

## His Forgetfulness

by Samara E. Kern

**Jim and I** always tended to reminisce after a long hunting trip, collecting on his dusty, ramshackle porch to discuss the past. We live close, but true conversation is only occasional. Jim's a hesitant man, you see, and usually his mouth is occupied by a cigarette, straight out of the front pocket of his battered overalls. He's become absent-minded over the years, struggling to fight the consequences of time. He heats our coffee on a makeshift stovetop, adding instant powder long past its due date.

We speak of friends, wives, and simpler days, before our crops perished, crushed by the icy hands of winter a few years back. For the most part, the crops failed to return. But Jim forgets often. It's as if the words are lost in his mouth, paralyzed, stolen by some unknown enemy tormenting him.

"Her name... What was it?" Jim asks me with a half-hearted chuckle.

"Who?" I snap back to attention, released from my contemplation.

"The girl--the one with the yellow hair, like the corn... and she had freckles," he answers with a nostalgic grin.

*It could be anyone*, I think. But Jim is fragile. Years of farming tend to take their toll on the body and mind. I take a deep breath, and a second to collect my thoughts.

"Sue?" I answer, a complete shot in the dark. Jim smiles softly, lost in contemplation.

"Yes," he says, "That's her. Thank you. What a cook she was!" I put my hand on his frail shoulder, my callouses scratching against the wool of his sweater. I agree, and give him a rather frail squeeze. His dog curls at my feet, lapping at my calves and begging for any scraps that I could possibly spare. I would, but these days have proven to be strenuous, evident by the cans of soup that Jim and I attempt to survive on. As the years go by, the longing to escape back to this farmhouse, to leave the life that I have built for the last forty years, only grows stronger. But today's different; it's all different lately. I can't bear to leave Jim, not after the tens of years that we have spent together. For the first time in years, Jim and I agreed to bake cookies together--my late wife's snickerdoodle recipe--to bring a bit of cheer into our otherwise dull lives. I grab the paper in which the recipe is scribed, stained by vanilla and egg yolk, but I recognize her scrawling regardless. No one cooks in my house anymore. So, we revive the tradition.

"Let's..." Jim struggles, reaching for the word at the tip of his tongue. He furrows his brow and shoots me a befuddled look. "Well, uh...". These days, he seems to lose track of his words more easily than ever.

"Bake!" I answer, with a pat on his back. "Let's bake."

I watch as Jim starts to read the recipe, and he saunters to the spice cabinet. As he stares into the cabinet, seemingly lost, I am reminded of his absent-mindedness.

*He's lost*, I think, *Even in his own kitchen*. I can't bear to think what the man faces alone.

"Come on," I sigh, "Let me help you." And Jim, well, he flatly refuses.

"I've got it, old pal. Don't worry about me so much," he says with a wink and his charming smile. His eyes are unsure, but I step back, providing him some space.

I continue to watch as Jim blindly fumbles with the spices in the cabinet that have long since lost their taste. He picks each up, studies its label, and contemplates its name with the intensity of an alchemist.

“Cinnamon,” he says. “And... sugar!” I watch as he grabs the cumin container out of the cabinet, and I snatch it from his hand.

“Jim, that’s cumin,” I patiently explain.

“Are you sure?” he answers. “Well, that’s silly of me. Pardon me!”

I smile, but it fails to reach behind my eyes. “It’s alright, just be careful to read the label,” I respond. He nods, and begins to search for the cinnamon and sugar. While he gathers ingredients, I begin to mix the others, selecting flour, baking soda, and vanilla. I search for a bowl and select a smaller one for Jim. I hear a crack and whip around, confused. Jim stands with a sheepish grin on his face, directly behind a smashed egg. He apologizes, explaining that it was an accident, but I brush it off regardless and begin to clean up the mess. I just barely beat the dog to the egg, and realize that Jim’s clumsiness may be the reason for the canine’s incredible girth.

“Why don’t you mix the ingredients?” I ask, and he agrees.

As I toss the rag, now soaked in egg yolk, into the sink, I look back at him. He smiles and whistles an unfamiliar tune with his eyes closed while kneading the dough, the most peaceful I’ve seen him in years. After placing the cookies in the oven, and some more struggling, we sit, talk, and reminisce as usual. At least, that is, about everything that he can remember, which is not nearly enough. But I miss my friend, and any presence that he provides is considerably better than none.