REMEMBER ME

CHARITY NORMAN was born in Uganda and brought up in successive draughty vicarages in Yorkshire and Birmingham. After several years' travel she became a barrister, specialising in crime and family law in the northeast of England. Also a mediator and telephone crisis line listener, she's passionate about the power of communication to slice through the knots. In 2002, realising that her three children had barely met her, she took a break from the law and moved with her family to Aotearoa New Zealand. Her first novel, *Freeing Grace*, was published in 2010. *Second Chances* (*After the Fall*) was a Richard and Judy Book Club choice and World Book Night title. Her most recent, *The Secrets of Strangers*, was a BBC Radio 2 Book Club choice for 2020, shortlisted for Best Crime Novel in the Ngaio Marsh Awards for Crime Fiction, and for best International Crime Fiction in the Ned Kelly Awards.

Also by Charity Norman

Freeing Grace

After the Fall

The Son-in-Law

The New Woman

See You in September

The Secrets of Strangers

REMEMBER ME

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For Pauline Perry

Remember Me _TXT.indd 5 25/11/21 2:28 pm

Remember Me _TXT.indd 6 25/11/21 2:28 pm

Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

—Henry Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas*

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17 June 1994

'I envy you,' she says.

She doesn't. Why would she envy me? She's Dr Leah Parata, five years older and infinitely, effortlessly superior. Everything about the woman screams energy and competence, even the way she's twirling that turquoise beanie around her index finger. She's tall, light on her feet, all geared up for back-country hiking in a black jacket—or maybe navy blue, as I'll later tell the police. Waterproof trousers, walking boots with red laces. Hair in a heavy plait, though a few dark tendrils have escaped.

'I really do,' she insists. 'You've bought your ticket to Ecuador. What an adventure.'

'Hope so.'

'I know so.' She grabs a bar of Cadbury's from the display and holds it up to show me. 'Got a craving.'

'I didn't know you were a chocoholic.'

'Just when it's cold. This should keep me going all the way to Biddulph's.'

I've only once managed to haul myself up to Biddulph's bivvy,

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a ramshackle hut on the bush line, built about a hundred years ago for professional rabbiters. They must have been hardy people. As I count her change, I peer out at the weather: standing water on the petrol station forecourt, raindrops bouncing high off the mustard-coloured paintwork of her car. The ranges are smothered in charcoal cloud, as though some monstrous creature is breathing out giant plumes of smoke.

'Seriously?' I ask. 'You're heading up there? Today?'

She takes a casual glance at the cloud cover. It seems to delight her. 'Lucky me, eh? Perfect weather for finding Marchant's snails. The first wet days after a dry spell bring 'em out. I've got a happy weekend ahead of me, crawling around in the leaf litter.'

I can't imagine why anyone would choose to tramp through those rain-soaked forests and uplands, but then I've never been a mountain woman. Leah is, of course. She took her very first steps in the Ruahine Range. To her, that wilderness is home. She's going on and on about her snails while I smile and nod.

'They're *this* big!'—holding up her fingers to demonstrate. 'Carnivorous.' She catches me blanching at the image of a giant, flesh-eating snail. 'Okay, maybe not the sexiest of our native creatures. But their shells are works of art, they've been around for millions of years, and now they're in trouble because everything preys on them. Possums, rats, pigs.'

Blah blah blah, I think, because I'm twenty-one, and empty-headed, and I've been jealous of Leah for as long as I can remember. Her teeth are a bit crooked. She has a high forehead, a small mole on her left cheekbone and a permanent concentration crease, a vertical line between her eyebrows. Yet somehow, these imperfections add to the hypnotic effect. I can see why my brother Eddie's had a crush since he first clapped eyes on her, swimming her horse in the Arapito stream. They were both eleven then, and he was a scrawny kid from Leeds, but he still hasn't given up hope.

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Just as she's opening the door to leave the shop, she drops her chocolate—*oops*—and swiftly stoops to pick it up again, flashing a wide, warm smile at me.

'Ecuador! Good for you, Emily.'

'I'll see you before I go,' I call after her.

I'm not sure she's heard me. She's striding across the flooded forecourt, pulling her beanie onto her head. The turquoise looks vivid even through rain-streaming glass. She checks her watch before getting into the car. I bet she's already forgotten our conversation. She'll be thinking about her snails, about what she's got to achieve over the weekend.

Her brake lights flicker at the exit. Now she's accelerating away, water rising in sheets as her wheels bounce through the flooded hollows.

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They never found Leah Parata. Not a boot, not a backpack, not a turquoise beanie. After she left me that day, she vanished off the face of the earth.

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ONE

February 2019

The sign I painted thirty years ago still hung beside the road gate: *Arapito*. The name means 'End of the path', which seemed eerily apt right now. I'd illustrated it with a pair of fantails in flight, though time and rust had obliterated all but their wings. Leaning out of the driver's window, I opened the creaking metal mouth of the mailbox. Mainly junk. A bank statement.

The landscape was a bleached desert, acres of desiccated grassland even up here in the foothills. Dust billowed in a beige cloud as I nosed my car up the drive. A small flock of sheep sprinted ahead, tightly bunched together, docked tails bouncing. Familiar things: the school bus shelter at the gate, the derelict woolshed, the backdrop of mountains. At the end of the drive a long, single-storey villa, surrounded by trees, clad in white weatherboards with heat haze dancing off its tin roof. *Arapito*. My home.

Dad was standing on the back porch, wearing canvas trousers and a polo shirt. Upright, tidy, self-contained. I waved as I rounded the house. I waved again, smiling, once I'd cut my engine. He simply watched me, shielding his eyes with one hand.

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Silence. For one final breath, I hadn't quite arrived. I was still on my journey, still free. I had a desperate impulse to turn the key, reverse and speed away—back to the airport, back to my own life.

Why was I here? What possessed me?

I was here because of that phone call. Just a month ago, a wake-up call. I'd worked in my studio all day, gone out on the town to celebrate a friend's promotion, fallen into bed long after midnight. Four hours later, the blaring of my phone dragged me from the paralysis of dream.

Still dark, silly o'clock. Must be Nathan, calling from . . . Malaysia? No, he'd moved on. Jakarta. My son never worried too much about what time it was in London, especially when he'd run out of money and wanted a payout from the Bank of Mum.

'Nath? Whassup?' My tongue was still numbed by sleep.

Not Nathan. My caller was a woman.

'Oh, Emily, I'm so sorry! Have I woken you?'

I lay with my eyes shut, trying to place the voice. A New Zealander, for sure. I wasn't in touch with many people in Tawanui, and these deep, placid tones certainly didn't belong to my sister. Carmen always sounds as though she's about to slap someone's face.

'I forgot the time difference,' the woman said.

Ah! Now I had it. Raewyn Parata. Our neighbour, our school bus driver. Leah's mother, the woman whose name was synonymous with tragedy. Raewyn had ample reason to be angry with the world and yet she always sounded pretty much as she did now: interested, gently determined.

Something must be wrong with Dad. I couldn't remember when I last lifted the phone to call him. Damn it, I meant to! If the worst had happened, I'd fly back for the funeral. Be easier to talk to him when he's dead.

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I didn't say any of that. You don't. You observe the social niceties, even when you know bad news is coming.

'Raewyn! How are you?'

'Good. I'm good.'

I was pulling a jersey over my head, feeling guilty, thinking about funerals.

'What's happened? Something up with Dad?'

'Well . . .' A hesitation. 'You heard about his accident?'

'Accident?'

'Nobody's told you. Uh-huh. Thought not. About a week ago, he and his car somehow ended up in a ditch next to Arapito Road. He wasn't hurt—just bruises—but they kept him in Hastings hospital overnight in case he was concussed. Ira dragged his car out of the ditch and took it to the panelbeater. Anyway, it's not just that . . . um, where do I start? For quite a while now I've been bringing him meals, shopping, doing a bit of cleaning.'

'He can afford a cleaner, Raewyn.'

'That's not the point.'

'You shouldn't be cleaning for him.'

It's tricky to pull on your jeans with a phone tucked under your chin. I managed it somehow before blundering into the kitchen. *Tea. Milk*. I pictured Raewyn in her own kitchen, on the other side of the planet. She stayed on after her son Ira moved out—stayed on alone, despite the shadows gathered there. A wooden house with peeling paint and rotting boards; fruit trees in the garden, generations of sheep grazing up to the fence.

'The doctors were worried,' she was saying. 'He kept asking how he'd got there. He was trying to examine other patients, checking their charts! We've known for ages, haven't we?'

'Have we?'

'But—oh, Felix!—he's refusing to take any medication. He says he's not going to prolong the inevitable.'

'He was fine when I was last home.'

'Are you sure about that?' I heard the small silence of her disapproval. 'That was . . .'

'Getting on for three years ago, now.'

'Long time. He was already hiding it then. Battling on. That's why he resigned from everything, that's why he's become such a recluse. Manu did the same: quietly gave things up when he knew he couldn't manage.'

The fridge door closed with a gentle click. It was covered in photos, mainly of Nathan at every stage from babyhood to twenty-two. Nathan, the cleverest little knock-kneed toddler who ever lived. Ten-year-old Nathan whizzing down the slide in our local playground. My favourite was quite a recent one of the two of us, skating on the Somerset House ice rink with our arms linked.

And there was Nathan with his grandfather on the porch at Arapito. Dad looked handsome in his gardening hat, neatly shaved, Mediterranean-blue eyes in a face that somehow seemed both delicate and heavy. Nathan was a nineteen-year-old beanpole with copper hair, freckles and glasses. My father and my son both stood very straight, wearing their photo smiles, awkward grins they stuck on whenever a camera was pointed at them.

I held my forefinger to my lips, pressing the kiss onto the beloved boy in the picture. I took this photo as we were setting out for the airport, the last time I saw Dad. He looked perfectly normal. I didn't remember anything . . . oh. Yes, I did, come to think of it. Little eccentricities, just a few wacky moments. He tried to serve us frozen green beans instead of ice cream. And there was that day he nipped into town to get milk but came back hours later with no shopping at all. He seemed angry, said he'd been collared by an old patient who talked so much that Dad had completely forgotten what he'd come for. Nathan called him an absent-minded professor. Now that I thought back, perhaps he wasn't angry. Perhaps he was frightened.

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'They did tests at the hospital,' Raewyn said. 'They got him to see a consultant.'

'And?'

'I'm afraid they think it's Alzheimer's.'

Alzheimer's. Among people my age—the sandwich generation, squashed between parents and children, never quite coping with either and feeling constantly inadequate—the word had friends recoiling with grimaces and sympathetic tuts. *Oh no! I'm so sorry, that's a cruel thing*. We're all afraid it's coming for us too. We're all terrified when we forget someone's name.

Raewyn was talking about the diagnosis, about what it meant for Dad.

'They've told him he has to stop driving,' she said. 'He's given me his car keys in case he forgets.'

'No! How's he meant to manage? You guys live miles out of town.'

'The thing is, Emily, this isn't new. He forgets to pay his bills. His electricity got cut off. I've even found him gardening in his pyjamas at midday.'

This, somehow, was more upsetting than his driving into a ditch. I couldn't imagine my father in any state other than that of immaculate dignity. He always—*always*—wore a jacket and tie to work, his shirt collars literally starched, a Panama hat for gardening.

'Today was the final straw for me,' Raewyn said. 'I went round with his shopping. I'd only just walked in when a frying pan burst into flames. These wooden houses can turn into infernos within minutes.'

'Do Carmen and Eddie know about this diagnosis?' My siblings.

'They do now. I don't think they were surprised.'

'So what's the plan?'

'They both lead such busy lives. They think he needs to go into a care home, probably St Patrick's, but he won't hear of it.

That's why I'm phoning you, Emily. You're the one person I could think of who might be able and willing to help.'

I indulged in a moment of smugness at being the *one* person—but I could see exactly where all of this was leading, and I didn't want to go there.

'I think you should come home for a while,' she said.

There it was.

'I don't live in the next town,' I reminded her.

'I know that.'

'I don't even live in the same hemisphere.' I sounded like a petulant teenager. I *felt* like one. 'I'll phone him today, I promise. But I can't simply drop everything, and there's the cost.'

'Imagine if you never got to say goodbye.'

Raewyn knew all about saying goodbye; she knew about never having the chance to say it. Manu. Leah.

'My useless brother and sister are both twelve thousand miles closer,' I moaned.

The kitchen door was inching open. A chubby-faced tabby squeezed through the gap and made a beeline for his bowl of biscuits. Max, my lodger's cat. My good friend, who spent his mornings curled up on a cushion in my cramped little studio. He was the model for Admiral Flufflebum, a wise, kind cat who lived in Buckingham Palace in a series of books I illustrated, whose success helped to pay the mortgage on this flat.

Raewyn aimed another shot.

'Come and see him while he still knows you, Emily. Don't just come for his funeral.'

'We're not very close.'

'You love him, though.'

After we'd hung up, I sat at the table and tried to kid myself that my father wasn't my responsibility. A bus came gliding past, early-morning commuters on the upper deck gazing straight into my world, and I into theirs. Nathan was gone, and the nest felt

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empty. Christmas was a tinsel-strewn memory. The truly dark days of winter were just beginning: January, February. Rain and greyness and political division.

But it was summer in New Zealand. Temperatures in the thirties, endless blue skies, evening dips in the Arapito stream—our deliciously clear little river, with its pools and cliffs and pockets of native bush.

You love him, though.

I was ten, charging around the house, looking for my gym bag, screaming at Eddie that he'd messed with my effing stuff—and he was screaming back that he hadn't touched my effing stuff, he wouldn't touch it with an effing barge pole, and Mum was slumped on the porch in her housecoat, smoking bitterly, and Carmen was cleaning her muddy riding boots among the cereal bowls on the kitchen table, and it was always like this—always, *always*, every morning. Dad was dressed for work after his run, looking about ten years younger than his wife, who was creased around all her edges. He behaved as though his family were characters on the telly, and he wasn't even watching the show. He wasn't abusive; he was simply absent. He didn't seem to care.

You love him, though.

But maybe he didn't love me. Or any individual, for that matter. My father loved his Fellow Man, whoever the hell that was.

Max jumped onto my lap and began kneading. He had it good: his bed, his bowl and a Burmese playmate who lived two doors down.

'Lucky sod, Max,' I whispered, as he rubbed his cheek against mine. 'Nobody expects you to drop everything for your old man.'

And then I opened my laptop. *Flights. Heathrow–Auckland.*

Not that I was planning on actually . . . I mean, *obviously* not. I was wondering what a flight cost nowadays, that's all. Just out of interest.

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I opened the car door. Heat surged into my air-conditioned sanctuary, along with the scents of childhood: pasture, sheep dung, resinous eucalypts and macrocarpas in the shelter belt. The dry hissing of cicadas reverberated, as though I were inside a tolling bell.

Dad was still standing on the porch. I inherited my colouring from him, blue eyes and mid-brown hair, though his had turned cotton-wool white in recent years. It was a bit out of control right now, frothing around his head like Einstein's. That wasn't normal for him.

'Whew—made it!' I cried, walking around to the boot to drag out my bags.

It was odd that he hadn't greeted me. He wasn't the kind of father you dash up to and fling your arms around and kiss noisily, doing a little dance together. He wasn't that kind of father; I wasn't that kind of daughter. He didn't *do* touching, never had. But this silence was strange.

Thank goodness for his dogs, who made a fuss of me—pouring down the steps to say hello, tails waving. First was Gloria, the boss, an elderly labrador with a coat the colour of shortbread. The smaller one, Gyp, was given to Dad by one of his many grateful patients. He had some spaniel in him, and some foxie, and a truckload of charm—chocolate and white, with bed hair and a lolling tongue.

'Good to see you guys,' I muttered, crouching to ruffle their ears. 'Gyp, you're all grown up!'

'Morning,' Dad said politely. 'Can I help?'

His smile was too sweet, too empty, too anxious. 'Sweet', 'empty' and 'anxious' were not words I'd ever have used to describe this man. There was an imposter in my father's body.

'Hey, Dad!' I was laughing to cover the awfulness. 'It's me. Emily.'

I counted to three before he turned into himself again. The lights came on, and there he was.

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'Emily! Of course it is! Sorry . . . the sun in my eyes, couldn't quite see . . . didn't recognise your car. Hired, is it? No need for that, you can use mine. Well, marvellous, you're here.'

We both pretended it hadn't happened. We both acted out a charade in order to cover up the horrifying fact that a father had failed to recognise his daughter. I climbed the steps to give the token half-hug and air kiss.

'Good journey?' he asked.

'Seems to get longer every time.'

Wariness froze his features again. I don't think he had a clue where I lived.

'I flew from London,' I explained, helping him out, 'into Auckland. Then another flight to Hawke's Bay airport in Napier, and then I drove for an hour down to here.'

'Sounds exhausting.' He gestured towards the house. 'Tea? Coffee? Let me carry your case.'

As he led the way inside, he twice glanced back over his shoulder as though checking I was still there. Perhaps he thought I might be imaginary.

'Good journey?' he asked again.

I blinked. 'Um, yes. Long.'

He tried to make tea, but after he'd opened the same cupboard three times I took over. He stepped aside and let me do it.

'Of course, the mugs are there!' he murmured. 'Stupid of me. Thank you. How was your journey?'

'Fine, Dad. Just a bit long.'

The kitchen hadn't changed in decades: old joinery, high ceiling, blissfully shaded after the glare of the road. A quick trip to the bathroom proved that hadn't changed either. Yellow tiles and a mouldy shower curtain.

Something was filling the air with cooking smells—wine and mushrooms. I lifted the lid of an electric crockpot to reveal a gently bubbling stew.

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'You're a chef!' I exclaimed.

'Raewyn brought that round, I think. Biscuits too—here, have one. They're those special biscuits, you know . . . Tip of my tongue. Named after the troops.'

'Anzac?'

'Anzac!'

I was rummaging in the cutlery drawer, looking for a teaspoon. I'd just found one when something caught my eye: a post-it note taped to the handle of the tin opener:

CAN OPENER

1. *Open the metal arms.*
2. *Put cutting edge onto edge of can.*
3. *Press down HARD!*
4. *Turn handle.*

Dad's handwriting used to be controlled and even, marching along straight lines. Much like the man himself, in fact. This was certainly his writing, but it looked as though he'd used his left hand, with quavering wobbles on every letter. Looking around me, I spotted more notes with spidery instructions: on the microwave, the dishwasher, the rice cooker. I slammed the drawer shut. This was terrifying.

'So,' I began, with fake brightness, 'how've you been?'

'Fine fettle.'

'I hear you had a bit of a mishap in your car?'

He looked both guarded and offended, shaking his head with pursed lips.

'Just a small one?' I persisted. 'An argument with a ditch. Didn't you have a night in hospital?'

'A night in . . . ? Ha!' he scoffed. 'Wherever did you hear that rubbish? No, no. An hour. They were fussing about concussion. Do they think I wouldn't recognise concussion in myself?'

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'Best to be thorough.'

'Can't have been much of an accident. The car hasn't a scratch on it.'

I decided not to mention the panelbeater. Fetching milk, I found the fridge festooned with notes, all in that wobbly handwriting. One bore Raewyn's phone number, with directions to her house. She and Dad had been neighbours for forty years, she lived just down the track—less than half a mile away, as the crow flies. He could have walked to her place blindfolded.

The other notes were equally disturbing:

DO NOT TALK to man who phones about my COMPUTER
FEED DOGS! FOOD IN BAG UNDER SHELF IN STOREROOM
Felix, have you had a shower today?
BRUSH TEETH
CHECK is the OVEN OFF? THE GAS?

One was in red felt tip, with giant letters:

EMILY ARRIVING ABOUT 12 PM MONDAY.
HER ROOM IS READY.
RAEWYN WILL BRING STEW IN CROCKPOT.

A trapdoor was opening under my feet. This wasn't right. What you have to understand is that my father, Felix Kirkland, was the most precise, orderly individual that ever walked this earth. Can you imagine what it's like to be the child of a perfect human being? Now he needed reminders to brush his teeth, to feed his dogs, to greet his daughter when she flew across the world to see him.

We sat in the shade of the broad porch roof, in the low-slung wooden chairs that had been there forever, our tray on the coffee table Eddie made at school: solid, with an inlaid chessboard on its surface. The porch ran right along the back of the house with

the boot room at one end. From here we looked over the garden, across steeply undulating farmland to the ranges beyond. I noticed a supply of split logs stacked against the wall, ready for autumn.

The dogs stretched themselves at Dad's feet while we humans made conversation about the dry weather, the state of the garden—'Needs a bit of attention,' Dad mumbled, shaking his head at the overgrown bushes, clumps of parched grass on the drive. None of this neglect would have mattered at all, but it wasn't him.

Stilted and impersonal conversation, on the other hand, *was* him. It always had been. This was why I only made the journey every few years. The twins had both settled in Auckland, while I'd run even further.

After a long silence, Dad put down his teacup.

'I want to get my house in order,' he announced. 'I mean literally. *This* house. Papers and rubbish all over my study. I can't seem to get rid of anything.'

This I could believe. His only vice was to be a hoarder of documents.

'You don't have to get rid of anything, Dad.'

'I do!' He slammed his hands onto his thighs. 'But I can't seem to make any progress. It's so irritating.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I can't leave all this mess for other people to deal with.'

'Nobody will mind.'

'I *must* get my house in order.' He was looking at me hopefully, half-smiling. 'You'll help me, Emily? You'll help me?'

My throat had closed. Maybe it was jetlag and sleep deprivation, maybe the treacherous weepiness of perimenopause, maybe just the fact of being home after three years and knowing that this visit really might be the last.

But I think it was because it was the first time in my life—the very first time, so far as I could remember—that my father had asked for my help.

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