

ACCESS POINT

Some Memories Never Die



A NOVEL

BY

T R G A B B A Y

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A C C E S S
P O I N T

T R G a b b a y

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For My Other Half...

When we look into the night sky and see a star that ceased to exist many millions of years ago, we are looking into the past.

Some memories never die.

Prologue.

“Are you ready?”

The subject took a deep breath and nodded. Ula could sense his anxiety, but the man's emotional state was of no interest to her. In fact, it was a bit annoying.

"You need to empty your mind of all extraneous thoughts," she said, placing the E.I.R. onto his head. Fashioned out of an old bicycle helmet, the unit held eighteen transmitters in key locations within the padding, each one connected to a colour-coded wire, all of which came together in a cable that led to the mainframe computer. Not unlike the connection between a laptop and a printer, except that in this case, the printer would be a human brain.

The man reached down to stroke the guide dog that sat patiently at his side. An unwelcome distraction, Ula instructed him to keep his hands folded together in his lap.

"I'm sorry," the man apologised. "I'm a bit nervous."

It wasn't a question so Ula didn't bother with a reply. Taking her place at the station, she opened the programme and brought the four GIFs she'd created to the front of the screen. Simple animations drawn in crisp, white lines on an empty black background, there was a hummingbird, a kite, a galloping horse, and a boy on a bicycle. Easy to code and, if the trial was successful, easy to recognise and describe.

"I'm going to begin now," she said after running a final systems check. "Please lean your head back onto the pillow and imagine that you're lying in a field of grass, staring upwards into a deep, dark void. Focus on it and nothing else, but don't try too

hard. Let it come to you. The first image will be generated in three... two... one..."

The man drew a shaky breath and held it, his pulse rising as his heart beat wildly in anticipation.

"A positive result is more likely if you relax," Ula said. "Please breathe normally."

He exhaled and tried to focus on the dark world that enveloped him, searching for something, anything, but finding only the uninterrupted emptiness that he'd lived with for three of his six decades. His hopes were starting to fade when a sudden streak of soft white light broke through the veil. But like a silent flash of faraway lightning, it was gone as quickly as it appeared.

Ula made a note of involuntary movement in the subject's ocular region. "Please tell me if you experience anything unusual," she said.

"I... I don't know." The man furrowed his brow. "I can't be sure... I thought I might have, but..."

"Describe what you thought you saw."

"I'm not sure if it was real." His face became contorted and his head moved reflexively from side to side, as if searching for the phantom light. "I... I can't be certain."

"Please describe it," Ula persisted.

"It was a light... very faint, like a flash... or a pulse."

"Do you still see it?" A camera was recording the session, but Ula made notes anyway. It helped her to think.

"No, it's... It's gone now. Perhaps I -- " He froze in mid-sentence. "Oh god..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Yes, I... I see it now, but it's..."

Ula leaned forward. "What do you see?"

A wave of emotion engulfed the man, rendering him speechless. He choked on his words and started to tear up.

"Please describe what you're experiencing," Ula said, her voice rising with frustration. But the man was lost, unresponsive. She had no choice but to end the test and remove the E.I.R. from his head.

"It's very important that you tell me exactly what you saw," she said sternly. "Please describe it to me in detail."

"It was a... a bird," he was finally able to say. "Rather, a rendering of a bird. A hummingbird..." He needed to draw a breath before he could continue. "It was hovering... out there in the darkness, and I... It seemed so real... I felt I could have reached out and touched it."

He broke down and started to cry uncontrollably, upsetting his animal and making it impossible to continue. Ula had no choice but to dismiss the subject with instructions to return the following day.

After completing her notes, she locked the office and headed for the institute's empty back stairway, preferring the eight flight walk to the lift, where she would undoubtedly be forced to share the tiny space with a bunch of strangers. The experience could traumatise her for hours, sometimes for days.

Exiting into the courtyard, where her bicycle was locked to the black iron railings at the side of the building, she tried to analyse her state of mind. Something like nine years had passed since she'd written that first line of code. A quarter of her life spent gathering data, writing, testing, failing, then gathering more data, re-writing, and testing again. She'd been caught in a vicious cycle, feeling that she was getting closer with each revolution, but never quite getting there. Until now.

Why then did she feel so empty inside?

Something had changed -- something unsettling -- but she couldn't put her finger on what exactly was troubling her. In all the time she'd spent pursuing success, she'd never quite considered the consequences of achieving it.

A light rain was starting to fall as she pulled into rush hour traffic on Old Street, heading west. My god, she thought, allowing herself a private little smile. She had literally made a blind man see! Not quite a miracle, but the world would look at it that way. And there lay the problem. Once her achievement became public knowledge, everything would change. The anonymity she enjoyed within the organisation was about to come to an abrupt and very unwelcome end. They'd left her alone for ten years, but they'd all want to be part of it now.

Shifting into high gear, she pulled out of the bicycle lane and manoeuvred around a slow-moving lorry. The rain was coming down hard now and the roads were building up to the usual late afternoon gridlock. Ula kept moving, weaving in and out of traffic as she entered the Old Street roundabout, then accelerating onto City Road, heading toward Angel. When somebody honked, she turned around to give them the finger.

And that was it. She never saw the bus that left her broken and bleeding on the cold, wet concrete.

1.

In spite of living in London for a year and a month, Mia Fraser hadn't seen much of the city outside the West End and East Putney, where she'd been sharing a two bedroom flat with three other girls. Still, something about Highbury Fields was eerily familiar. The children's playground, the local pub, even the sunbathers, scattered across the green under a clear blue September sky. It all struck a chord.

Shrugging it off as an effect of too much Saturday night partying, Mia re-checked the text to confirm that she had the right address. Can't be, she thought. Too good to be true. The imposing three-story brick townhouse was not only a five-minute walk from the Victoria Line, and ten minutes to trendy Upper Street, it also sat at the exact centre of the crescent, overlooking the wide open spaces of the park. Steeling herself for disappointment, she climbed the steps to the front entrance and rang the doorbell.

"Hi!" She flashed her most charming smile when the door opened a crack. "I'm Mia."

The woman stared out at her, perplexed.

"We texted this morning... About the room?"

"Oh... The room."

Caught in the direct sunlight, the woman looked pale and drawn, older than her thirty-eight years. She had short-cropped dark hair, which she clearly cut herself, and a tall, angular frame that was hidden under a loose-fitting jumper and baggy tracksuit bottoms. She gripped a walking stick in her right hand.

"Is it still available?" Mia asked.

The woman nodded. "Yes. It's available."

"Great! I mean, I thought somebody would've snapped it up by now. It's such an amazing location!"

The woman hesitated, as if unsure how to respond, then asked, "Do you want to see it?"

"Yes, absolutely! I mean, if it's a convenient time."

She was beckoned through the door, into a dark entrance hall with an elaborately painted tile floor. The woman gestured toward a wide wooden staircase.

"It's up there," she said.

Mia was someone who couldn't stop talking when she was nervous or excited and, at the moment, she was both. "I'm American," she explained as the woman led the way to the first floor landing, supporting her weight on the cane as she painstakingly pulled herself up, step by step. "But you probably figured that out. I grew up in Franklin, Tennessee, which is pretty close to Nashville, but I've been in London for a year now, in a flat share. We just heard the landlord's selling the building so we have to get out by the end of next week, which is pretty inconvenient because that's when college starts. I'm doing a degree in Fine Arts at Central Saint Martin's. Painting. This'll be my second year. Did I say my name is Mia?"

"Yes, you did."

"Right. I thought I did but I wasn't sure. What's yours?"

"Ula." She glanced back but didn't quite look Mia in the eye.

"It's a great house," Mia said, soaking it up. "Loads of character. I love all the art."

"This is it." Ula opened the first door on the right as they stepped off the landing. "It's quite small."

Furnished with a single bed, a wardrobe, a chair, and a set of drawers, it wasn't at all small compared to what Mia was used to. There was even a window with a view across the park.

"It's perfect!" she said. "I don't have much stuff. Just a couple of suitcases and my drawing board. I'd be at school most of the day and I don't play loud music. In fact, I'm really quiet. You wouldn't even know I'm here!"

Ula pointed down the hall. "There's a separate bathroom for this room. I have my own."

"I love it. I mean I *really* love it!" Mia wondered how it could still be available. Eighty pounds a week in a location like this? It was like hitting the jackpot. "Have you had a lot of people look at it?" she asked.

"Just you."

"Really?"

Ula frowned. "Why would I lie?"

"No, I just meant... I thought you'd get dozens of people from your ad."

"Oh. I don't know. My phone's been off most of the day."

"Yeah? Well, lucky me!" Mia displayed her charming smile again. "For a change!"

"It used to be my room," Ula said. "Before my mother died."

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

Ula met Mia's eyes for the first time. "It was a long time ago," she said.

"Oh, well... I'm still sorry."

Ula seemed at a loss for what to say next, so Mia kept talking. "Do you want me to fill out an application? Or I can give you a deposit... Unless you want references first?"

"No," Ula looked away and shook her head. "You seem fine."

"Really? Oh my god, that's great! And I promise you won't regret it. I'll be the perfect housemate!"

2.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Mia hadn't given her best friend, Kat, any details about the new accommodation, so when they pulled up in front of the house on Highbury Crescent, she was appropriately blown away.

"You're actually going to live here?"

"Not bad, huh?"

"Jesus, it's a goddamned mansion! On the freaking park!"

"There's a view from my room."

"For eighty quid a week?"

"Yep."

"Okay, you're lying to me, right? You've got some rich sugar daddy tucked away back in America who's doling out to save you from the slums of East Putney. That's it, isn't it?"

"Nope," Mia gloated. "Poor as dirt, but lucky. For a change."

Kat's beat-up old Mini had just barely been able to fit Mia's two cases, a box of art books, her portfolio, and her drawing board, and then only when she put the top down. With no other options anywhere near the house, Kat pulled into a "Residents Only" parking bay.

"Let's live dangerously," she laughed.

Mia hesitated before slipping the key into the door. "You think I should ring first?"

"Did you pay yet?"

"A month in advance."

"Then go ahead. You officially live here."

The house was eerily still and quiet, the only illumination a single ray of sunlight that cut through the air from somewhere above, revealing a river of tiny particles floating on the otherwise invisible current. The girls looked at each other, both suddenly feeling like intruders.

"Hello...?" Mia called out softly, then a bit louder. "Anybody home?"

"Maybe she's gone out." Kat opened the door to the drawing room and peeked inside. "Look at this," she said, taking in the dusty old furnishings and heavy velvet drapes pulled tight over the bay windows. "It's like a museum in here."

"Maybe we should come back later." Mia grabbed her friend's arm and pulled her out of the room. "I don't feel right snooping around."

"There's no way I can come back later, Mia. I've got shit to do. And you're not snooping around, you're exploring your new house. Anyway, it's perfect. We can get your stuff in without her watching over us. Come on." She headed back out the door. "Before she gets back."

The drawing board was the most awkward item to move, so they left it for last. Correctly judging herself to be the stronger of the two, Kat took the bottom end, supporting the heavy piece up the stairs while the more delicate Mia navigated the steps.

"Christ, what is this thing made of?" Kat groaned. "It's fucking heavy!"

"Wanna rest?"

"No, don't stop! We'll never get there if we lose momentum!"

"Be careful of the walls."

Kat grimaced. "You know I love you, sweetie, but if you say that again I'm gonna have to seriously mess you up."

They managed to safely manoeuvre the piece onto the landing and through the doorway, into Mia's room, without causing any damage. "Where do you want it?" Kat asked.

"Well, the light's good by the window and it'd be cool to have a view of the park while I work. But maybe there's more space by the door. What do you think?"

"I honestly don't give a shit, babe, but once I put it down I'm not picking it up again."

"Okay, by the window."

"Right..."

Kat looked up and gasped. Dropping her end of the table, it hit the wooden floor with a loud *BANG!* Mia spun around and found Ula standing in the doorway.

"Ula! ... Hi!... I... I didn't see you there!"

Ula didn't reply.

"I'm, ah... We're moving in," Mia stuttered. "But I guess you can see that. Oh... This is my friend, Kat. She's helping me out."

Kat gave her a smile and a little wave. Ula nodded back, but just barely.

"We're almost done," Mia said, doing her best to recover. "This is the last thing."

Ula stayed focused on Kat for a beat too long, then turned back to Mia. "You left the front door open," she said stonily.

"Oh, my god, did we? I'm so sorry!"

Ula held her hand out and displayed a key. "And you left this in it."

"Oh, Ula, I'm really, really sorry." She stepped forward and sheepishly retrieved the key. "It won't happen again, I promise."

Ula nodded, stole a last glance at Kat, then walked off toward the back of the house.

There was, of course, a parking ticket attached to the Mini's windscreen. "Bastards," Kat moaned.

Mia reached for it. "I'll pay it."

"Forget it." Kat grabbed the ticket, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it into the back seat. "The car's registered to my dead uncle in Liverpool."

"Really?"

Kat shrugged. "My dad's idea. He said the car would give up the ghost before they could figure out that Uncle George already had."

"Your dad sounds interesting."

"That's one way to put it."

"Anyway," Mia gave her friend a hug. "I owe you one."

"And don't think I'm gonna let you forget it."

It was starting to rain so they raised the top, then Kat slipped in behind the wheel. Mia leaned onto the window.

"I'm sorry we won't be flatmates any more," she said.

"Yeah, me too."

"But we'll still see each other, right? You can come down on weekends for a sleepover."

Kat frowned. "I'm not sure that's gonna work."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you see the look she gave me?"

"She was just annoyed about the key."

"I don't know." Kat looked toward the house, then back at Mia. "She's a bit on the weird side."

"You don't know anything about her."

"Neither do you."

Mia put on a playful scowl. "You're the one who's weird!"

"Of course I am." She keyed the engine and put the car in gear. "That's why you love me."

"That's actually true."

"Are you gonna be all right?"

"Of course! I'll make friends with her."

Kat gave her a look. "Good luck with that."

Mia stepped back onto the pavement and waved as the car pulled away. "Call me!" she said, but the car was already half-way down the block.

As the Mini disappeared, Mia stood there a moment, taking in her new surroundings. There was nothing out of the ordinary - a van parked on the kerb while the driver made a delivery; a young mother pushing a stroller; a couple of dogs chasing each other across the open field. Everything in its place, where it should be. Still. Something didn't feel right. Something felt very much out of place.

Laughing at her own foolishness, she took a deep breath and headed back into the house.