

Remember Me

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FREMANTLE 
fine independent publishing PRESS



Part One
Recollection

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The house is gone now but this is where it stood. Here in the first floor lounge on that damp Saturday afternoon I turned at the sound of the opening door and saw you. This is where it all began. In that moment everything else disappeared, there is just you and me. I can feel you across the room and in your eyes I see all that I feel — shock, confusion, desire. How long did we stand there? Did the others see my blush as you smiled at me? Could they ever know what began that day?

The house is gone now, a pile of rubble swept away in the relentless gentrification of North London. This street, lined with smart

apartments, once boasted gracious Edwardian houses encircling a park where we walked one evening as darkness fell and the first winter snow carpeted the scant grass. The street lights sharpened the shadows and our breath floated in clouds, wispy on the chill air. We leaned against a tree and you kissed me and stroked my face and told me I was beautiful. You took my hand and we walked back to the house, through the hallway and up the stairs to the noisy bright domesticity of the flat. Out there, just the two of us alone in the darkness, it had all seemed so safe, but inside there were other people — there were always other people.

Nearly forty years have passed. Do I dare to open this treasure chest of memory or will I leave it sealed, guarding the secrets as it has done for so long? For so many years I have wanted to tell you how it was for me — to ask you why it changed — to understand. If you were here now Karl, this is the story I would tell you; these are the questions I would ask you.

That morning I had been Christmas shopping in Oxford Street and early in the afternoon, loaded with parcels, I took a bus to the house in Northumberland Crescent. I was always welcome there. Joan treated me like a younger sister, in fact she was grooming me as a sister-in-law, a project in which neither her brother nor I had any interest. She made tea and we sat by the fire while Jock took the children to the park.

‘David’s being moved to another camp,’ Joan said. ‘He’s going to Melksham Barracks but he’ll be here for Christmas. You should come and stay.’ Her eyes, dark and intense, were fixed on me and she closed her lips in that determined way that always slightly intimidated me.

I stared into the fire. ‘Mum and Dad have a houseful over Christmas,’ I said. ‘They’ll expect me to be there — I’ll see David some other time.’

The silence was heavy with her disapproval and she let out an audible sigh. ‘Surely you could ...’ she began. A log slipped and she jumped up to push it back into the grate.

The tension broken I got up and wandered

to the window. It was a big, high-ceilinged room filled with solid old furniture, a roll-armed couch in grey and crimson moquette, matching chairs, a broad oak sideboard stocked with bottles and glasses, an upright desk. The carpet was littered with toys but the mess was superficial. Joan ran a tight ship. A husband, two small children, four lodgers and various casual visitors. There was always room, always food, always a welcome — as long as you stuck to Joan's rules.

I looked down into the street through the fine drizzle. It was almost dark, any moment now the street lights would come on. Jock had come back and was getting the children out of their coats and boots. Downstairs the street door opened and closed and there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs. I turned around and you were there.

In that moment everything froze. I put my hand on the back of the couch to steady myself.

I wonder if you remember that moment Karl. If I could ask you now, 'Do you remember the day we met?' would you scratch your head

and rummage through your memories? Would you look away in embarrassment and say, 'Now let me think ...' Or would you take my hand, look into my eyes and say, 'Yes! I remember it well.'

You were wearing a brown sweater over a cream shirt that was open at the neck and when you looked at me I saw the little hollow at the base of your throat tense and contract, as though you were trying to speak. Your eyes held mine and I wanted to surrender to their signal of desire.

How would it be if we were to meet now? I wonder what you look like today.

I imagine that I get on a plane and, clutching my boarding pass, struggle along the crowded aisle to my seat, and as I fasten my belt and kick off my shoes I strike up a conversation with the man in the seat beside me. Knowing that we have to spend some time in each other's company we exchange first names, and hearing that subtle accent I ask where he comes from. He tells me his name and that he is German and I tell him that I was once in love with a German who was also called Karl. I tell him that I fell in

love at first sight; that we had only a few months together and that I have never really understood why it ended.

‘He played the piano to me,’ I say. ‘I can still see his hands on the keys and his eyes watching me, blue eyes — just like—’

And I stop and look down at the hand resting on the arm of the seat between us, and I know that I have found you again.

Dreams. Perhaps you are still on the other side of the world, or perhaps you are close by. Perhaps we have already travelled on the same flight, passed each other in a street somewhere, drawn up side by side at traffic lights without even knowing we were so close. I expected to spend the rest of my life with you. Instead I have spent it wondering why it didn’t all work out the way we planned.

When you walked into the flat that day it was almost time for me to leave. Joan had invited me to stay the night but I’d declined. Now I wanted to stay but it was too late, the reason would have been too obvious. They were getting ready to take me to the station. Jock searching for his car keys, Joan persuading

your room mate to stay with the children. I went to the hall to get my coat. As I passed you my legs felt weak and I wanted to put my hand up to touch your face.

You followed me through the door. 'I think I'll come too,' you said. 'I need some air.'

Some air? In Jock's Mini Clubman with the windows closed and misted with condensation?

You were too tall for the back seat of a mini, and you sat at an angle to make room for your legs. Alongside you, I tried to keep strictly to my side of the seat. The possibility that the car might swing on a bend and throw me against you was thrilling. But suppose you thought it deliberate? You might be offended. Something about you cautioned restraint. You were worldly and experienced, a man, and I was accustomed to boys, to the awkwardness of teenagers. There was something exotic about you, the German accent was tinged with American vowels from your home in California, you had the sophistication of the traveller, the mystery of other cultures. I tried to find out more. You were thirty-one, you said, and you guessed that I was about twenty-three. When I told you I was seventeen you

seemed shocked and I sensed withdrawal. How could I show you that I was mature, intelligent — not just a silly teenager? Nothing in my repertoire of social skills equipped me to balance the intensity of my attraction to you with the essentials of ladylike behaviour that had been drummed into me at home and in the convent. Don't be pert or cheeky, don't flirt, don't show off or try to seem clever, and never let a man see that you're attracted to him. How could I obey the rules and still hold your interest?

Unfortunately Jock's driving was steady and careful and I was not hurled into your lap. There was no casual, inadvertent touch, no brush of hands, but there was a thrilling tension. I willed Jock to lose his way or get caught in a traffic jam, so that these moments would last and we would not have to say goodbye. But the traffic kept moving and Jock knew the way to Victoria Station like the back of his hand. He pulled into a parking bay.

'Here we are then,' he said. 'You've got a good six or seven minutes before your train.'

How could I leave not knowing if I would see you again? The nuns were looking over my

shoulder, vigilant for signs of fast or sinful behaviour. How fast and sinful I felt in my heart — if only I had the courage.

‘I wish you’d come more often,’ said Joan kissing me. ‘We don’t see enough of you. Think about Christmas — they might not mind — or Boxing Day perhaps?’

I hugged and thanked her, and as I turned to say goodbye you took my hand in yours, bent your head and kissed it.

‘I’m so pleased to have met you,’ you said as you raised your eyes to mine. ‘I hope we’ll meet again.’

I was weak with longing, and I walked away into the vast cavern of the station, unable to look back, unable to see the way ahead.

The Thames separated us and the lights of London thinned as the train travelled south. My reflection stared back at me from the window, my face was white and shaken, there were shadows under my eyes. You had come to the station, you hoped we would meet again, and you had kissed my hand. I had seen it in films, read of it in books and now it had happened to me. I drew that hand close

against my chest, holding my left palm against the back of it as if to trap your kiss there. I was sure that I was on the threshold of a great romance.

I knew you would call me soon. Not the next day, but maybe Monday or Tuesday. But Monday and Tuesday came and went and as the days slipped away the more confident I felt each time the phone rang that it would be you, and each time my confidence plummeted lower into anxiety and disappointment. I lay in bed dreaming of the moment I first saw you, the way you looked, the strong features, the high forehead, the reddish blond hair and that air of casual confidence. I began to wonder if I had only imagined that something important had happened in that first moment. I couldn't concentrate. Work was impossible.

'Do you think you could do this letter again Miss Beard?' Dr Murray asked patiently, and for the third time he handed me back the letter with my errors ringed in red.

'Are you going to sit gazing out of the

window all afternoon, Liz?" Mrs Maxwell said. 'There's a pile of typing here to get through.'

'She's in love,' laughed Jackie Baldwin. 'She met this German at the weekend and she's gone bananas.'

'Well she can't go mooning over him in the firm's time,' Mrs Maxwell said. 'Come on now dear. Pull yourself together and cut this stencil for me, then you can run it off before you go home.'

I cut the stencil and by the time I had finished it was smothered with blotches of the foul-smelling puce correction fluid.

'Perhaps you'd do better on the telex machine,' Mrs Maxwell said, shaking her head. 'You'll have to get over this young man dear, or you'll be in serious trouble.'

I dreamed of you by day and night and still you didn't call.

Three weeks later Joan's Christmas card arrived. I slit open the envelope and looked at the picture of robins in snow.

'Love from Joan, Jock, Jenny and Angus,' it said in Joan's writing. And in the corner, in a different script, 'Merry Christmas — Karl'.

Three words from you to me — there must be some way I could make use of them. I agonised over it while Christmas dragged on in a blur of friends, celebrations, gifts and too much food. And I battled with my resentment over my parents' insistence that I stay home, when I could have accepted Joan's invitation to Northumberland Crescent.

As the new year dawned I decided to write a letter. I used a sheet of my mother's paper which had the address and telephone number printed in a bold typeface at the top, so you couldn't miss it.

Dear Karl,

Thank you for your message on the Christmas card. It was so nice to hear from you. I hope you had a lovely Christmas with Jock and Joan and their family.

We had a good time down here in Sussex. My parents had some friends come to stay and we took the dogs for long walks in the snow, and played cards and charades in the evenings. Joan's parents came for lunch on Boxing Day, they are very good

friends of my parents and it was nice to see them again.

How are you settling down in England?

Are you enjoying your job? I hope everything is going well for you.

Happy New Year from Liz.

I drafted it several times, anxious to strike just the right note. The biggest problem was the signature line. 'Yours sincerely' was too formal, 'Sincerely yours' wasn't right either. Then I tried just 'Yours', which was what my mother usually put at the end of letters to friends. But on this letter to you it seemed to indicate the complete abandonment I felt. My friends always signed their letters 'Love from' but this was obviously too intimate. In the end I just gave up and settled for 'Happy New Year from'. I stared at the letter for a long time before folding it and putting it in the envelope. I thought I was being dangerously fast but you had left me no alternative. I took the letter to the post box on a freezing cold morning when the snow was turning to slush and freezing again.

Once the letter had left my hands I was

overwhelmed with embarrassment. I imagined you sitting by the fire in Joan's lounge opening it. You would smile when you saw the signature, read it carefully several times and then, quite discreetly you would ask Joan if you might use the telephone, or you would call me the next day from your office. The alternative, and less appealing scenario, was that you would be shocked to get a letter from a girl whom you had met so fleetingly. You would think me common and fast and I would have ruined the chance of ever seeing you again. I walked home, my heart beating noisily in my chest, nauseous with anxiety and praying that my mother would never find out what I had done.

Obviously the letter was a dismal failure at every level because still you didn't call.

By mid-January your recalcitrance was driving me to distraction. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, my eyes were ringed with red, my skin erupted in a rash. I couldn't call you, nice girls just didn't call older men. German girls were supposed to be very proper, but you had been living in California, and it was clear from films that American girls were fast and

loose, perhaps my English reserve was too subtle. Finally I resolved that as soon as the rash was gone I would go shopping again in London.

'Terrific,' said Joan when I called to ask if I could stay the night. 'We'll go out somewhere, I'll get a babysitter.' Light broke through the clouds. Joan and Jock were certain to mention that I was coming for the weekend and you would be there waiting for me. I'm not sure what I thought would happen, just that at least by seeing you again I would create an opportunity for something to happen. I refused to see your silence as a sign of disinterest, I could not let go.

The days passed slowly and my excitement mounted. I started to look better as I focused my attention on the approaching Saturday afternoon.

'I might come up to town with you,' my mother said. 'We could go to a matinee in the afternoon and come back on the train together.'

'But I was going to stay with Joan,' I said, my head spinning with panic. What else could

I add into the equation to stop her? 'I think Joan said David might be on weekend leave and we'd probably go out.'

The lie worked. My mother was fond of David and saw him as an eminently suitable boyfriend. Our families were friends and socially and financially theirs had the advantage. In my parents' eyes he must have been ideal marriage material.

'Oh that'll be nice, yes you'll enjoy that,' Mum said, straining the potatoes into a colander. 'I wonder how he likes the army.'

'It's the RAF actually,' I said, feeling inordinately grateful to David for simply existing. 'He's in the RAF.'

'Well, you're looking a lot better young lady,' said Mrs Maxwell, peering at me from behind her typewriter. 'Got over him have you? No man is worth all that mooning about you know. Plenty more where he came from.'

She rolled out from behind her desk like one of those small Russian dolls, so round they can't be toppled over but always bounce back.

She handed me a stack of files. 'Run these up to Dr Murray will you — he's waiting.'

'Aha!' said Dr Murray, surveying me over the top of his half-spectacles.

'The lovely Miss Beard — and I see the famous smile is back again. Well I hope that whoever was upsetting you these last few weeks has been roundly punished and despatched to Siberia.'

I put the files on his desk. 'Thanks Dr Murray, I'm feeling much better.'

'Now don't rush off, sit down a moment. I want to talk to you.'

He pulled up a chair and I perched on the edge, smoothing my skirt down over my knees. Pencil skirts were in that year, worn a couple of inches below the knee.

Dr Murray eased his bulk back behind the desk, and ran his hands through his hair leaving it standing on end. He was the stereotype of the eccentric scientist — brilliant, dedicated and totally disorganised in everything except his research.

'Since Miss Roberts abandoned me to get married, I haven't had a secretary of my own. Now I'm sure you've heard what a monster I

am but I wonder whether, if I promise to behave nicely, you might consider becoming my personal secretary.'

It had never occurred to me that I might be promoted from the typing pool. I had gone to this job straight from secretarial school a few months earlier and all the other secretaries were much older than I. Dr Murray was a director, and I was about to vault over the ranks of the managers' secretaries and land in the hallowed precincts of The Directors' Secretaries' Room. My delight was less about the job itself than how it might make me appear in your eyes.

Mrs Maxwell wasn't in the typing room when I got back and Jackie Baldwin promptly appeared alongside my desk.

'Well,' she said, twisting a strand of hair between her fingers. 'Did he offer it to you?'

'What?'

'The job — his secretary.'

'Well yes he did actually, how did you know?'

'God!' she cried, rolling her eyes. 'How dopey are you? Everyone knows he was going to pick one of us, we thought it would be you.'

I interleaved some carbons between sheets

of paper and rolled them into the typewriter.

'I didn't even know that Daphne Roberts had left,' I said. 'I hadn't noticed.'

'No, well you haven't noticed anything for weeks. Not since Fritz, or whatever his name is, kissed your hand. Have you heard from him?'

I shook my head. 'No, but I'll see him this weekend. I know I will.' And I told her about the letter and how I was going to London on Saturday.

'You're being a bit pushy aren't you?' she said, her eyes round with amazement, but I could tell she was impressed. 'You know — writing to him like that. You're so fast! Heaven knows what he might think of you.'

I shrugged, affecting a nonchalance I didn't feel. 'I don't care, there's nothing wrong in writing a letter.'

Mrs Maxwell materialised between us.

'I suppose we're losing you then Liz. Dr Murray says he wants you in his office from Monday.'

I nodded. I wasn't really interested in Monday. Saturday came first, it was Saturday that mattered. Jackie was staring at me

thoughtfully, sucking the end of her hair.

‘And what are you doing Jacqueline?’ said Mrs Maxwell, tapping Jackie’s hand away so that the damp strand dropped back to her shoulder. ‘Don’t do that dear — such a nasty habit. Now don’t you have any work to do?’

‘I was just telling Liz,’ Jackie said, ‘that we all thought she’d get the job.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Maxwell. ‘Yes indeed we did. Although I must say that your work has gone down in the last few weeks Liz. But this is a wonderful opportunity for you and perhaps it’ll get your mind off that boy.’

‘Class,’ Jackie said softly, turning back to her desk. ‘You’ve got class girl.’

Mrs Maxwell, with her uncanny ability to hear the softest whisper, was walking back to her office. ‘Exactly,’ she said, looking back over her shoulder. ‘Class — there really is no substitute for it. You’d do well to remember that yourself Jacqueline.’

Class — perhaps this would impress you — I wished I could bottle it and wear it as perfume on Saturday.
