

HOLD ON TO YOUR MEMORIES

By Josephine Strand

How I wish the brain had a recycle bin for old, forgotten memories to be stored in. Then, when we can't fully recall a childhood experience all we'd need to do is search for the missing files and 'restore' them to their original place. Often I find myself searching for memories of my youth. I pretend my cortex is an old, fragmented computer hard drive and try different 'key words'. Was it saved as 'Driving through the Karoo Desert on a hot summer day'? I try 'desert' then 'Karoo'. Nothing. I search and search, but all I find are fragments, random 'files' floating in a messy recycle bin. I once read that long-term memories are not stored in just one part of the brain but are widely distributed throughout the cortex. Not in an orderly pattern, like on a computer hard disk, but haphazardly. Perhaps that's the reason it's so hard to find them.

If not for some old faded photographs and a washed-out Super 8 roll of film, there's little left of that family road trip in my aging brain. An old blue and white Fiat 1100, the roof rack stacked with our luggage, our beach towels hanging on the car windows to block out the scorching sun. The rest, the stifling heat, meals eaten on the side of the road on top of abandoned drum barrels, are just a blur. And no matter how much I rummage through that rubble of discarded memories, not much else comes to mind of that trip—a remarkable one, for sure, to have left a lingering feeling of nostalgia inside me.

How did those memories get locked out in the first place? Did it not seem important at the time to hold on to them? Of course, better to save the newspaper clippings of the first moon landing—a cool story to tell my grandchildren one day. Preposterous, when I think about it, when all that's required these days is to key in a few words in a search engine to find any kind of information. And let's face it, when space travel has reached interstellar proportions and space

tourism is a fast approaching reality, a lunar expedition that took place half a century ago is not likely to grab a child's attention.

Our family's road trip through the Karoo Desert, on the other hand, would hold them spellbound with real-life anecdotes of wild critters slithering on the desert floor, of an endless ribbon of road snaking through craggy mountain passes and red sandy plains, its deep silence broken only by the rumble of the engine and our off-key singing. They'd listen in awe as I relate the precious time lost trailing behind a heard of sheep as it inched slowly across the road to the other side. Not to mention an emergency overnight stop for a leaking water tank in a tiny, isolated desert dorp, where the only 'accommodations' was a sleeping bag on someone's cool stoop under the starriest sky anyone has ever seen. With a little bit of imagination and the help of the old photos it's easy to fill in the blanks. But then it wouldn't be real. There's so much more to the story, so much that was negligently lost, all ending up in that bottomless memory bin of an outdated cerebral hard drive no skilled technician or hacker can ever revive.

Alas, I realize too late the importance of holding on to memories, the ones that really count.