

What Alice Forgot
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MORIARTY



First published 2009 in Macmillan by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Limited
1 Market Street, Sydney

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National Library of Australia
cataloguing-in-publication data:

Moriarty, Liane.
What Alice Forgot / Liane Moriarty.

ISBN: 978 1 4050 3857 7 (pbk.)

A823.4

Typeset in Bembo 12.5/14pt by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

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For Adam

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She was floating, arms outspread, water lapping her body, breathing in a summery fragrance of salt and coconut. There was a pleasantly satisfied breakfast taste in her mouth of bacon and coffee and possibly croissants. She lifted her chin and the morning sun shone so brightly on the water that she had to squint through spangles of light to see her feet in front of her. Her toenails were each painted a different colour. Red. Gold. Purple. Funny. The nail polish hadn't been applied very well. Blobby and messy. Someone else was floating in the water right next to her. Someone she liked a lot, who made her laugh, with toenails painted the same way. The other person waggled their multicoloured toes at her companionably and she was filled with sleepy contentment. Somewhere in the distance a man's voice shouted, 'Marco?' and a chorus of children's voices cried back, 'Polo!' The man called out again, 'Marco, Marco, Marco?' and the voices answered, 'Polo, Polo, Polo!' A child laughed; a long gurgling giggle, like a stream of soap bubbles. A voice said quietly and insistently in her ear, 'Alice?' and she tipped back her head and let the cool water slide silently over her face.

Tiny dots of light danced before her eyes.

Was it a dream or a memory?

‘I don’t know!’ said a frightened voice. ‘I didn’t see it happen!’
No need to get your knickers in a knot.

The dream or memory or whatever it was dissolved and vanished like a reflection on water, and instead fragments of thought began to drift through her head, as if she was waking up from a long, deep sleep, late on a Sunday morning.

Is cream cheese considered a soft cheese?

It’s not a hard cheese.

It’s not . . .

. . . hard at all.

So, logically, you would think . . .

. . . something.

Something logical.

Lavender is lovely.

Logically lovely.

Must prune back the lavender!

I can smell lavender.

No I can’t.

Yes, I can.

That’s when she noticed the pain in her head for the first time. It hurt on one side, a lot, as if someone had given her a good solid thwack with a hammer.

Her thoughts sharpened. What was this pain in the head all about? Nobody had warned her about pain in her head. She had a whole list of peculiar symptoms to be prepared for: heartburn, a taste like aluminium foil in your mouth, dizziness, extreme tiredness – but nothing about a hammering ache at the side of your head. That one should really have been mentioned, because it was very painful. Of course, if she couldn’t handle a run-of-the-mill *headache*, well then . . .

The scent of lavender seemed to be coming and going, like a gentle breeze.

She let herself drift again.

The best thing would be to fall back asleep and return to that lovely dream with the water and the multicoloured toenails.

Actually, maybe someone had mentioned headaches and she

forgot? Yes, they had! Headaches, for heaven's sake! Really bad ones. Fabulous.

So much to remember. No soft cheeses or smoked salmon or sushi because of the risk of that disease she had never even known existed. Listeria. Something to do with bacteria. Hurts the baby. That's why you weren't allowed to eat leftovers. One bite of a leftover chicken drumstick could kill the baby. The brutal responsibilities of parenthood.

For now, she would just go back to sleep. That was the best thing.

Listeria.

Wisteria.

The wisteria over the side fence is going to look stunning if it ever gets around to flowering.

Listeria, wisteria.

Ha. Funny words.

She smiled, but her head really did hurt a lot. She was trying to be brave.

'Alice? Can you hear me?'

The lavender smell got stronger again. A bit sickly sweet.

Cream cheese is a spreadable cheese. Not too soft, not too hard, just right. Like the baby bear's bed.

'Her eyelids are fluttering. Like she's dreaming.'

It was no use. She couldn't get back to sleep, even though she felt exhausted, as if she could sleep forever. Were all pregnant woman walking around with aching heads like this? Was the idea to toughen them up for labour pains? When she got up she would look it up in one of the baby books.

She always forgot how pain was so upsetting. Cruel. It hurt your feelings. You just wanted it to stop, please, right now. Epidurals were the way to go. One epidural for my headache, please. Thank you.

'Alice, try and open your eyes.'

Was cream cheese even *cheese*? You didn't put a dollop of cream cheese on a cheese platter. Maybe cheese didn't actually mean cheese in the context of cream cheese. She wouldn't

ask the doctor about it, just in case it was an embarrassing ‘Oh, Alice’ mistake.

She couldn’t get comfortable. The mattress felt like cold concrete. If she wriggled across, she could nudge Nick with her foot until he sleepily rolled over and pulled her to him in a big warm bear hug. Her human hot-water bottle.

Where was Nick? Had he already got up? Maybe he was making her a cup of tea.

‘Don’t try to move, Alice. Just stay still and open your eyes, sweetie.’

Elisabeth would know about the cream cheese. She’d snort in her big-sisterly way and be precise. Mum wouldn’t have a clue. She’d be stricken. She’d say, ‘Oh dear, oh no! I’m sure I ate soft cheeses when I was pregnant with you girls! They didn’t know about that sort of thing back then.’ She’d talk on and on and worry that Alice had accidentally broken a rule. Mum believed in rules. So did Alice actually. Frannie wouldn’t know but she’d research it, proudly, using her new computer, in the same way that she’d once helped Alice and Elisabeth find information for their school projects in her Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Her head really did hurt.

Presumably this was only the squidgiest fraction of how much labour would hurt. So that was just great.

It was not as if she’d actually *eaten* any cream cheese that she could remember.

‘Alice? *Alice!*’

She didn’t even really like cream cheese.

‘Has someone called an ambulance?’

There was that smell of lavender again.

Once, when they were undoing their seatbelts, Nick said (in answer to some fishing-for-compliments thing she’d just said), his hand on the handle of the car door, ‘Don’t be ridiculous, you goose, you know I’m bloody besotted with you.’

She opened the car door and felt sunshine on her legs and smelled the lavender she’d planted by the front door.

Bloody besotted.

It was a moment of lavender-scented bliss, after grocery shopping.

‘It’s coming. I called triple 0! That’s the first time in my life I’ve ever called triple 0! I felt all self-conscious. I nearly called 911 like an American. I actually punched in the nine. There’s proof I watch too much television.’

‘I hope it’s not, like, serious. I mean, I couldn’t, like, get sued or anything, could I? I didn’t think my choreography was that difficult, was it?’

‘I do think that last spin pirouette was a bit much when you’re already dizzy from the reverse turn after the double kick.’

‘This is an advanced class! People complain if you make it too easy. I give *options*. I teach in layers. God, I get complaints whatever I do.’

Was that talkback radio she could hear? She hated talkback radio. The callers were so cranky and nasal. They were always appalled by something. Alice said once that she’d never been appalled by anything. Elisabeth had said that was appalling.

She kept her eyes closed and said out loud, ‘Have you got the radio on, Nick? Because I think I have a headache.’ Her voice came out petulant, which wasn’t like her, but after all, she was *pregnant* and her head hurt and she was cold and she didn’t feel quite . . . right.

Maybe this was morning sickness?

Was it even morning?

Oh, *Alice*.

‘Alice, can you hear me? Can you hear me, Alice?’

Sultana, can you hear me? Can you hear me, Sultana?

Every night, before they went to sleep, Nick talked to the baby through an empty toilet roll pressed to Alice’s stomach. He’d heard this idea on some radio show. They said that way the baby would learn to recognise the father’s voice as well as the mother’s.

‘Ahoy!’ he’d call. ‘Can you hear me, Sultana? This is your father speaking!’ They’d read that the baby was the size of a sultana by now. So that’s what they called it. Only in private of course, they were cool parents-to-be. No sappiness in public.

The Sultana said he was fine thanks Dad, bit bored at times, but doing OK. Apparently he wished his mum would stop eating all that boring green shit and have a pizza for a change. 'Enough with the rabbit food!' he demanded.

It seemed the Sultana was most likely a boy. He just seemed to have a masculine personality. The little rogue. They both agreed on this.

Alice would lie back and look at the top of Nick's head. There were a few shiny silvery strands. She didn't know if he knew about them, so she didn't mention them. He was thirty-two. The silver strands made her eyes blur. All those wacky pregnancy hormones.

Alice never talked out loud to the baby. She spoke to it in her mind, shyly, when she was in the bath (not too hot – so many rules). *Hey there, Baby*, she'd think to herself, and then she'd be so overwhelmed by the wonder of it she'd splash the water with the flat of her palms like a kid thinking about Christmas. She was turning thirty soon, with a terrifying mortgage and a husband and a baby on the way but she didn't feel that different from when she was fifteen.

Except there were no moments of bliss after grocery shopping when she was fifteen. She hadn't met Nick yet. Her heart still had to be broken a few times before he could turn up and superglue it together with words like 'besotted'.

'Alice? Are you OK? Please open your eyes.'

It was a woman's voice. Too loud and strident to ignore. It dragged her up into consciousness and wouldn't let her go.

It was a voice that gave Alice a familiar irritated itch of a feeling, like too-tight stockings.

This person did not belong in her bedroom.

She rolled her head to one side. 'Ow!'

She opened her eyes.

There was a blur of unrecognisable colours and shapes. She couldn't even see the bedside cabinet to reach for her glasses. Her eyes must be getting worse.

She blinked and blinked again and then, like a sharpening

telescope, everything came into focus. She was looking at someone's knees. How funny.

Knobbly pale knees.

She lifted her chin a fraction.

'There you are!'

It was Jane Turner of all people, from work, kneeling next to her. Her face was flushed and she had strands of sweaty hair pasted to her forehead. Her eyes looked tired. She had a soft pudgy neck Alice had never noticed before. She was wearing a T-shirt with huge sweat marks and shorts and her arms were thin and white with dark freckles. Alice had never seen so much of Jane's body before. It was embarrassing. Poor old Jane.

'Listeria, wisteria,' said Alice, to be humorous.

'You're delirious,' said Jane. 'Don't try to sit up.'

'Hmmp,' said Alice. 'Don't want to sit up.' She had a feeling she wasn't in bed; she seemed to be lying flat on her back on a cool laminated floor. Was she drunk? Had she forgotten she was pregnant and got *deliriously drunk*?

Her obstetrician was an urbane man who wore a bow tie and had a round face disconcertingly similar to one of Alice's ex-boyfriends. He said he didn't have a problem with 'say, an aperitif followed by one glass of wine with dinner'. Alice thought an aperitif must be a particular brand of drink. ('Oh *Alice*,' said Elisabeth.) Nick explained that an aperitif was a pre-dinner drink. Nick came from an aperitif-drinking family. Alice came from a family with one dusty bottle of Baileys sitting hopefully in the back of the pantry behind the tins of spaghetti. In spite of what the obstetrician said, she'd only had half a glass of champagne since she'd done the pregnancy test and she felt guilty about that even though everybody kept saying it was fine.

'Where am I?' asked Alice, terrified of the answer. Was she in some seedy nightclub? How could she explain to Nick that she had forgotten she was pregnant?

'You're at the gym,' said Jane. 'You fell and knocked yourself out. Gave me an absolute heart attack, although I was sort of glad for the excuse to stop.'

The gym? Alice didn't go to gyms. Had she woken up *drunk* in a *gym*?

'You lost your balance,' said a sharp, jolly voice. 'It was quite a fall! Gave us all a shock, you silly sausage! We've called an ambulance, so don't you worry, we've got professional help on the way!'

Kneeling next to Jane was a thin, coffee-tanned girl with a bleached blonde ponytail, shiny lycra shorts and a cropped red top with the words *STEP CRAZY* emblazoned across it. Alice felt instant dislike for her. She didn't like being called a silly sausage. It offended her dignity. One of Alice's faults, according to her sister Elisabeth, was a tendency to take herself too seriously.

'Did I faint?' asked Alice hopefully. Pregnant women fainted. She had never fainted in her life, although she had spent most of fourth grade practising, in the hope that she could be one of those lucky girls who fainted during church and had to be carried out, draped across the muscly arms of their PE teacher, Mr Gillespie.

'It's just that I'm *pregnant*,' she said. Let her see who she was calling a silly sausage.

Jane's mouth dropped. 'Jesus, Alice, you are not!'

Step Crazy Girl pursed her mouth as if she'd caught Alice out being naughty. 'Oh dear, sweetie, I did ask at the beginning of the class if anyone was pregnant. You shouldn't have been so shy. I would have suggested modifications.'

Alice's head thumped. Nothing anybody said was making sense.

'Pregnant,' said Jane. 'At this time. What a disaster.'

'It is not.' Alice put a protective hand to her stomach, so the Sultana wouldn't hear and be offended. Their financial situation was none of Jane's business. People were meant to be delighted when you announced a pregnancy.

'I mean, what are you going to *do*?' asked Jane.

For heaven's sakes! 'Do? What do you mean, what I am going to do? I'm going to have a baby.' She sniffed. 'You smell of

lavender. I knew I could smell lavender.' Her sense of smell had been extra strong because of the pregnancy.

'It's my deodorant.' Jane really didn't look like herself. Her eyes didn't look right. It was quite noticeable. Maybe she needed to start using some sort of eye cream.

'Are you all right Jane?'

Jane snorted. 'I'm fine. Worry about yourself, woman. You're the pregnant one knocking yourself out.'

The baby! She'd been selfishly thinking about her sore head when she should have been worrying about the poor little Sultana. What sort of a mother was she going to be?

She said, 'I hope I didn't hurt the baby when I fell.'

'Oh, babies are pretty tough, I wouldn't worry about that.'

It was another woman's voice. For the first time Alice looked up and realised a crowd of red-faced, middle-aged women in sports gear surrounded her. Some of them were leaning forward, staring at her with avid road-accident interest, while others had their hands on their hips and were chatting to each other as if they were at a party. They seemed to be in a long, fluorescent-lit room. She could hear tinny music somewhere in the distance, clanking metal sounds and a sudden burst of loud masculine laughter.

'Although you shouldn't really be doing high-impact exercise if you're pregnant,' said another woman.

'But I don't do *any* exercise,' said Alice. 'I should do more exercise.'

'You, my girl, couldn't do any more exercise if you tried,' said Jane.

'I don't know what you're taking about.' She looked around at the strange faces surrounding her. This was all so . . . silly. 'I don't know where I am.'

'She's probably got concussion,' said somebody excitedly. 'Concussed people are dazed and disoriented.'

'Oooh, listen to the doctor!'

'I just did a first-aid course up at the school. I remember that exact phrase. Dazed and disoriented. You've got to watch for cerebral compression. That's very dangerous.'

Step Crazy Girl looked frightened and stroked Alice's arm. 'Oh dear, sweetie, YOU MIGHT BE JUST A LITTLE BIT CONCUSSED.'

'Yes, but I don't think that makes her deaf,' said Jane tersely. She lowered her voice and bent her head towards Alice. 'It's OK. You're at the gym, you were doing your Friday step class, the one you've been wanting to drag me along to for ages, remember? Can't quite see the attraction actually. Anyway, you had a spectacular fall and hit your head, that's all. You're going to be fine. More importantly, why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?'

'What's a Friday step class?' asked Alice.

'Oh, this is *bad*,' said Jane excitedly.

'The ambulance is here!' someone said.

Step Crazy Girl became goofy with relief. She bounded to her feet and shooed at the ladies like an energetic housewife with a broom. 'OK, gang, let's give them some space, shall we?'

Jane stayed kneeling on the floor next to Alice, patting her distractedly on the shoulder. Then she stopped patting. 'Oh my. Why do you get all the fun?'

Alice twisted her head and saw two handsome men in blue overalls striding towards them, carrying first-aid equipment. Embarrassed, she struggled to sit up.

'Stay there, honey,' called out the taller one.

'He looks just like George Clooney,' breathed Jane in her ear. He did too. Alice couldn't help but feel cheerier. It seemed she'd woken up in an episode of *ER*.

'Hey there.' George Clooney squatted down next to them, big hands resting between his knees. 'What's your name?'

'Jane,' said Jane. 'Oh. Her name is Alice.'

'What's your full name, Alice?' George gently took her wrist and pushed two fingers against her pulse.

'Alice Mary Love.'

'Had a bit of a fall did you, Alice?'

'Apparently I did. I don't remember it.' Alice felt teary and special, as she generally did when she talked to any health

professional, even a chemist. She blamed her mother for making too much of a fuss of her when she was sick as a child. She and Elisabeth were both terrible hypochondriacs.

‘Do you know where you are?’ asked George.

‘Not really,’ said Alice. ‘Apparently I’m in a *gym*.’

‘She fell during the step class.’ Jane adjusted her bra strap beneath her top. ‘I saw it happen. She did quite an impressive backflip and her head smashed against the floor. She’s been unconscious for about ten minutes.’

Step Crazy Girl reappeared, ponytail swinging, and Alice stared up at her smooth long legs and hard flat stomach. It looked like a pretend stomach. ‘I think she lost concentration for a minute,’ said Step Crazy Girl to George Clooney in the confidential tone of one professional talking to another. ‘I really don’t recommend this sort of class to pregnant women. I *did* ask if anyone was pregnant.’

‘How many weeks are you, Alice?’ asked George.

Alice went to answer and to her surprise found a blank space in her head.

‘Thirteen,’ she said, after a second. ‘I mean, fourteen. Fourteen weeks.’ They’d had the twelve-week ultrasound at least two weeks ago. The Sultana had done a peculiar little jump, like a disco dance move, as if someone had poked him in the back, and afterwards Nick and Alice had kept trying to replicate the movement for people. Everyone had been polite and said it was remarkable.

She put a hand to her stomach again and for the first time she noticed what she was wearing. Runners and white socks. Black shorts and a yellow singlet top with a shiny gold foil sticker stuck to her top. It seemed to be a picture of a dinosaur with a balloon coming out of its mouth saying, *ROCK ON*. Rock on?

‘Where did these clothes come from?’ she asked Jane accusingly. ‘These aren’t my clothes.’

Jane raised a meaningful eyebrow at George.

‘There’s a dinosaur stuck to my shirt,’ said Alice, awestruck.

‘What day of the week is it today, Alice?’ asked George.

‘Friday,’ answered Alice. She was cheating because Jane had

told her they were doing a 'Friday step class'. Whatever that was.

'Remember what you had for breakfast?' George gently examined the side of her head while he talked. The other paramedic strapped a blood-pressure monitor to her upper arm and pumped it up.

'Peanut butter on toast?'

That was what she generally had for breakfast. It seemed a safe bet.

'He doesn't actually *know* what you had for breakfast,' said Jane. 'He's trying to see if you *remember* what you had for breakfast.'

The blood-pressure monitor squeezed hard around Alice's arm.

George sat back on his haunches and said, 'Humour me, Alice, and tell me the name of our illustrious prime minister.'

'John Howard,' answered Alice obediently. She hoped there wouldn't be any more questions about politics. It wasn't her forte. She could never get appalled enough.

Jane made a strange explosive sound of derision and mirth.

'Oh. Ah. But he's still the prime minister, isn't he?' Alice was mortified. People were going to tease her about this for years to come. Oh, *Alice*, you don't know the prime minister! Had she missed an election? 'But I'm sure he's the prime minister.'

'And what year is it?' George didn't seem too concerned.

'It's 1998,' Alice answered promptly. She felt confident about that one. The baby would be born next year in 1999.

Jane pressed her hand over her mouth. George went to speak, but Jane interrupted him. She put her hand on Alice's shoulder and stared at her intently. Her eyes were wide with excitement. Tiny balls of mascara hovered on the ends of her eyelashes. The combination of her lavender deodorant and garlic breath was quite overpowering.

'How old are you, Alice?'

'I'm twenty-nine, *Jane*,' Alice was irritated by Jane's dramatic tone. What was she getting at? 'Same age as you.'

Jane sat back up and looked at George Clooney triumphantly.

She said, 'I just got an invitation to her fortieth birthday.'

That was the day Alice Mary Love went to the gym and carelessly misplaced a decade of her life.

2

Jane said of course she would have come to the hospital with her but she had to be in court at two o'clock.

'What are you going to court for?' asked Alice, who was perfectly happy not to have Jane come to the hospital. That was quite enough of Jane for one day. An invitation to her fortieth birthday. What exactly did she mean by that?

Jane smiled oddly and didn't answer Alice's question about court. 'I'll call someone to be there at the hospital waiting for you.'

'Not someone.' Alice watched the paramedics set up a stretcher for her. It looked a bit flimsy. 'Nick.'

'Yes, of *course*, I'll call *Nick*,' Jane enunciated her words carefully as if she was acting in a children's pantomime.

'Actually, I'm sure I can walk,' Alice said to George Clooney. She never liked the idea of being lifted by people, even Nick, who was pretty strong. She worried about her weight. What if the paramedics grunted and grimaced like furniture removalists when they lifted the stretcher? 'I feel fine. Just my head.'

'You're suffering from a pretty serious concussion there,' said George. 'We can't muck around with head injuries.'

'Come on now, our favourite part of the job is carrying attractive women around on stretchers,' said the other paramedic. 'Don't deprive us.'

‘Yes, don’t deprive them, Alice,’ said Jane. ‘Your brain is damaged. You think you’re twenty-nine.’

What did that mean, exactly?

Alice lay back and allowed the two men to efficiently lift her onto the stretcher. As her head rolled to one side, the pain made her dizzy.

‘Oh, here’s her bag,’ Jane picked up a backpack from the side of the room and squashed it next to Alice.

‘That’s not mine,’ said Alice.

‘Yes it is.’

Alice stared at the red canvas bag. There was a row of three shiny dinosaur stickers like the one on her shirt stuck across the top flap. She wondered if she was about to be sick.

The two paramedics lifted up the stretcher. They didn’t seem to have a problem carrying it. She guessed it was their job to lift all sized people.

‘Work!’ said Alice in a sudden panic. ‘You’d better call work for me. Why aren’t we at work if it’s a Friday?’

‘Well I really don’t know! Why aren’t *we* at work?’ repeated Jane in that pantomime voice again. ‘But don’t you worry a thing about it, I’ll call “Nick”, and then I’ll call “work”. So by work I assume you mean, ah, ABR Bricks?’

‘Yes, Jane, I do,’ said Alice carefully. They’d been working at ABR for three years now. Could the poor girl have some sort of mental illness?

Alice said, ‘You’d better let Sue know I won’t be in today.’

‘Sue,’ repeated Jane slowly. ‘And by Sue, I take it you mean Sue Mason.’

‘Yes, Jane. Sue Mason.’ (Definitely loopy.)

Sue Mason was their boss. She was a stickler for punctuality and medical certificates and appropriate work attire. Alice couldn’t wait for her maternity leave to start so she could get out of the place.

Alice saw Jane watching them as the paramedics carried her away. She was pinching her lower lip together with her finger and thumb, giving herself a fish face.

‘Get better soon!’ Step Crazy Girl called out from a stage at the front of the room, her voice amplified by a microphone strapped to her head. As the stretcher reached the door, there was a burst of throbbing music. Alice looked back to see Step Crazy Girl stepping quickly up and down on a low plastic platform. The women who had been gathered around Alice followed her every move on their own platforms. ‘Let’s go, LADIES! Give me a basic, give me a hamstring curl, now let’s RIDE the *RODEO!*’ The women straddled their steps and twirled imaginary lassoes around their heads.

Goodness. She must remember every moment of this freaky day to tell Nick. She’d have to re-enact that ‘Ride the Rodeo’ thing for him. He’d think it was hilarious. Yes, this whole day was quite a hoot.

(Except, of course, that it was also slightly terrifying, because what in the world was she doing in a gym with Jane Turner behaving like a fruitcake?)

They went out a glass door and into a huge long room as big as a supermarket. Nothing was familiar to Alice.

There were rows of complicated-looking machinery being operated by men and women who all seemed to be straining to lift, pull or push things that were far too heavy for them. The place had the studious, muted feel of a library. Nobody stopped what they were doing as the stretcher went by. Only their eyes followed with blank, impersonal interest, as if she was a news event on TV.

‘Alice!’

A man stepped off a treadmill, pushing his headphones down from his ears and onto his shoulders. ‘What happened to you?’

His face – bright red and beaded with sweat – meant nothing to her. Alice stared up at him, groping for something polite to say. It was surreal making conversation with a stranger while lying flat on her back on a stretcher. She was in one of those dreams where she turned up at a cocktail party in her pyjamas.

‘Bit of a bump on the noggin,’ George Clooney answered for her, sounding not at all medical.

‘Oh no!’ The man smeared a towel across his forehead. ‘Just what you need, with the big day coming up!’

Alice attempted to pull a rueful face about the big day coming up. Perhaps he was one of Nick’s colleagues and it was some work function she was meant to know about?

‘Well, that’ll teach you to be such a gym addict, eh, Alice?’

‘Ho,’ said Alice. She wasn’t sure what she’d been trying to say, but that’s what it came out as: ‘Ho.’

As the paramedics kept walking, the man climbed back onto his treadmill and started running, calling out after her, ‘Take care, Alice! I’ll get Maggie to call!’ He held up his thumb and his finger to his ear.

Alice closed her eyes. Her stomach churned.

‘You doing OK there, Alice?’ asked George Clooney.

Alice opened her eyes. ‘I feel a bit sick,’ she said.

‘OK. That’s to be expected.’

They stopped in front of a lift.

‘I really don’t know where I am,’ she reminded George. She felt it was worth mentioning again.

‘Don’t worry about it for now,’ said George.

The lift doors hissed open and a woman with sleek bobbed hair stepped out. ‘Alice! Are you OK? What happened?’ She had one of those ‘how now, brown cow’ accents. ‘What a coincidence! I was just *thinking* about you! I was going to call you about the – ah, the little incident – at school, Chloe told me about it, you poor thing! Oh dear, this is all you need! What with tomorrow night, and the big day coming up!’

As she kept talking, the paramedics manoeuvred the stretcher into the lift and pressed the button for the ground floor. The doors slid shut on the woman lifting a pretend phone to her ear just like the treadmill guy, while at the same time a voice cried out, ‘Is that *Alice Love* I just saw on that stretcher?’

George said, ‘You know a lot of people.’

‘No,’ said Alice. ‘No, I really don’t.’

She thought about Jane saying, ‘Actually, I just got an invitation to her fortieth birthday.’

She turned her head and was sick all over George Clooney's nice, shiny black shoes.

Elisabeth's homework for Dr Hodges

It was just towards the end of the lunch break when I got the call. I only had five minutes before I was back on and I should have been in the bathroom checking I didn't have food between my teeth. She said, 'Elisabeth? Oh hi, it's Jane, I've got a problem here', as if there was only one Jane in the whole world (you would think somebody named *Jane* would be in the habit of giving their last name) and I was thinking *Jane, Jane, a Jane with a problem*, and then I realised it was Jane Turner. Alice's Jane.

She said that Alice had fallen over at the gym during her step class.

So there I was with one hundred and forty-three people all sitting back behind their tables, pouring their iced water, eating their mints, looking expectantly at the podium with pens poised, who had each paid two thousand nine hundred and fifty dollars to see me speak, or two thousand five hundred dollars if they took advantage of the early bird discount. That's how much people pay me to teach them how to write a successful direct mail campaign. I know! That nasty commercial world out there is entirely foreign to you, isn't it, Dr Hodges? I could tell you were just politely nodding your head when I tried to explain my job. I'm sure it has never occurred to you that those letters and brochures you receive in the mail are actually written by real people. People like me. I bet you have a NO JUNK MAIL sticker on your letterbox. Don't worry. I won't hold it against you.

Anyway, it wasn't exactly the most convenient time for me to go rushing off to see my sister because she'd had a *gym* accident (some of us have jobs; some of us don't have time to go to the gym in the middle of the day). Especially as I still wasn't talking to her after the banana muffins incident. I know we

talked at length about trying to see her actions from a more ‘rational perspective’, but I’m still not talking to her. (Of course she doesn’t actually *know* I’m not talking to her but allow me my childish satisfaction.)

I said to Jane (somewhat irritably and self-importantly, I admit), ‘Is it serious?’ For some reason it never occurred to me that it really could be serious.

Jane said, ‘She thinks it’s 1998 and she’s twenty-nine and we’re still working together at ABR Bricks, so it’s seriously weird, that’s for sure.’

Then she said, ‘Oh, and I assume you know she’s pregnant?’

I am deeply ashamed of my reaction. All I can say, Dr Hodges, is that it was as involuntary and unstoppable as a huge hayfevery sneeze.

It was a feeling of trembly rage and it went from my stomach to my head in a WHOOSH, and I said, ‘I’m sorry Jane, I have to go now,’ and hung up.

George Clooney was very nice about his shoes. Alice was appalled and tried to climb off the stretcher so she could somehow help clean them – if she could have just found a tissue from somewhere, perhaps in that strange canvas bag – but both paramedics got stern with her and insisted that she stay still.

Her stomach felt better when she was buckled into the back of the ambulance. The chunky clean white plastic all around her was reassuring; everything felt sensible and sterile.

It seemed to be quite a sedate trip to the hospital, like catching a cab. As far as Alice could tell, they weren’t screeching through the streets flashing their lights at other cars to get out of the way.

‘So I guess I’m not dying then?’ she asked George. The other guy was driving and George Clooney was in the back with Alice. He had hairy eyebrows, she noticed. Nick had big bushy eyebrows too. Late one night Alice had tried to pluck them for him and he’d yelled so loud she was worried Mrs Bergen from

next door would do her neighbourhood-watch duty and call the police.

‘You’ll be back at the gym in no time,’ answered George.

‘I don’t go to the gym,’ said Alice. ‘I don’t believe in gyms.’

‘I’m with you,’ George smiled and patted her arm.

She watched bits of billboards and office buildings and sky flash by through the ambulance window behind George’s head.

OK, so this was all very silly. It was only the ‘bump on the noggin’ that was making everything seem strange. This was simply a longer, more intense version of that funny dreamlike feeling you got when you woke up on holidays and couldn’t think where you were. There was no need to panic. This was *interesting!* She just needed to focus.

‘What time is it?’ she asked George determinedly.

‘Nearly lunchtime,’ he said, glancing at his watch.

Right. Lunchtime. Lunchtime on a Friday.

She said, ‘Why did you ask what I had for breakfast before?’

‘It’s one of those standard questions we ask people with head injuries. We’re trying to ascertain your mental state.’

So presumably if she could remember what she had for breakfast, everything else would fall into place.

Breakfast. This morning. Oh, come on now. She must be able to remember.

The *idea* of a weekday breakfast was clear in her mind. It was two pieces of toast popping up in tandem from the toaster and the kettle bubbling crossly and the morning light slanting across the kitchen floor, lighting up the big brown splotch on the linoleum, which looked like it could be scrubbed away in a jiffy but most certainly couldn’t. It was glancing up at the railway clock Nick’s mother had given them as a housewarming present, with the fervent hope that it might be earlier than she thought (it was always later). It was the crackly background sound of ABC morning radio – worried, intense voices talking about world issues. Nick listened and sometimes said things like, ‘You’ve got to be kidding’, and Alice let the voices wash over her and tried to pretend she was still asleep.

She and Nick were not morning people. They liked this about each other, having both been in previous relationships with intolerably cheery morning people. They spoke in short terse sentences and sometimes it was a game, exaggerating their grumpiness, and sometimes it wasn't, and that was fine, because they knew their real selves would be back that evening after work.

She tried to think of a *specific* breakfast memory.

There was that chilly morning when they were halfway through painting the kitchen. It was raining hard outside and there was a strong smell of paint fumes tickling her nostrils as they silently ate peanut butter on toast sitting on the floor, because all the furniture was covered with drop sheets. Alice was still in her nightie, but she'd put a cardigan on over the top of it and she was wearing Nick's old football socks pulled up to her knees. Nick was shaved, and dressed, except for his tie. The night before he'd told her about a really important scary presentation he had to give to the Shiny-Headed Twerp, the Mother-Fucking Megatron and the Big Kahuna all at the same time. Alice, who was terrified of public speaking, had felt her own stomach clench in sympathy. That morning Nick took a sip of his tea, put down his mug, opened his mouth to bite the toast and dropped it onto his favourite blue striped shirt. It stuck right to the front. Their eyes met in mutual shock. Nick slowly peeled off the toast to reveal a big greasy rectangle of peanut butter. He said, in the tone of a man who has just been fatally shot, 'That was my only clean shirt', and then he took the piece of toast and slammed it against his forehead.

Alice said, 'No it's not. I took a load while you were at squash last night.' They didn't have a washing machine yet and they were taking all their clothes to the laundry down the road. Nick took the squished-up toast off his face and said, 'You didn't' and she said, 'I did' and he crawled through tins of paint and put both hands on her face and gave her a long, tender, peanut-buttery kiss.

But that wasn't this morning's breakfast. That was months ago, or weeks ago, or something. The kitchen was finished. She hadn't been pregnant then either. She was still drinking coffee.

There were a few breakfasts in a row where they were on a health kick and they had yoghurt with fruit. When was that? The health kick didn't last very long, even though they were pretty gung-ho about it in the beginning.

There were breakfasts when Nick was away for work. She ate her toast in bed then, relishing the romantic pain of missing him, as if he was a sailor or a soldier. It was like enjoying feeling hungry when you knew you'd be having a huge dinner.

There was that breakfast where they had a fight – faces ugly, eyes blazing, doors slamming – about running out of milk. That wasn't so nice. (That breakfast definitely wasn't this morning. She remembered how they forgave each other that night while they were watching Nick's youngest sister acting a tiny part in a stupendously long postmodern play that neither of them could understand. 'By the way, I forgive you,' Nick had leant over and whispered in her ear, and she'd whispered back, 'Excuse me, I forgive you', and a woman in front had turned around and hissed 'Shhh! Both of you!' like an angry schoolteacher and they'd got the giggles so badly they ended up having to leave the theatre, clambering past knees and getting into terrible trouble afterwards from Nick's sister.)

There was a breakfast where she'd grumpily read out possible baby names from a book while he'd grumpily said yes or no. That was nice, because they were definitely both only pretending to be grumpy that morning. 'I can't believe they let us *name* a person,' Nick had said. 'It feels like something only the King of the Land should be able to do.' 'Or the Queen of the Kingdom,' Alice said. 'Oh, they'd never let a *woman* name a person,' said Nick. 'Obviously.'

Did *that* happen this morning? No. That was . . . some time. Not this morning.

She had absolutely no idea what she'd eaten for breakfast this morning.

She confessed to George Clooney, 'I just said I had peanut butter on toast because that's my normal breakfast. I can't actually remember anything about breakfast at all.'

‘That’s OK, Alice,’ he answered. ‘I don’t think I can remember what I had for breakfast myself.’

Well, so much for ascertaining her mental state! Did George actually know what he was doing?

‘Maybe you’ve got concussion too,’ said Alice. George laughed dutifully. He seemed to be losing interest in her. Maybe he was hoping his next patient would be more interesting. He probably liked using those heart defibrillator thingummies. Alice would if she were a paramedic.

One Sunday, when Nick had a hangover and she was trying to convince him to go to the beach with her and he was lying on the couch with his eyes closed ignoring her, she said, ‘Oh, no, he’s flat-lining!’ and rubbed two spatulas together, before pressing them to his chest, yelling ‘Clear!’ Nick obligingly gave a realistic spasm right on cue. He still wouldn’t move, until she cried, ‘He’s not breathing! We’ve got to intubate him, *Now!*’ and tried to shove a straw down his throat.

The ambulance pulled up at a traffic light and Alice shifted slightly. Everything felt wrong about her body. There was an overwhelming tiredness deep in her bones, but at the same time a jittery, twitchy energy making her want to get up and achieve something. It must be the pregnancy. Everyone said your body didn’t feel like yours any more.

She lowered her chin to look again at the strange damp clothes she was wearing. They didn’t even look like something she’d choose. She never wore yellow, or singlet tops. The panicky feeling rose up again and she looked away and back up at the ambulance ceiling.

The thing was she couldn’t remember what she had for dinner last night either.

Nothing. It wasn’t even on the tip of her tongue.

Her tuna thing with the beans? Nick’s favourite lamb curry? She had no idea.

Of course, week days always tended to mulch together anyway. She would try and remember what she did last weekend.

A tangled jumble of memories from various weekends

poured into her head like an upturned laundry basket. Sitting on the grass in the park reading the paper. Picnics. Walking around garden centres arguing about plants. Working on the house. Always, always working on the house. Movies. Dinners. Coffee with Elisabeth. Sunday-morning sex, followed by sleep, followed by croissants from the Vietnamese bakery. Friends' birthdays. An occasional wedding. Trips away. Things with Nick's family.

Somehow she knew that none of them had happened last weekend. She couldn't tell when they'd happened. A short time ago or a long time ago. They'd just happened.

The problem was that she couldn't attach herself to a 'today' or a 'yesterday' or even a 'last week.' She was floating helplessly above the calendar like an escaped balloon.

An image came into her head of a grey cloudy sky filled with bunches of pink balloons tied together with white ribbon like bouquets. The balloon bouquets were being whipped ferociously about by an angry wind, and she felt a great wrench of sadness.

The feeling disappeared like a wave of nausea.

Goodness. What was *that* all about?

She longed for Nick. He would be able to fix everything. He would tell her exactly what they ate for dinner last night and what they did on the weekend.

Hopefully he would be waiting for her at the hospital. He might have already bought flowers for her. He probably had. She hoped he hadn't because it was far too extravagant.

Of course, really, she hoped he had. She'd been in an *ambulance*. She sort of deserved them.

Another image popped into her head. This time it was of an enormous arrangement of long-stemmed red roses and baby's breath in the crystal vase Nick's cousin had given them as a wedding present. Why was she imagining that? Nick never gave her roses. He knew she only liked them in the garden. Roses from the florist had no scent and for some reason they always made Alice think of serial killers.

The ambulance came to a stop and George leapt to his feet, ducking down so as not to bump his head.

‘We’re here, Alice. How are you feeling? You look like you’ve been thinking deeply profound thoughts.’

He pushed the lever to open the back door of the ambulance so that sunlight flooded in, making her blink.

‘I never asked your name,’ said Alice.

‘Kevin,’ answered George apologetically, as if he knew it would be a disappointment.

Elisabeth’s homework for Dr Hodges

The truth is that sometimes my work gives me a little rush, Dr Hodges, I’m embarrassed to admit it. Not a huge rush. But a definite shot of adrenaline. When the lights go dim and the audience goes quiet and it’s just me up there alone on the stage and Layla gives me her dead-serious ‘OK’ signal as if this is a NASA space launch we’re running. The spotlight like sunshine on my face, and all I can hear is the clinking of water glasses and maybe a respectfully restrained cough or two. I like that clean, crisp, no-nonsense smell of hotel function rooms and the chilly airconditioned air. It clears out my head. And when I speak the microphone smoothes out my voice, giving it authority.

But then again, other times, I walk onto the stage and I feel like there’s some weight pressing on the back of my neck, making my head droop and my back hunch, like an old crone. I want to put my mouth close to the microphone and say, ‘What is the point of all this, ladies and gentlemen? You all seem like nice enough people, so help me out and tell me, what is the point?’

Actually, I do know the point.

The point is they’re helping pay the mortgage. They’re each making a contribution to our groceries and our electricity and our water and our Visa. They’re all generously chipping in for the syringes and the shapeless hospital gowns and that last anaesthetist with the kind doggy eyes who held my hand and said,

‘Go to sleep now, darling.’ Anyway, I digress. You want me to digress. You want me to just write and write whatever comes to my mind. I wonder if you find me boring. You always look gently interested, but maybe you have days where I walk in the office looking all needy, bursting to tell you all the pathetic details of my life, and you long to put your elbows on your desk and your chin in your hands and say, ‘What is the point of all this Elisabeth?’ and then you remember that the point is I am paying for *your* Visa, mortgage, grocery bills . . . and so the world goes around.

You mentioned the other day that a feeling of pointlessness is a sign of depression, but you see, I don’t have depression because I do see the point. Money is the point.

After I hung up on Jane, the phone rang again immediately (presumably her, thinking we’d been cut off) and I turned it off mid-ring. A man walking by said, ‘Sometimes you wonder if we’d all be better off without these damned things!’ and I said, ‘Damned right!’ (I have never said ‘Damned right!’ in my life before; it just popped bizarrely into my head. I like it. I might say it at our next session and see if you blink) and he said, ‘Congratulations by the way. I’ve been to a lot of these sort of workshops before and I’ve never heard anyone speak such good sense.’

He was flirting with me. It happens sometimes. It must be the microphone and the bright lights. It’s funny because I always think it must be obvious to any man that all my sexuality has been sucked out of me. I feel like a piece of dried fruit. Yes, that’s it. I AM A DRIED APRICOT, Dr Hodges. Not one of those nice soft juicy ones, but a hard, shrivelled, tasteless dried apricot that hurts your jaw.

I took a few deep breaths of bracing airconditioned air and clipped the microphone back onto my jacket. I was in such a frenzy to get back on stage I was actually trembling. I feel like I may have become temporarily deranged for a while this afternoon, Dr Hodges. We can discuss this at our next session.

Or maybe temporary insanity is just an excuse for inexcusable behaviour. Maybe I’ll be too ashamed to tell you that

somebody called to say my only sister had been in an accident and I hung up on her. I package myself for you. I want to sound damaged, so you feel there is something useful for you to do, but at the same time I want you to think I'm a nice person, Dr Hodges. A nice damaged person.

I strode on to that stage like a rock star – and I started talking about 'visualising your prospect' and I was on fire. I had them laughing. I had them competing with each other to yell out answers to me, and the whole time we were visualising the prospect I was visualising the little sister.

I was thinking, head injuries can be pretty serious.

I was thinking, Nick is away, and this is not really Jane's responsibility.

And finally I thought: Alice was pregnant with Madison in 1998.