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Dear Sarah,

Hunter Raab

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Dear Sarah,

by Hunter Raab

My memories came back slowly, but back nonetheless. I don't remember how I got here, how old I am, or if I have any purpose here, but I remember as a kid I hated going to church, and once I became independent I never returned. It was boring, nothing against religion or my parents but it simply wasn't for me. Now, however, I wonder if I shouldn't have gone more.

I found myself in a relatively small apartment building that wasn't my own looking for food as if I'd lived there my whole life. The refrigerator was half empty, cookies on a plate laid on the counter and the sink was stacked full of dishes. I was alone, just minding my own business when all of a sudden I remembered a face. The face of a girl, a young girl, maybe fifteen. She was blonde and looked familiar, I couldn't quite put my finger on who she was, but I knew I knew her. It was like I was experiencing half-assed déjà vu. Eventually I remembered that she was my sister, and that because of our age difference we were never very close—although that being said I was never very close to anyone in my family.

“Do you need help finding anything sir?”

“Oh. No thanks, I'm just looking around thanks.” She walks away and I put the coat back on the rack.

I still don't know if I have all my memories back, it's only been a few weeks since I first remembered her. Actually, I know I don't remember everything because what is real here is often entirely gone in my memories. For instance, I can walk out in the street here and watch the cars drive by the colorful business buildings, but I can't remember what color the fence was at my old home. Or if I even had one.

I went looking for her the moment I remembered, despite not even knowing her name. I had this weird belief that despite me not knowing her, she would know me. Or that if once I saw her all would be okay again and I would remember everything. But no, she's not anywhere near me, nor do I want her to be.

I find myself praying from time to time now. Still not entirely convinced that God is real, but that doesn't say much. I'm hardly ever convinced of anything. Most of the time it is at night when I can't sleep, sometimes when I find myself in a pinch, but there have only been a few times where it felt genuine. Genuine in the sense that I felt as if he was listening. Some people here believe in multiple Gods, which I could see, but I don't know. If the belief that one man has the power to create the universe is insane to me, then I find it only fair that the belief of multiple is more so. But, like I said, you can never say for certain.

My boss yelled at me a couple weeks ago for skipping work, but I told him I didn't know what he was talking about. He told me to get my ass in there this minute or I was fired. I learned right then and there that not only did I have a job, but a life here as well. I started to doubt myself at this point, but I had spent the last couple days walking the busy streets by myself, getting lost, not knowing what's edible and what's not, sleeping at odd hours, and not smiling or laughing enough to listen to him when he spoke. He hung up the phone and I put, what I thought was a key chain at the time, back in my pocket before realizing I didn't know where I worked.

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The memories came back faster and faster with each passing day and I found myself more and more comfortable in this strange world with each passing moment. I no longer thought of them as dreams, or hallucinations, but of my past life. They were too personal, too...genuine for lack of a better word, to be fake. All my co-workers thought I was insane, they tried to take care of me, calm me down when I didn't need calming. Signed me up for counseling without my permission. I went to the meetings to give them a fair chance, but it didn't help. The lady just recycled clichés and things I already knew, it felt repetitive so I stopped going. I learned that my co-workers cared about me, and from that I judged I had been here a while. That this was, at least at some point, my home too.

I remembered that when I was nineteen I got in a car accident, and I remembered this one time a girl my friend's friend knew got stabbed by a stranger forty-seven times one night. Weird things like that kept popping into my head, like how the video camera was essentially made because of two rich people's stupidity. But it didn't feel

that weird. The world here feels just as random and scary sometimes.

I then found out that I have a roommate, who, aside from being a great conversationalist, is essentially worthless. He locked himself out and I found him waiting by the door when I got home from the office. Not sure how I got such a nice white collar job, or even how I still know how to transfer data from server A to server B, use Garret's—the equivalence of which would be Java or C++, if memory serves me correctly—and know the binary codes for each piece of technology here. But I do. Which is weird. Extremely weird and impersonal if you think about it, but like I said. This world can be random sometimes. I don't know what my roommate does, but from the amount of luggage he had it looks like he travels a lot.

One of the stronger memories that came back to me was my family and I eating brownies at the breakfast table on a cruise ship. Judging from the size of the house I grew up in, and the lack of similar memories, I don't think we were wealthy per-say. But definitely well off. I was in a white shirt and swimming shorts, my mother in a tank top and jeans, my sister in a pink dress, and my father shirtless. They had a buffet at the far end of the room, and occasionally a waiter would come ask you if you'd like anything special. We all declined his offer and, once the line died down, filled our plates with bacon, brownies, hash browns and berries. I went in the wave pool soon after, but the rest of my family was boring. I think being shirtless at late breakfast was fairly normal, but I can't remember. I don't remember much about the other people, only those who I knew well.

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One thing I can't remember is if I have any friends here. You would think that they would have contacted me by now, but I haven't booted up my computer in a long time and not sure how often I hung out with them. If, in fact they are real. In college, I would spend a lot of time on my desktop playing video games, modifying them, messing around with Photoshop, reading the news and theory crafting a lot. I remember that I had a lot of friends online that I talked to, some who lived in Canada or the U.K. while others lived just a few hundred miles away. But for the most part I tried my best to hang out with real, tangible friends. I would get drunk with a few of them, go to random tango nights, play soccer and Frisbee with them, but from what I remember I was never that close to any of them. Well, that might not be entirely true. There are too many gaps in my memory during that time to say anything concretely. But I do find it weird that I tried that hard in college to get real friends only to not have any here.

It's been a while since I did anything but work and eat. The streets aren't as hard to navigate as I thought, in fact it's kind of fun. This planet is much bigger than Earth, I can say that for sure. I can see some other planets in the night sky, a bright pink one almost close enough to show detail. A blue one in the far distance. And many, many stars presented on the comforting black canvas; I have no idea how the light pollution doesn't block them out, like it does on Earth. I don't remember much about the feeling of the night time there, but if it is anything like this than I know I must have spent a lot of time in it. The water underneath the bridge rages, faster than any river on Earth I'd presume. The sidewalk is narrow but the bridge is long and wide, connecting this island to the next. This whole planet is built like that, just a lot of islands connected with bridges above raging waters. I think at some parts the water is smooth, but for the most part you'll always hear the sound of water crashing into itself at high speeds.

This may sound cheesy, but right now I'm fine with being alone. All I need right now is nature. That will probably change with time, but I've been given a new chance and I should find who I am alone before I let anyone into my life.

...

I haven't showered in a week. Probably smell pretty bad, but hopefully I'm wearing enough deodorant to make up for it—that's how that works right? My body feels stiff yet weak, and I don't know why but I want my roommate to come home from wherever he is. I need to talk to him more. He probably does something cool for a living. He bought this couch, I think, and it's pretty comfy. So, that's cool.

I took the week off of work, told my boss I'd work from home. He said that's fine as long as I do my work. He still thinks I'm insane. Maybe he's right, he seems to know what he's doing. Obviously, he knows more than me, otherwise he wouldn't be the boss. The thing I respect about him the most, even though he is type A++ and a hard ass, is that he's grounded. He knows what he is doing, he knows what needs to be done and how to do it, and does it. For him it's simple. It's just the way he is. I'm not that way. I haven't even done any of the work I promised him I'd do. Lost in my head too much.

The memories have been coming back slower, but more vividly. Sometimes it's only one memory a week, and I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Have I lived here longer than I lived there? Why can't I remember anything about how I got here, or my closer past? The world's a strange place, and my brain is the perfect embodiment of it.

There is a radio tower on the next island over that provides something crazy like ninety percent of this world's broadcasting. It is massive, and in fact pokes out of the atmosphere a little bit. Just truly incredible, but the problem is it's owned by a bunch of dumbasses. They let anyone graffiti anything they want, anytime they want, on it. In fact they recommend it. "To boost creativity, like how our services boost your life," they say. You know what it looks like now? A few drawings of pretty ladies in the wind, a couple quotes, and a whole lot of terribly drawn male genitalia. Yup. People find it funny. It has the potential to be the most beautiful expression of our psyche anyone has ever seen, but instead it represents immaturity on a mass level.

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I got fired. Turns out he was serious. Not that I didn't doubt him, I, uh, more so forgot about it. That's okay though, everyone there thought I was insane. I mean, I might be a little, but who isn't, you know? They sit in chairs and stare at bright screens for sometimes more than two thirds of the day! For more than two thirds of the week! If you think I'm going to miss that then you clearly don't know me. It's just awful the way they treat you there. If you ask me I'm glad I got fired. Now I get more money, I think. That might just be an Earth thing. Ah, who cares.

These past few days have showed me something. Sometimes it's not about what you remember, but what you don't notice. You spend all this time trying to remember your past, as if it's a map to your future, but don't notice where you are. It's a cliché, but it's true. You know, when clichés become true often times you don't notice they're a cliché. Just thought I'd throw that out there. I was so busy trying to remember Earth that I didn't realize it might be still be in front of me. There is still money here, rent, roommates. Still suffering and happiness, what does it matter what chunk of land I live on? It doesn't. Does it?

...

So, at this point it's only a memory or so every month. I've found another job waiting tables. I figured that it's best if I stay busy and try something new. I hear it affects the brain in beneficial ways, which is pretty cool.

I remembered my old girlfriend, Sarah. We dated for three years before she broke up with me. Told me that I've changed, and that so has she. "Totally fine" she said, which it might have been, not sure how I reacted. We dated for three years, everything was more or less fine, I remember thinking that maybe something was off but it didn't feel drastic so I let it slide. She didn't talk to me for two days, then all of a sudden showed up at my door and we break up. Simple as that. Funny how quickly it can end.

There was this one time, during the first few months of dating, where she was into photography—never any good at it, truth be told—and we saw a baby bison driving through Yellowstone so she tried to take a picture while we were driving, it didn't turn out good. The bison was about to leave our field of vision too, so she made me drive backwards back to them to save time. The photo didn't turn out any better, but you know that's what she was like. Desperate for weird things, over exaggerating the little things, and always wanting something.

I feel weird for even saying this, like I knew her at all. I'm sure more memories will only come of us, so I don't want to pretend like I know everything about her, but this I do know. I know it as well as I know this world. Sometimes I wonder why I'm the only one to remember these sorts of things. I mean, you sleep in the same bed with someone for three years and their bound to have an impact on you, one would think. I'm sure I'm not the only one to have relationships with other people, although now that I think about it I might be the only one from Earth...

It might be an evolutionary advantage to forget the past. Keeps you from doing any self-harm, keeps you focused—what doesn't it do? Or better yet, what does it do? What does remembering Sarah do for me? It's like I'm living two lives. One being pointless and carrying more attachment, and the other beautiful but banal. It's like I'm forced to be alone.

Although I'm not alone, I've gotten closer to Zander. Turns out he's a journalist, a good one too! I've read some of his work, and he does an excellent job making it even. Not Bias, I mean. But also making us not biased, you know? It's easy to judge shit, especially if you don't know it. People used to judge me for preferring the indoors

to the outdoors, and when I told them what a PWM (pulse width modulation) was they thought I was too much of a nerd for my own good.

...

I wasn't very committed to the relationship at first, or at least didn't act like it. She was special, I could tell, and I loved spending time with her and all, but for some reason I never reached out to her. She would always text me first, asking me to dinner, or if I'm busy tonight. She knew nine times out of ten I wasn't, but at first she was timid like that. I think she thought she had to tread carefully around me or something. It wasn't like that, I just didn't have the courage to ask first. For the same reason she tread carefully around me, I didn't even text her. This lasted for surprisingly long, until it was more or less clear that if one wore the pants in our relationship it was her.

There was this one time I tried to teach her how to play *Counter Strike* until she gave up and wanted to leave because she had a headache, but I knew she wasn't feeling good for a different reason so I took her night hiking. She persisted that she didn't need to, that she was fine, just a headache, but she never gave a real "no." It was me who did most of the talking that night. I hadn't realized until then that most of the conversations were not only started because of her, but continued as well.

With my other memories, especially when it involves people, it normally comes in a random order. Sometimes I remember that when I was five my mom made me a Kit-Kat themed cake, and at another time I remembered that when I was twenty-one my mom made me come home for a weekend when I was two states away for our dog's birthday party—an event that had never happened before. But with Sarah they have all so far been chronological.

She was a weird one, definitely not like any of the other girls I'd met or even dated. One moment she would want me to go pick some flowers with her, travel to Europe spontaneously, cook a four course meal under candlelight on a random Tuesday night, choke her till she turns purple during sex then often switching roles with me, leave the upstairs lamp on at night in case someone might think to rob us, talk about how much she loved her horse as a kid when she never owned one, and the next she would be gone for a day or two, text me essays on how much she loves me, spend \$1000 dollars on camera equipment with no prior knowledge or experience, and take longer than necessary in the bathroom stall while ice skating. But God be damned if I didn't love her. We would sometimes sneak out at night, not trying to wake the other person up, only to run into each other in the parking lot and smoke cigarettes. Her favorite car was always the Blue Skyline R34 that parked in spot #5, while my favorite was the silver Honda S2000 in spot #23. I often rolled my own cigs; she bought hers, despite rolling them better than me.

Other times we would go out canoeing out on Mirror Lake, sometimes fishing but we both hated tying the knots and hooks. Despite us both coming from decently wealthy parents, we were decently poor. Not poor enough to worry about rent, but poor enough to trade a date at the movie theater to illegally downloading one off the internet. We downloaded them in case we liked them, and because she always said, "You never know when it will be taken down." I always preferred the term 'if,' but that's only because I knew the internet better than she did. Any movie that gets taken down from a website will: 1) soon be replaced by another website, if not already done, and 2) only become harder to find. Things very rarely truly disappear.

She knew wrestling like how I knew "weeb" stuff. That was her hobby, and she was pretty great at it. She was tall enough to have that natural reach over most, but short enough for it to still be hard. I judged her at first for it, just because I always thought it was more of a male sport. I didn't mean anything by it, or at least I didn't think I did, but she took offense to that. Everyone judges scenes when they don't know them, it's our way of filling the gaps in knowledge we have, and I thought I was above that. But she put me in an easy Tie Up, told me to apologize, and then taught me how easy it was to get out of and even reverse it. I apologized again for thinking it was weird that she could be both beautiful and a wrestler, and she told me that a lot of wrestling is mental.

...

For our year and a half anniversary she told me to propose soon. We had recently graduated college and a lot of her friends were getting married, some even had kids but those were the ones that only posted on social media when they were happy. She didn't want to be like them, and neither did I. "It won't be like that, it is different now."

"How?" I asked her. How was it not too soon for kids and marriage? We'd end up unhappy and controlled by our circumstances.

"It just won't." She promised, looking straight into my eyes, then at the white table clothed dinner table.

I didn't propose to her. Not then, a few weeks later, nor ever. I think she was fine with it too, or at least

that's not why we broke up.

...

I'm walking down Ninety-ninth street and there is a black cat in my way. I name her Chelsea, and I continue to walk. She follows me and I look around to see if anyone may own her. No one, not a person in sight. "It's crazy how few homeless there are here," I say to the cat.

Meow

"Couldn't agree more." I say twice, once looking down at her and the other quietly under my breath.

The water rages on my left and provokes nothing but anxiety in me. I can hear laughter in a far off alley, and I can hear the busy streets swear at itself. Love. Love I want to say got me here, but no. I remembered a flaw in Sarah, and consequently a flaw in me. I fear what is to come from here on out. I half hope for the consequential memories to maintain, so that I can learn that this was just a fluke. A one-time thing, but I'm afraid at the same time that it may not be.

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I have yet to shower today. Or yesterday to be honest. I've used my days off to lay in bed and ignore Zander's knocks on my door. Chelsea must be starving I think. I adopted her, unofficially. I work from three to eight tonight, and I promised myself I would go. While kicking at the thick air, pulling my hair, punching the bed frame and breathing heavily, perhaps over dramatically so, I promised myself I would not lose. Not to her, not twice.

I feed her some vegetables and dried pancakes because I still have yet to buy cat food. Her hair is less de-nounced and closer to her body. She seems more vulnerable since I've adopted her. Unfortunately for her, she has met me at a very bad time in my life.

My breakfast at one o'clock was alright. Not good, not bad. The pancakes from three days ago were dry so I made some new ones, but the milk was fine and I had plenty of butter. It was the first time I cooked something since Thursday, and now I'm waiting tables thinking of eating a fry or two.

I remember food helped, and so did the occasional walk or two. But if I stayed outside for too long the silence would get to me and then it's hard to go back inside and hard to stay outside. Leaving me no place but in loneliness, treading carefully. I remember the first night was rough, but as far as overcoming it the next few days were worse. I thought of her a lot, what I could do for her, how I could help her, what caused it, what didn't and what I could have done better leading up to it. This time that won't happen, this time I will focus on myself. This time I will not only remember that she went off her meds on purpose to "have more fun" but I will compare myself to it. Because I never did that, even though I never had to take any Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors, nor antidepressants, I still would never do anything of the sort.

I steal a tomato from the kitchen, grab two plates, use my butt to open the door and deliver them to table 16. "How's your day been?" The man, clearly trying to impress what looks like his boyfriend asks.

"You know, it's been pretty darn good. And yours?" I say.

"That's good to hear. Mine has been alright, thank you for asking." I ask him if there is anything I can help with, and leave.

Fake and uncomfortable situations like that used to always make anxious. Like I failed somehow, but also like there was too much riding on my plate. Sometimes it would lead to me analyzing the way others talked, and power dynamics, where I learned that often the first to interrupt was either more important or subtly desperate. Now I laugh. To myself of course, in my own head.

...

The seventh time it happened was because I ran into you in the parking lot. You hadn't come home that night so I used the time to research other apartments. I was in the phase of giving up on you, but I stuck around some more. After around ten o'clock or so and you hadn't walked through the doors I figured I'd run to the store and get some cigarettes. I hadn't been in the night time air freely in months, or at least what felt like it. I don't quite remember the duration, just the number of times.

I noticed you out of the corner of my eye and started to walk faster. I shouldn't have because the eye is naturally drawn to action, so I should have tried to blend into the otherwise peaceful night, but I didn't. And you looked at me for a while, before saying "Miles!"

"Miles!" loud enough to know that there was no chance in Hell I misheard you.

I turned around on a dime, like a dog greeting its master, or a slave not wanting to be tested for her worth, and knew exactly where your eyes were.

...

I've started to write letters, because I thought I remembered that it helped. I quit my job just last week, and because the boss didn't like it has shortened this week—my last week—to part time hours. Giving me plenty of time to test how fast I can type.

...

Dear Sarah,

My memories are coming back faster now. Sometimes it's hard to differentiate them from dreams, but most of the time I can tell. There's that certain real feeling to the memories, you know? It's linked to my emotions, that's how I normally tell. When I wake up sometimes I feel exhausted, or physically lost, but it never lasts very long. That's how I can tell.

...

Dear Sarah,

I remember why I don't feel bad. Well that's a lie. I feel terrible, but I don't feel bad for you. The first time it happened I was afraid, not for me but for you. No, perhaps afraid isn't the best way to put it. I was oblivious, forgiving, sympathetic, understanding, kind: human enough to make up for all that you lost. Yet still afraid, unmistakably afraid. I figured that maybe you had a rough day, maybe something terrible happened. And although you normally don't show your anger with violence, it did not surprise me when you did. You've always been passionate and emotional in all your endeavors, one of the many reasons I was dating you, but I suppose this was a drawback of just that.

Sometimes you hid it, but I could tell when you felt angry or unsatisfied. I could tell by your quietness, or by your fragmented sentences that you didn't want to talk. But this was not like that, this was the opposite. The only thing you wanted to do was talk, so I let you. But I didn't know what of, you just rambled. Passionately flailing your arms and yelling, maybe not even at me but it sure felt like it. You threw a plate and I ducked, it was at that point I left. You were off the rails and I needed to escape, Love be damned I'd help you later.

The second time it happened I tried to understand what exactly went wrong. You were yelling at me so loud and with such vulgarity that I couldn't see much of anything else. It must have been my fault, whatever it was. I tried to reason with you, but then remembered what anger does to reason. I tried listening but my ears seemed to fail me. I tried to understand but it all happened so fast, so I verified it in my head that I failed you and to do better. Because, honestly, I thought you deserved it. In fact, at the time you did, you most certainly did. This time you hurt me, but nothing too severe. I stood there and took it because I thought that's what you needed: a punching bag.

Even the third time I listened with intent. Granted I defended myself this time around, but my attention was all yours and yet again you let me down. Screaming at me for situations that you created, poverty—accusing me of stealing your money—, demotion at work—bottling up your failure—loss of hobbies and of health. I realized that night that I couldn't change you. That something inside of yourself, that you kept secret, was the source and so I tried my best to learn what that was.

The fourth time came and I took it. I studied it, I looked back at all that I owed you and thought it my duty to help you. I had learned of your prior alcoholism, of which you hid from me, and your old therapy sessions. Your mother told me, but don't worry I didn't tell her anything. In fact, she didn't tell me much either, only that you used to go. I assumed it was for addiction, but perhaps it was for your anger. I don't know.

Then the fifth and I realized that I couldn't help. Perhaps I could have after all, but at the time my hope for you was gone.

Then the sixth came and I thought about myself. I thought I should leave, enough is enough. But we shared a lease and where else would I go? No one would understand me even if I confessed. Was I just supposed to tell some friends while we're all together? Or go to the police? "Yeah, hello officer? My girlfriend has been beating me over the past couple months and I was wondering if you could uh...tell her to stop." No! It doesn't work that way.

The seventh came and I gave in. I let you have it, I let you win.

The eight and I tried my hardest to fight back but lost due to your overwhelming strength. I was a scrawny figure of a man, but I was comfortable. It was my homeostasis, and you took complete advantage over it.

The ninth was the same.

So was the tenth. And then they all became a blur.

Until finally blackness: a comforting contradiction to you.

...

Dear Sarah,

Remember that time you forced me to call my parents? It was right after one of those nights (the 11th or the 12th?), and you forced me to call my parents. Talk to them simply just to talk them, you said. All the while you stood there, over me, looking down at me. Ready to force your strength over me at any second. Testing your newfound power over me. You remember that time? I was big spoon that night. I couldn't leave, I just had to lay there awake and afraid while you slept with dominance in my arms.

I remember it.