

Seven Days to Tell You

Ruby Soames

thursday night

I don't hear the key in the door when the intruder enters my home. Nor does any light show when he steps in from the hall and there is no click when he slowly releases the door handle behind him. He waits inside my flat. He sucks the air into his lungs without making a sound. The winter wind escapes from his clothes.

His pupils widen as he pans the room. Shapes, in varying shades of grey, claim his focus. The cushion on the sofa has retained a half-moon compression left from where I'd been lying in front of the TV. There is a damp towel twisted around a chair leg with a near-empty bottle of wine next to it. I was too tired to put the wine away. It ferments next to a box of chocolates left open with a card depicting a teddy bear holding up a sign saying, *Thank you!*

His eyes take in the remains of my last few hours.

The intruder treads into the room as cars project silver balloons of light over the ceiling. He touches my coat as it lies collapsed over a chair. He moves back a little, wary of my *iPhone* earphones dangling out of my pocket, they sway to the silent jig of an underground train. He moves his head from one side of the room to the other, the darkness around him is losing. A plate of half-eaten lasagne is now hard and congealed in its microwaveable carton. The street lamp illuminates the faces smiling out from my photographs. The man looks at each picture without moving from where he stands: my face, tanned and smiling from holiday destinations or miscellaneous landmarks in my life: graduation, weddings, parties; the shelf below is devoted to photographs of my nieces and nephews.

To his left is the kitchen which is separated from the main room by what the estate agent called a 'breakfast bar.' Not that I've ever had breakfast there, I use the surface of the low dividing wall to dump my keys and post, though sometimes, if I have time or people over, I'll put fruit in a large, hand-painted salad bowl that was a wedding present. He sees a bunch of flowers still wrapped in cellophane in the sink half-filled with water. The petals have been pushed uncomfortably against the frosted windows.

He holds his breath as if the air will make him lighter as he walks across the living room. Then he stops outside my bedroom. Since I was a little girl, I've always slept with the door open the width of my mother's foot.

He pushes the door lightly with the tips of his fingers, wide enough so he can creep past.

The wooden-slat blinds in my bedroom almost shut out the street lights so he feels the way to my bed. I still don't hear anything, even the thud of his shoes dropping to the floor, the muffled fall of his jumper, T-shirt. He unbuttons his jeans, lets them slide down to his knees, shakes them off his feet. Even a few inches away, he must feel the heat from my body on his thighs. He bends right down to my face to peel off his socks and lower his boxer shorts.

My sleep isn't disturbed by the movement of someone undressing so close to me. Even when he sits on the edge of the bed, lifts the duvet and curls onto the mattress. And not when he slides over and touches my skin.

Not once do I wake up with the knowledge that someone is in my home and in my bed, placing a hand on my heart and holding it there.

Our heads lie on the same pillow. I turn and breathe in what you exhale.

Somewhere, deep in my unconscious, the person I was re-assembles itself, your hand on my back and I flow into you, I know that you are back, that it is you touching my hair and stroking my face, laying your mouth into my deadened hand, folding my palm around your kisses.

The coolness of your skin chases my blood under the skin's surface. You draw me into you, the capillary effect of desire - I can't resist moving into you although I fight reaching out for you - there have been too many times, too many disappointments. There was that dream once, almost as real as this, when I found you in the hospital car park curled up in the back of my grand-dad's Morris Minor. I said 'Marc, we've been looking everywhere for you! We thought you were dead...' and you said, 'Katherine, I was just sleeping,' and I said, 'Sleeping? For three years?' and you said, 'I was so tired, so tired.' We laughed. I told you everything we had done to find you, things that people said about you, the ways we tried to understand you. And it seemed all so funny...then the dream started to vanish and I couldn't get it back. I woke up. I still don't know how I got through that day. To lose you, to find you, and lose you again.

You stretch your thigh over me, hook me in its grip and pull me into you. You kiss my neck and I open my fingers to feel the ends of your hair. You nuzzle into the hollow under my collar bone, nip around my ear. You have returned.

That's what I keep saying in my head, 'He's back, he's back...' And you feel the same to me as you always did, although more bristly, perhaps your hands are a little rougher; have you put on weight or are you more muscular? But it is you. I've had these dreams before, but this is real. I don't want to notice the differences, I don't want to open my eyes or speak. I don't even try to find out whether you are still wearing your wedding ring. Hold me close and don't let the light in.

Now you draw me nearer to you, your hands knead my stomach, mould and squeeze me into a foetus which only you can feed, touch, or bring to life. You drown out the world with your heart-beat; it's all that's ever made sense for me. You. I drive my head into your solar plexus: opening my mouth for more, for all of you, for something of you.

You have come back, just as you left: with no warning; no words.

The winter sun edges through the blinds. The sound of cars becomes persistent and the bankers upstairs move around. You never met them, the American couple who arrived a year after you left, we often pass on the stairs and they laugh when I tell them they work longer hours than junior doctors. But later, later. This is still our time. There is that sweet smell behind your ears which takes me back to our first summer, I fill up on the smell of you. It's never enough. You tighten your hands around my hips, I press the soles of my feet on top of yours and you kiss the hollow curves around my eyes.

For this little while, the world can wait.

I know about waiting. In the first year after you left, I'd reach out in the night to touch you, and when my fingers padded the cold sheet next to me and there was nothing where you had been, I'd press the pillow to my mouth and scream until morning. Right in the beginning, of course, I didn't even go to bed at all. I slept on a line of cushions in front of the door, next to the phones and laptop. Usually with the television on. All night. All those nights.

After the first year I accepted that I'd be waking up alone. I had to. I kept a pillow close, clung to it as people do to a faith. A pillow, or maybe a man. And I talked to you. From that first night when you didn't return and I started calling your work, your friends, I was talking to you. I was defending myself against you when you'd return and be cross that I'd worried unnecessarily. When I had reason to worry, I begged you to come home, I bargained and pleaded. And all the time I spoke to you in my head, and now you are here and I am still talking to you.

And you are really here. So I keep my eyes closed as once again I let my hand go out on its own accord until it touches someone whose skin is more familiar to me than my own. Together again.

My alarm goes off. Your hand reaches out before mine and you press the button. Silence. It's almost as if the last three years hadn't happened. As if we will wake together, maybe make love before charging into the bathroom, shouting out the evening's plans from the shower, treading on each other's clothes, drinking each other's coffee by mistake and saying, 'I love you. See you tonight'.

Most mornings I wake before the alarm. For nearly three years, I haven't slept, not slept like people do, abandoned, untroubled. Since the day you left, there's been no release, neither peace nor cure; even when I've been asleep, I'm still looking for you. One thing about dreams is that you don't get to dream in them.

We turn together, your front against my back, you weave your arm through mine, holding the middle of me to the middle of you. The recovery position. I hesitate at

first, then I bring my fingers up to trace the tattoo on your upper arm with my index finger. I touch the **K**, the **T**, the **I**, **N**, **E** at the end. Whenever I see my name printed, I wonder about those letters on your skin. Who is reading the Braille of your commitment to me? I was asked, over and over, to describe your 'distinguishing features', and I told them, he has the name 'Katherine' written on his upper, left bicep. 'Hard to lose, eh, tats like that,' said one policeman looking at a photo of you and I on holiday, 'course there's always laser surgery but that can leave a right messy scar, some people tattoo over it but...' So here it is. Your mark. The letters that make up my name, engraved and embedded in your subcutaneous. Some things don't go away.

The alarm went off and you are still here. I should be getting ready for work. You lift yourself over me, your elbows taking the weight of your torso. I feel the current of air from your nose onto my face. You hold me down like a collapsed building and close my lips with your mouth. We stay like that as the minutes go by. I don't want you to move. I do not want to go back to my life. You kiss my eyes and I have to open them now to see you.

To see you again. The glare of the sky shuts them closed but your silhouette is imprinted on my lids. I look again. I can see you now that the room is as light as it will ever get today. It was the first thing about you that I ever noticed. Your blue eyes, Alpine blue eyes. Holiday eyes. You have more creases in the corners when you smile now. You drop your elbows, lift me back in your hands and make yourself into a blanket, covering me with your skin. And we laugh.

At first it sounds so canned. We laugh like a director has asked two actors to laugh. And laugh. And cut. And laugh. And then it becomes real and we laugh because we are so happy right there and then. The day is starting and all I want is my husband home and he is home: here, covering every part of me.

You are back.

We stop laughing, I draw my knuckles up to my mouth and bite hard to stop myself from crying – I learnt this the first year you left when I needed to stop the tears in supermarkets or driving the car, sometimes in mid-conversation with someone I didn't know. I'd just start melting and nothing could mop me up. I hold my breath like that, my teeth cutting into the back of my hands. You watch me. You pull my hand away, kiss where the skin's been broken and kiss my mouth again. I lick your shoulders. I can't leave you but I must.

June 6th, 2007: you left.

You didn't need to get up that morning just because I had to be at work for eight, but it was one of the rules you made for yourself when we first married, that you would always have breakfast with me if you could. You said a big love is made up of all the little things, the little acts of appreciation, and that once they stopped, people started taking each other for granted and then, what was the point?

I didn't always do that for you, Marc, and I was sorry for that later.

You made me coffee, brought me a couple of pain killers. I didn't have time to drink but swallowed down the pills.

We'd been to dinner with an old school friend of mine whom I'd not seen since sixth form and never liked anyway. She'd arranged the supper so I could meet a friend of hers who had returned from medical training in the US. It had been a terrible mistake to drag you out there. That night you'd said that you wanted to stay in, you had something to tell me. I said if it was important, it could wait till the weekend. I hadn't caught up on my sleep after a long shift, I was working the next day, a Tuesday, and we'd barely seen each other the week before. I was snappy, we were running late. You know I hate to be late and I was resentful about having to go out, having to wake up early the following day, having to galvanise you into doing something neither of us wanted to.

I hadn't eaten that day and the wine on an empty stomach knocked me out. I drank too much and couldn't stop apologising to you while we waited for a taxi. We'd quarrelled on the way home, something about Gina's friend flirting with me. It was all too clearly a set up on his part to meet me. I said things which hurt you, hurt you because they were true.

I've run over those last twelve hours so many times, always hoping that in the autopsy of your words, your gestures, what was unsaid, I might uncover a detail that would lead to a different ending.

And now I could ask you, was it that night? My friend and her shrill excitement, the conversations about children's schools, house prices and her fridge covered with animal-shaped certificates announcing things like, *Gold Star for Grace who smiled nicely today!* Months later, that's what I thought. It was that boring dinner party that drove you out. Their indifferent questions to you, their educational holiday plans and their tucked-up eco-friendly children. You saw a glimpse into our future and it wasn't good enough for you. I wasn't good enough for you. So after I apologised again, dressed and kissed you good-bye, I left our flat.

When I returned, you were gone.