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# i remember everything

fiona wilkes

FREMANTLE PRESS

# prologue

It was my mother who taught me to pray.

It started when her mother, my grandmother, gave me an illustrated children's Bible for my third birthday. The endpapers were stained gold, and, in the corner of the title page, there was an inscription in handwriting that had died out with the eleven-plus exam.

> *For Belinda Corrin on her 3rd Birthday.*
> *Remember to say your prayers.*
> *Love, Granny Claire.*
> *6 June 1964.*

For years, my mother read me stories from this Bible before bed, while Dad worked nights. My favourite was the tale of Noah's ark. I liked the way the animals paired off in twos, and the illustrations were so detailed that I felt I knew each creature as well as I knew my classmates. When the story was finished, she would tuck me in and remind me to say my prayers.

'Don't forget, Billie. If you forget Him, He'll forget you.' I gladly did as I was told.

It's hard to believe, now, but I used to love God, and praying gave me a direct line to Him. He was like an imaginary friend. Every night, after my mother put me to bed, I would sit up and ramble to God for hours. I practised on Him, embellishing, lying, testing theories. In learning to pray, I learned to tell stories, a skill that became increasingly necessary as I grew up. When I reached school age and met Laura, she

began to play the starring role in all of them. Perhaps I ought to have been the main character in my own prayers, but I have always been more interested in Laura than in myself.

I think my mother taught me wrong. She just said I had to *talk* to God. Tell Him my hopes and dreams, tell Him what I was grateful for, what I wanted to happen. What you are *supposed* to do when you pray, I have since learned, is to ask God to take care of you if you die in your sleep. You're supposed to ask Him to take care of everyone you love. Y'know, *please look after Mummy and Daddy and my brothers and sister and my friends*. I never asked Him to do that. Maybe that's why He didn't. Maybe that's why I'm such a bad sleeper now.

There is one thing that I've never quite been able to work out about the whole praying thing. Why do we have to *ask* Him for protection? My dad looked after me without me having to ask him to. I was a kid; I didn't know what I needed. He just did it all. He kept me safe; he kept my mum safe and my siblings and when Laura fell off the swing in our garden, he bandaged her up, too. But God? My heavenly Father? He has to be asked *nicely*?

Anyway. I remember telling Laura about praying and explaining it all to her. Laura's parents didn't go to church, so she didn't know that He was listening to everything we said. She asked me to tell her a prayer, so I did. I told her that I always prayed that we'd still be friends the next day, because my mother told me to ask for what I *wanted* to happen.

Soon after, I stopped talking to God altogether. I didn't need Him if Laura was listening. And Laura was better than God, I thought, because *she* answered me. Most of the time, anyway.

~

I give up on the night the second the alarm clock ticks over to five a.m.

I have never been a good sleeper, and it has only grown worse as

I have aged. For the time being, at least, I don't have to worry about waking my wife. She's a nurse and has, since March, taken to sleeping in the spare room to minimise the risk of infection. Still, all three pairs of our hands are cracked and raw from sanitising so often and, when she comes home from work, she swipes her lips with an antibacterial wipe before kissing me, her tired face pressed with red lines from the too-tight mask she wears on the ward.

Clicking the bedroom door shut behind me, I pad past our son's bedroom and down the stairs to the kitchen. A capsule in the coffee machine, dry biscuits in the dog bowls, butter on a piece of toast. I don't bother with a plate, instead clamping the toast between my teeth and carrying the coffee cup to my study. I like the door to stay locked when I work, although it irritates my wife endlessly.

'What if there's a fire?' she says.

'I'll climb out the window.'

'What if our son needs something?'

'I've trained the dogs to take care of him. Y'know, like Nana in *Peter Pan*.' This remark earns me a ball of socks to the head, although she is laughing when she throws them.

The second prong in her argument has faded as our son has grown, and as she has realised that I am irreversibly set in my ways. Her protests have lessened to the point that now I only have to hear them when we are with other people, so she can savour complaining about living with a part-time hermit. I don't mind being the butt of the joke. I'll still do anything to make her smile.

I set the cup on my desk, light wood marked with age and my carelessness, shift the keyboard out of the way, and prop my feet on the pouffe. I am particularly fond of this part of the house. It is filled with mementos. On the shelves are tins of dried flowers and jars of splintering paintbrushes mingling with stacks of books and photographs. The wheels of my chair run over an Indian prayer rug,

the once-vibrant wool imbued with the faint scent of sandalwood incense and cannabis. I have no desire to get down on my knees and smell the rug but, if I did, I know that it would now smell like spilled peppermint tea and the earthy undersides of my sockless feet. On the small table beside the desk, a thin coat of dust the colour of winter sand covers a Remington typewriter. The laptop on the desk hums.

I often write for children. I enjoy the escape offered by wizards and beanstalks and dinosaurs. But my interest in such stories has waned slightly since my son grew up. Every story I wrote, I wrote for him. He still asks me about them, wishing to know the fates of characters I based on him in the latest book of their series. This project, both new and old, is for him too. Or it will be. For now, it's just for me.

I reach for the children's Bible I keep beside the old typewriter with its now fragile leather binding. I read once, a long time ago, that Maya Angelou liked to write in bed with only a bottle of whiskey, a dictionary, and the King James Bible beside her. Well, I do not hold with beds, and more than half a beer close to knocks me flat on my back these days. The dictionary lives inside the humming machine. But the Bible? The Bible I can do.

I pull my chair closer to the edge of the desk, the hard line of wood sinking into the flesh of my belly. When I first envisioned what this project might be, I was skinny—*too* skinny—and the café tables and library desks I worked at hurt as I pressed myself against them, writing as fast as I could without my hand cramping around my pen. The memories flowed. They frightened me with their eagerness. They were fresh, ripe, on the cusp of rotting. Now, I have to search for them, coax them. I lift the screen of my laptop and rest my fingers on the keys.

PART ONE

# the best of times

## (1979–1983)

# 1

I had been lying on my stomach and reading *Anna Karenina* on the grassy hill for close to an hour, intermittently pausing to flick dry grass from the binding, or to underline a particularly good phrase, when Laura finally flopped down beside me.

'You wouldn't believe my day, Bills.' She groaned, shielding her face from the sun with a book. Her blue eyes were screwed up tight and the bridge of her nose was pink and peeling.

'What's that?' I asked, dog-earing my page.

Laura tossed the book she was holding towards me, and it landed with a thump atop my own. *Lolita*. When I looked at her in confusion, Laura chuckled. 'Exactly. Mr James gave it to me,' she said, tossing it aside. 'I told him I'd already read it, but he *insisted* I take his copy.'

Mr James was thirty-three years old and, until recently, had been our high school English teacher. He'd been in love with Laura from the minute she'd walked into his class four years earlier, at the grand old age of thirteen. I had hated him from that same minute. Every time he complimented Laura, or tugged at her thick blonde plait, or called her *Lo*, my stomach had flipped with disgust and jealousy. It didn't surprise me that he'd given her *Lolita*, or that he'd given her a gift at all. Men, especially older men, were always trying to get Laura to owe them something.

'Creepy,' I muttered.

'Yep.' Laura popped the 'P' like bubblegum and tipped her chin back to catch the last of the sun's rays.

The two of us had spent almost every evening out on the hill that summer, carving out a million mythologies of our girlhood. Martlesham Heath wasn't much to look at in those days; nevertheless, the hill watched over our small town, and we loved the way the lights of everybody's houses winked on, one by one, as the sun set and violet darkness descended over them. When two lights snapped on at the exact same time, we would shriek and descend into fits of giggles.

It was late August 1979, and we were eighteen years old. We had both been accepted to the University of Bristol. I was to read English Literature, Laura to study Fine Art. It had never occurred to either of us that we would attend different universities, although I had, to please my mother, applied to Oxford. Thankfully, I had not been successful. Even if I had been, I would have given my place up if it meant that I could stay with Laura. *Anna Karenina* was one of the books I anticipated would be on a reading list at some point in my university career, and this was the reason I'd decided to bring it with me to the hill as I waited for her. I had a box of books like that, which I had collected over the past year, all of them second-hand and all of them classics. Most had someone else's name inscribed on their title pages, and, occasionally, a year. I amused myself by making up stories about the previous owners and began to think of each of the books not as *Great Expectations* or *Rebecca* but as Marjorie Llewellyn's 1943 edition of *Great Expectations*, or Andrew Dagnam's copy of *Rebecca*, bought for him by his aunt, coincidentally named Becky, for his fifteenth birthday in 1966.

'Have you started packing yet?' I asked.

Laura stifled a yawn. 'Finished.'

'Already?' It was only Wednesday, and we weren't due to drive to Bristol until Sunday, ahead of Freshers Week.

She brushed yellowed grass from her arms. 'I can't wait to be shot of this place. I want my life to start.'

'What have you been doing so far?'

She shot me a devilish glance. It made my chest tighten. 'I want to leave bright and early on Sunday, so be ready.'

'We can't, we have to leave after lunch.'

'Why?'

'I have church.' Laura groaned dramatically and rolled halfway down the hill.

I shouted after her: 'I promised my mother. It'll be the last time till Christmas.'

'Fine.' She clambered back towards me. 'But the minute you've sopped up the last of your mum's god-awful gravy, we are out of here.' She let herself fall against me, the bones of our shoulders clicking. Her hair brushed against my cheek. She smelled like shampoo and summer grass and suncream. 'Forever.'

We'd planned out our whole lives on that hill, from early adolescence to that day in 1979. In the past, when we'd talked about the future, we were idealistic and superficial. We'd paint the living-room walls purple. We'd smoke cigarettes and go to Venice. We'd get married and wear poofy white dresses and smear sickly-sweet cake over our new husbands' stubbly chins. At the heart of each of these stories was the fact that we would not, under any circumstances, be staying in Suffolk. The details of our plans had blurred after we'd entered our teenage years and both realised that we had no interest in husbands, or marriage in general, but running away had remained our most consistent dream.

Laura terrified me by coming out when we were fourteen. She may have been the one to open her mouth, but they were my truths that tumbled out. I played it cool, which was not something I had ever successfully done when it came to Laura before, and told her not to worry, that we could still be friends. She told me that she had never been worried about *that*.

For two years, I listened to Laura whisper stories about girls in our year who she had kissed or had kissed her. She was an experiment for nearly every girl we knew, and a challenge for every boy. Each of her experiences left me further and further behind, and I could share none of my own with her. Finally, the day after my father's funeral, as we lay cocooned in my duvet, sipping pineapple Cresta, I came out to her.

That was when our plans shifted. When we went to university, we promised one another, our lives would begin—*properly*. Laura constantly told me just how sick she was of her 'nice, normal life'. She wanted adventure and dancing and lovers. I just wanted her.

I checked my watch. It had been my dad's once, and the brown leather strap was worn, often leaving an extra dusting of bitsy freckles on my forearm. I was going to be late for dinner if I didn't leave soon, so Laura and I went our separate ways. I reached home just a few minutes later, opening the door to the usual Wednesday evening sounds of my family.

*My family.* This unit, beginning to flake at the edges, consisted of my father, who, by that summer, had been dead for close to two years, my anxious, church-going mother, and three younger, unknowable siblings. From the time I was three months old, we had lived in a two-storey brick house on Warren Lane. A warren, out of interest, is a place where rabbits live and procreate. A nest with too many entrances, too many inhabitants, a labyrinth of loving and biting and the sharing of greens. More than once, Laura had played Ariadne, leading me out of the maze of that claustrophobic household and into the fresh air.

That day, I found my bedroom filled with empty cardboard boxes and black rubbish bags. I didn't need an explanation. My mother would have mentioned to somebody at church that I was leaving for university and soon the whole congregation would have pitched in to donate the packing detritus from their own last moves to my mother's

worthy cause. I sighed and cleared some room for myself to sit on my bed and continue reading. This lasted all of five minutes before my siblings descended.

'Can I have this room when you leave?' Nancy asked, with her hands on her skinny hips, pinning me with her big brown eyes. My room was only minutely bigger than her own, but she had always felt entitled to my hand-me-downs, and real estate was no exception. Even at nine years old, she was our mother's double, although unlike Mum's cropped cut, Nancy's chestnut locks were long and constantly tangled.

'No.'

'Why?'

The pout that appeared on her face was so immediate, like putting on a mask, that I almost laughed right at her. I thought better of it, though. Instead, I reached for her, smoothing her hair down before cupping her face in my hands. 'Because it's *my* room and has been since long before you showed up.'

'But you're *leaving*.' She pulled away from me with a huff, putting extra emphasis on the last word, as if she thought I wasn't grasping what it meant.

'I'll be back at Christmas,' I said, crossing the room to my desk to turn over the pages of writing I had been working on the previous night, protecting them from prying eyes. 'And then the holidays after that. I'll need somewhere to sleep.'

She opened her mouth again, no doubt to keep arguing, but was cut off by the arrival of Jack, three years her senior.

'Where's your copy of *Romeo and Juliet*? I need it for English.' Before I could answer, he spotted the play on my bookshelf and strode into my room to snatch it up, flipping through the pages and squinting at my cramped annotations.

'I'm so sorry to hear about your health, Jack. It must be such a hardship.' I said, sarcasm dripping.

He looked up from the bent paperback. 'What about my health?'

'It must be so hard being allergic to words as simple as "please" and "thank you".' I narrowly ducked the book that was hurled in my direction.

A millisecond later, I heard a gruff exclamation of pain and surprise. Then came, 'What are you all doing in here?'

Matthew slumped in, rubbing the spot on his chest that had been hit by the book. He threw it onto my bed and leant against the doorframe, pretending he was too cool to care. At fifteen, he almost was. He was taller than both me and our mother, but he carried his lankiness with genuine style.

Of all of us, Matt looked the most like our father. His eyes were the darkest, his hair the curliest, and his skin the most freckled. Sometimes, he reminded me so much of Dad that I had to look away, just to ease the ache in my chest. We were three years apart, but we were closer than any set of twins I'd ever met. I knew I'd miss Matt the most when I left for university.

Matt caught my eye as I made a face at Jack, who had not bothered to apologise. Ignoring the younger two, Matt said, 'Beach tomorrow? One last hurrah and all that?'

'I'm not dying, I'm just moving to Bristol.'

'Same thing,' he shrugged. 'So, beach or no beach?'

'Yeah, alright. But not tomorrow. I have to start packing. We'll go before I leave. Promise.' We ignored Jack and Nancy's clamours for invitations, mercifully silenced by our mother appearing beside Matt in the doorway.

She peered in at us and then nodded approvingly at the mess of cardboard boxes. 'Nice of everyone to pitch in, isn't it?'

The most that could be said for my mother and me at that point in my life was that *we got on*. We rarely quarrelled because we rarely spoke. If pressed, at that time, I'm sure my mother would have said

my best quality was that I was *good*. Well behaved. What she meant, of course, was that I didn't cause her any more trouble or stress than was necessary. That was the younger children's prerogative. They had been, after all, only seven and ten when we lost our father, so they would always, in the eyes of our neighbours and the teachers at school, get away with a little more than their peers. Jack, especially, took advantage of this whenever he could.

I'd been summoned, not once, but twice, to our nearest corner shop to hear a lecture about Jack's shoplifting habit. The people that owned the shop, a well-meaning couple in their sixties, didn't want to worry my mother with it, but implored me to keep an eye on my brother to ensure he didn't keep stealing from them. In response, Jack had moved on to graffitiing in underpasses and on the fence around the primary school. Picking my battles, I let him do it. I figured it was a more creative outlet than thieving from a small business. He was only twelve, and I hoped, maybe naïvely, that he would soon grow out of his rebellion.

'Dinner's ready, anyway,' my mother said, and there was a rush of movement as Jack and Nancy shoved past her to race down to the kitchen. Matt and I slouched after them.

Our house was unchanged from the time when my father had lived in it. It wasn't small, exactly, but it was narrow. This, combined with the number of people that were always inside, made it feel cramped. My mother, despite her newfound conservatism and fear of what others thought of her and her family, was not particularly houseproud, and the rest of us did little to help. There was always dust on the windowsills, the beds were never made, and the curtains still had holes in them from the summer we were haunted by moths. Stacks of books, most of them Dad's, lay around the house, piled up on tables and even covering the carpet in the upstairs hallway. Occasionally, you would come across a stack that had a cold cup of tea balanced precariously

on top, a skin of mould growing inside, or collections of crispy brown houseplants which we had all neglected to water.

We reached the kitchen and sat down to plates of chips and fishfingers. Nancy nattered about her tap class, while Mum probed Jack for information about where he had been all day. ‘Out with friends’ was not cutting it as an answer. Matt and I said nothing and ate our food as quickly as we could. We made it away from the table as Mum began to lecture Jack on the sins of lying to a parent.

On the landing, Matt and I separated. While he took the ladder up to his room two rungs at a time, I threw myself back down onto my bed with *Anna Karenina* and dreamed of Bristol.