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LIVES

Amnesia

By RACHEL CLINE

I lived in Los Angeles for almost 10 years, but it all runs together. I can never remember what happened when. In memory, I'm always driving down a sunny stretch of road, listening to [National Public Radio](#), trying not to spill my latte. Sometimes I have a splitting headache, which must mean I am on the east side or in the valley, and sometimes the ocean is glittering nearby. Occasionally I can remember the jacarandas being in bloom, which means, what? May? But that still doesn't tell me the year. It's just an odd lot of incidents, a memory salad. Here, look:

I was awakened by a Very Big Earthquake. I could look up the date on this, but the point is, I can't remember it. I woke up to the sounds of dogs going crazy and then, when the crashing started, realized that the window directly over my head could guillotine me. But I didn't move. I was going to die, and I just wanted to stay in bed. Forty minutes later, my friend Dan showed up with a flashlight. I was fine, but I still feel as if he saved my life.

I got a job on "Knots Landing." I made a pile of money. I wrote that [Halle Berry](#)'s character would put handkerchiefs over her bedside lamps, and there they were in the scene. Red silk. I was giddy with power. Then I was fired. The whole thing lasted less than six months.

I saw a shrink who began each session by handing me a roll of masking tape. I was supposed to mark a "safe boundary" around my chair. I spent a lot of time looking at his socks, which had pictures of golf tees on them.

I spent a year too depressed to get out of bed. Which year? Picture rumpled sheets.

The riots (a k a "the civil disturbance") came. This, of course, took place after the [Rodney King](#) verdict. Or was it the O. J. verdict? All I remember is driving west on the 10, seeing fires on my left and then watching it all on TV. Then I volunteered and spent an afternoon shoveling broken glass.

I turned 40. A friend gave me a dinner party at her splendid house, putting out her good crystal and china. The guest star was a dispirited psychic who didn't even bother to tell me I would eventually meet the man of my dreams.

I put an ad in The L.A. Weekly and went on a date with a cameraman. He had gone to Oberlin and was wearing black Converse high-tops — totally promising! There was just something he needed to tell me before things went too far: he had been abducted by aliens. Was that going to be a problem for me?

I woke up in the hospital with no idea how I got there. I forgot everything I said or heard within seconds of

saying or hearing it, but I knew my name and who was president. A week later, I saw the wreck of my little white car at a sunny impound lot in the San Fernando Valley. It seemed unlikely that the driver survived.

I went to the Oscars. A documentary I wrote the narration for was nominated. The director sat with the famous people; I was led to the third balcony with their moms. Mostly I watched the show on a monitor near the ladies' room. [Oliver Stone](#) passed me on the stairs and said, "How ya doin', babe?"

I was raped, I think. Although I was physically overpowered, I did know the guy, and there was no knife or gun. I remember driving home in the very early morning, wondering if I was ever going to have to see him again and, if so, what I should say.

OK, so those are the events I remember, but what's the right sequence? In the tragic version, an ambitious New Yorker works her way to success in Hollywood only to be pummeled by circumstance (earthquake, riots, rape) into a yearlong depression. When she emerges, the car she's driving is totaled. Sorry, kid, you tried. In the comic version, she sashays into Los Angeles wearing a sign that says "Kick me," and it does, repeatedly (freak therapist, scary dates, gaudy award shows, bad TV). Luckily, she gets amnesia, so the riots, earthquake and joblessness don't bother her in the least.

But of course the true sequence of events is neither of those. Big shock, I've lived my life in the wrong order. I crashed my car within six months of arriving and then, still confused and disoriented, attended the Oscars. I recruited the masking-tape therapist to help me start over after that, but he failed. During a vast, featureless middle period — before the earthquake but after the riots — I went on numerous blind dates, including the one with Marvin the Martian. Getting fired from "Knots Landing" kicked off my year in bed. And my introduction to nonconsensual sex occurred just before my 40th-birthday dinner. It was there, surrounded by real friends and one lax psychic, that I saw the cruel joke behind the preceding nine years of my life: amnesia had been unavailable at every moment when it might actually have come in handy. So I moved.

Rachel Cline is the author of two novels, "What to Keep" and, most recently, "My Liar," set in Los Angeles in 1994.

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