

The Memory Finder

CHAPTER ONE

I heard her before I saw her. A light step. Confident. Or perhaps a little angry. I didn't recognise the gait. I glanced at my watch. Again. I was late. That didn't happen to me. I'm never late. I hate late. I felt the underside of my tongue dry out. My jaw ached. My temples throbbed. A full-blown anxiety attack was building from the whites of my toenails, sparking bolts across the top of my feet and up my shins to make my knees contract and shoot pains up my thighs to my groin and guts and into my chest where it almost always got trapped until it fought its way out of my mouth in a series of strangled breaths. Ruddy gooseflesh skittered across my face and neck. I stamped with each step, repeating the mantra my mother had taught me years before: 'I am not my anxiety, I am not my anxiety.'

It wasn't that I might get detention that worried me. Hell, that would raise my reputation a notch from its lowly position at bottom of the food chain. No. It was the fact that my own system had hung me out to dry. You see, I had estimated it would take twelve minutes to hang out the washing in the morning, based on the number of items I'd seen my Mum load into the machine and the previous occasions on which I'd helped her. What I didn't anticipate was the wind. The way it whipped the fitted bed sheets so they curled around the wire. The way it turned a simple work shirt into a voluminous parachute that refused to be tied down. So twelve minutes turned into twenty-three minutes.

And now here I was. Out of breath. Anxiety following in my wake. I was late. And there were footfalls behind me that I didn't recognise. Goosebumps rushed over my skin again. I considered Snapchatting the impressive display of chicken skin flesh to Charlie. At least then he would know I was late. But I wondered what the mystery girl would think if I took a random selfie before going into school. And then I started to hyperventilate again.

The Memory Finder

I may not be my anxiety, but I have no control over my hyperthymesia. I am cursed with a memory that goes way beyond photographic – I have total recall. I mean actual, total, no-room-to-escape recall. My brain is like a GoPro and I can replay any given day's events whenever I want. Or whenever I don't want.

Monday 13 July 2015. 8.37am. Cool breeze. Misty rain. Smell of logs in fireplaces. Bare-branched trees lining the road. Hands smelling of washing detergent. Last song on iPod was Smoke and Mirrors by Imagine Dragon. Last ad on television before leaving the house was for Jeep. Black Bonds underwear and black tee with charcoal hoodie and charcoal jeans, grey socks, black sneakers.

I did sneak a peek when I felt it was safe to do so. I watched her saunter across the road, bag slung from one strap over her right shoulder, salmon-pink tee with a slogan that was too small to read, black skinny jeans, grey hoody unzipped, black Cons. Her hair was trapped in a ponytail low at the back of her head, but loose, dark, auburn curls, the exact shade of the tips of pumpkin when it's roasted to perfection and turns a bit caramelised, whipped the side of her face in the breeze. I hunkered down in the yard, finding a sudden interest in the broken sleepers that edged the path between the office building and one of the classroom blocks. The gate swung open and shut. She was in and walking towards me. I considered my options. Either develop the ability to wrap myself in an invisibility cloak, try my hand at one of those living sculpture things you see in cities or pretend that the grooves in the closest sleeper were like the most interesting grooves ever and that I always just hung around the front yard inspecting lengths of timber.

I realised the sound of her footsteps had ceased. I felt my Adam's apple constrict. She must have heard the gulp. I knew she was staring at me, waiting for me to acknowledge her presence, talk to her even. I reckon I could even hear the drop of her eyebrow as I continued to marvel at the striations and depth of the lines in the wood. When she moved behind me and

The Memory Finder

past, I chanced a look. The sun was bright behind her, casting a halo around her head. That'd be right. A freaking angel lands in our school and the first person she sees is me.

'Do we have to sign a late book here?'

I felt my jaw slacken and my cheeks burn. I was trapped in a nightmare where the only thing I wanted was to breathe but if I did that she would see my juddery, shaky chest heaving and yet if I didn't, she would witness me fainting.

She waited for me to respond. Or laugh. Or do something on the normal spectrum. I didn't. Instead, I looked at her tee shirt. It read 'Design your own image'. It sounded familiar, but out of context I couldn't place it. That irked me. My memory doesn't fail me. But usually didn't involve being confronted by a girl in the school yard on an already difficult morning.

And then Mr Garibaldi, the Principal, poked his head around the door and yelled at us to get to the office pronto and just as he finished shouting, the Briggs twins ran through the gate, deliberately smashed into me with their oversized bags and tore past us to get to the book first.

I held the door open for her but didn't check to see if she smiled or scowled. I'm never sure of the correct protocol. Is it polite to hold a door open for a girl? Or is it condescending? My parents have brought me up to respect all genders, races and demographics but sometimes it's so confusing that it would be easier to live on a planet inhabited entirely by robots. No feelings, no social structure, no moral constructs.

The Briggs twins marked the late book with an X. How original. Mr Garibaldi, now behind the window pursed his thin lips which made his moustache stick out. It gave me the creeps. 'Mr Wilde. You're not usually late.'

I wrote on the line allocated to me and handed the pen to the angel.

The Memory Finder

‘Ah, Ms Reed, is it? We were expecting you,’ Mr Garibaldi said, his volume still at shouting pitch. ‘On time,’ he added. It was like he was permanently plugged in to ACDC-worthy amplifiers.

The angel shrugged. ‘I overslept.’

‘Woodhall sent through your transfer papers,’ Mr Garibaldi. ‘You just need to get your locker sorted. Jett, can you show Ruby where the lockers are?’

I froze. Two things jammed the transmission of my brains. Did he say she transferred from Woodhall? Was that code for kicked out? Only hardcore head cases got kicked out of that school. This girl might be trouble. But she was inspecting her fingers; long, slim fingers, unpolished but well-manicured nails, smooth skin, narrow, creamy wrist. It didn’t look like it was attached to trouble. And did Mr Garibaldi just ask me to show her to the lockers?

I am not my anxiety. I must have been pulling a weird face. I’ve seen my weird face in the mirror lots of times. It’s scary. Ruby Reed dropped her hand and as I took a quick look at her face again a small furrow twitched between her brows. She cocked her head.

‘When you’ve finished staring at my breasts, perhaps you can tell me where we’re heading?’

‘Germaine Greer.’ *The Female Eunuch*. The full quote went:

It takes a great deal of courage and independence to design your own image instead of the one that society rewards...

‘What?’

‘Your...’ I couldn’t very well nod to her chest. Or point. So I just stared past her ear.

Dying silently.

‘My...?’

‘Slogan.’

The Memory Finder

She shifted on her feet and ran a finger under the strap of her bag and dipped her head, all in one flowing, fluid movement. ‘Right.’

With that I turned towards the lockers, almost tripping over my own shoelace and swinging my bag round so hard that it whacked me in my own stomach. I started walking. I couldn’t hear her footsteps so I turned back round and that’s when I saw another girl behind her. I jumped. I mean, I actually physically left the ground because this other girl hadn’t been there two microseconds before. And this girl was weird. Like Zombie-weird. Super pale, huge black circles around her eyes, worry lines so deep across her brow that you could grow seedlings in them, and her clothes were just messed up. Festy and ill-fitting. I brought my hand to cover my nose. There was a rotten-egg smell that was so violent I wanted to heave.

Ruby frowned and tucked her chin to her chest. She looked over her shoulder and turned back to me. She shivered, frowned deeper and hitched her bag higher on her shoulder. I closed my eyes as she said, ‘Thanks.’

When I looked at her again, the other girl had gone, along with the smell. And Ruby was waiting patiently.

I definitely needed more sleep.

Mondays are full of my favourite lessons – maths, science and geography. I know, I know, but come on, these things make sense. There are hard facts. The truth of these subjects is indisputable, logical. I like logic. It appeals. So much logic in one day meant that I had almost forgotten about Ruby, the festy girl and my lateness. Almost. That is until the final bell and I got caught in the usual melee of kids scrambling to get home to do the important stuff in life – tap into the treasures of the internet. I waited a bit for Charlie but I couldn’t see his hair in the crush, so I started to get dragged along with the rest of the crowd, sucked out of the doors like an astronaut cut off from the tether and flailing into space. As the crowd pulled

The Memory Finder

me along, we reached the entrance to the toilet block and I ducked out to pay a visit. Charlie often needed to go before walking home – that boy’s bladder must not have grown with the rest of him.

On the way out, I heard a sharp cry from the female block. The door opened and Ruby rushed through, her face pale with shock. For like the fleetingest of fleeting microseconds I held her gaze and then I looked back down at my feet. She looked genuinely ruffled. I wondered if she’d had a run in with Mia Briggs already. But she looked frightened, not pissed off. I should have asked her if she was all right. But my words were buried in the pit of my stomach, churning around with the anxiety and digestive juices in the permanent black hole of dread that lives in my guts.

Ruby got lost in the crowd.

That night I processed the day. This was standard procedure. I should have learned by now to turn away from the micro-analysis of each conversation, action or inference and not sift through the moments. I should have learned to simply shut down my brain in order to not be consumed by my own angst. But hyperthymesia is a challenging nemesis that refuses to die. It taunts, it teases. It is both a freakishly good and cruelly bad best friend. It is both a comfort and a curse. Ruby had rocked my Monday. And not in the cool vernacular kind of way. I mean I felt seasick. I lurched from memory to memory, rolling and heaving with humiliation. I had stared at her breasts. She called me out. I didn’t drop dead but I had a brief moment where I didn’t think my heart was going to start beating again. I opened up my laptop and logged onto my blog. I wrote it like a journal. Not that I needed to record my days. Clearly, I was never not going to remember them. But sometimes I just needed to write it down so I could see the arc of my narrative. Today was a bad plot point. I met a new girl. A perfect

The Memory Finder

conflict. But instead of rising to the challenge and going on a character journey, I clammed up and fell into my safe pattern of ignoring the world around. Such bad writing.

Shit. I stared at her breasts.

My phone buzzed. ‘Why am I only just hearing this story, dude? Whose breasts? How long did you stare for? What were...’

‘Shut up, Charlie. This isn’t primary school. We’re maturing young adults. We, as the next generation, should not be giving in to the gender stereotype of objectifying the women around us.’

‘Wilde? Are you sick?’

I probably am. Perhaps I should book a consult with my parents. ‘Go to sleep, Charlie.’

‘You can’t type a line like that on your blog and leave it without any explanation.’

I looked at my laptop. Shit. I had typed that. That is not what I meant to do. I deleted it.

‘Why did you delete it?’

‘Charlie, get out of my back end and go to sleep.’

‘Your passwords are so easy to hack, friend. And if you don’t tell me this story tomorrow, Wilde, I’ll repost all your trashed items.’

‘Nobody reads my blog, Charlie. Nobody cares.’

‘I do. And all those porn bots. And you have that other follower, Serendipity99. And clearly you care.’

I threw my phone on my pillow and flipped shut my laptop. I rolled off the bed and trudged to my bookshelf. It was time to do some serious penance. My mother had given me a book for my thirteenth birthday. A book she claimed would change my life, would open my eyes to the reality of the world around me. She said it would shape a new me, a future self

The Memory Finder

that future friends, lovers and/or spouses would benefit from. I looked for the familiar spine and there it was. I pulled it out, settled back on my bed and opened the cover of Dr Joe Dispenza's *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself: How to Lose Your Mind and Create a New One*.

The next day I waited for Charlie and he ambled beside me, waffling on about some YouTube clip he'd watched more than fifty times in a row. I sighed but he carried on. I spotted Ruby walking ahead and my stomach did a little jig. She was plugged in to her iPod. What kind of music did she listen to? Why was I even wondering? I would never find out.

She was leaning into her locker when I got to mine. What kind of cruel god of high school had given her a locker two down from mine?

Charlie dug me in the ribs and said, 'Is this her?' His volume control was as bad as Mr Garibaldi's.

I whipped my head around and drew a zip along my lips with my fingers, glaring at him.

'I can see why you stared, dude. Nice set.'

I turned a shade of puce to match the pink ribbons for breast cancer. Kind of appropriate really. And yet Charlie remained the bluish-white he always was. He had no understanding of appropriate behaviour, that boy. Despite hanging around with me for years.

Ruby walked up to him, pulled up his tee-shirt, inspected his bare chest, rolled the tee back down and shook her head. 'Yours don't talk back either.'

'What?'

'Your breasts. They don't seem to be much into conversation. Do they have names? What are their favourite bands?'

Charlie was still grinning. What a tool.

The Memory Finder

‘I call them lefty and righty, and they love Coldplay.’

‘Is he serious?’ She looked at me.

I shrugged. He was serious. He had no idea he was being roasted. I shrank even further into myself.

‘He’s Jett Wilde,’ Charlie said, and he actually extended a hand to her. He introduced *me* to a girl and then *he* tried to shake her hand. As I said, tool.

‘I know. It’s a cool name.’

Was it? I had always considered it a burden. Jett Wilde. It sounds so adventurous, so exciting. A comic book hero’s name. But given to me. The most boring boy in the world.

‘Ruby Reed. Breast girl.’

She folded her arms over her tee-shirt, a slim fit grey number with a smiling Beyonce blowing a kiss. The words underneath pronounced ‘Who run the world?’

‘Girls.’

‘What?’

‘Your...’ I couldn’t very well nod to her chest. Or point. So I just stared past her ear. Dying silently. Again.

‘My...?’

‘Slogan.’

She looked down. ‘Right. And don’t you forget.’

Tuesday 14 July 2015. 8.23am. Sun sliding through the blinds in the locker area so that dust motes bobbed and twisted through the dry air. Some Year Nine jock singing Pumped Up Kicks by Foster The Kids running past pointing his fingers in the shape of a gun at the back of younger kids heads. Homework sheet on patterns and algebra ready to be handed in, snuggling next to the paper on the transmission of heritable characteristics.

The Memory Finder

A week passed. I turned up at the lockers at the same time as Ruby a couple of times, but she just ignored me. Which was predictable. And a relief tbh. There was a girl once, when we were in Year 7, who had a crush on me. She was sort of sweet at first. Then a little bit odd. Calista Garcia. She spoke Spanish which made her seem really cool. And that in itself was terrifying. She asked me out on Facebook. And that was terrifying too. At that stage, my Mum still checked my status updates and messages and stuff and so she sat me down and told me about first dates, and feelings for girls, and stuff that still makes my toes curl now.

‘And where will you take Calista?’

‘What?’

‘She asked you out, where will you go?’

‘You don’t go anywhere, Mum.’

She frowned. ‘So what do you do?’

‘You talk and stuff. At school.’

‘And stuff?’

I wasn’t overly worried about the ‘and stuff’ bit. It was the talking bit that was terrifying. Then and now. I don’t do talking. Not to girls. Or to boys, really. Not anyone outside of my parents and Charlie. And even with Charlie it’s not exactly taxing stuff. A typical exchange might be:

Charlie: ‘Dude.’

Me: ‘Dude.’

So, for the next ten days of our romance, Calista sat next to me for lunch which annoyed Charlie because he couldn’t monopolise my time with his lengthy ‘dude’ conversations and other weirdnesses. She sat next to me in class. She smiled at me. A lot. She even used to follow me to school sometimes. And she talked to me. Well, she talked at me. And she didn’t

The Memory Finder

seem to expect me to answer her. Which was a win for me. But after ten days it all went sour. She flipped out. Told me I was terrible boyfriend. I treated her so badly. She was going to make sure nobody else went out with me because I sucked. As she ranted at me outside the science block I just nodded. It was all true. I just didn't understand why it had taken her so long to work it out. She asked Cody Watters out after that. They lasted three weeks. Apparently he talked too much.

Who run the world?

Girls.

The only class that Ruby and I shared was Media Studies. My parents forced me to do this subject 'to broaden my narrow prism of life'. Apparently, I see the world through the black and white of my hyperthymia. They felt that viewing the world through the distortions of other media would balance my perspective, give it some colour. I remember just nodding quietly, internalising my fears that colouring my world view would just mean that everything I did from then on would be projected in my mind in glorious technicolour. One day, I'll share the whole conversation with my mother again, and she might even see the funny side. Ruby sat towards the front and listened intently. She wrote lots of notes. She answered questions sometimes.

'I'm going to pair you up for this "Knowing Me, Knowing You" assignment,' Miss Baron said, reading from a list of names and garnering loud cries of derision each time a match was made. When she got to Ruby's name, I sank lower in my chair. Don't pick me, please. Don't. Pick. Me.

'Ruby, you can team up with Jett.'

She picked me.

The Memory Finder

Ruby turned and scowled at me. Or maybe it was a cool smile. I can never tell with normal people.

‘Jett’s work is usually concise to the point of micro. But you strike me as a student who has a naturally more effusive style. Together, you should balance each other out. Jett’s black and white against your colour.’

I swear my mother sets these assignments sometimes.

Ruby pushed back her chair and walked to where I was sitting with Charlie.

Miss Baron shouted over the din of moving kids. ‘You’ve got twenty minutes to make a start. Remember, your end result, however you choose to tell your story, should reflect your differing personalities.’

Charlie blurted out a laugh and held up his thumb and forefinger in a circle. He walked over to Heath Lardner and tried to shake his hand. Heath told him where to go.

‘He’s really strange, your friend,’ Ruby said, letting her bag fall to the floor. Her art pad fell out and I saw some of her sketches. Landscapes and faces in silvery greys.

I tried to write some notes. But how do you widen the prism of your life when it’s been so boring to date? How should I present the “knowing me” part of my life, with my hyperthymesia, without it reading like a diary? A really dull diary.

‘So, how are we going to do this?’

It was a fair enough question, but I had no answer. How do you go about doing an assignment with the new girl who already had me pegged for a perv or a weirdo?

‘Okay, Mr Verbose. How about basics. I live in the same street as you. Did you know that? I’m at number 62, round the bend.’ She started writing and I stared at the blank page in my workbook. ‘Figure of speech. We’ve been there since the end of last year. But why would anybody head that way when all the best parts of this town are in the opposite direction? Our street is like the tracks, isn’t it?’

The Memory Finder

I looked up.

Her eyebrows sunk lower. 'You know, the tracks. I'm on the wrong side – the old bit of the street, and you're on the right side. The newer houses.'

I chewed the lid of my pen and it slipped and dug me in the gums.

She did her best not to smile. I pulled the pen lid away and a line of bloody saliva stretched out then flopped against my chin. I cuffed it away with the back of my hand as she carried on talking. 'I do have a confession to make though.'

I pulled my hand away and the sleeve of my hoodie was filthy with gunk. I slipped it below the desk but that just looked dodgy, so I tried to lean it casually on the table top but ended up putting my elbow on a couple of pens and they rolled under it so that my arm slipped off and I thumped my chin on my other fist, biting the inside of my cheek.

She looked away but I'm sure I heard her snuffling out a laugh. 'I followed you that first morning. When we were both late.'

I raised my eyes up to meet hers. What was I supposed to say?

'I've heard this town is haunted.'

My tongue worried the bite and the blood left a metallic taste in my mouth. 'Where did you hear that?'

'Ah, so you do talk,' she said, arching her eyebrows. 'I made it up, Jett. This is supposed to be a project to portray a part of our personalities. If you don't start sharing stuff with me we are going to present the most boring media project in the history of the world.'

So what's new?

'Well,' she said with an air of finality. 'You obviously don't do the social chit-chat thing. How about I just do my bit and you do yours and we'll just present it as two separate parts and present it as an ironic statement on our personalities.'

The Memory Finder

She scribbled notes and I willed myself to speak, to say something. Anything. But my throat was glued shut. *I am not my anxiety*. I screwed my eyes shut. Listened to the scrawl of her grey lead against the paper. My heart pumped. My skin crawled with worry. My brain fizzed into overdrive.

When I felt my breathing returning to something similar to normal I opened my eyes again and that girl was back. The zombie one. She was standing behind Ruby with a blank expression. Her mouth opened and the stink wafted over me. Bile rose up my throat and I felt instantly hot and sweaty. I clamped a hand over my mouth and retched.

Ruby's nosed twitched. She looked over her shoulder. Her face swung back round to me and drained of colour. She reached out a hand to mine and that was when I lost my lunch. She caught it. A handful of regurgitated ham salad roll. Her expression of horror remained the same. The zombie girl was gone. Ruby was holding my second-hand lunch in her hand. And the cacophony of laughter in the room was rising in my ears as fast as my life was flashing before me.

I waited in the library for a full hour before I dared head home. The Briggs had started a rumour that I had spewed down the front of Ruby's chest and then tried to clean it up and that she had reported me for assault. I was now JettSpray Wilde.

I knew I had to apologise but the thought of talking to her was so overwhelming that I shrivelled up inside every time I ran through possible scenarios. It wasn't that I didn't want to say sorry. It was just that I had to physically speak. It made my stomach churn. And I couldn't possibly be the boy who threw up over the new girl twice.

I pushed my chair away from the desk and left the other swotty kids to their study. It was only as I neared the door that I saw Ruby, sketching at a window table. If I walked really fast she might not notice me. Instead, she stood up and kind of waved to me.

'Hey.'

The Memory Finder

I shoved my hands in my pocket.

‘Do you always ignore the girls you spew over?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What was that? I missed what you just said.’

I took a giant breath in. ‘I’m really sorry.’

Her eyebrows rose up and she jutted out her lips, nodding. ‘That’s okay. Thank you.’

I turned to walk out. Leave her in peace.

‘Wait, Jett. You saw it, didn’t you?’

‘What?’

‘That thing,’ she said. She picked up her sketch pad and shovelled it in her bag.

‘I’m not sure.’

‘The smell, though. That’s what made you sick.’

‘Maybe,’ I said, walking through the door beside her. Why was she still talking to me?

‘I wasn’t sure at first, what it was. I thought maybe I was going crazy. Believe me, with my life...’ she stopped abruptly. ‘But you saw something too.’ She was whispering and leaning in towards me. Her fingers were wrapped together and she was chewing on her bottom lip.

‘Yes, I saw something.’ I might as well just get it all off my chest, seeing as this would probably be the last social engagement we had. Once Ruby had settled in to the swing of the school she was bound to find some mates with whom she shared common interests. Like music or fashion or art or whatever she was into.

‘A ghost?’

‘What?’ That was unexpected. Maybe she was into *Supernatural*. Those Winchester brothers are pretty hot.

The Memory Finder

‘You think it was a ghost?’

I hadn’t given it much thought. I was more concerned about talking to Ruby to waste much time working out what the zombie girl was. But now I came to think about it there was no logical explanation.

I sighed. ‘I would say it was just a product of anxiety. Yours from being new here and mine because, well, because I’m me. But it’s not likely to be a ghost.’

‘Why not?’ I detected a tight little note of irritation in her voice. ‘Maybe this school really is haunted.’

‘Um, because.’

‘Because what?’

They don’t exist? ‘There has to be a rational explanation.’

‘Why?’

‘Um, because science.’

We walked on.

‘Well, not everything in our universe has a logical or scientific explanation. What about faith or love or how Tony Abbott got to be prime minister.’ She seemed pretty strung out. I wasn’t sure what to add to the conversation. ‘Some things defy logic.’

I buried my hands in my pockets and picked at the loose threads. It was quite comforting, that kind of repetitive action. Stimming. That’s what it’s medically called. But it sounds kind of wrong, so I didn’t tell Ruby. I slowed up as we approached my house. She seemed to be less riled. In fact, she kind of smiled at me as we stopped walking.

‘Look, Jett. I know you’re probably not thrilled about working with me. That I might challenge some of your safe ideas.’ She used air quotes and I didn’t quite know how to respond. She was right of course. I wasn’t thrilled at being forced to work with Ruby on an assignment. But it wasn’t for the reasons she was thinking.

The Memory Finder

‘And I’m not thrilled either. I don’t know anyone here but we’re stuck together and we have to have a plan for the assignment. We’re supposed to make it a reflection of both of our personalities.’

‘I...’

She shrugged. ‘I know, I know. I get it. It’s too early. Anyway, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.’

I took a mental snapshot of the situation. Me walking home from school with a girl. A girl on whom I had spewed. She was talking to me, not hitting me or humiliating me. And I was going to see her again.

Some things really do defy logic.