

# “The Art of Forgetting”

A short story by [Katherine Wikoff](#), with ChatGPT assists

The family knew their parts by heart—who would call, who’d stop by, who’d nod knowingly on Zoom. But Edgar had long since checked out of their play. He’d been faking dementia for three years.

At first, it was a strategy. Forget birthdays. Repeat questions. Stare blankly at a face just long enough to make people uncomfortable. Old instincts, really—hit your mark, pause for effect. His records spun between acts, a private score for his one-man show. And it worked. No more family Zooms. No more lame jokes about his jazz collection’s worth. No lectures about walking groups or cutting sodium. And especially no more casseroles, gift-wrapped in guilt.

But the family had escalated. Sold his house, shipped him off to Shady Pines, demoted his vinyl to an uncredited role at Goodwill. John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Donald Byrd—gone.

*Cristo Redentor*. The haunting refrain in his head, the soundtrack to his unraveling. He hadn’t thought it through. He should have read the whole script before signing on, but he’d skipped the fine print. Now rehearsal was over, the curtain had risen, and the stage was set for calamity.

Sometimes he forgot he was pretending. More often, he remembered — but forgot why. Was that the joke, or the punchline?

He sat in a beige recliner under imitation sunlight while his daughter recited, for the hundredth time, how “Mom died peacefully, surrounded by love.”

*Love*. Code for endless visits and weeping on schedule to satisfy other people’s grief. The family trod the boards like seasoned pros: grieving daughter, dutiful son, comforting niece. Edgar had opted out—he was just a background extra, a piece of furniture fading into the room.

Except he couldn’t look away this time. His daughter’s face was luminous in the pale LED light, eyes damp with conviction. Her words flowed like lines memorized but stripped of meaning. “She wasn’t in pain,” she insisted. “We were with her. She knew she was loved. Remember?”

No. He remembered screaming. Pills. Television blaring while the dog barked in the hallway. A withered hand clutching his wrist—tight, sweaty, desperate.

Or . . . had he invented that version later to punish himself? A twist in the third act. A bleaker ending. Something to make him feel . . . *something*.

Had she smiled? Said goodbye? *Had he?*

He'd told the story so many ways, heard it echoed back so many times, he no longer knew which version was true.

That was the trouble with pretending to forget: eventually, you did. Whole seasons of his life drained away, swirling down like bathwater gone cold. Jazz—*did* he love it? Was his brother truly a pilot? Had Paris ever happened? Some days, the memories seemed like nothing more than flickering images from old silent movies.

As the lies multiplied, so did the truths. Edgar couldn't tell which was worse. He was a method actor lost in the role, an unreliable narrator in his own one-man play, and he didn't know who was in charge anymore. He suspected the director had left the building.

He told the nurse he missed real sunlight. She brought him a plastic plant—an apology from the prop closet, a lie dressed in foliage.

He told the doctor he couldn't sleep. They adjusted his dose. Lights out on another moment he hadn't finished.

The only thing he didn't tell anyone was the truth, because by now it sounded more like bad improv than anything real.

At night, he whispered to the radiator, "Are you still there?"

No answer. Just the hiss of heating pipes, the steady flow of time, and the quiet rot of memories best left unspoken.

Verity—the woman who changed his sheets on Thursdays—drew closer, smoothing the pillow like she meant it. The gesture was simple, but her touch caught him off guard, like a sudden shaft of sunlight in the dark.

"You don't fool me, Mr. Edgar." She leaned in, voice dropping to a conspirator's whisper. "But I won't tell. Not yet."

Her smile was warm, with a kindness that made him want to believe. She patted his hand, familiar and sure, like she was his granddaughter. Or an actress pretending to be one.

He froze, caught between relief and suspicion. After all these years of smoke and mirrors, could this be real? Or just another act. It was so hard to tell. Was blurring truth and script the mark of a strong actor—or had he simply lost the plot entirely?

The weight of not knowing hung poised like a final curtain. But a spark of hope flared within him. He faced the audience, lights blazing, lines forgotten. And from the wings, a soft cue: breath held, lifeline offered.

This production wasn't finished. *Anything* might happen.