

My Laminated Mind

By Daisy Allen

3rd Place in the 12-17 Age Category

I feel like my mind is slipping away from me, like someone is taking pieces from my puzzle I'm trying so hard to keep together. Some days it's complete, everything clicks together, and my mind is full. But other times, yet another beloved fragment disappears. No matter how tightly I hold onto it, they always slide right through my fingers. Little by little, I can feel myself fading. The picture of who I am is still there somewhere, but now some parts are permanently blurred. I lie there pretending I am still in control, fooling myself that the pieces missing from my puzzle don't matter. My life is too quiet, too unfamiliar, too different from what I remember.

So, I did the only logical thing I could: I made a laminated card. I spent hours at my table with my black marker clutched in one hand, a ruler in the other. It was my safe space. Every item and every name I was scared I would forget was on that list. Kept in my pocket so it was always with me; if a name drifted out of my head, I checked. My fingers moved without me even thinking. Finger to plastic, plastic to fact. The card was only small, but it made me feel like my mind was fully functional again. Everything had a label, a name. For a few nights, I could even sleep soundly without the fear of waking up less knowledgeable. I loved that card dearly; it was the tape holding my puzzle together.

Then it was gone. My pocket felt bare. I tore through the house, checking each pocket more times than I could count. Panting heavily, I searched through my sofa cushions at lightning pace, sending crumbs and coins flying. The house tilted. Every door and wall looked the same. How was I supposed to tell them apart now? The silence screamed louder than my ears could handle. My hands shook so hard I dropped the cushion. No card. No words. No way back. I was losing my puzzle pieces.

"I don't know you."

The words I never wished to let out of my mouth cracked out of me, bouncing off the walls, leaving me empty inside. My heart jumped a beat as I waited for this woman's response, but she didn't step back. No. All she did was smile, the same grin I've seen in photos I couldn't quite place. Stepping closer, she took my hand in hers, her thumb pressed against my palm, steady and warm. For a second, I'm sure the panic stopped. My breathing slowed, my heart back to its normal pace. It didn't fix me. It didn't bring the card back. It just reminded me that I'm not alone in this mess. I gripped her hand tighter, as if she was my new hope, keeping my puzzle from falling apart.

The worst part about living with memory loss isn't that I can't recall basic information. It's that every night I go to bed wondering whether I'll wake up with more puzzle pieces lost beyond retrieval, if I'll ever wake up with the same memories again, or what people will say to me when I forget their name. I'm scared for my future and where my missing puzzle pieces are.