

**Missing Katie**  
**by Tom Edelson**  
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**1**

Saturday morning. I'm still at least half asleep. Marian is making waking-up noises.

She's up. She's left the room. It sounds like she's in a hurry, all of a sudden.

And then, she ... cries out.

Sorry, I don't know what else to call it. Not loud enough to be a scream, but it sure sounds like she's had a shock.

Anyway, the sound wakes me up in a hurry. In a moment, I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, ready to follow her and find out what's wrong.

She's back in the doorway of our bedroom before I have a chance to stand up. If the sound she made a moment ago hadn't already gotten my attention, the look that I see on her face certainly would have.

"Bob?" She sounds terrified.

"What is it, Mare?"

"It's Katie. She's ... gone!"

**2**

I said "Huh? Who's 'Katie'?"

If she looked scared before, now she looked aghast.

"Are you playing some sort of practical joke on me? Please stop it, it's not funny. You know perfectly well who Katie is."

"No, I don't. Honestly." I paused and thought. "Okay, the name does ring a bell ...."

"Yes?"

"I remember that we used to say, if we ever had a daughter, that's what we'd name her."

"*If we ever had a daughter?*" Marian looked, and sounded, like she'd been pushed one step closer to the breaking point.

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“Yes, that’s right,” I said. “Don’t you remember? We used to talk about that a lot. If it was a boy, we’d call him ‘George’. If it was a girl, her name would be ‘Katie’.”

“Yes, I remember. Of course I remember having those conversations. But that was before.”

“I’m not quite sure,” I answered, slowing my speech down, “what you mean by ‘before’.”

And I really wasn’t sure. But I was beginning to get an idea.

Her answer confirmed it. “Before we did have a daughter, and we did name her Katie.”

“But ... we don’t.”

“We don’t what?”

“We don’t have a daughter.”

“Bob. Please. Like I said before, if this is your idea of a joke, please stop it.”

“It’s not. I swear. I could say the same thing to you: ‘Are you pretending to believe that we have a daughter?’ Except ... you don’t sound like you’re pretending. You sound like you really do believe that we have a daughter. A daughter named Katie.”

She stared at me. “And you sound like you really do believe that we don’t.”

“That’s right. We tried to have a child. But you had ... there was ... a miscarriage. And the doctor said it would be safer if we didn’t try again.”

“Yes,” she said, “there was a miscarriage. And yes, the doctor advised us not to conceive again. And we talked about it, and we both wanted a child so much, that we decided to take the chance.”

“That’s not the way I remember it, Marian. We were tempted to, but ... but look. Wait. This is crazy. We’re acting as if this is something like trying to remember whether we went to Trier on our third anniversary, or our fourth. You can forget a detail like that, but you can’t forget that you do, or don’t, have a child.”

She echoed: “‘This is crazy.’ We can certainly agree on that much. It doesn’t make sense to think that you can forget something like that. Except that it seems that you have.

“Or I have,” she went on. “No, wait, I can’t accept that. How could I have ‘forgotten’ that Katie doesn’t exist, when I held her in my arms just last night?”

I had an answer for that. “When somebody believes something that isn’t true, we don’t say that they’ve forgotten that it isn’t true. We say that they have, well, imagined it.”

“So you’re saying that Katie is a figment of my imagination? Never existed, except in my head? That I’m having a delusion?”

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“That’s kind of what it sounds like from over here, yes. But I want to be fair, Marian. My memory — which doesn’t include Katie — seems real to me, and your memory seems real to you. I admit there’s no justification for my assuming that my memory is right and yours is wrong.”

“That’s one of the things I love about you, Bob. You’ve always been fair-minded, not a person who thinks he’s entitled to tell everyone else what is real and what isn’t. Thank you. But we’re still in a fix here, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” I answered. “We’re both taking the high ground, not doing the easy thing, which would be to loudly declare that the other one is wrong. Gold stars to us. But still, one of us has to be. Wrong, I mean. Right?”

“Right. We couldn’t both have a child, and not have one.” She stared into space for a while. “And it’s not just your memory against mine. Oh, God, it must be me that’s wrong! I must be going crazy. Oh, Bob, just hold me.”

So I held her.

### 3

“Are you going to send me away, to live in the crazy house, with the other crazy people?” Her voice was like a little girl’s.

“No! I would never do that. We belong together. I wouldn’t let a little thing like an imaginary daughter get in the way.”

I was taking a big risk, there, trying to inject a little lightness into the situation. I guess it worked, because she was smiling, a little, when she answered me.

“Oh, so now we’re just taking it for granted that she’s imaginary? That was quick. What happened to Mister Fair-Minded?”

Despite the smile, I thought that deserved a serious answer. “One, I was sort of kidding. Two, I only said that because *you* said, first, that it must be you that’s wrong. Why did you say that, by the way?”

“Because I went to her bedroom to check on her, and ... it wasn’t ‘just’ that she wasn’t there. It wasn’t her bedroom any more! The wallpaper, the furniture, and everything: all different from what it was last night. Or what I think I remember from last night ... and from the last seven years.”

I decided to risk a little more levity. “Actually, I hired a crack team of ninja decorators to transform the room overnight. Very quietly, while you slept.”

I guess that went a little too far, because for a moment she took me seriously. “You did?” A pause. “No, you didn’t. I can tell that you’re kidding. And why would you do such a thing? And besides, it couldn’t be done, not overnight, let alone silently.”

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“So I guess I have to resign myself to being crazy.” She put her head in her hands. Her shoulders started to shake. “You’re being awfully nice about this. But ... I don’t *want* to be crazy!”

And finally, she broke down and sobbed.

### 4

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Dr. Badger said. “What brings you two back to see me?”

We looked at each other.

I began. “Well, you remember that when we were last in here, we were trying to decide whether to try again, after the miscarriage, to have a child.”

“I certainly do remember. And I was very impressed with how you worked together, to come to a decision jointly. I remember thinking that you guys didn’t really need ‘marital therapy,’ in the ordinary sense. You just needed someone to bounce things off of, while you were making a very difficult decision.”

I held up my hand. “Let me stop you before you say any more. It would be better, I think, if you didn’t say anything about what we did decide. You see, we’re having an issue about that.”

“You mean that one of you wants to revisit the decision, to reconsider? Or both of you do?”

We looked at each other again. This time, Marian spoke up. “Ah, not exactly. We’re having a ... difference of opinion ... about something more fundamental than that.”

“More fundamental in what way?”

I gave it a try. “We have different memories about what we did decide.”

“You mean something like, one of you remembers it as settled for all time, and the other thinks it was supposed to be open to change?”

“No!” we both answered, in unison. And we looked at each other, again. And then we both looked at Don. The poor man looked bewildered, and who could blame him? But he also looked like he was willing to give us time to sort out it out.

Marian spoke to me. “You go ahead, Bob.” So I did.

“Don, you’re assuming that our memories disagree about something subtle; about a matter of interpretation, you might say. And of course naturally you would assume that. But the situation is a whole lot stranger than that. I’d say we’re afraid—well, I am, at least—that when we lay it out for you, you’ll think we’re both crazy.”

He looked at Marian with a questioning expression. She said, “Maybe. Or maybe you’ll only think that I’m crazy.”

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“‘Crazy’ isn’t a word that I use a lot. Most therapists don’t.” He gave us a moment to react to that, but neither of us did. “Anyway, why don’t you try me? You’ve certainly got me curious.”

Marian addressed me again. “How can we do this without sounding like we’re asking him to judge between us?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess that’s what’s got me tongue-tied, too. Like we were conflicting witnesses at a trial, and one of us has to be lying. But I don’t see any way around it. You’ve got to tell him what you remember, and I’ve got to tell him what I remember. Do you want to go first?”

“I’d just as soon you did, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay. I guess.” I turned back to Badger.

“All right, here goes with my version of the story. Like you said, it was a difficult decision. In fact, I’d say that’s an understatement.

“We’d both been assuming, since we got married, that we’d have a couple of children. The miscarriage really knocked us for a loop. The doctor said it would be safer for Marian if she didn’t get pregnant again. But that’s easy for him to say.”

“Right,” Marian chimed in. “Ever since I was a little girl myself, I assumed that the most important thing I’d ever do would be to be a mother. I don’t know, maybe ‘assumed’ isn’t quite the right word. I mean I was aware that there were other choices—that being a mother wasn’t the one and only proper role for a woman. But still, it was what I wanted. It was like a decision, really, more than an assumption, and it’s something I decided long before I met Bob.”

I took up the story, almost seamlessly. “And as for me, well, I fitted the male stereotype: I assumed that my biggest role was going to be to work at some sort of job. So my project, as a little boy, was to explore the different kinds of jobs, and see if I could decide which was the right one for me.

“But still, there was an underlying assumption that I would have a wife, and we would have children, and that providing for them was the main point of working hard at my job. It was what would give meaning to the whole thing. And if I were a good provider, then my wife wouldn’t have to worry about making money, and she could make the children her first priority. And that would be best for them: that way they’d grow up happy and well-adjusted. And then, I guess, producing a couple of smart, happy, well-adjusted children would be the most important contribution that the two of us could make to the world, to the future.”

Badger looked back and forth between the two of us. “I thought,” he said, “that you two were going to be telling me two conflicting stories. But I don’t hear any conflict, not yet anyway. It sounds like one story, and the two of you are telling it together.”

Marian said, “You know, you’re right. It does sound that way. So far, at least.”

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My turn: “‘So far.’ That’s the key. We just haven’t gotten to the conflicting part, yet. I sort of went off on a tangent—I guess we both did—about how thoroughly our assumptions were knocked over when we heard that we shouldn’t have children. We were both really sad about it, and both felt lost: so what are our lives supposed to be about, then?”

Addressing my wife: “At least I think we both felt lost: that I still haven’t, quite, reached the point where our memories conflict. Right?” She just nodded.

I turned my face back toward Badger. “And I guess here’s where conflict begins to creep in. Or almost: maybe we’re still not quite there. Like I said, we were both sad, both felt kind of adrift. But I was really concerned about what the doctor had said, too: that another pregnancy would present a real danger to Marian’s health. So I started, I guess, *trying* to get used to the idea that we could have a meaningful life together without children. The children were a lovely dream, but Marian was real, she was already part of my life. So I felt like I owed it to her not to push her into having children, not for my sake anyway, and not if it could kill her.”

“So you felt like you were being noble, did you?” That was Marian. “Well, I didn’t see it that way. It’s telling that you speak of the ‘idea’ of having children as a nice ‘dream.’ Something that would ‘give meaning’ to your working hard at your job; but you would still *have* a job to work hard at.

“So okay, I’ll take your word for it: the doctor said we ‘shouldn’t’ have children, and so you felt ‘adrift.’ But did it ever occur to you that your kind of ‘feeling adrift’ was kind of ... theoretical, compared to how I would feel? Yes, poor baby, you were faced with having to find a new source of ‘meaning’ for your work, for the way you spent your days. But what about me? If I just meekly accepted the doctor’s recommendation, then all of a sudden I’d have no idea what I was supposed to do with my life. Or with the next eighteen years or so, anyway. I’d have to come up with a whole new life, not just a new ‘meaning’ to assign to the same life that I was always going to live.”

I felt stung. “So what was I supposed to do? I mean, I take your point: hearing that you—or we—shouldn’t have children, that would disrupt your sense of what your life was about, even more strongly than it would disrupt mine. But was that my fault?”

Badger broke in: “Is she saying that it was your fault? Or, rather, Marian, let me ask you that: did you mean to say that it was his fault?”

“Of course not. He was just ... luckier. But it seems like men always are. Is it any wonder that I would feel some resentment about that?”

Badger started to say one thing, then checked himself and said another. “Before I give you a direct answer to that, I want to pause and acknowledge that we seem to have found some conflict. And then, well, if I look at my own reaction to that, it was like ‘Okay! Conflict! I know what to do about that. My job is to see if I can keep the conflict from spiraling out of control.’

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“In other words, part of me was almost glad when we ‘finally’ encountered some conflict, because then I knew what to do. Now I could start earning my keep.

“I was, you could say, ‘acting just like a man.’ I was defining myself by my job function. But then ... well ...”

He never finished that sentence. He just spread his hands wide, palms upward, tilted his head to one side, and gave a massive shrug.

It was an unorthodox way of defusing the tension, but hey, it worked like a champ. We both laughed.

Then I said, “So, uh, where were we?”

“I think the two of you were saying something similar: that it was difficult for both of you to hear the recommendation that Marian not get pregnant again. But that actually accepting the recommendation presented more of a challenge for Marian than for Bob. And so there was some tension around that: Marian, did you feel like Bob was pushing you to make a decision that you weren’t ready to make?”

“Yes,” she said. “I did feel that way, back then, when we having the sessions eight years ago. At the beginning, at least. We were at loggerheads, for a while.

“But we kept on talking, with your help, and then ... we worked it out. We came to a decision that felt right to both of us. At the time, anyway.”

“I see,” Dr. Badger said. “Or at least, I think I do. You came to a decision, eight years ago, that felt right to both of you. But now,” addressing Marian, “you’re not so sure that you’re still okay with it. And how do you feel about that, Bob?”

“Well, see, I don’t think that you have got it right. Though I don’t blame you. It’s not that we agreed, then, and now she’s having second thoughts. I mean, each of us remembers that we came to an agreement. But we have completely different memories of what the agreement was.”

“Okay,” he said, “let me try again. Tell me whether I’ve got it this time.” To Marian: “You remember that the two of you decided not to have children, for the time being.” And then, to me: “You thought that the decision was supposed to be permanent, not subject to reconsideration.” He looked inquiringly at both of us.

And once again, my wife and I said, in chorus, “No!”

Marian went on: “Get with it, man. You said that before, and we both told you then that you were wrong, and you still are.”

Don said with a smile, “Well, I feel like I’m being an effective therapist, because I’ve got the two of you agreeing about something: you agree that I’m wrong.”

Again, she and I spoke in unison: “Yes, but ...” And then we both went on speaking, but we weren’t in unison any more.

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Don made the “time out” signal, and said, “I was kidding, sort of. I mean yes, you agree that I’m wrong, but there’s something else on which you don’t agree. Something more important, probably. My problem is that I still haven’t been smart enough to figure out what that something is.”

I answered first. “Well, like I was saying, I can hardly blame you. What’s happened is so strange—so impossible, damn it—that you’re not going to get it until we lay it out for you in detail.”

“Okay, try me. Again. Please.”

So we did try again. I went first, and got a little farther into it this time. “I acknowledged that having a child felt really important to Marian. But I reminded her that there were other things she cared about, too. Like developing herself as an artist. We’d talked about that even before we got pregnant the first time. That being a stay-at-home mom would conflict with being very active as an artist. And she was sad about that—this is still before the first pregnancy—but she decided that it was worth it. And I said, way back then, that it was her decision.

“So we went ahead and conceived a child. But it miscarried, and the obstetrician did some tests to find out why. And when the test results came back, he told us that another pregnancy would be dangerous.

“And that’s when we starting coming to see you. And we both started out in the same place: that it was a tough decision.

“Then I brought up the artist business again. I said, ‘I know you decided that motherhood was more important to you. And I went along with that. But now we have new information.’ So I was suggesting that, in the light of what we’d been told about the dangers, that we—mostly you, Marian—weigh the options again; that maybe you could get used to the idea of being an artist, and accepting that it was better not to have a child.” I paused, because I didn’t want to hog all the talking time.

Marian took the opportunity. “Actually, I remember that too: that you made that suggestion. The difference is in what happened next. Why don’t you finish your version first?”

“Works for me. Well, the way I remember it, you didn’t think much of the suggestion, at first. But you agreed to give it more time. You agreed that we could play around with the idea, make it more concrete, by talking more about the kind of art you would like to do, and the kinds of success you’d like to achieve, and so on.

“So we did talk about that stuff, over several sessions, and, eventually, my ploy worked. As we visualized the possibilities, they got to seem more real, and so they got to seem more attractive. And eventually, you went for it. You said something like, ‘I really did want to be a mother, but I guess it just wasn’t meant to be.’

“Okay,” I concluded, “that’s the gist of it—so far as making the decision is concerned. Now it’s your turn.”

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So Marian took up the ball. “My recollection agrees with yours, up to a point. You did bring up the suggestion that maybe I should reconsider becoming an artist, and forego having children partly in order to make more time for art. And I understood that your real motive was to help me find a way to feel okay about avoiding the risks that childbearing held for me. So I felt like it came from caring, not from wanting to dictate how I should live my life.

“And, the way I remember it, we did come back here and talk about it some more. But I remember only one more session like that, not several. After that one session, something happened that firmed up my resolve: that made me feel sure that I wanted to try again to have a child, despite the risks.

“We did have several more sessions with Dr. Badger, but I didn’t waver any more. And so after a while, it was you who came around. Eventually, you said something like, ‘All right, I can see how important this is to you, and I believe that you are prepared to go into it with your eyes open. So ... even though it scares the hell out of me ... I agree. Let’s do it!’ And I’ve told you how much that meant to me.”

“Yes,” I said, “you told me that ... quite recently. And I still don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about it. What do you say when someone gives you heartfelt thanks for doing something, but you don’t remember ever doing it—remember doing pretty much the opposite, in fact?”

Don said, “I have a question. Marian, you said that the decision seemed open, not yet firm in your mind, for one more session’s worth of discussion. And then something happened that firmed up your resolve. What was that something? It could be important.”

Marian answered him. “Bob’s sister, Julia, came for a visit, stayed for a weekend, and brought her first child, Jake, who was just a baby then. I don’t know if you remember, Dr. Badger, that Julia, at that time, had never been married. She decided to keep the child and raise it herself.”

“That does sound familiar, yes.”

“So anyway, during that visit, I guess being around that baby just cranked up my mothering instincts. He was so sweet. And I said to myself, if Julia can raise a child without a husband, I can raise a child with one.”

I broke in. “But Julia didn’t have the same medical risk factors that you did.”

“I know that! I know it now, and I knew it then, too. But when I said, ‘If she can do it, I can,’ I wasn’t trying to make any kind of logical argument in favor of doing it. Those were just the words that came to me to express how I had come to feel about it.”

Don said to me, “And you don’t remember things that way at all?”

“Depends what you mean by ‘at all,’ I guess. I remember that Julia came to visit, with her baby. But I have a very different recollection of how the visit went.

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“She—Julia, I mean—hardly got any sleep, that whole weekend. We didn’t get very much, either. I don’t suppose the kid could literally have cried all night, every night, but it sure felt like it.

“And right after they left, you and I looked at each other. We didn’t say anything for a minute. And then, I distinctly remember that you spoke first, Marian. You said something like, ‘I was feeling resigned to not having any children of our own, but now? Instead of resigned, I think I feel relieved.’”

“That’s your story,” said Marian. “Mine is that the weekend was quiet and peaceful, and I felt very happy every time I looked at that adorable little child.

“And—it seems almost like a coincidence—I do also remember that right after they left, we just looked at each other for a minute. But, I can see it right now in my mind’s eye, you were the first one to say anything. You said, ‘I guess I’d better start figuring out how to save for our child’s college education.’ And I just smiled.”

Don looked at both of us, in turn. First he said, “Those certainly are pretty different ways to remember something.” And then, after a moment: “I have a question, the same question, for each of you. Or two questions, really, I guess. And I don’t suppose it matters who answers first.

“The first question is, how do you feel about the fact that your partner has such different memories of those events, seven years ago? And the second is, how does that relate to what’s going on in your lives in the present, and how do you feel about that?”

After a short pause, I ended up being the one to open my mouth. “Just a guess, doc: I bet what you’re wondering is, are we mad about it? Are we accusing each other of distorting the past, in order to win an argument in the present? Because I can imagine feeling like that.

“But, somehow, I actually don’t. I can’t accuse her of distorting her memories, because ... some sort of instinct is telling me that she genuinely doesn’t have the same memories that I do.”

Don: “You mean like she’s convinced herself so totally that she genuinely believes these memories of hers, even though—according to your own memories—hers are false?”

“No, not really. Look, we said this was going to sound weird, but, it just doesn’t feel like her memories are ‘false,’ at all, even though they’re so different from mine. Somehow it feels as if she actually lived through a different version of events than I did.”

Don looked inquiringly at Marian, so she spoke up. “Yes, actually, I feel about the same way. When I hear him tell his story, I—how do I even put this—I sort of ‘believe’ him. I mean, I kind of believe that I’m hearing a true account of what happened to *him* ... even though it’s so different from what happened to *me*.

“But that’s impossible. I know it is. How can such different memories both actually be true, especially when they’re about things that happened to the two of us together? It makes no sense, it’s impossible; but that’s how it feels, anyway.”

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Don looked at me, so I took the cue. “Yeah. What she said. That’s how it feels to me, too.”

“My goodness,” said Don, “that’s certainly ... unusual. I confess, I almost don’t know what to say. But then I come back to the other part of the question I brought up earlier: how does all this relate to the situation that the two of you are in, right now?”

I agreed, up to a point: “Yes, we are certainly going to have to talk about that, and pretty soon. But before we do, there’s something I’d like to add. I don’t know, maybe I’m worried that you’re about to call the men in the white coats, for both of us. But, for whatever reason, I want to say something that might help you understand how we can both be thinking in such a crazy way. If that’s okay?” looking at Don and at Marian, both.

Neither of them said anything to stop me, so I went on. “See, there’s more of our respective memories that we’ve shared with each other, and, there are places where, even though they’re starkly different, the two stories ‘fit together’ in a funny sort of way. Like, the weekend with Julia and Jake. Remember, it’s not just that we have different memories of how we felt afterwards, we have distinctly different memories of how Jake was acting, during that weekend. I remember him crying all night; Marian remembers him being peaceful, and hardly any bother at all. Right?”

“So here’s the weird thing. I remember that, a couple of days later, Julia called us, and told us that Jake hadn’t gotten better, and she’d taken him to the doctor. And it turned out that, during the weekend, he’d been in the early stages of some classical childhood disease; whooping cough, I think it was. And it got worse before it got better, and after a few more days, it had run its course.”

Don looked quizzical, like he didn’t see what was so weird about that, nor why I thought it was so important to talk about it. But Marian’s face showed a dawning realization.

“That’s right!” she burst out. “And I also remember that she called us a few days later; but, that first time that she called, it was to tell us that Jake had started to cry a lot at night. And then, after another few days, we heard that she’d taken him to the doctor—and it turned out that he had whooping cough: I remember the exact same disease!”

“Yeah,” I prompted her, “and what was it you said about the comment that she made, later?”

“Oh yes. The subject came up again, in a conversation we had with Julia, maybe a year later. She said we were lucky to have missed that bad time with Jake. She even made a joke about it: that if the disease had started a few days sooner, if we’d had to go through all of that during the time of her visit ... we might have had second thoughts about having children ourselves.”

Then I took up the thread. “Of course, I don’t remember having any such conversation with Julia a year later. That wouldn’t have made any sense, in the context of my own ... my own *reality*, is what I feel like calling it. Because of course, in my reality, we *hadn’t* missed Jake’s whooping cough, we *had* lived through part of it with her ... and we *had*, at least partly as a result, decided not to have children.

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“You see what I mean? The two stories are very different, and yet not so very, not right at that point. It’s as if the only thing that’s different is just *when* Jake’s whooping cough symptoms first began. And then, they diverge more, but it’s as if all the differences later could have resulted from that one ‘small’ difference then.”

“It’s like what they say about a butterfly flapping its wings,” Marian threw in, “you know what I mean”?

“I understand the saying,” Don answered her, “but, to be honest, I’m not sure I understand how it applies to your situation. And I guess that’s mostly because I’m not clear what your situation actually is.

“Remember, I don’t know anything about what has happened in your lives, since you stopped coming to see me. At the time, it seemed to me that you had both gotten comfortable with the decision that you were not going to conceive a child. But for all I know, you could have changed your minds since then. One of you could have, or you both could have changed your decision together. For all I know, you could have a child who was born less than a year after our last session together, and have been raising that child ever since.

“So I guess I need to just flat out ask the question: do you two have any children, or not?”

She and I looked at each other without speaking, and it was as if I knew that we were thinking the same thing: he still doesn’t get it.

I stayed quiet. Marian answered him. “Well, Dr. Badger, there just is no simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to that question. Not one that we both remember the same way, at least.”

“Huh? I don’t .... Wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me that one of you remembers the two of you having a child, and the other one doesn’t?”

“Yes, sir.” That was me. “I’m tempted to say, that’s precisely what we’ve both been trying to tell you, all session long. But that would sound like I was blaming you for not picking up on it; and really, I can’t blame you. It’s not something that would occur to a person very readily.”

“Well, that certainly puts a different light on things. Let’s see .... Oh, my goodness. I just realized that we’re out of time. We’ve run over, in fact. But look: this sounds like it could be an emergency. Is it?”

“No,” Marian said, “strangely enough, it isn’t. It sure felt like one, at first. But we’ve already gotten past that stage. At this point, we do have a problem, and we certainly could use your help, but it’s nothing that can’t wait until next week. Unless you don’t think you’ll be able to stand the suspense, that is.”

“You certainly have me wondering. But I’ll manage somehow,” Don said with a smile. “All right then. Does the same time next Thursday work for you guys?”

We told him it did, and we left.

5

We were in the car, headed back home after the session with Badger.

“Well,” Marian said, “he finally got it. I think.”

“Yes, I think he did. Up to a point. I wonder which is harder for him to grasp: the fact that you are convinced that we have a child, or had one, or however you say it? I mean, while I am equally convinced that we never did? Or the fact, despite all that, we aren’t arguing about whose version of our history is the real truth?”

Marian took a minute to answer. “Both would be hard to understand, at least initially, I’m sure. But I’m going to have to go with the second one as being even harder than the first.”

“I’m not sure I agree,” I said. “To me, they would just be equally incomprehensible. The first part requires you to accept that the world, or I guess I should say, the universe ... doesn’t always work the way that we expect. It’s just one of our bedrock assumptions: if you go to sleep at night, with your child in a room down the hall, then you’re going to wake up in the morning, and she’s still going to be there. Or possibly not: you could discover that she had disappeared overnight.

“But that it also turns out that your husband says that you never had a child? Not to mention the little detail that all of her bedroom furniture is gone, too? That’s just beyond human understanding. Except that it happened to us, I mean.

“But we’ve had a week and a half to assimilate it. That Badger would be able to take it in, in one session? Especially when we never really got to the crux of the matter until the session was nearly over? That’s not humanly possible.”

Marian thought for a moment. “Well, anyway, I guess the main thing is that it’s all pretty hard to take in.”

“You got that right! Maybe a better question is, what is the strangest aspect of the situation to *us*—not to Badger. You could say that the strange thing is that we aren’t arguing about the ‘real’ truth. Or you could say that the strange thing is how it almost doesn’t feel strange any more: it almost seems like a part of normal life, just another thing for us to cope with.”

Marian: “Um, yeah. I think maybe that tends to happen, after you’ve been trying to cope with something for a while. The focus shifts: it’s not ‘this just can’t be’ any more, instead it’s ‘How are we going to deal with it?’”

She went on: “But look, about the fact that we aren’t arguing about whose memories are real. We’re not, and I’m really glad we’re not. But *why* aren’t we? Or really, the question is why *I* am not arguing. You acknowledge that my memories are real ‘to me’ ... even though they’re different from yours ... but there’s a kind of implicit assumption that your memories are right, and mine are wrong, ‘in the real world.’ Or ‘in the world that we are inhabiting now’ might be a better way of putting it. That’s the most natural assumption for you: of course it’s easier to assume that your memories match the world you inhabit.”

## Missing Katie

She paused, partly in order to take a deep breath, and then continued. “But that’s hardly the most natural assumption for *me*. So if there’s anything remarkable—about how we’re reacting, I mean—it’s that I’m not arguing about that; I’m sort of ‘accepting’ as a fact that now, all of a sudden, I inhabit a world in which Katie doesn’t exist, and never did. I mean of course I *don’t* really ‘accept’ it, at least not in the sense of feeling okay about it. And I catch myself forgetting: asking myself how Katie going to react to something, and then it comes back to me: she’s not going to react to it, because in this world she doesn’t exist.”

“That must be really hard for you,” I put in.

“Well, yes, it is. But my point right now is different. I don’t ‘accept’ that my daughter—our daughter—doesn’t exist; but, except for the occasional forgetting, I *acknowledge* that, apparently, she doesn’t. You could almost say that I’m resigned to it.

“And while I do acknowledge it, I sort of feel like the fact that I do should not just be taken for granted. You see what I mean? It’s not like ‘of course’ your memories are right and mine are wrong; that’s not something that it’s okay to just assume. I acknowledge that mine are ‘wrong’ ... or don’t apply in this world I’ve landed in ... because I see *evidence* for that, so it’s not just your memory against mine.

“And I think it would be helpful if we could talk explicitly about what that evidence is. I’d like you to understand, as thoroughly as possible, just why it is that I am ‘accepting’—there’s that word again—that my memories don’t match the ‘current reality.’ And actually, I’d like to understand it better myself.”

“Sure,” I said, “if you think it will help. Do you want me to contribute pieces of evidence, or just listen?”

“Well, not exactly ‘just listen’ ... but let me take the lead, okay? If you come up with pieces of ‘evidence,’ I’m afraid I might react as if you were trying to convince me that she never existed. To say that your memories are right and mine are wrong. My nerves are raw enough that I’m afraid that might get to me, even though my rational self knows that’s not what you’re doing.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Okay. First thing ... this isn’t even part of the evidence I’m talking about ... is just the fact that she’s gone. Disappeared, is how it feels to me. Not here, anyway.”

“And that doesn’t count as ‘part of the evidence’ because ... ?”

“Because that’s not what the question is. It’s not, ‘Is she here?’ The question presupposes that she’s not. My starting point, my gut reaction, is that she was here, and now she’s not. The evidence I’m talking about is the stuff that tells me that, contrary to my instinctive belief ... in this ‘world,’ whatever that means ... that she never was here in the first place.”

“Yes, I think I see what you mean. It’s like the kind of question you have to ask yourself, given what you remember, is ‘Shouldn’t we be going to the police and filing a missing person report? And if not, why not: how can that possibly not be the right thing to do?’”

## Missing Katie

“Yes, exactly. Well, we know the short answer to that: once they heard that you don’t remember that she ever existed, they’d jump to the conclusion that I was crazy, and not even fill out the form. The question I’m raising is: what are the things that tell me that’s what would happen?”

“You mean, besides the overnight transformation of her bedroom into your studio?”

“Yes, besides that. But, darn it ... I wanted to be the one to bring that up!”

“Oh. Sorry. You wanted to answer your own question.”

“No fair. You’re making me sound stupid and petty. I really don’t think you have any idea how hard it is, acknowledging a situation like this, without falling back, myself, into thinking that I’m crazy.

“I mean,” she went on after a moment, “I know you’re trying to help with that, but it still feels like you don’t really get it.”

“Sorry,” I said again. “I mean it. And I’m sure you’re right: I don’t get it. And so I’ll keep trying to be helpful, and I’ll keep on messing up.”

“Thank you. I know you will. Keep trying, I mean. And you’ll get better at it. You already have, some.”

She patted my arm.

“Anyway,” she said, “yes; I did mean: what evidence has there been beyond the overnight transformation of her bedroom? And there have been other things, here and there. But ... after all that, I’ve changed my mind. What I need is not to make a list of all the evidence.”

I limited my reply to one word: “No?”

“No. And it was that little flare-up I had, just now, that changed my mind. It reminded me that this isn’t really about reason, for me; it’s about emotion.”

“I *think* I know what you mean. But go on.”

So she did. “If it were a matter of reason, I think I already have enough evidence that—so far as the rest of this world is concerned—Katie never existed. I ‘ought’ to just accept that it’s true, and move on. But I can’t.”

“I’m not surprised. I don’t think I could either, if I were in your situation. So ... what can I do to help? Are you asking for suggestions, or is this a time for me to just listen?”

She spoke slowly, weighing her words. “I guess what really happened is that I got the urge to go look for more evidence. Maybe hoping to find evidence that she does exist, or did.

“And I tried to tell myself that that was silly: that I already have all the evidence any rational person could possibly need. And then I remembered: I’m not a ‘rational person’ — not *purely* rational, I mean. And that’s okay.”

## Missing Katie

I took the risk of trying to help, by starting the next thought for her. “And if it’s okay to have this so-called ‘irrational’ desire to go looking for more evidence, one way or the other ...”

She picked up on it. “... then I guess maybe it’s okay to act on that desire. Maybe I really can go check it out some more, somehow. And maybe you won’t tell me I’m wasting my time.”

“I won’t. I promise. I don’t feel the same urge, myself; but it makes perfect sense to me that you do. By all, means, go ahead, if that feels like what you need. I’ll come along, and help you do it, if you want.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I just might ask you to.”

“Do you have anything particular in mind?” I admit: I was wondering, a little, what I’d gotten myself into.

“Um, yes. The school.”

“Oh, yeah, right! Of course she would have started school. Let’s see, what’s that public school nearby?”

“Le Conte Elementary. Yes, Katie was in their second grade class. Was, or maybe still is, but probably only in that other world I came here from.”

“Have you been by the school already?”

“I went by; it looks the same as it ever did, from the outside. But I haven’t been inside, since, you know, the change.”

“Well, I haven’t ever been inside. This me, in this world. I suppose that the other me went with you to parent-teacher conferences sometimes?”

“Of course you did. Every time. You’re a good father, you take just as much responsibility for your child as I do. Or did ... whatever.”

“Yes,” I said, “there’s a whole lot of ‘whatever’ in our blended world right now, isn’t there?”

“You got that right,” she said with feeling.

I hazarded a guess as to where this was going. “It sounds like we’re both assuming that in this world, nobody at the school will have heard of Katie. But you’d like to ask and find out for sure.”

“Yes, I would. It’s scary; it’s hard to imagine what kind of reactions we’ll get, if our assumption is correct and they don’t know her. It might not be rational, but I’d feel ... safer ... if you were there with me.”

“I understand. No problem. I think I can handle it; it wouldn’t be the first time that somebody looked at me strangely.”

“Great. Ah, would you be willing to drop in there right now, while we’re on our way home from seeing Badger?”

## Missing Katie

“Sure. No time like the present. Let’s go for it.”

A couple of minutes later, we pulled in to the school parking lot, and got out of the car.

### 6

Sure enough, it said “Le Conte Elementary School” on the outside of the building. From where we were, we could see a couple of entrances, both with glass doors. We checked the nearest one; the door wasn’t locked, but there was a sign taped up there that said, in big block letters, “All Visitors Must Report Immediately to Office. No Exceptions!”

I asked Marian, “Are we ‘visitors’? Even if we’re parents of a child here, which maybe we are?”

“Yes, even if. They made that clear enough, when I was here, ah, before ... and the sign is the same, so I assume that the rules are the same, in this world and the other one.”

“Okay, the office it is.” We followed the signs. Marian half-whispered to me as we walked: “I am ... was ... pretty friendly with the administrative assistant. Her name is Jane Compton.”

Ms. Compton was a slim woman of around thirty. Marian gave me a quick glance and then said to her, “Hello, Jane.”

“Jane” pulled her glasses down, and, after a moment, replied “Have we met, ma’am? And sir?”

Okay, that’s a pretty good indication right there. We hadn’t talked about what we were going to do, if the early indications were negative: how far we were going to take it. I decided to let Marian take the lead, if the pause didn’t stretch out too long.

It didn’t. “I’m sorry, Ms. Compton. That must have sounded too familiar.” The young lady raised her eyebrows: maybe she was thinking that coming up with the right first name could have been a coincidence, but ....

She didn’t say anything. Marian apparently realized that she hadn’t answered the question. “Oh yes, you asked if we’d met. Let’s just say that I’m not surprised that you don’t recognize me, but I certainly feel as if I know you.”

“Smooth,” I thought. I reflected that I’d just learned another new thing about my wife: in yet another world, she could have been quite successful as a lawyer. Or a con artist.

Compton’s reply was, “I’m not sure I understand, but never mind, I guess. How may I help you?”

Marian was ready. “We have a daughter. Her name is Katie. She’s in the second grade.”

“I see. And you’ve just moved to our neighborhood? You’d like to get her enrolled here at Le Conte?”

## Missing Katie

“Actually,” Marian told her, “things have been such a whirlwind lately that I haven’t kept track of things very well. I thought we already had enrolled her. But Bob”—indicating me—“didn’t recall doing that, or my telling him that I had done it. So we decided we’d better drop by and check.”

“Normally, I would have taken care of that for you. And, obviously, I didn’t. I suppose it’s just possible that Ms. Fisher took care of it while I was out, and didn’t mention it to me. Let me check the log book.”

While Compton was getting said book out of a file cabinet, Marian clued me in about Ms. Fisher: “The principal.”

Compton heard her, and raised her eyebrows again. “If you’ve met Ms. Fisher, then I guess maybe she did get your daughter enrolled, in my absence. Let me see.”

After scanning through the book for a few more moments, she said, “No, I’m not finding anything about a Katie. This would have been how recently?”

Marian thought for a moment, or pretended to. “Oh, definitely within the last two weeks.”

Compton said, “Definitely no ‘Katie’ recorded that recently. Let me see, there must be some explanation ... I *suppose* she could have written the first name down incorrectly. Just to be sure, may I have your last name, and your address?”

I felt that it was time for me to say something, so I told her. I realized afterwards that by that point, some people might have begged off answering the question, or even given a false name and address. But such ideas tend not to occur to me.

Compton’s final verdict: “I can say with certainty that your daughter is not recorded in our log book.” She looked up from the book. “So I guess you’ll be wanting to get her enrolled? We do prefer that the child be present, though.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” Marian assured her, “of course you wouldn’t want have a child enrolled in the book, and no one on the staff had met her yet. That’s okay; we can come back, with Katie, another time soon.”

So we and Ms. Compton said our goodbyes, “for now,” and we went back to our car.

## 7

“I’m *very* impressed with your handling of that,” I said to Marian as soon as we got out of the building. “You’re the one who’s been through the bigger trauma, but you seem to have more presence of mind about it than I do. Except for one little thing ....”

“I know,” she said. “We’re not likely to be in a position to keep our promise—to go back there with Katie—‘another time soon.’ I wonder if they’ll send a truant officer out looking for her.”

## Missing Katie

“We’ve got a little time to figure out what to say, if they do. I certainly didn’t mean to criticize. Anyway, we got what we came for.”

“We did, indeed.” Marian was nodding her head as she said it. “Another solid indication that, ‘in this world’—whatever that means—no one but me has any memory of Katie. You know, after hearing that, I feel like the possibility of dealing with a truant officer is the least of my worries.”

“I hear you,” I said emphatically. “Or ‘I feel you’—isn’t that what the rappers say? After an experience like that, you need to relax, and I could use some chill time myself. What say we go out for pizza?”

What was said, in reply to that, was in the affirmative.

## 8

The rest of the week had gone by, and we were back in our next session with Dr. Badger. We recounted the story of our visit to the school.

“Thank you for that,” he told us when we were done. “For the update, but not just for that. I feel like I’m a lot closer to understanding the overall situation, as the two of you see it. Will you humor me while I make another attempt to reflect it back to you?”

We both nodded.

“Okay,” Don said, “now where do I start? Hmm . . . .”

“I guess I won’t go back eight years, to when you two were in here previously. Let’s pick the relatively recent time when things got strange, for both of you. I think you said, last time, that you’d been living with the strangeness for two weeks already. So by now, the beginning of it would be about three weeks ago. Right?” Again, we indicated our agreement.

“Okay. I think you said it was a Saturday morning when things got strange. Marian, you experienced that morning this way: you got up, and you went down the hall to check on your daughter, Katie. I guess that was what you were accustomed to doing?”

“Not really,” she said. “Normally, when we woke up on Saturday morning, Katie was already there to greet us. Or sometimes she would hear that we were awake, and come down to our room. But either way, she was almost always there before either of us got out of bed.”

“Ah, I see. You went to check because she *wasn’t* there yet. It was unusual.”

“Right. But it turned out not to be just a question of ‘yet.’”

“That’s what I gathered at the last session, yes. Katie wasn’t in her bedroom . . . and it didn’t even look like her bedroom. And you haven’t seen her since.”

## Missing Katie

Then he waited, giving Marian a chance to process that—after hearing it stated so baldly by him—and then react.

Which she did. “I had a little girl; or rather *we* had, Bob and I. And then she disappeared.”

After another pause, Don filled in the next bit: “... and then you found out that neither Bob, nor anyone else but you, had any memory that your daughter had ever existed.”

“Yes.” She put her head in her hands for a moment, but then straightened up again and looked right at him, without saying anything else.

“And what was that like for you?”

“What do you think? I felt completely alone. I’ve been feeling that way, in the background at least, ever since. Though it could have been worse.”

“And when you say it could have been worse, you mean ... ?”

“Bob’s reaction. He could have called me crazy. And worse than that: he could have been angry, or contemptuous, because I was ‘crazy.’ I’m grateful that he didn’t react like that.” She held out her hand and squeezed mine.

Don kept coaching her along. “So instead of being angry or contemptuous, Bob was ...”

“... supportive. That’s what I’d call it. Not every single second, but almost. When I think about how it could have been ...”

“So you’re very aware that Bob’s reaction could have been less supportive. And you’ve expressed that you’re grateful. And I’m sure he appreciates that.”

I took my cue. “I do appreciate it, because I know this is so hard for her, that I’m impressed that she’s even able to spare the attention to say that to me. *For me.*”

“And I,” said Don, “am impressed by both of you. Your mutual concern and gratitude shows you both to be strong and caring people, and your relationship to be remarkably solid.”

He paused again, giving that point time to sink in, before going on to his next thought. “At the same time, well, Marian, you’re being so conscientious about Bob’s feelings ... I do wonder, a bit, if you’re letting that get in the way of fully experiencing your own.”

She answered him: “Could be, I suppose. But there are worse problems to have, don’t you think?”

“Definitely. I’m just fulfilling my obligation as a therapist, by reminding you not to bottle things up.”

“Duly noted. I’ll be sure to remember that when it’s time for your performance review.”

Don smiled. “Okay. If you’re ready, both of you, perhaps next we could review what the experience has been like for Bob.”

## Missing Katie

I looked at Marian, she nodded, so I went ahead. “There isn’t much that we haven’t covered already. For me, normal life was, well, just normal ... aside from the fact that my own wife remembers it differently. I had my job, we had each other, she had her art ... and we didn’t have any children.

“And we talked last session about how that came about: my memories of how we ended up deciding not to have children, and your memories, Marian, of how we decided that we would. Try again, I mean, after the miscarriage.”

“Can I pick it up here,” Don asked, “and see if I’ve got it right? You both remember that as a tough decision, and one that you were actively engaged in making together. In fact, that’s what brought you to see me, for our earlier sessions eight years ago.”

I jumped back in. “Neither of us was really sure, but I was the one who was leaning more against it. I was more worried about the possible health problems that Marian could have, if she got pregnant again. More worried about them than she was, I mean.”

Don: “And then your sister came to visit.”

Me: “That’s right, Julia and her baby Jake. Apparently we both remember the visit, and agree on when it happened, but have different memories of how it went. In fact, it seems like right there—during their visit—is where Marian’s memories and mine begin to be different. And stay different, after that, until just recently.”

Marian took a turn. “You say that Jake was sick all during the visit, and that made it a miserable time for all of us. And according to you, that was enough to turn around my whole attitude: ‘Oh, I thought I wanted children, but never mind.’”

“Do I detect a note of skepticism?” That question was from Don.

“You sure do. First, of course, I don’t remember Jake being sick. Not during the visit. It was a delightful time, and it reinforced my feeling that motherhood was my calling. That whole story, ‘sick baby keeps all the grownups from sleeping,’ just didn’t happen, in my world. But even if it had, I can’t believe I would have reacted the way Bob says I did.”

“Oh,” I said, “I hadn’t heard this part before. If I understand you right, on this point, my memory sounds ‘wrong’ to you. And not just in the sense that you remember things differently. My story doesn’t ‘sound like you.’ You don’t believe that you would have changed your mind, even if the experience with the sick baby had ‘really’ happened.”

“Yes. I guess you hadn’t heard that before, because I hadn’t thought of it before. But now that I have, well, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”

“Whoa,” I said, “no fair! This isn’t a theory about what you hypothetically might have done. I specifically remember it happening.”

“Yeah, but I thought we weren’t going to argue about whose memories were real, and whose weren’t.”

## Missing Katie

“Not about ‘the one true reality,’ no. But this is different. I know we haven’t gotten this explicit about ‘rules,’ but I guess I thought we had an implicit agreement: I don’t argue with your memories, and you don’t argue with mine. Like each of us is the authority on the reality of his or her own world.”

Marian practically wailed. “But how does that even make sense? How can there be ‘the truth’ about your ‘world,’ and another, different ‘truth’ about mine? Don, help me! Is there such a thing as ‘the truth,’ or isn’t there?”

“We’re all in uncharted territory here, Marian. I don’t think our language has an established way of talking about a situation like the one you two are experiencing.”

After a moment’s thought, he went on. “I’m a psychologist, not a philosopher. I’ve never even tried to answer a question like ‘What is truth?’ But I guess my working answer—the one I use without ever thinking about it—is that fundamentally, the truth is what works. In this case, the world has given you two a task, one which most people never have to undertake.

“You have been married for years. Your memories agree on that much. But now, all of a sudden, each of you discovers that the other one, suddenly, has different memories from the ones that you do, about what the last seven years or so of that life together have been like. So that has forced you to figure out how to cope with that, together as well as separately.”

I jumped in. “I kind of thought we were doing really well at that. And I guess I gotta admit, I especially proud of my own part in it.”

Marian sounded suspicious. “Why especially proud of your own part?”

“Because every time we’ve checked your memories, and mine, against anything else, what we find out seems to agree with my memories, and not yours. Like when we visited the school the other day. They’d never heard of Katie. That’s consistent with my memories, and not with yours.

“So it would have been awfully easy for me to say, ‘Clearly, my memories are right and yours are wrong.’ To call you delusional, and say that the problem is all in your head, that’s what’s got to be fixed.

“But I haven’t done that. So to tell the truth, I’m particularly proud of the fact that I haven’t. I suppose I feel like I deserve a lot of credit for that.”

“But I *have* thanked you for it!” Marian blurted out. “And okay, if your male ego needs for me to thank you again, then I do. I truly am glad that you haven’t been treating me like a crazy person. Glad most of the time, anyway.”

Don jumped on that and said to her, “Tell us about that ‘most of the time’ part, would you?”

So she complied. “Sometimes, when I’ve been feeling like I have a grip on the situation, and then something happens that seems to be telling me that I don’t ... sometimes it feels like I want

## Missing Katie

to escape from the pain of wondering whether I'm crazy: that it would be easier if I just admitted that I am.

“And besides, it's all very well to say ‘The truth is what works,’ but is that really all there is to it? Isn't there a real question here: am I crazy or am I not? And if I am, wouldn't it be better for me, and everyone else, to just admit it?”

“That's a really good question, Marian”—that was Don again—“and I've got to admit that I'm not really sure how to answer it. The best I can do, at the moment, is this: I guess you're right ... hypothetically. I mean, if you were clearly ‘crazy’—or delusional, that seems like a better word—well, it might not be best to tell you so in so many words, but yes, it ought to inform how I respond to you, and to Bob.

“But here's the thing: instinctively, I just don't feel like you *are* delusional. Yes, your memories don't match the ‘consensus reality.’ But for some reason—I honestly don't know why—it just doesn't ring true to draw the conclusion that there's something drastically wrong with your mind, that you are ‘out of touch with reality.’ You just don't come across that way.”

“Me too,” I said. “I mean, that doesn't ring true for me, either. And if you can't explain why it doesn't for you, well, I can't explain why it doesn't for me, either. It just doesn't.”

We were all quiet for a few moments. I broke the silence. “So, uh, where were we?”

Don looked relieved. “Now there's a question I think I can answer. I think the two of you *have* been doing really well at finding ways to talk about this, ways that ‘work’ for you. It's not just what you haven't been doing—declaring that Marian is crazy—but what you have. You've hit upon this ingenious solution of talking about ‘your world’ and ‘my world’, or ‘the world that I seem to have been inhabiting for the last seven years.’

“Now just like you, sometimes, in the middle of that, I feel the need to throw in a disclaimer, something like ‘... whatever that means.’ But even if none of us clearly understands what it means, still ... it works. It gives you two, and me as well, a way to communicate about the situation. I think that's what I meant when I said ‘The truth is what works.’”

I spoke up in a mock tone of complaint. “But, doctor, if it's working so well, why do we keep getting off on these philosophical side tracks, like Marian saying ‘Am I crazy, or am I not?’ (Not that I'm putting the blame on you, Marian: that's just the first example that came to mind.)

“I mean, maybe we are doing ‘really well’ in coping with the situation ... whatever *that* means. You know: ‘really well’ compared to what?”

“Um, what I'm trying to say is, even if we are doing ‘really well,’ it's still overwhelming, for both of us. We need to do even better, because—I'll go out on a limb and speak for both of us—we both feel, sometimes, like we're going crazy. So we need help. And—I don't want to sound like I'm complaining, but—when we get to talking about ‘What is truth,’ it just doesn't feel like that's getting us where we need to be.”

## Missing Katie

Don replied: “That’s fair. ‘What is truth’ sounds pretty abstract; it does make a person wonder, how talking about something like that could help you two with your painful situation. Right?”

I just nodded, so Don went on. “This situation you’re in is painful ... and it’s strange. I agree with you: the real point, the thing you need help with, is coping with the pain. But in order to do that, you need to be able to talk about it. And that’s where the other thing, the strangeness, can get in the way.

“Because the experience is so unfamiliar, that makes it particularly *hard* to talk about it. I mean, talking about painful feelings is always hard; but this time it’s hard for an additional reason, besides the usual ones. It’s unusually hard to find the words, because there aren’t any. Our language doesn’t have a standard vocabulary for describing situations like yours; no language does. You’ve got to make up your own vocabulary as you go along.

“And that’s what you’ve been doing. In fact, when I said you were coping really well, at least part of what I meant was just that: you *have* made up your own vocabulary, and it works pretty well.”

Marian asked for clarification: “You mean when we talk about ‘my reality’ and ‘his reality’?”

“That’s a big part of it, yes. It lets each of you accept the ‘truth’ of each other’s memories, even though it doesn’t seem like both sets of memories could be true in the same world.”

I had a contribution, so I made it. “That was working, and then we got into difficulty a little while ago, when Marian objected to something I reported about what happened in my reality. I said after a weekend with a sick baby, she was suddenly a lot less sure that she wanted to have children.”

Marian: “And I was like, no, that can’t be right, I wouldn’t have reacted that way.”

“Right,” I said, “and my immediate reaction to *that* was, how can you say you wouldn’t have reacted that way, when I’ve just told you you did react that way? It’s not like an ordinary conflict of memories, because you weren’t even there.”

I stopped for a moment, as what I’d just said was only then sinking in. Then I acknowledged it: “Whoa, I just said that you have to trust my memory—my memory about something *you did*—and then said ‘You weren’t even there.’ What does that even mean?”

“Maybe,” Marian said, “it means something like this: in the event you are talking about, ‘Marian’ was there; but it was sort of not the *same* Marian: it wasn’t me, the Marian in the room here and now. I’m not the same Marian, because I don’t have her memories; I don’t have *any* memories of the experiences you had, with that other Marian, over the last seven years.

“And yet, I guess, I was assuming that the ‘other’ Marian *was* the same person as me: the same personality, I mean. So, without thinking about all the philosophical nuances, I said ‘I can’t believe I would have reacted that way.’”

## Missing Katie

“Wow,” Don said, “you guys have just showed me another example of what I meant by ‘making up your own vocabulary.’ Bob reported his thought that ‘you weren’t even there.’ And then you, Marian, responded that some ‘Marian’ was there, and it was sort of the same Marian, and sort of not.”

“When you feed it back like that,” Marian observed, “it really does sound crazy.”

“I think I can understand why you’re saying that. I hear that it sounds crazy, to you, when you hear it from me. But to me, it *doesn’t* sound crazy. Because ‘crazy’ is a word we use when someone is not showing the ‘normal’ abilities to cope.”

Marian answered him. “Oh. I think I’m starting to understand what you mean. It’s like, before you judge how we’re coping with the situation, you have to take into account how very strange the situation is.”

“Oh! Yes,” I said, “I think I’m starting to get it, too. A lot of the time, Marian and I seem to be floundering around, hardly even able to express ourselves. But Don, you’re saying something like ‘You’re being too hard on yourselves: there are no standard responses to such a strange situation, so it’s only natural that even perfectly sane people would flounder around some.’”

Don looked at both of us, in turn, as he said “Exactly! The situation is unfamiliar, wildly so, and so dealing with it requires a lot of creativity. And effective creativity is not just having ideas: after you think of them, then you have to test them out in practice. And sometimes they work, and sometimes they don’t, and when they don’t, then you have to think of something else and try that.

“In other words” ... slowing down to emphasize his point ... “you have to flounder around.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Marian. “And floundering around is going to get frustrating sometimes. When nothing is working, when you feel like you can’t even make sense of things, then maybe it’s sane to wonder whether you’re crazy.”

“By George,” said Don in his best Henry Higgins voice, “I think she’s got it! Or both of you have, I should say.”

I said “Woo hoo!” and Marian said “Yay us!”

“Yes,” said Don, “by all means do congratulate yourselves. You may not be coping *perfectly*. But given what you’re up against, you both deserve a lot of credit for coping as well as you are.

“Hmm, I see that we are about out of time. I guess I was already sort of summing up. Just one more thing: let me affirm again that—as you said, Bob—what really matters to me, professionally, is your feelings. I mean, that’s what I’m trained to help you with. Those, and your relationship. This case presents some cerebral challenges, too, in figuring out how even to describe what’s happening; but those aren’t the focus for their own sake.

“So if either of you notice that I seem to be getting bogged down in that intellectual stuff, please point it out to me, as Bob did earlier.”

## Missing Katie

Marian asked whether we would get a kickback for doing part of his job for him. I think he could tell that she was kidding.

“Really, my job *is* to get you to do my job for me.”

On that note, we confirmed that we were on for the following week, and took our leave.

### 9

On the way home, I was struck by a thought. “I think we lost track of something. A question came up, and it seemed important at the time, but we never went back and answered it.”

“Oh, yes? What was it?”

“I was telling the story of how ... in my world ... we came to decide not to try getting you pregnant again, after all. I said that the turning point was when Jake was crying all weekend long. And you said you found it hard to believe that something like that could cause you to change your mind so quickly.”

“I remember. And then you said something like, ‘This is my memory of something that happened in my world. You weren’t even there. So why don’t you take my word for what happened there?’ And then we got off into talking about what it could mean to say that I wasn’t there, when, shall we say, some version of me *was* there.”

“Right,” I continued. “So we never came back to the question of whether we should have a rule: you can’t question my memory of what happened in my world, and I can’t question your memory of what happened in yours.”

After a pause I said, “But now that I think about it, it would be silly to establish that as a hard-and-fast rule. I mean, even normal couples, who live in the same world through their whole married lives, sometimes remember things differently.”

“Yes,” said Marian. “But really, in this case, it isn’t all that important. It’s obviously true that in your world—where I have, this version of me has, unexpectedly joined you—we did, somehow or other, end up not having a child. Does it matter whether it happened in exactly the way that you recall?”

“I guess not. Funny, though, how when it came up, it seemed really vital to settle the point.”

“Goes to show how things can look different when your perspective changes.”

That was as close as we ever got to acknowledging, out loud, what an important turning point that session with Badger had been.

**10**

I had taken that day off from work. I'm lucky to have a flexible schedule that lets me do things like that when I need to.

The next day, though, I went in to the office as usual. During the day, I was grateful to notice that I wasn't worrying about Marian the way I had been, when I was away from her, ever since Katie disappeared.

And when I got home, there was a further good sign: her mood seemed ... comparatively speaking ... almost cheerful.

Soon after we sat down to supper, she had something to say. "You know, Bob, I *did* something today."

At first, that made me cautious. "Honey, I don't mean to be argumentative, but I just don't understand what you mean when you say that you 'did something.' Don't you do things every day? Doesn't everyone? Isn't it impossible not to?"

"Well, sure, if you want to be technical. But the last few weeks, I haven't *felt* like I was doing anything. Not anything meaningful. I've just gone through life in a fog, like a person in shock. Which I pretty much was, I guess.

"I would sit and mope. Or would search all over the house, looking for a sign of Katie's existence. Or spend hours on the Internet, searching for the same thing."

"Ah, yes. You mentioned checking the Social Security database, I remember. So anyway, today was different?"

"Very different. Though at first, if anyone had been watching me, they probably wouldn't have been able to tell: outwardly, I probably looked like I was just moping again."

"Which, I gather, you were not."

"It didn't feel like I was moping; it felt like I had a decision to make, and I was determined to make it."

I just nodded.

"In fact, I started out by giving myself a good talking to. 'Self,' I said, 'I think you've run out the string on wondering if this is real: wondering whether Katie has really disappeared from your life. You don't have any idea how such a thing could happen; but clearly, it has.'"

"So you've, shall we say, accepted it?"

"Ha. Not the word I would have used."

"No, I guess it wouldn't be. It's kind of a two-edged word, isn't it?"

## Missing Katie

“Exactly. I guess you could say that I haven’t ‘accepted’ her disappearance; but I’ve accepted *the truth* of her disappearance, if you see what I mean.”

“I think I do. So, that led to your feeling like you needed to make a decision?”

“Well, yes. I almost feel like saying, ‘Of course it did.’ The decision is, ‘Now what?’ Or, ‘What am I going to do with myself?’”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought about that myself, but as you say, of course that would come up. Without Katie to take care of, I guess you do have more free time.”

“*Free time?* Well yes, that too, but that hardly seems like the important thing. It’s more like a question of my purpose in life.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to belittle it. Of course. You never were the sort of person to sit around and read magazines. Though after what you’ve been through, I certainly don’t want to put any pressure on you. You could be, outwardly, just sitting around ... for months. I would assume that inwardly, what you were doing was healing.”

“Thank you, I think. And no, I’m not going to claim that I’ve done all the healing I need to do. But it feels like it’s time for the next stage of my healing to take a different form.”

“And have you decided what form that should be?”

“More than that. I’ve started doing it.”

“Great! But, ah, what is it?”

“It’s drawing. Art.”

“That makes sense. That’s what you were thinking about, before we decided to have a child. And then of course the other Marian, the one in the world where we decided not to have a child, she went ahead and did it.

“And you’ve had a chance to see her work; you know she’s good at it. And since you and she are different versions of the same person, you know that whatever talent she has, you have too.”

“Bob? Shut up.” She gave me a kiss. Then she took my hand, and led me into her studio (also known, in that other world, as Katie’s bedroom).

There were the familiar drawings, done by the “other” Marian. But the one on the easel was new.

It was a little girl, with long, light-brown hair. Maybe, what, seven years old?

Oh.

I looked at Marian. “It’s Katie, isn’t it? You, ah, remember what she looks like.”

“Of course I do. She’s my daughter.”

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“And ... mine? Or maybe that would be the ‘other’ Bob.”

“No,” said Marian, “you had it right the first time. Different versions of the same person, remember? She’s your daughter.

“And now *you* know what she looks like, too.”

### 11

We didn’t tell Badger about the picture the very next time we saw him; we waited until the time after that, or maybe two times after that—I don’t remember exactly. And I don’t know why we waited: it somehow just seemed like “our thing.” Maybe we wanted to be able to tell him something definite about the effect that it was having.

By the time that we did tell him, that was no longer in doubt. By then, Marian had produced about six different drawings of Katie. I had been able to watch the improvement in her technique: this Marian had some catching up to do, since she hadn’t previously done as much drawing as the other one had.

More importantly, though: while the pictures showed Katie at different ages, and in different clothing, poses, and moods, and sometimes in different media ... it was, clearly, always the same girl. By now, I really did feel that I knew what Katie looked like.

“And not just what she looks like,” I told him. “Each picture has been a jumping-off point for at least one story.

“For example, there’s one that shows Katie asleep in the back of the car. She’s wearing a terry-cloth robe; Marian tells me that underneath, she’s still got her damp bathing suit on. And there’s sand on her arms and legs.”

Marian took up the story. “I show Bob the picture, he asks me some questions, and before we know it, he’s heard all about Katie’s first day at the beach. How the waves fascinated her! She would run toward them, and then get scared and run away from them.

“One of them caught her, and she fell down and started to cry. Bob was there in a second, and scooped her up. She cried a little more, but not much.”

“You know what she said?” That was from me. “‘The water jumped on me, Daddy. It tried to eat me.’ But she was brave.”

Badger had a comment. “The way you say this, it’s very much as if you remember it happening. Which you don’t, right?”

I confirmed that. “It was the ‘other Bob’ who rescued her from the big wave, of course. But you know what? Sometimes, for a moment, I forget things like that. I feel as if I actually had lived through these experiences with my little girl.”

## Missing Katie

“And what’s that like for you?”

“Before the pictures, I saw myself as having only one role in the situation: to support Marian. I was acutely aware that I couldn’t even imagine what it must be like for her, to raise a daughter for seven years, and then suddenly have that daughter vanish out of your life. And then, to make it worse, your husband doesn’t even remember her—and neither does the rest of the world.

“I remember telling Marian once, back then, ‘You must miss her just awfully.’ But now? Now, I miss Katie myself.”

“And how does that feel?”

“I did say to Marian, one time, that I felt I had gotten a raw deal. I was getting the sad part, but I’d never experienced the happiness of being with her.

“And I did feel kind of wistful when I said that. But even then, I was half kidding. Bottom line is, I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“Yes,” said Dr. Badger. “Parents usually do end up feeling that way.”

## 12

By the time that we reached the end of that session, all three of us agreed: we didn’t feel like Marian and I needed weekly therapy sessions, any more—for now, at least. We had accomplished what we needed to: to find a way of coping with the situation that worked for both of us. None of us would have been able to predict, a few weeks before, how we would do that: by getting to the point where I could actually share Marian’s feelings about Katie, rather than just sympathize with them.

We also all thought that we should not stop seeing him entirely: that it would be better, at least for now, to come in once a month, rather than once a week. The reason for that was simple enough: he was the only person besides ourselves, in the world we currently inhabited, who knew that Katie had ever existed.

Or, if you prefer, the only one who knew that the *idea* of Katie had ever existed.

Badger, though, didn’t try to get us to phrase it that way. He didn’t demur at all when we spoke of Katie, as we both now did, as a real seven-year-old girl who just happened to be, um, elsewhere. Or a real eight-year-old girl, after we told him about the quiet little party that the two of us had on her birthday.

And that was what we needed from him. We weren’t ready to share Katie’s story with anyone else, not yet at least, for fear that they would think that we were both crazy. But periodically sharing it with him helped to stave off the fear, which tried to creep back from time to time, that that was exactly what we were.

## Missing Katie

He did acknowledge, when I asked him one time, that not all therapists would agree with what he was doing. Some would insist that Marian's belief in Katie—and now mine, as well—had to be considered a delusion, and that the therapist, therefore, was required to keep trying to “cure” us of it: that what he was actually doing carried the maxim “meet the clients where they are” a little too far. Or a lot.

In fact, he said that ... while he had no way of knowing for sure ... he suspected that *most* therapists would not approve of his approach. When I asked him why he was willing to go against the prevailing opinion like this, he shrugged and said, “I guess I'm just a maverick. Always have been, probably always will be.”

That was just fine with us.

### 13

Here are some things I have learned about my daughter.

She loves climbing trees, and she's good at it. Good enough to scare Marian and me, if we're watching. And we don't think we've just forgotten what we were like when we were kids ourselves; we're sure neither of us ever ventured up as high as she often does, with no sign of fear on her own part.

(Marian and I had a talk about that, when the tendency was starting to manifest. Among other things, gender stereotypes were touched upon ... and promptly anathematized. We shared a solemn vow to strike the word “tomboy” from our vocabularies; and indeed, I, at least, have never used it since. Until just now, of course.)

Similarly (where stereotypes are concerned): she's good at reading and writing, but where she really shines is in math. In class they were just starting multiplication, but one Saturday afternoon, fooling around on a piece of paper, our Katie reinvented algebra.

(Okay, we can't be sure that a developmental psychologist would agree with that interpretation of what she did, even supposing that we had the piece of paper to show. But it's our story, and we're sticking to it.)

But, proud as I am of these talents of hers, I'd be the first to agree that Katie is still a child.

Consider, for example, what she does on a weekend morning, if she comes into our bedroom and finds that we are both asleep. She picks one of the four available big toes, and wakes up its owner by wiggling it. But with this, too, at least one aspect of it could be called precocious: she seems to have a well-developed sense of fairness. If she picked one of Marian's toes last time, the next time she is more likely to choose one of mine. And vice versa, of course.

And what is her favorite thing in the whole world? That's easy: pancakes on Sunday morning. Except that, if something else is uppermost in her mind at the moment, she's likely to nominate that, instead. At one time or another, without being asked, she has named each of the following

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as her absolute favorite thing: SpongeBob SquarePants; blowing out the candles on a birthday cake; riding her bicycle; visiting Grandma; and the Lone Ranger's horse, Silver.

Children are like that.

### 14

Saturday morning. I'm still asleep. I hear something, but I think it's part of my dream.

Then I am pulled out of the dream, because I feel something that I can't fit into it. It feels like someone has hold of my toe, and is wiggling it.

I open my eyes, and as soon as they have focused, my first thought is, "Oh, of course. It's Katie."

Then all of a sudden I'm wide awake, and staring at her. I don't change my mind about its being Katie: clearly, it is. The part that's gone is the "of course" part.

I shake Marian by the shoulder. "Honey, it's Katie! She's real! She's here!"

Marian opens her eyes, looks at Katie, then back at me. "Of course she's here," she says. She glances at the clock on the bedside table. "It's after seven; what else would you expect?"

I just look at her.

"And Bob, I know you don't know this, but she had a nightmare in the middle of the night, and she came and woke me up. It took me nearly an hour to get her settled down again.

"So could you be a darling, and get her some breakfast? I think I can sleep some more, if you'll let me."

I say, "But ...." Then I change my mind, and shut up, and talk to her silently in my head, instead.

Okay, Marian. Yes, I should let you sleep some more. I can explain it all later.

It's kind of a long story, and something tells me that it isn't going to be an easy one to understand, the first time that you hear it. So it's better that you be rested and wide awake for that.

And besides, right now I've got work to do.