

## GRAHAM SWIFT

*Remember This*

They were married now and had been told they should make their wills, as if that was the next step in life, so one day they went together to see a solicitor, Mr Reeves. He was not as they'd expected. He was soft-spoken, silver-haired and kindly. He smiled at them as if he'd never before met such a sweet newly married young couple, so plainly in love yet so sensibly doing the right thing. He was more like a vicar than a solicitor, and later Nick and Lisa shared the thought that they'd wished Mr Reeves had actually married them. Going to see him was in fact not unlike getting married. It had the same mixture of solemnity and giggly disbelief – are we really doing this? – the same feeling of being a child in adult's clothing.

They'd thought it might be a rather grim process. You can't make a will without thinking about death, even when you're twenty-four and twenty-five. They'd thought Mr Reeves might be hard going. But he was so nice. He gently steered them through the delicate business of making provision for their dying together, or with the briefest of gaps in between. 'In a car accident say,' he said, with an apologetic smile. That was like contemplating death indeed, that was like saying they might die tomorrow.

But they got through it. And, all in all, the fact of having drafted your last will and testament and having left all your worldly possessions – pending children – to your spouse was every bit as significant and as enduring a commitment as a wedding. Perhaps even more so.

And then there was something . . . Something.

Though it was a twelve-noon appointment and wouldn't take long, they'd both taken the day off and, without discussing it but simultaneously, dressed quite smartly, as if for a job interview. Nick wore a suit and tie.

*Remember This*

Lisa wore a short black jacket, a dark red blouse and a black skirt which, though formal, was also eye-catchingly clingy. They both knew that if they'd turned up at Mr Reeves' office in jeans and T-shirts it wouldn't have particularly mattered – he was only a high street solicitor. On the other hand this was hardly an everyday event, for them at least. They both felt that certain occasions required an element of ceremony, even of celebration. Though could you celebrate making a will?

In any case, if just for themselves, they'd dressed up a bit, and perhaps Mr Reeves had simply been taken by the way they'd done this. Thus he'd smiled at them as if, so it seemed to them, he was going to consecrate their marriage all over again.

It was a bright and balmy May morning, so they walked across the common. There was no point in driving (and when Mr Reeves said that thing about a car accident they were glad they hadn't). There was no one else to think about, really, except themselves and their as yet unmet solicitor. As they walked they linked arms or held hands, or Nick's hand would wander to pat Lisa's bottom in her slim black skirt. The big trees on the common were in their first vivid green and full of singing birds.

They were newly married, but it had seemed to make no essential difference. It was a 'formality', as today was a formality. Formality was a lovely word, since it implied the existence of informality and even in some strange way gave its blessing to it. Nick let his palm travel and wondered if his glad freedom to let it do so was in any way altered, even enhanced, now that Lisa was his wife and not just Lisa.

Married or not, they were still at the stage of not being able to keep their hands off each other, even in public places. As they walked across the common to see Mr Reeves, Nick found himself considering that this might only be a stage – a stage that would fade or even cease one day. They'd grow older and just get used to each other. They wouldn't just grow older, they'd age, they'd *die*. It was why they were doing what they were doing today. And it was the deal with marriage.

It seemed necessary to go down this terminal path of thought even as they walked in the sunshine. Nonetheless, he let his palm travel.

And in Mr Reeves' office, though it was reassuring that Mr Reeves was so nice, one thing that helped Nick, while they were told about the various circumstances in which they might die, was thinking about Lisa's



arse and hearing the tiny slithery noises her skirt made whenever she shifted in her seat.

It was a beautiful morning, but he'd heard a mixed forecast and he'd brought an umbrella. Having your will done seemed, generally, like remembering to bring an umbrella.

When they came out – it took less than half an hour – the clouds had thickened, though the bright patches of sky seemed all the brighter. 'Well, that's that,' Nick said to Lisa, as if the whole thing deserved only a relieved shrug, though they both felt an oddly exhilarating sense of accomplishment. Lisa said, 'Wasn't he *sweet*?' and Nick agreed immediately, and they both felt also, released back into the spring air, a great sense of animal vitality.

There was a bloom upon them and perhaps Mr Reeves couldn't be immune to it.

They retraced their steps, or rather took a longer route via the White Lion on the edge of the common. It seemed appropriate, however illogical, after what they'd done, to have a drink. Yes, to celebrate. Lunch, a bottle of wine, why not? In fact, since they both knew that, above all, they were hungry and thirsty for each other, they settled for nothing more detaining than two prawn sandwiches and two glasses of Sauvignon. The sky, at the window, meanwhile turned distinctly threatening.

By the time they'd crossed back over the common the rain had begun, but Nick had the umbrella, under which it was necessary to huddle close together. As he put it up he had the fleeting thought that its stretched black folds were not unlike women's tight black skirts. He'd never before had this thought about umbrellas, only the usual thoughts – that they were like bats' wings or that they were vaguely funereal – and this was like other thoughts and words that came into his head on this day, almost as if newly invented. It was a bit like the word kindly suddenly presenting itself as the exact word to describe Mr Reeves.

As they turned the corner of their street it began to pelt down and they broke into a run. Inside, in the hallway, they stood and panted a little. It was dark and clammy and with the rain beating outside a little like being inside a drum. They climbed the stairs to their flat, Lisa going first. Nick had an erection and the words 'stair rods' came into his mind.

It was barely two o'clock and the lower of the two flats was empty. Nick thought – though very quickly, since his thoughts were really elsewhere – of how incredibly lucky they were to be who they were and to have a flat of their own to go to on a rainy afternoon. It was supposed to be a 'starter home' and they owed it largely to Lisa's dad. It was supposed to be a first stage. He thought of stages again, if less bleakly this time. Everything in life could be viewed as a stage, leading to other stages and to having things you didn't yet have. But right now he felt they had everything, the best life could bring. What more could you want? And they'd even made their wills.

He'd hardly dropped the sopping umbrella into the kitchen sink than they were both, by inevitable progression, in the bedroom, and he'd hardly removed his jacket and pulled across the curtains than Lisa had unbuttoned her red blouse. She'd let him unzip her skirt, she knew how he liked to.

It rained all afternoon and kept raining, if not so hard, through the evening. They both slept a bit, then got up, picked up the clothes they'd hastily shed, and thought about going for a pizza. But it was still wet and they didn't want to break the strange spell of the day or fail to repeat, later, the manner of their return in the early afternoon. It seemed, too, that they might destroy the mood if they went out dressed in anything less special than what they'd worn earlier. But just for a pizza?

So – going to the other extreme – they took a shared bath, put on bathrobes, and settled for Welsh rarebit. They opened the only bottle of wine they had, a Rioja that someone had once brought them. They found a red twisty candle left over from Christmas. They put on a favourite CD. Outside, the rain persisted and darkness, though it was May, came early. The candle flame and their white-robed bodies loomed in the kitchen window.

Why this day had become so special, a day of celebration, of formality mixed with its flagrant opposite, neither of them could have said exactly. It happened. Having eaten and having drunk only half the bottle, it seemed natural to drift back to bed, less hurriedly this time, to make love again more lingeringly.

Then they lay awake a long time holding each other, talking and



listening to the rain in the gutters and to the occasional slosh of a car outside. They talked about Mr Reeves. They wondered what it was precisely that had made him so sweet. They wondered if he was happily married and had a family, a grown-up family. Surely he would have all those things. They wondered how he'd met Mrs Reeves – they decided her name was Sylvia – and what she was like. They wondered if he'd been perhaps a little jealous of their own youth or just, in his gracious way, gladdened by it.

They wondered if he found wills merely routine or if he could be occasionally stopped short by the very idea of two absurdly young people making decisions about death. He must have made his own will. Surely – a good one. They wondered if a good aim in life might simply be to become like Mr Reeves, gentle, courteous and benign. Of course, that could only really apply to Nick, not to Lisa.

Then Lisa fell asleep and Nick lay awake still holding her and thinking. He thought: What is Mr Reeves doing now? Is he in bed with Mrs Reeves – with Sylvia? He wondered if when Mr Reeves had talked to them in his office he'd had any idea of how the two of them, his clients (and that was a strange word and a strange thing to be), would spend the rest of the day. He hoped Mr Reeves had had an inkling.

He wondered if he really might become like Mr Reeves when he was older. If he too would have (still plentiful and handsome) silver hair.

Then he forgot Mr Reeves altogether and the overwhelming thought came to him: Remember this, remember this. Remember this always. Whatever comes, remember this.

He was so smitten by the need to honour and consummate this thought that even as he held Lisa in his arms his chest felt full and he couldn't prevent his eyes suddenly welling. When Lisa slept she sometimes unknowingly nuzzled him, like some small creature pressing against its mother. She did this now, as if she might have quickly licked the skin at the base of his neck.

He was wide awake. Remember this. He couldn't sleep and he didn't want to sleep. The grotesque thought came to him that he'd just made his last will and testament, so he could die now, it was all right to die. This might be his deathbed and this, with Lisa in his arms, might be called dying happy – surely it could be called dying happy – the very thing that

no will or testament, no matter how prudent its provisions, could guarantee.

But no, of course not! He clasped Lisa, almost wanting to wake her, afraid of his thought.

Of course not! He was alive and happy, intensely alive and happy. Then he had the thought that though he'd drafted his last testament it was not in any real sense a testament, it was not even *his* testament. It was only a testament about the minor matter of his possessions and what should become of them when he was no more. But it was not the real testament of his life, its stuff, its story. It was not a testament at all to how he was feeling *now*.

How strange that people solemnly drew up and signed these crucial documents that were really about their non-existence, and didn't draw up anything – there wasn't even a word for such a thing – that testified to their existence.

Then he realized that in all his time of knowing her he'd never written a love letter to this woman, Lisa, who was sleeping in his arms. Though he loved her completely, more than words could say – which was perhaps the simple reason why he'd never written such a thing. Love letters were classically composed to woo and to win, they were a means of getting what you didn't have. What didn't he have? Perhaps they were just silly wordy exercises anyway. He hardly wrote letters at all, let alone love letters, he hardly *wrote* anything. He wouldn't be any good at it.

And yet. And yet the need to write his wife a love letter assailed him. Not just a random letter that might, in theory, be one among many, but *the* letter, the letter that would declare to her once and for all how much he loved her and why. So it would be there always for her, as enduring as a will. The testament of his love, and thus of his life. The testament of how his heart had been full one rainy night in May when he was twenty-five. He would not need to write any other.

So overpowering was this thought that eventually he disengaged his arms gently from Lisa and got out of bed. He put on his bathrobe and went into the kitchen. There was the lingering smell of toasted cheese and there was the unfinished bottle of wine. They possessed no good-quality notepaper, unless Lisa had a private stash, but there was a box of A4 by the computer in the spare room and he went in and took a couple of sheets



and found a blue roller-ball pen. He'd never had a fountain pen or used real ink, but he felt quite sure that this thing had to be handwritten, it would not be the thing it should be otherwise. He'd noticed that Mr Reeves had a very handsome fountain pen. Black and gold. No doubt a gift from Sylvia.

He returned to the kitchen, poured a little wine and very quickly wrote, so it seemed like a direct release of the thickness in his chest:

*My darling Lisa,*

*One day you walked into my life and I never thought something so wonderful could ever happen to me. You are the love of my life . . .*

The words came so quickly and readily that, not being a writer of any kind, he was surprised by his sudden ability. They were so right and complete and he didn't want to alter any of them. Though they were just the beginning.

But no more words came. Or it seemed that there were a number of directions he might take, in each of which certain words might follow, but he didn't know which one to choose, and didn't want, by choosing, to exclude the others. He wanted to go in all directions, he wanted a totality. He wanted to set down every single thing he loved about his wife, every moment he'd loved sharing with her – which was almost *every* moment – including of course every moment of this day that had passed: the walk across the common, the rain, her red blouse, her black skirt, the small slithery sounds she made sitting in a solicitor's office, which of course were the sounds any woman might make shifting position in a tight skirt, but the important thing was that *she* was making them. She was making them even as she made her will, or rather as they made *their* wills, which were really only wills to each other.

But he realized that if he went into such detail the letter would need many pages. Perhaps it would be better simply to say, 'I love everything about you. I love all of you. I love every moment spent with you.' But these phrases, on the other hand, though true, seemed bland. They might be said of anyone by anyone.

Then again, if he embarked on the route of detail, the letter could hardly all be written now. It would need to be a thing of

stages – stages! – reflecting their continuing life together and incorporating all the new things he found to commemorate. That would mean that it would be all right if he wrote no more now, he could pick it up later. And he'd written the most important thing, the beginning. But then if he picked it up later, it might become an immense labour – if truly a labour of love – a labour of years. There'd be the question: When would he stop, when would he bring it to its conclusion and deliver it?

A love letter was useless unless it was delivered.

He'd hardly begun and already he saw these snags and complications, these reasons why this passionate undertaking might fail. And he couldn't even think of the next thing to say. Then the words that he'd said to himself silently in his head, even as he held Lisa in his arms, rushed to him, as the very words he should write to her now and the best way of continuing:

*I never thought something so wonderful could happen to me. You are the love of my life. Remember this always. Whatever comes, remember this . . .*

Adding those words, in this way, made his chest tighten again and his eyes go prickly. And he wondered if that in itself was enough. It was entirely true to his feelings and to this moment. He should just put the date on it and sign it in some way and give it to Lisa the next morning. Yes, that was all he needed to do.

But though emotion was almost choking him, it suddenly seemed out of place – so big, if brief, a statement looking back at him from a kitchen table, with the smell of toasted cheese all around him. Suppose the mood tomorrow morning was quite different, suppose he faltered. Then again, that 'whatever comes' seemed ominous, it seemed like tempting fate, it seemed when you followed it through even to be about catastrophe and death. It shouldn't be there at all perhaps. And yet it seemed the essence of the thing. 'Whatever comes, remember this.' That was the essence.

Then he reflected that the essence of love letters was that they were about separation. It was why they were needed in the first place. They were about yearning and longing and distance. But he wasn't separated from Lisa – unless being the other side of a wall counted as separation. He could be with her whenever he liked, as close to her as possible, he'd



made love to her twice today. Though as he'd written those additional words, 'whatever comes', he'd had the strange sensation of being a long way away from her, like a man in exile or on the eve of battle. It was what had brought the tears to his eyes.

In any case there it was. It was written. And what was he supposed to do with it? Just keep it? Keep it, but slip it in with the copy of his will – the 'executed' copy – so that after his death Lisa would read it? Read what he'd written on the night after they'd made their wills. Is that what he intended?

And how did he know he would die *first*? He'd simply had that thought so it would enable Lisa to read the letter. But how did he know she wouldn't die first? And he didn't want to think about either of them dying, he didn't want to think of dying at all. And even supposing Lisa read these words – these very words on this bit of paper! – after his death, wouldn't they in one undeniable and inescapable sense be too late? Though wouldn't that moment, after his death, be in another sense precisely the right moment?

Love letters are written out of separation.

He didn't know what to do. He'd written a love letter and it had only brought on this paralysis. But he couldn't cancel what he'd written. He folded the sheet of A4 and, returning to the spare room, found an envelope, on which he wrote Lisa's name, simply her name: Lisa. Without sealing the envelope, he put the letter in a safe and fairly secret place. There were no really secret places in the flat and he would have been glad to declare that he and Lisa had no secrets. Had the opportunity arisen, he might have done so to Mr Reeves. But now – it was almost like some misdeed – there was this secret.

But he couldn't cancel it. Some things you can't cancel, they stare back at you. There was nothing experimental or feeble or lacking about those words. His heart had spilled over in them.

He went back to bed. He fitted himself against Lisa's body. She'd turned now onto her other side, away from his side of the bed, but she was fast asleep. He kissed the nape of her neck. He wanted to cradle her and protect her. Thoughts came to him that he might add to the letter, if he added to it. But the letter was surely already complete.

His penis stiffened, contentedly and undemandingly, against his wife.

She knew nothing about it, or about his midnight session with pen and paper. He thought again about Mr Reeves and about last wills and testaments. Pen. Penis. It was funny to think about the word penis and the word testament in the same breath, as it were. Words were strange things. He thought about the word testicle.

The rain was still gurgling outside and whether it stopped before he fell asleep or he fell asleep first he didn't remember.

The truth is he did nothing with the letter the next morning. He might have propped it conspicuously, after sealing the envelope, on the kitchen table, but he didn't want to disturb the tender atmosphere that still lingered from yesterday, even though that same tenderness gave him his licence. Wouldn't the letter only endorse it? He felt a little cowardly, though why? For what he'd put in writing?

He looked adoringly, perhaps even rather pleadingly, at Lisa, as if she might have helped him in his dilemma. She looked slightly puzzled, but she also looked happy. She was hardly going to say, 'Go on, give me the letter.'

His line of thought to himself was still that the letter wasn't finished. Yes, he'd add to it later. It would be premature, at this point, to hand it over. Though he also knew there was no better point. And the moment was passing.

It was a Saturday morning. Outside, the rain had stopped, but a misty breath hung in the air, and over them hung still the curiously palpable, anointing fact that they were people who'd made their wills.

The truth is he could neither keep nor deliver, nor destroy, nor even resume the letter. It was simply there. Though he did keep it, by default. His hesitation over delivering it, a thing at first of just minutes and hours, became a prolonged, perennial reality, a thing of years, like his excuse that he'd continue it.

And one day, one bad day, he did, nearly, destroy it. It was a long time later, but the letter was still there, still as it was on that wet night in May, still in the envelope with the single word 'Lisa' on it, but now like a piece of history.

And his will, now, would certainly need altering. But not yet. Not yet.

He thought of destroying the letter. It had suddenly and almost accusingly come into his mind – that letter! But the thought of destroying a love letter seemed almost as melodramatic and sentimental as writing one.

How did you destroy a love letter? The only way was to burn it. The smell of Welsh rarebit reinvaded his nostrils. You found some ceremonial-looking dish and set light to the letter and watched it burn. Though the *real* way to burn a love letter was to fling it into a blazing fire and for good measure thrust a poker through it. And to do this you should really be sitting at a hearthside, rain at the window, in a long finely quilted silk dressing gown . . .

Then his chest filled and his eyes melted just as they'd done when he first penned the letter.

The truth is they separated. Then they needed lawyers, in duplicate, to decide on the settlement and on how the two children would be provided for. And, in due course, to draw up new wills. He didn't destroy the letter, and he didn't send it on finally to its intended recipient, as some last-ditch attempt to resolve matters and bring back the past, or even as some desperate act of guilt-inducement, of warped revenge. This would have betrayed its original impulse, and how hopeless anyway either gesture would have been. She might have thought it was all a fabrication, that he hadn't really written the letter on the 10th of May all those years ago – if so, why the hell hadn't he delivered it? – that he'd concocted it only yesterday. It was another, rather glaring, example of his general instability.

He didn't destroy it, he kept it. But not in the way he'd waveringly and wonderingly kept it for so many years. He kept it now only for himself. Who else was going to look at it?

Occasionally, he took it out and read it. He knew the words, of course, by heart, but it was important now and then, even on every 10th of May, to see them sitting on the paper. And when he looked at them it was like looking at his own face in the mirror, but not at a face that would obligingly and comfortingly replicate whatever he might do – wrinkle his nose, bare his teeth. It was a face that had found the separate power to smirk back at him when he wasn't smirking himself, and to have an expression in its eyes, which his own eyes could never have mustered, that said, 'You fool, you poor sad fool.'

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