



A Brief Vacation From Myself

What becomes of a man when his slate is wiped temporarily clean?

By TOM FIELDS-MEYER

I was looking in my closet, choosing a shirt, when I lost my mind.

Four hours later, I'm in the E.R., and I don't know how I got here. My wife, Shawn, stands at my bedside, her expression alternating between reassuring and dismayed. Next to her, a doctor in his mid-50s calmly tells me he's going to name three objects.

"I want you to hold these in your mind," he says. "Apple, table, penny." I nod, noticing a semicircle of young interns behind him, listening intently. Then the doctor asks me to multiply 17 times three.

"I'm not very good at math," I say. He waits. "Let's see. Twenty times three is 60, minus six." I pause, correcting myself. "No, minus nine. Fifty-one?"

"Good." He smiles. "Now, what were those three objects I named?"

I can't recall the objects. I barely remember that he listed them. Flustered, I purse my lips and slowly shake my head, looking at Shawn.

She fills in the blanks for me: I woke up, took a shower, and when I stepped out, I seemed disoriented. I sat down on the bed.

"Wait, remind me, what are we

doing today?" I asked her.

"Do I need to remind you again? We're having lunch at the Swerdlows'." I didn't remember that.

I put a hand on my forehead, then lay on my back. "What day is it?" I asked her.

Concerned by my blank stare, Shawn shot me questions: Do you know who came over last night? (I didn't.) Do you remember what we argued about yesterday morning? (I couldn't.)

When I couldn't recall that our eldest son was in college, she called my doctor. He told her to take me to the E.R. immediately. She told me to get dressed and went downstairs to tell our teenage sons what was going on, sort of—that Dad had a bad headache and needed to go to the hospital.

When she came to retrieve me, I was wandering around the bedroom in my boxers. Her phone rang—the doctor.

"I don't care what he's wearing," he told her. "Go."

She drove, and I asked questions: "We're going to the hospital?" "Did you bring my wallet?" "I have my contacts in—

what about my glasses?"

She answered patiently. Then I asked again—the same questions. "We're going to the hospital?" "Did you bring my wallet?" And again. After the fourth repetition, my wife was crying. After the sixth, she pressed harder on the accelerator.

At the E.R., they gave me a CT scan—no bleeding.

The doctors asked me questions: Who is the president? (I can't recall.) What do I do for a living? (I'm a writer.) What did I have for breakfast? (No clue.) The doctor asked me to draw a clock and draw hands to show 11 o'clock. I manage to do that.

My memory picks up around the moment the doctor is giving me a diagnosis. "We know what this is," he says. "It's benign and it will happen only once in your life." He gives it a name: transient global amnesia, in other words, inexplicable short-term memory loss. For four hours my brain has replayed the same two-minute loop, recording nothing and missing large chunks of the recent past. I'll recover, but it could take days. The only long-term effect, he

says, is that I'll never remember these four hours. Ever.

He sends me to a hospital room for observation. Lying there that afternoon, I spot a black striped shirt on a hanger.

"Who chose that?" I ask Shawn. "I would never pick that shirt."

"You know you've already asked that question 10 times, right?" she says. (I don't.)

That night I get a brain M.R.I., the next morning an EEG. The tests confirm that my brain is normal, but that doesn't help me shake the disconcerting feeling that we are all just one misfiring neuron away from forgetting who the president is or what we did last night or what transpired in our most intimate moments. In an instant I had become like my grandmothers in their last years, floating through life, uttering the same old phrases as if for the first time.

Your accumulated memories make you who you are—how terrifying is it that they can simply vanish? What do you become then? This question still nags at me every morning I can't remember where I put my keys, each time I can't recall why I came downstairs. Now I have a simple way to ground myself. I repeat three words in my mind: apple, table, penny. ♦

Tom Fields-Meyer is the author of "Following Ezra: What One Father Learned About Gumby, Otters, Autism and Love From His Extraordinary Son."

ILLUSTRATION BY MELINDA JOSIE

✉ E-MAIL submissions for Lives to lives@nytimes.com. Because of the volume of e-mail, the magazine cannot respond to every submission. Share comments on this essay at nytimes.com/magazine.