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The Man Who Forgot His Wife

Written by John O'Farrell

Published by Black Swan

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John O'Farrell

THE MAN WHO FORGOT HIS WIFE

BLACK SWAN

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For Lily

Chapter 1

I remember when I was a child I used to watch *Mr & Mrs*. We all did; it seemed like the only option available, so everyone just put up with it. A bit like all those marriages on the programme, now I think about it. Obviously *Mr & Mrs* wasn't the cultural highlight of our week; we didn't all rush to school next morning and share our outrage that Geoff from Coventry didn't know that Julie's favourite foreign food was spaghetti. But unquestioningly we just watched the procession of unglamorous couples go through the minor embarrassment of revealing all the little things that they didn't know about each other. Or, worse still, that there weren't any.

If ITV had wanted to increase the ratings a bit, perhaps they should have done a little more covert research about the big stuff the partners really didn't know. 'So, Geoff, for tonight's star prize, do you think that Julie's favourite way to spend a Saturday night

is: (a) Watching television? (b) Going to the cinema? Or (c) Secretly meeting her illicit lover Gerald, who at least asks her about her day occasionally?'

But the subtext of *Mr & Mrs* was that this was all there was to marriage: just knowing each other very well. Being very familiar with one another. The giant heart-covered cards of Valentine's Day should say '*I'm really used to you*' or '*Love is . . . knowing every single thing you're going to say before you even bloody say it.*' Like two lifers sharing a prison cell, you just spend so much time in each other's company that there really shouldn't be anything left that might surprise either of you.

My marriage was not like that.

Lots of husbands forget things. They forget that their wives have an important meeting that morning, they forget to pick up the dry cleaning, or they forget to buy their wife a birthday present until they are passing the Texaco mini-mart the night before. It drives their partners mad that men can be so self-obsessed as to overlook a major event in the life of their other half or a key date in the marriage calendar.

I didn't suffer from this careless absent-mindedness. I just completely forgot who my wife was. Her name, her face, our history together, everything she had ever told me, everything I had said to her – it was all wiped, leaving me with no knowledge that she even existed. I would not have done very well on *Mr & Mrs*. When the glamorous hostess escorted my wife out of the soundproof box, I would have been losing points already for optimistically asking which one I was married to. Apparently women hate that.

In my defence, it wasn't just my wife I forgot, it was everything else as well. When I say, 'I remember watching *Mr & Mrs*', that is actually quite a momentous statement for me. The phrase 'I remember' was not always in my vocabulary. There was a period in my life when I might have been aware of the TV show but would have had no personal memory of ever having seen it. I was very even-handed during the dark ages of my amnesia: I had no idea who *I* was either. I had no memory of friends, family, personal experience or identity; I didn't even know what my own name was. When it first happened, I actually checked to see if there was a name tag on the inside of my jacket. It just said 'Gap'.

My bizarre reawakening occurred on a London underground train at some point after it had emerged into the daylight, stopping pointlessly at nowhere places that seemed unsure whether they were the outskirts of London or suburbs of Heathrow Airport.

It was a drizzly afternoon in what I vaguely still understood was the autumn. There was no blinding flash or euphoric energy surge; just a creeping confusion about where I was. The humming tube carriage started up again and then I became aware that I had no idea why I was on this journey. 'Hounslow East' said the sign outside the grimy window as the train came to a halt, but no one got on or off. Perhaps this was just a momentary blackout; perhaps this blank nothingness was what everyone felt as they reached Hounslow East.

But then I realized that not only did I not know where

I was going, but I couldn't remember where I had come from either. Am I going to work? What is my work? I don't know. Now the panic was rising inside me. I'm not well; I need to go home and go to bed. Where is home? I don't know where I live. Think! Think – it will come back to me!

'Come on—' I said out loud, intending to address myself by my own name. But the end of the sentence wasn't there; it was like a missing rung on a ladder. I searched for a wallet, a diary, a mobile phone, anything that might make it all fall back into place. My pockets were empty – just a ticket and a bit of money. There was a small red paint stain on my jeans. 'I wonder how that got there?' I thought. My brain had rebooted, but all the old files had been wiped.

There were loose pages from free newspapers scattered around the floor. I saw the tear in the fabric of the seat opposite. My mind was processing new input at great speed now, devouring advertising slogans and signs telling people to look out for suspicious packages. But staring at the tube map in front of me, I found all these new lines of thought were unable to link up with anything else on the network. The synapses in my head were closed for essential refurbishment; the neurons were being held at King's Cross due to signalling problems.

The fear made me want to run away, but this was an affliction that followed me around. I was pacing up the empty carriage now, bewildered as to what to do next. Should I get off at the next deserted station and try to get help? Should I pull the emergency lever in the hope

that the sudden stop would jolt my memory? 'It's just a temporary blip,' I told myself. I sat and squeezed my eyes closed, pressing my hands against my temples as if I could force some sense out of my head.

Then, to my relief, I was no longer completely alone. An attractive-looking woman boarded the train and sat diagonally opposite me without making eye contact.

'Excuse me,' I said quickly. 'I think I might be going a bit mad!' and I may have emitted a slightly manic laugh. Before the doors even had time to think about closing, she got straight up and left the carriage.

I noticed on the map that the train would do a loop at Heathrow. If I travelled back in the direction in which I had come, maybe a station or some visual prompt might help me relocate myself? And more people were bound to get on the train at the airport; surely then I would find someone who could help me? But at Heathrow Terminal 2 I went from travelling alone on an empty train to being trapped in a jam-packed carriage, with luggage-laden travellers squashed up against one another, talking a hundred different languages, none of them mine. I noticed every button on every shirt, heard all the different voices at once – everything was louder, colours too bright, smells too strong. I was on a tube train with maps clearly stating the route, with thousands of people travelling there with me, and yet I felt as lost and lonely as it is possible to be.

Half an hour later, as the only person standing still in a teeming railway terminal, I scanned the boards for some route back to my previous life. Arrows pointed to

platforms and numbered zones; dozens of signs told hurrying travellers where they might go, as ceaseless information scrolled across screens and distorted announcements filled my ears. There was a short queue at a stall offering 'Information', but I was guessing they wouldn't be able to tell me my identity. I ventured into a public toilet just to stare into a mirror and was shocked by the age of the bearded stranger I saw frowning back at me. I guessed I was around forty, maybe more, greying at the temples and thinning on top. It was impossible to know whether it was the years or the mileage. Without even thinking about it, I'd presumed I was somewhere in my early twenties, but now I could see that I was actually two decades older than that. I learned later that this was nothing to do with my particular neurological condition – that's just how everyone feels in middle age.

'Sorry – can you help me? I'm lost . . .' I said to a young man in a smart suit.

'Where do you want to go?'

'I don't know, I can't remember.'

'Oh, yeah, I know where that is. You want the Northern Line; change at Wanker Street.'

Other passers-by just ignored my requests for help: eye contact was avoided, wired-up ears were deaf to my pleas.

'Excuse me – I don't know who I am!' I said to a sympathetic-looking vicar pulling a suitcase on wheels.

'Ah, yes . . . well, I don't think any of us knows who we really are, do we?'

'No, I mean I really don't know who I am. I've forgotten everything.'

His body language suggested he was already keen to be on his way. 'Well, we may all sometimes feel as though we don't know if there is any meaning to it all, but in fact each of us really is very special indeed . . . Now *I*'m forgetting that I'm already late for my train!'

Seeing the clergyman made me wonder if I had actually died and was on the way to Heaven. It seemed unlikely that God's sense of humour was so warped that he would make us travel to Heaven on the London underground during the rush hour. 'Paradise plc would like to apologize for the delay for those travelling to the afterlife. Customers destined for Hell are advised to alight at Boston Manor, where a replacement bus service is in operation.' In fact, this experience did feel like a kind of death. Trapped as I was in some dream-like suspended state, I knew of no one who cared if I lived or died. I had no character witnesses who could vouch for my existence. I think I learned then that that is the most basic primeval human need of all – that simple reassurance that you are alive and will be acknowledged by other human beings. 'I exist!' declare all those Stone Age cave paintings. 'I exist!' say the graffiti tags on the underground walls. That's the whole point of the internet – it's given everyone the chance to proclaim their existence to the world. Friends Reunited: 'Here I am! Look over here! Yes, you had forgotten me but now you remember me again!' Facebook: 'This is me. Look, I have photos, friends, interests. No one can say I was never born – here is the proof for all to see.'

That is the central tenet of twenty-first-century Western philosophy: 'I tweet, therefore I am.'

But I was trapped in something worse than solitary confinement. Even the individual travellers around me, thousands of miles from their homes, would still have their friends and family with them, efficiently packed away in their heads. My mental vacuum had physical symptoms; I was shaking and felt short of breath. Part of me wanted to go back to the underground platform and throw myself in front of the next train. Instead I watched a rushing commuter aim an empty coffee cup at the trolley of a litter-collector, but then continue on her way when it missed and fell to the floor. I bent down, picked it up and added it to the other rubbish that was being slowly collected by the elderly Asian man in his ill-fitting luminous suit.

'Thank you,' he said.

'Um, excuse me, I think I've had some sort of stroke or something . . .' I said, as I began to explain my predicament. It sounded so implausible, I thought, as I heard myself describing it, that I felt an enormous gratitude to this man for appearing genuinely concerned.

'You need the hospital! King Edward's is a mile up the road,' he said, pointing in the general direction. 'I would take you there, but . . . I'd lose my job.'

It was the first compassion anyone had shown me and suddenly I felt like crying. 'Of course – medical help!' I thought. 'That's what I need.'

'Thank you! Thank you!' I gushed to my best friend in the whole world. The location of the hospital was

confirmed by a map on the side of a bus shelter; you just went straight up the road and turned left at the giant lump of chewing gum. Now I was going somewhere; just this mission gave me a fragment of hope. And so I strode up the busy main road like an amazed time traveller or an alien from another planet, trying to take it all in, some of it strangely familiar, some of it completely bizarre. There was a brief moment of hope when I saw a sign on a lamp post with the headline 'MISSING'. Underneath was a photocopied picture of an overweight cat. And then the towering concrete block ahead turned into the hospital and I felt my pace quicken, as if the people in there might somehow immediately make everything better.

'Excuse me – I really need to see a doctor,' I gabbled at the front desk of Accident and Emergency. 'I think I've had a sort of brain freeze or something. I can't remember who I am or anything about myself. It's like my memory's been completely wiped.'

'Right. Could I take your name, please?'

There was a split second when I actually went to answer this question in the casual manner in which it had been posed.

'That's what I'm saying – I can't even remember my own name! It's like, all personal information has suddenly been erased . . .'

'I see. Well, could I take your address then, please?'

'Um – sorry – I don't think I'm making myself clear. I've got this extreme amnesia – I can't remember a single thing about myself.'

The hospital receptionist managed to look harassed and bored at the same time.

'Right. Who's your registered doctor?'

'Well, *I don't know*, obviously. I was on a train, and then I suddenly realized I didn't know why I was on it, where I was going or anything. And now I can't remember where I live, where I work, what my name is, or even if this has ever happened to me before.'

She glanced up at me as if I was being particularly uncooperative. 'NHS number?' Her exasperated tone at least conceded that this was a long shot. The phone rang and she left me there in limbo while she dealt with someone more amenable. I stared at a poster asking me if I had remembered to examine my testicles. I didn't know, but felt this probably wasn't the moment.

'I'm sorry, but we're not allowed to process you without asking these questions,' she said, when she returned her attention to me. 'Are you currently on any prescriptions or regular medications?'

'I don't know!'

'Do you have any allergies or follow any special diet?'

'No idea.'

'And could you please provide the name and contact details for your spouse or next of kin?'

That's when I first noticed it. The indented ring of white flesh on my fourth finger. The ghostly scar where a wedding ring had been. All the fingertips were crowned with badly bitten nails, red raw around the edges.

'Yes, next of kin! I have a wife maybe?' I said excitedly. The ring could have been stolen, along with

my wallet and phone. Perhaps I had been robbed and concussed and maybe my dear wife was looking for me right now. The shadow of a wedding ring filled me with hope. 'Maybe my wife is at this moment ringing round all the hospitals, trying to find me,' I said.

A week later I was still in the hospital waiting for her call.

Chapter 2

My fingernails had grown back and the skin was no longer gnawed away until it bled. I had a label on my wrist that said 'UNKNOWN WHITE MALE', though the hospital porters had dubbed me 'Jason' after the fictional amnesiac in *The Bourne Identity*. However, it turned out that knowing absolutely nothing about yourself was not quite as exciting and eventful as it appeared in Hollywood blockbusters. My status seemed to have evolved from emergency in-patient to layabout lodger at King Edward's Hospital in West London. Already I found myself feeling sufficiently established to refer to the place as 'Teddy's'; the fundraising posters featured a friendly teddy-bear character that had presumably been chosen ahead of the image of a 1950s Teddy Boy or an item of lady's lingerie.

I had no illness as such. I had been examined on the first day for a possible blow to the head, but there was no such logical explanation for why on Tuesday,

22 October, my brain had suddenly decided to restore factory settings. Each day I had woken up hoping that I might have woken up. But the split second of disorientation that you experience on stirring in a strange bed had now lasted an entire week. I kept reaching in vain for my missing past life, but it was like the ghostly sensation when you imagine your phone just vibrated in your pocket and then check to find that no one called.

I had been seen by a regular stream of doctors, neurologists and attendant students, for whom I was paraded as something of an interesting novelty. They were all united in their diagnosis. None of them had the faintest idea what had happened to me. One medical student asked me rather accusingly, 'If you've forgotten everything, how come you can still remember how to talk?'

One of the neurologists, on the other hand, was particularly focused on my claim that I hadn't lost memories of general current affairs or the wider world. 'So would you remember, for example, the publication of *The Computer Under Your Cranium* by Dr Kevin Hoddy?'

'Er, Kevin, lots of people might not remember that . . .' interjected one of the other doctors.

'Okay, what about the BBC Four series *The Brain Explorers*, co-presented by Dr Kevin Hoddy?'

'No – I don't recall that.'

'Hmm, fascinating . . .' said Dr Hoddy. 'Absolutely fascinating.'

It only compounded my depression to realize that, at the moment, my very best friend in the whole world

was Annoying Bernard in the next bed. In one way Bernard provided a valuable service to me during those first seven days. On the inside I was almost crippled with anxiety about what had happened to me, who I was and whether I would ever recover the rest of my life. But it never seemed like I had much time to dwell on this, due to being in a constant state of mild irritation at the man in the next bed congratulating me for remembering what I had for breakfast.

'No, that's not a symptom of my condition, Bernard. Remember, you were there when the consultant explained it all.'

'Sorry, I forgot! It must be infectious!'

Bernard meant well; he wasn't an unpleasant person – in fact, he was unremittingly jolly. I just found it a bit wearing to have to spend twenty-four hours a day with someone who seemed to think that my neurological disorder could be overcome if I was just upbeat and cheerful about the whole 'bloomin' business'.

'I tell you what, there's a few embarrassing things in my past that I wouldn't mind forgetting, I can tell you!' He chuckled. 'New Year's Eve 1999 – know what I mean?!' and he mimed drinking as he rolled his eyes. 'Oh yes, I wouldn't mind forgetting that one! And a certain lady from the Swindon Salsa Dance Club . . . oh yes, I wouldn't mind that episode being struck from the official record please, Mr Chairman!'

Eventually one doctor in particular seemed to take the lead on my case. Dr Anne Lewington was a slightly mad-looking consultant neurologist in her fifties who was supposed to be at this hospital only two days a

week, but was so perplexed by my condition that she made a point of seeing me every day. Under her supervision I had a brain scan, I had wires attached to my head, I had audio-visual stimuli tests; but in every case the activity in my brain was apparently 'completely normal'. It was a shame my brain had no button just to switch it off and then switch it back on again.

It took me a day or two to work out that Dr Lewington's excitement at examining my results bore no relation whatsoever to any progress or understanding of what had happened to me.

'Oooh, that's interesting!'

'What? What?' I asked optimistically.

'Both hippocampi are normal, the volumes of both entorhinal cortices and temporal lobes are normal.'

'Right – so does that explain anything?'

'Nothing at all. That's what's so interesting! No bilateral damage to the medial temporal lobe or diencephalic midline. It would appear that your extra-personal memories have been consolidated in the neocortex independently of the medial temporal lobe.'

'Is that good or bad?'

'Well, there's no discernible logic or pattern to any of it. But then that's typical of brain scans as a whole – such a mystery!' she said, clapping her hands together in delight. 'That's what makes it so utterly compelling!'

I felt my body slumping back in the chair again.

'And as for how memories are processed and stored – that is one of the most baffling areas of all. It's such a thrilling subject to be researching!'

'Hmmm, great . . .' I nodded blankly. It was like

having open-heart surgery and hearing, 'Wow – what's this big muscle in here pumping away of its own accord?!'

It was quite a few days before Dr Lewington had reached her conclusion and came and sat by my bed to explain what she thought had happened. She talked so quietly that Bernard was forced to turn off his radio on the other side of the curtain.

'From cases similar to your own in the United States and elsewhere, it seems that you have experienced a "psychogenic fugue"; literally a "flight" from your previous life, possibly triggered by extreme stress or an inability to cope with whatever was happening.'

'A fugue?'

'Yes, this only happens to a handful of people every year in the whole world, though no two cases seem to be identical. The loss of personal items such as your phone or wallet was probably deliberate on your part as you slipped into the "fugue state", and it's usual to have no recall of consciously abandoning all traces of your former life. Clearly you have not forgotten everything or you would be like a newborn infant, but typically with "retrograde amnesia", the patient would know, say, who Princess Diana was, but might not know that she had died.'

'Paris. 1998,' I said, showing off a little.

'1997!' came Bernard's voice from the other side of the curtain.

'Your recall of these *extra-personal* memories suggests you stand a good chance of getting your

personal memories back and returning to your old life.'

'But when exactly?'

'Thirty-first of August,' said Bernard. 'She was pronounced dead around four a.m.'

Dr Lewington was reluctant to make any promises, and had to concede that there was no guarantee that I would definitely recover. And so I was left alone with this frightening thought, staring at the green curtains around my bed, wondering if I would ever make contact with my previous life again.

'Maybe you're a serial killer?' said Bernard's nonchalant voice.

'Sorry, Bernard, are you talking to me?'

'Well, she said it might have been caused by a need to shut out your past; perhaps it's because you couldn't stand the torment of being the undetected murderer of homeless vagrants whose bodies are stored in freezer cabinets in your basement.'

'That's a lovely thought. Thank you.'

'It's possible. Or perhaps you're a terrorist.'

'Well, let's hope not, eh?'

'A drug dealer. On the run from the Chinese triads!'

I resolved to say nothing in the hope that the speculation might peter out.

'A pimp . . . A compulsive arsonist . . .'

There were some headphones somewhere. I looked under my bedside table for a way to block out the list of appalling crimes that might have precipitated my breakdown, most notably 'paedophile', 'vivisectionist' and 'banker'.

I dismissed Bernard's speculation as completely ridiculous, and then later that afternoon felt a flush of fear and guilt as I was informed that there were two policemen waiting for me in the ward sister's office. In fact, they had not come to arrest me for war crimes against the people of Bosnia, as Bernard suggested. It turned out that they had come with a large file of 'Missing Persons' which they now went through very slowly, staring carefully at each photo before looking studiously at me.

'Well, that one's clearly not me,' I found myself interjecting, desperate to see if I was on any of the later pages.

'We have to give due consideration to every single file, sir.'

'Yes, but I'm not that fat. Or black. Or a woman.'

They looked at me suspiciously to see if I might have attempted to cover up my African, feminine features and then reluctantly turned the page.

'Hmmm, what do you think?' said the officer, looking between my face and the photo of a wizened old pensioner.

'He's about eighty!' I objected.

'A lot of these people look older than they actually are, sir – they might have been on drugs or living on the street. How long have you had that beard?'

'Er, well – since before I can remember . . .'

'Just roughly speaking. A month, a year, ten years?'

'I don't know! Like the nurse said, I am suffering from retrograde amnesia, so my mind is a blank about everything prior to last Tuesday.'

They looked at each other, gently shook their heads in exasperation, then continued looking for any similarities between my appearance and the photos of a teenage girl, a Sikh, and a Jack Russell terrier, which at least they conceded had been put in the wrong file.

The fact that no one had reported me missing seemed to tell a story of its own. There had been no urgent reports on the news, no tearful appeals from a loving family, no full-page adverts in the newspaper for this dearly missed husband, father or work colleague. Had I been this lonely before my fugue, I wondered; had that been the stress that provoked my mental Etch-a-Sketch into shaking the screen clear to start again?

Whatever my past, all I could think about was being rescued from this desert island in a city of eight million people. I wanted to build a big fire on the beach, put a message in a bottle, spell out giant letters for passing aircraft.

'Could we get something in the newspaper?' I kept suggesting to the ward sister. 'A sort of "Do you know this man?" feature next to my photo?' Despite her general air of never having enough time or appreciation, she eventually agreed that this might be a good idea, and I sat in her tiny office while she nervously rang the news desk at the *London Evening Standard*. She explained my situation, but I only heard her side of the conversation, as she covered the mouthpiece and relayed their questions about me.

'They want to know if you are really brilliant at the piano or anything like that?'

'Well – I don't know . . . I can't remember. Maybe I should speak to them?'

'He doesn't know.' Another pause. 'Are you, like, an incredible linguist or a maths genius or anything?'

'I don't think so. I can only do the easy puzzles in Bernard's Sudoku book . . . Should I speak to them?'

'Er, he can do easy Sudoku puzzles. Does that help at all?'

Apparently the paper didn't have the staff to send anyone round to the hospital, but said they might run the story if we sent over all the details with an up-to-date photo. The next day in the centre pages there was a huge double spread headed 'Who's the Mystery Man?' Beneath it was a picture of a well-groomed young man standing beside Pippa Middleton at a charity polo match. I went through the paper twice, but there was nothing about me. It transpired that they had been intending to run my story, but then the scoop about the mystery companion of Prince William's sister-in-law had broken, and the editor had ruled that they couldn't have two 'mystery man' stories in the same edition. The journalist who had taken our initial call was now on holiday, so the potential story was now assigned to another reporter. 'Tell me,' she asked, 'are you, like, really brilliant at the piano or anything?'

I found it hard to sleep at night, and sometimes slipped away to the dark and empty Day Room, which boasted a great view of the hypnotic London skyline. It was on the fourth night, staring out at the million tiny lights of

the city, that it hit me that this was my life now; that this syndrome wasn't some temporary blip. Someone was called to investigate the loud thumping noise coming from the tenth floor. It was there that one of the orderlies found me, banging my head against the glass over and over again. 'Hey, mate, don't do that!' he said. 'You'll break the glass.'

Sometimes I would pass a few hours in the television room. It was on one of these visits that I discovered *Mr & Mrs*, which had been reinvented featuring celebrities and their good-looking spouses. This programme became something of an obsession with me. I just loved how these couples could remember so much about one another, and I laughed along with every marital faux-pas and basked in the couples' easy familiarity.

'Ah, found you!' declared Bernard in his unmistakable high-pitched nasal whine, just as the second half of the programme was about to begin. 'Look, I got a couple of books for you from the newsagent's in the lobby: *How to Improve Your Memory in Just Fifteen Minutes a Day*! I don't know why we didn't think of this ages ago!'

'That's very kind of you, Bernard, but I'm guessing that's more for general forgetfulness than retrograde amnesia.'

'Well, it's all degrees of the same thing, isn't it?'

'Er, no.'

'Believe me, I know what you're going through because I can never remember where I've put my keys.'

'See, I don't suffer from that, actually. I can remember

everything I've done since coming to this hospital. But I just can't remember a single thing about my life before that day.'

'Yes, yes, I see what you're saying. So you might need to do more than fifteen minutes a day,' he conceded, opening the book at random. '*When you are introduced to a new person for the first time . . . try repeating their name out loud to lodge it in your memory. So instead of just "Hello" you say "Hello, Simon"*. Well, you could try doing that for a start!'

'Yeah, but you see, I don't think that's going to unlock the first forty years of my life . . .'

'Scissors is the other one. I can never remember where I left the scissors. Sometimes I think they must be deliberately avoiding me! Ooh, this is a good one: "*If you have problems remembering telephone numbers, try making associations. For example, if a friend's number is 2012 1066, then just remember it by thinking, London Olympics and the Battle of Hastings.*"'

'Okay – great. If that particular number comes up, I'll definitely remember it like that.'

'You see!' said Bernard, gratified that he'd been such a help. 'And it's only fifteen minutes a day. Ooh, *All-Star Mr & Mrs*! I'd love to go on that programme. You know, like, if I was famous . . . and had a wife.'

When my favourite TV show was over for another day, I announced I was heading back to my bed, but Bernard jumped up 'to keep me company', triumphantly revealing the other book he had bought on the ground floor. He had decided that one way to trigger a memory of my own

identity might be to read out every single male name in the worryingly thick tome entitled *Name Your Baby*. Part of me wanted to scream in frustration, but I knew that in his uniquely unhelpful way, Bernard was only trying to be helpful.

During the course of that long afternoon it became clear why *Name Your Baby* has never been a huge hit as an audiobook. Sure there are lots of characters, but none of them is ever particularly developed. 'Aaron', for example, has a walk-on part right at the beginning but then we never hear from him again. The same was true with 'Abdullah', who also failed to offer up any clues as to whether that might be the sort of name my parents had given me.

'I'm not sure you should lie down like that,' said Bernard. 'You're still really concentrating, aren't you?'

'Definitely. I'm just closing my eyes so I can be sure there's nothing else to distract me . . .'

I eventually woke up to the alliterative poetry of 'Francis? Frank? Frankie? Franklin?' Even though Bernard had been going for several hours, he still declared every name with extraordinary gusto and optimism. I had just had the same dream I'd experienced a couple of times now: a snapshot of a moment sharing laughter with a woman. I couldn't remember a face or a name, but she seemed to love me as I loved her. The sensation was pure happiness, the only colour in a black-and-white world, and I was crushed when I awoke to the huge void that was my life right now. Had it not

been for the gripping narrative of Bernard's book, I might have allowed myself to be quite depressed.

'Gabriel? Gael? Galvin? Ganesh?'

'Hmmm,' I thought, 'I don't think I look much like a "Ganesh". I haven't got four arms and the head of an elephant, for a start.' Maybe I could ask him to stop now; perhaps claim that after several hours of intense concentration I was tiring a little.

'Gareth? Garfield? Garrison?' An unspecified electronic buzz was coming from the ward reception desk. 'Garth? Garvin? Gary?'

And then something extraordinary happened. On hearing the word 'Gary', I just heard myself mumble '07700 . . .'

'What was that?' said Bernard.

'I don't know,' I said, sitting up. 'It just came out when you said "Gary".'

'Is that it? Is that you? Are you *Gary*?'

'I don't think so. Say it again.'

'Gary!'

'07700 . . .' There was more. '900 . . . 913.'

It was like an involuntary spasm; there was no context or meaning to it – it just felt natural that those numbers followed that name.

'That's a telephone number!' said Bernard excitedly, writing it down.

'Yeah, but whose?'

Bernard looked at me as if I was being particularly stupid. 'I mean, someone called Gary, probably, but I wonder who he is?'

We had discovered a fragment of DNA from my past

life. Bernard had successfully shown the way to my hinterland. I'd been sceptical and negative and he had proved me wrong. I might have actually congratulated him on his tenacity and initiative if I hadn't noticed that these very qualities had caused him to reach for his mobile phone and start dialling.

'What are you doing?' I screamed.

'Ringing Gary. Was it "913" at the end?'

'No, don't! I'm not ready! We should talk to the doctor! You're not allowed to use that in here—'

'It's ringing!' and he threw the handset over to me.

Slowly I raised it to my ear. 'There's no one there. It's probably just a random number. I can't believe I'm even listening to this . . .' Then a distant electronic crackle. And after a whole week, the first faint sound heard by rescue teams digging in the rubble.

'Hello?' said a male voice, on a weak, distorted signal.

'Um . . . hello? Is that . . . er, Gary, by any chance?' I stammered.

'Yeah. Vaughan! Is that you? Where the hell have you been? It's like you suddenly disappeared off the face of the earth!'

In a panic I dropped the call and threw the handset back to Bernard.

'Did you recognize his voice?'

'Er, no. No, I . . . It's probably just some random bloke,' I stammered. But the stranger was ringing straight back. And soon they were having quite an animated chat about me.

'Not any more,' said Bernard. 'I think *I*'m his best friend now . . .'