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Fellside

Written by M. R. Carey

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FELLSIDE

M. R. CAREY



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To Louise. To David. To Ben.

If I lived a thousand years I could never love you enough.

PART ONE

WHO BY FIRE

1

It's a strange thing to wake up not knowing who you are.

Jess Moulson – not thinking of herself by that name or any other – found herself lying in white sheets in a white room, overwhelmed by memories that were predominantly red and yellow and orange. The colours merging and calving endlessly, out of control, billowing heat at her like she'd opened an oven door too quickly and caught the full blast.

Someone had just been talking to her with some urgency. She remembered the voices, low but coming from right up against her face.

Her face . . . Now she thought about it, her face felt very strange. She tried to ask one of the women in white who came and went why this was, but she couldn't open her mouth very far, and, when she did, she wasn't able to make anything happen beyond a few clicks and rasping sounds which hurt her in coming out.

The woman leaned in close and spoke very softly. She was younger and prettier than Jess but still managed to wear an air of authority. For a moment, Jess didn't even have any kind of reference point for what this person might be. A nurse or doctor

seemed most likely, but in the utter disorientation of those first few minutes it seemed possible that she was some kind of nun – that the crisis Jess was going through, against all the evidence, was a crisis of faith.

"You won't be able to talk for a few days yet," the woman told her. "You shouldn't even try. There was a lot of damage to your lungs and the tissues of your throat, and they won't heal if you put strain on them."

Nurse then, not nun. The damage was to her lungs and throat. Her soul might well be intact, although it didn't really feel that way.

Jess made a shrugging gesture with the arm that didn't have a drip in it. She wasn't shrugging the information away; she was trying to ask for more. But the nurse either misinterpreted the gesture or ignored it. She walked on without another word.

Jess was left feeling not just frustrated but afraid. The nurse's expression as she looked down at her had been very strange. There had been compassion there, but also something that looked like reserve or caution. Did Jess have some disease that was communicable? But in that case, why get so close?

She didn't worry about it for long though. There was something in her system that was pulling her endlessly towards sleep. She gave in to it – a surrender that was repeated on and off through that first day. Her conscious periods were short. Her sleep was shallow and haunted by whispers in what sounded like many different voices. Her waking brought the same questions every time as she clawed her way up out of the darkness like a swimmer hitting the surface just before her lungs gave out.

Where am I? How did I get here? Who's thinking these thoughts? What was before this?

It wasn't just the one nurse who was careful around her. They all seemed to have their issues. Jess kept hoping that one of them would answer the questions she couldn't ask. It seemed like this should be something that got covered in Nursing 101. If a patient wakes up from severe trauma, you start by filling her in on the

basics. "You've had a very nasty accident," say, or "You were mugged and rolled and left for dead outside a tube station."

Almost a clue there. A thousand memories twitched at those words. Tube stations had been a feature of her life, so London was probably where she lived. But there was nothing in her mind to back up either the accident or the mugging hypothesis. There was just a hole – the outline you might leave if you cut a paper doll out of a sheet of newspaper and then burned it or threw it away. She wasn't Jess for now. She was the suspicious absence of Jess.

When she did start to remember, she got that same sense of blank confusion all over again, because she was only remembering earlier awakenings. The first day hadn't been the first day after all. She had been here for much longer than that, drifting in and out of consciousness, living in a single fuzzy moment that was endlessly prolonged.

The earlier wakings had been different from the more recent ones. Her disorientation had been overwhelmed back then by desperate, uncontainable hunger. She was an addict (when those memories came back it was in an almost physical surge, as though her compressed mind were snapping back to its accustomed shape) and she had needed a fix. Had needed to feel okay. One time she had pulled herself out of the bed and crawled most of the way to the window, drip and all, intending to climb out of it and slip away down to the Hay Wain on a heroin run. Through the window there was a view of sky and tall buildings – no way of knowing how far away the ground was. But Jess had been prepared to try until the women in white embargoed the idea.

Remembering all this now brought the craving back, but it was dulled. Manageable. The hunger wasn't strong enough to pick her up and shake her. It just sat in a little corner of her mind, politely requesting attention.

That in itself was scary. With the memories of her addiction had come another set of memories, pushed to the surface of her mind by the force of some internal pressure. She'd got clean before, just once in her life, and the process had been a dark streak of

misery obliterating days and weeks. If she'd been through cold turkey again, lying in this bed, then she must have been here for a very long time.

The weird feeling in her face frightened her too. It was as though her flesh didn't belong to her. As though someone had given her one of those cosmetic masks made of fragrant mud and then forgotten to scrape it off after it hardened.

On the third day she tried to sit up. Women in white came running and pushed her down again. "I want a mirror," she told them in a bellowed murmur like the world's worst stage prompt. "Please, just bring me a mirror!"

The women in white swapped uneasy glances until one of them reached a decision. She went away and came back with a tiny compact from someone's handbag. She held it so Jess could look up into her own face looking back down at her. It was a nasty shock, because she really didn't recognise it.

This wasn't the amnesia. She knew what her face should look like, and what she was seeing now wasn't it. Oh, it was a reasonable facsimile that would fool a stranger – and when it was at rest it didn't look too bad. Well, yeah, actually it did. There was thick swelling around her eyes as though someone had punched her a whole lot of times. The skin was taut and shiny in places. And she was fish-belly pale, as if she'd spent a year or two living like Osama Bin Laden in a cave in the side of a mountain.

But when her face moved – when she tried to talk – it turned into something from a nightmare. The right side of her mouth was unresponsive, deadened, so the more animated left side tugged and twisted it into a parade of grimaces. The symmetry disappeared, and you realised that it had never really been there at all.

"Okay?" the nurse holding the compact asked. Gently. Probing the wound.

Jess couldn't answer. There wasn't any answer that covered how she felt.

Some of the recent past came back to her in her sleep that night. The whispering voices were still there, as though a hundred

conversations were being held in the space around her head. With them came a sense of vulnerability, of lying exposed in some big open space. She wasn't alone: a multitude surrounded her, invisible. So many that there wasn't enough room for them all to stand: they were folded around and over her like hot treacle poured out of a pan.

Jess hadn't dreamed since she was a child, but images came and went nonetheless. She held her face – a tiny version of it – in her hands, and then parted her fingers to let it drop. Again and again. Sometimes when it dropped there was a rustle or a tinny clatter from far below her, sometimes no sound at all.

Then the fire came, rising up in front of her.

Climbing in at her mouth.

Nestling inside her.

She woke shivering in the warm hospital room, chilled by her own slick sweat. A breath was caught halfway up her throat like a solid thing, and she had to spit it out piecemeal, in quick, shallow gasps.

"What happened to me?" she croaked at the nurse who came to take her temperature and blood pressure in the morning (smell of breakfast heavy in the air, but Jess was nil by mouth so the smell was as close as she was going to get). "There was a fire, wasn't there? Tell me. Please!"

"You should—"

"I know, I know. I should get some rest. But I can't until I know. Please!"

The nurse stared at her for a long time, hanging on the cusp of saying something. But all she said finally was, "I'll ask the doctor." She tucked Jess in, folding the stiff cotton sheets with the brusque efficiency of an origami black belt.

"Please," Jess whispered again, saving it for when the nurse's face was bent down close to hers. She thought it might be harder to say no at that range.

And it seemed she was right. "Yes, there was a fire," the nurse said reluctantly as she smoothed out the last creases from the sheet.

"Where . . . was . . .?" Jess asked, feeling only a few hot twinges in her throat this time. As long as she limited herself to monosyllables, she could ace this conversation.

"Your flat. Your flat caught fire when you were inside. When you were . . . not able to move."

When I was high, Jess translated. I set my flat on fire when I was high. Who does that? Only someone intent on ruining themselves and everyone around them.

Her mind treated her to a slideshow. A resin statue of a Chinese dancer with a flute. A lampshade shaped like a hot-air balloon with two waving fairies in the gondola underneath. Her folk CDs. Her books. Her photo albums. All gone?

"How . . . bad?" she asked.

"Very bad. Really, you should try not to think about it. It's not going to help you to get well."

The nurse retreated quickly. It seemed to Jess that she wanted very much to get out of earshot before she was made to field any more questions.

And at that point another slide clicked into view.

John.

His face, his name and a sense of what the face and the name had meant. Oh Jesus, if John was dead! Panic flooded her system, only to be followed a moment later by a wild and slightly nauseating surge of hope. If John was dead . . .

She sat up before she even knew she'd decided to. She couldn't sustain it though, and slumped right back down again, sick and dizzy.

She had to know. She husbanded her strength so she could ask, and tried to shore up her non-existent stamina with an exercise regime. She could only hold her weight on her elbows for a few seconds before falling back on to the sheets, but she worked on it at intervals through the morning, determined each time to beat the previous time's total.

Consultants' rounds were at eleven. The doctor walked past Jess's door without slowing, followed by a bustling line of medical students who – each in turn – peered in with big round eyes as

though Jess was a model in a porn shop peepshow before hurrying on to rejoin the crocodile.

Right then.

God helps those who help themselves. Jess hauled herself out of bed and slid her feet down on to the floor. She worked the cannula out of her wrist and let it fall. The loose end drew a ragged red line across the white sheet.

It wasn't easy to get vertical, but once she did, she was able to translate her drunken sway into a forward march just by picking the right moment to raise a foot and put it down.

She headed for the door at action-replay velocity, taking about a minute and a half to cover twelve feet. Getting through the door was more of a challenge, because she accidentally knocked it with her elbow and it started to close on some kind of spring mechanism. She had to lean against it to keep it open as she negotiated the narrowing gap. Then she was through, the door swinging to behind her, and for a moment she thought she was free and clear. But that was because she was looking to the right and the swelling around her eyes left her with no peripheral vision.

From her blind side a hand came down on her arm, just below the shoulder – not heavily or tightly, but it stopped her dead all the same. A voice said, "Ms Moulson, I'm going to have to ask you to go back inside."

Jess turned. It took a lot of small movements of her feet. The woman who was facing her now was not in white, but in midnight blue with a bright yellow tabard. She was a policewoman, no taller than Jess but a fair bit stockier and more solid, and presumably (unlike Jess) not so weak that a stray breeze would knock her over. Jess sagged, checkmated in a single move.

And appalled and confused all over again. Why was there a policewoman here? Was she under guard? And if she was, did that mean that she was under protection or under restraint?

That was such a big, yawning chasm of a question that it eclipsed, for a few moments, the question of what had happened to John.

"Why?" she croaked. That was a little vague, but it would have to do.

The policewoman frowned. She had dark, freckled skin that made Jess flash on the memory of her own face in the mirror – her unnatural pallor, like something that lived under a stone.

"You're under arrest. Didn't you know that?"

She did now. That had to count as progress. She managed another "Why?"

The other woman's expression changed, but only for a moment – a cloud of doubt or concern drifting across it and then disappearing as quickly as it had come. "For murder, Ms Moulson," she said. "The charge against you is murder."

She closed in on Jess, as though she intended to herd her physically back into the room. Jess stood her ground, more out of bewilderment than belligerence. Murder? she thought. Whose murder? Who am I supposed to have . . .?

"You'll have to go back inside," the policewoman said. "I shouldn't even be talking to you. I'm the one who's meant to keep other people from talking to you."

"Who . . .?" Jess panted. The corridor was yawing like a ship at sea. She couldn't move, although she might make an exception for falling down.

The woman's hand came out and took her arm again. She leaned past Jess and pushed the door open – effortlessly, one-handed. Jess could have thrown her full weight against it right then and that feeble little spring would have been too much for her. "Please, Ms Moulson," the policewoman said. "Go back inside now. I'll tell your lawyer you're awake, the next time he calls."

But Jess had come way too far to back down. "Who?" she whispered again. "Who . . . dead? John? Was . . . John?"

"Your lawyer will fill you in," the policewoman promised. But when Jess didn't move, she sighed heavily and shrugged. "It was a little boy," she said. "A ten-year-old. It looks like it may have been an accident, but that's not for me to say. You set the fire, and the charge as I understand it is murder."

She had both hands on Jess's arm, one above and one below the elbow, and was trying to turn her around. But no part of Jess was communicating with any other part now. Her upper body moved, her hips twisted, her legs stayed exactly where they were.

There was only one ten-year-old boy who she knew even vaguely. His name popped into her head from nowhere, and her lips shaped it although no sound came.

Alex.

Alex Beech.

She was aware of falling. But the floor, when she got to it, recoiled from her as though she was something unpleasant to the touch.