SHORT STORY

You and My Memory Keeper

by Shrutidhora P Mohor



"Only Our Shadow Knows" by Jack Bordnick

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

I set him weekly tasks, tasks that he must finish to my satisfaction.

Sometimes that means noting the details of date and time of faded pictures. At other times, he has to piece together fragmented conversations, from scattered papers, from dusty bookmarks, or from scrapbooks in which the handwriting is barely readable. I sometimes supervise closely, as he bends over my scribbles, making sense of them decades later, and at other times, he works on his assignments more independently, occasionally confirming with me, or, helping me re-tell, and thereby re-remember. His most vital task always is to enable me to repeat, recall, re-narrate, an activity which never tires me. I let my memory coalesce, and at such times, I always insist upon his undivided attention. But sometimes I am difficult, refusing to repeat when I am not in the mood.

“How cold was it?” He asks.

I shut my eyes, pretending not to hear him. I remember telling him earlier how cold it was.

“Memory is supposed to be your asset,” I assert.

“It is. But it needs aids to perform well. Hence, the query.”

“Is it?”

I look away, attempting to think of relevant aids to memory. The last lap of winter, I remember. The large window, yes. The grand black and white mosaic floor of the renovated balcony wing, right! The nauseous smell of tinctures, yes, of course!

That year, summer had arrived late, later than usual.

I remember seeing you for the last time on a day in early spring, expecting the first blossoms to brush over my head as I pranced on my way to you. Instead it was nippy, a tad frosty on remote metal surfaces where there had barely been any sunshine for the last four months. I drew the stole over my head, pulling it down to cover my forehead as well, and tucked its loose ends inside my collar. It didn’t help much though, for when I saw you, asleep, or so I liked to believe, your foot uncovered, your ankle showing, the skin blackened from the dirt picked up earlier that morning, I shivered on your behalf and calling out for the attendant angrily for neglecting her duty, pulled the striped quilt cover over it. I believe you felt warm and comfortable as I did so, while I looked around at the large open windows, too many around your head, through which the chilly morning breeze wafted in and ruffled my stole.

Can someone shut the windows here? I raised my voice to demand attention. It’s cold. *He* is cold!

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Somebody at the other end of the corridor stopped abruptly at my loud call and looked at me with wide-open eyes. He pushed the brakes of his trolley, loaded with medical equipment.

Can you shut the windows? Can you kindly help me shut the windows?

He pushed his trolley away, throwing half a glance at me over his shoulders.

At this point somebody else came to check on a tiny chit of paper pinned to your quilt. It had your name written, the date, and 6:35 am.

“Can you identify a colour for your pain?” He sounds sincere, as though this is more than a job for him.

“Identify what?” I frown at him. Sometimes I do feel that he talks more than he needs to.

“A colour,” he repeats. “Corresponding to your pain. Like there are colours for danger levels.”

I let out a deep breath. Pain looks a poisonous grey before my eyes.

“It takes a couple of days for the pain to set in. Wait for the hurt finger to feel the pain”. That’s what grandma had said around half a century ago, when I had accidentally slipped my middle finger into a glass bottleneck and it had got stuck, I had simultaneously pulled at the heavy glass bottle and at my finger desperately for a minute, causing it to be bruised and swollen soon after. I had been in my teens then and I had wondered what grandma meant when she said that about the pain being a slow intruder, taking its time to creep in before it launches its assault. Don’t worry, it’ll heal soon afterwards, she had added. She had been right, at least in this case. On the third day, I had a stiff finger, blackened, swollen, refusing to bend or grip things. It lasted for two days after which it gradually reduced.

I wonder if *all* pains have a similar cycle.

It has been years, more than a decade now. The pain is crawly-creepy, sliding in and occupying more space with every passing day. It has grown in size and weight, its contours hard and piercing, its texture uniformly rough, de-formed, de-shaped, de-coloured, elbowing its way in wherever, whenever, whatever, normalising itself as a part of my life, my breath, my bones, my sighs, my memory, my imagination.

He, on the other hand, is late to report for work today. I fidget for a while, trying to recall the tasks that I have set him this week. These mundane work-memories drift through my head.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

I lie sleepless through busy sunny mornings while the buzz of the world passes me by. I stare at the ceiling like a lizard turned on its back, discerning patterns in the whitewash above my head. My eyes are dry, or at best moist only in the eyelashes with an odd tear rolling down the side of the face on the pillow, a momentary wetness, incapable of soaking the pillow cover. If I met grandma now, I would ask her if she could map all kinds of pain, beyond the ones of flesh and blood too. Perhaps she would know when this would heal. Or, *if* at all.

"I remember every detail, go ahead, ask me! It was Thursday, around 9 in the morning, and he was wearing light green." I continue after a brief pause. "There was a traffic snarl somewhere on the road and I remember urging the cab driver to take a quick detour. Most stores had not yet opened, but the pharmacy at the seven point crossing already had a queue."

The memory-keeper looks at me, unimpressed.

Between us is my work-table, no longer much in use except for the memory-keeper stacking files and papers, keeping notes, outlining diagrams during our work sessions.

"What?" I ask in impatience. I *know* it's his job to preserve every detail. I *also* know that I have a compulsion to re-narrate every memory, every story, for in doing so, I assure myself that *I* remember perfectly, and not just the person appointed for the purpose. It's just that I prefer to control the briefs that *I* give him. Your memory belongs to me, not to him.

He is focused on his job. "Can you recall what you thought of as you rushed up the stairs, on your way to meeting him?"

I fall silent. I don't think I like his insolence. After a while I say, "I wasn't in haste. I was thinking of the taste of the milk in his tea, thick and curdled, a tea that I have never tasted though, mine always light golden, without milk, fine and easy on the palette." I recalled those afternoon walks during the height of winter when at the gate of the lakeside entry, you would stop for tea in an earthen cup, cracking a silly joke with the tea-maker, and pulling my leg over how my tea is merely warm water, bland, lacking in colour. The memory-keeper is attentive to details. He stands up at the other side of the table and after taking a quick walk through the room, prompts me, "And how did he drink his tea? Did you not recall that too as you went up the stairs that morning?" "Hmm, I did. I was thinking of how his fingers wrap themselves around the cup, the space between each of his fingers, the edges of his nails, a little pressed, broken in one place. I was repeating in my head the plan for that evening. We had planned to host a party with a few of our close friends."

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“Did you have those close friends coming over for the party?”

“We never had the party in the end.” My voice is instinctively low now. I don’t know why he had to ask this.

“Are you sure?”

“Why do you doubt?”

“We had a party that afternoon. Small one. Three others had joined us. We drank lots of tea, and nibbled at tiny, heart-shaped cookies. One of us had baked fluffy Greek cakes, with lemon and honey. There were corn cheese tarts too. We dug our forks into those and savoured each bite.”

“How many did he have?”

I scratch my forehead. “He left early.”

“How many did he have before he left?”

I purse my lips in deep thought, scanning layers and layers of memory stacks, about you, precious ones, brittle ones, endangered ones, protected ones.

“Did he leave alone?”

“No!” This time I am ready with a reply. “No, not at all. He waited for them to finish and when they got into the car, the three doors shutting in synchronic smoothness, he drove them away.”

“Did you give him their addresses?”

I take no time to reply to that either. I shake my head both ways, asserting the redundancy of that question. Silly man! He still misses the crux of the matter. “That was never necessary with him. He knew who needed to be dropped where. His sense of direction was great. So was his ability to remember old fast food joints, familiar houses, the odd café next to a defunct post office, every hoarding, every street corner.”

“I see. So did you wave them goodbye?”

“I did, from a distance. The roadside eatery was playing some known song. Its tune wrapped itself around my body, the melody flitting in and out of my dress, kissing my ankles. As our little red car drove away over a flat plain terrain leaving behind patchy, rubbery imprints of its wheels, I knew I felt peaceful, and my life was in order.”

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“Your car? Or his?”

“Ours. Whatever we had, we had together.”

“Right! And did you ask him if he had checked the wheel pressure the day before? Or refilled the engine oil?”

I remain silent for a few seconds. At last I say, “You mis-interpret your job description.” I draw lines with my fingers on the table top in front of me in silence for a minute or so. My eyes are angry, dry, my mouth a pit of crackling roasted timber, crispy, ready to burn.

I look up to meet his eyes. Lowering my voice to a steel-finish low staccato, cold and steady, I add, “You are supposed to assist me in recounting all essential things about *him*, not about the car, or a tea party, or about where my friends stayed. When he was here, there was peace, there was love, there was happiness. And your job is to help me preserve *those* memories and ensure that I have an audience in you when I keep repeating our words and our million micro stories, our everyday laughter, our nonsensical exchanges, our tete-a-tetes.” Taking a quick, angry breath, I continue, “I pay you so that you can hear me every time I narrate these and can cross-check with the information that I have given you in the first month of your employment about him, about us, about our tiny magical world of love, fun, trust, laughter. Do you have a difficulty in understanding what exactly you are supposed to do here? Is your role not clear enough?”

A long speech in a tone of abrasive authority tires me. I get up from my chair and walk into the next room. There I pour myself a glass of warm water from the flask kept on the bedside table. Then, I walk back to where we have been working. My memory-keeper is quite unfazed though by my controlled outburst. He says without any manifest excitement, “It is! I assure you it is and that’s why I must point out when you miss finer points.”

I snap at him, my voice still low but sharp. “Points which you are unaware of in the first place and points on which I haven’t given you the original version of what happened and what I am to remember?”

His face has a smile when he says, “Why do you suppose I am unaware?”

I pause between each word and speak without looking at him. “How…Exactly how would you *know* unless I tell you?”

“Madam, do you think we can remember only such things that we *know*? What’s the point of a human memory then?”

I have a ball of cotton moving up and down my throat. “What do you mean?”

He doesn’t reply.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

In impatience, I tap on the side of the bed. “What does that mean?” I half-yell.

He seems to hesitate and I implore him to clarify. I hate puzzles after all these decades.

“Madam, can you not recall his happiness whenever he thought of you while you were at work? Or, his muted, lost expressions, his helpless eyes when he was being admitted two days before what turned out to be his last? You didn’t see him at these times. But tell me, do you have the slightest difficulty in remembering his face at such times? Can you not remember his glee when he would plan a prank on you? Can you not imagine his contentment when he would visit exhibitions and collect artefacts that you hold dear till date? Madam, is there anything that we remember outside our imagination of what we can remember? He *himself* is your best memory-keeper, madam. I am merely an employee, guarding your memories on his behalf.”

Tears roll down my cheeks. The fire is doused.

I shuffle my feet to the window behind. Pushing aside the curtain, I look at the evening sky. A star-lit galaxy touches my forehead through the opening. I sense peace, I sense slumber, almost as it used to be when we were together. I still have questions, but I think I’ll take them up the next day.

I skip dinner and retire for the night.

That night it rained upside down. That wasn’t surprising, given that when you and I were together, we often found ourselves standing on our heads. *Paagal*, you would say. Madness, indeed, I would agree.

That night, we went happily crazy, as it rained upside down.

Fine, razor-sharp arches of columns of water shot up from the ground and dashed upwards to pierce the sky, leaving a trail of muddy footsteps all the way, mine, yours, all of ours, from the past, right into the future. I wanted to shake my coat the way our favourite neighbourhood dog does, draining himself of excess water, his tail muddy and tapered, after a heavy shower during which even his driest hiding places have turned as wet as dripping towels. Those towels that we would squeeze under the doors to ward off the lashing cyclones on scarily stormy nights during our childhood.

When I arrived at your door, drenched, my fingers icy and witch-like, my body translucent, my eyebrows sheltering the mouth of a waterfall, yet my soul on a grill, waiting to be doused, you, dry as timber in a log cabin, moved towards me, your hands holding the

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

bouncing waterfall from hitting the rocks down there, I sneezed, once, twice, thrice, and then, gulping the anti-allergic tab that you slid into my hands, I climbed into the boat that was waiting for us, a boat with floral prints on it, looking exactly like my umbrella turned upside down.

The rain-party was cut short as the clock chimed. What time is it? I wondered.

Someone said, 6:35.

I asked the person what the time meant.

He did not reply, his silence cold and indifferent, yours still faintly warm, the kind of warmth that hangs around our nostrils when we are asleep.

For once, you too remained silent, not venturing to answer my desperate query.

"There's someone at the door."

"Ask him to leave."

"Do you know who it is?"

"Doesn't matter. I don't approve of visitors."

"I thought as much. Can I ask you something?"

"You talk too much. This way your ability to remember details will wane."

"But you admit that I do my job well enough."

I move my tongue inside my mouth looking for a retort. Unable to find one, I prompt him, "What is it that you want to ask?"

"Are you sure he was only your soulmate? And not your romantic partner? I mean, just curious for a confirmation. You have told me before, of course."

I pout my mouth. "I find it irksome to remind you each time that he *is* my soulmate."

"Technically, *was*. But anyway, how many did you interview for this, er, job?"

"None of your business! You got selected, that's all that matters."

Later that evening when it is time for him to leave, it seems he has something to say. He clears his throat and asks, "Why did you select me for the job?"

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

My eyes are shut. I rock my chair to and fro, my feet swinging back and forth. I take time. At my age, that's easy. I pretend to be absent-minded, or just moody. At last I say, "Maybe because you are a bit like him in some parts."

"Which parts of him?"

"The ones that I *don't* remember." I concede.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.