

seven days to tell you

by

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What is a wife to do when a husband disappears? Cry, call the police, pursue his old friends, delve into his past? Kate does all of these – and more.

When Marc turns up after three years and asks for a week to prove his love, Kate is tempted.

Should she let him back into her life?

Is a week long enough to learn the truth?

For Mimi and Xan

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thursday night

I don't hear the key in the door when the intruder enters my home. Nor does any light show when he steps in from the hall and there is no click when he slowly releases the door handle behind him. He waits inside my flat. He sucks the air into his lungs without making a sound. The winter wind escapes from his clothes.

His pupils widen as he pans the room. Shapes, in varying shades of grey, claim his focus. The cushion on the sofa has retained a half-moon compression left from where I'd been lying in front of the TV. There is a damp towel twisted around a chair leg with a near-empty bottle of wine next to it. I was too tired to put the wine away. It ferments next to a box of chocolates left open with a card depicting a teddy bear holding up a sign saying, *Thank you!*

His eyes take in the remains of my last few hours.

The intruder treads into the room as cars project silver balloons of light over the ceiling. He touches my coat as it lies collapsed over a chair. He moves back a little, wary of my *iPhone* earphones dangling out of my pocket, they sway to the silent jig of an underground train. He moves his head from one side of the room to the other, the darkness around him is losing. A plate of half-eaten lasagne is now hard and congealed in its microwaveable carton. The street lamp illuminates the faces smiling out from my photographs. The man looks at each picture without moving from where he stands: my face, tanned and smiling from holiday destinations or miscellaneous landmarks in my life: graduation, weddings, parties; the shelf below is devoted to photographs of my nieces and nephews.

To his left is the kitchen which is separated from the main room by what the estate agent called a 'breakfast bar.' Not that I've ever had breakfast there, I use the surface of the low dividing wall to dump my keys and post, though sometimes, if I have time or people over, I'll put fruit in a large, hand-painted salad bowl that was a wedding present. He sees a bunch of flowers still wrapped in cellophane in the sink half-filled with water. The petals have been pushed uncomfortably against the frosted windows.

He holds his breath as if the air will make him lighter as he walks across the living room. Then he stops outside my bedroom. Since I was a little girl, I've always slept with the door open the width of my mother's foot.

He pushes the door lightly with the tips of his fingers, wide enough so he can creep past.

The wooden-slat blinds in my bedroom almost shut out the street lights so he feels the way to my bed. I still don't hear anything, even the thud of his shoes dropping to the floor, the muffled fall of his jumper, T-shirt. He unbuttons his jeans, lets them slide down to his knees, shakes them off his feet. Even a few inches away, he must feel the heat from my body on his thighs. He bends right down to my face to peel off his socks and lower his boxer shorts.

My sleep isn't disturbed by the movement of someone undressing so close to me. Even when he sits on the edge of the bed, lifts the duvet and curls onto the mattress. And not when he slides over and touches my skin.

Not once do I wake up with the knowledge that someone is in my home and in my bed, placing a hand on my heart and holding it there.

Our heads lie on the same pillow. I turn and breathe in what you exhale.

Somewhere, deep in my unconscious, the person I was re-assembles itself, your hand on my back and I flow into you, I know that you are back, that it is you touching my hair and stroking my face, laying your mouth into my deadened hand, folding my palm around your kisses.

The coolness of your skin chases my blood under the skin's surface. You draw me into you, the capillary effect of desire - I can't resist moving into you although I fight reaching out for you - there have been too many times, too many disappointments. There was that dream once, almost as real as this, when I found you in the hospital car park curled up in the back of my granddad's Morris Minor. I said 'Marc, we've been looking everywhere for you! We thought you were dead...' and you said, 'Katherine, I was just sleeping,' and I said, 'Sleeping? For three years?' and you said, 'I was so tired, so tired.' We laughed. I told you everything we had done to find you, things that people said about you, the ways we tried to understand you. And it seemed all so funny...then the dream started to vanish and I couldn't get it back. I woke up. I still don't know how I got through that day. To lose you, to find you, and lose you again.

You stretch your thigh over me, hook me in its grip and pull me into you. You kiss my neck and I open my fingers to feel the ends of your hair. You nuzzle into the hollow under my collar bone, nip around my ear. You have returned.

That's what I keep saying in my head, 'He's back, he's back...' And you feel the same to me as you always did, although more bristly, perhaps your hands are a little rougher; have you put on weight or are you more muscular? But it is you. I've had these dreams before, but this is real. I don't want to notice the differences, I don't want to open my eyes or speak. I don't even try to find out whether you are still wearing your wedding ring. Hold me close and don't let the light in.

Now you draw me nearer to you, your hands knead my stomach, mould and squeeze me into a foetus which only you can feed, touch, or bring to life. You drown out the world with your heartbeat; it's all that's ever made sense for me. You. I drive my head into your solar plexus: opening my mouth for more, for all of you, for something of you.

You have come back, just as you left: with no warning; no words.

The winter sun edges through the blinds. The sound of cars becomes persistent and the bankers upstairs move around. You never met them, the American couple who arrived a year after you left, we often pass on the stairs and they laugh when I tell them they work longer hours than junior doctors. But later, later. This is still our time. There is that sweet smell behind your ears which takes me back to our first summer, I fill up on the smell of you. It's never enough. You tighten your hands around my hips, I press the soles of my feet on top of yours and you kiss the hollow curves around my eyes.

For this little while, the world can wait.

I know about waiting. In the first year after you left, I'd reach out in the night to touch you, and when my fingers padded the cold sheet next to me and there was nothing where you had been, I'd press the pillow to my mouth and scream until morning. Right in the beginning, of course, I didn't

even go to bed at all. I slept on a line of cushions in front of the door, next to the phones and laptop. Usually with the television on. All night. All those nights.

After the first year I accepted that I'd be waking up alone. I had to. I kept a pillow close, clung to it as people do to a faith. A pillow, or maybe a man. And I talked to you. From that first night when you didn't return and I started calling your work, your friends, I was talking to you. I was defending myself against you when you'd return and be cross that I'd worried unnecessarily. When I had reason to worry, I begged you to come home, I bargained and pleaded. And all the time I spoke to you in my head, and now you are here and I am still talking to you.

And you are really here. So I keep my eyes closed as once again I let my hand go out on its own accord until it touches someone whose skin is more familiar to me than my own. Together again.

My alarm goes off. Your hand reaches out before mine and you press the button. Silence. It's almost as if the last three years hadn't happened. As if we will wake together, maybe make love before charging into the bathroom, shouting out the evening's plans from the shower, treading on each other's clothes, drinking each other's coffee by mistake and saying, 'I love you. See you tonight'.

Most mornings I wake before the alarm. For nearly three years, I haven't slept, not slept like people do, abandoned, untroubled. Since the day you left, there's been no release, neither peace nor cure; even when I've been asleep, I'm still looking for you. One thing about dreams is that you don't get to dream in them.

We turn together, your front against my back, you weave your arm through mine, holding the middle of me to the middle of you. The recovery position. I hesitate at first, then I bring my fingers up to trace the tattoo on your upper arm with my index finger. I touch the **K**, the **T**, the **I**, **N**, **E** at the end. Whenever I see my name printed, I wonder about those letters on your skin. Who is reading the Braille of your commitment to me? I was asked, over and over, to describe your 'distinguishing features', and I told them, he has the name 'Katherine' written on his upper, left bicep. 'Hard to lose, eh, tats like that,' said one policeman looking at a photo of you and I on holiday, 'course there's always laser surgery but that can leave a right messy scar, some people tattoo over it but...' So here it is. Your mark. The letters that make up my name, engraved and embedded in your subcutaneous. Some things don't go away.

The alarm went off and you are still here. I should be getting ready for work. You lift yourself over me, your elbows taking the weight of your torso. I feel the current of air from your nose onto my face. You hold me down like a collapsed building and close my lips with your mouth. We stay like that as the minutes go by. I don't want you to move. I do not want to go back to my life. You kiss my eyes and I have to open them now to see you.

To see you again. The glare of the sky shuts them closed but your silhouette is imprinted on my lids. I look again. I can see you now that the room is as light as it will ever get today. It was the first thing about you that I ever noticed. Your blue eyes, Alpine blue eyes. Holiday eyes. You have more creases in the corners when you smile now. You drop your elbows, lift me back in your hands and make yourself into a blanket, covering me with your skin. And we laugh.

At first it sounds so canned. We laugh like a director has asked two actors to laugh. And laugh. And cut. And laugh. And then it becomes real and we laugh because we are so happy right there and then. The day is starting and all I want is my husband home and he is home: here, covering every part of me.

You are back.

We stop laughing, I draw my knuckles up to my mouth and bite hard to stop myself from crying – I learnt this the first year you left when I needed to stop the tears in supermarkets or driving the car, sometimes in mid-conversation with someone I didn't know. I'd just start melting and nothing could mop me up. I hold my breath like that, my teeth cutting into the back of my hands. You watch me. You pull my hand away, kiss where the skin's been broken and kiss my mouth again. I lick your shoulders. I can't leave you but I must.

June 6th, 2007: you left.

You didn't need to get up that morning just because I had to be at work for eight, but it was one of the rules you made for yourself when we first married, that you would always have breakfast with me if you could. You said a big love is made up of all the little things, the little acts of appreciation, and that once they stopped, people started taking each other for granted and then, what was the point?

I didn't always do that for you, Marc, and I was sorry for that later.

You made me coffee, brought me a couple of pain killers. I didn't have time to drink but swallowed down the pills.

We'd been to dinner with an old school friend of mine whom I'd not seen since sixth form and never liked anyway. She'd arranged the supper so I could meet a friend of hers who had returned from medical training in the US. It had been a terrible mistake to drag you out there. That night you'd said that you wanted to stay in, you had something to tell me. I said if it was important, it could wait till the weekend. I hadn't caught up on my sleep after a long shift, I was working the next day, a Tuesday, and we'd barely seen each other the week before. I was snappy, we were running late. You know I hate to be late and I was resentful about having to go out, having to wake up early the following day, having to galvanise you into doing something neither of us wanted to.

I hadn't eaten that day and the wine on an empty stomach knocked me out. I drank too much and couldn't stop apologising to you while we waited for a taxi. We'd quarrelled on the way home, something about Gina's friend flirting with me. It was all too clearly a set-up on his part to meet me. I said things which hurt you, hurt you because they were true.

I've run over those last twelve hours so many times, always hoping that in the autopsy of your words, your gestures, what was unsaid, I might uncover a detail that would lead to a different ending.

And now I could ask you, was it that night? My friend and her shrill excitement, the conversations about children's schools, house prices and her fridge covered with animal-shaped certificates announcing things like, *Gold Star for Grace who smiled nicely today!* Months later, that's what I thought. It was that boring dinner party that drove you out. Their indifferent questions to you, their educational holiday plans and their tucked-up eco-friendly children. You saw a glimpse into our future and it wasn't good enough for you. I wasn't good enough for you. So after I apologised again, dressed and kissed you good-bye, I left our flat.

When I returned, you were gone.

It's policy in hospitals to let relatives have time alone with the deceased. In some hospices they give families the option to video a relative's last hours. I've always encouraged wives and husbands, even the children, to stay as long as they need to say goodbye. Since you disappeared, I've envied the bereaved the chance to see those they've lost for one last time.

I've witnessed how loved ones cry over a corpse. How they bury their faces into a cold, hardened frame. How they try to warm the bodies, shake the arms out of their torpor, bringing lifeless hands up to their faces. Sometimes they'll scream at the cadaver, often they'll pat the torso, softly, gingerly, as if afraid of waking them up. How they wait for a smile to appear on lips that can't speak. Junior house doctors have asked me to help remove a family member who's fallen asleep with a dead body in their arms. Mothers sometimes believe that if a dead baby will breast feed, it'll come back to life. Some talk – saying all that was never said while the person was alive. Sometimes there's wailing, sometimes there's a low guttural croak. Often, nothing at all. A father might stand just a few seconds before leaving his child to the morgue.

And then there are the un-grieved, the unclaimed. Before I specialised in paediatric cardiology, I worked in Accident & Emergency – well, you know that, I remember you sitting on those wonky chairs trying to hold a plastic cup of scorching coffee, waiting for me to be free long enough to have a quick chat or a snog in the utilities' room. I frequently saw cases of the homeless or people who've lived on their own, who'd died with no one but the doctor on duty to note their last breath. Since you left, I can't leave those bodies without fretting that someone needs to be notified; someone who can't sleep, who checks the missing persons' websites, whose life is devoid of meaning because that person never came home.

You close your hand over the back of my neck and then release the skin like a mother cat does her kitten. You turn, look at the ceiling. I reach my hand over your chest. It rises and falls. Your heartbeat is regular. I have my body.

We line up our profiles on the pillow, and I see half of you. I have always only ever seen half of you.

Even on this black and white late March morning, your eyes are blue. You touch my face, everyone has their touch, like a fingerprint or a snowflake, and yours is the touch I have been searching for. In all those men, I found no one who came anywhere close to touching me like you do.

friday morning

'I'm going to move into radiology,' says Mona as she makes incisions into her cheese and tomato sandwich, 'I've decided. I can't take the nights anymore, I just can't.'

She squints over her plate while carefully extracting the tomato slices with two plastic spoons. She looks up at me. 'Want it?'

'Why d'you have tomatoes in your sandwich if you don't like them?'

'Well, I thought I did, but then I remembered that I didn't. It's the nights and,' she looks around the room before divulging, 'we're trying for a baby...but don't tell anybody, will you? You know what they're like around here.'

'Sure.'

'And with Johnny being made a consultant we can afford to have one of us at home...I'm not saying I want to be like some stay-at-home mum or something, but with kids and that, you can't be rushing out the house with a weekend bag three nights a week and I don't want to give up absolutely so, if I make a change now...well, what do you think?'

'I think it'd be a good move. Marc and I always said that if we had a family I'd have to stop being on call, at least for the first few years.'

Mona nods before looking down into her food. She winces at the khaki-coloured lettuce leaves before removing them. Maybe she wonders if she'd been insensitive talking about families when I don't have a husband, or I have a husband, he just disappeared.

Disappeared that is, until last night.

Mona's one of the few friends who still asks about you. Most feel that they've put in their time supporting me over the worst bits and now they hope I've moved on and am looking forward to my new life. 'Keep focusing on the future, Kate,' they say, looking ahead with their eyes. They believe that part of encouraging me in the getting-on-with-it process is not to remind me of you – if they remind me, I'll get upset and then they'll be the cause of my distress. But Mona isn't like that. She attributes her talent as a doctor to her investigative skills and not shying away from the questions that others aren't ask. She's fascinated by my extra-curricular life of private detectives, morgues, clairvoyants, being a minor celebrity in the missing persons' world and, of course, the occasional trips abroad to check out possible sightings.

'Any news...of him?' she asks, quietly looking away.

'Funnily enough, he came back last night.'

Mona stops chewing. 'What?'

I look back at her with a straight, no-messing expression. She knows I'm not joking. Not the type.

'What?' she repeats.

I bite my bottom lip.

'Kate? Kate! What are you saying? He came back? Last night?'

'Yes'.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, when I was sleeping he got into to bed with me.'

'Are you joking? He got into bed? With you?'

I nod.

'How did he get in?'

'With his key.'

Mona draws up her lower jaw.

'What did he say?' Her sandwich balances limp in her hands.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

I nod again.

‘So how do you know it was him? Maybe it was a burglar?’

‘Well, he didn’t take anything...and he looked very like the Marc I was married to.’ My jaunty tone sinks into a whisper. ‘It was him. It was Marc.’

‘It was him? Him? Marc?’

‘Mona, you’re repeating everything I say.’

‘But I can’t believe it! What, he really came back? You didn’t just imagine it, did you, Kate?’

‘No, he was there.’

‘He must have said something?’

‘He didn’t need to.’

‘Kate. He didn’t need to?’

‘You’re doing it again.’

‘But Kate...Kate...he walks in after nearly three years and not so much as a *sorry I’m late, love, the traffic was murder?*’

Devinder from Paediatrics brings his tray over and sits down with us. He smiles while taking out an extremely red apple from his pocket and polishes it on his white coat.

‘All right ladies?’ He checks the shine.

‘Kate’s husband came back last night after three years.’

‘Oh.’

‘Can you believe that?’ Mona asks, holding onto his sleeve to keep reality within reach.

‘Oh,’ he says, sinking his teeth down into his apple.

‘Is that all you can say?’ Mona’s head swivels from Devinder to me, from me back to Devinder and back again. ‘So he just got into bed with you. That’s it. Fine.’ She prods Devinder’s white coat. ‘He just got into bed with her after disappearing in 2007. I mean, is he back? Is he not? Is he...what? And Katie, what the hell are you doing here sitting with us?’

People turn to look at us.

I continue eating, not really acknowledging the food or the questions.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ sighs Mona. ‘I don’t know!’ She hits the table in frustration. ‘So what do you think, Devinder, huh? He just turns up out of the blue for a cuddle without any explanation and no one thinks that’s odd?’

Devinder looks at me while he chews loudly.

‘My mum had a cat like that.’

I often asked myself, what would I do if I found you? Of all the scenarios I came up with, going limp, rolling over and becoming mute was never the role I’d cast for myself. So Mona is right to react as she does, but I can’t explain what it was like, to have you back, and just want that moment.

You turned, sat up and, after waiting a few seconds, lifted yourself off the bed and walked into the bathroom. I heard you urinating. You returned after three years to use the toilet, I thought, leaning over the side of the bed and touching your clothes. Different clothes. I picked up a T-shirt and sniffed it. I listened to see if you flushed the toilet...no, you never did. So you’re still trying to conserve water.

You stood in the doorway like in a dream. You moved with a look of concentration over to my clothes’ cupboard, opened it, and took out a dark green suit. It is in fact my interview suit which I’d only recently worn, but you wouldn’t have known that. You bent down and picked out a pair of black boots. As though I wasn’t there, you opened my top drawer and touched my underwear gently, as though the tossed-in pants and bras were kittens gathering for warmth. You drew out a pair of black pants, stroked your cheek with them and then plucked out a bra. You laid the outfit on the bed, then, after consideration, added a pair of tights. The look was a little austere for me - but I let you dress me, moving your hands over my breasts, drawing the skirt over my hips, turning me over in the bed as you closed me up for the day.

You walked me to the bathroom and while I peed, you squeezed the toothpaste on my toothbrush and held it up to me. I wanted you to insist I didn’t go to work today but we both knew it was the right thing to do. I took the brush – held it up as if to say, ‘No, I’m not letting you do that’ – and you smiled. You brushed my hair and then looked into my make-up bag. You pulled out a lipstick, ‘Fuchsia Fun’ it was called.

You touched my lips with the colour and you were about to open the mascara but put it back. Why did you put it back, Marc, because I might cry today?

The mime continued with you sitting me down and returning with a coffee and my boots. You kissed my toes and slid them into the tights, after that my legs were shut up in the boots. I drank the coffee. I looked at you, you looked back: if you knew what I knew, you were giving nothing away. I understood that you wanted me to go to work, I knew that you had somewhere you needed to go, someone you had to see. And then you bent down, took me by the elbows firmly in your hands and levelled your eyes with mine.

‘When you come back, I’ll be here,’ you said. ‘Katherine, I will be here. I have something I want to ask you.’

I slit open a *Kit-Kat* for Mona and me. We sip our murky filtered-coffee. The three of us look out the windows at the rain.

‘So where was he then?’ Devinder asks.

‘I don’t know,’ I answer. ‘We didn’t say anything, just slept.’

‘I know the feeling,’ he says.

‘God you two! This is so unreal! I don’t understand. You didn’t say anything? I’d have...I’d have punched his bloody lights out! I’d have...I’d have... Have you told the police?’

‘No. I’ve a lot on today...anyway, I don’t know what to say.’

Mona shakes her head as she chops her chocolate into four equal pieces and lines them up.

‘Well I don’t know what to say either; this is very strange, too weird for me. I can’t believe you didn’t even ask him where he’d been...I mean, there’s a time for sleeping and a time for...sorting these things out. What the bloody hell did – that’s my bleeper. Shit. Gotta go. Are you going to be okay?’

Mona stands up, shakes the crumbs from her coat over my tray.

‘Oh!’ she says, looking at me. She shuffles over and hugs me, leaving slivers of wafer on my cheek.

‘Uurgh,’ winces Devinder.

‘What?’

‘Don’t do all that lesbo stuff while I’m eating thank you.’

‘It’s called giving your friend support, you freak. Kate, find me if you need...I don’t know, if you need anything.’

Mona’s bleeper goes off again. ‘Devinder, talk to her.’

She squeezes my hand and drops her two strips of chocolate on my tray. ‘This is really...really...too...bloody weird.’

‘Katherine, I will be here,’ you said. All this morning I’ve been about to run out of the hospital doors and go home to you, just to see you, to see if it really, really is true, but coming to work is what saved me over the last three years, and it needs to save me now.

‘There are tubes and wires and drips and bits of plastic stuck all over him...and what’s that going into his belly button?’ asks baby Jamie’s grandmother. ‘It must hurt him. Doesn’t it hurt him?’

‘The line going into his stomach was fed in today. I know it looks a little...bulky, but it’s getting all the medication directly into him. Babies’ veins can’t keep taking perforations so this is the most effective way of giving Jamie what he needs. We’re pleased with his progress so far.’

‘But you don’t think he’ll make it, do you, Doctor?’

‘All babies are different. Jamie’s a fighter, so, for the moment, there’s no indication that he won’t. I know how –’

‘But it looks so painful, all those –’

‘Jamie’s had extensive heart surgery Mrs...’

‘Harris.’

‘Harris. At the moment, his situation appears comfortable.’

‘Well, I’ll tell my daughter he’s “comfortable”. He doesn’t look very comfortable. He’s her first, well, all of our first and this is just so...’

Red veins swim under her tears. She shakes them off. ‘I’m here so she can have some rest.’

It's Friday afternoon now, six hours after I left you in my flat. Our flat.

'Oh, and here she is now, I said, take a rest dear, what are you doing back?'

'I couldn't sleep. Hello,' says Jamie's mother.

We all look at Jamie.

'The doctor says he's "comfortable". He's a fighter.'

The granny nods to me, urging me to lay on the reassurance.

'It'll take the next few days to see how the procedure has worked but he's as stable as can be for the moment.'

'See, "stable" the doctor said. Why didn't you sleep?'

I am just about to move onto my next patient when Mrs Harris grips my arm, 'It's just she can't touch him. She says she can't touch him, that's all. With all those tubes...'

With the help of two nurses, we manoeuvre the equipment around so that Jamie's mother can prise her fingers through a hole at the top of the clear plastic cot.

'Here,' I say, 'you can put your fingers through...just gently rub his ears. Babies like that.'

'Yes, see,' encouraged Jamie's granny, 'he hasn't got anything going into his little ears at least.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' whispers the new mother.

'If he remains stable, you might be able to feed him some of your expressed milk through this drip here later tonight. So try and get some sleep – Jamie needs you to be well and rested, the nurses are here all the time. He's in very good hands. Goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye, Jamie.'

'Mummy, I won't be able to make this Sunday.'

'Oh darling, how disappointing. You sound terrible. Ghastly week?'

'I'm sorry, but...'

'Oh I do wish you were coming. Daddy's got his Johns Hopkins' brigade over, such bores those Americans, and such fussy eaters! And so I won't be seeing the lovely Anthony either?'

'No, no...'

'You haven't had a tiff have you? Katie, you sound a bit...like you have...'

'No, mummy, it's not that.'

'Well what? Is everything all right?'

'Marc is back.'

There's a long silence, muffled sounds and a crack. Perhaps she'd dropped the phone. Then she murmurs something like, 'Oh darling.'

'Mummy?'

'What do you mean, he's back?'

'Just that. He came back last night, actually very early this morning.'

'And...and...what happened?'

'I was asleep and...then I had to go to work.'

'Where is he now?'

'I don't know. He said we'll see each other tonight. He has something he wants to ask me.'

'Well I imagine you have a few things to ask him too!'

'Of course, but...I don't really know.'

'Know what?'

'What difference it would make.'

'Kate, you off?' asks Dr McKendrick while I unbutton my white coat and drop it into the laundry basket. 'Oh, and how did Monday go?'

'Monday? Oh, okay. They asked a lot about budgets, databases, training hospitals, local authority funding - and a little bit about whether or not I could tell the difference between a heart or a toe.'

'You did say that the heart was the one without nail varnish?'

'Now you tell me!'

I stand in front of him lifting my winter coat over my shoulders. I button up and wait like a child requiring permission to be dismissed.

'Have a good afternoon,' McKendrick nods.

'You too.' I want to smile back at him but I can't. After turning towards the door, I twist round to face him. 'You know, I minded you writing about my personal life in your report. You told them that I'd had problems.' McKendrick is about to interrupt but I go on. 'It wasn't necessary. I've never given you reason to doubt my...'

'Hold on, hold on, Kate, I had to say something. I couldn't have recommended a 31-year-old to take on a job of such responsibility without making sure they knew absolutely everything about you. So that's why I've been getting dirty looks from you all week! Look, I stressed emphatically that what you've been through has never affected your work.'

'So why mention it? Why? And you said I'd had counselling, didn't you? Made me look like a loony!'

'Don't be silly Kate. It's all credit to you. The loonies are those who don't recognise they need help...and I think we could both name a few in this department, hum?'

I went to pull my hair out of my scarf before remembering that I'd recently had it cut.

'Come on,' he says, 'if I hadn't said something, someone else would've, hum? A lot of people want that post. You can read a copy of my letter if that'd make you feel better. It's embarrassingly effusive, sycophantic even...Anyway, you wouldn't be such a remarkable doctor if you weren't such a loony.'

'I just want to know, what did you say...exactly?'

'I alluded to a bereavement of a personal nature which you'd dealt with showing strength and maturity. I said you'd availed yourself of professional help and continued working as efficiently and competently as ever. It's nothing new Kate, we all have problems - it's just a matter of how we deal with them.'

'Funnily enough, that's what the counsellor said.'

McKendrick chuckled.

'Look, I hope they give you the job, but you'll be sorely missed - I said that too if you want to know.'

I couldn't be cross at him anymore: McKendrick wasn't just my direct boss but an old friend of my father's. I lifted my arms up as far as my coat would allow and gave him a hug.

'Hurry up or I'll have to visit the counsellor myself,' he says.

I follow the strip lights until I leave the building.

'Bereaved', so that's what they call it. I open my car door. A bereavement: I had a bereavement. I repeat McKendrick's words to myself. Whenever I've had to describe my experience of losing you, that's what I've said, 'It's like a bereavement without the body'.

A better description would be 'deconstructed'. I've been completely deconstructed, slapped together in a rush job and dropped back into the world, looking normal but feeling nothing like it. As I insert my key in the ignition, I whisper, '*dextrocardia with situs inversus*,' recalling the symptoms of an anomaly where one in ten thousand babies are formed with all their major organs arranged the wrong way around. The heart beats on the right side of the chest. I lean back in my car as it starts. My heart hurts with every beat, whichever side it's on.

Bereavement, I called it. A death without a body, a coffin, a note, a funeral or a reason. But now what do I call it, what do I call it now that you've come back?