

COME AGAIN

ROBERT
WEBB



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1

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For Mum

Awake, dear heart, awake! thou hast slept well;
Awake!

Prospero, from *The Tempest*

Part One

COME UNDONE

Chapter 1

She woke with her mouth forming a single word. ‘You.’ This was how they always ended, her dreams of Luke. The details varied but they would always be alone together in his room back in college. Two people still in their teens, asking their first questions, sharing their first jokes. Kate noticed the freckle on a knee showing through his ripped jeans; his ready smile; the way he tilted his head when he listened. The twenty-eight-year conversation was a few hours old – the first night of their first week. This was the beginning.

She sat in the little armchair in the corner of his student room, Kurt Cobain watching her with an intelligent smirk from the Nirvana poster on the wall opposite. Below Kurt, sitting on his bed and leaning against the wall, was Luke – similarly slim but darker, unbleached, and with a face that had seen less trouble. He was jiggling his foot off the edge of the bed. Kate had just given him something to jiggle about.

‘I mean, I wouldn’t have to take *all* my clothes off, right?’

Kate adjusted the A4 pad on her lap and carried on sharpening her pencil. ‘No, of course not. Just slip your shirt off if you like. The trouble is, I’m not good enough to draw clothes. That pyjama top would present quite a challenge.’ She looked up from the pencil and met his mock-insulted gaze.

‘It’s not a pyjama top,’ he said, slightly pouting, ‘it’s a grandad shirt.’

‘Ah yes, of course,’ Kate smiled, ‘the blue and grey stripey cotton thing with four open buttons at the top that definitely doesn’t look like you’re wearing pyjamas.’

Luke pinched the top of the shirt to one side and frowned at it. ‘Yes, it’s possible,’ he nodded like a barrister. ‘It’s possible that there’s a resemblance with—’ Abruptly, he glanced up at her. ‘Hang on, where did you get that pencil sharpener from? This is my room, isn’t it?’

Kate stopped turning the pencil and took a breath.

No, not yet. Let’s not wake up yet.

The intrusion of logic threatened to end the dream too soon – she felt the beginning of a rise towards consciousness but resisted it by talking. She wanted to stay right here, in this room, in this moment. She wanted to stay here forever.

‘Oh, it’s my pencil sharpener. I carry it around everywhere in case I run into a boy I want to seduce.’

Luke stopped jiggling his foot. ‘I’m being seduced, am I?’

‘Certainly. Why do you think I told you to strip? You don’t think I can actually draw, do you?’

Luke looked around his room with a mixture of surprise and excitement. ‘To be honest, yes I did think you would at least make a token effort.’

Kate put the drawing materials to one side and moved over to sit beside him on the bed. ‘And what was going to happen after I’d made a token effort?’ She ran a hand slowly over the shoulder of his shirt, her fingers tracing the v-shape of the top buttons down to where they met the sprinkling of chest hair. She knew this body like no other: nineteen-year-old Luke, Luke in his twenties, Luke in his thirties . . . and then, halfway through his forties . . .

He gave her the quizzical smile that always signalled the end of the dream. He said, ‘What’s the matter?’

She searched his face helplessly. ‘You died.’

He took her hand and gently said, ‘I know, my love. I know. But you have to wake up.’

‘Can’t. Don’t want to. Can’t.’

‘You can, sweetheart. Rise.’

‘Go to the doctor! You’re still young! The tumour’s tiny now, they can take it out, you can—’

‘Kate, my love,’ he said, ‘it’s too late.’

Luke looked down at their hands. She followed his gaze: down to their wedding rings and then back up into the eyes of her middle-aged husband. He said, ‘You’re going to be all right, Kate. Come on – you know things. You’re the Girl from the Future.’

She gently took her hand away and whispered, ‘I’m not going to be anything like all right.’

‘Get some help.’

‘No,’ she said with certainty. ‘No one can help me. And I’ve had enough of the future.’

His shirt was clutched in her fists.

‘You,’ she breathed.

Kate brought it up to her face but of course it had lost his smell long ago. Now it was tie-dyed with mascara and crinkled with dried snot.

Needs a wash. Can’t be bothered. Maybe tomorrow. No, not tomorrow. Today’s the day.

Memory stick. Where is it? Keys downstairs.

Wonder who’ll find me? Maybe the mice I hear at night. Don’t go for the liver, guys. You’ll get smashed out of your tiny minds on the liver. I wouldn’t want you to start making bad choices.

Kate slowly bundled the shirt under her pillow and began to think about the effort it would take to get out of bed. Too numb for tears now and long past words – the only

person she wanted to discuss Luke's death with was Luke. She gazed at the window opposite, through the curtains she hadn't drawn – a single cloud in the blue March sky. A puffy cumulus, like a freeze-framed explosion.

Sometimes, over these last nine months, she would manage to get back to sleep. She would sleep until she gave herself a headache. This morning, for better or worse, she already had a headache from last night's Pinot binge. In these first few seconds of consciousness the fingertips of a monster hangover were beginning to find a grip around her brain. She would have to get up. A more organised widow bent on self-destruction would surely keep some ibuprofen nearby.

'Rise', he says. Easy for you to say, Lukey.

Kate sat up and stared at her battered and reddened hands against the white duvet as they closed into fists.

She dared herself not to look over to the empty side of the bed. Maybe if she just avoided the standing insult of his absence and just got on with her day then by the time she got back from the bathroom he would be there, sleeping safely. She looked over anyway. Just the normal tally of beer and wine bottles.

The bed clinked as her feet found the floor.

Socks.

At least she'd taken her shoes off.

'Best foot forward, Katie.'

It was something her dad used to say. Onwards then, downstairs in search of Nurofen. The headache was the one pain that she could do something about.

Memory stick. Must make sure the memory stick is safe. No, need a piss first. God, this day is relentless.

She grimaced at the bathroom mirror. At least she didn't have to see herself undressed this morning because she was

still wearing the clothes she had passed out in. Baggy jeans, black long-sleeved top covered by a black loose-knit jumper, faded with time. She entertained the vague memory of what this five-foot-three body used to be capable of – this winner of medals and trophies. She saw her dark eyebrows raised at the thought, neither proud nor bitter. Sport belonged to a different lifetime.

What they don't tell you at Widow School, she had come to understand, was the way you age. You meet and fall in love with someone when you're eighteen, and the two of you are still together when you're one day older, and then another day older . . . until all the days of twenty-eight years have gone by. So there's a part of you that sees yourself through their eyes – a part of you that is still eighteen. And when they die, when that connection is lost, you start to see what other people see instead. Kate gazed at this middle-aged woman, almost a stranger. A cruel sort of time-travel but in her mind it seemed just. Luke was gone and he had taken her innocence with him. Fair enough. What did Kate Marsden need of innocence?

She inspected the diaspora of the make-up that she applied five days ago. Why the hell was she wearing make-up, anyway? She remembered with a shudder. Her mother had made one of her regal visits and Kate thought she ought to make some kind of effort. The eyeliner had spread south, as if to find a new life away from the war zone. Her hair was a tangle of neglect. With attention, it could be coaxed into a wavy stream of dark brown, falling just short of her shoulders. Now it sat defiantly on the top of her head like a mad hat. She thought of looking for a hairbrush but the idea nearly sent her back to bed.

No, check the memory stick. In the kitchen. Oh yeah, that piss.

It was a three-bedroom terraced house in Clapham. Too

big for a couple with no children but reasonable given Kate's age and salary. Or her former salary. She had been fired yesterday afternoon.

'Charles,' she said as she sat on the loo. Tentatively she encouraged her colon.

Come on then, Charles.

She waited for the usual all-or-nothing verdict: the shitquake or the turdfast. Nothing, then. What was this – day four? It was hardly surprising. It wasn't like she had eaten anything. She was about to haul up her knickers and jeans but decided they were such a disgrace that she just took them off and left them on the floor. There was no point putting them in a laundry basket since the distinction between 'special places for dirty clothes' and 'the rest of the house' had evaporated. The effort of reaching down to get the fabric past her heels almost made her throw up so she stood and leaned on the sink to get her breath back.

She washed her hands with what was left of the coal-tar soap she had found in the bathroom cabinet a few days after the funeral. Not a favourite of hers but Luke had used it occasionally when the nights drew in and he got a flare-up of eczema. The thin bar reluctantly foamed. She spent a long time rinsing under the cold tap, mesmerised by the splashing water. 'Who asked you to dance, then?' she asked with a tenderness that surprised her. She looked up to find the scary-looking woman again. Her cobalt eyes still flickered with life, having somehow missed the memo that everything else was closing down. She kept her own eye-contact as she found the tap and strangled the flow. From this angle she looked fully dressed but she didn't care anyway: she snorted a mirthless laugh at the idea that personal modesty could ever be an issue in a house as implacably empty as this. The jumper came down past her hips and she expected no company.

Kate took back Luke's soap gently in one hand and gripped the edge of the sink with the other. She closed her eyes and recalled yesterday's confrontation with Charles. Well, what had she expected? The guy was a criminal. In his office, she had managed to conjure a version of her old self: the bold and self-possessed person she was before the sky fell in. A tribute act which had taken a heavy toll on what was left of her energy. Today she felt like Yoda, agedly picking up his walking stick after ten minutes of leaping around and twizzling his lightsaber like a demented frog.

She had expected a fight. She hadn't expected threats of terrible vengeance.

Kate met her own eyes again, refusing to blink.

Charles – the attendant lord to the Russian gangster. And how did he begin?

'Thanks for coming to see me, Kate, and may I say for the record that I'm sorry about Luke et cetera.'