My Memories of a Future Life

Roz Morris lives in London. From the earliest age she had a compulsion to express herself on the page. Let out of London university, she was soon working as a journalist and writing novels. You’ll have seen her books on the bestseller lists but not under her name because she ghostwrote them for other people. She is now coming into the daylight with novels of her own.

When not at a qwerty keyboard she enjoys the 88-key kind, though she readily admits she handles the instrument with even less tact than the worst pianist in this novel.
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Thanks

To John Whitbourn, Jane Conway-Gordon, Catherine Pellegrino, Ron Abramski, Frazer Payne, Porter Anderson, Victoria Mixon, Joan Morris and most of all to my husband Dave Morris. All novels need their believers. Thank you all for believing in this one.
The Red Season
Within the soundproofed walls, the candles knew the truth. This wasn’t nirvana. It was a building in the grimy backlands of Clapham Junction station. In the yoga studio all was hushed, but the candle flames stirred to agitated vibration as a train passed. Delicate instruments, shivering to an influence none of us could hear or feel.

The truth was I shouldn’t be here, lying still on a purple slip of mat in a row of people who looked like they’d all fallen from the sky. Being told by a barefoot girl to empty my mind. To quiet my thoughts. And just be.

Quiet was something I’d had too much of in the past few weeks.

If this were a proper day I’d be at my Yamaha grand piano, sending glorious noise out of its black wing. For hours I would see only the black and white keys. My reflection in the lacquer-black bodywork swaying across the gold lettering. My hands lifting and falling. And today, being the first Monday of the month, I should have been at my tutor’s house.

That was before the pain.

Now, on this first Monday, instead of dancing up a storm of demisemiquavers on his Hamburg Steinway, I was lying on a wooden floor on a sticky mat, trying to be – quiet. I hadn’t done yoga before. I was trying to like it. I’d heard so many people say they loved it with a passion, but so far I didn’t get it. We’d been here for ages and all we seemed to be doing was lying down. Although the instructor didn’t call it lying down. She called it a posture.

‘Shavasana,’ she intoned as she passed me at a serene pace, toes spreading with each step. ‘It means corpse pose.’

In the mirror I could see the clock. We had been here only ten minutes. How time drags when you’re a corpse. But I’m not good with things that need to be done slowly.

It must be the pianist temperament. Pianos are percussion instruments. They can’t give you long swelling notes like strings or woodwind. You need to keep moving; keep the pulse.

The instructor continued her slow tour. ‘Think of nothing,’ she said. ‘Absolute nothing.’

The rhythm of her feet suggested a tempo, and then the slow movement of Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto. That moment when the orchestra goes quiet and the piano comes in with a languorous, meandering scale –

No, that wasn’t nothing. Try again.

I looked at the white ceiling tiles and tried to be blank like they were. Ah, they weren’t blank. They had a pattern, like they’d been designed to resemble something – what? Wood grain? Crazy paving?

No, that wasn’t nothing.
The candle flames trembled. They knew, even if we didn’t, that another train was passing. With somewhere to go. I studied the orange tongues, tried to pick up the iron beat drumming into the topsoil, the bedrock, the bricks that made this building, the boards of this wooden floor.

For heaven’s sake. Was this all we were going to do?
I’d expected yoga to be more enthralling. Overwhelming. Engulfing.

The instructor reached the front of the room and folded into a cross-legged position between the candles.

‘Feel your chakras aligning,’ she said. ‘Feel your chi. Flowing through your meridians.’

Meridians.

In the last few weeks I’d had my stuffing searched inside out. They’d found arteries. Veins. Nerves. Muscles. Tendons. Ligaments. Joint capsules. Synovial fluid. Long bones and the hollows in their core. Carpals. Metacarpals. Phalanges like witch talons. I’d been ultrasounded, CTd, x-rayed, y-rayed, z-rayed. What they didn’t find, ever, was chakras, meridians or chi.

‘Time your breathing with your heartbeat. Feel your heartbeat. Through your temples...’

I heard a sound behind me. A sort of muted rasp.

No, surely it couldn’t be, not in the holy yoga class.

‘Yes,’ smiled the instructor. ‘Let go of everything. Let go of self. Let go and just be.’

It was well past time for me to let go. I stood up and folded my mat. I tried to do it quietly but the purple plastic made a sticky slapping noise which earned irritated looks from some of the corpses. No one scowled at the corpse who’d farted, though.

I dumped the mat on the rack and grabbed my shoes. Being trainers, not slippers or hobbitty clogs like everyone else had, the teacher had placed them reprovingly at the door. And I left.

The club was windowless like an airport. I passed from yoga studio to changing room to reception without a clue what weather to prepare for.

When I reached reception the front door swung open and the horrible truth greeted me. Heavy, hissing rain. Oh great. I had a twenty-minute walk home.

I zipped up my inadequate fleece and prepared for a miserable journey.

‘Are you walking?’ said the receptionist. ‘Do you want to borrow one of the club umbrellas?’

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I’ve got RSI.’

‘RSI? Is that a class?’

A woman pushed in through the doors, her grey tracksuit streaked with rain, her hair in dripping straggles.

I hesitated, looking at the jolly brolly propped by the reception back office. But I couldn’t take it.
In medieval times there was a kind of torture where your hands were bound in soaking cloths. As they dried they squeezed your hands like little birds in a vice, an inescapable ache hammering in the bones. If I carried an umbrella for half an hour, that’s how it would feel.

I’d tried yoga because my specialist had run out of other solutions.

The pain began a few months ago. As I finished my work at the keyboard, as the last chords left the iron frame and steel strings, the penalty came creeping in. Persistent, neon flashes, deep in the structures of my wrists, fingers and arms.

If you were gardening and you felt pains like that you’d stop and take yourself to the doctor. I ignored it.

All musicians had aches and twinges. I had seen violinists put down their instrument after a long rehearsal and take two entire minutes to uncurl their necks.

Music is physical. Playing a concert grand is hard work; the action is much stiffer than a household upright. To bring out their big sound takes real strength. You might play a passage of sixteenths at a tempo of 120 beats per minute, which is four notes per second, every second, and you might do it for hours. So of course we get sore.

I thought it was just a bad patch. I started to be careful away from the piano. Umbrellas were avoided. I stopped opening jars. Tins likewise. But instead of relief, each week needed another sacrifice. Years before, the gauze of short sight had descended like a set of veils until I couldn’t read the music in front of me. Now this damage closed down my whole life in millimetres.

Sometimes I woke in my bed at night, with a feeling like my arms were long gloves stroked by wire brushes. A horrible, painful prickling that went on for hours, as though my nerves were a crackling storm.

A month ago I was on my way into the ENO rehearsal room. Three mornings a week I played accompaniment for opera and ballet rehearsals. I gripped the door handle and gave it a good twist.

Then I was standing still, paralysed, because it felt as though my entire wrist was about to snap.

The conductor found me by the door, waiting for the courage to move. He looked straight at my hands.

‘Just warming up,’ I said. Musicians don’t talk about injury. If a concert organiser or an ensemble suspects you might not play, they’ll find someone else.

‘I used to be a pianist,’ he said. ‘Now I can’t touch a piano. Go and see a specialist.’

I did.

The specialist did his tests, said I had repetitive strain injury, and told me to rest for a month. For three weeks now I hadn’t touched a piano at all.

I reached my road: two facing rows of 1930s Tudor-looking houses. The hood of my
fleece was clinging to my head like a wet sheet. Each footfall pumped freezing water around the inside of my trainers. I pushed through the gate and the overgrown hedge whipped me with wet fronds.

Parked in the porch was a bike, its saddle covered with a Sainsbury’s bag.

My housemate, Jerry, must have Tim over again.

No way could I make small talk with a visitor. And the bike had fallen across the door, a stupid place to leave it. I’d have to move it before I could get in. I leaned on the wall and hooked my foot through the cross-bar. What I’d intended was that the bike should move neatly aside but it perversely crashed onto the porch, handlebars pointing backwards. The front door was snatched open.

Jerry stood there, his shaved head grained with stubble and his black eyebrows horrified. ‘Why are you kicking Tim’s bike?’

I waved my hands at him. ‘Because I’m not allowed to pick it up.’

Of course I could have picked it up, but the specialist had said everything I did with my hands had to be rationed. I’d denied myself an umbrella, so why did an unwanted visitor deserve precious hand time?

And I was worn out and worn down and the wind was gusting on my skin as though the rain had dissolved all my clothes.

‘Tell him if he’s going to park his bike like a clown he might as well ride a unicycle,’ I added, just in case my mood wasn’t clear, and hurried into the hall.

‘Glad to see the yoga’s working,’ muttered Jerry.

In the lounge, Tim the offender was sitting on the sofa, peering at me with curiosity. Looking at the foul-tempered prima donna pianist, as well he might. I rushed upstairs.

‘Wow,’ I heard Tim say, ‘she’s got an artistic temperament all right.’

I locked myself in the bathroom, turned the taps on. The noise was cathartic, like the howl that had been churning inside me all day. I sat on the bath’s rim, exhausted and cold. The spray from the taps sent hot mist over my back.

On the radiator was a pair of white cotton gloves, drying. The specialist had told me to wear them so that I would realise every time I used my hands. I certainly did; they made everything slippery. I couldn’t type emails, or write longhand, send texts or even hold a mug of tea. I’d sniggered at the suggestion when it was first made, imagining Victorian gentlewomen and dandyish hip-hop stars. Now I’d lost my sense of humour about them.

I peeled off my clothes. As they slapped onto the floor I saw a lime green Post-It note with a calm face drawn on it.

Jerry had them all over the house. I must have dislodged it when I came up the stairs.

He was prone to panic attacks. He’d had them for years but recently they’d been getting worse. He’d gone to doctors, who gave him things to do like sticking green smileys everywhere. I was forever finding one stuck to my foot as I walked out of the
house, or opening the fridge to see a green grin. Painful as it was, I’d find a pen and annotate them. The one in the fridge had a slurping tongue. The one in the microwave had gone cross-eyed. Jerry, strangely, never said anything about how they were acquiring personalities.

I turned the taps off and slid into the bath. Sat in the water gazing at that green face – which I’d given a blindfold to, under the circumstances.

I don’t know what it did for Jerry but it made me furious. I wished someone could prescribe me a cheery face to take everything away.

I couldn’t go downstairs again. I couldn’t think of how to get us all chatting normally and passing cups of tea around or glasses of wine. I stayed in the bath, the water turning tepid like my anger, until I heard Tim and Jerry go out and I could tiptoe back into my home.
Chapter 2

Four weeks’ waiting were over. I was in the office of Dr Johnson Golding, consultant in rheumatology and rehabilitation, high up the tower block of Guy’s Hospital.

I’d spent a lot of time in this room, sitting patiently while machines examined, scanned and scrutinized. But all those tests had involved some polite ray doing invisible detective work while I studied the anatomical charts on the walls.

Not today. Electrodes were taped on my forearms, one on the wrist and one in the crook of my elbow. These were connected by red and black wires to a machine with dials and lights. When the switch was thrown, an electric current fired down the main nerves and the doctor watched my thumbs twitch. It was painful and peculiar in a sickening way, like grabbing an electric cable and not being able to let go. Not the million volts they use to fry murderers in Alabama, of course. This was a spider-leg scratching, an electrical rasp, a dance of millipedes under the skin that you felt could do bad things to your heart but only if given the long leisure of a professional torturer.

Now it was over I flexed my fingers, checking they belonged to me again and only moved when I asked them to. Dr Golding peeled the sticky tape off the electrodes, discarded it into a yellow dump bin and rolled the leads into a coil. He gave his verdict. ‘Nerve conductivity seems within normal ranges for both arms.’

‘What does that mean exactly?’

‘It’s normal.’ He looked at me and blinked, as he always did when I asked him to translate his diagnoses. ‘Each nerve is working fine.’

‘And that means?’

‘Your symptoms are not caused by nerve compression.’

I rolled down my shirt sleeves and put my jumper back on. Another test negative. They were always negative. No swellings, no anatomical abnormalities. No explanations. Just mysterious pain.

Jerry had had this too. He’d had tests for asthma, cancer, HIV, his heart wired up to ECGs. Nothing wrong, the doctors said when they’d examined him. Just panic attacks. Have a green smiley.

Dr Golding wheeled the machine back to its parking space, between the ultrasound and some other scanner I’d also had a close encounter with. He sat down at his desk and nudged the mouse. The screen came on, showing my notes and a series of numbers from the electrocution test. He checked them and flicked to another screen which showed how my arms would look if sliced up like salami, in gaudy colours like Andy Warhol prints.

I knew every patch of grey in his salt and pepper hair, or at any rate, those on the left-hand side of his head. I’d watched this view of him, interpreting my case notes, for at least as long as I’d studied his charts and the green paint between them.

When Dr Golding spoke he looked at the screen, as though those diagrams and read-
outs represented me as adequately as the flesh and blood in the chair. ‘You’ve been
resting your hands now for – how long? Four weeks?’

‘Four weeks exactly.’
‘And how’s the pain?’
‘A little better.’

It was, a bit. I could open jars if they weren’t too tight and carry light bags of
shopping. The mundanities I’d phased out in favour of important things.

Dr Golding opened a drawer and stirred the contents with his finger. He pulled out a
thing like a nutcracker and handed it to me. ‘See what happens when you squeeze the
handles together. Right hand first.’

I did as he asked. As my fingers closed on the handles I felt the familiar pain, as if all
the tendons in my wrist were shifting like a points change on a railway track. I was going
to pretend nothing was wrong but he was watching my face carefully.

He took the handles from me and put them in my left hand. That was even worse. He
returned the device to the drawer and pushed it shut with his knee.

‘Maybe it’s painful because I’m a little bit stiff,’ I said. ‘I haven’t been playing.’
He typed more notes at rapid speed. ‘I think you need to rest more.’
More rest? Was that all?
‘Can’t you do anything?’
‘Not really. You need to rest. Come and see me again in another month. Try to relax.’

Jerry had been told to relax too. He’d tried a brief flirtation with Buddhism. Herbal
pills and weird diets. But it hardly mattered what he did. Several times a month I’d hear
him wake with an animal gasp, then he’d pad down the stairs to his studio. I’d hear the
rumble of casters on the bare floorboards as he rolled his chair to the computer. As I
drifted back to sleep he’d be pounding the keyboard, checking in with other sufferers
around the world. In the morning he would still be there, preferring to stay awake than
risk the horrors that waited for him in sleep.

And besides, I only knew one way to relax.

If I’d had a hectic day before I sat down to practise, I didn’t start with scales or
arpeggios. I played my current piece, slow as treacle. The enemy of good playing is
hurrying. If you take your time, you feel how one note wants to move into the next. You
understand the function and organisation of the rhythm. Then you bring it up to speed and
every note is perfectly placed. If I started my practice like that, I was relaxed
immediately. Sit down, slow down, and you’re in the zone.

The trouble is, to do it you need a bloody piano.

I walked out of Dr Golding’s office. Miles of lino stretched into the distance, in stifling
medical green. It had a pale streaked pattern like rain marks on a concrete building. I
passed wards where people sat in dressing gowns with washed-out faces that never saw
the sun, the dialysis suite where a man with a bloated abdomen like a pregnancy waited
for treatment. The place reeked of helplessness.
A nurse bustled past me. The green walls sucked all the colour from her face too. I found myself walking faster, as if to prove I was still fit, to stop the green mile draining me too. Look, I told the walls, I’m able to walk around and I’m a lifelike colour. It’s only my hands that are wrong.

And soon they will be all right. There’s nothing structurally amiss, the scanners said so. The nerves are working fine, we found that out today. This is only temporary.

At the end of the corridor was a door to the stairs. It had a twist handle, the kind I found difficult. There were footsteps behind me and I stood aside to let a figure in a white coat pass me. He opened the door and held it for me with his foot, then slipped into a side door marked *Staff cloakroom*. I mumbled thanks and started down the stairs.

He called to me. ‘You dropped these.’ I turned. He was holding my white gloves.

I walked back up the stairs. I wasn’t looking at the doctor’s face. The white coat made him part of the hospital furniture. I focused on those limp gloves, mumbled thanks again.

‘Carol?’

I looked at him for the first time. About my age. Slim, darkish hair with a side parting that went into a high V on one side of his forehead and made his features look elegant. Eyes emphasised by shadowed creases; that haunted look doctors sometimes have, but quite attractive.

Yes, I recognised him, but only vaguely. It wouldn’t be from college; since the age of sixteen I’d been in music academies. Earlier then. Not my original school because it was girls only, so he must have been a friend of somebody’s friend.

‘It is Carol Lear, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘I remember you playing Rachmaninov at Kate Rafferty’s...’

Today, of all days, he couldn’t have said anything more wounding if he’d tried.

I took my gloves. ‘Thanks.’ I hurried away.