, and I have never... no one has ever asked for the entire foundation to be ripped out.”

“I can’t live with the ghosts anymore,” I said, the words spilling out. “Every time I look in the mirror and see my progress, I still hear his voice. I still feel the weight of his expectations. I remember the name everybody called him, the way he walked, the way he tried so hard to be a man that he broke himself in the process. I want a childhood where I just lived. I want to remember being a little girl in a sundress. I want to remember my mother braiding my hair, not cutting it short against my will.”

The merchant’s face turned serious, and she leaned closer.

“I understand that you got dealt a bad hand in life...but people come here to forget a bad breakup. Enjoy a fake memory of going to the same grade school as Freddie Mercury. Not to get a lobotomy. Memories are the scaffolding of the soul, child. You take them away, and the house that is “you” might fall down. You won’t be the same person. You will be a stranger to yourself.”

“That’s just it,” I whispered. “I’m tired of being a haunted house.”

There was a long silence that followed. I nervously started scanning the vials in the shop.

Finally, she pointed to a very high shelf, where the vials were clear, but still glowing with a soft, pearlescent light. "I can fill them with 'Stock Girlhood #2.' It's a very popular one. Scraped knees in summer dresses, tea parties with a grandfather who smells of lavender, the soft pride of a mother watching her daughter dance. Disney movies on Saturdays. It's a gentle life. Generic, but kind. The cost will be all your memories until you fully transition. With a change this huge, keep in mind that your relatives and family will be completely puzzled for a few months. They'll still remember the old you. They'll bring the old you up again and again."

There was a minute of doubt in my mind. All my pain would disappear. But I would disappear too. How could I rectify becoming somebody else? I got it.

"I'll take it, if you could make me do one thing after," I said.

The process did not feel like a surgery, more like a symphony. She pulled a long, silver needle from her hair and touched it to my temple. I felt a tug. Not painful, but deep. As the silver mist flowed from my head into the glass vials, I watched my pain and life turn into liquid. The old lady's face was quite grim.

"Are you sure, dearie?" she asked one last time, her voice distant. "Once the cork is in, the old you will fade away slowly."

"Do it," I breathed.

Then came the intake. A pearlescent light flowed into me. Suddenly, I 'remembered' a pink bedroom I'd never had. I 'remembered' the way my long hair

felt in a ponytail when I was six. I remembered my mother calling me 'Elena' with a smile that reached her eyes. The trauma of the wrong body, the years of performing a role that felt like a death sentence.

It all vanished, replaced by a soft, sun-drenched past that was as beautiful as it was fake. Like a plastic flamingo on an imitation grass lawn.

"I hope you're happy, Elena." A weary old voice I didn't remember said.

When the bell above the door rang as I exited, I didn't remember why I had entered that shop in the first place. Uh, shop? What was I doing? For some reason, my step felt light, unburdened by the ghosts of a thousand tough days. At the same time, I almost started sobbing, and knew I needed to write something.

I walked to a small café around the corner. I pulled a piece of stationery from my bag and a pen. I needed to write to them. To the parents who had always loved their daughter, right? The pen hovered over the paper. My heart felt heavy, a strange mix of the joy I now 'remembered' and a grief I couldn't quite name anymore. I was a stranger to myself, a plastic masterpiece painted over a real tragedy.

One thing.

I started writing as if possessed by a ghost of someone who was erased. These were not my words anymore.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am writing you as a testament to a life I will not remember. It won't make sense to me even an hour from now, but I need you to bear this cross for me.

I will only remember a childhood that feels gentle. I will not remember my tantrums when you forced me to go to the barber. I will not remember the days of forced football practice. I will only remember being your sweet, loving daughter. But you will remember giving me a name that has cursed me my entire life. If you bring this up, I won't remember any of it.

I let go of my grief.

Please do not mourn me as if I died. Some animals cannot grow unless they shed a skin that no longer fits. Even if that skin once kept them alive in tough times. What is left behind is still real, even if it's not the whole animal.

I will be lighter, and this might not be the best way to deal with it. But I love myself so much that I grant myself an easy, carefree life. Without the curse I was born with.

Perhaps I didn't just let go of the grief, but also of the strength of the me who could come out and transition.

Even if you remember the old me. Even the old me after I transitioned, she won't be there. You can cry for her. But it does not matter. Because by the time you read this, I will be someone else entirely.