lovereading.co.uk

Lost

Michael Robotham

Published by Time Warner

Extract is copyright of the Author

1

The Thames, London

I remember someone once telling me that you know it's cold when you see a lawyer with his hands in his *own* pockets. It's colder than that now. My mouth is numb and every breath like slivers of ice in my lungs.

People are shouting and shining torches in my eyes. In the meantime, I'm hugging this big yellow-painted buoy like it's Marilyn Monroe. A very fat Marilyn Monroe, after she took all the pills and went to seed.

My favourite Monroe film is *Some Like It Hot* with Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis. I don't know why I should think of that now, although how anyone could mistake Jack Lemmon for a woman is beyond me.

A guy with a really thick moustache and pizza breath is panting in my ear. He's wearing a life vest and trying to peel my fingers away from the buoy. I'm too cold to move. He wraps his arms around my chest and pulls me backwards through the water. More people, silhouetted against the lights, take hold of my arms, lifting me on to the deck.

'Jesus, look at his leg!' someone says.

'He's been shot!'

Who are they talking about?

People are shouting all over again, yelling for bandages and plasma. A black guy with a gold earring slides a needle into my arm and puts a bag over my face.

'Someone get some blankets. Let's keep this guy warm.'

'He's palping at one-twenty.'

'One-twenty?'

'Palping at one-twenty.'

'Any head injuries?'

'That's negative.'

The engine roars and we're moving. I can't feel my legs. I can't feel anything – not even the cold any more. The lights are also disappearing. Darkness has seeped into my eyes.

'Ready?'

'Yeah.'

'One, two, three.'

'Watch the IV lines. Watch the IV lines.'

'I got it.'

'Bag a couple of times.'

'OK.'

The guy with pizza breath is puffing really hard now, running alongside the gurney. His fist is in front of my face, pressing a bag to force air into my lungs. They lift again and square lights pass overhead. I can still see.

A siren wails in my head. Every time we slow down it gets louder and closer. Someone is talking on a radio. 'We've pumped two litres of fluid. He's on his fourth unit of blood. He's bleeding out. Systolic pressure dropping.'

'He needs volume.'

'Squeeze in another bag of fluid.'

'He's seizing!'

'He's seizing. See that?'

One of the machines has gone into a prolonged cry. Why don't they turn it off?

Pizza breath rips open my shirt and slaps two pads on my chest.

'CLEAR!' he yells.

The pain almost blows the top of my skull clean off.

He does that again and I'll break his arms.

'CLEAR!'

I swear to God I'm going to remember you, pizza breath. I'm going to remember exactly who you are. And when I get out of here I'm coming looking for you. I was happier in the river. Take me back to Marilyn Monroe.

I am awake now. My eyelids flutter as if fighting gravity. Squeezing them shut, I try again, blinking into the darkness.

Turning my head, I can make out orange dials on a machine near the bed and a green blip of light sliding across a liquid-crystal display window like one of those stereo systems with bouncing waves of coloured light.

Where am I?

Beside my head is a chrome stand that catches stars on its curves. Suspended from a hook is a plastic satchel bulging with a clear fluid. The liquid trails down a pliable plastic tube and disappears under a wide strip of surgical tape wrapped around my left forearm.

I'm in a hospital room. There is a pad on the bedside table. Reaching towards it, I suddenly notice my left hand – not so much my hand as a finger. It's missing. Instead of a digit and a wedding ring I have a lump of gauze dressing. I stare at it idiotically, as though this is some sort of magic trick.

When the twins were youngsters, we had a game where I pulled off my thumb and if they sneezed it would come back again. Michael used to laugh so hard he almost wet his pants.

Fumbling for the pad, I read the letterhead: 'St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, London.' There is nothing in the drawer except a Bible and a copy of the Koran.

I spy a clipboard hanging at the end of the bed. Reaching

down, I feel a sudden pain that explodes from my right leg and shoots out of the top of my head. Christ! Do not, under any circumstances, do that again.

Curled up in a ball, I wait for the pain to go away. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. If I concentrate very hard on a particular point just under my jawbone, I actually feel the blood sliding back and forth beneath my skin, squeezing into smaller and smaller channels, circulating oxygen.

My estranged wife Miranda was such a lousy sleeper she said my heart kept her awake because it beat too loudly. I didn't snore or wake with the night terrors, but my heart pumped up a riot. This has been listed among Miranda's grounds for divorce. I'm exaggerating, of course. She doesn't need extra justification.

I open my eyes again. The world is still here.

Taking a deep breath, I grip the bedclothes and raise them a few inches. I still have two legs. I count them. One. Two. The right leg is bandaged in layers of gauze taped down at the edges. Something has been written in a felt-tip pen down the side of my thigh but I can't read what it says.

Further down I can see my toes. They wave hello to me. 'Hello toes,' I whisper.

Tentatively, I reach down and cup my genitals, rolling my testicles between my fingers.

A nurse slips silently through the curtains. Her voice startles me. 'Is this a very private moment?'

'I was – I was – just checking.'

'Well, I think you should consider buying that thing dinner first.'

Her accent is Irish and her eyes are as green as mown grass. She presses the call button above my head. 'Thank goodness you're finally awake. We were very worried about you.' She taps the bag of fluid and checks the flow control. Then she straightens my pillows.

'What happened? How did I get here?'

'You were shot.'

'Who shot me?'

She laughs. 'Oh, don't ask me. Nobody ever tells me things like that.'

'But I can't remember anything. My leg . . . my finger . . .'

'The doctor should be here soon.'

She doesn't seem to be listening. I reach out and grab her arm. She tries to pull away, suddenly frightened of me.

'You don't understand – I *can't* remember! I don't know how I got here.'

She glances at the emergency button. 'They found you floating in the river. That's what I heard them say. The police have been waiting for you to wake up.'

'How long have I been here?'

'Eight days . . . you were in a coma. I thought you might be coming out yesterday. You were talking to yourself.'

'What did I say?'

'You kept asking about a girl – saying you had to find her.'

'Who?'

'You didn't say. Please let go of my arm. You're hurting me.'

My fingers open and she steps well away, rubbing her forearm. She won't come close again.

My heart won't slow down. It is pounding away, getting faster and faster, like Chinese drums. How can I have been here eight days?

'What day is it today?'

'October the third.'

'Did you give me drugs? What have you done to me.'

She stammers, 'You're on morphine for the pain.'

'What else? What else have you given me?'

'Nothing.' She glances again at the emergency button. 'The doctor is coming. Try to stay calm or he'll have to sedate you.'

She's out of the door and won't come back. As it swings closed I notice a uniformed policeman sitting on a chair outside

the door, with his legs stretched out like he's been there for a while.

I slump back in bed, smelling bandages and dried blood. Holding up my hand I look at the gauze bandage, trying to wiggle the missing finger. How can I not remember?

For me there has never been such a thing as forgetting, nothing is hazy or vague or frayed at the edges. I hoard memories like a miser counts his gold. Every scrap of a moment is kept as long as it has some value.

I don't see things photographically. Instead I make connections, spinning them together like a spider weaving a web, threading one strand into the next. That's why I can reach back and pluck details of criminal cases from five, ten, fifteen years ago and remember them as if they happened only yesterday. Names, dates, places, witnesses, perpetrators, victims – I can conjure them up and walk through the same streets, have the same conversations, hear the same lies.

Now for the first time I've forgotten something truly important. I can't remember what happened and how I finished up here. There is a black hole in my mind like a dark shadow on a chest X-ray. I've seen those shadows. I lost my first wife to cancer. Black holes suck everything into them. Not even light can escape.

Twenty minutes go by and then Dr Bennett sweeps through the curtains. He's wearing jeans and a bow tie under his white coat.

'Detective Inspector Ruiz, welcome back to the land of the living and high taxation.' He sounds very public school and has one of those foppish Hugh Grant fringes that falls across his forehead like a serviette on a thigh.

Shining a pen torch in my eyes, he asks, 'Can you wiggle your toes?'

'Yes.'

'Any pins and needles?'

'No.'

He pulls back the bedclothes and scrapes a key along the sole of my right foot. 'Can you feel that?'

'Yes.'

'Excellent.'

Picking up the clipboard hanging at the end of my bed, he scrawls his initials with a flick of the wrist.

'I can't remember anything.'

'About the accident.'

'It was an accident?'

'I have no idea. You were shot.'

'Who shot me?'

'You don't remember?'

'No.'

This conversation is going around in circles.

Dr Bennett taps the pen against his teeth, contemplating this answer. Then he pulls up a chair and sits on it backwards, draping his arms over the backrest.

'You were shot. One bullet entered just above your gracilis muscle on your right leg leaving a quarter inch hole. It went through the skin, then the fat layer, through the pectineus muscle, just medial to the femoral vessels and nerve, through the quadratus femoris muscle, through the head of the biceps femoris and through the gluteus maximus before exiting through the skin on the other side. The exit wound was far more impressive. It blew a hole four inches across. Gone. No flap. No pieces. Your skin just vaporised.'

He whistles impressively through his teeth. 'You had a pulse but no measurable blood pressure when they found you. Then you stopped breathing. You were dead but we brought you back.'

He holds up his thumb and forefinger. 'The bullet missed your femoral artery by this far.' I can barely see a gap between them. 'Otherwise you would have bled to death in three minutes. Apart from the bullet we had to deal with infection. Your clothes were filthy. God knows what was in that water.

We've been pumping you full of antibiotics. You've been lucky.'

Is he kidding? How much luck does it take to get shot?

'What about my finger?' I hold up my hand.

'Gone, I'm afraid, just above the first knuckle.'

A skinny looking intern with a number two cut pokes his head through the curtains. Dr Bennett lets out a low-pitched growl that only underlings can hear. Rising from the chair, he buries his hands in the pockets of his white coat.

'Why can't I remember?'

'I don't know. It's not really my field, I'm afraid. We can run some tests. You'll need a CT scan or a MRI to rule out a skull fracture or haemorrhage. I'll call neurology.'

'My leg hurts.'

'Good. It's getting better. You're making very good progress. You'll need a walking frame or crutches. A physiotherapist will come and talk to you about a programme to help you strengthen your leg.' He flips his fringe and turns to leave. 'I'm sorry about your memory, Detective. Be thankful you're alive.'

He's gone, leaving a scent of aftershave and superiority. Why do surgeons cultivate this air of owning the world? I know I should be grateful. Maybe if I could remember what happened I could trust the explanations more.

So I should be dead. I always suspected that I would die suddenly. It's not that I'm particularly foolhardy but I have a knack of taking shortcuts. Most people only die the once. Now I've had two lives. Throw in three wives and I've had more than my fair share of living. (I'll definitely forgo the three wives, should someone want them back.)

My Irish nurse is back again. Her name is Maggie and she has one of those reassuring smiles they teach in nursing school. She has a bowl of warm water and a sponge.

'Are you feeling better?'

'I'm sorry I frightened you.'

'That's OK. Time for a bath.'

She pulls back the covers and I drag them up again.

'There's nothing under there I haven't seen,' she says.

'I beg to differ. I have a pretty fair recollection of how many women have danced with old Johnnie One-Eye and, unless you were that girl in the back row of the Shepherd's Bush Empire during a Yardbirds concert in 1961, I don't think you're one of them.'

'Johnnie One-Eye?'

'My oldest friend.'

She shakes her head and looks sorry for me.

A familiar figure appears from behind her - a short square man, with no neck and a five-o'clock shadow. Campbell Smith is a Chief Superintendent, with a crushing handshake and a no-brand smile. He's wearing his uniform, with polished silver buttons and a shirt collar so highly starched it threatens to decapitate him.

Everyone claims to like Campbell - even his enemies – but few people are ever happy to see him. Not me. Not today. I remember him! That's a good sign.

'Christ, Vincent, you gave us a scare!' he booms. 'It was touch and go for a while. We were all praying for you – everyone at the station. See all the cards and flowers?'

I turn my head and look at a table piled high with flowers and bowls of fruit.

'Someone shot me,' I say, incredulously.

'Yes,' he replies, pulling up a chair. 'We need to know what happened.'

'I don't remember.'

'You didn't see them?'

'Who?'

'The people on the boat.'

'What boat?' I look at him blankly.

His voice suddenly grows louder. 'You were found floating in the Thames shot to shit and less than a mile away there was

a boat that looked like a floating abattoir. What happened?'

'I don't remember.'

'You don't remember the massacre.'

'I don't remember the fucking boat.'

Campbell has dropped any pretence of affability. He paces the room, bunching his fists and trying to control himself.

'This isn't good, Vincent. This isn't pretty. Did you kill anyone?'

'Today?'

'Don't joke with me. Did you discharge your firearm? Your service pistol was signed out of the station armoury. Are we going to find bodies?'

Bodies? Is that what happened?

Campbell rubs his hands through his hair in frustration.

'I can't tell you the crap that's flying already. There's going to be a full inquiry. The Commissioner is demanding answers. The press will have a fucking field day. The blood of three people was found on that boat, including yours. Forensics says at least one of them must have died. They found brains and skull fragments.'

The walls seem to dip and sway. Maybe it's the morphine or the closeness of the air. How could I have forgotten something like that?

'What were you doing on that boat?'

'It must have been a police operation . . .'

'No,' he declares angrily, all pretence of friendship gone. 'You weren't working a case. This wasn't a police operation. You were on your own.'

We have an old-fashioned staring contest. I own this one. I might never blink again. Morphine is the answer. God, it feels good.

Finally Campbell slumps into a chair and plucks a handful of grapes from a brown paper bag beside the bed.

'What is the last thing you remember?'

We sit in silence as I try to recover shreds of a dream.

Pictures float in and out of my head, dim and then sharp: a yellow life buoy, Marilyn Monroe . . .

'I remember ordering a pizza.'

'Is that it?'

'Sorry.'

Staring at the gauze dressing on my hand, I marvel at how the missing finger feels itchy. 'What was I working on?'

Campbell shrugs. 'You were on leave.'

'Why?'

'You needed a rest.'

He's lying to me. Sometimes I think he forgets how far we go back. We did our training together at the Police Staff College, Bramshill. And I introduced him to his wife Maureen at a barbecue thirty-five years ago. She has never completely forgiven me. I don't know what upsets her most – my three marriages or the fact that I pawned her off on to someone else.

It's been a long while since Campbell called me buddy and we haven't shared a beer since he made Chief Superintendent. He's a different man. No better or no worse, just different.

He spits a grape seed into his hand. 'You always thought you were better than me, Vincent, but I got promoted ahead of you.'

You were a brown-noser.

'I know you think I'm a brown-noser. (*He's reading my mind.)* But I was just smarter. I made the right contacts and let the system work for me instead of fighting against it. You should have retired three years ago, when you had the chance. Nobody would have thought any less of you. We would have given you a big send-off. You could have settled down, played a bit of golf, maybe even saved your marriage.'

I wait for him to say something else but he just stares at me with his head cocked to one side.

'Vincent, would you mind if I made an observation?' He doesn't wait for my answer. 'You put a pretty good face on

things considering all that's happened but the feeling I get from you is . . . well . . . you're a sad man. But it's something more than that . . . you're angry.'

Embarrassment prickles like heat rash under my hospital gown.

'Some people find solace in religion and others have people they can talk to. I know that's not your style. Look at you! You hardly see your kids. You live alone . . . Now you've gone and fucked up your career. I can't help you any more. I told you to leave this alone.'

'What was I supposed to leave alone?'

He doesn't answer. Instead he picks up his hat and polishes the brim with his sleeve. Any moment now he's going to turn and tell me what he means. Only he doesn't; he keeps on walking out of the door and along the corridor.

My grapes have also gone. The stalks look like dead trees on a crumpled brown paper plain. Beside them a basket of flowers has started to wilt. The begonias and tulips are losing their petals like fat fan dancers and dusting the top of the table with pollen. A small white card embossed with a silver scroll is wedged between the stems. I can't read the message.

Some bastard shot me! It should be etched in my memory. I should be able to relive it over and over again like those whining victims on daytime talk shows who have personal injury lawyers on speed dial. Instead, I remember nothing. And no matter how many times I squeeze my eye shut and bang my fists on my forehead it doesn't change.

The really strange thing is what I imagine I remember. For instance, I recall seeing silhouettes against bright lights; masked men wearing plastic shower caps and paper slippers, who were discussing cars, pension plans and football results. Of course this could have been a near-death experience. I was given a glimpse of Hell and it was full of surgeons.

Perhaps, if I start with the simple stuff, I may get to the point where I can remember what happened to me. Staring

at the ceiling, I silently spell my name: Vincent Yanko Ruiz; born 11 September 1946. I am a Detective Inspector of the London Metropolitan Police and the head of the Serious Crime Group (Western Division). I live in Rainville Road, Fulham . . .

I used to say I would pay good money to forget most of my life. Now I want the memories back.