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Remember Me This Way

Written by Sabine Durrant

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SABINE DURRANT

Remember Me This Way



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For B.S., J.S. and M.S

‘I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense.’
C.S. Lewis

Zach

I stood on the common and watched her up in the school library. The lights were on and she passed by the window twice. The third time, she leaned her elbows on the sill and looked out. She seemed to stare straight at me, though I knew I was hidden, my back pressed against the tree, my face concealed behind a web of branches. I had it in mind to step forward when a man came into view behind her, and as she turned, I saw her laugh, a chink of white throat. I imagined his lips then in the dip of her neck, where the vein throbs, her eyes closing, his hands on the swell of her breasts.

If I know for sure that she has moved on, that she has forgotten what we had, I'll kill her.

She has no one to blame but herself.

Chapter One

Lizzie

February half-term, 2013

A deep breath. Petrol, manure, the mineral tang of salt. I'm not that far from the sea, even here. My face is damp from the drizzle and the spray of tyres on wet road. I'm gripping the flowers in both hands now, like a bride. I chose hyacinths, though I wasn't sure – blue ones only. Zach told me you should only ever have one colour in a bunch. I've wrapped the stems in wet kitchen roll and secured them in a small freezer bag. Either I made the paper too wet or there's a small hole in the bag, because water is seeping out. It's dripping down to my elbow.

Over the road, I can see a slope of grass, a copse of blunt trees, the shadow of a hill behind. Above that, sky the colour of dirty sheep, darker patches, a dribble of falling sun in the distance as the cold afternoon closes in. I am concentrating hard on all these things, because I know that somewhere in the corner of my vision, across the carriageway and away to the left, is the spot. But I'm not going to look. Not yet.

It is Valentine's day, exactly a year since my husband's car crash, and I am two hundred miles from home beside an A-road in the middle of Cornwall. This trip is an ending or a beginning – I'm not quite sure which. It's time to move on. People tell me that all the time. I'm trying to believe them.

I pick my moment between the streaming cars and run. When I reach the far side, I look back at the lay-by where my Nissan Micra sits, rocking in the backdraught of the passing lorries. My dog watches me from the side window. I've had a feeling since I parked that I'm being shadowed. It's probably just the remoteness of the place; so many people driving past, no one else stopping. Or it's guilt – guilt about all sorts of things, but mostly that I should have come sooner.

It's conventional to visit the scene of a fatal accident, to leave flowers: all those lamp posts decked with cellophane where poor cyclists have been killed. It's less usual to leave it this long. The night it happened, when PC Morrow came to the door, she would have brought me here straight away. The patrol car was waiting. My sister Peggy stopped me. She told Morrow I needed to go home with her, not drive five hours to a wet, windswept Cornish roadside, to smoke and wreckage. It would be insane, she said. I could go another time. Zach was gone. There was nothing I could do.

And it wasn't as if I didn't know what happened. Morrow, fresh from her Family Liaison training, went over it again and again. I understood about the lethal combination: the sea fog and the wet road, the sharp bend, the soft-top roof, the bottles of his favourite distillery-only whisky on the passenger seat, the oil paints, the solvent-soaked rags in the boot, the thick trunk of the tree – the disastrously placed tree.

I kept putting it off. People understood. Cornwall was Zach's favourite place. He had a house down there that would need sorting out; they assumed I would get to it in my own time. But then, in the days and weeks that followed, I began to dread it – seeing the emptiness of his bungalow, feeling the loss of him all over again.

I feel a shiver up my back. The clouds are thickening. A gust whips my coat. I must hurry up, get this done, return to

the car before it gets any darker. A motorbike, overtaking a lorry, howls. I step back. This thing that had seemed so necessary when I was two hundred miles away has started to feel mad, reckless.

I pick my way along the narrow crumbling shoulder between the white line and the barrier. One foot in front of the other. That's how you get through – everyone tells you that. One step at a time. I focus as hard as I can on the littered ground: a hamburger wrapper, smeared with ketchup; a used condom, oddly bright in the polluted grass. A polystyrene cup, lodged in the barrier, flips and flaps every time a car passes. As I near the bend, a horn blares – in anxious warning maybe, or perhaps in astonishment at the madwoman in the road with her hands full of flowers.

When I get there, I'll put the hyacinths down flat at the base. Is that right? Or do they need to be higher? Perhaps I should have thought more about it, brought Sellotape. Zach would know – though he'd hate me for coming. He would take it as an insult, not a tribute. He hated sentimentality. He didn't even like anniversaries. He'd think I was giving in to cliché, or to the advice of others. 'Who've you been listening to, Lizzie Carter?'

I can sense the tree's form now, its arms veined against the grey sky. I reach the frayed slash in the hedgerow. Pale green shoots on the tip of each twig. It's callous, the way this hawthorn has regenerated, the way it has bounced back. I glance behind once more and then I hoist myself over the crash barrier, and there it is: the tree, an oak, oddly dignified despite the deep gash in its gnarled bark.

Zach's tree. I reach out to touch it, to feel the rough grooves of the bark with my fingers. I rest my head against it. My eyes fill.

My friend Jane didn't think I should come on my own today. I made her laugh to prove I could cope. I put on a

funny voice and talked about my 'ceremonial visit', my 'ritual deposit of floral tribute' – phrases from the self-help book my sister gave me. I didn't tell her the whole truth – how complicated my grief is, how murky; how, more than anything, this is about laying ghosts.

Is all grief so confused, or is it just my particular misshapen form of it? There are days I accept his death and I move through the world as if underwater. Ordinary tasks, like filling the dishwasher, or sending off bills, feel brutal and empty. I resent the pigeons nesting outside the bedroom window; the schoolkids at the start of the term in their new uniform. I can be sideswiped by the smallest of things. I saw a white bike helmet on the head of a man cycling down Northcote Road last week and a wave hit me with such strength, my knees buckled. I had to crouch for a bit on the pavement outside Capstick Sports. Other days, I forget. I am almost carefree, relieved, and then I am overcome by feelings of such intense shame I don't know where to put myself. I succumb to lethargy and depression. I put things off.

Standing here, I feel close to him in a pure way. This was the point of coming. His death feels real for the first time. I must let him go, hard as it is, because, despite everything, he was the love of my life. Peggy is right. He was the man I have spent most of my life loving – the most minutes, the most hours, the most days, the most time. I close my eyes, blink my tears away, and wonder if I can now let my restless thoughts lie.

Something crackles beneath my foot, and I look down.

Propped against the roots is a bouquet of flowers. Casablanca lilies, formally wrapped in cellophane, secured with a large purple ribbon.

I step back. Another accident in the same place: that's my first thought. A black spot. The curve of the road, and the

unfortunate lie of the land. Another night of fog, perhaps. More rain.

I'm disconcerted. I don't know where to put my hyacinths. The lilies look so professional and important. I stand there, wondering what to do. I'm not sure Zach, despite his contempt, would want to share. So it's a moment before I even see the note. It's white. Someone has drawn a large heart with a name – I tilt my head: *X E N I A* – spelled out around it. And at the top, in big black letters, it reads: *For Zach.*

And for a moment, honestly, I think: what a coincidence. Someone else called Zach has crashed and died here. Did they, to use PC Morrow's verb, 'fireball' too?

And then, as the truth settles, I lay the flowers down meekly, to the side. I rise and, in a trance, pass again through the gap in the hedge, over the crash barrier, and I'm heading along the road the way I came, empty-handed, head down. It's only when I look up that I see another car – a silver SUV, right up close behind the Micra, tight against its bumper.

A knot begins to press at the top of my spine. I try to run back across the road but my legs feel weighted, drugged. Cars are coming from behind. A horn blares. My skirt is flapping, trails of scarf whip around my face. Brakes squeal, another horn sounds. A rush of air and spray.

I fumble at the car door, hurl myself into the seat, greeted by the dog, his wiry lurcher body, licking and wriggling and trying to get away from me all at the same time. In the rear-view mirror I watch the SUV pull out, catch the hunched form of the driver wrestling the wheel. He must have stopped to check directions, or take a call. Mustn't he?

Seen in the mirror, my eyes are red-rimmed. A scratch has appeared across my cheek. I rub the top of Howard's head, roll my fingers under his collar and dig them into the folds around his neck. I am trying not to cry.

A hand-drawn heart. Xenia. He never mentioned a Xenia.

I feel a sharp ache of jealousy, mixed with the old longing, but I am aware also for the first time of its opposite: a slipping of responsibility. Someone else loved him. I have a taste at the back of my throat, clean and metallic, and, despite everything, I realise it's relief.

The Internet played Cupid. I like to be upfront about that. My sister Peggy, who cares more about appearances than I do, decided early on that we shouldn't. Pretend it began with a chance encounter at the supermarket. 'Tell people you bumped into each other by the fresh fruit,' she said, 'reaching for the same Fairtrade pineapple or what have you.'

'Or at the ready-made meals for one,' I said.

'Picking over the Mr Brain's Pork Faggots,' said Zach. 'Or what have you.'

I was wary at first. I couldn't think what he saw in me. But at that moment, in Peggy's kitchen, watching him charm my sister, the 'what have you' already a private joke between us, I let myself fall in love.

Jane, happily married to her childhood sweetheart, had encouraged me to sign up. Since we first met at sixth-form college, apart from a brief period in my twenties she had never known me not single. We worked at the same school – it was Jane who put me forward for the job in the library – and she nagged every break time. 'It's not like it used to be,' she said. 'No stigma. You just need to pick a website attached to a broadsheet newspaper. You'll get the right kind of person there. You know . . .' She made a rolling gesture with her hands, spinning delicacy from snobbery. 'Educated.' Jane went to university and sometimes forgets that I didn't.

For my profile, I wanted to write, *Dowdy librarian, few qualifications, main carer for parent with dementia, very little*

romantic experience. Jane had other ideas. *My friends describe me as an outgoing and fun-loving world traveller*, she wrote, batting me away from the screen. *Equally comfortable in jeans and a little black dress.*

'I don't even own a black dress.'

She tutted dismissively. 'Who cares?'

Zach was my sixth date. An artist, he lived in Brighton, way beyond my prescribed five-mile radius, so I almost didn't meet him. On the phone, he suggested a walk. They tell you to avoid that sort of interaction; better to meet in a public place. He had already showed himself a rule-breaker. The others had engaged in a series of emails in which personality-revealing issues were debated – country life versus town, sexual excitement versus companionship. He just asked if he could ring me. Plus he used his real name right away, not 'Lookin'forluv_007', say, but Zach Hopkins.

In his photograph he wasn't skiing, or braced in front of a vintage car. He didn't have his arms around a German shepherd. His picture was black and white, out of focus, shot at a low speed, taken from above, his mouth half open, a slight frown; the puzzled concentration of a person deciphering a crossword. The picture looked artless, picked at random, though as I would find out, nothing was ever artless or random with Zach.

I said yes to the walk. I don't think I hesitated. His low, steady voice; his air, very slightly ironic, of cutting to the chase. Already I was enthralled, knocked off course by his certainty.

He caught the train from Brighton to Clapham Junction and I waited for him nervously outside the new entrance at the top. It was November, overcast, with a light chill in the air – but it wasn't cold. He was wearing a Russian fur hat and a heavy coat over a baggy linen suit. As we set off towards the common,

me tugging at Howard to stop him leaping up at the hat, he told me it had taken a long time to choose his outfit. 'I wanted to impress you with my natural sophistication. You are, after all, a world traveller.' He gave a small bow. 'I was also pursuing a note of eccentricity, an oddity about which we could reminisce. I wanted us to be able to look back and say, "Remember that fur hat you wore on our first date. What were you thinking?" With the added advantage—' he paused to strike a pose '—I thought the trench made me appear more muscular.'

I found it hard to talk because I was so overwhelmed by how handsome he was. The breadth of his shoulders, the blue intensity of his eyes, the stooped height of him. Halfway through my previous date, a coffee in Starbucks with MrNiceGuy, a telecoms engineer from Crystal Palace, I had caught sight of the two of us in a mirror. Our rounded shoulders, our bland and yet vulnerable expressions. We looked like two turtles without their shells. I couldn't think what Zach was doing here. Or why he would waste any time with me. The way he spoke, too, the self-conscious theatricality and the slight nervousness behind it, the accelerated intimacy that might have been ironic or might not. He was the opposite of shell-less turtle, the opposite of bland.

'You seem quite muscular to me,' I said eventually.

We hadn't even walked as far as the traffic lights across the South Circular when he reached for my hand, stuffing it inside his pocket along with his own.

I remember that more than anything – the rough warmth of his fingers, the dryness I was to discover came from oil paint and white spirit, the cracks across his palm. I remember that more than his volubility, or the heavy overcoat or the ridiculous hat. He didn't hold my hand stiffly, either. He rubbed it as we walked, massaging it back and forth with his thumb as if testing the flesh.

Later, when I knew more about him, when he'd explained about his childhood, the problems he had with trust, when he had gazed so deeply into my eyes I felt as if my insides were melting, he told me it wasn't loneliness that had led him to the Internet. In the normal run of things, he met single women all the time. He was in search of a new beginning, that was all. He just wanted to start again.

I turn the key in the ignition and pull out. The traffic is heavy. It's the dull end of a Saturday afternoon, locals are heading away from a football match. Dusk is beginning to roll out across the fields. I still have twenty miles to drive from here and I promised Jane, who knows how much I am dreading opening the door to Zach's holiday house, that I would reach it before dark.

I keep going the long way – the Bodmin bypass and the main road into Wadebridge; two sides of a triangle. It's the route Zach used to take to Gulls before he discovered the short cut. A year ago, according to Morrow's analysis, Zach missed the junction and turned round at the next roundabout. Morrow said he'd probably been drinking. He would definitely have been tired, out late the night before with an art dealer in Exeter, a bad night in a B & B, and then a long day with his paints on the moors.

I think, before I can stop myself, about the last time I saw him – the morning before he died. We were in our small kitchen in Wandsworth. The radio was on, broadcasting the results of a by-election in Hampshire. I was late for work, wary of him, shrugging on my coat, finding a lead for the dog, stuffing on my hat. But as I passed by the door, he reached out and grabbed my sleeve. His pupils were smaller, the irises a lighter blue. His mood had changed. 'I love you,' he said intensely, tugging me closer. 'You do know, don't you?'

'I do,' I said. I never doubted that.

'Because I do,' he said. 'I do love you.'

He kissed me full on the mouth. I tasted coffee, and mint, and last night's whisky. I felt myself sink, yielding, as I always had. My stomach clenched. Tears began to prick. If he had moved his lips to brush the hollow of my neck, I'd have gone upstairs with him, however late I was for school, however scared I was.

I said: 'I'm sorry the chicken had mushrooms in it.'

His voice was soft. 'It's just I thought you knew.'

I said: 'I should have remembered. And I'm sorry I was late home. Peggy was in a state about the baby.'

'She's got you round her little finger,' he said.

Howard came up then and nudged my elbow. I scratched behind his ears. He hadn't been well and I put my hand to his chest, checking.

Zach looked away. 'You love that dog more than me.'

'I don't.'

He rearranged the coffee pot and his coffee cup on the table so the handles faced the same way. He aligned the teaspoon on the saucer. 'Do you promise?'

I'd been kneeling and I stood up, forcing myself to laugh. I had already decided to leave. I had written the letter and posted it. It would be waiting for him in Cornwall. I'd sent it there because I thought it would be better if he were a long way away when he read it. I was hoping this last breakfast would be normal. To my own ears my voice sounded too high, strangulated, the words squeezed dry on my tongue. 'I promise I don't love the dog more than you.'

I spoke to him twice before he died – once on the phone that night and once late the following afternoon. I wanted to hear his voice one more time. He was still on Dartmoor when I rang, at a point called Cosdon, painting a run of ancient stone tors. Bleak and funereal, he said, stretching into the distance like

unmarked graves. He was after a dying light. He would reach the bungalow after dark. I told him to be careful on the last unlit stretch of road. It was the last time I spoke to him.

I pull off the dual carriageway, slow down, head over the bridge. The road narrows to a single lane. I put my lights on. I stay under the speed limit. I always do. Zach said I drive like an old woman. It's the sort of thing I try to remember, his fondness for a casual insult, the way his jokes could tip into something nastier. I hope it will make me miss him less.

It doesn't work.

You can love and hate someone at the same time. You can so pity them it's like a fist in your stomach, be so resentful you want to hit them. They can be the best thing that ever happened to you, and the worst. You can have thoughts of leaving them and yet the memory of their skin, the pads of their fingers across your ribcage . . . these can take your breath away, even after a year.

The letter will still be there at the house. It has sat unopened for a whole year. I imagine it buried under the pizza flyers and the TV licence reminders, the Electoral Roll brown envelopes.

Thank God he died before he read it. That's one thing to be grateful for. He never learned of my betrayal.

When I get there I am going to burn it.

I change gears for the hill. The car jerks. Howard, curled next to me, doesn't lift his head from his paws.

I have driven past the holiday park, and caught, through a hedgerow, my first velvet glimpse of sea, when I see headlights glaring in my rear-view mirror. Undipped, right up close. I am on a slight incline and I accelerate until the lights have receded. Stupid idiot, I think, but then the lights are back. Dazzling, flashing. The car is on my bumper. Its horn is sounding. I think of the silver SUV in the lay-by. Is this an

SUV? I can't see anything else, not the sea, not the banks, not the road, just these insistent, blazing lights, and I've started driving faster and faster, hurtling down the hill towards the village until I reach the farm shop. I skid into the entrance and screech to a halt.

The car zooms past and is gone. I wait for a moment. Howard has got to his feet and is nosing at the window. It is dark out, the vegetable racks loom like gallows, and suddenly everything is very still.

The self-help books with their formal stages of grief, they expect a standard trajectory: shock, disbelief, bargaining, anger, depression, final acceptance. I think I've got jammed. The one Peggy gave me, *The Flowering of Your Passing*, had a chapter on 'pathological grief'. It's when a bereaved person finds it impossible to move on. I think pathological grief might be what I've got.

No one is out to get me. It's pathological. Survivor's guilt. Leaver's guilt. Unfinished business.

If I had stolen the lilies, I could have them with me now. I would touch them, rub their dusty satin between my fingers, breathe their sickly scent and know that I hadn't made them up.

It's a short drive from here, along a web of rough roads that follow the contour of the hill. Gulls is on the outside of this network, close to the edge of the cliff where the properties begin to run out. I put on the radio and rattle the last pock-marked stretch of journey, singing thinly to Taylor Swift.