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The Day I Lost You

Written by Fionnuala Kearney

Published by Harper

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'Incredibly moving'

SUSAN LEWIS

The DAY I LOST YOU

'Beautiful & life-affirming'

ANNA MCPARTLIN

FIONNUALA KEARNEY

The DAY I LOST YOU

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HARPER

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For the strongest women I know – my daughters, Kate and Jane, and my mother, Mary.

PART ONE

Prologue

There are always before and after moments. Profound instants when, one second, life is a clear, high-pixel image and the next, it's grainy, less focused.

The day it happened, the seventh of December 2014, had been a normal day – nothing unusual about it. A band of low Arctic pressure produced the sort of cold that froze my fingers through gloves and numbed my toes through sheepskin-lined boots. The winter sky – a perfect, crisp blue – was marred only by wispy white plane trails latticing through it.

Theo and I were on the Irish coffee stall at the Christmas fair all afternoon – the most dreadful baristas, unable to produce a straight line of cream along the top of the coffee and a little too liberal with the alcohol. It was the season of goodwill. Fairy lights flashed: home-made crackers with loo-roll centres were snapped; high-pitched carols were sung; crumbling, puff-pastry mince pies were trodden into the polished parquet floor of the school hall, and the heady scent of festive cinnamon and cloves filled the air.

I remember it being a fun-filled afternoon.

When I got home, I flicked the kettle on and turned the thermostat up. I sat a while, my hands wrapped around a cup of black tea, staring into the garden in the fading light, my feet tucked up underneath me. Much as I loved her, days without Rose were precious. I had so little time to myself that merely sitting, *being*, just the act of doing nothing was a joy. Right up until the moment the doorbell rang, it's the 'ordinary-ness' of that day that I recall.

When the door pinged, I still didn't stir – not until I heard Doug's voice through the letterbox. Then I leapt from my seat.

'Jess. It's Doug. Can you open the door?'

I made my way to the hall, heard him moving about in the porch; foot to foot. *Doug has not come to my door for a very long time*.

From my jacket pocket, my mobile phone trilled. Seeing his number, I realized he would have heard it ring too.

'Open the door, Jess. It's important.'

I answered the phone and hung up immediately.

'What do you want?' I spoke through the four solid panels.

'I need to speak to you. Please.' His voice seemed to break on the last word and I opened the latch.

Doug, my ex-husband, the man whom I apparently 'strangled with my love' was standing there, shivering.

'Can I come in?'

I looked over his shoulder, expecting to see Carol, his wife, there.

'What do you want, Doug?' I repeated.

'Can I come in?' he asked again.

And that was the moment. I made the mistake of looking in his eyes; the cobalt-blue eyes that Anna, our only child, had inherited from him. One generation later, Rose has those same eyes too. That was the split moment – between what was, and what would be. His next words tapped a slow, rhythmic beat in my head; each one etching itself on my brain like a permanent tattoo. And something happens when the body is forced to hear unwanted tidings; life-changing, cruel words. Adrenaline charges to the extremities, willing the frame to stay standing, despite the urge to fold; willing the heart to keep beating, despite the urge to snap into hundreds of tiny fragments.

My knees buckled at right angles – my entire body felled. An instant sweat oozed from my pores, seeping through to my fingertips. Fear choked me, as I fell into Doug's arms, as his familiar scent washed over me. And, in an instant, the world, as I knew it, was different.

1. Jess

Ten Weeks Later – Friday, 13 February 2015

I wake to the taste of salt on my lips. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the early morning light; my mind takes a little longer to realize that I've been crying in my sleep. With a glance at the neon clock by my bedside, my damp lashes blink. It's useless – I won't fall asleep again.

My limbs stiff, I climb slowly out of bed before crossing the landing to check the room opposite. She's there, fast asleep. I resist the urge to touch her, to rest the back of my fingers on her forehead. It's a habit; a throwback, I think, to when she had pleurisy as a baby and we failed to spot the temperature early.

Her breathing is soft, regular and rhythmic as a slow beat on a metronome, her chest rising and falling under the duvet. She turns onto her stomach, faces away from me, one hand stretched in a curve above her head, the other falling over the side of the bed. I take her arm and tuck it in beside her.

Next along the landing is Anna's room. I grab a pillow from her bed and, clutching it tight to me, take the stairs down slowly. Soon, the coffee machine clucks, promising my morning nectar.

I fill Rose's lunch box. It's the last day of school before the half-term break and something tells me she'll wake early, excited at the fact that today means no lessons, lots of playtime fun, not to mention the holiday . . . School closes early, so it's just a snack; just one slice of bread, lightly buttered and sliced in two, a piece of ham inside. Crusts removed. She hates crusts. A satsuma – the easy-peeling sort – and a bottle of water.

I stop my hands moving; wonder, if I turn the television on, will it halt the onset of what I just feel in my bones is a bad day. Before I know it, my hand is on a nearby photo frame. I don't even look at it, instead raise my arm and hurl it across the room. It takes on a Frisbee-like flight, landing, where I must have hoped it would, on a sofa three metres away. I walk from the kitchen to the other side of the room that stretches across the back of my narrow house. There should be a dining table here. Instead, there's a leather armchair and a frayed, unloved, tatty two-seater that Anna and I rescued from a skip with great intentions of reupholstering it. Slumping down into it, I run the palm of my hand over its ancient fabric, feel its bobbly surface. I reach for the tossed frame, clutch it to my chest, before releasing it to my lap – image facing down.

I pick up the phone and dial a familiar number. 'Tell me not to smash the photos. Remind me I would really regret it.'

'Jess, it's six a.m.'

'I'm sorry. Tell me. Please.'

'Ok-ay.' Leah clears her throat and I imagine her sitting up in bed, Gus grunting an objection beside her. 'Leave the photos alone, do not break anything; you will regret it.'

'Right.' I clutch the silver frame tighter. I don't need to look. It was taken on a camping holiday in France the summer Anna was fourteen, the summer she discovered boys.

Leah tries hard to stifle a yawn. 'I would've called you in another hour.'

'I know.'

'Happy Birthday, big sis. You going to be okay?'

I giggle, a small ironic sound. 'Sure I will. I'm sorry for waking you. Apologize to Gus. See you later.'

I hang up the phone, stroke the back of the picture frame. Today is my forty-eighth birthday. It is also her twenty-fifth birthday. Twenty-five years ago, she shot into this world with the speed of a firing gun. But for a midwife with advanced catching skills, she would have flown off the bed, hanging by the cord that still joined us.

'Happy Birthday, baby.' I talk aloud, but there's no one there.

'Nanny?' I turn quickly. Rose is walking towards me, her arms outstretched. She seems to move in slow motion and I remember to take it in; to commit this image of her sloping towards me to memory, her curls all awry and bouncing as she moves. I bend down to her as she reaches me and pull her up to my chest. She puts her arms around my neck, her fingers lacing through my own twisting locks. And I'm cast back to when she was a

toddler and she had barely any hair yet. What she did have was downy-fine and corkscrew. She would find mine and pull it, gently unravelling the coil, fascinated by the spiral twists. I was captivated. She was not my child, but through the twists and turns of shared DNA, we had the same twisting, turning hair.

And now, here I am, my fingers laced through her mane, massaging her head in a way I know she loves.

'I had a bad dream,' she says, gripping me tighter.

Me too. I dreamt that your mummy had left us. Every night I dream your mummy has left us. Then I wake up and smell her pillow and tell myself it was just a dream.

'Don't worry, love.' I kiss her hair. 'It was just a dream.'

'Who were you talking to?'

'Nobody, I was just talking to myself.'

'Daddy says people talk to themselves when they get old.' She pulls away and peers directly into my eyes. 'Are you old today, Nanny?' Her mouth smiles, yet it's her eyes, lined by long curving lashes, that seem to laugh. The wonder of that almost makes me gasp.

I tickle her under her arms. 'Cheeky,' I say. 'Not that old. C'mon, let's get you showered before breakfast.' She squeals and runs up the stairs ahead of me, shouting that she has a card for me. At just five years old, she has no memory that today is her mother's birthday too and, all in all, perhaps that's a good thing.

At the school gate, I'm joined by Leah, who sidles up beside me. After I've held onto the child for an irrational length of time, I let go, and together we wave Rose into school.

Before she gets to the door, she runs back to me and whispers, 'Love you, Nanny.'

'To the stars and beyond.' I blow her a kiss and she catches it in one hand, then tosses it back to me and I tap my heart. It's a thing we have; something we started when I first dropped her at 'big' school. It's something Anna and I used to do when she was little too.

She darts off, her friend Amy linking her arm at the door to their classroom.

It feels strange for me not to join her, but having managed to wrangle a rare day off by swapping shifts with Trish, the other teaching assistant for Year Six, I'm not hanging around in case someone changes their mind. My break for the half-term starts now. From the yard, Finn, Theo's son, gives me a small wave. He's tall for his age, his head hovering above his classmates, and I can tell he's wondering why I'm still on this side of the gate.

'You checking up on me?' I ask my sister, as my fingers curl a return wave to Finn and I walk back to my car.

'Yep.' Leah isn't known for subtlety.

'I'm all right.'

She shakes her head. 'Don't be ridiculous, none of us are all right. Here . . .' She hands me a small package and a card and I put them straight into my bag. 'I know you won't celebrate your birthday . . . her birthday,' she says. 'But nor should we forget the day.' She reaches for me and gives me a squeeze. It's not a hug. Leah doesn't do proper hugs. I take advantage anyway and close my eyes briefly.

'Sean is picking her up straight from school, right?' she says.

I nod. He came around last night to collect her bag after she'd gone to bed.

'It's only for ten days. She'll have a wonderful time with her daddy and it's good that his parents are on hand to help.'

I pull away. The thought of Sean, Rose's father, playing Daddy with her on holiday in some all-inclusive resort in the Canaries doesn't fill me with the joy everyone seems to expect. He doesn't even really know her; doesn't know that she likes mini-yogurts after dinner; doesn't know that she wakes up three nights a week calling for her mummy; doesn't know that she likes to choose her own clothes every day; doesn't know that she needs cuddles at night to help her sleep. He knows none of this.

'He doesn't even know her.' I say it aloud.

'He's trying. Even before Anna died—'

My head snaps around. 'Don't.'

'I'm just trying to point out that you and Anna together were a force of nature. Let him be her father, Jess. Rose is going to need him too.'

I wrap my arms around myself.

'Let's go for breakfast,' she says.

'No.' I will her to stop talking, wonder why she's not already on her way to work.

'I'm sorry.' She knows what she's done. 'I shouldn't have said that.'

'You shouldn't.' No one. No one is allowed to say that Anna is dead. No one. I don't care if it's denial. I don't care if the chances of her being alive are nonexistent. I have no body to bury.

Leah reaches out, wraps her arms around my neck.

'I'm sorry,' she repeats. 'Today of all days, that was insensitive.'

'I miss her so much,' I whisper softly, then bite my bottom lip so hard that I taste metal.

'I know,' she says, her squeeze lingering, her grip unusually tight on my sleeve. 'I'm here. I love you.'

I don't tell her that it's not enough.

'Breakfast?' she repeats.

'What in Christ's name am I going to do?' I ask on the way back to our cars.

Leah shrugs. 'Just keep breathing in and out.'

'That's it? That's your advice?'

'You don't—'

'I don't what? Tell me, Leah. What is it I'm not doing? You have no bloody clue.'

I walk away yelling behind me, 'I don't want breakfast. If you hurry you can catch the nine ten to Waterloo.'

'Jess, stop. Wait.'

I'm already in the car, strapping myself in. She doesn't get it. She has never had children, and it has left her remote, detached from real life. As the engine revs into life and her form disappears in the rear-view mirror, I justify leaving her there in my head, even though I know I shouldn't have. I curse myself. She's doing her best. We all are, but Leah doesn't know what unconditional love is. Leah doesn't know how the pain of a missing child takes over and has a heartbeat of its own.

I drive the short journey from the school to home, and when I get there try to busy myself with housework. On the way upstairs, I pass by a pile of Anna's shoes in the hall. They're stacked on top of one another. There are

heels and flats all lumped in together – a knee-length suede, high-heeled boot embraces a brown brogue. I don't touch them. I'm afraid if I touch them, even move them to her room, that she won't come home. So, I leave them there. I try to forget all the times I shouted at her to remove her pile of crap from the front door. That's what I called them, these things of Anna's – a pile of crap.

In Rose's room, I hoover the floor, which is covered in glitter from the birthday card she made. I strip her bed, find a few pieces of Lego in the sheets, and toss them into a large box underneath. Her scent lingers on the bedding and, as I make my way downstairs to the washing machine, past Anna's mound of shoes, I inhale it.

Downstairs, my phone vibrates a message from Theo. A firm friend since we worked together over ten years ago, he's someone I know I can trust with my mood today.

'Happy Birthday' seems all wrong. Costa at 12? X

I read his text and consider saying no. Theo's probably just on an hour's break from the surgery, and I should probably be more mindful of my state affecting another. But the thought of a long and lonely birthday stretching before me stops me doing the right thing.

It's exactly midday and he is there first, two coffees already in front of him, sitting in the booth to the rear of the café, our usual perch for putting the world to rights. The scent of crushed, bitter coffee beans fills the air. It pokes a memory of the day Anna went missing, the day of the Christmas fair.

'Before I sit down,' I say. 'One thing . . .'

Theo's eyebrows stretch.

'I don't want to talk about my birthday.'

The stretch reaches further, creasing his forehead.

'Theo?' I refuse to sit down until he agrees.

'Okay.' He pushes a coffee to the opposite side of the table from him and I slide into the booth. 'So,' he says. 'How're you coping with the fact that today is Anna's birthday?'

My eyes close slowly.

'What?' he says. 'You told me not to mention your birthday. You never said anything about not mentioning hers.'

I pretend he hasn't spoken, take a sip of the coffee, make a face, then swap it. 'Sugar,' is all I say.

I want to talk but can't. I want to cry, but only seem to be able to do it in my sleep. An empty but easy silence falls between us. It's like that with us sometimes. We've been friends for such a long time that the quiet doesn't scare us. Theo rubs his nose with the back of his hand.

'It's no easier,' I finally speak. 'I swear. Some days – it's everything I can do to breathe.' I'm reminded when I hear these words aloud how badly I behaved to Leah. 'That line about time healing isn't true,' I tell Theo. 'All lies. Time doesn't heal.'

'It will. Days like today will always be the worst.'

My head shakes. 'Today's bad. Yesterday was worse – the apprehension . . . It's like physical pain and it's all over, every muscle, every nerve ending in my body.' I grip the handle on the coffee mug so tightly that my knuckles whiten. 'Before . . . birthdays, sharing the day together, it was such a special thing, as if she always knew that *she* was the best birthday present I ever got.'

He sips his coffee, his silence letting me know he gets it, then deftly changes the subject.

'Are you doing anything tonight?'

'Dinner at Leah's. Gus is cooking,' I tell him. 'But I'll see how I feel. I'm not sure I'll go.'

'You look like you could do with a hug.'

My eyes dart around our local Costa. 'No thanks, you're all right. Granted you're separated, but you've probably got half a dozen patients in here and you're still a married man.'

'Hmmm,' he says.

'What does "Hmmm" mean?'

'Nothing. We're here to talk about you. You want something to eat? You should eat. You're all skin and bone.'

I refuse food. 'How's Finn doing?' I have found it hard since Harriet walked out on their marriage to understand how she also walked away from their eleven-year-old son.

'He seems all right. This is the first half-term where he gets parents sharing him. It'll be strange. You spend more time with him during school hours than I do.' His smile is half questioning, but it's not something I'm prepared to get into – not today. Finn is not himself in school, seems attention seeking; but then again, that's probably only to be expected.

'Right. I should get back.' He taps his hands, palms down, on the edge of the table, then stands. 'You want that hug?' His eyes, the same colour as the casual khaki-coloured trousers he wears today, rest on mine.

We embrace. He holds me tight. I catch a whiff of his aftershave, and all I can think of is Anna. I close my eyes,

pretend that this moment of closeness is with her; pretend that it's her scent – a floral, sweet one rather than a musky one – that I'm inhaling. I have to stop myself clinging to him.

'This time last year, remember the night?' he whispers.

I do remember. A crowd of us went out to celebrate my birthday and I ended up dancing on the table. It was a night for Sean to have Rose, and Anna had called to collect me in a cab after being out with her own friends. 'Taxi for drunk mother!' she had called into the pub.

'It's good to think of fun times,' he says.

Theo seems to know the exact picture I have flooding through my brain. He rests his hand on the top of my back and, for a brief second, I think he's going to say something profound, something that might make a difference – some insight into how I'm going to handle this all-consuming, exhausting, loss. Instead he says, 'It's shit, Jess. Nothing I say will make it better, but I will keep on trying.'

His remark's not profound but, somehow, it helps.

It's ten forty. I'm lying in bed on the night of my forty-eighth birthday. My mother has left two answerphone messages for me, neither of which I have felt able to respond to. My ex-husband sent me a text telling me he is thinking of me. My only sister is mad at me for walking away from her this morning and cancelling dinner tonight. My beloved granddaughter is in another country with her father and his parents. My friend's marriage is over and, though he still wants to help me, I'm not sure anyone can. It's Anna I want to hear from.

I snap a Valium from a pack Theo prescribed. Tonight, I need to sleep.

I'm floating on an airbed on a calm sea, rising and falling with the gentle ebb of the dark blue ocean – the colour of her eyes . . . I recognize the beach from a holiday we'd taken years ago – Doug, me and Anna. She's there, on the sand, and she's waving to me. I'm so thrilled to see her that I slide from the airbed, begin to swim back to shore. All the while, she's laughing and waving, calling to me, 'Mama! I'm here!' And as I swim as fast as my limbs will allow, I'm crying, thinking, 'She's not missing, after all. Look! There she is, you can see her.'

I stop swimming, tread water for a moment, am frustrated as I don't seem to be nearing her. 'Mama!' she continues to call. 'Over here!' And then I see it, a huge sea of white behind her. It's moving quickly and I'm confused. How can a white wave be coming for her? I'm the one in the sea. When it swallows her whole, I feel myself sinking underwater. As I fall, I tell myself she's still alive, but I know . . . I know she would never have left Rose.

I wake, groggy. My face is wet.

I cannot cry, but every night I seem to swallow the sea and the salt water escapes through my eyes.