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THE STORY OF
FORGETTING
STEFAN MERRILL BLOCK

'A COMPASSIONATE, WILDLY INVENTIVE NOVEL.' *GUARDIAN*

The Story of Forgetting

A NOVEL

Stefan Merrill Block



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Abel

ONCE, I FELL IN LOVE WITH EVERYTHING

I never found a way to fill all the silence. In the months that followed the great tragedy of my life, I sprang from my bed every morning, donned my five-pound, cork-soled boots and did a high-step from room to room, colliding with whatever I could. The silence meant absence and absence meant remembering, and so I made a racket. The rotting floorboards crying out when roused, the upholstered chairs thudding when upended, the plaster walls cracking when pummeled: small comforts when everywhere, always, the silence waited.

Over time, I learned to divide it into pieces. If, after breakfast, I found myself straining to hear my daughter's voice in the yard, or my brother's hobbled gait scraping down the hall, or Mae fiddling with the radio, I blamed it on the silence that had just collected before me, in my freshly emptied bowl of porridge, and then I chased it away, rattling the bowl's innards with my spoon. Sometimes, from the room that once belonged to my brother and Mae, a particular kind of silence, more profound than the rest, began to seep out under the door, and I had to charge in, fists and feet swinging, to beat it into submission.

I may never have made peace with it, but over the years I began to recognize the possibilities that the silence afforded me. It was absolute. That was its horror but also its blessing. Into itself, the silence promised to absorb whatever I gave it: my delusions, my regrets, even the truth.

But still. Even if the words go straight from my mouth to oblivion, the fundamental truth of my life is so simple, the saying of it makes me feel so foolish I can hardly bear to say it at all:

I was in love with my brother's wife.

But that is far from the story in its entirety. More accurately, I will say:

I once believed I cared more about my brother than any person still living, but I was wrong. I cared even more about the woman he married, the woman that my brother, at times, seemed hardly to care about at all.

Look at me. Still jealous, after all these years. Why should I have to compare who cared the most? Life isn't a competition, is it, with the one who cares the most getting the most? The lethargic and the cynical can live in mansions. And here I've remained, left to silence in this place with walls that barely stand.

Did my brother love Mae? Perhaps, in his way, he loved her; I can't say. She was his wife, and for him that was a simple enough answer. But did I love her? Yes. I loved things of hers that you would think unlovable. For example. I fell in love not only with her feet but also with her toes, misshapen from birth into two rows of adorable zigzags.

And not just that. I also fell in love with the sounds her feet made when they walked. Separately, I fell in love with the sound of her walking on dirt, and on wood, and in mud. These days, there is a young mailman who must have the same leg span as Mae. I know when my monthly issue of *National Geographic* or the latest offering of the Book-of-the-Month Club is about to drop through the slot because I suddenly find myself deeply, completely in love.

The time came when I knew I had to make a decision, or else I might do something severe. I devoted myself to watching Mae do the things that I thought would be the most repugnant to me. I asked myself, What makes a person most fall out of love? I decided

the answer was obviously to see the person you love making love to someone else.

My brother's room, which was once Mama's room, was on the second floor. Outside is still the massive willow tree with long, leafy fingers that creep in and tickle your face if you sleep with the window open. And so, because that night I had fallen in love with something hypothetically impossible, the sound Mae's stomach made when it moaned from too much food, I decided I had to climb that tree and watch the one thing that could make me instantly fall out of love.

Up in that willow, behind the leaves, I sat like a dirty old man, like the man I have perhaps become, waiting for something terrible. But instead, my brother and Mae did not even look at each other. They only crawled into their bed, each as far to either side as possible, and fell asleep. The next night, after I had fallen in love with the way Mae shucks corn, I climbed the tree again. Again, nothing came but sleep. For the next five days I fell in love with so much that I prayed they would finally make love, or else I didn't know what. When Mae would pour my brother's coffee after breakfast, her pouring a thing I had fallen in love with long before, I might suddenly stand from my chair and scream, "I'm in love with the way you pour!"

I had sworn to Mama long ago that I would never lose my mind when it came to love. But losing my mind was precisely what I was doing.

Five days passed, and still my brother and Mae had yet to use the bed for anything but its dullest purpose. On the sixth, I did something I knew to be unforgivable. But I thought that I could accomplish the act stealthily, that the shame of the thing would be mine alone. Or maybe I wasn't really thinking at all. As I watched Mae sleep, her face to the window, me falling in love with the way the arch of her nose pressed into her pillow, I began to rub myself in that tree.

The next day, I walked the three miles into town, through some excuse, and when I came back I brought a dirty magazine, filled with detailed images of men and women wrapped up in each other, for my brother to look at. For inspiration. I claimed it was for me, which seemed natural since it had been so long since anyone had seen me with a woman. I left it in obvious places where I knew he would see it. For a time the fish didn't bite; I knew that I would soon have no choice but to take drastic action. Just before dinner one night, after fifteen nights straight on which they had not made love, I saw that the magazine had disappeared from the little shelf near the door of the barn, which made me hopeful. But then, minutes later, I saw my brother sneak it back when he thought no one was watching. He had taken it with him to the outhouse, and so I knew my plan had backfired.

What else of Mae's could I possibly find repulsive? But I had already tried everything. Once, when she had gone to the outhouse, I had peeked through a knot in the wood, watching her do her business, hoping that the most base things her body could produce would repel me. Instead, I only fell in love with the sounds she made and the way her tiny, elegant hands wiped. I was hopeless. I imagined awful things. I imagined ways to kill my brother that would look like accidents but would not be. I imagined kidnapping Mae in the middle of the night and then explaining why I had to do what I did. I imagined simply asking her if she had also fallen in love with anything of mine, and if so, maybe we could escape together.

But, then I would remember, it was hopeless. Who did I think I was? I wasn't about to become the kind of person who can commit fratricide. And I certainly was no kidnapper. Then I thought, What do I really know Mae thinks of me?

Sitting one afternoon in the expansive stretch of our wheat field, where it seemed possible to convince yourself that all human problems were imaginary, that the whole of the earth was nothing

more than a shaggy, endless khaki, I nevertheless found myself attempting to conjure potential evidence of Mae's true feelings.

Years before, Paul had traveled to Dallas for great spans, sometimes entire weeks. Eventually, these trips came to an end when he returned, one evening, with Mae. That first night she sat next to me at supper. Trying to flatter Paul, every time she took a mouthful she would say "Mmmm," her breath rushing from her nose and breezing the hairs of my arm. Three times, our knees touched. Once, for minutes.

I chided myself: What does that even mean? Sure. Perhaps, sometimes, as she rests a plate of food at the table, she leans heavily against my back, lingering. Perhaps, sometimes, she smiles at me in the conspiratorial way of a shared secret. Perhaps, sometimes, when we're reading in the evening, she lies on the couch just so, kneading her toes into my thigh. But, no. To her I am just the pathetic, lonely brother. I am the lonesome, clinging third in what would otherwise be a normal marriage of two. I am the one person too many. And if I simply didn't exist, everything would be easier. I am the person she perhaps has seen rubbing himself while watching her sleep. And, of course, my body still remains as it always has been. Still, I am the deformed hunchback, the way my right shoulder and my spine lock bones. Still, I am only cause for disgust.

Maybe I was exaggerating. Exaggerating in the way that a single, frustrated need can compress a life's complexities and convolutions into a wildly simplified story, written in self-pity, of one's own insufficiencies in a world populated by the sufficient. But I couldn't help myself. I couldn't help but trace the history of my sad lot back to its origin. I began to think of when Paul and I were still boys. We were twins. For a time there was no distinction between that which was the both of us and that which was uniquely me: the purest form of love either of us would perhaps ever know, a form to which my brother would one day return.

Sometime near our fifth birthday, my brother and I stepped to-

gether into a bath Mama had drawn. Suddenly, the earth rumbled, a great fissure cracked open, and my brother was separated from me for the rest of time. I had gazed at his body. And as I had done so, I had also begun to scrutinize my own. I had, for the first time, begun to take note of that which marked us as different. Most notably, of course, my hump. At some point, as my brother's scapulae had parted with admirable, unfailing symmetry, mine had grown askew, a bony snarl, snaring my right arm like the dead limb of a trapped wolf, to be chewed away for the sake of freedom. My hump. A part of me was in unfortunate excess, perched there upon my shoulder, an excess that telegraphed my future paucity, the women and jobs and love and family that would be forever withheld from me. It wasn't that I ever resented Paul. In ways, it was just the opposite. As the girls of High Plains flocked to Paul at the end of each school day, as Paul's talents for baseball and sprinting grew into legend, as Paul's sturdy, superior frame accomplished work on the farm with startling efficiency (tilling vast fields in a matter of days, bucking chicken feed by the ton, bearing fifteen gallons of milk, from the barn to the house, all at once), Paul was proof of what I would have been, if not for my shoulder blade's poor sense of direction. A notion both heartening and tragic: all that stood between the seemingly boundless possibilities available to my brother and my own lonely lot was a two-pound obstruction of sinew and bone. A part of me was in excess; I tried to accept it, but secretly never stopped believing it a harbinger of a hidden talent to be revealed to me in the future, of a secret capability to possess at last something Paul could not, something that would be mine alone. Is the truth as dark and covetous as that? Is that why the only love of my life had to be my brother's wife? Is it possible that my love for Mae was, in part, something other than love? Perhaps. But at the time, it was enough to say, I was in love.

I decided I had only two choices. The first was that I would kill

myself, but I quickly understood that I couldn't do it. As it turned out, I still wanted to live. I couldn't even come up with a reasonable plan for suicide. The second, which was really the only choice I had, was to leave. To leave for any place but there.

It was the night before I would go. I had packed the things I would take and had explained to my brother and the woman I couldn't bear to love as much as I did that I had to make my own life and stop being an intruder on theirs. This was as good a reason as any because it was also the truth. That night, with my last bit of hope, I climbed the willow one more time and watched my brother and Mae go about their sad, silent routine. Climbing into bed, turning their backs to each other, then falling asleep. As I unbuckled my pants and watched Mae's face, I tried to imagine riding away in trains and buses and cars, being in big cities that looked nothing like where I was then. But instead what I imagined was that the thing that was in my hand was instead inside of Mae.

Eventually, I sighed and let go of myself. The thing slouched away like a miserable, malnourished creature all its own. I closed my eyes. I opened my eyes. I looked into the window. And then. Everything changed.

Mae stood from her bed, my brother still sleeping behind her. She came to the window, and at first I prayed that if I remained incredibly still she would not see me behind all those leaves. But she stared right at me. Would I have done something different if I hadn't been leaving the next day? Perhaps. But I did what I did. I stared back.

Then, through the window, I watched her turn and leave, falling in love with the way she walked on her tiptoes. She crept out to the tree. I scrambled to buckle my pants back together. Then she was climbing, and I was falling in love with the way she climbed. I did not move. I was as still as the branches. And then. She was in front of me. There were so many words to say to her

then, about all the things of hers that I loved. I couldn't say anything. But Mae could.

"Abel," Mae said. "Don't leave."

And then. She touched me, and I thought, Maybe I am not the one person too many after all.

SOMETIMES, THE PARALLELS are enough to strike me as the darkest, most poignant joke of my sixty-eight years. Sometimes, it is almost as if the mythos of Original Sin was purposefully recast on our little farm for the modern audience: the willow tree starring as the Tree of Knowledge; the bonds of matrimony as God's command; my own hunchbacked, pilose body poorly cast as the fruit dangling from the branch; that pitiable, flaccid thing slouching in my hand making a cameo as the serpent; Mae's touch playing the part of forbidden desire; the great tragedy of my life aptly filling in the role of all human suffering that would follow.



'AN EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER OF
A NOVEL . . . ABLAZE WITH LOVE
AND VITALITY.' *SCOTSMAN*



FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD SETH WALLER IS DEVASTATED WHEN HIS MOTHER IS DIAGNOSED WITH A RARE, EARLY-ONSET FORM OF ALZHEIMER'S. WHEN HE WAS GROWING UP, HIS MOTHER ALWAYS BRUSHED ASIDE QUESTIONS ABOUT HER PAST AND FAMILY, AND SETH REALISES THAT SOON HE WILL LOSE HIS CHANCE TO FIND OUT ANY MORE. HE DECIDES TO UNCOVER THE TRUTH ABOUT HER LIFE, THEIR FAMILY HISTORY AND THE CONDITION, AND WHAT HE DISCOVERS IS MORE SURPRISING THAN HE EVER COULD HAVE IMAGINED.

INSPIRED PARTLY BY THE AUTHOR'S OWN FAMILY HISTORY, *THE STORY OF FORGETTING* IS A MOVING AND EXHILARATING NOVEL OF LOVE, LOSS, HOPE AND GENETIC DESTINY.



'BLOCH'S GENETIC CURSE HAS GIVEN HIM MATERIAL THAT IS OVERFLOWING WITH MEANING AND VITALITY . . . A TRIUMPH OF A NOVEL.' *INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY*

'THIS IS ONE OF THOSE RARE WORKS OF NEAR-GENIUS BY A YOUNG WRITER WHO, UNTIL HE PRODUCED THIS BOOK, WAS UTTERLY UNKNOWN . . . A TOUCHING, INVENTIVE READ.' *INDEPENDENT*

'BLOCH TREATS A HEARTBREAKING SUBJECT WITH POWER AND SENSITIVITY.' *THE TIMES*

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