Memory Market

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The going rate for a childhood memory is four thousand dollars. More if there is a mother in it. The broker explained this to me the first time like it was a kindness. Like thinking it was the same thing as having a choice. I had Mum's prescription in my pocket and three days until the next payment, so I sat down.

An attendant met me at the door. "Keep your recollections clear," she ordered. "Distortion reduces cognitive asset quality."

The extraction room was smaller than I expected. A reclining chair adjusted itself as if already knowing my shape. Wires wrapped around my temple, cold as judgement.

"Category?" the broker asked.

"Maternal." The word felt bitter in my mouth. Clinical. Like my mother was being translated into a dossier.

"Emotional intensity: low, moderate, high?"

The beach. Mum's hand over mine on the blue striped towel, warm from the sun. The way she laughed contagiously. "High."

He typed. "We'll list it as premium, five thousand, two hundred." He said it the way someone would tell you the price of petrol.

The extraction took four minutes. Afterwards there was a faint blankness where the memory had been; not painful, just absent, like putting your tongue to a gap where a tooth used to be. Outside, the world felt unchanged. That was the cruelty of it.

I bought Mum's prescription on the way home. The government had recently significantly increased the price of cancer medication, and since many couldn't afford it, they legalised memory selling which led to their startup of memory market.

Mum was sitting up in bed when I got home. More herself than she'd been in weeks. "Good day honey?" she asked.

"Good," I pretended. "Great."

That was in March. By June I had already had to sell eleven memories. The brokers had a system for everything. Cognitive assets were graded like produce: freshness, emotional clarity, narrative coherence. The older ones fetched less unless formative. Firsts were valuable: first holiday, first loss, first love.

"Forty-three thousand dollars," the broker told me.

Forty-three thousand dollars of myself.

The buyers were never named. That was policy. The broker would call them collectors. Collectors consumed memories the way others consumed art or wine. For them, authentic emotion had become a luxury.

Mum got better slowly, then quickly. Each sale made her stronger; each sale left me with less. I'd come home and find her at the stove, humming while she cooked. I knew she hummed the way you know a country's capital or a birthday. Although I couldn't hear the same tune anymore.

One evening she turned from the sink and smiled; the smile that meant she was happy I was there. For a moment I felt a flicker, then nothing. I remembered there had been a feeling. But the feeling itself was gone. Brown hair. The scar on her left wrist. One sugar in her tea. I knew her completely. I just couldn't feel her anymore. That night I found her old cardigan on the back of my chair. I pressed it into my face and waited. Nothing. The wool just smelled like wool, as tears rolled down my face.

The broker called on a Thursday. "I have a new collector," he said. "He's requesting for your most recent memory, your mother's recovery. He says maternal ones have a particular warmth to them that he finds difficult to source."

"No."

"The offer is eighteen thousand dollars."

"No." I hung up.

I walked into the dining room; mum had made two cups of tea and pushed one toward me. I looked at her face, the lines around her eyes, her skin starting to glow again, and tried to feel it. It didn't come. I had sold the feeling to keep the person. She smiled at me then; it felt expensive. That's when I understood something the broker never needed to explain.

The market knew my mother's worth. It knew the cost of keeping her alive. What it could not measure was the thing that had existed between us before the sale. The warmth of her hugs, the tune I could no longer hear, the feeling that used to live in that smile.

Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing. I hugged her then. She was warm in my arms. That at least was still real.