Missing You

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Published by Pan Books

Extract

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PAN BOOKS



First published 2010 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-45441-4

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by Ellipsis Books Limited, Glasgow
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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one

Sean walks the short distance from his car to the front door, his keys in one hand, a wrap of flowers in the other. His steps are measured, but adrenaline is hurtling through his arteries. Belle, in her yellow sundress and sling-backs, is standing in the shade of the hall, sunglasses holding back her hair, her arms tanned, a silver bangle on her wrist. Her body makes a barrier between him and his home and he knows from the set of her shoulders what she's going to say. They have been careering towards this moment for weeks.

'Don't,' he says, 'not today, Belle, not on such a beautiful day.'

'I can't do this any more,' she says. 'I can't keep living like this.'

The engine of his car is ticking; the smells of hot metal and scorched rubber from the tyres drifting towards him. Sweat chills the hollow between the parallel swells of muscle on his back. He licks his lips to draw saliva.

'Please,' he says, 'please, Belle . . .'

'I'm sorry, Sean,' she says, 'but you have to go.'

Her eyes drift from his face and down to the left. He follows her gaze and sees the bulging suitcase by the radiator

and, beside that, an assortment of bags, his guitar and his CDs stacked carelessly in a cardboard box marked *Virgin Wines*. The paperback that he left face-down beside the spare bed this morning has been jammed into the pocket of his sports bag. Everything that obviously belongs to him is piled in the hall.

'You can come back and collect the rest when you're ready,' she says.

The hand holding the flowers drops to his side. The cellophane crackles and two petals fall at his feet. Sean slips the keys into his pocket.

'Belle,' he says, raising his free hand, pleading. He touches her gently on her bare arm. Her skin is sun-warm. She takes a small step backwards and his hand falls away. She rubs the place between her elbow and her shoulder where his fingers touched her, and she frowns and shakes her head.

'I'm worn out,' she says. 'Please, Sean, no more talking. Just go.'

He passes her the flowers. She sets them down on the telephone shelf without looking at them. They are roses the colour of milk.

'I need to see Amy.'

'She's in bed.'

'I have to say goodbye.'

'It'll just make it harder for you, Sean. Don't.'

But Belle steps aside. Sean passes her. He runs up the stairs, oblivious to the polished mahogany banisters, the cream carpet, Belle's beautiful, framed photographs of urban sunsets, and he goes into Amy's room. He leans

against the wall with his head tipped back and presses his fists against his temples, trying to calm his heart.

The blue curtains patterned with stars and moons keep out most of the light and the room is warm, scented by talcum powder, wax crayons and sherbet. Sean bats the butterfly mobile that hangs from the ceiling. The paper insects bob and weave.

'Christ,' he says under his breath. 'Oh Jesus Christ!'

'Daddy?'

Amy is spread out like a starfish on top of her bedcovers. She's wearing a pale green nightie. Her hair is stuck to her forehead and Sean can just make out a red mark on the bridge of her nose where she has been rubbing it with her finger. He tries to make his face normal.

'I just came to say night night.'

Amy yawns, a little cat yawn. She smiles up at him sleepily.

'Can we have a puppy, Daddy?'

'Mmm,' he says, 'one day.'

'I'd prefer a girl puppy. I think we should call her Polly.'

Sean tries to reply but his mouth is dry as sand.

'I'll look after her,' says Amy. 'She can sleep in a basket under my bed.'

He closes his eyes. He feels the weight of himself against the wall.

'Then when I wake up in the night, I can put my hand down and she'll be there.'

Amy drops one arm over the side of the bed to demonstrate.

Sean rubs his mouth with the flat of his hand. Thoughts

are chasing through his mind. There must be a way out of this. There has to be another way. He has to think straight.

'Ooh!' Amy laughs and pulls her hand back up. 'She licked my fingers!'

Belle is at the door.

'That's enough, Amy,' she says, smoothly, coolly. 'Settle down now. Daddy's busy. He has things to do.'

'Belle . . .'

'It's just prevarication, Sean. Go now. You can see Amy at the weekend. You can take her out on Saturday.'

'Belle . . .'

'It's for the best,' she says.

'Best for whom?' he whispers. 'A broken home is best for whom, exactly?'

'Don't let's fight any more,' she replies in a calm, reasonable voice, the voice of an executioner. 'Don't let's make it any worse than it already is.'

She follows him down the stairs. He is waiting for something to happen, something that will change the situation, put things back on track. He counts the stairs and at the bottom he sees that she has moved the suitcase and the bags from the hall out onto the drive. The roses are in the waste-paper basket, their stalks, bound by an elastic band, sticking up as uncompromisingly as the legs of a dead animal.

He turns; she shakes her head slightly.

'Belle!'

He takes her hands in his, her limp and cool, lifeless

hands, and he holds them up to his chest. 'Belle, please!' he says. 'Please don't throw away everything we have, just think about—'

'There's no point,' she says, pulling away her hands. 'We've been through this a million times.'

'But you don't listen . . .'

'Because you say the same things every time.'

'That bastard has poisoned your mind, he—'

'This has nothing to do with Lewis . . .'

'Oh come on! We were fine until you started—'

'Shut up!' she cries. 'Stop it! I've had enough!'

'Mummy . . .'

They both look up. Amy is standing on the half-landing where the stairs bend. She is holding on to the banister with one hand. Her hair is messy and her eyes are large and worried.

'It's all right, darling,' says Belle, changing the texture of her voice and its cadence in a heartbeat. 'We're not fighting, we're just . . .'

Sean's heart is beating so violently that he is afraid he will not be able to conceal his emotion from Amy. He doesn't want to frighten his daughter, so he turns and steps through the door. Belle immediately closes it, pushes it shut. He imagines her leaning against it on the other side, holding her breath. She will calm herself, he thinks, and then she'll take Amy back to bed and settle her. Then she'll fill a glass with wine and she'll take it out into the garden and sit on the swing-seat in the shade of the walnut tree, and she'll put her head back and close her eyes, breathing a sigh of

relief into the blue sky. She will listen to the birdsong and clear her mind. Later, she'll telephone the Other to tell him the good news. Maybe she'll summon him over. Or maybe she'd prefer to spend her first night without Sean on her own. It would give her time to change the sheets.

Right now, Sean would like to hurt her. He'd like to hurt Belle like she's hurt him.

No, he doesn't want to hurt her; he wants to convince her of his love. He wants to love her.

He doesn't know what he wants.

He wants everything to be how it was four weeks ago, before she told him about the affair.

He wonders if this is really the end of their marriage. It can't be. That would be inconceivable.

He turns back to the door. He has to talk to Belle, he has to make her realize; she doesn't know how much he loves her, he hasn't convinced her, and he will do *anything* for this not to be the end. He's even proposed to let Belle see the Other if she wants to. Sean is prepared to wait for her; he is strong enough to put the thought of the two of them, together, from his mind for the sake of his family. She has been infected by her new lover, but sooner or later the venom will pass through her system and she'll be herself again and she will come back to him.

Sean raises his fists to beat on the door, and then he hears a polite cough to his left and turns and sees their neighbour, Mrs Lock. She is attending to her dahlias, and is

poised, watching, secateurs in one gloved hand. She gives the slightest shake of her head.

She knows. She's heard the arguments. It is possible that, while Sean has been at work, Belle has gone into Mrs Lock's kitchen and confided her troubles to the older woman, asked her advice over a pot of tea and biscuits.

'I should give her a couple of days,' says Mrs Lock in a kindly voice. She smiles, all grey hair and gentle, sorrowful eyes.

Sean drops his arms. He nods.

He loads his things into the car. But they won't all fit so he leaves two bags at the end of the drive, beside the bins. Let the dustmen take them. What does it matter to him?

He wipes his face with his sleeve, gets into the car and starts the engine. He looks back at the house through the mirror, but the door doesn't open. Belle does not come out to call him back.

He drives to the end of the road and then he sits there, in his car, his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows, his forearm resting on the edge of the open window, vacillating between tipping the indicator switch up and tipping it down because he cannot decide whether to turn left or right.

Sean's face is wet with tears.

Left or right?

It doesn't matter.

Either way, everything he loves will still be behind him.