

SOME ABSENCES NEVER FADE.
SOME PRESENCES CAN'T BE EXPLAINED.

ECHOES *of* HER

DES BRADY

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Tom Adler was a statue in a river of strangers, Adelaide's crowds flowing around him like water around stone. In the space between heartbeats, he was thrust backwards, seeing her for the first time, the wrench of her absence just a memory. His gut tightened as something shattered inside.

For there before him was his wife. The one who had died three years before.

Standing in busy Rundle Mall, he watched in a trance. She moved through the throng with easy, unconscious grace, her hair now a rich auburn instead of the blonde he'd known, her frame leaner. Yet this was no doppelgänger, no uncanny semblance: it was his beautiful wife, in full blossom, untouched by death's hand.

Possessed by this ghost, he followed at a cautious distance, once almost calling her name, wanting to convince himself that this was no mirage. But the shadow was gone, lost in the tangle of bodies in the market. His breathing laboured in the claustrophobic space, his chest constricting.

Doubt rocked him, propelling him into a twilight zone, caught between suspicion and bewilderment. *It surely couldn't have been her.* She's dead. Something that was certain.

Until now.



This apparition pursued him through sleepless nights, pale faces surfacing in dreams like drowning memories, until desperation drove him into Newtown's labyrinthine back streets, hunting for the one they called *The Tracer*.

He ascended the shambolic, dusty stairs to a door with a glass window. Gold letters, newly embossed and oddly pristine, announced: *Robbie Thornton, Private Investigator*. He knocked uncertainly, then pushed the door open, its hinges creaking in complaint. Stepping inside, he found a small, disorderly office that reeked of decay, the air thick with the ghosts of a thousand cigarettes, a leather chair dying its slow death in one corner.

Sitting behind his desk smoking slowly, Robbie Thornton nodded towards a chair.

'Thanks for seeing me, Mr Thornton,' he ventured as he sat uncertainly, soft whispers of smoke drifting, veiling the room in a haze.

Thornton regarded this man suspiciously. Partner disappearances weren't unusual. He'd walked through enough human wreckage to know the patterns: women who melted into the shadows, fleeing anguish and abuse, often pursued relentlessly. He always questioned motives, never wanting repeats of past mistakes—women ending up cold in a morgue.

'How does that work?' Thornton finally offered, smoke curling between them like fog on a moor.

'I'm not sure. What do you mean?'

The response made Thornton tilt his head to one side, as if the question was absurd.

‘Gone for three years and now suddenly back?’ Thornton continued, his voice edged with the doubt of countless lies.

‘Like maybe I’m seeing things?’ Tom’s voice came out sharper than intended. He saw the flicker in Thornton’s eyes, the subtle tightening of the investigator’s mouth. The look of misgiving.

‘Didn’t say you were,’ Thornton replied as he leant back, relaxing, tapping his pen slowly against a battered notepad, the sound ricocheting around the musty space.

‘But you’re not the first person to see a dead ringer walking around after a disappearance. Sometimes turns out it’s a cousin. Or a sister. Maybe something else.’

The inference of the last remark struck Tom in the chest, yet it wasn’t something he’d dismissed himself. He could, of course, simply be mad.

‘Well, she’s an only child and I don’t believe in ghosts.’

Thornton nodded, partly satisfied but still wary, still surveying for red flags.

‘Okay, let’s start simple. When and where?’

‘Rundle Mall, two weeks ago. I was there finalising business on Claire’s estate. She was born there.’

Tom’s throat tightened. ‘She walked right past me, no flicker of recognition. Like I was no one.’

Thornton scribbled, the scratch of pen loud in the quiet. ‘Anyone with her?’

‘No.’ Tom’s hands clenched around his coffee cup, eyes remaining oddly calm.

‘Fine. What’s her family situation? Do you think she was looking for something?’

‘I don’t know. Her parents died years ago. There’s really nothing here for her. Except memories, I guess. She always mentioned feeling incomplete in a way.’

Thornton lit another cigarette and stood, briefly looking out the window, then turned back.

‘People don’t just die and reappear. You sure that’s all?’

Tom flinched. ‘You think I’m hiding something. Did something to her?’

‘Wasn’t saying that. But men chasing missing wives isn’t something new.’

Tom’s breath was shallow, hands bunched into knots, face reddening.

‘Well, it was her. I *know* it. Anyway, I’ve already found her, haven’t I? Wouldn’t need you.’

Thornton paused, nodding slowly.

‘I suppose. Maybe you’re not sure.’

‘Look, I’m sure. I just need to know *why* she would fake her own death. It’s just not normal.’

In that moment, Thornton saw something in this man: his demeanour, the quiet resolve, the underlying conviction, that finally convinced him.

‘Okay. I’ll go and have a look. Can’t promise you anything though.’

‘Alright, Mr Thornton, I appreciate it. Whatever happens.’

But as Tom left the office, melting into the sharp Sydney air, a chill crept up Thornton's spine. The dead didn't simply step back into sunlight. Or stroll through shopping malls with new hair and empty eyes. Yet Tom's reactions seemed genuine, unforced, although he could be a good actor, Thornton reminded himself.

But one thing he knew for sure: people only reappear for a reason.



A week later Tom Adler stared at the photos Thornton threw in front of him, his face pallid. Still disbelieving. It *was* Claire. It wasn't just the facial similarities, but the way she held her head to one side when contemplating something. Yet, in some bizarre way, part of him wanted it to be wrong. Three years of grief had become familiar, almost comfortable. Hope was dangerous, it just made everything hurt again.

'She goes by the name Sarah Wells,' Thornton said. 'Showed up at the women's shelter eight months ago. Just gave her name. People don't ask many questions in these places.'

'Why would she... *is* it Claire?'

'I don't know. We'd need to do a lot more digging.'

He turned to Thornton with sudden resolve. 'Look, whatever's happened, I just want her back.'

Thornton watched closely, trying to detect the slightest chink, that subconscious tick that betrays deeper, insidious emotions. Like retribution.

'That might be a bit more complicated. Why she did this? And why so long to reappear?' Thornton shook his head, telegraphing an obvious message.

'I know what you're saying. But we were happily married. No conflict, no issues.'

'I'm just stating the obvious. It's pretty damn unusual.'

Tom's voice trembled. 'Alright, I'll go and see her. Work it out. Maybe she's got amnesia.'

Thornton sat back, shaking his head.

'Look, like I said, she could just resemble your wife. Grief plays tricks.'

Tom looked up from his lap with a look of steely determination.

'Okay, I get it. You don't want to be involved. Fine. I'll just have to do it myself.'

Against his better judgement, Thornton threw a lifeline, hoping he wouldn't go under himself with this desperate soul.

'Alright,' he conceded. 'I'll go back and talk to her. Alone. It might be the only way to get the truth.'



Thornton stood at the threshold of the modest house in the backstreets of Adelaide, a cold wind brushing his coat. The paint on the house was chipped, the porch sagged slightly, and the sign above the entrance read *Avalon Resource Centre*. He smiled at the Arthurian reference—the island of magic and healing—which seemed appropriate for this women's shelter. Yet the bars on the windows and heavily reinforced front door belied this arcadian image.

Thornton grinned as Maggie Wright opened the front door, a smile gradually forming. With a head of bright pink hair, wide smile and girth to match, she was a force. Thornton had come across her in her Sydney days, taking his clients into the sanctuary of her shelters.

‘How are ya, you old bastard?’ she laughed, as she flung the door open and gave him a bear hug.

‘Great, Mags. You haven’t changed. Still gorgeous.’

‘Just a lot bloody older, mate. Now, down to business. You want to see Sarah?’

He nodded. They’d talked briefly the day before about Sarah’s discovery eight months before. She’d been found wandering near the train station, confused, with no identification and no memory of who she was.

‘Well, you’ve seen it before, Robbie. Minds shut down from the trauma. You know the drill. Softly, softly.’

He nodded, knowing all too well the psychological landmines to be avoided.

They found Sarah in the kitchen, ladling stew with quiet precision, sleeves pulled low despite the heat. Maggie approached her and smiled.

‘This is Robbie, Sarah. Remember I told you about him?’

Sarah nodded but her eyes darted sideways, wary but curious.

‘Can we talk somewhere quiet?’ Thornton ventured softly.

She smiled, but her fingers were clenched into her sleeves. He’d seen that look before: fear dressed up as friendliness.

‘You doing okay?’ he asked as they sat.

Thornton watched her carefully, aware of the boundaries. She smiled, pushing a lock of hair from her face, arms resting on the table.

‘Yeah, it’s nice here,’ she said, voice soft but clipped. Her fingers worrying the edge of a paper cup.

‘Before that?’

A flicker in her eyes. ‘I don’t remember. Mostly gaps. Sometimes sounds remind me of things. A woman singing. Other sensations like the sea, the smell of lilies. Others I can’t recall,’ her voice trailed off, eyes riveted to the ground.

‘Doctors give you a reason?’

She shrugged. ‘Said trauma. Brains hide things to keep us alive.’ Her lips pressed into a thin line, as though sealing away more.

Thornton extracted a dog-eared photograph of Claire from his pocket and slid it over, watching her face.

‘When you look at this woman, what do you see?’

Something flickered across her face, recognition, confusion, fear. ‘She looks like me...but different.’

‘Her name was Claire Adler. She disappeared three years ago. Happily married. Husband saw you, mistook you for her.’

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The photo trembled in Sarah's hands. 'Me? Why?'

Thornton leaned forward carefully, placing his hand on hers, talking slowly. 'Well, the records show something that might shock you, Sarah.'

Her eyes shot up to meet his, face draining of colour.

'You're her identical twin sister, separated as very young children. Obviously, the resemblance is uncanny.'

Her knuckles whitened around the cup, face ashen, eyes fixed like lasers on the photo.

'That's not *possible*... I... I don't have a sister,' she whispered yet her voice suggested uncertainty.

Thornton rested a hand on her shoulder, gentle but steady.

'Sarah. There's no doubt you're sisters. But there's another possibility.'

Her lips trembled, but her look was sharp. 'Oh my god. Does he think *I'm* her?'

'What do you think?'

She stood, wrapping her arms around herself almost like a shield, shaking her head. Tears welled. 'I don't *know*... who I am.'

'Sometimes people disappear from their own lives. Sometimes they need to forget who they were.'

Sarah stared at the photograph, mind reeling. 'But I remember being here for so long. The doctors, my amnesia...'

'Do you? Or do you remember being told you had amnesia?' Thornton's voice was gentle but persistent. 'What's the first thing you actually remember?'

She closed her eyes, palms pressed against her temples. 'The sound of a train, someone calling my name, but I couldn't answer.'

Thornton leaned back, studying her. 'Ever wake up with another name on your lips?'

Startled, her head jerked up. 'Why would you ask that?'

'Just a hunch,' he said lightly. 'Some people forget who they are, but their dreams don't.'

Her eyes sharpened, focusing on something beyond the conversation.

'Mimi,' she almost whispered, testing the name like a key in a lock, fists bunched with wads of her cardigan. Her eyes met Thornton's in a desperate moment, voice trembling. 'I'm scared of what's buried in here, what I might find. It's almost like I'm happy not knowing.'

'I know, Sarah. But the thing is, the truth has a way of surfacing.'

She stared into the distance for a long time, her head awash with indecision, but finally nodded. 'I need to know. This is not living anymore. I'm just existing between possibilities.'

Thornton nodded.

'In the end, Sarah, the real question is whether you're ready for it.'

Sadness flooded her face as Thornton got up to leave, but she grasped his sleeve.

‘Please,’ her voice shook, ‘I’m sorry to be so... umm, look... I need to know. Even if it destroys whatever I’ve found here.’

She looked at him and gave a half smile, squeezing his hand.

‘Thank you for your help.’

Leaving her sitting watching the sun’s rays dappling the ground, this case had become more than just a missing memory. Thornton just hoped he’d made the right decision.



Two weeks later, Thornton returned to the shelter, Tom waiting nearby on a bench.

‘Are you sure about this?’ he asked.

Sarah stood, watching Tom through the window, his posture both hopeful and defeated. Something in her chest tightened. Was it recognition or empathy?

‘I don’t know, Robbie. I’ll just have to take one step at a time.’

She walked across slowly, each step feeling like choosing between lives. Tom looked up as she approached.

‘Hello,’ she said, sitting beside him.

‘Hey. Sorry... umm... I’m not sure what to call you.’ His voice broke on the words as she put her warm hand on his and looked into his eyes.

‘I don’t know who I am, Tom, but I... *we*... need to know the truth. I remember fragments—a man’s cologne, shared things, but I don’t know if they’re my memories or dreams I’ve built around a photograph.’

Tom studied her face. ‘You used to hum when you cooked. Mozart, usually.’

Sarah felt a flutter of something, perhaps memory or imagination. ‘Did I... uh, Claire... love you?’

‘I thought so. But if you’re her, if you left... maybe I was wrong about everything.’

‘What if I remembered everything right now? Would you still want me to remember?’

Tom was quiet. ‘I thought I wanted answers. But maybe the questions are easier than the truth.’

They sat in silence as the sun set.

‘I may never know who I really am,’ Sarah said finally. ‘But I know who I am right now. Someone who wants to stop running from herself, whoever that might be. My name is Sarah. Or Claire. Or someone in between. Does it matter?’

‘I don’t know,’ Tom said. ‘But maybe we can figure it out together.’

He reached for her hand.



Thornton stepped back toward the gate, lighting a cigarette as a train horn sounded in the distance. Watching them, he felt the old, familiar unease of a puzzle forced into place. Maybe it was Claire. Maybe it wasn’t.

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Thornton exhaled, smoke curling away into the Adelaide dusk. Some truths, he knew, were worse than lies.

AUTHORS NOTE

This story started as a competition piece but it asked more of me so I turned it into a published version: *The Memory Thief* which was the first in the series I am calling *Tracer* (2 books in and mor to come). This is a *very* different psychological thriller from what we have here although the bones are there for it. The inspiration came from a “what if” moment – what if a man saw his dead wife three years later in a completely different city and who did not recognise him.

This version resolves quite differently from *The Memory Thief* but still in a satisfying but mildly disturbing way. It is the end, the questions raised by Robbie Thornton finding this woman, that I hope lingers.

You can email me at **des9999@live.com.au**. I’d love to hear what you think about this one.