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The rosebush was already there when they moved in. Someone must have planted it many years ago; perhaps it had only been a little plant back then and the person who put it in the earth never had the chance to see it in full bloom. Intertwined with the passion-flower, the roses had climbed up and covered almost half of the brick wall at the back of the garden. The scarlet and purple flowers were so vibrant, it surprised Claire that something so beautiful was able to grow in this little dark backyard, and she couldn't help but hesitate before she snipped off a bunch of roses with the secateurs. There was something sacrilegious about it, like when she had taken that glorious orchid while on a walk, which had then wilted by the time they got home. Why did she have to take it; wasn't it enough just to look at it? But this time, the flowers weren't for herself.

Claire looked up into the bright blue sky and followed the white jetstream of a plane leaving London. How quickly this year had passed, she thought. How

good the world was at looking normal and concealing its tragedies.

“Let’s go,” Anthony shouted from inside the kitchen. “I haven’t got all day!”

Claire smiled as she knew that while it sounded as if he had something very important to do, he just wanted to be back in time for the match.

“You don’t have to come, you know. I can go by myself,” she said.

He didn’t even answer, just rushing out of the house instead.

It was a hot, humid day. City Road was jammed with traffic and a line of buses moved sluggishly forward, like a herd of ancient animals slowly dying in the sun.

“Don’t you want to try again?” Anthony asked tentatively when they reached Upper Street, Angel Tube station just a few steps away. “It’s only one single stop to King’s Cross, you know.”

Claire shook her head.

“You don’t want me to have a heart attack, do you?”

It happened shortly after the bombings a year ago, somewhere on the Northern Line. It was rush hour, and Claire had found herself pushed to the back of the carriage, unable to move. People were swaying with every turn, and she could feel the cumulative weight of the passengers smothering her. Her heart was racing in her chest so hard it was as if a living creature was trying to

get out. ‘Calm down, for God’s sake,’ she had said to herself, but her heart just went faster. The noise of creaking metal and rattling wheels cutting through the darkness at high speed gave her a drowning sensation. Staring at the door and counting the seconds, she remembered the expression: ‘soft target’. She could die here with all these strangers, in an instant, just like that. The fear and aggression in the air was almost palpable; everyone on survival. Suddenly something inside her changed, a sudden diffusion of chemicals in her brain. She had to get out of there, right then.

With both her elbows she pushed people aside. Someone swore at her, “Stupid bitch”, but she didn’t care, she was someone else now, brutish, raw, animal-like. She would have punched anyone who dared to stand in her way. These weren’t people anymore, just obstacles, stinking, hateful flesh.

When Claire had finally emerged from the Tube, stepping into the daylight, she was covered in sweat and out of breath, her mouth dry. Stumbling into the toilet of a nearby Starbucks, she looked at her face in the mirror: it wasn’t just pale, it was as white as a sheet. Her knees weak and shaky, completely exhausted, she sat on the lid of the toilet seat to recover. She propped her head in her hands, ashamed of herself; she couldn’t believe that she had behaved like that. For a brief moment she had actually lost her mind.

After that incident Claire had decided to never, ever

go down there again and was relieved that Anthony didn't insist on using the Tube. Even though he was convinced it was just one of her fads that would be forgotten with time, he had bought her a scooter as a gift.

Pentonville Road was a long stretch, and Claire carried the flowers head down so they wouldn't wilt as quickly in the heat. Anthony checked his BlackBerry and there was a Happy Birthday greeting from his mother. He read it somewhat disappointed, as if he had expected it to be from someone else. Claire felt sorry for him, that they had to do this on his birthday – that this day was a day of grief for so many.

She could see other people with flowers now, someone even carrying a giant teddy bear under his arm. A large crowd had gathered just a few metres to the right of King's Cross station entrance. There was a little square behind some railings with a tree in the middle, at night a seedy place where drug dealers and prostitutes hang out.

Now there were dozens of people creating a temporary memorial, and Anthony and Claire joined the queue, waiting for their turn. A security guard made sure that not everyone went in at once. Policemen were protecting the site, batons and guns at the ready. Most people just laid down their flowers and left, but some were kneeling in front of a photograph or wreath, praying.

Even though King's Cross was a busy, noisy spot, on this particular day there was a strange silence, interrupted only by announcements from the loudspeakers inside the station. Claire was looking at the photographs and children's drawings. There were flowers everywhere, some still wrapped in foil, sweating away in the sun, releasing their sweet, heavy scent. The smell of death, Claire thought, and she laid the roses next to a photograph mounted on a piece of cardboard. It showed a young girl with short blond hair. Underneath, in big red letters, was written 'Why?'

A man next to her wept, holding on to the picture of a woman, almost tearing it apart. Suddenly he let go of it and left, looking around with darting eyes. He appeared completely lost, as if in panic, not knowing where to go. Eventually he disappeared into the shadowy hall of the station.

They didn't talk on their way back. One of the reasons she loved him so much was that Anthony always seemed to know when it was time to be silent. She touched his hand with her finger, briefly and gently, as if to reassure herself it was real, that if needed there was this hand she could grab and hold on to.

The noise of the football on the telly filled the afternoon. It was a welcome distraction and had the comforting sound of normality, the rhythm of everyday life.

Claire was in her room upstairs, sitting at the desk by the window surfing the internet. There were speeches and readings in Regent's Park and several other commemorative events all over London. She found a website with photos and a short biography for each of the 52 victims. There it was again, the picture of the blond girl. She was from Poland, 27-years-old, and had been on her way to work that morning – perhaps thinking of her next trip back home to her family in Krakow when the bomb hit. They identified her because they found a fragment of her tooth in the rubble.

Claire wondered how her parents had learnt of her death. They couldn't get her corpse back in a coffin. There was no corpse. There weren't even ashes. Maybe one morning her parents had received a package, bearing a London postmark, containing that fragment of their daughter's tooth.

Claire scrolled up and down the photographs. All these faces were still fresh in the memory of the public, but they would be soon forgotten. A year after the bombings she had brought flowers, but would they do it the following year and the year after that? She doubted it.

Claire realised that people die twice and it's the second death that's final – when no one remembers you anymore, when all that remains of your existence is wiped out, then you are completely and truly gone.

She turned off the computer. From downstairs she could hear Anthony shouting and clapping his hands in excitement. Arsenal were winning. He would be in a good mood tonight and they were going out to celebrate his 33rd birthday.

Looking out of the window, Claire could see the evening sun about to disappear behind the rooftops and chimneys of Islington, the sky red and orange, slowly turning darker.

Anthony was usually reluctant to do anything on his birthday, but when she told him they were going out for dinner with some friends he seemed flattered that she had made the effort.

He liked the Moroccan restaurant, with its low, round tables and dark little corners where people could play boardgames and drink sweet mint tea served in tiny glasses.

Sam, Christine and David were already there when they arrived, sharing a big mezze platter. Sam and Christine had just come back from India and their photos circulated around the table. Pictures of women in colourful saris on a backdrop of lush green, children on a roadside, waving, Christine on her bike, wearing a weather-beaten helmet. It had always been one of Sam's dreams, riding around India on a motorbike, and Christine had got her licence just for the holiday.

Claire was impressed by Christine's courage, and the fact that she was 37, childless and completely

relaxed about it. One night she had asked her whether she was anxious to get pregnant. “We love to travel, and if it happens that’s great, but, if it doesn’t, I’m not going to beat myself up about it.”

Claire felt instantly relieved and comfortable in her company. Both Christine and Sam were teachers, and their double income and generous holidays allowed them to travel. They always seemed to have just come back from some faraway place: Easter Island, Galapagos, Vietnam. There was a constant whiff of adventure and foreign lands about them.

Sitting next to her, Claire was admiring an intricate silver bracelet on Christine’s tanned wrist that she had bought for next to nothing in a market somewhere in Rajasthan.

“It would be impossible for you to leave Britain,” said Sam in a loud voice to David. “You would die of hunger.”

David, one of Anthony’s work colleagues, notoriously neurotic when it came to food, was raving about a place in Notting Hill where one could get wheat grass shoots.

“Probably one of the reasons why you are still single,” said Anthony, “is your grassy breath.”

They had tried to hook David up several times, but to no avail. Especially with Sadie, which had been the biggest disaster so far. “How could you send me a vegetarian?” she had said after she’d invited David to one

of her dinner parties. Sadie was an excellent and keen cook, and told them how David had picked out the vegetables from her slow-cooked beef casserole.

For Sadie this was not only a turn off, but a complete insult. “A man who doesn’t eat meat must be rubbish in bed,” she once concluded.

“My body is my temple,” David had replied in his defence when they asked how the evening with Sadie had gone. “She even eats dead animals for breakfast!”

Anthony and Claire were laughing as he told them. “That’s what it comes down to,” Anthony commented, “food. Even falling in love is dietary related. Sadie is a bloody carnivore and David’s a cow. I can’t believe we even let them near each other.”

They had just finished their first course when Sadie arrived with her new boyfriend, Paolo, in tow, whom she introduced proudly. He was from Brazil, and Claire knew immediately that he must have something to do with dancing; she could tell from his upright posture and precise, slow movements and there was a pride in the way he carried himself that only dancers have.

‘Shame it’s not going to last long,’ Claire thought, offering him a chair. Sadie never had a boyfriend for very long. Sometimes she had girlfriends, too, and they tended to stay a bit longer. One girl, ten years her junior, had even moved in with her, and at the time Sadie had become obsessed with the topic of same-sex

marriage. When the girl left her for an artist, Sadie claimed her “heart had been broken”, and from then on she changed her boyfriends in quick succession.

Sadie was 42 but young at heart. She exuded in abundance what Anthony called “*joie de vivre*”. When she entered a room the chemical composition of the air seemed to change. Everyone looked at her, men and woman alike. The one thing that struck Claire most about Sadie was the fact that her mature beauty seemed far more powerful and threatening than the obvious beauty of youth could ever be.

David hugged her, tapping her shoulder in a manner old friends do. He was probably just relieved he didn’t have to put up with her himself; everything about Sadie was much too much for him. Claire almost laughed out loud – seeing them together, she realised it was the most unlikely match.

Paolo and David got immediately engrossed in a conversation about some new action film. Claire wondered whether Paolo knew that Sadie was bisexual, and whether that played a part in his being attracted to her. Maybe it was something shifty in his eyes, or his apparent confidence that made Claire uncomfortable about him. He was probably just too good looking – in an obvious sort of way. She had always been suspicious if a man was too good-looking, especially when he knew it.

Anthony was sitting on the other side of the table. He was wearing the blue Paul Smith shirt she had given

him for his birthday and his eyes and hair appeared darker, nearly black. Depending on the light, there was a hint of red in his hair – the Irish influence, a sign of his Celtic ancestry. His olive skin was unusually dark for a Brit and luckily he didn't share the pasty complexion of his family members. While they got burnt by the first hint of summer sun, he developed a tan almost immediately. His slender wrists and long hands implied sensitivity, and she liked the way his wristbones protruded under the skin when he gesticulated with his hands. She had always assumed he would be good at playing the piano. At times Claire wondered whether Anthony wasn't wasting creative capacity and whether it did his talents justice working as a junior analyst at HowlandRoberts. He was responsible for the pharmaceutical sector of this well-respected City firm, and his prospects there matched his ambition to climb the career ladder.

Anthony was explaining something to Sadie, elaborately gesticulating. He liked to use them to great effect while talking, just like an Italian, she thought; it was entertaining to watch.

Sadie was laughing and nodding at what he said but, when he realised Claire was observing them, he winked at her – a quick, sexy gesture across the table, throwing it at her like a ball she was supposed to catch. She appreciated that he showed his attraction to her so openly, especially in front of Sadie.

Even though she regarded Sadie as one of her closest friends and trusted her a great deal, Sadie's sexiness, her sheer lust for life, meant that she was a natural enemy to the very convention of marriage. Sadie had in fact called herself unsuited to any sort of marital agreement. "I am married to life," she had said. "People need concepts like marriage to weather the storm of life, only to get shattered and disillusioned. Life doesn't follow rules and contracts; it never does."

However, Claire didn't think of her as a cynic, which made it even more difficult to dismiss her opinion. She had much too much warmth for that. Claire was the first to defend Sadie, but nevertheless harboured the faintest suspicion – and she hated herself for the thought and tried to reject it as paranoia – that Sadie was the kind of woman who had the ability to destroy an otherwise happy couple.

Sometimes Claire wondered what it was exactly that attracted her to Anthony. After all, he spent his days in an environment completely alien to her – in a world of numbers and projections. He seemed to follow a clear path and as a result was much more grounded than her. Until she had met him she was just floating around, rootless like a particle in a vast ocean forever moving, carried only by the unpredictable current of life. Perhaps it was just the right timing and she was finally ready and willing to let someone take her on his way.

After all those years of wandering around, being with Anthony felt like resting on a island and for the first time she as able to take a deep breath.

Anthony broke her thoughts by waving at the waiter to order more wine.

“I’d much rather have a house in Tuscany; I could never live in France,” Christine said.

“As it stands, we are not buying a house anywhere,” Sam replied. “We just came back from a huge holiday...”

“I told her all I want is a little farm and a vineyard in California.” David was talking about the girl from Santa Barbara again.

He showed photos of her on his BlackBerry. Claire had seen the pictures before. David had met this girl two years ago on a trip to California and was still talking about it like it was yesterday.

Mandy was vegetarian of course, clean and pretty. His dream woman.

“But you haven’t seen her for ages. It’s a fantasy. She’s probably married by now and has a kid.”

“We are e-mailing,” David said defensively. Claire realised that the girl wasn’t a fantasy for him. He lived with her, even if only in his mind.

“We talked on Skype recently,” he added, looking down as if he had been whipped.

When Claire went to the toilet an hour later she could see the lipstick had crumbled in the corners of

her mouth, her tongue blue from the red wine. While she was wiping her lips with a wet tissue she realised that for the last few hours she had actually forgotten what day it was. No one had mentioned that it was a year after the attacks, though maybe they just didn't want to spoil Anthony's birthday.

Coming back from the toilet, she looked at them from a distance. There they were, a bunch of joyous people, celebrating a birthday on a summer evening. And why shouldn't they? The scene was so innocent and happy, and it was good to see Anthony enjoying himself. When she returned to the table they were laughing hard about something; apparently she had just missed the punchline of a joke. The waiter then appeared with a ramshackle chocolate cake, a burning candle in it.

As they sang Happy Birthday, Sadie stood up, moving her hands as if conducting an orchestra. Paolo got up, put a hand around her waist and, to a song on the radio with a catchy samba rhythm, did a few moves. A true performer, Claire thought, instinctively rubbing her knee. She knew how it felt to be the centre of attention, presenting a perfectly trained body. She could tell immediately Paolo was a natural – he had the enviable ease of the South American, the rhythm ingrained in his bones. She knew he would ask her when he sat down and, putting his hand over her shoulder in a manly protective way, he turned to her.

“Sadie told me you are a dancer too?”

“Oh gosh no, not anymore anyway,” Claire pointed quickly at her left knee. “I had a very bad cruciate ligament injury. It happened ages ago, but the meniscus is ruined. I’m teaching swimming lessons to children now.”

She saw that he was pitying her, thinking of how many years of training she must have gone through, and so she added: “We are hoping to have children soon, so maybe it’s better anyway. I couldn’t possibly have a dance career now.”

She heard her own words sound unconvincing, but Paolo nodded sympathetically. “Of course not, of course not,” and after a pause, “It’s so difficult to sustain a living.”

He went on to tell her about his DVD, a self-teaching course, which was selling well. She could understand why Sadie liked him. Apart from his looks, he had obviously come a long way. She was sure he had broken many hearts over the years, and Claire imagined all of the girls lined up who had waited for him after class, young and pretty. Easy prey. Against them, Sadie was a solid rock.

“A good catch,” Anthony said later, referring to Paolo as they walked back home.

“He seems a nice guy,” Claire agreed. “We should invite them over for dinner soon.”

“You mean before they break up in a few weeks’

time.” Anthony laughed.

Claire’s hand was nestled in the back of his trouser pocket; she could feel the muscle of his buttocks moving. Their steps on the empty street made a hollow sound. It was a warm night, the moon cut perfectly in half.

“Soon the moon will be full again,” Anthony said. There was something deeply comforting about a moon that was going to be full, Claire thought. It meant there was a rhythm and interplay they could do nothing about; it was just there, eternally, a bigger cycle that was following its own set of rules.

She felt tipsy when she got up the stairs to the bedroom. Naked, she sank into the white sheets, her body warm and saturated. She thought of her body as an egg; something very fragile that was now protected.

“Thank you,” Anthony whispered into her ear, his hand running down her spine.

Lying back to back, their feet locked, she closed her eyes, already half-asleep.

She couldn’t remember whether it was the light or the flapping that made her wake up only an hour later. A helicopter was hovering almost directly over their house.

“What’s that?” Claire said, rubbing her eyes.

“They must be looking for someone,” Anthony answered in a slumberous voice. “Just go back to sleep.”

The helicopter flew north but came back only a minute later. It seemed to be flying in circles over Islington. She got up and looked behind the curtain down on to the street. She saw her scooter parked on the other side. The houses opposite, the cars, everything was immersed in the dim light of the streetlamp, unreal like an old black and white photograph. Only the flapping of the helicopter violently disturbed the placid scene, tearing it apart. It was Anthony's voice that finally released her from standing there, staring at the empty street, just as she realised it was fear, cold nameless fear, that was stirring in her chest.

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Miss Zelda's voice came from the far corner of the room.

"Imagine your body is transparent," she said.

Claire didn't know how long she had been lying on the bed. They were alone; it was dark. She saw her own body gradually sink deeper and deeper, her limbs weightless, floating in a timeless space. The pain in her head had gone. She imagined in her brain a mass of blood vessels, painfully pulsating, the place of fears and nightmares. Now her head felt light and clear, like a room full of clutter that in one fell swoop had suddenly been tidied up. She opened her eyes, surprised to see the woman standing right next to her. She looked

at her moonshaped face, a red-lipped smile hovering over her.

“Very good Claire. Well done,” Miss Zelda said, taking her pulse. “Take your time.”

However, Claire sat up immediately. She was wide awake and she realised exactly where she was. A wooden replica of a Buddha figure was sitting on a small desk. Miss Zelda put out the scented candle with two fingers before she switched on the light.

Claire jumped off the bed and slipped into her flip-flops. The walls were covered with pictures of babies. Babies in cots, babies wrapped in pink and baby blue blankets, lying in the arms of their smiling mothers. There must have been at least a hundred pictures. She wondered whether all these woman were former patients who had been lying on that very bed, being hypnotised just like she was. When she had started she had found the photos of all the happy mothers intimidating, but now she just looked into familiar faces as if they were cheering her on, encouraging her not to give up just yet.

Walking down Harley Street, Claire felt taller, as if the voice of the therapist had straightened her spine. The sun appeared from behind a cloud for just a few moments before it disappeared again. Claire imagined being someone else, someone with no purpose and no goal, walking down a street in a big city with no name,