

'Heart-stoppingly
believable'
CLARE MACKINTOSH

'Ingenious. I couldn't
put it down'
M.J. ARLIDGE

ONE
OF THEM
IS LYING.

**FORGET
MY
NAME**

J. S. MONROE

Dr Patterson sits back, glancing at the computer screen on her desk. On the wall behind her is a large map of the world, illustrating recommended injections for different countries. Southern India – diphtheria, hepatitis A, tetanus, typhoid – is partially obscured by her head.

‘It’s quite normal for someone in your position to feel these things,’ she says. ‘Your sense of disconnection may also turn into frustration and depression.’

‘I’m not sure what I would have done if I hadn’t met Laura,’ I say, feeling another pang of guilt for the woman who doesn’t know me and is being so kind.

She looks at Laura and then at me.

‘We were talking on the phone earlier about the various different types of amnesia. In most cases, memory loss like this tends to pass quite quickly, sometimes in a matter of hours. If your condition persists, we will need to run some tests, establish if you’ve suffered any physical trauma to the brain. We also need to rule out other organic causes such as a stroke, a brain tumour, an epileptic episode, encephalitis or possible thyroid disorders, even vitamin B deficiency. Recreational drugs and alcohol can also be factors in memory loss. My guess, though, is that you’re experiencing what we call psychogenic or dissociative amnesia – stress is one of the biggest causes.’

I sit up in my seat, aware of people passing on the pavement outside the window. It’s disconcerting to hear myself being discussed in this medical way.

‘Would you like some water?’ Dr Patterson offers, sensing my discomfort.

I nod, watching as she fills a glass from a plastic bottle and passes it to me.

‘I’m just going to take your blood pressure,’ she says, getting up from her chair. ‘Have a listen to your heart, check your breathing.’

She continues to talk as she wraps a sleeve around my arm, fastening it with Velcro before starting to inflate it. I try to relax, concentrate on my breath, the lower part of my lungs.

‘Do you know today’s date?’ she asks. I shake my head. ‘The month? Year?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. This is all so hard.

‘Where we are?’

Another shake of the head. I hear Fleur’s voice in my ear. Right now all I want to do is curl up in bed and cry.

‘It’s OK,’ she says, undoing the Velcro. ‘I’d also like to perform a brief neurological examination.’

My hands tense as she picks up a stethoscope from her desk. After listening to my heart, she conducts a series of tests, assessing my balance, eye movements and visual field, shining a torch into my pupils and checking facial and neck muscles. It’s then that she reaches for her ophthalmoscope. An image of a white coat comes and goes.

‘I just need to examine your retina,’ she says, noticing me flinch. ‘And look for raised intracranial pressure,’ she continues, her cheek close to mine. ‘All seems fine.’

She sits down again, putting the instrument back on her desk. My eyes linger on it for a second before I look away.

‘Some people experience “anterograde amnesia”, which is when you can’t form new memories. They can recall the past, before the event that caused the amnesia, but nothing

afterwards. Let's see what you can remember tomorrow, after a good night's sleep.'

'How do you mean?' I ask.

'It's possible you could forget everything that's happened today.'

She glances at Laura.

'The other main form of amnesia is retrograde, where you can't remember anything from before the event that caused the memory loss. Autobiographical details, your name, address, family, friends and so on. You are, though, able to form new memories. I suspect this is what you're currently suffering from.'

'But she will get better?' Laura asks.

'It's hard to say at this stage,' she says to me. 'I'd certainly recommend further examinations, maybe an MRI brain scan. If the amnesia is stress-induced, it should resolve but may take time. You might be experiencing what we call a dissociative fugue. A temporary loss of identity accompanied by unplanned travel, confusion and amnesia. Right now you just need to relax, perhaps do some yoga with Laura? I think she's already offered.'

Laura nods, smiling.

'I'd like that,' I say. Laura's kindness makes me want to cry.

'I don't think it's necessary for you to be admitted tonight – even if there were any beds available, which I'm afraid there aren't. The only other option is a night in an A & E corridor.'

'I'd rather not,' I interject.

'It was terrible up there last week,' Laura says.

'Your blood pressure's a little high,' Dr Patterson continues, ignoring her friend, 'which is to be expected, but your breathing is clear and I can find no evidence to suggest a stroke or infection.' She turns to Laura. 'Are you really OK for her to stay with you tonight?'

'Honestly not a problem,' Laura says.

However bad I feel about Laura, it's much better that I sleep in her house.

'Normally I'd like to exclude all organic causes first, but the community psychiatric nurse is in the village tomorrow. And we're in luck – there's been a cancellation at 9 a.m. Would that suit?'

I nod, glancing at Laura, who smiles back at me.

'In most cases like this, the semantic memory is unaffected. You should still be able to understand words, colours, how things work, general knowledge, that sort of thing. And I don't anticipate any other cognitive impairment. You aren't at any personal risk.'

'I knew what to do with my train ticket today,' I say, 'if that's what you mean.'

'If you've got time,' Dr Patterson continues, glancing at Laura, 'take a walk around the village together. Try to relax, let the dissociated mind reconnect. Often all our memory needs is a trigger, a familiar face, for everything to start coming back. Maybe go along to the pub quiz tonight. You never know, someone might recognise you. These things can resolve themselves very quickly.'

'She remembered the layout of our house,' Laura says, shifting the mood again.

'Really?'

'The upstairs rooms, a shower in the downstairs loo – before she saw any of it.'

Dr Patterson looks up at me and then back at her screen, deep in thought.

‘We were wondering if she’d lived there before, a long time ago.’

‘Normally with retrograde amnesia, those sort of episodic memories are lost,’ Dr Patterson says, ‘although sometimes patients can recall things from their very distant past.’

‘Maybe that’s it,’ Laura says to me. ‘Perhaps you lived in the house as a child.’

Dr Patterson either doesn’t hear Laura’s theory or chooses to ignore it. ‘For what it’s worth, we’ve got three Jemmas registered at the surgery, one with a “J”...’ She pauses, turning from the screen to me.

Laura and I both look up, struck by the sudden change in Dr Patterson’s expression. Her breezy manner falls away as she scrolls down the screen.

‘What is it?’ Laura asks.

I stare at Dr Patterson, scared of what she’s about to say.

‘Nothing,’ she says, turning back to us, distracted, her mind clearly still processing what she’s just read.

We both know she’s lying.

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‘I suppose Jemma could be my name,’ I say as we walk away from the surgery in the evening sunshine. ‘Though I don’t see how Tony would have guessed it.’ Across the road, bell ringers are practising in the church, peals chasing each other down the scale.

‘It suits you,’ Laura says. ‘And Tony’s good at guessing names. Uncanny sometimes.’

‘Do you ever do the pub quiz?’

‘Not really my thing. Tony’s obsessed with it. He’s only forty but lives in fear of getting Alzheimer’s – his father died of it. The quiz is his way of keeping his brain fit although he’ll never admit as much. He doesn’t like to talk about it.’ Laura starts to giggle. ‘Oh yes, he also likes to sing.’

‘Sing?’

‘They always wind down after the quiz with an open-mike session. The team who wins has to go first. Nobody can stop him, certainly not me. Singing’s Tony’s thing.’

‘And you don’t like it?’ I’m smiling too now. ‘His voice?’

“‘Let there be spaces in your togetherness” and all that.’

“‘And let the winds of heaven dance between you.”” I look up at Laura, surprised. I completed the poem without even thinking.

‘See – your memory’s fine.’ She pauses as we wait to cross the road by the church. ‘Tony spent a large part of his early career taking photos of bands, hoping to sing in one himself. He used to sing to his dad too. In his dying days. Seemed to ease the Alzheimer’s – if that’s possible.’

We follow a path beside the graveyard and down through a water meadow to the railway, which runs parallel with the canal. A train is in the sidings, engines idling. After crossing the tracks, Laura shows me the slope where she and Tony went tobogganing on their first weekend in the village.

‘Do you have any children?’ I ask. I regret the question immediately. Behind us the church bells momentarily lose their rhythm, colliding awkwardly. There were no signs of kids in their immaculate house.

‘We’ve tried,’ Laura says.

‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.’

‘It’s fine. We’ll keep trying.’

We walk on down the canal, past a row of moored narrowboats, flowers tumbling down their sides like May queens’ garlands.

‘I know this sounds weird,’ she asks, ‘but do you think you have any kids?’

I pause to consider. ‘I’m not sure how I’d know.’

‘Tits heading south and a 24/7 state of tiredness and guilt?’ she offers, laughing. ‘At least, that’s what the mums in my class say.’

Our conversation tails off after that as she shows me the draughty Scout Hut where she runs her yoga. I wonder if she’s thinking about Susie Patterson, what the doctor saw on her computer screen. Something upset her, dented her professional calm. On our way back up the high street, we stop outside a café.

‘This is Tony’s place,’ she says. ‘His pride and joy. He’s always dreamt of running his own New York-style vegan café and having somewhere to hang his pictures. We bought it a couple of months ago.’

I look up at a sign that reads: ‘The Seahorse Gallery & Café’. There’s a food counter with glass cabinets at the front and some tables and chairs at the back, where the walls are lined with big framed photos.

‘It used to be the village shop,’ Laura says.

‘Are they his photos?’ I ask, peering in through the window at the pictures hanging on the back wall.

‘Tony loves seahorses.’

‘Different,’ I say, turning to walk on quickly. ‘Was it always a shop?’

‘It was once the village bakery – a long time ago. Is it ringing any bells?’

I shake my head. ‘The only place I feel I’ve seen before is the pub.’

‘And our house.’

‘And your house,’ I repeat quietly, stopping in the street to look around. ‘I just wish I knew why I came here. Who I am.’

Laura touches my arm, managing a weak smile before she walks on ahead. This is difficult for me, but it’s tough for her too. A stranger pitching up on her doorstep. As we turn into School Road, the adrenaline builds again as I remember the moment I knocked at the door. I look around for something to distract my mind. A thatcher is working on a roof up ahead, strands of straw lining the sides of the road.

‘Are you sure it’s OK for me to stay the night?’ I ask. ‘Tony seemed a bit—’

‘Of course it’s OK. He’s keen to help you. We both are.’

‘How long have you guys been together?’

‘We got married last year. Six months after we met. Whirlwind romance.’

‘White wedding?’

‘Not quite.’ She laughs. A group of people walk past us, on their way to the pub quiz, perhaps.

‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.’ Unable to discuss my own past, I seem to be obsessed with other people’s.

‘It’s fine. We had a wonderful day. I always thought I wanted a white wedding, but he talked me out of it.’

‘How come?’

‘He’s a wedding photographer – at least he was. Seen too many loveless white weddings to want a traditional one of his own. So he whisked me off to a field in Cornwall that overlooks Veryan Bay, near where I was born. It was so romantic. Twenty friends watched