

The Boy in the Halls of Memory

The boy approached the Halls of Memory, stones of apprehension weighing down his every step. The Curator stood before him, back bent, leaning into a glowing screen, the faint blue light revealing the depths of his dark eyes. "What do you seek in these hallowed Halls?" the Curator asked flatly, his eyes never moving from his screen, the words flowing from his mouth as they had millions of times over the millenia. The boy took a slow step forward. "I seek a...umm... I seek a memory... a memory of, um..." he stopped, the words well rehearsed in his mind, stumbling out of his mouth too quickly for him to keep up with their contents.

The Curator's left eyebrow arched, his eyes still glued to his work. The boy shook his head, steadied his breathing and spoke again. "I seek a... a memory of home. It's so I can remember what was important to me..." he trailed off, unable to catch the emotion he grappled with. The Curator's cold eyes finally met the boy's and he took stock of the vagrant before him. The boy was short and skinny, but lanky in spite of his statue. He shivered slightly, his eyes taking in the room before him, the marble walls and pillars, finally settling on the great aspen doors that lay behind The Curator.

The Curator straightened his back and looked down at the boy. "Are you sure that's what you're looking for?" The boy tentatively nodded, his eyes betraying his attempt at certainty. "You must be very specific young man, the doors of the Halls will only open for you once. That you've found this place means that your need is great, but if you cannot find the memory you seek then God will cast you out. You will never find these Halls again. Many have left this place in vain, never finding what they seek." The boy bowed his head to hide his frustration, his hands shaking, soft tears falling from his eyes. The Curator felt a pang of pity for the anxious boy, and his expression softened.

"Let me ask you the question again, take your time and think hard on the answer. What do you seek in these hallowed Halls?"

The Curator could see the boy's face twist in thought, emotions swirling across his visage. "I think... maybe... the memory I'm seeking is one of love?" The Curator looked at the boy closely, carefully gauging his words. It was his duty to oversee these Halls and keep them safe, not to aid every lost soul who did not know what they were looking for. The boy's eyes searched the Curator's face, still unsure, searching for an answer or hint in the man's expression. "Many come seeking memories of love boy, but love is complex, complicated, and tied up in too many other feelings. Most who seek it out here do not find it." The boy's eyes glazed over in thought and worry.

"Think deeply and feel out the shape of your heart, trace the contours of your pain, understand it. Identify the state of your soul and then tell me: What do you seek in these hallowed Halls?" The boy stood silent in the center of the tall bright room, his mind working, and again his eyes carefully focused on the great aspen doors before him, never shifting his gaze from them for more than a moment, as though he feared they may vanish if he looked away too long. He was lost in his own feelings, pain slowly gathering across his brow. His mouth shifted unconsciously, tasting the bitter emotions on his tongue.

Time continued to pass, and the Curator patiently watched the thinking child. It dawned on him that this was the longest any Seeker had been able to pull his mind from his work, and as his eyes drifted back to his screen and his never-ending tasks, he heard the boy finally speak. "The memory I seek was once one of home and love, but now... I think it's become something different? When I try to remember that day all I feel now is loss... and a longing."

The Curator felt his lip tilt in a wry half smile. "I seek a memory of loss and longing." and this time the boy's voice was steady, filled with quiet certainty. The Curator nodded and pointed the boy to the doors behind him, as he leaned over and re-immersed himself in his screen.

The great white aspen doors of the Halls of Memory swung inward and the boy walked through them, blinding light filling his vision. The boy took one glance back at the Curator, already hard at work, the boy becoming just another memory as the great doors slowly closed blocking him from view.

He was alone in a long tall hallway. It was dark, but the boy could see ahead clearly, the ceiling above covered in bright twinkling stars lighting his way. As he walked forward the marble floor grew cracked, dirt and grass poking its way through the ground, eventually smothering the smooth hard stone with a soft carpet of green. The hall smelled of the morning dew, filling his nose and washing him in nostalgia. On his left and right, stretching down through the endless hall were doors of different shapes, sizes and colors. Each door has a viewing window affixed in the center at the door, conveniently placed at the boy's eye level. Colorful lights shone from some of the windows, others were dark and quiet, and behind some he could hear the faint hum of music, sound, and laughter.

With watery eyes he passed these all by, desperately wanting to open each one, but knowing that they were not the Memory he sought out. He peeked through the windows and occasionally lingered at a door here and there, and still could not find what he wished to remember. The boy moved from door to door, further and further down the hall. The further he went, the darker the hall became, his path ahead becoming obscured and smothered in mist. The boy looked up and saw the stars on the ceiling beginning to fade and blink away. The icy claws of fear gripped his thin body, his mind racing with panicked thoughts.

Had he chosen the wrong hall? Had he opened the wrong emotion within himself? Was he wasting his one and only chance? Despair infected his mind as he began rushing from door to door, window to window, grief clutching at his small worn heart.

The hall grew dark and cold, the ceiling now black and empty of light. The boy could only see a couple more doors in front of him, everything beyond veiled in darkness. The boy ran to the door on his right and saw the inside of a car and a dark rainy road through the viewing window. His heart froze and fear caught the breath in his throat. He tore himself from the door and stumbled almost collapsing in his grief. He knew that memory well, it had stalked him in his dreams for years, he did not need to see it again.

The boy slowly approached the door on his left, cold dread blossoming in his gut spreading its tendrils to his numb hands. With growing trepidation he stepped in front of the door and looked through the window, terrified of what he may not find. Through the window he saw a small kitchen, morning light streaming in from a skylight above. His heart leapt and all the cold drained from his body, replaced by heat and relief. He knew this place and moment. He had found what he was seeking.

The boy opened the door slowly, the sound of birdsong wafting through the threshold into the dark hall behind him. The rousing smell of a hot breakfast drifted by and he breathed it deep through his nostrils, relishing in the long forgotten scent. He saw a skillet sizzling on a stove top, green branches swaying in the window beyond and the boy was entranced, his mind jammed in disbelief. He never imagined he could and would be back here in this room. The boy had carried so much doubt and fear, like vines gripping his body, slowing his every step, and as he walked through the doorway each one sloughed away, falling from his tired shoulders and drifting away on the breeze. For the first time since he could remember, the boy felt light.

He approached the stove slowly, eager to see the source of the wonderful smells, when he heard a calm concerned voice break on his ears, soft, sweet, and radiant. The boy turned and looked at the woman who had entered behind him. Her eyes were a reflection of his own, the contours of her nose matched his own, and as her gaze and smile were in lockstep with his own expressions.

“Good morning my sunshine, please watch the stove sweetie, it’s really hot.” The woman glided over to the boy with ethereal grace. With a practiced ease, one arm hugged him while turning him from the hot stovetop, the other sliding the skillet to a back burner, turning the knobs on the stove to redirect the flames. The boy was awed, every motion she made was smooth and steady. She made everything look easy, made anything seem possible.

“Remember baby, whenever I’ve got the stove on, don’t get too close. You wouldn’t want to get burned would you?” She spoke the words gently, with a patient smile. The boy dreamily smiled back and nodded and she leaned down and kissed him lightly on the forehead, a wave of warmth passing through his body on contact, his cuts and bruises a distant painless memory.

Steady footsteps sounded from the other room and the boy turned his head to see a man walk into the small kitchen. The man smiled and his eyes gleamed with mirth. The boy and the man had similar faces, they shared the same chin, and although the man’s hair was longer and streaked light gray lines, it also matched his own. Wavy locks, with the deep-layered color of dark mahogany. The man reached down and tousled the hair that looked so much like his own, his strong fingers melting away all the uncertainty that had infested the boy’s mind.

“Howdy kiddo, sleep well?” The boy nodded, unable to speak, overwhelmed with emotion. The woman and man hugged each other and continued their morning routine just as they always had done. The boy’s emotions finally breached the surface of his shackled heart, racing to catch up with his scattered thoughts, and the boy laughed as he smiled and wept in equal measure.

The three spent the rest of the day together, the boy happily lost in the waking dream. They walked to a nearby park, taking in the beauty of nature. The boy looked around and saw so much color returned to a world that had become dark and gray. They went home and the boy giggled to himself as he helped the woman do chores around the house, an activity he once despised, now joyously grateful for. They ate dinner, sat in the yard, and talked about blissful nothings, small, bright conversations about life, living, and all the small, brilliant wonders of the world.

As the sky outside grew dark and the moon climbed into the sky, they sat out on the back porch gazing up at the stars. Faint, sweet music drifted from a small speaker on the deck. The boy lay in his mother's lap as she stroked his hair, her eyes closed, her gentle smile stretched placidly on her face. His father sat near reading. He glanced up from his book to meet the boy's eyes and grinned, the warmth in his gaze heating the boy's tired soul. A long forgotten feeling came over the boy, a moment of true serenity covering him in bliss. He took a soft moment to catalog the feeling, the soft tugging of his heart, catching it in amber, sense memories to be preserved and remembered forever.

The boy knew he would never lose this day again, and lost himself in the quiet love, closing his eyes and warmly drifting off to sleep.

The boy awoke to the cries of gulls and the rumble of boats, the nearby dock humming with morning activity. He lay on the cold ground under the makeshift shelter he called a home, his dirty clothes desperately trying to hold onto the fading heat in his body. He rose slowly and quietly, tears streaming silently down his face, forced again to confront his loneliness and desperation.

Something had changed in him though, something had shifted in his being. The boy clutched his heart, beating strong and sure beneath his ragged skin. The memory of those he had lost, once a dark pit of grief, had changed into a fountain of light, his sadness flowing upward and out of him. The boy walked out into the cold light of day, feeling like the wind, free and determined.

The longing he felt had become hope, and with his memories burning bright, he pushed forward, his future stretching before him as endless and vast as the bright blue sky.