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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Way Back Home

Written by Freya North

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# THE WAY BACK HOME

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## *When I was . . .*

*When I was born there were already other children at Windward. None was beyond toddling age and, as such, we were grouped together pretty much like the clumps of perennials in the garden, or the globs of paint on a palette in one of the studios, or the music which drifted from the top rooms – discordant notes that, as a whole, wove together into a quirky harmony of sorts. We were who we were, the children of Windward – a little ragtaggle tribe further defining the ethos and eccentricity of the place.*

*I wasn't born in a hospital. I was born at Windward but I wasn't born in my home. I was born in Lilac and George's apartment with Jette assisting my mother, ably helped by all the other females there at the time, whether permanent or itinerant, mothers or girls, lesbians, lapsed nuns and even an aged virgin. I know all about a woman called Damisi who was visiting at the time though, it seems, no one really knew where her connection lay. She was a doula, apparently, and I know the story off by heart – how she had all the women breathing and bellowing to support and inspire my mother to relax. It worked – I know I was as easy a birth as it's possible to have, slipping out into the Windward world to a backing track that was practically a bovine opera. Some of the other children heard – how could they not – and often, they mooed at me. I didn't mind – it seemed my own special herald. However, when I first*

*heard a similar sound emitted by a cow it scared me senseless.*

*When I was five, Louis, who was always very old but never seemed to age, hosted my birthday party in his apartment. We didn't know he knew magic. He took pennies from behind all our ears – it was probably the first time any of us had coins of our own. He gave me a piggy bank to keep mine in – to start saving the pennies, he explained. I thought I had to save the coins from some fate that would otherwise befall them.*

*When I was ten, my birthday party was a disaster. I'd been at the local school for three years, been to the parties of my classmates – pink and proper, simultaneously joyous and lively and yet fastidiously organized. That's all I wanted – a party like that. A neat cake with the right number of candles. My parents got it wrong. There were only nine candles. Someone – probably my mother – had put a tenth one in, but had decided that it was incorrect. Ten? That's wrong. That small dent in the beige icing of my lopsided, inedible cake was to me a sinkhole of indifference. It struck me then that perhaps not everyone loved everyone.*

*When I was fifteen –*

*When I was fifteen something terrible happened.*

# CHAPTER ONE

Oriana

To Oriana, it seemed so small. So ridiculously and unnervingly small that she felt compelled to rub her eyes. It had to be an illusion – the truer, more sensible, more realistic proportions would surely be reinstated after a good blink. But there it was still, nestled in a fold of land which looked soft enough to be made of fabric. Like biscuit crumbs in a scrunched napkin, there was the small town outside which she'd grown up. She pulled the hire car in to the verge. She didn't want to get out, she wanted to avoid familiar smells that might make it seem real. She didn't want to hear anything that might say well! welcome back, duck. She wanted to believe that she had no history with this mini place and no need of it. It looked silly, being so small. Not worth a detour. Certainly not worth a visit. Not worthy, even, of a drive right through. This wasn't Lilliput. This wasn't romantic. This was Nowhere. Nowhere, also known as Blenthrop, Derbyshire. The worst thing about this bastard place striking Oriana as being so small was that it made the rest of the world feel

so vast. And suddenly she felt isolated, acutely alone and terrifyingly far away from the place she'd called home for so many years, the place she'd left only the previous day. God Bless America, she said under her breath though she knew she'd never go back.

Driving to her mother's house was easier because she'd never lived there. There was little to recognize, nothing to flinch at; she was unknown and that was preferable to intrusive welcomes and waves, however warm and well meaning Blenthrop folk might be. The further she drove from her childhood home, the longer the space she could finally create between her ears and her shoulders. As she relaxed a little, the car seat felt more comfortable and her headache lifted. Really, jet lag had nothing to do with the tension and now that the anxiety had dissipated, Oriana let the genuine tiredness billow over her the way her mother used to waft her duvet when she was a little girl, giggling in bed waiting for it to land. They call it a comforter in the United States, she thought. My mum's gone all sheets and blankets because she says it makes the bed look 'properly made'. My mom – the all-American girl who's now as small-town English as they come.

The tiredness, the tiredness. Should she pull over? Half an hour left to Hathersage. Open the window. Turn the radio up another notch. Drink Coke. Pinch yourself awake. Pinch yourself that you really are here again, eighteen years on. Kick yourself, wondering if it's a stupid idea, really.

* * *

Oriana's mother didn't know what to do. Her daughter was sleeping and though she'd told her mother not to let her, under any circumstances, what was Rachel to do? Her daughter, wan and sunken-eyed, too thin. Rachel looked in at the front room. Oriana was curled embryonically into a corner of the sofa, her hands tucked tightly between her thighs, the tips of her socks hanging limply a little way off her toes; the heel of her right sock was twisted to her ankle, as if her shoe had wanted to cling onto her feet. Her hair looked lank and flat and her lips were chapped. She wasn't wearing earrings. She'd spilled something on her top. This wasn't jet lag, Rachel sensed. This was exhaustion.

Rachel had done that trip back to America often enough since she herself emigrated from there aged nineteen. She knew well that, though jet lag made you feel discombobulated, it didn't make you look like *that* – how Oriana had looked on arriving an hour ago. When Rachel had opened the door to her daughter, she read in half a glance all the unrevealed secrets and sadness that had slipped unnoticed between the lines of her sporadic emails. On her doorstep, Rachel saw how the crux of it all was suddenly writ large over Oriana's face, her general scrawniness. The details, however, remained concealed. She was shocked. How could she have known nothing? She was ashamed that, once again, a mother's instinct had failed her.

'I'll give her another ten minutes,' Rachel said, unsure.

'That'll make it forty winks,' Bernard said. 'I'll be

popping out now. Just round the block.' And he kissed his wife who, just then, really did love his habit of explaining life with sayings and clichés. Bernard Safely. Had ever a person had a more appropriate surname?

'Two shakes,' Bernard told her though they both knew that his walk around the block would take far longer than two shakes of a lamb's tail. She watched him through the bubbled-glass panel of the front door as he walked away. The distortion made him appear to have no bones, amorphous as jelly. Her ex-husband, Oriana's father, referred to Bernard as spineless. Through the warped glass, he did indeed look so. Rachel felt disloyal. She rarely thought about Robin these days. She supposed she'd have to, now Oriana was back, even if she didn't want to. She'd see him in her daughter's crooked smile, her high cheekbones, the way her gaze darted away while she talked but focused fixedly on whoever spoke to her. Father and daughter both had the ability, without realizing it, to make one feel simultaneously inconsequential and significant.

'Oriana Taylor,' Rachel said quietly and then, in a whisper, 'Oriana Safely.'

It didn't flow. It didn't work. It would never have worked. She'd always be Oriana Taylor, daughter of Robin. *The* Robin Taylor. Would they mention him? She and her daughter had managed for eighteen years to skirt issues as if they were dog mess on the pavement.

* * *

Malachy

An ex-girlfriend had described it as *Saturn Returns*. Malachy hadn't a clue what she meant. That dream you have, she'd said, you might not have it often but it'll always recur – like *Saturn Returns*, with similar cataclysmic fallout. It makes you introverted and horrid to be around.

He'd ended the relationship soon after. She was a bit too cosmic for Malachy and she talked too much anyway. If he had the dream, the last thing he needed was a load of astrobabble bullshit. A warm body cuddling next to him, soothing him, taking his mind off it – that's what he required. Saturn Returns. She never knew that a prog-rock band of that very name had formed in his childhood home, exploded onto the music scene for a couple of years in the late 1970s and then finally imploded back at the house in 1981. He never told her, even though the band had jammed in the very place where Malachy currently lived.

Last night, the dream had once again hijacked his sleep, apropos of nothing. In the woods, with his brother Jed, their teenage bodies of twenty years ago encasing their current souls. They were out at summer dusk, shooting rabbits. A large buck running away, stopping, turning and facing him. Delicate eyes and soft silver pelt conflicting with the anomalous fuck-you gesture of lope-long ears rigid like two-fingered abuse. Malachy pulled the trigger and smelt the saltpetre and heard the harsh crack and felt the kick and experienced the extreme pain as half his world went dark.

He'd often wondered whether the rabbit was some kind of metaphor. He'd tried to analyse why in the dream he didn't shout for help; why his brother was there only at the start. And he never knew whether he killed the rabbit, the little fucker. The pain cut the dream short, always. And he always woke up thinking, but it didn't happen like that, *it didn't happen like that*. And he'd be cranky and introverted for a good while after because he knew that he'd much rather it *had* happened like in the dream.

Stupid dream. Malachy left his bed and showered. Dressed, he snatched breakfast, yesterday's post in one hand, toast in the other. What he really wanted to do today was write his novel, not go to work. Business was slack this time of year – early March, thick frost, too cold for tourists, too close to Easter for more hardy holidaymakers; too close to Christmas and Valentine's and Mother's Day for locals to fritter any more of their money. The irony was Malachy could very well *not* open the gallery because, after all, he owned it – but the fact that he owned it compelled him to keep it open, never take time off, never get sick. Tuesday to Friday, 10 till 6. Saturday 10 till 5. Summer Sundays 11 till 2. Closed Mondays. If the gallery was as quiet as he anticipated, he'd work on his novel from there today. He left the apartment, glancing guiltily at the house. He ought to do the rounds, really. He hadn't done so for a couple of days.

Paula de la Mare waved at him, before she hopped into her car, belting down the drive. Malachy followed, absent-mindedly creating acronyms from

the letters on her car's registration plate. At the bottom of the drive, she turned right, taking her girls to school. Malachy followed her a little way before joining the main road into Blenthrop.

Some idiot had dumped litter in the doorway of the White Peak Art Space; yesterday's chips lay like flaccid fingers in the scrunch of sodden paper. He rummaged in his satchel for something suitable like a plastic bag. Phone. An apple. Slim leather diary (he refused to use his phone for anything other than calls). A tin of pencils, a spiral-bound notebook and a flashdrive. He had no plastic bag. The toe of his shoe would have to do. He shoved the takeaway detritus into the gutter and opened up the gallery.

It was always the weirdest feeling. It never diminished and it engulfed Malachy the moment he entered. The immediate stillness and quiet of the space contradicted by the undeniable sensation that, up until that very moment, they'd been alive; the paintings, the sculptures. If he'd turned up a minute earlier, or sneaked in through the back, he was certain he'd have caught them at it. Now, as every day, they were just figures frozen into their canvases, others quite literally turned to stone, bronze or, in the case of Dan Markson's work, multicoloured polymer. It was like the characters in his novel – Malachy sensed they existed without him but whenever he returned to the manuscript, he found them exactly where he'd left them.

In the gallery, he straightened a couple of frames and adjusted the angle of a spotlight that was glaring off the glass of a watercolour. There were few emails

to respond to and within the hour Malachy felt justified in inserting the flashdrive and clicking on the folder called 'novel', selecting from within it the file called 'novel10.doc'.

'Tenth draft in only fifteen years.'

He said it out loud, with contrived loftiness, laughed and took the piss out of himself, receiving the abuse well. All residual effects of the dream had gone, the details were forgotten. Until the next time.

* * *

Jed

None of his girlfriends knew this, but whenever Jed had sex in the morning, he always had Ian Dury playing in his head. He'd grown used to the soundtrack. It wasn't a distraction and it didn't irritate him; it was a brilliant song after all – as sexy in its funk as it was funny in its lyrics. It had started with Celine. She had been French, intense and passionate, and when she'd purred in his ear in the middle of his sleep, *wake up and make love with me*, that's what kicked it all off.

Jed knew his current relationship was on the way out; from fizz to fizzle in eight months. It had been as awkward as it had been depressing last night, to be the only non-conversing table in a packed and buzzing restaurant. They checked their phones, ate, gazed around the room, checked their phones again, eavesdropped on other people's conversations and

barely looked at each other. Fiona went to bed when they arrived back at his flat. I'm tired, she'd said, as if it was Jed's fault. He'd sat up late, finishing off the red wine he'd opened the night before, even though he'd forgotten to put a stopper in it and it really didn't taste very good. Jed had thought, I'm too young to be one of those couples that go out for dinner and don't speak. And then he thought, I'm too old to be frittering away time on a relationship like this. I have a headache, he thought, collapsing into bed and drifting to sleep before he could remember to kiss her goodnight let alone check she was even there.

But he woke, horny. It was natural, chemical. Ian Dury was goading him to have a proper wriggle in the naughty, naked nude. He sidled up to Fiona, his cock finding the soft dale between her buttock cheeks to nestle in. Unlike Ian Dury, however, it wasn't lovemaking he wanted. Just a fuck. She moved a little, her breathing quickening as he ran his hand along her thigh, up her body, a squeeze of her breast before venturing downwards and between her legs. She was warm and moist and she let him manoeuvre her so that he could work his way into her from behind. No kissing. She had a thing – paranoia – about morning breath, which initially he'd found charming, then irritating but today just useful, as he didn't want kissing and eye contact. He just wanted to come because soon enough she'd be gone.

She dumped Jed in a stutteringly over-verbose phone call that lunch-time. It's not you, it's me. I just need some space. Let's just be friends. It's fine,

he kept saying, I'm fine with it. I agree. If something of such little substance was finally over, it really didn't warrant this level of analysis or justifying. Don't worry, he told her, don't worry. I feel the same.

'You feel the *same*?' She sounded affronted, as if her self-esteem was dependent on him being crushed.

Jed sensed this. 'I mean,' he qualified, 'if you're *sure*. Take all the time you need.'

'I'm sure,' she said.

'OK,' he said, 'OK.' And for her benefit, he dropped his voice a tone or two. 'Take care,' he said.

'You too,' she said. 'Friends?'

'Friends.'

He had too many of these 'friends' with whom he had mercifully minimal contact. None had truly made the transition from girlfriend to friend. None had even re-formed into useful booty calls. Ultimately, none meant that much to him because none was the one who got away. He hadn't seen her for such a long time, not since she moved to America a decade and a half ago.

# CHAPTER TWO

Nine o'clock. Oriana felt pleased with herself. Apart from a vaguely recalled period of wakefulness in the small hours and despite the nap that her mother had tricked her into taking the previous afternoon, she'd slept through the clash of time zones and she'd slept well enough for it to feel truly like morning. There was no need to count the hours backwards and figure out what the *real* time was. She accepted that nine in the morning, GMT, was now the true time in her life. She looked at the dressing gown her mother had laid out for her. It was white towelling and had the crest of a hotel embroidered in navy on the breast pocket. My mum has become one of those people who actually *buy* the hotel robe. She didn't know whether she should laugh or cringe at this. She did know she'd rather get dressed than put the thing on. This wasn't her home and it wasn't a hotel and she wasn't comfortable mooching about in borrowed towelling robes. She opened the bedroom door and listened hard. The house appeared to be empty but still Oriana padded quietly, self-consciously, along the corridor to the bathroom. She thought, this is the type of carpet I fantasized about as a child. The colour

of butterscotch and as softly dense and bouncy as a Walt Disney lamb. And the bathroom itself; warm, bright and spotless, with hotel toiletries placed neatly on the sink *and* the bath – additional prerequisites of her childhood dreams. And yet she could not remember her mother ever yearning for such things.

Showered and dressed with her hair in a towel turban, Oriana made her way downstairs. Stairs that don't creak or groan, she mused, make one feel light and dainty. When she was young, her father had called her Fairy Elephant – such was the inadvertent noise she'd make even crossing the hallway of her childhood home. It was only when she was at the base of the stairs that she realized she wasn't alone in the house. From behind the glazed door leading into the kitchen, she could hear the radio tuned low to something middle of the road. It must be Bernard. Had it been her mother, the volume would have been high on a talk show and Rachel would be joining in, or, as Bernard would have described it, having her tuppence worth.

'Morning.'

Bernard looked up from the crossword and a mug of tea. He smiled his uncomplicated smile. 'Good morning, love,' he said. 'Breakfast?'

Last night, Oriana had been too tired not to feel sick after a couple of mouthfuls and prior to that, she'd only snacked on the plane.

'Yes, please.'

'What would you like?'

She looked blankly around the kitchen. She had no idea, really.

'Toast and tea?' Bernard suggested. 'Poached egg?' He could hear hunger in her inability to decide. He chuckled. 'Sit yourself down – have a look at six across.'

She couldn't concentrate on crossword clues and watched Bernard at the stove. 'I had a special poaching pan,' she said, 'in America.'

Bernard had a spoon, a saucepan of boiling water and a perfected technique.

'Fancy that,' he said, his tone genial.

Poached to perfection, Oriana thought, as she tucked in.

'More toast?'

Oriana nodded because Bernard's toast was cut into triangles, buttered thickly and placed in a toast rack. The taste was as comforting as it was delicious. English salty butter and builder's tea. She had to concede that some things just didn't travel well across the Atlantic.

'What do you have for breakfast,' Bernard asked, 'over there?'

Oriana wondered why he was using the present tense. Being tactful, probably. She'd told them both last night that she was back in the UK for good or for whatever. She shrugged. 'I used to just grab something,' she said, 'from a stall or a bakery, on my way to work.'

Bernard filled her mug with a strong brew the same colour as the brown teapot. He used a tea strainer. The tea strainer had a little holder of its own and the teapot was returned to a trivet on the table. He did like things just so, Bernard. Oriana

knew that in itself was what had attracted her mother to this ordinary, gentle man. Her father placed used tea bags on windowsills and tore into loaves of bread with his hands and teeth. Her father once told her that plates were for the bourgeoisie.

'You take your time,' Bernard said and she knew he meant way beyond her eating breakfast at his table. 'Your mother'll not be long.' And he returned to his crossword, instinctively knowing when to pour more tea, when to glance and smile. Privately, they both reflected that they liked this time, just the two of them. They'd rarely had it. They barely knew each other. Rachel, who could have been the conduit, had kept them separate.

After breakfast – and Bernard had insisted she went nowhere near the washing-up (plenty of time for that, love) – he sent Oriana out for a walk, explaining painstakingly the route around the block. His pedantry with directions had infuriated her when she'd been a teen. Boring old fart. Mum – he's such an *old woman*! Now, though, she liked it. It was one less thing to think about – which way to go – because in recent months which direction to take had consumed her entirely. Today was a day just for putting one foot in front of the other, for allowing the sidewalk to turn back into a pavement, for acknowledging that driving on the left was actually right, for accepting that cars were tiny and the traffic lights and postboxes were different, more polite somehow, and that this was Derbyshire, not San Francisco, and that was the end of that.

* * *

'Where is she?'

'She's out for a walk – just round the block. The Bigger Block. I told her the way.'

'But round the block doesn't take an hour, Bernard, not even the Bigger One, not even when your knee's playing up.'

'She'll be fine.'

'Something's happened to her.'

'Here? In Hathersage?'

'Not here in Hathersage, Bernard. Out there – *over there*.' Rachel gesticulated wildly as if America, her own homeland, was an annoying fly just to the left of her. 'Something happened,' she said. 'That's why she came back. That's why she looks the way she does.'

'Well,' said Bernard, 'she had a good breakfast. You can't go far wrong on a full stomach.'

Rachel rolled her eyes and left the house.

The cacophony of tooting and the screeching of tyres tore into Oriana's peaceful stroll.

'Get in, honey!' Her mother was trying to open the passenger door while leaning across the gearstick, buckled as she was by her safety belt and hampered by her capacious bag on the passenger seat. Rachel now had the door open and was lying on her handbag.

'Oriana – get *in*.'

For a split second, Oriana actually thought about sitting on top of her – if the urgency in her mother's voice was anything to go by. But Rachel had managed to straighten herself and hoick the bag into the back by the time Oriana sat herself down.

Her mother was agitated. 'You can't take an hour to walk around the block!'

'Can't I?'

'No!'

'No?'

'No! *Not* without telling someone you're going for a *long* walk.'

She's serious, Oriana thought. She's utterly serious. All those years when she didn't know where I was and didn't care what time I was back.

It was so preposterous. Surely her mother could see that? However, the irony appeared not to have confronted Rachel. But there again, Rachel had reinvented herself and parcelled away the past when she'd left Robin for Bernard. The car radio was on and Rachel bantered back vitriolically at the callers and the presenters, having her tuppence worth, all the way home.