

# Remember Us to Life

*“Scripture tells us we are made in the image of God. This alludes to neither our physical body nor our intellects. Rather, it regards our inexplicable desire to be creative. To create.*

*Who is our Creator? A power that creates a thing from nothing.*

*That is the image we inherit.*

*We write our realities.*

*Our creativity takes many forms. The one we all share, our most sacred capacity for making a thing out of nothing, is procreation.”*

Pope Greta II, “On the nature of Creation”, Vatican eAnnals, 2033

“Ollie, I’m home!” Ray says with cheerfulness neither he nor Ollie are fooled by.

He pulls out a small plastic container and pops open the lid.

Shame floods him. He is used to that by now.

He swallows one pill, and leaves another on the kitchen counter.

In the living room, his teenage son sits on the couch. Not looking up as Ray walks behind him. Ray pats Ollie’s thick hair and heads to the bedroom. He sits on the floor, leaning against the wall, hidden from the world. From himself. Mostly, from Ollie.

“Initiate TROGAN Horse,” he instructs the ever listening box on the shelf. A projector switches on. A rectangle of light appears on the empty wall across from Ray, catching the dust particles by surprise.

Tomorrow he’ll awake there all crumpled up, a discarded idea of a man. He will swear that was the last time. Because he promised. We can spend a day as family, he will think with false hope. Come tomorrow evening, he’ll be at the exact same spot once more.

“Describe scenario,” the detached voice requests.

“Chelsea with the triplets, age five, October, Dunham playground,” he asks of the damned device. Let the show begin.

And there it is, his body relaxes.

The face of his wife.

Chelsea.

And his boys. Oliver the only one wearing glasses. His hazel eyes huge behind the lenses. Ollie, caught in his own world, never seemed to mind Duncan and Terrance were always making fun of him, as brothers do.

*They are all at the playground, and the air is just the right amount of crisp. Chelsea in her worn grey cardigan, reddish hair like the leaves that had started turning, loose around her slim shoulders, her smile infectious. Goofing around with the three, laughing so hard, her entire body wriggling with joy.*

He watches, recalling the long nights she spent at the lab, away from them. Professor McKee. She never changed her maiden name. Academics rarely do.

*On the wall, Dunc and Terry climb up, and slide down, again and again, shrieking and yelling in the pure delight only children seem to possess.*

Computational Neurophysiology. She was fascinated with memories. How we form and retain them, how we fetch them when needed, or play fetch with them, more often than not. How what they show us differs from what had actually happened.

Before they were parents, before Ray even met Chelsea, a curious new technology was making a splash in the AI academic puddles. Not quite her community, but close enough for her to pay attention. Generative-adversarial networks. GANs. These artificial neural networks excelled at fabricating sensory input. At first, just blurry face images, short snippets of what sounded like terrible music. Then as the idea took hold with intensity, and research raced ahead, the images gained focus, details. They went from faces, to anything really. Sounds became pleasing, real good music, then voice, chatter, conversations.

Then fully formed videos.

*Little Ollie is crying. He found a dead chickadee. Chelsea crouches next to him, gently explaining something Ray cannot hear, probably a mix of biology and empathy. That one, always so sensitive. Terry, meanwhile digging excitedly in the wet soil, splaying it all over Dunc. It will be a long shower for that duo when they return home. Always making such a mess. Ray on the wall walks over and joins them, jumping in the puddle himself.*

Eventually, by describing a scene using a few simple cues, the AI would rapidly conjure the video for it. If you wanted any specific person to feature, all you needed was to provide their images, videos, sound snippets to the system.

GANs were fun, exciting, really good for porn. But beyond that, no one really had ideas as to what they were actually good for.

Chelsea had ideas, of course. She thought of psychotherapeutic avenues, through memories. Recreating trauma and reliving it in a safe space. It seemed like a solid direction. Yet, the months wore off and it wasn't making a difference to her post-trauma patients.

They agreed he'll be the stay-at-home dad. He always wanted kids. Plural. She wanted one. Let's start with one, then, he suggested. Life can be surprising that way.

Six month in, a comically huge belly for her frame, she came home very late one night.

"The oddest thing happened today, Ray," she was shaken.

"Yes?"

"I was with a patient, we GAN-created a scene from his past. Some things his uncle did to him."

"Oh."

"Yes. But that's not it. When it was over, probably an hour later, I was logging some of the details, and had this strange feeling, like a brief spasm. It lasted only a few seconds, and then I realized it felt like that GAN-scene had happened to *me*."

"What do you mean?"

"I remembered it, like it was my memory. I knew it made no sense. It's like...you know how you can remember what happens in a dream as if it was a reality, even when it's nonsensical? But dreams, you know how they feel so...mushy. This doesn't feel mushy. I just have a vivid memory of me, as a boy I never was, being touched by an uncle I never had. And I know it's not real, it just feels like it happened. It feels like a memory."

She had to figure it out, the science of what happened to her. Her lab members experimented further, on themselves. They shouldn't have, of course. Didn't matter. They couldn't reproduce it.

*Terry and Dunc, always pairing up, are bouncing at the seesaws. Ollie is just standing nearby, looking up, lost in some dream, Chelsea standing behind him, patting his thick hair. Ray never managed to figure out Ollie the way she did.*

It happened to her again. That time she found the doorway.

"You wouldn't believe what it is," she stormed in one night, scooping toddler Ollie up to give him one of her huge hugs. "It's my asthma pills. If I take them an hour before or so, the GAN scene becomes a memory!"

"What?"

“Yes, and Charles of course couldn’t stop himself, he took one as well, same happened to him. This is huge, Ray. And scary.”

“Kinda like Total Recall, no? Should we run off to start a virtual tourism company and get rich?” he laughed while wrapping his arms around her, Ollie cradled between them, beaming.

“Well, you know, I always thought Mr Dick was a bit myopic. Superhero stuff. This is for real, accessible to anyone. I don’t think people will use it for adventurous fake Mars tourism.”

“Then what will they use it for?”

“What I can think of scares me. These memories of what didn’t really happen feel so real to me. I almost can’t believe that they didn’t happen. Imagine tricking someone to go through this without them knowing. Imagine forcing someone to acquire such memories.”

“Shit.”

“Yes. Shit.”

“Ray,” she put Ollie down, looked at her husband, “we’re going to publish this work soon. We can’t keep this secret. The pills are out there, the tech is out there. We need to make the effect of combining the pill and the algorithm known to all, or it will be misused by those in on the secret. It’s bound to be discovered one way or the other. I’m scared of what this thing can do. It can get so bad. The best I can hope for is that the pills become thoroughly regulated. Inaccessible for most, so this doesn’t turn into the worst drug in history.”

“They will regulate it. I’m sure.”

She paused. Considering her words. “I need you to promise me you will never use it, Ray.”

“Of course I won’t.”

It was bad, but not in the way she anticipated. People didn’t care much for using it on each other. They used it on themselves. Humans have always craved connections, the real, meaningful kind. The kind that takes time and effort and often pain to find and nurture and keep. And still, it’s never perfect. Why bother trying to be vulnerable and exposed, learn of the other’s imperfections, allow them to see yours, when you can simply forgo the work, and remember what you wish had happened between you and any person of your choice?

She saw less and less of them afterwards. Flying around the world, petitioning for action, talking to dignitaries. Every small piece of legislation took months, if not years, of excruciating work. She never slowed down. Slowly, the world acknowledged the risk. New counter measures were developed. The asthma medicine became heavily regulated, illegal for most. The months passed into years. She had a responsibility, to make the world a safer place

because of what she discovered. Perhaps guilt had eaten her all up from the inside. When she did come home, she seemed more and more like a visitor. Ollie missed her, and cultivated sullenness.

When the divorce papers came, Ray wasn't surprised. She had a mission, something to march towards, an all consuming passion. She was blind to anything else, family included. He had become trapped in the lethargy of his own life. Losing her didn't seem to make a difference. Almost. She offered a generous separation agreement, and had no interest in custody. Ollie's heart never quite recovered. Ray's heart wasn't much better. Ray found bitterness, and other things to be intoxicated with. He ached over the life that should have been, could have been.

During one of his fits, he collected all her digital images, videos from as early as he could find, talks she had given, podcasts, recordings of her mediocre guitar playing, nursing, laughing. Anything. He fed it into the hungry AI. He swallowed the benign looking pill kept in a locked drawer he had the key for.

He asked the AI to create a scene with him and Chelsea taking a walk in the park, back when it was still just the two of them. He breathed hard, when he saw her hair, a soft flame dancing with the gentle sun. He watched, smiling, tears streaming down his cheeks. It was a fabrication, but it felt so good. An hour later, a spasm, and then, he couldn't tell anymore that walk never happened. Only the piece of paper he had written for himself made for a reminder. He quickly tossed it to the bin. He felt no obligations to remain true to the promise he once made. It had lost its meaning. But he recognized this could unravel something within himself he was scared of. He made a new promise, this time to himself: never again.

He kept the pills.

He went back again.

And again.

Many times over.

He forgot to be careful. Even an AI can be daft.

“Ray and Chelsea at the park. Ollie age seven, the three of them. Us.”

That was all it took. The algorithm misunderstood, and conjured two more identical copies of Ollie. So there were indeed three of them.

“Stop simulation! Revert!”

Too late.

Ray looked at the three copies of Ollie with fascination. The two new ones were rambunctious and...happy. No eye-glasses to hide behind. No mind wandering to quiet places, with a deep silent concentration. No sense of world sorrow no seven year old should have to harbour, yet Ollie already did.

Terrance and Duncan, he decided to call them right there and then. They were just two boys, running around, messing about, tugging at each other, being obnoxiously beautiful. They manifested joy and glee and an impish sense of what's fun. They were a handful. But finally, with them, he wasn't failing at being a parent. Only Chelsea was ever good at placating Ollie's moods.

An hour later, the spasm arrived.

He could have conjured that day again, asked for a different memory for it, reverted the error.

But he didn't.

Night after night, he rewrote history, lost in creating the history of the two boys. His boys.

Ollie discovered Ray's game. His fake siblings. The libraries of GANs recordings. He wasn't even angry. He simply demanded his share of the pills.

Ray argued at first. As his addiction intensified, and Ollie's mood became ever more sour, he gave up. There was shame, of course there was shame. Always shame with Ollie. But also, relief. Finally, they had something to bond over.

In the kitchen, Ollie swallows his pill, and walks over to sit next to Ray.