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## A Slant Cut

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# The *Word Hoard*

*/ward/hôrd/* n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

## A Slant Cut

Erica McKeen

Dr. ——— told me the procedure is highly experimental. A slant cut, a sideways look at the human time capsule of memories. The past fifteen years of medicinal research have un-bedded the strings of connectivity within the brain.

Sam and I are the perfect candidates.

I learned all of this six weeks ago, before the extensive check-ups and check-ins and interviews, during the last of which Dr. ——— asked me to call him Stephen and henceforth became associated in my mind not with the incomprehensible lab coat-clad men of my childhood anxieties but with some spotted, bespectacled, crooked boy by the same name who tried to kiss me in primary school. I imagine what Sam would have said—*Ob how our heroes have fallen*—and wonder if she has already crept between my ears, independent of science. *Stephen*, the doctor announced, with one word murdering my deities and setting me on the slippery course of damaged confidence. All this, all these gained and lost connections in six weeks, and all from first-name familiarity. Sam's been kept on ice and unchanged. Meanwhile, I took crash courses on memory and psychology, shock and brain development and amnesia and phobia, meditation, hypnosis, dissociation. Remember, the procedure is highly experimental and therefore apt to produce overstimulation, psycho-

logical bruising, or death, partial or complete. Sam's been preserved in a freezer. Meanwhile, I've grown sour—mouldy, I would say, if I were feeling poetic—on grief and override hope. Dr. ———, *Stephen*, told me any alterations that have occurred in my brain shouldn't matter, that all of this information and self-education passes only into my short-term memory, that my long-term memory remains unmined in the sense that I still possess the psychological tools to reconnect with Sam organically.

All six weeks ago or somewhere between then and now. I sit in a green hospital gown, the back open like a wound, my spine running in a ridge to the base of my skull. Skin seems a thin covering.

Fortunately, the most likely case of failure is a rejected transplant and the loss of the manipulated portion of my hippocampus. In short, regret is a clinical impossibility.

—————

*My boss fired me for clinical disorganization. That's what she called it. Clinical. As if my behaviour can be diagnosed, shaven down to accommodate her cube-like definitions. Pab! It was that vegan fast-food place downtown. Not the best gig, and I would have fired myself months*

*ago had I been manager. Ever smelt pot? This lady apparently had not. She accepted my sleeping in and missing work as “running late.” So, clinical disorganization. I’ll take it.*

*A disorderly disorder. Greta didn’t get the humour when I called to tell her the story. Another? Another? I suppose she’s worried about rent. If I can pay for pot, I should be able to cough up some coins for laundry, right? Pah! Pah! Pah!*

*Greta’s completing her Ph.D., you see—should be finished within the year—so it’s all this mug belongs in this cupboard, please don’t talk to me when I’m at my desk, I’d rather not order take-out again. She’s in the right, of course, always has been. This is why she can’t understand the comedy of a disorderly disorder. When I mentioned my boss’s phrasing, “clinical disorganization,” she said I could be as clinical or as disorganized as I damn well pleased, as long as it didn’t bugger up her life in the process. She mentioned respect and commitment, and I suppose I agreed, because I’ve just spent the traditionally pot-filled portion of my afternoon vacuuming the apartment rugs and washing dishes to make it up to her. She’ll be home by nine, she said. Take-out’s acceptable when she’s not around, but it’s less acceptable when I no longer have the discount that went along with my vegan gig. I suppose tea and rice will have to do. And Night by Elie Wiesel, for that matter, because I’m downright sick of these Netflix series people keep telling me are phenomenal and which turn out to be another lengthy struggle between quirky characters desiring connection and achieving nothing but misconception.*

*But now I’m sounding like Greta. Our minds bump occasionally, it’s not unheard of. Look, here’s the thing:*

*Night begins with the line, “They called him Moische the Beadle, as if his entire life he had never had a surname.” That one line got me thinking about Greta and myself and about what if we could marry and what if kids and what would their surname be. And what of definitions, labels, compartments. “Clinical disorganization.” That line from Night got me thinking about all the people with only surnames. I saw a psychiatrist a week ago, five blocks from where I work—used to work—free and government sponsored, you know, and the moment I read his name I knew I wouldn’t be telling Greta about that particular excursion. Not because his name was anything special but precisely the opposite. Something about its broad, generic quality put me on edge, got me thinking about surnames, about Greta and me, about compartments. About the miniscule capsules the doctor wanted me to take, costing fifty bucks a bottle.*

*Goddamn, what to do now without the gig downtown? If I’m not careful it’ll be twenty pages of Greta’s thesis to look over. Never! Enough! Pah!*

*The tea’s bitter. The bathroom’s my only private capsule in this studio apartment. Bugger me.*

—————

*I dreamt during the surgery, and I never dream. It was the anaesthetic, I’m certain. Dr. ———, Stephen, *Stephen*, assures me that connections can’t be made that quickly. But I dreamt of*

Nazis, and of Sam holed up in a long, cold, dark cabin, bone-thin, as skinny as she ever was; or rather it was *me* holed up in there. I can't help asking Stephen about it when I wake.

He is blunt and conventionally assertive. The transplant has not been rejected (good), an incalculable amount of childhood memories were removed and therefore lost (unavoidable), and the connections between myself and Sam, if any, should begin to form concretely within twenty-four hours (uncertain, hypothetical, verging on conjectural). The establishment of these connections *cannot* have already begun. The dream, he explains, was projection, imagination, and wishful thinking. It was not Sam's mind merging with my own.

I think, *What's the difference?* It's something Sam would have wondered. Does it matter whether Sam's real, physical brain causes me to dream, or that the memory I have of her does? The dream is the same, my experience of the dream is the same. I suppose the difference lies in Sam's experience.

Stephen looks at me and sighs, says the drugs are still in effect, the headaches will only get worse, and he will have to wake me every half hour for a short interview, some note-taking on his part, and a routine check of my bodily reflexes.

Now I swallow this pill and get back to sleep. But first, what was my mother's full name?

Charlotte James.

Good, Stephen says.

*Unavoidable. Uncertain, hypothetical, verging on ...*

—————

*Made brazen and befuddled by mystery meat.*

*That's Greta's answer when I ask her how she's feeling. She acquires a kind of nervous joy while employing al-literation. It's this fake literary genius thing she gets a kick out of, like she's a part of something by partaking in Ph.D. studies, but still apart from it. She feels safe in her compartments but also constricted. Very in-depth and psychoanalytical, and she would love to explain it to you if you gave her half a chance.*

*I've come to join Greta for lunch in one of the university's smaller cafeterias, and she certainly does have a pile of mystery meat all in a mess on the paper plate in front of her, but why this should make her feel brazen or befuddled I have no idea. I've brought my own lunch. Rice and chopped peppers and pinto beans.*

*I could at least add soya sauce, Greta advises.*

*I harrumph! at her mystery meat.*

*Our eating habits are contradictorily representative of our personalities. Here are my beans, for example, all tied up with the rest of the meal, and yet plainly distinguishable as beans. I eat slowly; I don't finish. Greta's meal is a mystery that needn't be solved, in my opinion, but Greta's always got to sort things through. She'll eat 'til the plate's clean.*

*Brazen? I wonder. I suck my lips between my teeth. Greta often grows tired of my wondering.*

*She surprises me by smiling. She leans across the table and kisses me.*

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*Greta, Greta, Greta ...*

Stephen wakes me through whispers. It is night. He reminds me of our check-ups half an hour, an hour, two hours previous. I pretend to remember, but he catches my fib when I can't answer questions about a story he apparently told me thirty minutes ago.

*What colour was the pony's tail? Who did the man go to see that morning? Can I recall any major plot points?*

No. Please leave me be. Even these sentences, these words, are arduous and overlaid with connections Sam wouldn't see, wouldn't care to see. I tell Stephen I've had enough of thinking.

*What am I thinking about?*

Mystery meat. But please don't tell Sam I was never in love with her veganism. My mother...

*What about my mother?*

My mother taught me meat-eating. She told me I was omnivorous.

*What was her name?*

I suck my lips between my teeth. Charlotte.

*Full name?*

Charlotte.

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*If I'm honest, my attraction to Greta didn't begin as physical, perhaps never was. I've never felt much attachment to bodies. We met in a hospital. I was studying in the university, completing my B.A. in history with a focus on the Holocaust. A week earlier, I had fainted in an underground hallway between classes and was now forcibly hospital-bound. Greta was visiting her mother, who was in the process of dying.*

*I was on my way to the vending machine for a bag of potato chips, under the pretense of going to the cafeteria for a banana, which my doctor highly recommended. My heart was dangerously weak. Vulnerable? I found some poetic symbolism in my diagnosis, didn't mind playing the victim. I welcomed Greta's intrusive stare as I turned a corner in the hallway.*

Have I seen you around somewhere?

*Like most people fumbling through grief for the first time, Greta was starving for connection, but I was more invested in compartmentalization at the time. She had not, as a matter of fact, seen me around somewhere. There was a woman in one of her literature classes with a similar haircut, also anorexic. I could hardly feel offended. Greta looked so bedraggled herself that I didn't believe her when she told me she was a visitor and had wound up in the wrong ward.*

*She wound up in the wrong ward on purpose after that, and we eventually wound up in bed together. It wasn't physical, not for me. Greta's mind was so cavernous after the death of her mother that I found myself fitting—contorting—into all available spaces within her brain.*

*She opened herself willingly. I fell in love with her vacuities.*

*She told me her mother's name for safekeeping. Charlotte James. Like me, Greta knew the significance of definition.*

*Later, now, it's all this mug here, Ph.D. papers, mystery meat, coins for the laundry, and I wonder if our hospital encounter was obtusely warped by my memory. It seems much too spontaneous. A pot-induced fantasy? A waking dream?*

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It was me in the dream, I know that now. Me in the long, dark cabin, Nazi-surrounded. I've lost the words to explain it to Stephen. When I squeeze out, "bone-thin," he tells me, yes, he knows that Sam died of anorexia. A weak heart. It's all in the paperwork. I find some poetic symbolism in his phrasing, and I shriek at him to take back the words.

*Shhh, shhh, softly. Careful.*

I don't want to be careful. It's suddenly very clear, that here is Dr. —, all of the doctors, the man who diagnosed my mother, the man who diagnosed Sam, met her downtown five blocks from the vegan gig, offered her compartmentalizing pills for fifty bucks a bottle, all separate and yet the same man who approached me the day after her death, *presently diagnoses me*. I will not sit for one more moment.

I try to stand.

*It's quiet, it's okay. Have a seat.*

No.

*It's okay. Greta, Greta, it's me.*

Yes.

Good.

Good.

*Now tell him your mother's name. How—? You gave it for safekeeping. Charlotte James. Tell him.*

Unavoidable.

*Pull it together. He'll send you home with me.*

Uncertain, hypothetical, verging on conjectural.

*I remember the mystery meat—Brazen—is that not enough? I remember ...*

You should have been a meat-eater, like me. *It had nothing to do with that. Nothing? Let it go. Let it open.*

*Be cavernous for me.*

Carnivorous? Cavernous ...

*Vacuous.*

Vac—

*Greta, compartmentalize me.*

Greta. Sam. Charlotte James. Stephen. (Dr. —.)

She is neither *up* nor *down*, straight *nor* slant. Where? She is living *here with me*. Stephen approved. We agreed. There are no more *clinical diagnoses*, decisions, or *disorganizations*. There is no longer even the impossibility of regret.