



Memory Card

Sophisticated Sophie, breaking down so slowly.

The words whirl and dance around my head, a twisting turning merry-go-round of syllables. Sibilant, teasing. Sophie the wise one, sat alone at home with her nest of blankets filled with photos, while her man takes another evening out with his friends. *Just getting a breath of air. You understand. Just... you know... taking a break.*

Taking a break from me.

Each photo mocks me. Each is a cuckoo looking up at me. None of these images are mine. I don't remember taking them, posing for them or standing with teeth gleaming in the Florida sunshine while a stranger pressed the shutter. I've looked at them all a hundred times. I have images in my head of where we went, of what we saw. But the photos that came off the memory card are not the ones I remember putting on there.

Florida was the make or break moment in our relationship. Or it was supposed to be. As newlyweds, we had booked three weeks in Kissimmee as a honeymoon/come celebration of our new lives. Both had new jobs. We were both financially secure, but the holiday would wipe us out for a while. We didn't care. We were still young,

happy to be having a last fling before we settled down in the city to worship the great god FTSE together.

The miscarriage came a week before the plane was due to leave and due to serious complications, I couldn't travel. I told Dean to go alone, not to waste the chance, take his brother, take a mate. But he redeemed the tickets and we took our reduced capital and spent a wet weekend in Wales a month later. We were happy. We looked after each other. We had not planned a baby for years yet and after all, as long as we hung onto health and each other...

We made it to Florida this year for our tenth anniversary. We had barely had a holiday together in the whole decade. Diaries were too full to co-ordinate travel. I took to Spanish resorts with the girls, he went ski-ing in Austria with his rugby mates. We were happy. Until we went to Florida. Then we realised what we had been missing all of those years. Each other.

I dropped the memory card off at the supermarket in a lunchbreak and picked up my pack of photos on my way home that evening. A bottle of Chablis and a meal for one lay in my basket. Dean had training on a Monday night. Had done for a decade.

'Sophie Charleston?' the cashier doublechecked as I reached for my pictures. I hesitated. I hadn't been Sophie Charleston for a very long time.

'Sophie Dale,' I corrected and she took the photos a whisper from the edges of my fingers. 'Although Charleston was my maiden name.'

She frowned at me and flipped open the pack. 'Looks like you.'

She showed me the top snap; me squinting up at the sun in the back garden of my parents' home, a week before we left for America. I glanced at the slip she had

in her hand and there was my handwriting, proudly proclaiming the name I was born with. I shrugged it off.

‘Must have had a mad day and forgotten I was married,’ I joked, but the smile didn’t quite make it to my eyes. What the hell had I been thinking?

‘Wish I could do that,’ she grinned, flashing a diamond studded front tooth. ‘Only I’d have to have a lobotomy to forget my fella, big ‘orrible lump that he is.’

The first time I looked at the photos I was in the bedroom, alone. I’d waited until I was sure Dean wouldn’t be coming back for anything and sneaked them out of my bag like a great dark secret. I don’t know what I expected to find. After all, I had only slipped and given the wrong name. There was nothing else I was expecting to be wrong, was there?

I saw myself smiling up at the camera lens once more. The sun in my eyes on the neat grass at the back of the house in Kent I had grown up in. I blinked. My parents moved house when I was eighteen and now lived in Cornwall. It was my Dad’s dream. I looked at the old garden, at the tree my swing used to hang from. It lowered over my head, giving no shade because of the empty space where half of the branches had torn off in storms when I was little. There were still scars where the ropes had sawed into the bark during years of happy swinging, but the tree was bigger. Mystified, I moved on.

Me, at the airport, with my hair tight on top of my head and no make up on. I blinked. I didn’t remember travelling like that. I never went out of the house with my hair scraped back or missing mascara. Dean had never seen me without eyeliner, I didn’t think. How could I have forgotten travelling with a bare face, looking like a pale ghost of myself?

I flipped through the photos faster and faster. Where was Dean? Had I imagined ten years of good, but uneventful marriage? Was my husband a figment of my imagination?

He was in the tenth shot. Tanned and long, he was wearing surfer shorts and his hair was bleached with the sun. I held the photo on its own in my fingers, the rest fanned across my knee like a forgotten hand of poker. I stared at him. He looked young and happy. Loose. I didn't even think he looked like this when I met him. Did he really look so good on holiday, even after only just arriving? Had he *really* been this different in America?

The photos fanned in my fingers. The places were familiar. The roads we had travelled. The places we had stopped and photographed were all there. But we were different. Half way through the pack of photos I found out how different. There was Dean, smiling at the camera, his broken tooth perfect again, his eyes squinting at the right sunlight. In his arms a little girl with hazelnut eyes, just like his own, her chubby arms tight around his neck.

I concertinaed the photos back together like a car trick and I hid them down the side of my chair. I was going mad. The child had my hair. His eyes. My dimples. His smile. His tooth... broken in a scrum and not capped for nearly a year. The cap always looked wrong, he hated it. Wished he'd never played the damn game in the rain a week after we lost the baby.

The baby.

I reached for the snaps again and they were all of her now. In my parent's garden, she was laughing up at my Dad as he pushed her on my old swing. Sitting on Mum's knee. Mum's face; even, not drooping from the repeated strokes that had plagued her for the past seven years. I went through the snaps one by one. She was

in every one. Kissing me, her dimpled hands holding my cheeks and both our eyes screwed up tightly shut. The final shot had her face against the roundness of an expanding belly. My sandals on the feet. I glanced across the room to where the sandals sat beneath my dressing table stool. They were still on the tightest setting. On the photo, my feet had expanded and the sandals were fastened much looser than I was used to.

Hardly able to breathe, I put a hand to my stomach. Flat. Tight. Five gym sessions a week and classes on a weekend were ridged into my abdomen. Dean joked he could bounce pennies off me when I lay down. And in this photo, I am round and soft, like a fruit waiting to ripen and burst. Suddenly feeling sick, I push the photos away from me. What am I doing to myself? Delusions? Hallucinations? I glance back at the last photo - my left hand, on the little girl's head, holding her face to my stomach, is bare. Not married.

I remember the holiday. I remember my husband. I sit and recite the names of our wedding guests to myself, remembering which tables they sat at and the trouble it caused keeping certain relatives and ex-partners apart. How could all of that be a false memory? It was still so clear in my mind. My wedding dress got covered in burrs from a cousin of Dean's, a mischievous four year old. The silk was ruined but it made us laugh to remember the look of concentration on his face the photographer captured as he threw the sticky seeds at me from behind.

I went to the wardrobe, spilling the blanket and the photographs across the floor as I went. My memories were what made me the person I am. They grounded me - they were the stepping stones that got me to where I was now in my life - if I was wrong about all the things I thought about myself, and reality was submerging, then I was starting to sink as well.

The wedding dress was there. The scratches and runs still marked the otherwise seamless silk. Like snow covered in first footsteps. I closed my eyes and held the dress to my face. Same familiar smell. Still married. Still me.

I turned back to the scattered photographs and most of them were face down. The ones that weren't showed Dean riding a horse in a vast American saddle. I blinked. He hated horses. Always had, always would. In another, he is standing with Micky Mouse, laughing as he gets an autograph for the child. Given a choice between Disneyland and hot needles in his eyes, Dean would hold his eyelashes open for better access.

But that look on his face. The joy as he listens to something she is whispering in his ear as he bends towards her.

I turn the photo over and sit on the floor in the mess of shiny paper and tangled blanket. Do I tell him? Show him all of these strange untruths? Shall I destroy the memory card and burn these false memories before they start to convince me that they should have been real?

To tell the truth, it had been a relief for months before the holiday that he was out so much. We didn't much like what we found in Florida. In the Florida in my mind, the one I remember. The one my head keeps running over in bed every night before I fall asleep. We had been missing each other for years. Passing at breakfast and then again at bedtime. Strangers living together, but still aiming for the same goals, or so I thought.

I reached tentatively for a random photograph from the middle of the stack, hoping for another glimpse at the daughter we never had, but the shot is of myself, sat in the hotel bar in the middle of the evening. I am wearing a beautiful strapless gown and my hair is falling over one side of my face. The look of total misery in my

eyes astounds me. I remember this night. I remember the meal we had just eaten. I remember Dean getting up to go to bed before me, while I stayed downstairs with the terrible pianist and the cocktail list.

It was the day we decided to go our separate ways. I recognise this empty face even less than I recognised the swollen ankles in my favourite sandals. I take the memory card and put it into a safe place I may never think of looking at again. Then I gather up the photos and decide to look at them again tomorrow, just to see if anything else has changed. Then I might phone and talk to Dean about it all. About everything.

Maybe talking is all we have left, but there might just be a little bit of him that wants to remember a little bit of me that once had the potential to be happy with him instead of being content to look the other way when things started to go wrong.

Tomorrow.

Tonight I was so tired of it all, I just had to sleep.