



**The Man Who Could Not Forget**  
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**Published:** 2008

**Tag(s):** "short story", romance, fiction, fantasy, speculative

**The Man Who Could Not Forget**

**A Short Story**

**by**

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I have a problem with my memory. It isn't that it ever fails me - quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, my recall of events from all but the earliest years of my life is truly photographic, so there was little doubt in my mind the woman before me now was the one who had stolen the book.

I had seen her only minutes earlier in Brady's Antiquarian Book shop, in a corner of its labyrinthine interior. I had looked up briefly from my perusal of a box of eighteenth century prints, to see her in the process of tucking the book down the front of her trousers. Then she had simply walked out with it.

It was Brady himself who raised the alarm because he had seen her too, though not her face, but from the slightly amazed stare she gave me as she passed the both of us, he must have surmised I'd be able to recognise her again. That stare had been quite haunting, causing me to gaze after her in cold astonishment.

She was on the street in a moment and would have got clean away except, incredibly, she blundered into the arms of a passing policeman. Indeed the whole incident might have been amusing except for the fact that Brady, having caught her up, then delved into her clothing in order to recover the book. Now I know she'd stolen it, but even so there was something ungentlemanly about his actions and I found myself siding with the woman.

"It's mine," she protested.

"Nice try," Brady sneered.

"No, really" she said. "I just hid it to avoid confusion."

The policeman listened impassively to this exchange before asking the woman if she could prove the book was hers.

"Well of course I can't," she said. "But can he prove it's his?"

It was a good point. She had taken the book from the second hand section of Brady's shop, where the stock was mostly low grade stuff and bore no proprietorial markings. The constable turned to Brady: "Well, can you?" he asked.

Of course Brady couldn't prove it either, but shop lifters were the bane of his life and I could see he was determined to make an example of the woman. That was when he turned and jabbed a finger at me.

"He'll back me up. He saw her take it as well!"

Now in fact I had not seen her take the book from the shelf. I had only seen her slipping it down her trousers and so, to the letter of his request, I was unable to help. This may seem a little pedantic but I should point out that I did not owe Brady any favours. Many were the times when he had asked me sarcastically if I'd intended buying anything, a reference to the fact I only ever browsed. He was not to know I did not need to buy his prints; the act of simply looking was sufficient for me to possess them. Also, the affair seemed ridiculously overblown. I had noticed the stolen book was a tatty volume of essays by one J. V. Lanchester. The fly cover was missing, the spine broken; why the woman should have risked prosecution for such a worthless thing in the first place, I could not imagine.

So, all eyes were upon me: the policeman's, Brady's, the woman's. She looked pale and nervous, and, apart, from a few wrinkles around her eyes, exactly as I remembered her from our first encounter, ten years ago.

"I really couldn't say," I told them.

Brady coloured at once, an ominous bright red, like he was about to pop. The policeman thought about it for a moment before deciding to give the woman the benefit of the doubt, then rubbed salt in Brady's wounds for good measure, reprimanding him sternly for interfering with the woman's clothing. I turned to Brady and gave a helpless shrug, at which he gruffly announced he would be closing his shop for the rest of the day, then proceeded, rather peevishly, to usher everyone outside.

Walking back to my studio, I thought about the woman. Our first encounter had been in the library at the Polytechnic, where we had been students. It had been a wet afternoon and consequently the place had been busier than normal with very few places remaining to sit. It was thus by chance we'd found ourselves facing one another across a cramped reading table.

I'd found her passably attractive but I was 25 at the time, somewhat older than the norm for a student, and was already jaded by my experience of intimate relations. It was my memory, you see? Everything is recorded, all the things you normal people are the better for forgetting; every slight, every cross word, every bitter misunderstanding. And I suppose it's in our nature that emotional negatives carry more weight than the positives - a thing which in my case provides little nourishment

for those first tiny seeds of attraction to blossom into anything more lasting.

It was for this reason I had tried to ignore a growing and somewhat irksome arousal, but with little success. Indeed, such was the strength of her effect upon me, I had begun to imagine her undressed and in all manner of lurid poses. I assure you I was not normally given to moments of such unbridled prurience and at the time had found the experience quite unsettling. In the end I'd only been able to overcome my considerable distraction by gathering up my books and notes and moving to another table.

I did not see her again,... until the day of the incident in the book shop.

Now, that I can remember her from so long ago, and after such a brief and, you might say, insignificant encounter is not so remarkable since I can bring to mind the face of every person I have ever met. What *is* remarkable however, as I had first realised from her expression when she had looked at me in Brady's book shop, was that she remembered me as well, with equal clarity.

As I walked, idly reminiscing over the incident, I suddenly came upon her. She was waiting a few doors down, having apparently flopped onto the steps of a shop, the tatty memoirs pressed against her bosom. She looked sickly pale and drawn, and she was sweating. When she saw me, she eased herself to her feet and invited by neither word nor gesture, fell into step with me.

"I should thank you," she said.

I gave a careless shrug. "I did not see you take the book."

"I'd like to explain," she began, hesitantly at first. "I don't make a habit of this sort of thing you know." She looked away, perhaps reading my silence as indifference, and then she said what she had meant to say in the first place: "We've met before." She almost whispered the words, as if she couldn't believe it herself. "I wouldn't mention it except that I believe you might also remember me, which would be incredible, wouldn't it? I mean, considering it was so long ago, and our encounter was so brief."

"I believe we *have* met, yes. So,... we're the same, you and I?"

"It would seem that way."

As we walked I noticed her pace slowing, as if she were a clockwork doll gradually winding down. "I had no idea there might be others like me," I said. We had stopped now, the weight of her apparent fatigue

having ground us to a halt. I looked at her more closely, wondering about the power of her memory. "Can I buy you a coffee?" I enquired. "Perhaps we should talk."

She smiled. "Coffee would be good. And I do believe I need to sit down."

"Forgive me for mentioning it, but you look a little pale. Is there anything I can do?"

She smiled and shook her head. "It's nothing," she replied.

I was not interested in making an impression on this woman, so I escorted her to the bus station cafe across the street, which was not exactly renowned for its cuisine, nor its ambiance. It was rest and refreshment we sought, nothing more.

"You were reading art," she recalled, as we watched the busses swinging in and out. Her name was Clarissa and indeed her memory was every bit as perversely proficient as my own. "You were writing notes, in green ink, with a tortoiseshell fountain pen."

"An essay on Monet," I remembered. "And you were reading Wordsworth's Prelude. You had on a denim jump suit, a blue scarf around your neck, and a little badge on your lapel, a teddy bear, ... yellow enamel."

As we continued to share the recalled minutiae from that brief encounter, I began to tingle with a rare anticipation: this woman was different from all the others I had ever known. We alone could understand one another. Then, almost in the same breath I cursed the futility of it. A relationship with this woman was no more likely to succeed than any other - indeed it seemed twice as likely to fail, neither of us ever able to forget a single word of all the words we might ever share. And in a million kindnesses, it is always the handful of insults we would remember. As a distraction, I asked her why she had taken the book.

"It's rare," she said. "Possibly the last copy in existence. I've searched everywhere for it and would you believe it? I find it on the day I've left my purse at home. It didn't seem such a dreadful crime - and I was going to sneak it back when I had read it. As you know, I need only read it once to possess it."

"But surely Brady would have put it to one side for you?"

"No, I've asked him to do that sort of thing before and he's always refused. He's not exactly the most obliging of characters. I remember

finding a book once that he'd marked up for sale at a pound. But as soon as he realised I was interested in it, he wanted ten pounds for it."

"He does have something of a cantankerous reputation," I agreed.

"I know it sounds irrational, but I was afraid it might be gone by the time I came back, or if I asked him to set it aside, he'd pull some trick on me, like before. And you've simply no idea how important this book is to me at the moment."

She took the volume from her pocket and turned to the inside cover where I noted it was a first edition - 1946. Here also, the price was scribbled in the top corner: Fifty pence. For all his faults, Brady did have an eye for a book's worth and from the looks of it, J. V. Lanchester did not have much of a following.

"There's one copy of the Lindisfarne Gospels," I said. "That's priceless. But this?"

She shook her head. "There are many copies of the Gospels - just the one original, but these essays are probably the last existing vessel of this man's knowledge. Your paintings by Monet, my Wordsworth - those works have been recorded and printed so many times and are in the minds of so many people, they will never be forgotten,... but Lanchester's childhood in a Manchester slum? His experience as an overseer in a cotton mill? His views on social change in the nineteen thirties?"

"But they're just some old geezer's memories,... they're not important, surely? I mean, they don't exactly make the world a richer place."

She smiled. "Who's to say?"

Suddenly, she broke off, as if overcome by a sharp pain in her head.

"You're unwell," I said.

"It'll pass," She looked at me speculatively. "I'm sorry to ask this when you've already been so kind but will you walk me home? Please don't get the wrong idea. It's just that I'm afraid I might pass out on the way."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"There's nothing anyone can do," she said. "It's my mind. I've been filling it with too many books, lately. Now and then it shuts down in protest. I'll be fine, if you could just see me to my door."

I was horrified. "You mean you still make a habit of *reading* books?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

I shrank away from the thought of it. "Not books,... there's too much information. I collect pictures, that's all. "

It was essential to avoid filling one's head with too much sensory information. I would even remember the numbers of the busses manoeuvring past our window and the faces of the passengers gazing back at us until the end of my useful life. And each day added inexorably to this burden of trivia: it was enough to cope with, without actually setting out to deliberately look for more. If I was careful, perhaps I would have another twenty years or so before my mind burned out, after which lay only pathetic confusion in an asylum. Now I understood the nature of Clarissa's sickness: she was nearing that stage already.

We walked slowly while she complained of dizziness and paused frequently, crouching on the pavement like a drunkard, her head between her knees to stave off a fainting fit. Eventually, she led me to a respectable suburb and to the door of a tidy terraced cottage. It was here, while fumbling for her keys she finally collapsed, leaving me to carry her inside.

The house was fastidiously neat, though what struck me most, given her apparently suicidal thirst for text, was that there were no books. The walls were plain white, and the floor was bare, with just a few plain rugs ordered with geometric precision, and some simple chairs. It was much like my own home - nothing to arrest the attention, only blank spaces where one might safely stare and put the ever vigilant receptor circuits on hold.

There was no sofa to place her on, so I took her upstairs to her bedroom. This too was in the minimalist style with a low bed and a plain wardrobe, everything white, and without feature. I laid her on the bed, arranging her as comfortably as I could and then I sank down beside her feeling incredibly sad.

She looked so pretty, and we had so much in common, but it was pointless pursuing a relationship with Clarissa. We could become friends of course, but I already had a string of women with whom I shared a pointless friendship - pointless because all my life I had craved so much more. Had I not been concerned for her health, and had she simply passed out blind drunk, then I would have walked away - but under the circumstances, common decency forced me to stay.

Perhaps it was boredom then that made me carefully slide Lanchester's essays from the pocket of her overcoat - although I admit I was also curious about him and I wondered if there might not be something singularly profound about his insight that had driven Clarissa to possess his words at any price. In the end though, I was sorely

disappointed. His prose was convoluted and banal. Speed reading, I ploughed on relentlessly, devouring the text for just one jewel of timeless wisdom, but there were none. These were the memoirs of an ordinary, and poorly educated man, the record of an unremarkable life. Brady and I were of the same mind: Fifty pence was about its worth and I regretted soiling my memory with it.

Shortly after finishing the book, I was roused by a loud rapping on the door and, thinking it might be an anxious relative, I hastened downstairs to open it only to find Brady on the doorstep.

"I should have guessed you'd be in it together," he said.

I was astonished. "You! You must have followed us here?" I was astonished. "For fifty lousy pence! You're crazy."

"It's the principle," he replied. "Now where is it?"

I looked down guiltily at the book in my hands. Brady reached out calmly and took it. "I don't expect to see either of you in my shop again," he said.

Clarissa slept off her malaise and woke after dawn, looking brighter and fresher, though I knew her recovery would be short lived. She gave me a tender look when she saw me waiting at her bedside, but became gloomy when I told her what had happened.

"I don't think he'll come back," I assured her, but Clarissa seemed less concerned about Brady's visit than the loss of the book he had taken from her.

"I'll never find another copy," she groaned.

I tried to make light of it. "Well, from what I read - it's not something you should lose much sleep over."

She froze. "You read it? All of it?"

"Yes. Cover to cover."

"So... you could recite it to me?"

"That might take days!" I protested.

"But you *could* do it? Word for word?"

"Certainly. But it's dross. Why waste your mind on it?"

She looked at me desperately. "Please, I must have that book."

"Why should I help you to commit suicide?"

"Is that what you think?"

"What else am I to suppose, when you seem bent on burning yourself out?"

She looked at me curiously. "I don't keep this knowledge, you know? I pass it on."

I was puzzled. "What do you mean, you pass it on?"

"I mean I *pass it on*, you know, to students mostly,... I'm a tutor at the college now. But you don't understand, I pass it on directly,... from my memory to theirs - not that they're aware of it of course. They just think I'm a good tutor."

She could see I was struggling with this bizarre concept, so she enlightened me further. "That time we met, at college, I gave you some saucy images of me so you'd want to get to know me better,... Polaroids I'd taken of myself. I thought of them and then projected them into your mind. It was cheap, I know, but I was younger then and not so sensitive. Funny, it had always worked on men before,..."

I felt myself go pale.

She smiled. "I'm surprised you don't know the technique." Suddenly she grew serious and drew herself closer. "You don't do you? You really don't. You're still carrying it all with you! Your whole life!" She was horrified. "How can you bear it?"

"What choice do I have?"

"Surely, you know that in passing it on you are relieved of the knowledge yourself? That's why people like us live the way we do,... so we can put other stuff in there as well - like,.. like,... those bus numbers from last night and any other trivia that keeps accumulating."

I shook my head in disbelief. "You dump the garbage into other people's heads? But don't they know?"

"You can jumble it up," she said. "It's just background noise to them - and quite harmless,... but to us,... to us, such a relief!"

"But,... how is it done? How do choose your subjects?"

"It's easy," she said. "You can do it to anyone - even a passer by."

It was a revelation, and I realised at once such a technique would extend my useful life to the norm. If only it were true! "Can you teach me, Clarissa?"

She looked at me cautiously. "Of course. Just as soon as you've given me Lanchester's essays."

"But if you teach me now, I could give you the essays directly," I said. "And rid myself of them in the process."

"It might take months to teach you," she said, "And I'm not sure my client can wait that long."

We began after breakfast - me typing out the essays word for word, comma for comma on her computer. It was not a difficult task, only tedious, like copying out the pages of a dictionary. Every hour or so, I would produce a handful of printouts, which she would then settle down to read. The task took two long days to complete, the last full stop being punched in around midnight, after which I slept on a comfortable futon Clarissa had prepared for me in her spare bedroom.

I woke up the following morning to find her sitting cross legged on the floor regarding me strangely, as if something was troubling her - as if perhaps she'd changed her mind, and was thinking of going back on her word.

"You *will* teach me?" I reminded her. "You promised."

She sighed. "Have you thought that the price will be your memories? Which ones and how many, only you can decide. Once gone, they are gone for ever and I'm worried you'll be reckless, destroying half your life in an attempt to preserve it."

"Surely I'm the best judge of that," I said. But I knew she had a point, for already I had begun secretly sifting my memories in an attempt to label them for execution, and it had been harder than I'd thought. Was it only the good memories that sustained us? The successes? The times of deep satisfaction? Could I safely dispose of the failures, the cringing embarrassments, the heartaches, the insults - or were they just as important in defining us? Was there a danger I would destroy my soul in an attempt to preserve its mortal vessel?

She reached out and squeezed my hand. "But of course I'll teach you," she said tenderly. "Besides you still have pictures of me I'd like returning."

"Ah no, Clarissa," I replied, teasing her. "Some things I will never be persuaded to part with."

By now she was almost too weak to leave the house, as if Lanchester's infernal essays had proved too much for her and in the end, I had to drive her across town to her appointment with her client. I was curious

about him - even more so when she directed me through the gates of a geriatric home.

We were greeted at the door by a cheery faced nurse and shown along a corridor heavy with a soporific heat, and finally into a lounge whose walls were lined by the vacant expressions of thirty ancient souls. Clarissa picked out a frail old man in a wheelchair and knelt beside him.

"My client," she said.

He was in a bad way - his skin almost transparent and drawn tightly over his bones. I offered him my hand, a gesture he returned by some long embedded reflex. He felt deathly cold.

The nurse hovered at my elbow. "Poor old chap," she said. "He's stone deaf,... and he can't even remember his own name."

"Perhaps he doesn't need to," I replied, for I knew it of course: This was none other than J V. Lanchester. And now I understood the value of memory, not just his, but also my own because what to me had been worthless was of course, to him, a spotlight cutting clean through the fog of his decrepitude to the finest of his days - days that had leaked away from him, to be gathered by chance into the strongholds of two temporarily stronger minds.

I tightened my grip on his hand and Clarissa closed her eyes, as if to concentrate. Then she sighed and I swear as I looked into his eyes, I saw a glimmer of light - not much - but enough I thought,... .

... ..to sustain him,...

Michael Graeme.

Thank you for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it. If you're interested in obtaining other short works by Michael Graeme then why not visit the "Rivendale Review" Website at [www.mgraeme.ic24.net](http://www.mgraeme.ic24.net). Several novels by the same author are available from Lulu.com. All are free to download.

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