

Mnemonics, Magic, and Memoir

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How to conjure a Memory Palace

You want to remember something long and complicated, but you have trouble remembering. You have a lot of trouble remembering. So, you imagine a place you're familiar with; your workplace, your high school, your street. Then take a walk down that street noting features as you walk; that shop, that park, that creak, and so on. In each of those places you stop and put down a part of what you want to remember; put down a little bit of memory and with it a little bit of mnemonic magic of something strange. The stranger, the weirder, the grosser—the better. You'll remember the strange and the gross, that's the foundation that binds a memory palace to the ground, to itself, and to you.

You remember walking across the slimy bridge over the creak on your hour long walk to school. Your determination is greater than your sense. Weakness, uselessness, and stupidity are fears that drive you to walk, to get your best friend to walk, all the way to school. All the way even over the rotting wood and through the squelching mud. You remember the sagging wooden bridge and the narrow wooden steps that lay behind your friend's home that disappeared into a hill and out into a neighbourhood infinitely better and safer than your own. You remember the black bird with the red stripe that dive-bombed intruders on the overpass leaving scars and soggy lost hats. You remember finally arriving and feeling accomplished before the first bell ever rang. You remember being good at something before the morning song, the mission impossible song, reminds you to get to class for your own impossible mission; to keep fooling everyone into thinking you were smart. You will learn of imposter syndrome exactly five years too late to help you any.

Before any of that you remember learning to sprint at the park. Of measuring out the distance by walking across the field with your mother toe to heel to toe and marking the distances off with jackets. She is tired and still wears her white work hijab as she does this with you and amazingly her temper is gentle as though somehow, she knows what's troubling you. You remember racing across the dewy grass and timing it on a kitchen timer because you had no watch and cellphones were still bricks. You remember the freedom and triumph of getting better at something tangible. Something more measurable than your working memory.

Even before that you remember the shop and learning how to steal by dropping candy on the floor. You remember kicking it across the store and later bending over to tie your shoes only to pick it up. You remember putting the candy inside the space between your ankle and your sock and walking a distance behind your mother as she pushes your sister in a stroller before you stop to retrieve your goods. You will get caught immediately and you try to

run away before you are swept up into the arms of an uncle-neighbour who brings you back to your mother. Nonetheless you remember that you were good at stealing, better than anyone can teach, and at an age younger than you should justifiably remember. The remembrance of the act is a victory in of itself.

Hold on to these remembrances. They are sweet but not too sweet, there is bitterness that tempers it and that bitterness will help you call up a memory palace with a strong foundation.

There are other things you can use to conjure a memory palace that will work almost as well. Things like love, hope, desolation, and rage will work but they will cost you. The cost of using love and hope to build a palace is losing yourself in the beauty of what was and what never can be again. The cost of using desolation and rage to build a palace is trapping yourself within the repulsiveness of what was and what should never be again.

If like me you are too poor to afford the price of using rage and unable to find hope in your past strong enough to build a palace on you must settle for the gross and hope that other darker things do not creep in when you're not paying attention.

So, now that you have sprinkled in enough mnemonic magic, enough weirdness, you move on to the next feature and the next until you have nothing left to carry. Occasionally, you should walk down that street, rebuild the bricks of memory so that they do not fade away into nothing. Remember to pay attention to the bindings and scrape off rage and desolation wherever you find it. Caretaking is essential to a healthy well-lit palace.

How to build an Invisibility Spell

You want to be invisible; you have your reasons—I won't question them—but you don't want to be seen and you don't have access to magic; arcane or otherwise. So, you build little things; a way of walking, a way of breathing, a way of standing that are the foundations of an invisibility spell.

True invisibility is difficult to attain, but full invisibility isn't often necessary. Sometimes you can use just the parts of the spell for the same effect and match them to where you are.

Imagine where you will be when you want to be invisible. Is it a street, a classroom, or a home?

At home. At night. When you can't sleep and so you pace the length of your apartment: You can time the fall of your feet to the sound of the train, the snoring your father makes, and the sound of the television droning on at all hours of the night. Stand in strange places, hold your breath halfway between exhale and inhale, wait till quiet things are loud to sneak around at night or till loud things are quiet to come out of hiding in the day.

If you forget to hide, and eventually you will, you must wait for the rage to finish with you. Wait for hurt to turn into bruises, the words stupid and useless to fade from the air and settle in behind your ears, wait until your mother has moved on to something else, anything else, until your father is distracted by something else, anything else. Then you may move.

Until then lay under the bed, sit beneath the kitchen table, stand inside the closet. Learn to disappear when no one is noticing. You can hide from rage for a little while, you can hide from it a little longer by burying it in the tranquility of your own skin but eventually, the rage will want to dig its way out. Eventually you will bruise.

At school. In Language class. You sit still at your assigned desk and find something to watch. Watch the world from your window, read the world from a book in your lap, listen to the worlds of kids sitting near by, but don't speak, don't share. Disappear inside your own skin between conversations and group work. Disappear between the covers of a book. Disappear into the middle distance of in here and out there.

Pretend your marks are good or that you didn't spend all last week trying so hard to fail so badly. Lie and then pretend to get mad about something else entirely when your only friend asks why you can't spell 'easy' words. She can't know the source of your true rage. She can't even be allowed to think the word stupid even as it echoes from its spot behind your ears where the beads in your braided hair click together. Stop being friends with people in your class; they can see you too clearly.

Sit still, hope the boy behind you stops pulling on your braids, hope the tree you disappear up into at recess is still secret. Disappear into the middle of the class. Disappear whenever you can but always reappear before you are missed, before your absence is more visible than your presence.

On a Toronto street. On the walk home. Stay in the middle of the crowd near the back, don't make eye contact, wear headphones without music, wear your hat low over your eyes, look mean, or tired or done—just done with the world.

Keep moving so that even when people see you, and they always see you, they can't pin you down. Don't make eye contact, never make eye contact. But know that won't work if your sister often stops to chat up one of our local boys hoping to score some weed or something better. If he puts an arm across your shoulder stop mid step, drop your shoulder, and roll away from his touch, anyone's touch. He is fire, you know the drill: stop, drop, roll

until you disappear into a rage within your own skin and say: 'Don't fucking touch me.'

'Well you smell like shit anyway.'

'Then don't fucking touch me.'

You roll into the shadow of rage to avoid fear. To avoid the knowing smile, your sister gives the boy with '*work*' in his pockets after you've disappeared in your own skin that's overflowing with indignation. To dodge the knowledge of the stink of sweat and castor oil soaking into your joints that's supposed to help with the chronic pain. But you can't put off pain or rage for very long.

Don't be invisible so much as make parts of you invisible. Choose those parts wisely. Some day you might want to spread your wings and find them missing altogether. Some day your bruises will blend into your dark but not quite Black enough skin and you will finally be invisible, so invisible people want to believe your bruises don't exist.

How to lift a Curse

You've found something atypical: a curse that changes as it follows you through the years. Like a long shadow it exaggerates your every step. To lift it you must first understand it.

It is something that appears at the start of the school year, between your teachers' ears, somewhere below their hairlines, and above their chins. You find it between that first optimistic day of class and the end of a dreary October. You will notice that it always comes to them as a spell, a curse, written on the page that only takes effect once they read; IEP.

The curse is fickle and changes teachers each a different way. Sometimes it's towards kindness. Often its confusion. Once it was disbelief and disgust. Every time it masks you from their sight. It colours every question, every silence, and every mark good or bad. It is indirect and not meant for them. It bounces off them, through them, and onto you. And it is foul.

May your wins be discredited. May your losses be tragic. May your teachers expect less of you. May your teachers accuse you of cheating the system and of not really being... stupid. May your classmates not know your true nature, laugh at your nature, and send your poor tenth grade English teacher into tears watching you trying to pretend you aren't you in the middle of a third round of laughter.

You must realize that the curse's true name is shame. Only then can you banish it. Only then can you transmute cursing into hallowing. Only then can you walk away from it.

May your shame lessen to nothing. May your forgetfulness be a blessing.

How to make a Tincture for Trauma

Years after. At night. You will be sitting outside on a collapsible chair, wearing a security uniform with co-workers guarding a gate when a police officer shows up. You'll recognize the officer and he will recognize you. Your heart will speed up and his eyes will narrow.

And then you remember the race, the fear, and the gun. You will try to not look at his gun. You will try to think about anything else. Despite yourself you will try to banish the memory. None of that will work and suddenly you will be ten again trying very hard to work all the parts of an invisibility spell you will not have used in years.

The spell casting will fail. You will have become loud and bright and interesting in a way your younger self could never have been; in a way your younger self never wanted to be except in private when loneliness overcame her fear.

Eventually, you will hear that the police officer normally works in the part of the city where you live.

“North York, almost in the part that becomes Etobicoke.”

You will feel your heart stop for an instant as he tells this to the other guards.

The officer will look at you occasionally, trying to figure out where he knows you, where you know him. He will be twenty years older than your some twenty years. He will be old enough to have chased two little girls up the stairs with a gun in a bad neighbourhood during an elevator service outage. He will be tall enough to scare ten-year-old you.

Eventually, he will tell the other guards that he often works out of Yorkdale Mall. The mall you grew up going to, the mall you work at. Eventually, you will remember him, from two months ago, arresting a shoplifter at your day job.

Eventually, you will calm down enough to tell him from where you know each other. You will do this for safety, you will do this so a police officer never has another reason to pull his gun on you; so that this officer will not confuse you for someone who will need a gun pulled out on. The officer will look at you and smile. You will hope that it means you are safe. He will then take out his phone and show you pictures of shoplifting suspects to look out for.

He will tell you stories about his work. You will nod and try to be polite. He will joke with the other guards. You will notice his lock screen is a picture of a woman with a dog and you will realize he's just a man like any other.

You will try not being afraid. You will succeed for a minute at a time. You will hope that eventually you will never be afraid. You will be afraid when he leaves because you can't keep track of him and his gun if he is out of sight. You distract yourself by going on break and reading a book about heroes and magic. There will be no words for officer in the book you read, and you will be glad.

You will devour the tincture made of words carefully, because if you ingest too much too quickly, you'll get drunk off the fantasy and you'll blunder into trouble that is more permanent than trauma. You will always keep situationally aware. You will always have your back to a wall or your face to a reflection because there is no tincture for death. For that you must do more than walk, for that you must run.

In any case, you will have lost too much to believe in magic, and maybe you don't need magic: you know with your brain and enough time anything can be forgotten.