

Flaming Memory

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Time: Present Day. The stage is set to suggest a psychiatrist/psychologist's office within the psychiatric ward of a hospital. There is a large desk with a desk chair, an oscillating desk fan (off at the beginning of the scene), and a couple of patient chairs facing the desk from the other side. There is a box of Kleenex and some adult coloring books and markers, etc. There is a window toward the front of the stage. The THERAPIST is seated, and AMANDA is standing with her back to him looking out at the courtyard.

AMANDA

Look how much smoke is in the air. The sky is literally orange. They haven't let us go out at our scheduled times for the last two days. Not that there would be fresh air to be had out there, but I feel more human when I can step on the grass and sit outside on one of the benches under the trees. I want to look at the plants in those planters. I really just want to be home. I've only been here three days! It feels like three months. (pause) Honestly, I'm fine! I promise I won't *actually* drive into oncoming traffic.

(AMANDA walks to the chair and sits down.)

THERAPIST

(calm, reassuring) There is too much smoke for the hospital to allow patients to spend any time in the courtyard. I know that is an added difficulty to being here. It's understandable that you want to get home. But the doctors here will have to see some progress before that happens. (pause) As an outside therapist, I am not able to dictate how long your stay here is, Amanda. But if I can report a breakthrough today, we might shorten it significantly. (pause) The important thing we need to talk about is the reason you have been hospitalized. It sounds like you are recovering a traumatic memory you've been suppressing all these years. When we examine these events closely, and talk through them, it can often take away their potency. Tell me what you remember about what happened on the train.

AMANDA

I was excited about the shorts I got for my birthday. I was going to wear them on the train. They were pink with white pinstripes. These shorts looked like a skirt until you noticed they had legs. I thought they were so cool.

THERAPIST

What else?

AMANDA

It was my first time riding the train on my own. I was going back to Oregon after visiting my dad in San Diego. My mom was going to be picking me up from Union Station.

THERAPIST

How old were you?

AMANDA

I'd just turned twelve.

(THERAPIST jots a note down on his yellow legal pad.)

THERAPIST

How long had your parents been divorced by then?

AMANDA

Since I was three.

THERAPIST

Were you excited that you got to spend that time with your dad?

AMANDA

Sure. I mean, I used to love to get to go stay with him. It didn't happen very often. Like once a year, or sometimes every two years. He used to spend a lot of money when I'd visit. I liked it unless I was mad that I thought he was trying to buy my affection. It sometimes felt like that as I got older.

THERAPIST

Let's get back to the train ride to Oregon. What do you remember?

AMANDA

I was pretending to be older. (pause) On the train. I was pretending. (pause, she lifts the hair on the back of her neck with one hand and fans herself with the other) Does it feel hot in here?

THERAPIST

The wall thermometer says it's 70 degrees. (pause) I'm sure pretending to be older is not an uncommon thing for young people to do.

AMANDA

Maybe it's not uncommon. But I feel so stupid. Even forty years later I can feel the heat rise, like flames across my face. Especially when I remember what a foolish child I was. (pause) It's hard to think about this, to talk about it. I feel sick to my stomach. Can we stop for now?

THERAPIST

Of course, we can stop if you need to. But I would challenge you to work through a bit more of this.

(AMANDA looks at the clock on the wall, crosses her arms and leans back against the back of her chair.)

THERAPIST

You were admitted to the psychiatric unit due to concerns of self-harm. It is my opinion that this has resulted from your recent triggers and nightmares, it's important to uncover as much as you're able to.

AMANDA

(becoming angry) I remember remembering this shit before! About 20 years ago! When I asked my mom about it, she said I was *so* weird when I got off the train that day.

THERAPIST

(calm demeanor, matter of fact) I want to come back to what your mom said about the way you acted when you got off the train, but first, I want to tell you it's not unusual to block a recently recovered trauma memory. I know that some of my patients have experienced similar. These memories can easily slip right back into that vault. (pause) Tell me, were you in therapy 20 years ago, when you remembered this?

AMANDA

No.

THERAPIST

Well, this time you are. (pause) Let's do our work. (pause) What happened on the train?

AMANDA

I lied. I said I was 16. (she laughs maniacally). Fifty-year-old me – looking over his shoulder – at the 12-year-old me before him – can plainly see that *she* looks about 10 years old. Ha! (pause) It's too awful. I just want to stop thinking about this. (pause) Why is it so hot in here?

(AMANDA stands and goes to the window.)

THERAPIST

Tell me what you remember happening on that train.

AMANDA

(anguished) I thought he was cute. (she starts to sniffle, fighting back tears and fanning her face). I actually (pause) thought he was *so* cute!

(THERAPIST pulls a tissue from the box, walks to give it to AMANDA. They look out the window together.)

THERAPIST

Who did you think was cute? Who are you talking about?

AMANDA

(agitated) The police officer that got on the train sometime after I did! (calmer) I'd managed to find a seat on a row that no one else was sitting in, so I had an empty seat right next to me. I put my backpack there and got my book out.

THERAPIST

So, you remember that a police officer got on the train sometime after you found a seat in an empty row. How did you know he was a police officer?

AMANDA

(getting a little angry) I don't know, his uniform, I guess! Why? Are you saying he wasn't a real police officer?!

THERAPIST

(very calm voice) I have no idea if he was a police officer or not. Is there something about your memory that leads you to the consideration that he wasn't a 'real' police officer?

AMANDA

(angry) I don't know! Gawd! I thought he was a police officer! I thought I *had to* let him sit next to me. I thought I *had to* do what he said.

THERAPIST

You told me your mom said you were acting strangely when you arrived back at Union Station. Can you say more about that?

AMANDA

Yeah, she said I was so weird when I got off the train. I don't *even remember* getting back to Portland. My cousin, Julia, she's my same age, came with my mom to pick me up. I don't *even remember* it. Mom said I acted so strange. I had a weird laugh and stuff.

THERAPIST

A weird laugh?

AMANDA

Yeah. Like – all fake. And she said I smiled really tense and weird. She said I wasn't the same person for a couple of weeks, but she never could figure out what happened. I'm guessing she was pretty busy at work, and stuff, to do much in the way of figuring it out. (She pauses and gazes out the office window.) And then I guess I must have gotten over it after a couple of weeks, so she could forget about it, right?

THERAPIST

How does that make you feel?

AMANDA

(laughing tightly) Did you *really* just ask me that? I mean, my mom did her best. I don't think it was super easy having *me* for a daughter.

(AMANDA returns to her seat.
THERAPIST follows and sits at the desk.)

THERAPIST

What happened when the man sat next to you on the train?

AMANDA

He said I looked cold and covered me up with one of those travel blankets they have on trains. (Pause.) Is it hot in here? It feels *so very* hot in here.

(AMANDA lifts the hair up from the back of her neck, looks through the stack of adult coloring books on the desk, apparently suddenly uninterested in the conversation.)

THERAPIST

What happened then?

AMANDA

(talking in a dry, matter of fact tone) I can't remember.

THERAPIST

What did he look like?

AMANDA

I don't remember.

THERAPIST

What did his uniform look like?

AMANDA

(suddenly nearly shouting) I don't know!

(AMANDA leans forward, confrontational)

THERAPIST

I want you to try something with me. Do you feel like you can do that?

AMANDA

What? What do you want me to do?

THERAPIST

I want you to repeat a phrase after me, and then fill in the answer with your memory as best you can.

AMANDA

What phrase?

THERAPIST

If I knew what it looked like, it would look like this:

AMANDA

I'm supposed to say that? And then fill in what I think his uniform looked like?

THERAPIST

If you think you can try this exercise, it may help you remember what happened. That will allow you to process the events, therefore diluting some of the pain involved in your trauma.

AMANDA

What do you want me to say again?

THERAPIST

If I knew what it looked like, it would look like this:

AMANDA

If I knew what it looked like, it would look like this: Geez, I don't know! Dark? This feels weird.

THERAPIST

It *can* be strange at first. Let's give it another try.

AMANDA

If I knew what it looked like, it would look like this: (AMANDA closes her eyes and takes a couple of deep breaths) Crisp and dark navy-blue pants. The kind with creases down the center of each leg. A short-sleeve blue button-down shirt with a crisp collar and pockets on the breast with a patch on the sleeve and another above one of the pockets. The belt is heavy with things clipped to it. Shoes, shiny and black. A dark jacket over his arm. (pause) Blue eyes, so blue! Jeezus! I can see him! Dark hair and blue eyes! Now, I can see him in my mind. Grinning at me. And staring with those blue, blue eyes.

(AMANDA stands and returns to the window.)

AMANDA

How do I know if any of this is real? How do I know I'm not just imagining these details?

THERAPIST

When I got here to see you today, you told me you've been having nightmares about him and what happened to you on the train. What you've just participated in is a method to fill in those gaps, so you are able to piece together the events, remember them. And then to take some control over your response to the triggers when they do happen.

AMANDA

Maybe he wasn't even a *real* police officer. What if that was just a ruse?

THERAPIST

I'm not sure if him being a real officer or not has any bearing on your part in all of this.

AMANDA

I should have told him I was twelve.

THERAPIST

Don't you think he knew that?

AMANDA

I lied. (pause) I thought he was cute. I was excited that he seemed to like me. (pause) I think I'm going to be sick.

(THERAPIST stands up and gets a basin from the shelf and hands it to her.)

THERAPIST

Some patients feel ill when uncovering these memories. Some get sick, others just feel like they are going to.

(THERAPIST returns to his chair.)

AMANDA

I really hope I'm not going to need this. (she sets the basin on the desk) Also, can we turn that fan on? I swear it's getting so smoky in here. (fans her face) And it's too hot. Do you know, are the wildfires getting closer to us?

THERAPIST

They've evacuated the neighborhoods on the east side of the river, but it's doubtful the fires will jump over it.

(THERAPIST reaches the edge of the desk where the oscillating fan is and turns it on.)

THERAPIST

But, Amanda, the thing is – every little bit of this discussion is taking the potency and the power away from the traumatic event. (pause) It will get easier.

(AMANDA looks at the clock. THERAPIST follows her gaze. Then they look back at each other.)

AMANDA

It feels like so much more time should have passed.

THERAPIST

Are you willing to keep working?

AMANDA

I guess.

THERAPIST

So, you are 12 years old, alone, and a man, dressed as a police officer, and maybe he was or maybe he wasn't, sits next to you on the train heading north from California to Oregon. (pause) That's kind of a long train ride, right? How long did he sit next to you?

AMANDA

It seemed like hours.

THERAPIST

What do you remember about it?

AMANDA

I remember thinking he was nice. He asked what book I was reading. My dad had bought it for me before I got on the train. It was about a family of wolves. We talked about animals. He said he loved animals of all kinds. He told me about his own animals. Oh! I can suddenly remember some of the things he said to me! (pause) He had a dog, a huskie, and three cats, all rescues.

(AMANDA stands and walks to the window again. She stares outside but sees her past.)

AMANDA

He went to the dining car and bought us food. He acted so friendly. We ate together. And talked and laughed together. It was so much fun. I really liked him.

THERAPIST

Then what happened?

AMANDA

I thought – well, I don't know what I thought. (getting angrier again) I was a dumb kid! What the hell did I know? I just really started to like him. (pause) I'm so ashamed. (fans her face) And you're going to tell me I deserved everything that happened when I tell you this. (pause) I wondered what it would be like to kiss him. (pause) I remember thinking about that. (pause) He was being so nice to me. He acted like I was pretty. And older than I was. (pause) I can remember! I couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to be kissed.

(AMANDA walks to the desk and grabs up one of the adult coloring books from the desk and fans her face and returns to the window to look outside.)

THERAPIST

You have a lot of guilt and shame about normal feelings a tween girl might feel, and this could be why you blocked out this memory. (he writes something down on his pad) At some point things started to change. He said you looked cold. He covered you in a blanket. What happened after he covered you in the blanket?

AMANDA

Do you think the orange sky is heightening my anxiety? It feels very apocalyptic. (pause) Anyway, he asked if he could look at my book. I can remember the way he held it up in front of himself as if he was reading it. And he did read it – aloud, to me, for a few minutes. Like he was *actually interested* in it. But with his other hand – his other arm (pause) he reached under the blanket.

(AMANDA walks back over to the desk and sits down, she reaches for the basin to hold in front of her.)

AMANDA

(pause) Remember how I told you that the shorts I was wearing, pink with white pinstripes, looked like a skirt? It was because the legs were wide and flared out. (pause) Well, do I have to say this out loud? The part about him having no problem reaching up under them?

THERAPIST

How did you respond?

AMANDA

Gawd, I've never told a soul about this. I can remember this now! (incredulous/pause) I was frozen! I couldn't move! I was alarmed and afraid. (pause) There were other passengers around. (calmer) I should have pushed him away, yelled – something. But I just sat there. Frozen.

THERAPIST

I want to remind you that it is natural for victims to freeze in times like that.

AMANDA

(assertive, direct) You *can't* call me a *victim*. I'm *not* a victim. There are real victims – of real violence. That isn't me. He didn't assault me. I can't call it that. I don't have the right to be *traumatized* by this. I brought this all on myself.

THERAPIST

You are *remembering*. You are doing important work – hard work. You were twelve years old, riding a train across two states, by yourself. I want to push back on the idea that you aren't a victim. This is still causing you this much pain, even after all these years. Enough so that it's landed you here – *inpatient* treatment.

AMANDA

But – he didn't *hurt* me, really. Although, thinking back, I couldn't remember how I got this bruise on the inside of my leg. It must have been from him pushing my legs – you know, apart or something. (sobbing, holding the basin tightly in her lap, like she might have to use it) I can *remember*, now! I remember trying *so hard* to keep them together!

THERAPIST

I think it's time to re-frame this. I'm sure you know that it could have been much, much worse. It has been for many other victims. But the fact that this sort of abuse happens in varying degrees of severity does not diminish your experience. You were a victim. The key is to turn it around and become a survivor. You went through an agonizing ordeal and must give yourself the grace to heal and become whole again. You are doing the hard work. This is why therapy is important. Remembering and processing how this event impacted you is imperative to your recovery. How are you feeling?

AMANDA

(upset) I feel ashamed. Like – I got what was coming to me. I told him I was 16 years old. (she fans her face) I was attracted to him. I got scared when he – touched me. I should have shouted.

(pause) I can remember this now! There was this one passenger that looked right at me as he walked down the center aisle. Only for a second, but I could have asked for help! He looked from me to him – seeing how he held up that book, pretending to read. He bought that act and just kept walking. (pause) This whole thing was my own fault. (pause) And when he finished – with me – he just left. Left me by myself. Alone for the rest of the train ride.

THERAPIST

If I introduced you to a patient, a young girl in sixth grade, from down the hall on the youth side of the unit, past the double doors at the end of the corridor, and she shared a similar story and told you it was all her own fault, what would you say to her? Would you agree with her and tell her she's right? Or would you hold her close and tell her she mustn't blame herself? That you know from personal experience what it's like.

AMANDA

I can see what you're trying to do. I'm sure I would tell her it wasn't her fault. She is a child.

THERAPIST

You were a child, too. It changed you.

AMANDA

(she fans her face) I just want to take it back – my control. He stole it from me. He stole my center. How could he do that? And how could I let him?

THERAPIST

That makes sense. Your past has defined that part of you. (pause) I know I pushed you today, but it's clear that you want to get out of here and get home. Talking about this will become easier. We will address how to process it more fully in your future sessions. But it will become easier. You'll see.

(THERAPIST puts his pad and pen down, stands up, comes around the front of the desk and sits on the edge of it, clasping his hands in front of him.)

THERAPIST

I can honestly report that you've made a breakthrough today, Amanda. I obviously can't tell you that you'll be getting out of here soon. It's not up to me. But I will say this – the unit is full and there are other people in need of a bed. I'll have a discussion with your psychiatric team.

(AMANDA sets the basin on the desk, stands, walks over to the window, fanning herself with the coloring book.)

AMANDA

You know what? (pause) I never wore those shorts again. My mom always wondered about that. She used to suggest I wear them with one of my cute pink tops. But I just *couldn't*. I never knew why, really. If I ever wear shorts, even now, I wear the kind that fit close.

(Lights go down on the stage.)