

I

I can't remember my own name.

I repeat the words to myself like a mantra, struggling to stay calm, trying to comprehend their full meaning. Loosed from the moorings of my old life, I can only be guided by the present now.

I watch from the train window as the countryside slides by. Is the person opposite staring at me? I study his reflection in the glass. This must be what it feels like to lose your mind. From somewhere at the back of my skull a headache rolls in. Breathe. I can do this.

My legs start to tremble. I press my feet hard into the carriage floor, one at a time, focusing on the canal now running alongside the railway. I need to keep it together, be brave. How might a normal person behave in this situation? They would take time out, allow the brain to do its thing. Let the synapses fire. Half the people in this carriage have probably forgotten things: partners' birthdays, wedding anniversaries, pin numbers, their own names...

When we reach the station printed on my ticket, I step off the train, filling my lungs with fresh country air as I zigzag up the footpath to the road, following a column of weary commuters. Should I recognise any of them? Rush hour has only just begun. To my left, a river feels its way through a meadow, the shallow water sparkling in the summer sun. Sheep bleat in the distance, a cheer rises from the cricket pitch by the church. Beyond it, fields of rapeseed, the colour of English mustard. And then there's the canal, rows of brightly painted narrowboats tied up along the towpath.

The village is only an hour on the train from London, but it feels very rural. Pastoral. I walk over the railway bridge and head up the high street, past a letterbox, trying to think straight. I know I'm doing the right thing. When I tried to report my lost bag at the airport, the man at the desk said that temporary amnesia can be triggered by all sort of things, but work-related stress is one of the most common causes. In such circumstances home is the best place to be. Post on the doormat, letters with a name on the envelopes. And when he asked me if I could find my way home, I retrieved a train ticket from my pocket and we both agreed that it must be to where I live.

At the Slaughtered Lamb I turn right into a lane lined with old thatched houses. I should be relieved as I walk down towards the last building on the right, a small cottage with a teal-blue front door and dripping wisteria, but I'm not.

I'm terrified.

I try to imagine myself closing the front door behind me, flopping down on the sofa with a large glass of chilled Sauvignon Blanc and something trashy on the TV. Except that I don't have a key. Standing in front of the house, I glance up and down the street and hear a voice behind

the front door. American. A chill runs through me. I step over to the window and peer in. Two people are moving about in the kitchen, silhouetted by low sunlight slanting in from the garden double doors behind them. I stare at the figures, barely able to breathe. My gaze settles on a man chopping salad at the kitchen island with a large steel knife that catches the light. I want to turn away, run down the street, but I force myself to watch as he cuts. Behind him, a woman stands at a Belfast sink, filling a saucepan with water.

I return to the front door, check the number. It's the right house. My fingers are shaking too much to press the front-door bell. Instead, I wrap both hands around the wrought-iron knocker and bang it, my head hanging forward like a supplicant in prayer. *Om mani padme hum*. No answer, so I knock again.

'I'll get it,' the man says.

I step backwards into the lane and almost lose my footing as the door opens.

'Can I help?' the man asks, with a faint, uneasy smile.

I feel dizzy. We stare at each other for a second, each scrutinising the other for something, an explanation, recognition. I realise I'm holding my breath. He glances down at my suitcase and then back at me. I look at him for as long as I can – one, two, three seconds – and then turn away.

I know I should say something at this point – *Who are you? What the hell are you doing in my house? Please tell me this isn't happening, not after all I've been through today* – but I remain silent. Speechless.

'We're not interested if you're selling anything,' he says, motioning to close the door. 'Sorry.' I recognise the accent: the cocksure, familiar sounds of New York. He throws another

glance at my suitcase. He must think it's stuffed full of oven gloves and ironing-board covers, or whatever is hawked on doorsteps these days.

'Wait,' I say, grateful that I can remember how to speak. My voice startles him. Am I shouting? A high-pitched ringing has started up in my ears.

'Yes?' he says. His face is lean, alert, washed-blue eyes set deep, a neat goatee, hair tied in a ponytail. I sense it's not his natural response to close the door on a stranger.

'Who is it, darling?' a female voice calls out from behind him. English.

He breaks into a smile that's almost serene in its intensity. Fleur's face swims in front of my eyes, a fleeting smile on her lips too. I rest a finger against the tattoo on my wrist, hidden below my blouse sleeve. I know that we got one each: a beautiful lotus flower, purple, partially open. If only I could remember more.

'I live here,' I manage to say. 'I've been away on a business trip. This is my house.'

'Your house?' he asks, folding his arms and leaning back against the doorframe. He is well dressed – a floral-patterned shirt, buttoned up at the collar, thin charcoal-grey cardigan, designer jeans of some kind. He seems to find my suggestion more amusing than strange and glances up and down the street, perhaps checking for hidden TV cameras, a presenter clutching a microphone. Maybe he's just relieved that I'm not trying to sell him aloe vera.

'My front-door key was in my handbag, but it was lost at the airport, along with my passport, laptop, iPhone, purse...'
My words tail off, the ringing in my ears now unbearable. 'I was about to get a key from the neighbours, and then I was going to call the police, report—'

FORGET MY NAME

The ground begins to rise up. I force myself to look at him again, but all I can see is Fleur in her apartment doorway, asking if I want to come in. I take a deep breath, visualise a bodhi tree, a figure in repose below its calming, sacred boughs. It's no good. Nothing's working. I thought I could cope, but I can't.

'Can I come in?' I ask, my body now swaying uncontrollably. 'Please?'

A hand on my elbow softens my fall.

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‘She’s very beautiful.’

‘I hadn’t noticed.’

‘Come on, she’s stunning.’

‘She needs help.’

‘The surgery said they’d ring back in fifteen minutes.’

I lie there with my eyes closed, listening. They are in the kitchen, where I first saw them from the window, and I am in the small sitting room at the front of the house. His voice is confident, assured. Hers is more hesitant, softer. After fainting at the door, I came round on the sofa and chatted briefly with the woman, who is called Laura, reassuring her that I was OK and just needed to close my eyes for a few minutes until the dizziness passed. That was five minutes ago.

‘Are you feeling better?’ Laura says, coming into the sitting room.

‘A little,’ I reply, turning my head towards her. ‘Thank you.’ She’s holding a large mug of fresh mint tea. I notice my blouse sleeve has rucked up, partially revealing the lotus tattoo.

‘I brought you this,’ she says, placing it on the low Indian

table in front of the sofa. On one side of the mug is a drawing of a cat in a hero yoga pose. I involuntarily straighten my back.

‘We’ve rung our local surgery, here in the village,’ Laura continues, glancing at my wrist. ‘The doctor’s going to call back in a minute.’

‘Thank you,’ I say again, my voice weak.

‘Still dizzy?’

‘A bit.’

I reach forward for the tea. Laura is in her early thirties. She’s wearing three-quarter-length leggings and a fluorescent sports top, as if she’s about to go for a run, and she’s in good shape: tall and manicured, hair pulled up into a bun, glowing skin. Almost too good to be true, apart from a pronounced darkness beneath her eyes.

‘Tony says you thought this was your house,’ she says, trying to make light of her words. I take a sip of the mint tea, hot and honey-sweet, hoping it might dispel the cold dread in my stomach. ‘Said you were about to get a key. From our neighbours.’

She manages another short laugh and stops, turning away.

‘It is my house,’ I whisper, cradling the mug for warmth.

I can sense her bristle. Nothing obvious – she seems too kind for that – just the faintest recalibration. Tony, who must have been listening, comes to the doorway that links the sitting room with the kitchen.

‘Thank you for the tea,’ I say, keen to keep things cordial. ‘And for ringing the surgery. I’m sure I’ll be fine.’

‘Not if you still think this is your house,’ Tony says. He’s smiling, but there’s a hint of the territorial in his voice. My tattoo is still visible. After a few seconds, I casually pull down my sleeve to cover it.

I take another sip of the tea and look around the low-ceilinged room. Everything is immaculate, nothing's out of place. A wood-burning stove set in a large inglenook fireplace; to one side, a pile of logs, rounded like prayer rolls, neatly stacked; a collection of yoga and self-help books in a small bookcase, sorted by height; a wooden solitaire board, its marbles all in position. Even the reeds of a White Company 'Seychelles' room diffuser on the windowsill have been perfectly spaced. The contents might have changed, but the house's small proportions are familiar.

'I've come here because—' I pause, surprised by the emotion in my voice. 'I've been having a difficult time at work. Today, when I flew in from a conference, my handbag disappeared at the airport. I tried to report it, but I was unable to remember my own name.' I pause again.

'You can remember it now though?' Laura asks, turning to Tony. 'We all have our senior moments.'

Tony looks away.

I shake my head. *I can't remember my own name.*

'At the airport, all I could remember was where I lived. I thought if I could just get here, my house, this sanctuary, everything would be OK. And the one thing that wasn't lost was my train ticket home. I found it in a pocket.'

'You had your suitcase too,' Tony says, gesturing to the front door, where it is standing on end, handle still extended. 'Where was the conference?' he asks. Tony is more interested now, less defensive.

I can feel tears coming and do nothing to stop them. 'I don't know.'

'It's OK,' Laura says, sitting down next to me on the sofa. I realise I'm grateful for the arm she puts around my shoulders. It's been a difficult day.

‘There should be a label on the handle,’ Tony says, walking over to the suitcase.

‘It got ripped off. Before I took the case from the carousel.’

He looks at me as my voice falters. I see myself in the arrivals hall, sitting down on the edge of an abandoned trolley, gazing at the same half-dozen suitcases going round and round. And then mine appeared, in front of a large, uneven parcel wrapped in black plastic and tape. An image of Fleur came and went, her body folded in on itself like a contortionist’s, all elbows and knees.

‘And you really can’t recall where the conference was?’ Tony asks.

‘It may have been in Berlin.’ Another image of Fleur floats up: dancing wildly, her eyes bright. I blink and she is gone, lost in the void.

‘Berlin?’ he repeats, unable to hide his surprise. ‘That’s a start. Airline?’

‘I arrived at Terminal 5.’

‘British Airways. Do you know what time?’

‘This morning.’

‘First thing?’

‘I’m not sure. I’m sorry. I came straight here. Maybe late morning? Lunchtime?’

‘And you can’t recall your own name?’

‘Tony,’ Laura interjects.

I start to sob again, scared by how it all sounds when someone else is saying it. I need to stay strong, take this one step at a time. Laura gives me another hug.

‘All I know is that this is my house,’ I say, drying my eyes with the tissue she gives me. ‘Right now that’s all I can remember. My own home.’

‘But you know that’s impossible,’ Tony says. ‘I can show you the real-estate deeds.’

‘It’s OK,’ Laura cuts in, glancing up at Tony again, who sits down on the other sofa, across from us. ‘We should call the police,’ she continues. ‘Leave our number – in case someone hands your bag in at the airport.’

A shared silence as her words settle like dust in the room, absorbed by the ancient brickwork of the fireplace until there is nothing left of them.

‘I guess there’s no point, is there?’ Tony says after a few seconds, his voice quieter now. ‘Not if she still doesn’t know her name.’

Another silence. I need to tell them everything that I know about this house, the details I can recall.

‘My bedroom’s upstairs on the left, the other one is across the landing, just large enough for a double bed,’ I begin. ‘It’s next to the bathroom – shower cubicle in the corner, bath beneath the window. There’s another small room beyond the bathroom, more of a storage space than a bedroom, and an attic above it.’

Laura looks across at Tony, who is staring at me in disbelief.

‘At the bottom of the garden is a brick outbuilding, perfect for an office,’ I continue. ‘And there’s a shower in the downstairs loo.’

I’m about to go on, tell them about the walk-in larder off the kitchen, but the phone rings.

‘That’ll be the surgery,’ Laura says, picking up the receiver from the coffee table in front of us. I sense she’s grateful for the interruption.

I sit in silence as Laura explains to the doctor about the woman who’s just arrived on their doorstep claiming she lives

in their house. Tony rubs the small of her back as she talks. I look away, close my eyes. This is all too much for me.

‘Yes, she says she can’t remember her name... where she’s been... She says she lives here... I haven’t asked.’ She puts a hand over the receiver. ‘She’s asking for your date of birth?’

The expression on Laura’s face suggests she knows already it’s another pointless question. I shake my head.

‘She doesn’t know.’ Laura listens for a while and then speaks again. ‘She lost her passport at the airport, along with her bank cards, laptop’ – a glance up at me – ‘and all her other ID.’ I nod. She listens again, this time for longer. I think she must know the doctor quite well, maybe as a friend.

‘Thanks, Susie. Really appreciate it.’

She puts the phone down.

‘Dr Patterson, one of the locum doctors, will see you this evening. A personal favour. She wanted you to go straight to A & E to check for any physical causes – head injury, stroke, that sort of thing – but I talked her out of it. We had a hellish time there last week, didn’t we, darling?’ She glances across at Tony, who nods sympathetically.

‘Six hours,’ he says.

I flinch at the thought of so long in a hospital.

‘Because you’re not registered at the practice, I’m taking you in on an appointment in my name.’

‘Thank you,’ I say.

‘Maybe she is registered?’ Tony says.

‘I don’t know,’ I reply. ‘I’m so sorry. Turning up here like this.’

‘Have you heard of something called psychogenic amnesia?’ Laura asks.

Tony looks up.

‘Susie, Dr Patterson, she was just mentioning it. Major trauma or stress can cause temporary memory loss. A fugue state, I think she called it. I’ll let her tell you more. It comes back, though, the memory. Over time. There’s no need to worry.’ She touches my hand.

‘That’s good,’ I say. ‘Can I use your loo?’

‘Of course.’

‘You know where the bathroom is,’ Tony says, standing aside as I walk past him.

I don’t answer. First left out of the kitchen.