Garlic With an S

by Barry R. Taylor

There was something wrong with the garlic. Eric noticed right away. When the shoots emerged from the still-cold soil in his back garden, they formed the outline of a giant letter S.

The S was unexpected. Eric always planted his garlic in two straight rows: regimented, like soldiers awaiting inspection. In October, he would dig two trenches in the back garden, trowel-blade deep and six metres long, half a metre apart. Then he would carefully select the biggest and best garlic bulbs from the August harvest to use as stock. He would plant exactly forty cloves of garlic, twenty in each row, shoot end up and hand-width apart.

Each garlic clove would grow into an entire bulb by the following summer. Forty bulbs of garlic was enough to last one person most of a year. Eric liked garlic.

On a sunny day in mid-April Eric stood on the back step and looked out over the mostly dormant garden. It occupied all of the small backyard. Eric called it his secret garden. Truly, the only person to whom it was a secret was his grumpy landlord, who lived in the other half of his side-by-side duplex. Fortunately, the tall wooden fence prevented him from seeing that Eric had ripped out the patchy grass in favour of flowers (around the outside) and vegetables (in the middle). A foundation planting of shrubs lined the back of the house. More or less in the centre of the vegetable plot, atop an old tree stump, stood a two-foot statue of Demeter, the Greek goddess of the harvest. The stone goddess looked down on the vegetables with placid benevolence.

Nothing was up yet except the garlic. Spring had only just arrived, and was still setting up shop. The precocious, eager-to-grow garlic shoots were spear-points of shiny green, less than a thumb's length high. They stood out against the bare soil. The giant letter S across his backyard garden was smooth and symmetrical. He had obviously gone to some trouble to lay it out right. He had no memory of doing that. He had no idea why he would do that. Was the letter S significant? Was it intended to remind him of something?

That the garlic was a reminder was not implausible. Eric used many reminders these days. Since the accident, his memory had become a clunky machine, difficult to steer, prone to

failures and glitches. It needed all the help he could give it. There were reminders on his refrigerator and on his phone. Prompts popped up on his computer at work and his computer at home. Even his smart television reminded him of things. Perhaps the garlic in the shape of an S was a reminder too. But of what?

The planting was not a horticultural concern. Garlic laid out in an S instead of straight rows should grow as well and taste as good. Yet it bugged him. What did the S signify? Was it a person? A date? Perhaps a place, like Stellarton or Shelbourne. He couldn't think of any place special to his life that began with the letter S. Maybe it was a reminder to do something. Take up skiing? That seemed unlikely in spring. Learn to sing? Shave every morning? Evidently, the previous October he had felt confident that a single letter would be sufficient to nudge his memory. He had been wrong about that.

Dr. Bernard had warned him that there would be days like this. She was his attending physician during the time he spent in the rehab centre, after the accident. "The concussion jangled your brain's ability to form new long-term memories," she explained, shortly after he transferred from the hospital. They were sitting in her consulting room. Big, comfortable chairs, windows looking out over the parking lot. Dr. Bernard's diplomas, carefully framed, shared the walls with pictures of scenery. Dr. Bernard was a middle-aged woman with the patient, precise air of a high-school mathematics teacher.

"I'm sorry, what – what does that mean?" Eric asked. He was wearing dark glasses. Bright light hurt his eyes.

She smiled. "Short-term memory is how you remember you left something cooking on the stove. Long-term memory is how you remember where the stove is. Daily events get integrated into long-term memory, but it's not a simple process, like adding pages to a book. Your brain edits, compresses, and makes connections to other memories. That's the part where you're having trouble. You can remember what's on the stove and where the stove should be, but you may not remember that the stove is gone because you sold it yesterday."

He digested this. "Will it come back?"

"The stove?"

"My memory."

"It should do. It will take a while though. Your brain has to re-learn how to remember. We'll give you some exercises to help."

She was right on both points. His memory did come back, mostly anyway, and it took a lot of work. After a month in rehab the doctors judged that it was safe for him to go home. A nurse dropped by to check on him – every day at first, then every other day, then weekly. She made sure he was taking his meds, and remembering to buy groceries. Or remembering that he had bought groceries the day before so there was no need to do it again.

By midsummer he was cleared to return to work. He stumbled a lot, at first. His co-workers were patient. They learned to send memos twice. They reviewed background in meetings. Gradually his performance improved. The number of sticky-notes on his computer monitor dwindled. Now, a year after the accident, he was more or less back to normal.

Except that he had planted the garlic in the shape of an S and he had no idea why.

Eric's memory of his time in rehab was fuzzy, full of gaps, like a badly spliced movie. That was just as well, for the most part, because it had been very dull. He spent a lot of time doing memory exercises: solving puzzles, recalling lists of objects, keeping a journal. The rest of the time he did physical exercise, read books, watched television. Reading was frustrating, especially at first. He could read a book well enough, and follow the text as he went along, but by the following day he would have forgotten it all and have to read it over again. He could walk around the grounds of the rehab centre, but the nurses warned him not to lose sight of the building because he might not remember the way back.

There were other patients there too, of course. All the patients with brain issues were grouped in one ward. Eric remembered some of their names, or faces, rarely both. Sometimes they were vague figures in the background. There had been big, brooding Otto, always complaining about something but good company otherwise. And the thin, older woman – what was her name? – who loved to talk about her children. Clara, that was it. Or Carlene? Anyway, there was also young, pretty Kelsie who alternated between flirty animation and pain-filled crying jags, and the thin, troubled fellow who had to learn to talk all over again. Other patients arrived too late or left too soon to leave an impression on his perforated memory.

There were medical people too. He remembered Dr. Bernard, of course, and one of the nurses, the one who brought his meds every morning. He remembered she had nice legs. He couldn't recall her name though. Conversely, he remembered an older nurse – her name was Rhoda – but he had no clear image of her. A couple of the physical therapists stuck in his mind; the rest were a blur.

There had been one woman there, another recovering accident victim, whom he rather liked. Round face, bright eyes and a slow smile that spread across her face like a summer sunrise. She was irritated because they had to shave off all her hair for surgery. She had been proud of her hair. She showed Eric a picture taken the previous year. It showed her at a party, smiling behind a birthday cake. Her hair was long and black and luxurious.

"It will grow back," Eric assured her.

"It will take a year," she replied.

What was the woman's name? For the life of him he couldn't remember. He decided to call her Ivy because when he first met her she was still connected to IV lines.

He remembered meeting her, more or less. She had been sitting up in bed, dressed in loose loungewear. He was struck by how pretty she was, despite her bald head with its fuzz of re-growing hair and a surgical scar above one ear. The absence of framing hair made her face seem almost round, but for the almond-shaped chin. She had clear, balanced features and deep, brown eyes.

"What are you in for?" he asked, fumbling to make conversation.

She grimaced. "I hit my head against a kitchen counter. Hard. Too hard. It hurt. Apparently it bruised my brain. Did you know that was a thing, a bruised brain? And I started accumulating fluid, in my brain. They had to open my skull to relieve pressure, or something."

"That all sounds . . . very unpleasant," Eric said. He was feeling decidedly out of place. This woman was too cool to be wasting time in a rehab clinic. She should be running a modelling agency, or flying fighter jets. He said, "But I don't understand. How did you hit your head against a kitchen counter? I mean . . . it would be way down here." He gestured with one hand.

Another grimace, rueful this time. "I fell off a chair," she said. "Can you believe that? I was standing on a kitchen chair, trying to reach something at the top of a cupboard and I fell off. It was stupid. I was stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"No," Eric interjected, mostly so she would stop saying "stupid" over and over. "It was an accident. Accidents happen. There's no use crying over spilled milk. Or a bruised brain."

Then, for the first time, Eric encountered the slow smile that spread across her face like a summer sunrise. "I suppose you're right," she said. "So why are you here?"

Eric was gaping, awestruck by that smile. After a long pause, he said: "I've been hit by a truck."

His description of the event was not quite accurate. The truck hadn't actually hit him. His memory of the event was as foggy as a remembered dream. Driving his clunky old Honda Accord to work one cold April morning. Following his usual route along a paved county road, the morning after a sleet storm. Driving slowly, wary of black ice, invisible and frictionless. A truck approaching in the oncoming lane: bulking, grey, dirty. A water truck? Maybe a water truck. Crossing a bridge; a sign that said, "Bridge ices before road". The truck sliding, swerving to the right, until the front bumper struck the guardrail. A great shuddering groan as the truck tipped over, the back end still moving forward. Time slowing down. Watching, helpless, as a wall of water from the ruptured truck slammed into the side of his car, spinning it sideways and over the embankment at the edge of the bridge.

Hanging there, dazed, blood running down his face, trapped between his seat and the airbag, still in his seatbelt. Can't move his legs, can't even raise an arm. Side window broken. Looking down into the river, flowing high after rain, still lace-edged with ice. Was he in the river? Water all around him, thick and grey, trapping him, pinning him down, freezing him slowly. The weight of it laboured his breathing.

How long had he hung there? Then the sound of voices, clanking and motors, a jerk as the tow-truck winch tightened. A door wrenching open, the grey coldness receding, flowing away. A young face there, lined with professional concern.

"Sir, are you awake? Can you speak?"

"Late for work," Eric said.

The blood on his face turned out to be only a broken nose. No other injuries besides cuts and bruises that a few days in hospital set right. The shock to his head was more serious. He suffered headaches and nightmares. When testing revealed the extent of his memory impairment, he was passed on to the rehab centre and the care of Dr. Bernard.

Eric contemplated his journey as he again stood on the back step, looking out over the back garden. The steps ended in a small, wooden landing surrounded by a white railing. Two steps above the ground, it provided just enough elevation to give a clear view of the whole garden at once. It was Saturday morning. The garlic shoots were taller now, defining the letter S

more clearly. It was a round, bold S. It spilled out of the narrow garlic bed into space normally reserved for onions and carrots.

At that moment, however, it wasn't the anomaly of the garlic that troubled him. Spring was proceeding, in the slow, reluctant way of the east coast. The morning was sunny, but cooled by a northeast breeze. The earliest snow crocuses were emerging from the earth to spread their tiny, bright blossoms into the chilly air. Eric had planted them in a patch of ground between the back walkway and the fence. Later, the space would be filled with annuals. The crocuses completely filled the space. In the uncanny synchrony of spring bulbs, all the crocus flowers opened at once. They were blue and yellow and white. The flowers were arranged to form a capital letter A.

The A was another surprise. Eric had no idea why it was there. He did remember planting the crocus bulbs, late the previous October. Planting bulbs had been useful therapy. It relaxed his mind after stressful work days. He remembered planting a good number of crocuses. He didn't remember planting them in the shape of a letter. He had no idea why he would have done that.

Now he had two letters botanically displayed in his back garden. The reason for them remained elusive. These holes in his memory were vexatious. What could S-A stand for? South America and South Africa seemed equally unlikely. Saturday Afternoon? Soviet Attache? The two letters could not possibly be accidental: he had clearly gone to some trouble to plant the garlic, and the snow crocuses, in a precise pattern. S-A could mean anything.

"I don't suppose you know anything about this?" he asked the statue of Demeter. The goddess remained silent.

"Hello?" cried a female voice, from inside the house. "Eric, are you here?" It was his visiting nurse, come for her weekly check-in.

"I'm here, Danika," Eric called, turning back into the house. He closed the door so she wouldn't see the garlic or the crocuses.

Eric was still thinking about his alphabetical garden as he drove into work the next morning. He had become a very careful driver. Any time he passed over the bridge, it reminded him of the accident. Sometimes the memories were too vivid.

"Did you have another nightmare?" Dr. Bernard asked him, one morning.

"Not another one," Eric replied. "The same one. Again." They were in her consulting room.

The nightmare was different every time, yet always the same, variations on a theme. It was obviously derived from his accident. He was driving somewhere, with or without other people in the car. Usually it was raining or snowing, but he wasn't worried. It was important to get somewhere. Gradually he would notice the water, rising all around, nearly covering the road. Where had it come from? Only driving forward would save him from the flood. Then a truck, grey, amorphous, enormous, overturning in front of him on the rain-slick or ice-coated road, spilling its ocean of water toward his car. Except in the dream it wasn't exactly water but some ill-defined waterish liquid, dirty and grey and unnaturally dense that filled the whole car, burying him up to his chest in an instant. Breathing became effortful; he could feel the press of the water against his body. The car slipped toward the flooded river or maybe the flood reached the car, the filthy water rose higher and higher, up to his neck, and in moments it would cover his face –

That was where he always woke up, terrified.

Dr. Bernard said, "It's normal to experience nightmares after a traumatic event like your accident. But there is something more going on here, I think. Your mind is hiding something from you, shielding you from some fact or event you don't want to face. Why can't you remember what the truck looked like?"

"I do remember," Eric said, a touch defensively. "The truck was big, like an 18-wheeler or some such and grey, definitely grey. A tanker truck probably."

"Probably?"

"It was a big grey truck! It spilled water all over me."

"I see. Do you have any idea how long you were in the river?"

He shook his head. "Maybe half an hour? Long enough to get very cold and very wet. I was fading in and out, I'm not sure. Do we have to talk about this?"

"Not if you don't want to. But there is something you should know."

"What's that?"

"I've spoken with the first responders at the scene. Your car was never in the river."

Dr. Bernard's revelation upset Eric for the rest of the day. That was her intention, he suspected. She was trying to jolt him into remembering something. But what?

"Your memory is getting better," said the bald woman who's real name wasn't Ivy, a few days later. "I don't have to repeat things I told you yesterday, or the day before."

They were sitting in the atrium, a glass-walled, sunny gallery at the end of the building, watching spring snowflakes fall and die against the windows. The atrium was a favourite gathering place for patients, away from the medical austerity of the wards and exercise rooms. Eric was sitting in a padded lounge chair with wooden sides, Ivy in a wheelchair. She hated it, but her therapist worried about fainting spells. Ivy had a book open in her lap. She had been quizzing Eric about it.

"If you say so," Eric replied. "Clara insists that she's told me about her son three or four times. I still can't remember the kid's name."

"Clara has two children," Ivy reminded him.

He made a helpless gesture. "And in an hour Rachel is going to give me another of her damned tests and I will forget half the objects. I know that exactly because my score last time was fifty per cent." He was referring to Dr. Bernard's standard memory test, in which the subject was asked to look at pictures of everyday objects for one minute, then write down as many as he could remember. In Dr. Bernard's version, Eric had to recall the objects the following day.

As with so much else about his time in the rehab centre, when his mind was still repairing itself, his memory of Ivy was fog-edged and incomplete, like a dream that slips away on awakening. He remembered, or thought he did, that she liked historical romance novels, swimming, and impractical shoes. She danced badly and sang well. Or was it the other way around? He couldn't remember what she did for a living, though she must have told him. A small business? Mostly he remembered the deep brown eyes and the slow, thrilling smile.

He found himself thinking about not-really-Ivy a couple of weeks later, when he was again working in the secret garden behind the house. It was a Sunday, not his traditional day for garden work, but it had rained on Saturday. The weather had finally turned warm, at least on some days. Eric was turning over ground and working in compost in preparation for planting onions. Onions had to go in early. The work required accommodation. He had to work around the giant S of garlic, one end of which protruded into the traditional onion space.

Eric was amusing himself trying to remember Ivy's real name. He did not succeed. It was entirely possible that her name had never fully registered in his faulty memory and there was no name to recall. Still, he was glad of the distraction. It kept him from thinking about crocuses.

Eric planted crocuses of two kinds. The smaller, earlier flowers, not far removed from their wild ancestor, he called snow crocuses. The larger, showier crocuses, varied and enhanced by centuries of selection and cross-breeding, came into flower a couple of weeks later, when spring was less of a prospectus and more a commitment. Eric planted crocuses here and there around the edge of the garden, in no particular arrangement. He enjoyed the bright spots of colour they provided in late April, blooming in a rush when everything else was barely sprouting.

The crocuses this year looked different. The older bulbs still formed a loose constellation of flowers around the boundary of the garden. The newest flowers, the ones he must have planted the previous fall, were more organized. The blue and white and striped flowers ran in two thin lines along the wooden fences on either side of his yard. The two outside lines were connected by a third line running diagonally across the whole garden, vegetable plot included. The flowers formed a spindly but unmistakable letter N.

Eric had noticed something was wrong with the crocuses the day before, when he had been standing on the back steps, watching the rain, and trying to decide if the soil was too wet to work. The crocuses clearly saw no point in opening their flowers in the cold rain, when no sun-powered bees would come to visit them. Still, Eric could see the sprays of narrow leaves, and the points of colour in the middle of each one. He could see them ranked along the fences, and then marching, bizarrely, straight across the vegetable garden, as if passing inspection before Demeter. Today, when the soft air and warm sun enticed the flowers to open, their strange and purposeful arrangement could not be denied. The stone Demeter looked down on them benignly from her wooden pedestal, as a proper goddess should.

Eric was beginning to be annoyed with himself. Why did he keep doing this? Or rather, why had he kept doing this last autumn? Was it all a confused mistake? His concussion had been far from over when he planted the fall bulbs.

No. It was clear that he had planted the flowers in arrangements of letters on purpose. Given his situation, it was likely that he had done so to remind himself of something, presumably something important. That decision seemed apt, given that he had indeed forgotten entirely what the flower-letters meant. But if the matter was important, why not make a note to himself, as he did for everything else, something like, “Remember your mother’s birthday” and stick it on the refrigerator? Planting crocus and garlic letters seemed like a very round-about aide memoire.

He ripped open another bag of compost. He tried to fathom what the three letters, S-A-N could mean. All manner of American cities named after Spanish saints came to mind: San Francisco, San Diego, San Bernardo, San Clemente, but none of those had any relevance to his life. Maybe SAN was a fragment of a larger word? Sangria? Sanitation? Sanity, of which he might be losing his? Nothing fit.

"You are still going to experience moments of confusion," Dr. Bernard had warned him, on the day of his release. "Don't panic when it happens. Healing after a concussion is a gradual process, even in the later stages. Take things slow, don't take on too much at once, and don't worry if you plant your garden alphabetically." Actually, she hadn't said that last bit, he was fairly sure of that, but he rather wished she had. It would have been re-assuring. As it was, his secret garden was vivid proof, visible from the air, that his jostled brain was still sputtering. Why couldn't he remember why he had planted things so strangely?

A scene from the rehab centre floated up in his mind. He was sitting with the bald girl whose real name wasn't Ivy in the atrium, listening to the rain thumping against the overhead windows. She and Eric were sitting side by side in comfortable lounge chairs.

"I wish I had met you earlier," Ivy said. "Before all this happened. Before your accident. And mine."

He looked at her. "Why do you say that?"

"We're damaged people. Both of us. We're not our right selves. I have no hair and I might fall down. You forget things, random things. You might forget me."

He smiled. "I won't forget you."

"Can you be sure? Your memory is still unreliable, otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"I'm getting better. You said so yourself. And I remember that you said it."

She shook her head. Eric tried to imagine long hair swinging. "Rachel says you won't fully recover until you can remember the accident. Remember it clearly and completely. She says you're hiding from something, something about it that's too scary."

It was his turn to frown. "How do you know all this?"

She sighed. "You told me. Yesterday."

Eric leaned back in his seat. He closed his eyes behind his sunglasses. "Rachel says it wasn't a water truck and my car was never in the river. But if it wasn't water, what was it? Scared the hell out of me, whatever it was. I thought I was going to drown."

"I'm glad that you didn't," Ivy said.

He was having the nightmare again. How many times had it replayed? It was the same every time: the road, the car, the rising water, the huge and ominous truck overturning, the water smashing into his door, shattering the window, punching the car into the river.

Wait. Something was wrong. The dream wavered, repeated, as if God were making live edits. The car didn't hit the river. It hung over the edge, just before the bridge, where he could see the water swirling, cold and ice-rimmed, just below. The car was filling with – what was it? It wasn't water, somehow he knew it wasn't water, but it flowed and it was cold and dense and it was pinning him to his seat, he couldn't move, he could barely breathe, and it was rising higher up his chest, dark and liquid and if it reached his mouth . . . .

"An oil truck?" Dr. Bernard said, the next morning, whenever that morning was.

Eric nodded. "It was an oil truck, not a water truck. I remember that now. A long, grey tanker truck. That's why it was so thick and heavy, why I couldn't move. It was some kind of heavy oil. Black, or at least very dark. Thick and cold and gooey. Must have been a nightmare to clean it up."

"An oil truck," Dr. Bernard said again. "You're sure of this?"

"Quite sure. I had my recurring nightmare again last night. I must have remembered what you said about the car not going in the river. I think that jolted my memory. That's why the memory is so terrifying. Imagine death by drowning in oil."

Dr. Bernard made a note in her book. "Yes, that would be quite horrible," she agreed. "Can you remember the exact moment when the truck overturned?"

"Do we have to keep going back there?"

"Only for a moment. The truck hit the guardrail, slid sideways and overturned. Is that right?'

"Yes."

"Where did the oil come out of the truck?"

"Oh, there are ports on top. Where they pour the oil in. They flew open when the truck overturned and the oil came pouring out."

"I see." She made another note. "You would think they'd be more careful about locking those down."

Eric was driving to work these days in a comparatively new Toyota Yaris, courtesy of the insurance company. The old Honda had been a write-off, of course. There would be no way to get all the oil out.

He recalled the conversation with Dr. Bernard as he began laying out rows for onions. He used a garden hoe to make two parallel grooves in the loose earth. Finally facing the trauma of his encounter with the oil truck had been a turning point in his recovery, or so it seemed to Eric. His memory improved. The nightmares receded. He stopped getting headaches from bright lights or loud music, or at least did so less often. The proof of his progress was his release from the rehab centre back to real life: his house, his job, his friends, his garden.

He began setting starter onions into the first furrow, shoots just below soil level, a full hand-with apart. Onions need room. He made absolutely certain that the two furrows were simple straight lines, and not a Greek letter or a mathematical symbol or something. Three uninterpretable glyphs in his garden were quite enough.

About halfway down the furrow he came to something blocking the trowel. It was probably a rock. This glacier-molded soil was full of stones. He used the hoe to work the rock loose, then pulled it up with his hand. It wasn't a rock. It was a daffodil bulb.

What now? He held the sprouting bulb up in one hand, wondering. It was definitely a daffodil. The thick green shoots were already stretching upwards, keen to break through the surface and bask in spring sunshine. But what was the bulb doing in the middle of the vegetable garden? Daffodils belonged in the flower garden or along the fences. There were several large clumps there, blooming dutifully every year. They tried to remind Eric, with their leafy abundance, that it was really time he thinned the bulbs. A new daffodil arising from seed was not impossible, but this bulb was too big for that. Eric studied the ground. Now he could see the other daffodil shoots, bright lances of green just breaking the surface, colonizing the vegetable garden. He had apparently planted them in a tight circle with the statue of Demeter at its centre.

Something very odd was happening here. Eric considered calling Danika. Maybe his mind hadn't healed quite as well as he thought. He picked up the hoe and replaced it in the tool shed. He abandoned the half-planted onions and retreated into the house. He found himself thinking about that woman in the rehab centre again.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," the woman with brown eyes and no hair said one afternoon.

Eric was taken aback. "What? Leaving! You only just got here!"

They were strolling through the little green space behind the rehab building, taking in the May sunshine. A wall of trees muted traffic noise, which Eric still found difficult to bear. Someone had espaliered a row of apple trees along the wall of the building. Swelling flower buds speckled the green leaves with spots of pink.

Ivy (not her real name) favoured him with that slow smile he was coming to love. Her hair was an inch-long carpet of glossy black. She said, "You want me to spend more time in a hospital? Miss more time away from home? Sacrifice more income?"

"I'm sorry. Of course not. I didn't mean that. I'm delighted you're better. It's just that – you've been here such a short time. What, two weeks? I feel like I've been here forever."

"Rachel said I had to stay for observation, to make sure I didn't fall down and that the pressure in my head didn't return. I'm clear on both counts. So no reason not to go home. I can hardly wait."

Eric said, "Good for you. I'll be leaving soon myself, I hope. I'm over seventy now." He was referring to his latest score on Dr. Bernard's memory test. Eighty was his ticket home.

"How many children does Clara have?" she challenged.

He was ready this time. "She has two sons. Ross is twelve and Brian is ten."

"What about her daughter?"

"Her daughter? Wait – really?" Then he caught the twinkle in her eye. "That's a mean trick," he groused.

She was smiling now. "That's why it's such fun. Also knowing that you'll be wondering for days whether she really has a daughter."

"Does she?"

"I'll never tell."

They sat down on their favourite bench. The scents of trees and grass filled the close space. He hesitated. Then he said, "I'd really like to see you again. I mean, outside of this place. In real life."

She shook her head. "No."

Her reaction was a slap. "Why not?" he said, feeling stupid.

"It's too soon. You have to wait."

"Oh. Very well, I'll wait if I must. How long?"

"A year."

"A year!"

"We're still damaged, Eric. We both need time to get back to health, to being our proper selves. You need a year to recover from your concussion. Recover completely. I need a year to let my hair grow back. So I can feel whole again."

Eric tilted his head, puzzled. "I don't understand. It's just hair," he said.

"Oh, it's just hair," Ivy snorted. "Like a man. I loved my long hair. My hair was my pride, my vanity. It was my one good feature that compensated for all the other flaws. My hair got me attention on the street and free drinks in bars. My hair got me dates! I could fling it when I wanted to look carefree, or drape it across one eye when I wanted to look sultry. I could wind it up to look tall and sophisticated or let it fall loose and sexy. My hair gave me a reason to look in the mirror without frowning and a great excuse for being late for everything. It fluttered in the wind and it got in my eyes and it was always in the way and I loved it. And they cut it all off. Now I look like a billiard ball with eyes."

"You look lovely," Eric said, and he meant it. "I'll wait a year for you."

"Maybe you will. Maybe you'll forget me."

"Why would you say that? Of course I won't forget you." But even as he said the words he wondered if they were true. Did Clara have a daughter?

"Maybe," she repeated. "A year is a long time. A lot can happen in a year." She paused for a long moment, considering. "Let's try a memory test," she said.

A few days later, after work one evening, Eric was again standing on the back landing, overlooking the secret garden. It did seem full of secrets now. The long, slender S of the garlic was growing taller along one side of the vegetable garden, starkly green in the evening light. The A of the snow crocuses had faded, but the giant N created by the later crocuses was in full bloom. The crocuses were dabs of blue and white paint on the brown canvas of the earth. There was no mistaking the circle of daffodils surrounding the stump with the statue of a Roman goddess on top. The circle could be interpreted, Eric realized, as a capital letter O. The circle cut right through the cross-row of crocuses, imposing O on top of N like the logo of some trendy fashion brand.

And still Eric had no explanation for any of this. The four letters together, as they emerged, spelled SANO. What did that mean? There was no word, or place, or name, in Eric's recollection (spotty as it was) that began with SANO. Was it an acronym? Someone's initials?

An internet search of Sano returned the name of a professional baseball player and a brand of women's shoes. Neither option was satisfactory.

A deeper mystery was why he had planted bulbs this way. He was sure now that the letters were a message to himself. Garlic sewn wildly instead of in neat rows could be explained by a mental glitch, but a smoothly curved S could not. Yet it was odd that he didn't remember what the message was or why he had planted it. By the previous October he had been out of rehab for almost six months; he had been back at work, back to driving, and except for a few memory lapses and headaches, back to himself.

Eric pondered these questions as the sun settled toward the west. The soft light reminded him of a session with Dr. Bernard, late in his stay at the rehab centre. They had been sitting in the atrium, late in the day, when the sunlight was gentler on Eric's eyes.

"You're memory has shown steady improvement," the doctor said, looking over her notes. "That's very encouraging. Headaches and nightmares pretty much under control. Sleeping normally. I think you're ready to go home."

"I've been ready to go home for weeks," Eric replied. "I just needed to remember where home is."

She smiled at that. "There's one thing troubling me. You're memory of the accident is still imperfect. You're holding something back."

Eric closed his eyes. "I don't like talking about the accident," he said. "It terrified me."

"Understandably. Yet I think you need to face it full-on, eventually. You're still fighting a mental block. It may take some time to overcome."

He looked at her. "A mental block? I don't understand. I remember the accident now. The oil truck and everything. Why do you keep coming back to that?"

"Sometimes our minds deal with trauma by refusing to see it. We unconsciously edit the memory of the event to leave out the worst moment. So our memory, or at least the memory we can access, isn't necessarily what really happened. Do you follow me so far?"

"More of less," Eric said.

"This defense is essentially lying to ourselves, so it causes all sorts of stress. Sometimes that stress is expressed as unconscious connections to the traumatic event."

"Right, now you have indeed lost me," Eric complained.

She smiled again. "Suppose a man runs over a duck with his car. He kills the duck, but he convinces himself that it ran away, so he doesn't feel so bad. Yet every time he sees a duck, or a picture of a duck, or a bath towel with a duck on it, he breaks out in a sweat. Or he may find himself buying rubber ducks without knowing why."

"All right, I get it now. That's strange enough. But why are you telling me this?"

"I want to make you aware that these mental tricks can happen, so you can watch out for them."

"Do I need to?" Eric wondered.

Eric surveyed his inexplicably literate garden and wondered. Were the letter-shaped plantings an unconscious response to something he was trying not to remember? Was he buying rubber ducks? He did remember the accident clearly now. Didn't he? He frowned. Something about the daffodils in a circle troubled him. Now that the shoots were up, they would grow quickly. Within a week, each bulb would produce a spray of long, grass-like leaves and two or three yellow flowers atop tall stems.

Yellow. There was something about yellow. Daffodils were yellow. Yellow was a bright colour, it stood out, it caught the eye. Fire trucks were yellow. Yellow trucks. A truck could be yellow.

Eric was breathing quickly. He felt his pulse rising. He looked about the garden; there was something about the daffodils, the yellow daffodils, planted in a circle, a yellow circle, it looked like a giant letter O, but the circle wasn't exact, it was flatter on one side, did that make it not an O but . . . a D? Then the four letters in his garden didn't spell SANO, they spelled

Sand

Abruptly the memory came roaring back. Driving to work the morning after a late-winter sleet storm; everyone crawling along, ice everywhere, feeling like traction could vanish at any moment; crossing the bridge, the truck approaching, a yellow truck, not grey, dirty yellow, the colour of county utility trucks, yellow for visibility, like a fire truck. This truck was sanding, the spreader spinning at the back, tossing grit on the icy road; ironically the truck itself losing control on the bridge, sliding sideways until the front fender hit the guardrail; then time slowing down as Eric watched, helpless, spellbound, as the truck toppled sideways, thudding down onto the road a few metres in front of him, spilling its load of

Sand

A grey tidal wave of sand slamming into Eric's car, driving it sideways across the slippery road and over the embankment, the window shattering, sand pouring in, cold, grey, dense, burying him to the neck in seconds. Hanging there, teetering, wet sand everywhere, on his face, in his eyes and nose, mixing with blood running down his face, can't even clean it off, can't move at all, the sand too heavy, compressing his chest, making every breath a labour. Dazed by the collision, barely conscious, cold, wet and terrified, staring downward for who knows how long into the icy, swirling water of the river.

Eric stood on the back deck, gasping in fast, shallow breaths. He felt his heart thumping in his chest. The world swirled around him as he fell to one knee, retching. *Sand*. Sand everywhere, overpowering him, burying him, nearly killing him. He could see the wave rushing toward him, deadly and unstoppable, The image played again and again, an infinite loop of panic and fear. He gripped the handrail and closed his eyes. He tried vainly to get his too-fast breathing under control. For a moment he was sure he would vomit, or pass out.

Slowly, all too slowly, the panic attack passed. Eric climbed to his feet. He did not relinquish his grip on the handrail. He waited for his alarmed heart to slow down. "Damn you, Rachel, for making me remember that," he growled. He took a deep breath, then another, willing himself to calm down. The wave of sand had not gone away. He could still see it in the background, hiding in the shadows at the back of his mind, ready to pour out at any moment.

There, at last, was the explanation for this peculiar decision to plant his spring bulbs in the shape of letters. He had been lying to himself, denying the terror of being buried in sand and so replacing it with slightly less terrifying alternatives. But the internal conflict created by this self-deception pushed him to unconsciously express the real fear. He had been buying rubber ducks all along.

He frowned. Something about that explanation was unsatisfying. Maybe he would call Dr. Bernard, get her opinion. There was a difference between buying rubber ducks and planting the garlic in an S. The latter took time, effort and attention. He must have spent most of an afternoon planting the garlic just so. Could he undertake such an operation while being unaware of why he was doing it? Wouldn't he have had ample time to reflect, reconsider, wonder what on Earth he was doing, and stop doing it? Yet he had not only continued, he had repeated the exercise three more times.

There had to be a better explanation. He was reminding himself of something, that was certain, but not the real cause of his accident, or not only that. There was something else. He stood there on the back step, watching the sun set over his secret garden, pondering. Sand. The word itself was gentle and sibilant, almost soothing. It reminded him of something, or someone. Maybe that girl he met in rehab, with the deep, brown eyes and the slow smile like a summer sunrise. If only he could remember her name. It wasn't Ivy, of course, but wait, wait, something to do with sand, sand was the key, her name was

Cassandra!

Yes! That was it! Her name was Cassandra and she was a florist and she lived in Bridgetown and she loved pumpkin pie and dancing and her favourite colour was blue. Eric found himself smiling as a flood of new memories washed over him. It had all been connected to her name.

"Let's try a memory test," Cassandra said. She was sitting beside Eric on their favourite bench, in front of the tiny apple tree. She withdrew a sealed white envelope from a pocket and handed it to Eric. "Here is my phone number. Don't open it! Don't look at it. When you get home, put it away somewhere. Hide it from yourself. Put it somewhere you won't stumble on it accidentally. Promise me you will do this."

Eric was bewildered. "I promise. But why – "

"It's a test," she persisted. "To see if I'm worth remembering. If you can remember where you put the envelope a year from now, open it and call me. I'll have my hair back by then."

"Can I give myself a hint?"

"I suppose, as long as its subtle. And doesn't give away where the envelope is. You have to remember that yourself. You have to remember me."

"Oh, I remember you now, Cassandra," Eric said, standing on his back step. "I remember everything." He was still smiling like a fool. He descended the two steps into the garden, crossed through the crocuses and the emerging daffodils to the stone statue of Demeter standing atop a stump. He carefully lowered the statue onto its side and removed the plastic sandwich bag beneath it. He opened the bag and removed the small white envelope inside. He was already tearing the envelope open as he trotted back into the house. He had a long-distance phone call to make.