

GETTING STARTED

By Chris Heyward

I looked down at the woman I assumed to be my wife. Propped up on one elbow, I moved the duvet cover gently from her face. Not a bad face, in a bony, fitness-freak sort of way. I looked around the room. Beige wallpaper, chocolate brown carpet. Someone had no taste at all. I hoped it wasn't me.

I looked at the way my wife's (?) blonde hair lay across her face as she slept, a strand of it lifting softly as she breathed. I was beginning to really hope this was...Ursula? I made a mental note of the shape of her cheek. Made a bet with myself that her eyes were blue.

I slipped out of bed. Boxers and a tee-shirt. So far, so ordinary.

At the bottom of the stairs I turned right. Lounge and dining room. Try again. Kitchen on the left. Bingo. Everything was unfamiliar, but it felt...familiar for it to feel that way. Soldier on.

Kettle and coffee neatly to hand and five minutes later I was enjoying a steaming cup of Columbian. The kitchen was red and white. Very smart. It was then that I noticed the post-it on the fridge door.

Leave for work 8.30am. Map in brief case. I'm sleeping in. Roaring hangover. Love you. F. Xx

F? Who's F? Who's Ursula? I saw the brief case tucked under the table. It was black leather embossed with the initials: G. W. George? Graham?

Opening it I found it to be full of blueprints. A map lay on top with directions drawn in red. Something was starting to feel comfortable. Suddenly I felt this had been rehearsed. Had happened before.

Twenty minutes later I'd showered and was driving along a leafy road. The keys on the table by the door had fitted the silver Volvo parked in the drive. So far, so good. Red brick houses were set back and a white dog was running along the pavement. I knew for sure that I'd never seen the dog before, but the houses..?

I turned into my destination and I parked in front of a two story building with 'Walker Brothers' over the door. Before I had climbed the stairs I knew that my name was Greg Walker and I was an architect with the family firm. I knew I was married to Francine and Ursula was...well, we'll leave Ursula out of it for now.

I had a good day at the office, as they say. Most of the people who worked there, including my brother, smiled broadly when I arrived and all asked me if I was OK. Today. They said 'Are you OK, today?'

It was slotting into place. Again.

At dinner that night, Francine and I enjoyed an unremarkable bottle of something white and talked for hours.

‘How is all this for you?’ I asked.

She looked at me and cocked an eyebrow. I would have lost the bet. They were green. ‘I’ve asked that before, haven’t I?’

‘Once or twice,’ she smiled. Damn, she was gorgeous. Lucky me to have this as a new item every day.

The note was taped to the bathroom mirror.

Your name is Greg Walker and you don’t live here. When you find this, come and wake me.

I walked back into the tiny blue bedroom. The bedside lamp was on and a woman was sitting on the side of the bed. I’d never seen her before in my life. She was standing now, putting on a dressing gown.

‘I’ll make some tea,’ she said, plonking a kiss on my mouth as she passed. Her red hair flamed as a green neon sign flickered through the smoky window. A siren screamed somewhere.

I was cold. Lost, but I knew I had to stay quiet. Things would resolve themselves. They always did. Why would I say that?

‘Do you want a biscuit? A sandwich?’ she called from somewhere in the depths of the flat. So, I knew it was a flat.

She returned holding two mugs and a packet of digestives was tucked into a pocket.

We sat on the windowsill and sipped our tea. I knew answers would come.

‘Ok, ready? Again?’ she asked.

I nodded.

‘Your name is Greg Walker. My name is Ursula Hannah and we are having an affair.’

She watched my face. Waiting for a reaction.

She continued. ‘You are married to Francine and you have no children. You work with your brother, you’re partners. You’re an architect. A year ago you drove your motorcycle off a cliff in Cornwall.’

Something was clawing at my brain. Pain. Blood. The smell of oil.

‘You were in hospital for months and came out all shiny and new.’

‘Except...’ I said.

‘Except that the extensive brain damage caused a type of TGA. Trans global amnesia. I know, it sounds like an airline.’ She chuckled and took a swig of tea.

‘You tell me this every time I come here.’ It was a statement.

‘Anyway, in your case it has the effect of resetting your brain after a night’s sleep. It lasts about six hours and at some point during the day, all your memory returns. But every morning, back you go again into your own version of Groundhog Day.’

Something was stirring. Creeping round my head. I knew she was right.

‘Your surgeon, Mr Latimer, says that your downtime will progressively get longer.’

‘Downtime?’

‘The time each day when the TGA causes an amnesiac attack. I’m sure your wife brings you up to speed every day. She knows about us, by the way.’

I had a hell of a woman here. By the sound of it, I had a hell of a woman at home, too.

I seemed to know there'd be a note on the fridge door.

If you're reading this, you can bring me tea in bed. I don't take sugar. PS. It's Saturday.

While the kettle was boiling, I walked out into the garden. It was large and apple trees were in full bloom. I felt happy here, like good times had been shared here. I could smell a barbecue, hear sausages sizzling. It was a memory, surely. An echo of a party with family friends. The mist was closing in again and I clutched at the wisps, in vain.

I took the tea up to...my wife? I wanted to call her Ursula but something was stopping me. 'Greg, sweetheart'.

Greg, my name was Greg.

'We need to talk but we'll wait until this afternoon. You know, when ...you're back.'

I felt a burning need to commit an act of violence. I could feel something welling up, building. I felt isolated, like everyone else was in on a joke.

'No, tell me now. Whatever it is, I need to hear it now.'

So, she patiently and dutifully explained to me what had happened on that cliff top in Cornwall. She told me how they'd fought to put me back together and how my consultant feared that the amnesiac events would last longer as time went by. Nobody had any concrete answers, but coping strategies were discussed. Coping strategies?

'Mr Latimer suggested we start keeping a journal. You need to write down everything that happens and you must read it every day. It will act as your memory.'

'Have we started it?'

I was hoping she would produce a large, well thumbed volume from under her pillow. I imagined it would be full of thoughts and plans and ideas. I started to hope that, as if by magic, my past life would be restored to me in the form of a notebook. I bet I've written it all in pencil, I thought. Pencil marks on unlined paper are so much more writerly than pen. I could see myself working at an easel, pots of pencils on a desk. Was I an artist?

'No, pet. We haven't started it yet. I thought we'd give it a go today. It'll be a new beginning. You can read the journal tomorrow morning for the first time. We'll leave it on the kitchen table. Get a routine going. I'm really excited about it. I think it's going to be so good for you. For us.'

I laid my hands flat on the door of the fridge. I felt so sure there should be something there. I ran my hands up and down, feeling for something. Anything. What was I missing? I wasn't even sure that it was my fridge. I didn't believe it was my kitchen. A part of me knew for sure I'd never been here before.

Then I saw it, lying on the worktop. A slim black notebook.

I sat on a stool and watched it, almost expecting it to move. I picked it up and opened it. The pages were unlined. A firm, confident hand had written on the first page...in pencil.

My name is Greg Walker. I'm married to Francine...

'Greg?' a clear voice drifted down the stairs. "Are you down there? What are you doing?'

I stroked the page. Read the words again. I called up to Francine. My wife. 'I'm just getting started.' *SLQ*

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