

For Dolf, James and Ally

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The Truth About Lies

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1

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A liar ought to have a good memory.

English proverb

They make me go to counselling. It's been a month already but I still have to waste my afternoon with Dr Harrison at Mandela Lodge. The guy's an idiot. Maybe these sessions would be worthwhile if Dr Harrison was any good at his job, or if I was actually upset about Hanna dying, but he's not, and I'm not. But we pass the time both pretending to be otherwise.

"If only Hanna had told me how bad she was feeling," I say. "I could've helped." I dab my eyes with a tissue from the box placed carefully on the edge of my armchair. It's for the weeping mob hanging round his

office. Girls like Maya and Keira who are enjoying the drama of it all. “I knew she was upset about breaking up with Ed, but I never thought...” I trail off, leaving a dramatic pause.

Dr Harrison reaches out and pats my hand. “None of us did. None of us saw the signs.”

He’s the one with the framed certificates in psychology and counselling on the wall so maybe *he* should have spotted something. After all, Hanna used to see him because of all her ‘body issues’. Hanna – the most beautiful girl you’ve ever seen. But I let it go.

“I suppose you never really know what’s going on inside someone else’s head,” I add, blowing my nose and seeing that the irony’s completely lost on Dr Harrison as he nods sadly and passes me another tissue.

“You’re not to blame yourself, Jess,” he says. “You were a good friend and roommate to her.”

I don’t blame myself.

I blame Hanna.

You see, Hanna set this off. She started going out with Ed. Not because she’d found her soulmate, not because she couldn’t live without him, but because she knew how much I liked him – and that I’d never dare to act on it. It was just another game for her. And because she

was always able to click her fingers and have any student here panting after her, she took him. Just like that.

I saw them together in the lunch queue, leaning in towards each other, whispering, a touch on the arm, and I knew. It was exactly 12.55 p.m. on June 14th last term. A pleasant twenty-two degrees and sunny outside. We'd done maths that morning, pages 72 to 78 of the textbook, mine had a coffee stain on page 76. Hanna wore pink Converse pumps, a cute flowery dress and... I could go on and list every last detail in the dining hall and describe every single person who was there that Tuesday but it would take too long. You'd get bored. Jesus, I'd get bored.

So back to the late departed Hanna Carlsen. I pretended it didn't matter – the rubbing my nose in it. I forced a winning smile. I whispered to her later that they were so perfect together, made for each other. And she flicked her white-blond hair and fiddled with her friendship bracelets. But I stored it up. It can be hard for me to move on – to not bear a grudge.

I force myself to refocus on Dr Harrison. He's now suggesting a tablet if I'm having trouble sleeping. I take a special interest in pharmacology and physics these days. I test myself for fun to pass the time while Dr Harrison polishes his glasses and drones on about

post-traumatic stress disorder.

Question 1 (5 marks)

List the primary symptoms of a combination of alcohol, caffeine, appetite suppressants and low self-esteem.

Answer

Weight loss, blurred vision, tachycardia, nausea, confusion. (Open windows on the third floor to be avoided.)

Question 2 (5 marks)

How long would it take a teenage girl weighing seven stone to hit the ground when falling from a third-floor window?

Answer

No time at all. Even a skinny girl like Hanna makes a hell of a mess on impact.

*

I never thought the whole Hanna situation would end like that. She didn't have to get so obsessed with how she looked, so thin-skinned about any criticism. But one thing leads to another. One lie rolls on to more. Unintended consequences. And life is full of those.

Now Dr Harrison's fiddling with his bushy eyebrows and doing that annoying tongue-clicking again. He

uses it to fill the silences in our sessions. But this time he's the first to crack and speak again: "It's tragic when young life full of promise is ripped away." He speaks like a packet of fortune cookies. "Bereavement casts a shadow that's slow to fade." And another one. "But time can heal." Boom. A hat trick of clichés. He should go into the greeting-card business or cheesy calendars. Maybe he is already and that's where he gets all these platitudes. They're meaningless.

Doesn't he realize he's meant to listen as a counsellor, not dish out his opinions? But I can't be bothered to explain this to him. I don't want to shake his world order. He looks attached to his dingy study in this college in the middle of nowhere and his life with his mousy wife. She smiles out shyly from the photo on his desk. He's moved it from the middle shelf since our last encounter.

"You can contact me at any time, Jess. Not just within these sessions." He takes a card from the drawer and pulls an old-fashioned fountain pen from his shirt pocket. His nib scratches in the awkward silence. "But let's meet again at five on Thursday. I've written it down so you don't forget."

"Thank you," I say, lip quivering as I carefully cup the card between my hands. "And thank you for listening."

I'm adorable. He loves this sort of rubbish. I swear his eyes are filling up as I close the door behind me.

I rip his stupid appointment card into tiny squares and let them flutter away on the breeze in the courtyard.

I don't need a piece of paper to remember anything.

2

Hyperthymesia – *hyper* (Anc. Gk: *excessive*) + *thymesia*
(Anc. Gk: *memory*)

Every generation has its flashbulb moments. Events that are so major you always remember exactly where you were and what you were doing. Like when the planes hit the Twin Towers or a terrorist bomb ripped apart a Tube train. They're ingrained in your head. Flash-click. But can you remember where you were a week last Monday? A month ago? A year? Can you recall details about an ordinary day?

I can. For me, every waking moment is a flashbulb moment. I recall everything from the age of eleven like a never-ending motion picture. The interesting

and the boring, the good and the bad. But especially the bad. I hold on to every cruel word, every act of unkindness, every act of betrayal. I have major baggage. Now imagine what that could do to a person. Your brain would explode, right? Or you might end up a bit like me.

Professor Coleman helped me to manage it, once upon a time, showed me how to file things away. She's a professor of cognitive neuroscience and I was her amazing guinea pig. So this is how I've learned to cope: I imagine the inside of my head is a vast library; a beautiful one with galleries and mezzanines and sliding ladders, flooded with daylight and with free vending machines. Everything I'd like an actual library to be. Why not? I have to carry it around with me *all* the time. The bookshelves are lined with all the books and journals I've ever read, courtesy of my photographic memory.

I can take down a virtual book, open it up and check what I read. All this I do in a millisecond. I'm a walking Wikipedia without the need for Wi-Fi.

But the biggest area in my mind-library is the 'Autobiography' section, thanks to my hyperthymesia. And this is where I'm truly unique. Here I have whole rooms labelled by year. Everything is filed, every

single day has its own book – the date written neatly on the spine.

Say I want to know what I was wearing on January 18th 2015 (a Sunday, terrible weather). I go to the library in my head, make my way to the oak-panelled room for 2015, select the shelf for January, take down the book for January 18th and open it. All in my brain. And then I see it: a complete record of the day I can fast-forward or rewind: jeans, blue sweatshirt (nothing special).

I've made it sound controlled. It isn't. It can be hard to keep the memories filed tidily on the shelves. They fight for my attention, flooding me with a crazy rush of emotion. And if one gets loose, it brings more cascading down with it. All those minutes, hours, days of my life, jostling to be replayed.

On the way back from Mandela Lodge, I stop at the makeshift shrine in the courtyard to straighten a teddy bear. It's fallen over in the autumn breeze and is in danger of burning on the tea lights. We don't want another tragedy. The toy's rank but no one dares to throw any of this rubbish in the bin yet. Hanna was seventeen not seven.

'Heaven has a new angel' is on the latest bunch of flowers, still with a price sticker from the local garage

shop. *So* classy. They've been doing a roaring trade in candles and cheap bouquets wrapped in plastic. People who didn't even know Hanna are wallowing in tribute Facebook pages and mock-religious rituals. The college is planning a sponsored hike across Dartmoor, working in teams 'like Hanna would have wanted'. Would she? Really?

The Principal must be wetting herself in fear that more worried parents will pull their kids out of the school. Five have gone already, including Ed. Not much fun being the ex-boyfriend of the girl who died. People stared and whispered. *I* stared and whispered. Accidental death or suicide, whichever one it was, isn't good for business for boarding schools. Dartmeet College is full of international kids and misfit British ones whose parents dump them here. Some choose the college because of its 'holistic, caring, international' mission statement. It claims to be educating the future leaders of aid organizations and global businesses and promoting world peace, blah, blah. I'm not sure how well that's panning out, but the old buildings certainly hook rich oligarchs looking for a Hogwarts experience for their little darlings. Although it turns out nobody appreciates *actual* death and drama.

I chose Dartmeet because it's remote and a long

way from my old life. And my mum liked the glossy brochure once upon a time.

I light the candles that have blown out and spot a new envelope addressed to Hanna. This one takes my attention for being edged in black ink like a Victorian mourning announcement. She won't be reading it herself so I may as well have it.

"Hi. Jess, isn't it?" The new guy Dan's standing there looking uncomfortable, his hands pushed deep into the pockets of his jeans. He looks even taller than his six foot two from my crouched position. "I wanted to tell you I'm really sorry about your friend," he says. He flicks his floppy gingery hair out of his eyes, and it falls right back again.

I shove the card quickly into my bag. He holds out a hand to help me up. He's strong but he doesn't look like a meathead – not like the rugby players. "You picked a bad time to join Dartmeet," I say.

He shrugs. "Circumstances. This is ... nice." He points unconvincingly at the shrine.

"It's OK, you don't have to pretend. I know it's lame."

"If it helps, that's good," he says.

"Hanna would've liked it. She was into this sort of thing," I say. "She looked blond and pink but she could be quite dramatic. Gothic even." I smile. He smiles.

“Gothic?”

“She loved Halloween,” I find myself saying, “and vampire movies.” I’m just making stuff up.

He looks embarrassed, like he’s run out of death small talk. “I was going to the Common Room to get a decent coffee. Want to come?”

He doesn’t know yet that I’m not good company. I dislike all the chatter clogging up my head for evermore. The inconsequentiality of most conversations here is unbelievable. And if someone says something that irritates me, I’m stuck with it whirring around and around until I can subdue it in my mind-library, shove it on a shelf and lock the room.

So I was going to say no, be my usual self, but something about him makes me want to say yes for a change. And wouldn’t that be the normal thing to do? I aim to come across as normal from time to time. Especially as I’m lacking in the pretend friends department after Hanna leaving me. Maya and Keira have taken me under their wing to demonstrate their compassion for the dead girl’s roommate but it’s not a comfortable place to be. My brain cells are slowly dying, for one thing. So I smile at Dan and say, “Sure,” like a typical seventeen-year-old.

*

We take our coffees to a table out on the decking. In winter there are heat lamps and blankets but right now there's still just about enough warmth in the sun to sit outside. There's a good view of the well-kept gardens and the untamed moor beyond, with a distant silhouette of the tors that pass for hills in Devon.

Dan chats on about his room, makes me laugh about his roommate's rules on the storage of their footwear, tells me he had a nasty virus that kept him off school till now and how he's playing catch-up in his classes. He's easy to be around and I relax into the chair and sip slowly at my drink.

"Are you doing the vigil for Hanna tonight?" he asks.

"It might be too upsetting," I say. I fiddle with the ends of my hair, twirling my finger around and around. Why can't everyone move on? It's been four whole weeks already. Hanna's parents flew her body back to Denmark for a burial there. But the grief brigade felt cheated and so we had an interminable memorial service and now this 'vigil' in the chapel.

"These rituals are to help the living," he says. "My dad's a vicar so I've seen a lot of them. But if it makes matters worse for you, don't do it."

He makes it sound so easy.

“You’re better than Dr Harrison,” I say. “He’s way out of his depth with all this.”

“I can drone on for hours if nobody stops me but I’ll shut up now. No one likes an armchair shrink.” He smiles at me over his coffee cup and I notice the tiny freckles on his nose. “I want to study psychology at uni.”

“That makes a change from the world-peace wannabes in this place who are all off to do sustainable development or geopolitical science,” I say. “You can usually find them in the yoga yurt. Though I guess you’ll be bringing peace, too – just one tortured soul at a time.”

“Yes, it’s a long-term plan,” he says, grinning back. “I should be done by 2450.” He checks his expensive-looking watch. “Gotta go in a minute. I said I’d go for a run with Felix.”

I can’t help but frown. I hope he’s not a joiner-inner. Professor Coleman told *me* to get a hobby once upon a time. Something to distract me from the never-ending replay of my life to date. She gave me paints and pencils and one of those God-awful mindfulness colouring books. I was so beyond calming down with some pretty patterns – that was one of the ways she misjudged me.

One day, I guess I'll have it out with her. But it'll be on my terms. There's no rush. It's not like I'm going to forget.