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It was Graham Greene who said a story has no beginning or end. The author simply chooses a moment, an arbitrary point, and looks either forward or back. That moment is now - an October morning – when the clang of a metallic letter flap heralds the first post.

There is an envelope on the mat inside my front door. Inside is a small stiff rectangle of paper that says nothing and everything.

Dear Ali,

I'm in trouble. I must see you. Please come to the reunion.

Love Cate.

Sixteen words. Long enough to be a suicide note. Short enough to end an affair. I don't know why Cate has written to me now. She hates me. She told me so the last time we spoke, eight years ago. The past. Given long enough I could tell you the month, the day and the hour but these details are unimportant.

All you need to know is the year - 1997. It should have been the summer we finished university; the summer we went backpacking across Europe; the summer I lost my virginity to Brian Rusconi instead of Cate's father. Instead it was the summer she went away and the summer I left home - a summer not big enough for everything that happened.

Now she wants to see me again. Sometimes you know when a story begins...

When the day comes that I am asked to re-calibrate the calendar, I am going to lop a week off January and February and add them to October, which deserves to be forty days long, maybe more.

I love this time of year. The tourists have long gone and the kids are back at school. The TV schedules aren't full of re-runs and I can sleep under a duvet again. Mostly I love the sparkle in the air, without the pollen from the plane trees so I can open my lungs and run freely.

I run every morning - three circuits of Victoria Park in Bethnal Green, each one of them more than a mile. Right now I'm just passing Durward Street in Whitechapel. Jack the Ripper territory. I once took a Ripper walking tour, a pub-crawl with ghost stories. The victim I remember best was his last one, Mary Kelly, who died on the same date as my birthday, November the 9th.

People forget how small an area Jack roamed. Spitalfields, Shoreditch and Whitechapel cover less than a square mile, yet in 1880 more than a million people were crammed into slums, without decent water and sewerage. It is still overcrowded and poor but that's only compared to places like Hampstead or Chiswick or Holland Park. Poverty is a relative state in a rich country full of people who cry poor.

It is seven years since I last ran competitively, on a September night in Birmingham, under lights. I wanted to get to the Sydney Olympics but only two of us were going to make it. Four hundredths of a second separated first from fifth; half a metre, a heart beat, a broken heart.

I don't run to win any more. I run because I can and because I'm fast. Fast enough to blur at the edges. That's why I'm here now, flirting with the ground, while perspiration leaks between my breasts, plastering my T-shirt to my stomach.

When I run my thoughts become clearer. Mostly I think about work and imagine that today someone will call and offer me my old job back.

A year ago I helped solve a kidnapping and find a missing girl. One of the kidnappers dropped me onto a wall, crushing my spine. After six operations and nine months of physiotherapy I am fit again, with more steel in my spine than England's back four. Unfortunately, nobody seems to know what to do with me at the Metropolitan Police. They think I'm a wonky wheel on the machine.

As I pass the playground, I notice a man sitting on a bench reading a newspaper. There is no child on the climbing frame behind him and other benches are in sunshine. Why has he chosen the shade?

In his mid-thirties, dressed in a shirt and tie, he doesn't raise his eyes as I pass. He's studying a crossword. What sort of man does a crossword in a park at this hour of the morning? A man who can't sleep. A man who waits.

Up until a year ago I used to watch people for a living. I guarded diplomats and visiting heads of state, ferrying their wives on shopping trips to Harrods and dropping their children at school. It is probably the most boring job in the Metropolitan Police but I was good at it. During five years with the Diplomatic Protection Group I didn't fire a shot in anger or miss one of their hair appointments. I was like one of those soldiers who sit in the missile silos, praying the phone never rings.

On my second circuit of the park he is still there. His suede jacket is lying over his lap. He has freckles and smooth brown hair, cut symmetrically and parted to the left. A leather briefcase is tucked close to his side.

A gust of wind tears the newspaper from his fingers. Three steps and I reach it first. It wraps around my thigh.

For a moment he wants to retreat, as if too close to the edge. His freckles make him look younger. His eyes don't meet mine. Instead he bunches his shoulders shyly and says thank you. The front page is still

wrapped around my thigh. For a moment I'm tempted to have some fun. I could make a joke about feeling like tomorrow's fish and chips.

The breeze feels cool on my neck. 'Sorry, I'm rather sweaty.'

He touches his nose nervously, nods and touches his nose again.

'Do you run every day?' he asks suddenly.

'I try to.'

'How far?'

'Four miles.'

It's an American accent. He doesn't know what else to say.

'I have to keep going. I don't want to cool down.'

'Okay. Sure. Have a nice day.' It doesn't sound so trite coming from an American.

On my third circuit of the park the bench is empty. I look for him along the street but there are no silhouettes. Normal service has been resumed.

Further along the street, just visible on the corner, a van is parked at the curb. As I draw nearer, I notice a white plastic tent over missing paving stones. A metal cage is propped open around the hole. They've started work early.

I do this sort of thing - take note of people and vehicles. I look for things that are out of the ordinary; people in the wrong place, or the wrong clothes; cars parked illegally, the same face in different locations. I can't change what I am.

Unlacing my trainers, I pull a key from beneath the insole and unlock my front door. My neighbour, Mr Mordacai, waves from his window. I once asked him his first name and he said it should be Yo'man.

'Why's that?'

'Because that's what my boys call me: "Yo man, can I have some money?" "Yo man, can I borrow the car?"'

His laugh sounded like nuts falling on a roof.

In the kitchen I pour myself a large glass of water and drink it greedily. Then I stretch my quads, balancing one leg on the back of a chair.

The mouse living under my fridge chooses that moment to appear. It is a very ambivalent mouse, scarcely bothering to lift its head to acknowledge me. And it doesn't seem to mind that my youngest brother Hari keeps setting mousetraps. Perhaps it knows that I disarm them, taking off the cheese when Hari isn't looking.

The mouse finally looks up at me, as though about to complain about the lack of crumbs. Then sniffs the air and scampers away.

Hari appears in the doorway, bare-chested and barefoot. Opening the fridge, he takes out a carton of orange juice and unscrews the plastic lid. He looks at me, considers his options, and gets a glass from the cupboard. Sometimes I think he is prettier than I am. He has longer lashes and thicker hair.

'Are you going to the reunion tonight?' I ask.

'Nope.'

'Why not?'

'Don't tell me *you're* going! You said you wouldn't be caught dead.'

'I changed my mind.'

There is a voice from upstairs. '*Hey, have you seen my knickers?*'

Hari looks at me sheepishly.

'*I know I had a pair. They're not on the floor.*'

Hari whispers, 'I thought you'd gone out.'

'I went for a run. Who is she?'

'An old friend.'

'So you must know her name?'

'Cheryl.'

'Cheryl Taylor!' (She's a bottle blonde who works behind the bar at the White Horse). 'She's older than I am.'

'No, she's not.'

'What on earth do you see in her?'

'What difference does that make?'

'I'm interested.'

'Well, she has assets.'

'Assets?'

'The best.'

'You think so?'

'Absolutely.'

'What about Phoebe Griggs?'

'Too small.'

'Emma Shipley?'

'Saggy.'

'Mine?'

'Very funny.'

Cheryl is coming down the stairs. I can hear her rummaging in the sitting room. 'Found them,' she shouts.

She arrives in the kitchen still adjusting the elastic beneath her skirt.

'Oh, hello,' she squeaks.

'Cheryl, this is my sister, Alisha.'

'Nice to see you again,' she says, not meaning it.

The silence seems to stretch out. I might never talk again. Finally, I excuse myself and go upstairs for a shower. With any luck Cheryl will be gone by the time I come down.

Hari has been living with me for the past two months because it's closer to university. He is supposed to be safeguarding my virtue and helping pay the mortgage but he's four weeks behind in his rent and using my spare room as a knocking shop.

My legs are tingling. I love the feeling of lactic acid leaking away. I look in the mirror and pull back my hair. Yellow flecks spark in my irises like goldfish in a pond. There are no wrinkles. Black don't crack.

My 'assets' aren't so bad. When I was running competitively I was always pleased they were on the small side and could be tightly bound in a

sports bra. Now I wouldn't mind being a size bigger so I could have a cleavage.

Hari yells up the stairs. 'Hey, Sis, I'm taking twenty from your purse.'

'Why?'

'Because when I take it from strangers they get angry.'

Very droll. 'You still owe me rent.'

'Tomorrow.'

'You said that yesterday.' *And the day before.*

The front door closes. The house is quiet.

Downstairs, I pick up the postcard again, resting it between my fingertips. Then I prop it on the table against the salt and pepper shakers, staring at it for a while.

Cate Elliot. Her name still makes me smile. One of the strange things about friendship is that time together isn't cancelled out by time apart. One doesn't erase the other or balance it on some invisible scale. You can spend a few hours with someone and they can change your life, or you spend a lifetime with a person and remain unchanged.

We were born at the same hospital and raised in Bethnal Green in London's East End although we managed to more or less avoid each other for the first thirteen years. Fate brought us together, if you believe in such things.

We became inseparable. Almost telepathic. We were partners in crime, stealing beer from her father's fridge, window shopping on the Kings Road, eating chips with vinegar on our way home from school, sneaking out to see bands at the Hammersmith Odeon and movie stars on the red carpet at Leicester Square.

In our gap year we went to France. I crashed a moped, got cautioned for having a fake ID and tried hash for the first time. Cate lost the key to our hostel during a midnight swim and we had to climb a trellis at two a.m.

There is no break-up worse than best friends. Broken love affairs are painful. Broken marriages are messy. Broken homes are sometimes an improvement. Our break-up was the worst.

Now, after eight years, she wants to see me. The thrill of compliance spreads across my skin. Then comes a nagging, unshakeable dread. She's in trouble.

My car keys are in the sitting room. As I pick them up, I notice smudges on the glass-topped coffee table. Looking closer, I can make out two neat buttock prints and what I imagine to be elbow smudges. I could kill my brother!

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