

## “Recollection”

The light sinks through Detective Farrier’s eyelids like rope to a drowning man. He had never been a dreamer; his sleep was only a deep blackness permeated by flickering pieces of image, an absence ended only by the world reaching out to find him with its little fingers of light and sound. The detective sits up with a groan, absently fumbling for an alarm by pure habit. The wooden chair juts into his back, leaving little prickles along his spine.

It then occurs to him that there is no alarm, only the faint noise of cars and the rattling of a faulty air conditioning unit. The thought follows quickly that the incandescence prying at his eyelids is not sunlight, but his computer monitor, where he had been working until late in the night. He opens his eyes proper and his gaze flickers longingly to the still-made motel bed, then back to the screen, where Vernon Wells’ brown eyes watch him with the blurred edges typical of a memory photograph.

The kid had an accurate memory. Farrier had recognized Vernon immediately from the movies. The distributor had been quick to share information to avoid his own arrest, scared shitless of the idea of Slopes Media coming after him with all their lawyers. The whole thing probably drove him out of distribution for good; at least, the detective hopes so.

He turns off the monitor and stands. Better start a pot of coffee. It’s already late morning, and with Slopes Media breathing down his neck, he can’t waste a moment more. Management had been disappointed in his lack of progress on the Kent Weaver case. No one seems to have seen or met the man. He doesn’t have a single memory photograph of Weaver taken from a witness, nor had detective Farrier found evidence within the tapes that’s added up to anything, until yesterday. Despite the lingering stiffness and the mediocre quality of the Styrofoam cup of tar-coffee, the day is packed with promise.

The detective goes to the machine, the boxy metal device just bigger than a hand, its cathode hanging off the table’s edge, deceptively simple in its design. He had left it out after the kid had used it. The tray is open from where the detective had removed the disc yesterday. He had been careless in his haste. The equipment is expensive, and easily damaged. Even a sufficient amount of dust in the tray can ruin it permanently. He carefully blows on it, and closes the tray.

He slips on his modest brown-grey overcoat, the worn felt adorned only with the name SLOPES. The evidence presses into the chest pocket like plates of armor. He picks up the memory photograph

device gingerly and places it in its small black case. He tucks it into his jacket and heads to the parking lot, where the company vehicle awaits his approach.

The detective starts the car and it groans awake. He had written down several of the locations the kid had listed, hidden spots and open ones. In the winter, these places seem to hang themselves with gloom, all concrete edges and cutting corners where the distributors sell. Empty, empty... He passes the naked trees and the building wet with a cold rain that must have happened in the night. The detective tries not to lose hope at each stop with no sign of Vernon Wells. He can't be everywhere, the detective reminds himself. But he is somewhere.

It's late afternoon, the sun close to setting and the detective's body beginning to ache restlessly from the repetitive drives around the same blocks, when the detective finally catches sight of him. Vernon Wells sits at a bench in front of the law school. He's sat by the dead fountain, apart from the students milling about in the nearby courtyard. He's cut in half in the detective's visage, blocked off by a brick wall, but his face is unmistakable.

The detective parks a street away and begins to walk, stepping in puddles as he goes briskly around the corner. He skirts around a deep puddle, his reflection catching in the mud, his dark eyes flattened in the still water. The water captures all of him in uncomfortable detail, every wrinkle and scar facing out. He looks away from the puddle. He had missed some real rain in the night, he thinks again, wondering just how tired he must have been to have slept straight through. His hands go to his pockets in the sharp wind, and he rounds the corner to the bench. He sits.

The detective regards Vernon in his periphery, his rain jacket standing out starkly against the concrete. It's a gaudy yellow, as all rain jackets are, like someone poorly pretending to be a duckling, some animal more water-resistant than a human being, and failing miserably. It's the kind of yellow that you wear to scream 'happy' in the elementary sense, the kind that says, "Look at me," in highlighter yellow, "I'm a sun in the sky!"

The man beneath the jacket is anything but. Vernon huddles in on himself as though attempting to be a man far smaller than he is, his arms crossed over his chest and his leg shaking in what could be either cold or nerves. His deep-bagged eyes move impassively to take in his new companion on the bench. Vernon is older than he had been in the movies. Weathered, stark against the gray sky, his skin wet and pockmarked. None of the chubby, smooth skinned youth the detective had seen. Nothing like the Vernon from the movies at all, up close.

“Someone told me you have DVD’s?” asks the detective. “Pirated copies?”

“Yeah. Are you looking for something specific?” asks Vernon quietly, hand twitching toward the pockets of his jacket, which pucker out strangely, stuffed with contraband. His voice is grating, high and whiny like he’s half-attempting to sing.

The detective flashes his badge, and Vernon, expressionless, moves as if he’s going to bolt. Detective Farrier clears his throat.

“Vernon,” the detective says.

Vernon pauses at his name, halfway off the bench. He turns, confusion written across his features.

He speaks again in that shrill voice. “How do you - ?”

“You know Kent Weaver.” There’s no use obfuscating his purposes here.

“I don’t know who that is.”

“This,” says the detective, “says you do.”

The detective takes the disc case from his breast pocket and slides it over, the case scraping quietly against the dark, splintered wood of the bench. THE LOVERS OF CADBERRY LANE, says the cover in scribbled marker. The detective taps the near illegible signature, K.W.

“Got this from a kid who said he got it from you.”

“I, uh, I found those. I don’t know who burned them,” says Vernon. He still hasn’t moved, still in that half-standing, half-sitting position, like startled prey.

It would be possible, if it were just any distributor. If Detective Farrier had not done his diligence, he might have believed it.

“You’ve been arrested before for distribution of Kent Weaver burns,” says detective Farrier.

“Doesn’t mean—”

“Not to mention that you appear in the movies themselves.”

Vernon stares at him in disbelief. The detective adjusts his position on the wet bench, the rainwater already soaking through his slacks. He reaches back into his jacket pocket, and removes more discs, one by one, each in clear cases signed K.W.

“Your face appears here at 6 minutes, here at around 30 minutes, and here, briefly, just a blip when the lead actor’s face turns into yours. All Kent Weaver. I’ve been looking for you. Now, I currently have evidence to bring you to Slopes Media on multiple counts of distribution of pirated material. I guarantee you have a bunch of contraband movies in that jacket if I search you. But you want to go home, don’t you?”

Vernon looks toward the law school, at the handful of students meandering in the gray courtyard. The security guards stand like begrudging statues by the doors, large men who would tackle him if he ran.

Vernon looks back at the detective, and sighs. “You didn’t come sit next to me to let me go home.”

“Distributors are not our main concern. I can get up right now and walk away, and no one has to know anything. I’ll forget your name.”

“If?” asks Vernon.

The detective pats the seat beside him, an invitation.

“I just need you to give me the information I need to build my case, and then you’re free to go.”

Vernon’s face twists into a new expression, forehead rippling in thought. He stays that way for some time, perfectly still as if frozen by his own focus.

“Well?” asks the detective impatiently.

Vernon sits back down, his body sinking slowly back to the bench as if pulled by gravity rather than his own will.

“Shit, man. If it was just a couple months ago I’d have never talked to you. But... I really don’t want to deal with Slopes Media again.” Vernon runs a hand down his face. “What do you want to know?”

“Where is Kent Weaver?”

“I don’t know. Genuinely, I don’t.”

“But you have met him personally.”

Detective Farrier looks him up and down flatly. Vernon’s leg is bouncing nervously, his lips are tight as he chews the inside.

The detective watches him carefully, mulling the man over, and a thought occurs to him, one that had been sitting since last night.

“Are you... him?” The detective presses.

The statement pulls a sharp laugh out of Vernon, and he looks up to meet the detective’s serious expression with his crinkled eyes.

“Am I—? I can’t do what Kent does. Me, pirate. That’s fuckin’ hilarious. If you knew me you’d know how hilarious that is.”

“Still, I know there’s a lot you know. A lot you can tell me about your time in the industry,” the detective prompts, trying for anything that would get him talking.

“That’s a lot to get into.”

“Well, you can start with how you got *involved* in all of this.”

Vernon stops, and thinks long and hard. It seems to be his habit, becoming lost in his own head this way, returning only when he has made some decision firmly within himself.

“I’ve been in this business since early on,” says Vernon. “Back when memory photography first came out. I was at a party and this guy, friend of mine, pulled up a movie I’d seen before, but it was... different in little ways. He showed me a whole cabinet of them he had bought off somebody, ready to

resell. Called them his ‘DVD recollections.’ Sort of a play on DVD collections. Thought he was so clever. He said it would catch on, and everyone would be calling ‘em that.”

“I’ve never heard the term.”

“*Exactly*. That sort of sums him up. He was always getting into shit that was ‘just about to catch on.’ Ended up deep in debt any time he would start some new hustle. So I didn’t have much faith at first. He explained the whole business to me, how they watch it in the theatre and remember the details and record it from the memory. I told him they did a shit job with the details, he said hey, not everybody’s got a eidectical – you know – a perfect memory or whatever. Pirated versions can be a little off, so you gotta know your dealer and know he’s delivering a pretty good product. He was bitching about how hard he was finding it to get someone who would go sit through the movie ten or eleven times to remember it good enough to burn to disc without big gaps. I volunteered, but I’ve got kind of a bad memory from all the, you know, shit I’ve done, and he knew it.”

“Who was this friend?”

“We called him *Big Dan-o*.”

“His *legal* name,” the detective clarifies.

“You want Kent Weaver, right? I didn’t promise to rat anybody else out,” says Vernon, hunching back into himself and avoiding the detective’s eye.

Detective Farrier doesn’t push the point. The last thing he wants is to push the man too far and have him shut up entirely.

“Alright,” says the detective softly, nodding in what he hopes is an encouraging way. “Around that time, the goal was to make a more accurate rip of the movie. How did that change, exactly?”

“You don’t know?” asks Vernon, seeming genuinely curious. “Aren’t you some kind of expert on this stuff?”

Detective Farrier sits still, just managing to keep from shifting in discomfort. The truth is, little is known about how the pirates alter the movies. Slopes Media is concerned only with their assets and couldn’t care less about the “how” so long as the piracy stops.

“You really don’t,” Vernon says, something amused in his expression. “At first it was a matter of bad memory. People would smooth over the rough parts of the movie, and add little bits of dialogue they thought they remembered but that wasn’t really there. They would watch the copies and make copies of the copies, and there would be differences from all the misremembering.”

Detective Farrier nods. “And yet, some people are able to manipulate them with intention. They have to be tinkering with the machines somehow, yes?”

The memory photography device was designed with the courtroom in mind, to pull accurate testimony straight from the mind of witnesses. It's designed to shut down if tampered with in any way.

“They aren’t manipulating the machine,” says Vernon. “That’s what makes the pirates so genius. They’re manipulating their own memories.”

“That’s impossible.”

“The different pirates’ signature styles, that’s stuff you can’t get by accident. Mary Jane’s always gave the actors more chemistry, Jim Dodge’s ripoffs were always silent films– people speculate that he might be deaf, and that’s why you can see all these little visual details that he remembers with so much clarity...”

The pirates sometimes consider themselves the directors of their pirated films. Some of them will go in and replace the credits with their own names, while others leave it as a blur. No one really remembers all the credits, yet another staple of pirated movies. The stylistic idiosyncrasies are a major part of profiling pirates and making arrests.

“Say you’re telling the truth. How? How can they tamper with the memories?” the detective presses.

Vernon shrugs. “I’ve asked around, people say different stuff. Some people say it’s like dreams. Do you ever have crazy dreams, like you’re in your undies at work or something?”

The detective thinks back to the deep blackness. The mere hints of some creature lurking below.

“No,” says the detective honestly. “I don’t dream.”

“Come on, everyone dreams,” scoffs Vernon. “It’s part of the sleep cycle, you’d die if you didn’t, it’s your subconscious doing it’s thing.”

“How scientific,” says the detective dryly.

“Maybe you don’t remember your dreams, that’s all.”

It has never occurred to the detective to wonder exactly where his mind wanders at night. He had always assumed that it goes nowhere at all, and he simply ceases to be, a respite from the dreary realities of existence.

The detective is no novice on matters of the mind, having trained at the academy on how to manipulate men into making confessions, how to glean information from a witness, how to read body language and little cues that can make or break a case. But the subconscious is another matter entirely. To think some animal exists deep inside him where his rationale cannot reach is an unsettling thought. No, he prefers not to dream.

“Mine are like smudges,” says Vernon. “Like there’s not much in there to go off. I’m not a creative like that. Not even in my own back-brain, I don’t think. But some people say it’s sort of like that. Or that it’s something for real psychos who can just lie to themselves. I’ve never been a liar, really, either... forthcoming, that’s my name. Right detective? I’m being *compliant* and *forthcoming* enough for you, aren’t I?”

There’s a bitter edge to the words that the detective elects to ignore.

“Certainly,” he says.

Vernon rifles through his own pockets and produces a pack of gum. He wordlessly offers the detective a piece, and the detective shakes his head.

Vernon pops the gum into his mouth and continues amidst his chewing.

“I did actually ask Kent how the whole thing works. Said if it was a trade secret I’d respect it, but I was so curious, and... well, jealous, a little. He was the only pirate I’d ever actually met directly. He said it’s not imagination so much as alternate memory. Remembering something the way it *felt*, not how it really *looked*. He said for him, it’s seeing the movie through his eyes. Makes no sense to me.”

“I just can’t believe that,” the detective admits.

“I mean, I’ve never actually seen it happen,” Vernon says. “Just relaying what I was told.”

“Tell me more about Kent,” the detective suggests.

“Like?”

“Anything you know, everything, assume it’s all relevant.”

Vernon nods. “Kents movies were always something special. He added this spin to his versions. They were always realer than real, like his memory was realer than the movie. The only thing is, he was awful at endings, and the movies are just sad as hell. You always knew it was a Kent.”

“Did he approach you about distribution?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“So, how do you know him?” the detective asks, tapping his foot impatiently.

“He had something I wanted.”

Vernon pauses for a long moment, lost somewhere in his own head. He opens his mouth, and closes it again, as if deciding where to begin.

“When I was a kid,” Vernon says, “I would always go to the park and play with this one kid. We would play tag every week when our moms brought us to the playground. You know, best friends in that kid-way where you don’t know each others names, even, but you’re like that.” He crossed his fingers together tightly and insistently. “There was this movie... Have you seen *The Little Horse*?”

“No.”

“I watched it as a kid, with my parents. I think I was the only person who liked the movie, it was one of those B-movies, the acting is just awful. But little kids remember things like that differently. To a kid

that stuff is all they've ever seen, so it's really good, to them. It's about this kid who has this horse, and the horse is wild, untameable, but he wants to enter it into a race..."

"Pardon me for the interruption, but is the plot of the movie especially relevant?"

"Hey, you said talk, I'm talking," says Vernon, throwing his hands up. "You don't wanna know shit, fine!"

"Sorry, sorry. Go on."

"So, *The Little Horse*. It's lost media now. No one has a copy, I'm asking around pretending I want to sell it but really I just wanted to watch it again, see how it held up. Nostalgia, you know. I heard through the grapevine that Kent Weaver had a pirated copy. I thought that was weird, because the movie didn't really do well, and even Kent fans probably wouldn't want to buy it. Except me. I wanted it."

Vernon pauses, thinking again.

"I was familiar with Kent but I wasn't huge into him at that time, until I decided I needed to look for him. Then I got my hands on as many of his movies as I could find, trying to track him down. *Twilight Alley*, *The Canoodler*, that kind of stuff."

It was indeed how he had gone about his own investigation, looking for leads in the changes. A New York skyline replaced with the skyline of a town more familiar to the pirate, pieces of dialogue replaced with regional slang. Kent is remarkably good at keeping personal memories out of the movies he pirates, for the most part.

"The ones with a lot of changes to them," says Detective Farrier. "That's where I saw—"

"Me. Yeah, I saw it too, and I realized, I recognized a lot of these faces. And some of the memories, too. As a kid I didn't have a lot of friends, so I would just watch it over and over, and play with that one singular kid on the playground, and I talked his ear off about the movie. And one day, he tells me he's moving away. The last time I saw him, we had this conversation about what we were gonna be when we grew up, how we would find each other. He said, "I'm gonna be a horse, and you can be a cowboy, so we can keep playing." I said, "I can't be a cowboy—"

“I already told my mom I’m gonna be a doctor,” quotes the detective, the pieces slotting together.

“Doctor,” Vernon chuckles. He’s quiet for a moment. “I really thought things would turn out different.”

“That’s a conversation you two really had.”

“There are a bunch of little moments like that in the movies. So I knew it was him, the kid from the playground. I tracked him down based on what I knew. He had moved to Illinois, I knew his real name and his old address, it wasn’t too hard after that.”

“And that name is?”

“Ah, I’m in the middle of the story. Relax. So. I went to him, and he knew me right away, said, ‘you’re the boy from my movies.’ The guy had grown up to be a real recluse. He admitted that he had sort of put those games of tag up on a pedestal. I had, too. It made it strange to meet the real man, this fucking... greasy, quiet kind of guy in this dark room with boxes of DVDs, spending day after day just burning them. We talked like kids about the movies, all the stuff he had made because by now I was a mega fan. We... didn’t bring up much of what we’d been up to in the meantime.”

“Where did you meet him? What was the address of his place?” asks the detective, cutting into Vernon’s rambling.

“I’ll write it down for you, but to save you some time I’ll tell you don’t bother; he’s long gone by now. Like I said, he seemed paranoid, I don’t think he would meet someone at whatever place he actually stays. He had his stuff just scattered around in open boxes and suitcases. I wonder if he just sort of hops around... Now can you let me tell the story?”

“Alright. Please, continue.”

“He got “The Little Horse” out of one of his boxes. I told him this was maybe the only copy of this movie out there, I had been searching for years for the original and no one had it. He warned me he had changed things. I knew they would have changed, of course, hell, I knew the movie would be a hundred times better, but we shared this look. We both knew we wouldn’t ever see the actual, original movie again. I wanted to see that scene where the horse runs off into the field, it’s my favorite scene, right before the credits. I told him that, and I said I thought the scene might just make me sad, now,

thinking about how it used to make me feel. He gave me the disc, free. He said, 'They try to sell you a beautiful dream. My movies are for free. Just know that.'

"He gives them away?"

"Maybe," says Vernon, pressing a fist to his chin in thought. "He's got to know everyone else is selling them, though. When I buy Kent Weaver DVD's to distribute they're always crazy expensive... I left pretty soon after that, I went home and... I watched it."

"And...?"

"My mom was in it, some other people too who might have been his parents or something. He had cast me in the main role, that kid who owns the horse and is gonna put it in the big race. Nobody was the original actors. But the horse was the same, running all through the field at the end— or maybe all horses just look the same. God, he got that scene so perfect," says Vernon, eyes glazed over like he's watching something far in the distance, "I watched it a bunch of times. It was a sad one, all his movies are sad. The original wasn't sad like that. But his movies are special. They're... they flood through you and you feel something you don't even really understand, you know? Like rain. Like a good kind of rain. I wanted to call him after, but I hadn't even asked for his number or anything."

The silence at the end of the story comes abruptly. Detective Farrier realizes only in the silence how close he had leaned, listening to the story of how Weaver's movies had been felt. He himself had only ever watched the movies analytically, pausing every few moments to examine the backgrounds, the faces. He had never let himself lean in toward the screen.

He sits back and coughs, embarrassed to have been lost in such a way.

"Did you have any contact with him after that?"

"Pretty soon after that was when you guys raided my place and I had to move. I was out of the business for awhile, I didn't see much of anybody after that. Went and worked in a kitchen for a while. I only got back in town recently."

"Do you remember what Mr. Kent looked like?" he asks, the question that this entire conversation has circled delicately, that it all hinges upon. The other information had been useful context, but if he doesn't get a picture, this conversation will have been meaningless.

“Yeah. Course I do,” says Vernon, sounding almost offended.

“Alright,” he says, shaking off the feeling, reminding himself of the investigation, “Then. Yes. We’ll connect the cathode to your head and you can burn the image into this disc. Once you’ve done so, you can go.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

The detective takes out the little black case and removes the memory photography device, which had until now waited patiently in his overcoat. All Vernon needs to do now is comply, put the cathode to his head and allow the memory of Kent Weaver’s face to sit in his mind for a moment, in order to be recorded onto the disc.

Once the company knows what he looks like, things will become far easier. No need for wading through hours of footage any longer, they can go after him directly and take legal action.

“Look, is it okay if...” Vernon muddles over the words, “if I don’t tell you his real name? It’s just...”

“It’s alright,” says the detective quietly, “The photograph should be enough. And he won’t ever know it was you who gave us the information.”

Vernon sits for a long moment, thinking. The detective waits patiently as Vernon undergoes whatever dilemma is in his head. Finally, Vernon nods.

“Good man,” says detective Farrier.

Detective Farrier’s stomach is struck with a gnawing hesitation. Some part of him doesn’t want to put the cathode to the man’s head, to return to the motel and see the true face of Kent Weaver - to see him as only a man, not a case to be solved. But he must remember his purpose here. He holds out the cathode expectantly.

Vernon takes the cathode and places it to his temple. He closes his eyes, and breathes deeply, engaging the memory.

“Focus on the face of Kent Weaver,” says detective Farrier. “The slope of his nose, the color of his eyes, focus on the shape of his eyelids, and the curve of his lips.”

Vernon focuses, forehead wrinkling, the pockmarks all dipping in toward the center.

“Now focus on the way his eyebrows move, and the socket around his eyes. Focus on the way his skin fits over his bones.”

Vernon’s face, screwed tight and tense, slowly relaxes as he grows entranced in his memory.

“Focus on the color of his skin, and the pores, and the little scars or marks there. Focus on the way his head attaches to his neck. Focus on any tattoos he had, and the clothes he was wearing.”

Vernon’s lashes flutter and he tips his head back against the bench. Finally, the machine dings, signalling completion of the memory photograph capture. Detective Farrier removes the cathode from Vernon’s head gently, and tucks it back against the side of the machine.

“That’s all, then. It’s been fascinating to meet you,” says the detective.

Detective Farrier holds out a hand to shake, but Vernon doesn’t take it, his face cast down toward the concrete ground.

“Sure,” mutters Vernon, something choked in his voice. “Good luck with your investigation.”

Vernon stands, then, still not meeting his eye. He hunches, pulling his raincoat tight around him, and walks off without another word, that yellow coat growing smaller and smaller until it disappears past the dead fountain, into the little crowd of students. Perhaps he would continue to sell today, or perhaps he would go home, maybe spend the dreary day counting his blessings for narrowly getting away from Slope’s long arm.

The detective waits a long moment before he stands, wincing at the cold wet that’s seeped entirely through. He walks westward, back toward where he has parked, around the puddles that reflect him from the bottom up and the branches knocked loose in the storm.

The puddles wave, a little wind picking up to make waves across them. The detective meets his reflection again, broken up by the waves into little shimmering pieces, smoothed over to form someone else's face entirely.

He goes to the company car and turns it on, placing the memory photograph device in the passenger seat. He drives carefully, aiming not to jostle the precious memory. He'll deliver it to Slopes Media by the afternoon, and perhaps they can make a positive ID on the guy. *Or perhaps tomorrow*, he thinks, the little stack of burns sitting in his chest pocket, all signed K.W. They would be evidence in a lockbox once Weaver was caught, and they would be gone. *Perhaps he could give him a day.*

The rain starts up again just as the detective arrives back at the motel. He takes the memory photograph device from the side door and tucks it beneath his jacket, holding it against his hip like a child, praying the water won't reach. He goes to the gray door of his room on the first floor and opens it to the stale, familiar air. The half-full coffee cup greets him, and he sips it, wincing at the taste. Deep black. Bitter, all of it, the dark motel and the still-made bed, the shadows cast across the pillows. Nothing like the colors of the movies. The rain patters outside like little knocks on the door, insistent, reaching toward crescendo.

Detective Farrier sets the memory photograph device down, and removes the disc. He goes to the computer and inserts it into the tray, anticipation swelling in his chest as the file appears on the screen in its faint blue glow. He clicks on it and pulls up the image, straight from the memory of the witness.

He blinks, stunned for a moment by the computer's light and all it holds in that photograph of Kent Weaver. The rain beats down the door now, the wind screaming, and the detective can only stare at the screen.

The image of Kent Weaver is not the greasy, reclusive man that Vernon had described. It isn't a man at all.

It's an image of a horse, galloping across a field, blurred at the edges like a half-remembered dream.