

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-18491-5 - Forget to Remember
Alan Maley
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *Remembering and forgetting*

Jan picked up the telephone and called her sister's number, but there was only an answerphone message: 'I'm sorry. There's no-one available to take your call. Please leave a message after the beep.'

Jan tried to make her message as calm as possible.

'Hello, Kate. This is Jan. I'm sorry, but you'll have to come down to Mother's. We've got to talk. I can't go on like this. It's becoming impossible. I know you're always busy, but you'll have to come. I can't manage with Mother any more. Please call me back at Mother's house as soon as you can.'

Her mother's voice called weakly from the next room.

'Who was that, dear?'

'No-one important. Don't worry, Mum.'

'Well, if I don't worry, who's going to worry? Someone has to do the worrying...'

'It's OK, Mum. Really.'

'Oh good. Did you have a nice time then?'

'Sorry?'

'Didn't you go on holiday somewhere?'

'Not me, Mum. That was Mrs Jenkins from next door.'

'Oh. Who are you then?'

'Mum. I'm Jan. I'm your daughter. Surely you can recognise me.'

'Oh yes. That's right. The trouble is, there's too much to remember. I can't remember everything, you know.'

'I know that, Mum. I know.'

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Jan sighed. It was late on Sunday afternoon. The room was already getting dark. On the table there was a bowl of rotting fruit – the bananas were black, the oranges brown. On the shelf above it stood her parents' wedding photograph in a silver frame. It was yellow with age. Next to it stood a framed photo of her sister Kate getting her degree from Oxford University. Then there were pictures of Jan's daughter, Cindy, and Kate's children, Jeremy and Caroline, when they were all on holiday together in Spain in happier times. There was a picture of Kate and her husband and children by the river, in the garden of their beautiful house in Marlow. There were pictures of herself and Kate as children. She picked up a picture of her father. He was carrying Kate on his shoulders. He looked so strong, so confident, so full of life.

There were no photos of Jan with her father. That was typical. He had always loved Kate more. She had been his favourite in everything. Jan remembered how he'd always treated her so badly and Kate so well. When Jan left school she'd had to go out to work, not go to university like Kate. But Kate had had the best of everything. Jan had always felt hurt by it. 'Why were families like this?' she wondered. Anyway, now her father had been dead for nearly four years.

As she put the photograph back, Jan noticed the thick dust on the shelf. She sighed again.

Outside the window a cold wind was blowing the petals off the spring flowers. It began to rain.

'Is my father still alive?' came the tired voice from the armchair.

'No, Mum. He died twenty years ago.'

'Oh, did he? What about my mum? Did she die too?'

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‘Yes, Mum. She died ten years ago. Don’t you remember?’

‘Are you sure? I thought she came round for a cup of tea last week.’

‘No, Mum. That was old Mrs Jenkins who lives next door.’

‘Oh, was it ...?’ Her voice died away as she slowly thought about this piece of confusing information.

She was silent for a while. Her hands lay still in her lap, except when she occasionally moved the newspaper she was holding. Her eyelids were heavy, her eyes almost closed. She began to breathe more loudly, a low bubbling sound coming from her throat. She was dribbling from the corner of her mouth and down her chin, like a baby. Jan tiptoed to the kitchen and put the kettle on for a cup of tea. When she returned, her mother was still fast asleep, her mouth loosely open. Her head had fallen to one side.

Suddenly, she woke up. Her eyes were wide open, but they were empty. They seemed to see nothing. Then they slowly focused again.

‘Oh hello,’ she said brightly. ‘Nice of you to visit me. Have you been here long?’

‘I’ve been here since yesterday, Mum. Don’t you remember?’

‘Oh, have you? Yes, perhaps you have. But you can’t expect me to remember every little thing, you know.’

She picked up the newspaper from her lap and looked at it, but without reading it.

‘Anyway, where’s my tea? I can’t do without my tea.’

‘I’ve already put the kettle on, Mum. It won’t be long.’

‘I should hope not. I can’t wait around for ever, can I? I’ve got work to do.’

‘I know, Mum. I know.’

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Jan went to the kitchen and prepared a tray with cups, milk and sugar. Then she made the tea, strong and dark the way her mother liked it. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

She swore softly under her breath. 'Why do you have to hang on to life like this? It's over for you. Why can't you just die like other people? God forgive me, but why don't you just let go, and die? I can't bear to see you suffering like this any more.'

She dried her eyes, took a deep breath and carried the tray in to her mother.

* * *

It was past eleven o'clock that night when the phone rang. Jan had already fed and bathed her mother and put her to bed. She felt tired, so tired. She picked up the phone.

'Hello?'

'Hello, Jan. It's Kate. I got your message. What's the problem?'

Jan took the phone into the kitchen and closed the door.

'The problem? What do you think the problem is? It's our mother, of course.'

'Why? Has something happened?'

'Something is happening all the time. Her mind is falling to pieces. Bits of her memory are falling into a big black hole.'

'But surely it's not that bad, is it? I mean, she seemed pretty lively to me when I came down to see her last month.'

'Yes, it is that bad. In fact, it gets worse every week, every day even ... I've had to see the doctor about her again, and he says she shouldn't be on her own. She can't look after herself. He says she needs twenty-four-hour care. It's all

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happening so fast. Ah, it's all very well for you. You come down here once a month, if that, spend a few hours with her and then rush off home again. You should try living round the corner from her like me.'

'Surely you're not suggesting that I should drop everything in Marlow and move down to Lewisham, are you?'

'Oh no! I wouldn't dream of it. Your life has to run like clockwork, doesn't it? Nothing must upset your routines – your law cases, and your children, and your holidays, and your husband, and your maid – it all has to be organised, doesn't it? You have so much to do ...'

'Don't be so unfair, Jan. I made my choices and you made yours. It's not my fault that you're stuck in Lewisham. You should have moved away when you had the chance, when Dad died. Maybe it would have saved your marriage too ...'

'Leave my marriage out of this. Mind your own business. My husband was a stupid idiot and he would have been a stupid idiot wherever we were.'

'OK, OK. Calm down. I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'All right. Sorry. I'm tired. I've been staying here with Mother all weekend. And I'm going to stay tonight as well.'

'Well, I'm tired too. We went mountain climbing in Wales over the weekend, and the drive back here was terrible. You know what the motorway traffic is like on a Sunday. It took us absolutely hours to get back home.'

'Look, Kate, we've got to meet. I can't talk to you properly over the phone. Can you get down here any day this week?'

'Not during the week, Jan. You know that. I have this big case coming up, and I may have to fly over to Paris to see some clients.'

'What about next weekend?'

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‘Well, I was planning to go up to Cambridge to see Jeremy for the weekend, but I suppose I could just go for the day on Saturday.’

‘Good. Can you come straight here from Cambridge on Saturday evening and stay the night?’

‘Sorry, Jan. I don’t think so. It would be too much of a rush. And we’ve got a dinner party with some of Hugh’s business partners on Sunday evening. It’s important. I have to be there. So I’ll come down in time for lunch at your place on Sunday, and drive back here in the evening.’

‘What about Hugh? Will he come with you?’

‘Erm ...’ There was a long pause. ‘I ... doubt it. You know how he loves his golf.’

‘All right then. Let’s leave it like that – you’ll come down next Sunday. But please come prepared to listen to me. We can’t just go on arguing all the time.’

‘Quite. All right, big sister. Sleep well.’

‘You too. Goodnight.’

Jan went back into the lounge. She needed a drink. She searched through her mother’s drinks cupboard and found a half-empty bottle of Napoleon brandy. In fact, it looked as if it had been there since the time of Napoleon! She poured herself a glass, drank it down and went up to bed.