

**IT WILL COME TO ME**

*"This is driving me crazy."*

*"What?"*

*"The name of that actress. You know the one I mean. She was in that movie --"*

*"That actress who was in that movie --"*

*"Three Billboards in ... wherever it was. She's very well known. She's married to one of the Cohen brothers. She was in Fargo."*

*"With the woodchipper scene. Yes. I know exactly who you mean ... I can picture her ..."*

*"But what's her name? She was in that other one about the woman ..."*

*"The one about the woman ..."*

*"She's always grumpy."*

*"The actress?"*

*"No! The woman she played. It was a book. We both read it. It had sort of a yellow cover"*

*"Sort of yellow?"*

*"Well, some yellow -- elements -- I think. We lent it to ... someone ..."*

*"Who?"*

*"I don't remember. It was set in Maine ... or somewhere ... something about pickle or ..."*

*"Pickle?"*

*"Well, a condiment ... or ..."*

*"Olive. Kittredge."*

*"Yes! Olive Kittredge."*

*"Are olives considered a condiment?"*

*"I don't know. I don't care! But who's the actress who played Olive?"*

*"I don't remember. You'll think of it eventually. Or not. Can we watch the show now?"*

*"It's driving me crazy! Her name's on the tip of my tongue ...it's ... (A)*

And so goes an all too typical conversation in the Bowie household, the sort of conversation that seems to arise more and more frequently these days.

I suppose in the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter much whether I can remember the name of a particular actress - or even a word like -- "Compulsive thief. 12 letters" -- when it pops up in the crossword - a word I know perfectly well (B) -- but one that just won't come to me the way it used to. The worry, I suppose, is that this isn't just a nuisance, but the start of a slippery memory slope, gentle at first, but one which will get steeper with each passing year, sending me hurtling faster and faster downwards until I end up splayed in a refuse pile at the bottom asking "What do you call that thing with four legs and a flat top?"

I used to have a memory like the proverbial steel trap. Names of people, real or fictional, rolled trippingly off my tongue. Obscure foreign place names popped effortlessly to mind. Arcane words -- "Enjoying another's misfortune. 13 letters." -- (C) No problem.

But now the steel is showing hints of rust. A memory flits by teasingly, tauntingly. The trap snaps shut -- but there's nothing there. The jaws are empty. The memory has slipped away. The trap has to be pried open, creakingly, to try again to snatch the elusive memory out of the mist of time. "It's on the tip of my tongue," I say. Again. But it may stay there for minutes, or hours, lurking just out of conscious reach.

Short of cases of actual dementia, memories are usually not irretrievably lost. They're still there playing games on us

like rascally children -- hiding, poking their heads out, ducking back just before we spot them -- toying with us, tantalizing us, tormenting us.

It's a truism that our memory deteriorates as we get older. Loss of Memory is one of the relentless Four Horsemen of the Aging Apocalypse, along with 2. Aching back, aching knees, aching, well, everything. "I ache in the places where I used to play," as Leonard Cohen memorably put it. 3. Loss of Hearing - "What?! Say that again. I couldn't hear you." And 4. Netflix Addiction "Is there anything good on tonight that we haven't seen?"

One article I read said memory loss can begin by age 45, possibly even earlier. But is there anything we can do about it? Turning to the internet, I find no shortage of miracle products "Clinically Proven to Boost Memory!" "The Natural Way to Supercharge Your Brain!" and so on. Most of them seem to include something called Ginkgo Biloba - whatever that is. But when I ask Dr. Google - "Does Ginkgo Biloba improve memory?" The answer seems to be a resounding "There is no evidence for this claim."

I find another site offering "Brain Exercises. Tests to Improve Your Memory in Minutes a Day!!" I take one test which involves remembering ever more complicated sets of flashing colours. I do woefully. A sad-face emoji pops up on the screen. I'm in the bottom 20% of the population. Hopeless! I try again. This time I score in the mid-range. One more try -- a smiley face appears. Success! I'm now in the top 15%. A couple more tries and I'll be the Smartest Person in the World! But have I really "supercharged" my brain in six minutes? Or have I just figured out how to do the test?

I've heard this about crosswords too -- that doing a lot of them doesn't really sharpen your brain, it just makes you better at doing crosswords. I always do the New York Times Sunday

crossword and I can certainly do it faster now than when I started a few years ago, although words I know perfectly well often don't come as quickly as I'd like. "Fear of foreigners. Ten letters"... It will come to me ... (D) And in terms of remembering the name of that damn actress my crossword brain is still stumped.

I check other sites. "Take the Brain-Age Challenge! Calculate Your Brain's True Age." I do one of these and am told I have the brain of a 19-year-old!!?? Hmm, I must have done something wrong. There are other tests and brain exercises with questions like "Name as many vegetables as you can in one minute." I somehow manage to forget brussels sprouts, mushrooms and zucchini but still get 14. It says 11 is excellent. So, at least for now, I don't have to worry about forgetting what a carrot is called. There's also the Montreal Cognitive Assessment Test - the one Donald Trump bragged about "acing." Known as a mini-mental, it has questions like "Name this animal" beside a picture of a rhinoceros. I managed that so I guess that makes me at least as smart as Trump, possibly a low bar. And I still can't remember the name of that actress!!...

*"Alexa McDonough ..."*

*"What?"*

*"I'm still trying to think of that actress's name."*

*"Alexa McDonough! She was a politician. She definitely wasn't in Fargo."*

*"I know, but the other one's name is something like that. It has the same sort of sound -- an A sound -- a Mc sound. The same sort of rhythm -- Da da -- da-da-da"*

*"Boatie McBoatface."*

*"Very funny."*

*"Can we watch the show?"*

Looking further, I find "Simple Tips to Keep Memory Loss at Bay" from The Mayo Clinic. Maybe this is what I need. The tips include:

- Incorporate physical activity in your daily routine. Exercise increases blood flow to your brain which should help to keep your memory sharp.

- Stay mentally active. Do crossword puzzles. Play bridge. Learn to play a musical instrument.

- Socialize regularly. Social interaction helps ward off depression and stress which can contribute to memory loss.

- Sleep well. Sleep plays an important role in helping you consolidate your memories, so you can recall them down the road.

- Eat a healthy diet. Choose fruits, vegetables, beans, whole grains, nuts and pumpkin seeds. For protein, eat plenty of fatty fish.

And so on. But these don't seem like miracle cures. They just seem like common sense, and I already do most of them. Physical activity. Check. Crosswords. Check. Although learning to play a musical instrument at my age may be a bridge too far. And, although I can't claim to eat a lot of pumpkin seeds, I check most of the dietary boxes and lots of us were probably told by our mothers that fish is "brain food."

So maybe we don't need magic potions or a rigorous regimen of brain teasers and tests. CNN's health guru Dr. Sanjay Gupta says older people are not doomed to lapse into a "brain fog" of constantly forgetting things. He prescribes an easy, common sense approach, based on three S's - Slumber, Sweat and Socialize. Or to put it simply -- Get a good night's sleep and then take regular brisk walks with friends you enjoy talking to.

That doesn't sound so hard. Can tuning up one's memory really be that easy? And how perfect do we want our memories to be anyway? Sure, a balky memory can be an irritant and a time

waster and a nagging reminder of our fading mental powers, indeed, of our very mortality. But would we really want to remember *everything*? Vividly? Good or bad?

Ask Jill Price. She's known as The Woman Who Can't Forget. Her memory is phenomenal -- almost perfect. Now in her fifties, she remembers everything that's happened since she was 14, whether she wants to or not. She has a rare condition known as HSAM -- Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory. Given any random date from years ago, she knows what day of the week it was, what the weather was, what she was wearing and everything that happened on that day -- both world events and personal things. She doesn't forget, can't forget, anything. At first glance this might seem like a blessing - no more forgetting where we put our keys or our glasses or the name of that person we've met five times or that pesky crossword entry. Daily life would be a breeze. Or would it? Would a flawless memory really be a blessing? Or a curse? And would crosswords be any fun if you instantly knew all the answers? "Fear of foreigners. Ten letters." (D)

In Price's case she likens her condition to being a prisoner to her memory, locked in a cell and forced to watch an endless loop of old home movies constantly playing in her head, whether she summons them up or not. This makes it next to impossible to focus on whatever task is at hand, because details from her past are constantly buzzing in her brain, crowding out the present, flooding her mind with an endless barrage which she describes as being "non-stop, uncontrollable and totally exhausting."

Far from a blessing this sounds more like torture. Surely we all have things we'd rather forget, and maybe forgetfulness actually serves a purpose. Indeed, I came across a new study

from the University of Toronto which says, wait for it -- *forgetfulness actually makes us smarter!*

The study argues that forgetting things is not only normal, it's actually beneficial. Swapping out old memories for new ones is good. It lets us hold onto things that are important and let go of what's not. This allows us to make smarter decisions in our lives because we're not distracted by old, irrelevant details. Mind you, part of the study was done on mice, but it sounds like a good theory to me. So from now on when a memory eludes me I'll say no problem -- I'm not forgetting I'm just de-cluttering my mind to "optimize intelligent decision-making" so I can deal with important life questions - like what will we watch on Netflix tonight?

*We finish the show we've been watching - (Philip Roth's The Plot Against America - not bad) The credits roll. Joan asks --*

*"Winona Ryder? Which one was she?"*

*"She must be the sister. The dark-haired one."*

*"Really? She looks old. She used to look a lot younger when she was in that other one -- with Richard Gere --"*

*"Pretty Woman?"*

*"No, no. That was Julia Roberts. No, An Officer and a Gentleman."*

*"That wasn't Winona Ryder."*

*"It wasn't?"*

*"No. It was ... you know. Whatsername ... She was a star for about 15 minutes. Terms of Endearment ... aagh ... It will come to me ..." (E)*

*"Maybe it's time to go to emergency. Ask for a brain transplant."*

*"We can't. I don't remember where I left my keys."*

The Answers: --

- A. Frances McDormand
- B. Kleptomaniac
- C. Schadenfreude
- D. Xenophobia
- E. Debora Winger

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PROFILE KINGSTON

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