

Flooding the Memory River

by Savannah Schroll Guz

After a full week under hospital supervision, David no longer needed to be strapped to his bed. The drugs he was injected with at every twelve hour interval had finally slid a soft padding between his intellect and the crooked maneuverings of reality. He simply couldn't feel the spiny sting of life's ironies anymore. And truthfully, it was not unpleasant to experience this suspension, this lack of concern, the elation of standing on nothing at all and fearing no earthward plunge.

"Icarus or Daedelus," asked David of the nurse wheeling him into the common room.

She ignored his question, perhaps not truly hearing it. "There you are now, Mr. Steadman. Time to play with the others. It's good to be out of bed and free now, isn't it?"

"Icarus or Daedelus?" David asked again, louder.

"I don't know what you're going on about, Mr. Steadman," she said cheerily, kicking the brake on the wheelchair. She took the towel that hung from one of the chair's push-handles and dabbed at a glimmer of spittle that appeared in the corner of David's mouth.

David looked around, his movements slow. He no longer trusted his ability to perceive anything because of this cotton batting between his senses and the outside world. Gazing to his left, he saw a man reading the newspaper. He looked reasonably intelligent and David felt somewhat heartened. Another man lingered along the room's periphery, pressing himself against walls, unable to sit still. The

noise of a TV reached him through layers of doubtful awareness. He turned his head away.

Although David no longer traced the dark fissures and deep crevices that existed along the walls of his mind, the medicine bent his gaze further inward. His perception of time came to resemble something flowing and ungraspable. It gained a kind of moving liquidity. Occasionally, his dead mother came to visit him, looking at him with wordless accusations, raising her eyebrows, frowning with patent displeasure. He felt relief when she left, her weight shifting from foot to foot to foot as she walked into a shallow current of memories that were distinct only in places, where they congregated like minnows or rippled like river moss. *It will only drown you if you immerse your whole head*, his mother said as she disappeared into the thicket on the opposite bank. *But not*, he argued back, *if you just dip your face in to see what the other world looks like*.

But as he was repeatedly injected with sedatives, he *had* fallen beneath the surface of these memories, his head and body submerged in a wide and sinuous river of them. His movements were slowed by the metaphysical force of his own passing recollections, and he brushed from his face the silt he'd disturbed on his forced descent. He appeared there again and again over successive days. Often, he thought to move his arms to struggle against the increasing tide, but his will was gone. His eyelashes and hair moved with the current, his arms slowly followed. If he could not fight the flow, he would at least allow it to entertain him.

Now, however, David sat on one bank of his Memory River, which was covered with fine, powdery snow. Its flow had been staunch ed by transparent patches of ice. Not as many things traveled past him now and the woods on the other bank were seemingly empty and deadly silent. He sat alone, feeling the chill through his standard issue hospital clothing and his non-slip socks (for they wouldn't allow him shoes, or even slippers).

A figure emerged from the brush on the other side. It was a woman, a woman he *knew*. *Who is this?* The hair, curly, crazy, a riotous joy, he thought. *I know you. Who are you?*

"David," the voice said, "don't you recognize me?"

"Rachel," David's jaw dropped. "You're on the other bank."

"I suppose I am," she laughed diffidently.

"You're dead."

"God, don't say *that*." She extended her arms and spread her fingers. "Look, I've still got my wedding ring on. I *can't* be dead!"

David remembered that his was gone, and held up his naked finger to show Rachel. There was, however, still a vague mark in his muscle. You could tell it had been there. "Someone took mine, and I'm still very much alive."

"Who took it?"

"I don't know. Where have you been?"

"Everywhere, David. Everywhere. I want to tell you everything. For the first time in months, I feel free. So *incredibly* free. It's amazing." She threw out her arms, tossed her head back, and grinned from ear to ear. David had never seen her so overjoyed. She started down the bank, sliding over stones and mud deposits, places where the ground was not frozen. She put a foot in the Memory River.

"What are you doing?" David asked, standing up.

"Coming over to your side," she continued wading in, now as far as her shins.

"But you can't!"

"Why not?" Now the water was at her knees.

"Because I've only just found you again."

"Yes," she said, with the water at her hips, "and now we can be together." She had raised her arms as if to balance herself, but in a delicate, girlish way, as if she didn't want to get her hands wet. "God, it's *so* cold."

David, suddenly believing a crossover was possible, looked for a sturdy tree limb, widened his stance, and held out the branching end in order to help her across.

As he was reaching, testing his balance, he heard a noise upstream. It began as an immense crack and was followed by a low drone that steadily grew in volume. David turned his head left and saw a swell of muddy water surging towards them. He stuck the limb further out over the river and Rachel, up to her neck now, reached for it but was still too far away. He could see the fear in her eyes, her pupils so dilated she hadn't even a surrounding edge of iris. She was barely keeping her head above the water. "I shouldn't have done this. It's too deep now," she cried.

Her open mouth kept dipping beneath the surface. Her arms appeared occasionally as she tried to tread water, but she was tiring. "I love you, David. I didn't always, but I do now. I love you."

The water flooded over the banks, covered her head, and pulled leaves, snow, and pig-nosed walnut shells with it. But it did not take

David. He watched Rachel's head, which momentarily re-emerged, as the tide carried her away. Eventually, she vanished altogether, ostensibly pulled down by an undertow.

David could only watch, in helpless impotence. Internal and external reality came together at once as he realized the cold he felt against his cheek was not the water or the river rocks, but the hard linoleum of the hospital's common room floor. He was out of his wheelchair, lying against the tiles in a position that suggested he was listening for something. He saw a pair of non-slip socks near his face and lifted his head to see the man who had been reading the newspaper.

"You won't hear the cavalry coming that way, friend," the man said. "That's the old method, and it doesn't work anymore. They fly now, you see."

David began to cry. His sobs filled the common room, drowning out even the television. "I want to go home," he shouted at the man. "I don't belong here."

"The louder you say it," said the man, "the less likely they are to believe you."

