

# FALSE MEMORY



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*Baltimore*

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FIRST EDITION

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This book is dedicated to  
Tim Hely Hutchinson.  
Your faith in my work,  
a long time ago  
—and now for many years—  
gave me heart  
when I most needed it.  
And to  
Jane Morpeth.  
Ours is the longest  
editorial relationship  
of my career,  
which is a testament to  
your exceptional patience,  
kindness, and tolerance for fools!

*Autophobia* is a real personality disorder. The term is used to describe three different conditions: (1) fear of being alone; (2) fear of being egotistical; (3) fear of oneself. The third is the rarest of these conditions.

*This phantasm  
of falling petals vanishes into  
moon and flowers...*

—Okyo

*Whiskers of the cat,  
webbed toes on my swimming dog:  
God is in details.*

—The Book of Counted Sorrows

*In the real world  
as in dreams,  
nothing is quite  
what it seems.*

—The Book of Counted Sorrows

*Life is an unrelenting comedy.  
Therein lies the tragedy of it.*

—Martin Stillwater



# 1

On that Tuesday in January, when her life changed forever, Martine Rhodes woke with a headache, developed a sour stomach after washing down two aspirin with grapefruit juice, guaranteed herself an epic bad-hair day by mistakenly using Dustin's shampoo instead of her own, broke a fingernail, burnt her toast, discovered ants swarming through the cabinet under the kitchen sink, eradicated the pests by firing a spray can of insecticide as ferociously as Sigourney Weaver wielded a flamethrower in one of those old extraterrestrial-bug movies, cleaned up the resultant carnage with paper towels, hummed Bach's *Requiem* as she solemnly consigned the tiny bodies to the trash can, and took a telephone call from her mother, Sabrina, who still prayed for the collapse of Martie's marriage three years after the wedding. Throughout, she remained upbeat—even enthusiastic—about the day ahead, because from her late father, Robert "Smilin' Bob" Woodhouse, she had inherited an optimistic nature, formidable coping skills, and a deep love of life in addition to blue eyes, ink-black hair, and ugly toes.

*Thanks, Daddy.*

After convincing her ever hopeful mother that the Rhodes marriage remained happy, Martie slipped into a leather jacket and took her golden retriever, Valet, on his morning walk. Step by step, her headache faded.

Along the whetstone of clear eastern sky, the sun sharpened scalpels of light. Out of the west, however, a cool onshore breeze pushed malignant masses of dark clouds.

The dog regarded the heavens with concern, sniffed the air warily, and pricked his pendant ears at the hiss-clatter of palm fronds stirred by the wind. Clearly, Valet knew a storm was coming.

He was a gentle, playful dog. Loud noises frightened him, however, as though he had been a soldier in a former life and was haunted by memories of battlefields blasted by cannon fire.

Fortunately for him, rotten weather in southern California was seldom accompanied by thunder. Usually, rain fell unannounced, hissing on the streets, whispering through the foliage, and these were sounds that even Valet found soothing.

Most mornings, Martie walked the dog for an hour, along the narrow tree-lined streets of Corona Del Mar, but she had a special obligation every Tuesday and Thursday that limited their excursion to fifteen minutes on those days. Valet seemed to have a calendar in his furry head, because on their Tuesday and Thursday expeditions, he never dawdled, finishing his toilet close to home.

This morning, only one block from their house, on the grassy sward between the sidewalk and the curb, the pooch looked around shyly, discreetly lifted his right leg, and as usual made water as though embarrassed by the lack of privacy.

Less than a block farther, he was preparing to conclude the second half of his morning business when a passing garbage truck backfired, startling him. He huddled behind a queen palm, peering cautiously around one side of the tree bole and then around the other, convinced that the terrifying vehicle would reappear.

“No problem,” Martie assured him. “The big bad truck is gone. Everything’s fine. This is now a safe-to-poop zone.”

Valet was unconvinced. He remained wary.

Martie was blessed with Smilin’ Bob’s patience, too, especially when dealing with Valet, whom she loved almost as much as she might have

loved a child if she'd had one. He was sweet-tempered and beautiful: light gold, with gold-and-white feathering on his legs, soft snow-white flags on his butt, and a lush tail.

Of course, when the dog was in a doing-business squat, like now, Martie never looked at him, because he was as self-conscious as a nun in a topless bar. While waiting, she softly sang Jim Croce's "Time in a Bottle," which always relaxed him.

As she began the second verse, a sudden chill climbed the ladder of her spine, causing her to fall silent. She was not a woman given to premonitions, but as the icy quiver ascended to the back of her neck, she was overcome by a sense of impending danger.

Turning, she half expected to see an approaching assailant or a hurtling car. Instead, she was alone on this quiet residential street.

Nothing rushed toward her with lethal purpose. The only moving things were those harried by the wind. Trees and shrubs shivered. A few crisp brown leaves skittered along the pavement. Garlands of tinsel and Christmas lights, from the recent holiday, rustled and rattled under the eaves of a nearby house.

Still uneasy, but feeling foolish, Martie let out the breath that she'd been holding. When the exhalation whistled between her teeth, she realized that her jaws were clenched.

She was probably still spooked from the dream that awakened her after midnight, the same one she'd had on a few other recent nights. The man made of dead, rotting leaves, a nightmare figure. Whirling, raging.

Then her gaze dropped to her elongated shadow, which stretched across the close-cropped grass, draped the curb, and folded onto the cracked concrete pavement. Inexplicably, her uneasiness swelled into alarm.

She took one step backward, then a second, and of course her shadow moved with her. Only as she retreated a third step did she realize that this very silhouette was what frightened her.

Ridiculous. More absurd than her dream. Yet something in her shadow was not right: a jagged distortion, a menacing quality.

Her heart knocked as hard as a fist on a door.

In the severe angle of the morning sun, the houses and trees cast distorted images, too, but she saw nothing fearsome in their stretched and buckled shadows—only in her own.

She recognized the absurdity of her fear, but this awareness did not diminish her anxiety. Terror courted her, and she stood hand in hand with panic.

The shadow seemed to throb with the thick slow beat of its own heart. Staring at it, she was overcome with dread.

Martie closed her eyes and tried to get control of herself.

For a moment, she felt so light that the wind seemed strong enough to sweep her up and carry her inland, with the relentlessly advancing clouds, toward the steadily shrinking band of cold blue sky. As she drew a series of deep breaths, however, weight gradually returned to her.

When she dared to look again at her shadow, she no longer sensed anything unusual about it. She let out a sigh of relief.

Her heart continued to pound, powered not by irrational terror anymore, but by an understandable concern as to the cause of this peculiar episode. She'd never previously experienced such a thing.

Head cocked quizzically, Valet was staring at her.

She had dropped his leash.

Her hands were damp with sweat. She blotted her palms on her blue jeans.

When she realized that the dog had finished his toilet, Martie slipped her right hand into a plastic pet-cleanup bag, using it as a glove. Being a good neighbor, she neatly collected Valet's gift, turned the bright blue bag inside out, twisted it shut, and tied a double knot in the neck.

The retriever watched her sheepishly.

"If you ever doubt my love, baby boy," Martie said, "remember I do this every day."

Valet looked grateful. Or perhaps only relieved.

Performance of this familiar, humble task restored her mental balance. The little blue bag and its warm contents anchored her to reality. The weird incident remained troubling, intriguing, but it no longer frightened her.