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Opening extract from
Picture Me Gone

Written by
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The first Mila was a dog. A Bedlington terrier. It helps if you know these things. I'm not at all resentful at being named after a dog. In fact, I can imagine the scene exactly. *Mila*, my father would have said, that's a nice name. Forgetting where he'd heard it. And then my mother would remember the dog and ask if he was absolutely sure, and when he didn't answer, she would say, OK, then. Mila. And then looking at me think, Mila, my Mila.

I don't believe in reincarnation. It seems unlikely that I've inherited the soul of my grandfather's long-dead dog. But certain traits make me wonder. Was it entirely coincidence that Mila entered my father's head on the morning of my birth? Observing his daughter, one minute old, he thought first of the dog, Mila? Why?

My father and I are preparing for a journey to New York, to visit his oldest friend. But yesterday things changed. His friend's wife phoned to say he'd left home.

Left home? Gil asks. What on earth do you mean?

Disappeared, she says. No note. Nothing.

Gil looks confused. Nothing?

You'll still come? says the wife.

And when Gil is silent for a moment, thinking it through, she says, Please.

Yes, of course, Gil says, and slowly replaces the phone in its cradle.

He'll be back, Gil tells Marieka. He's just gone off by himself to think for a while. You know what he's like.

But why now? My mother is puzzled. When he knew you were coming? The timing is . . . peculiar.

Gil shrugs. By this time tomorrow he'll be back. I'm certain he will.

Marieka makes a doubtful noise but from where I'm crouched I can't see her face. What about Mila? she says.

A few things I know: It is Easter holiday and I am out of school. My mother is working all week in Holland and I cannot stay at home alone. My father lives inside his head and it is better for him to have company when he travels, to keep him on track. The tickets were bought two months ago.

We will both still go.

I enjoy my father's company and we make a good pair. Like my namesake, Mila the dog, I have a keen awareness of where I am and what I'm doing at all times. I am not given to dreaminess, have something of a terrier's determination. If there is something to notice, I will notice it first.

I am good at solving puzzles.

My packing is nearly finished when Marieka comes to say that she and Gil have decided I should still go. I am already arranging clues in my head, thinking through the possibilities, looking for a theory.

I have met my father's friend sometime in the distant past but I don't remember him. He is a legend in our family for

once saving Gil's life. Without Matthew there would be no me. For this, I would like to thank him, though I never really get the chance.

It seems so long ago that we left London. Back then I was a child.

I am still, technically speaking, a child.

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I know very little about Mila the dog. She belonged to my grandfather when he was a boy growing up in Lancashire and dogs like Mila were kept for ratting not pets. I found a dusty old photo of her in an album my father kept from childhood. Mostly it contains pictures of people I don't know. In the photo, the dog has a crouchy stance, as if she'd rather be running flat out. The person on the other side of the camera interests me greatly. Perhaps it is my grandfather, a boy who took enough pride in his ratting dog to keep a photo of her. Lots of people take pictures of their dogs now, but did they then? The dog is looking straight ahead. If it were his dog, wouldn't it turn to look?

This picture fills me with a deep sense of longing. *Suadade*, Gil would say. Portuguese. The longing for something loved and lost, something gone or unattainable.

I cannot explain the feeling of sadness I have looking at this picture. Mila the dog has been dead for eighty years.

Everyone calls my father Gil. Gil's childhood friend has walked out of the house he shared with his wife and baby. No one knows where he went or why. Matthew's wife

phoned Gil, in case he wanted to change our plans. In case he'd heard something.

He hadn't. Not then.

We will take the train to the airport and it is important to remember our passports. Marieka tells me to take good care of myself and kisses me. She smiles and asks if I will be OK and I nod, because I will. She looks in Gil's direction and says, Take care of your father. She knows I will take care of him as best I can. Age is not always the best judge of competence.

The train doors close and we wave goodbye. I settle down against my father and breathe the smell of his jacket. He smells of books, ink, old coffee pushed to the back of the desk and wool, plus a hint of the cologne Marieka used to buy him; one he hasn't worn in years. The smell of his skin is too familiar to describe. It surprised me to discover that not everyone can identify people by their smell. Marieka says this makes me half dog at least.

I've seen the way dogs sniff people and other dogs on the street or when they return from another place. They want to put a picture together based on clues: Where have you been? Were there cats there? Did you eat meat? So. A wood fire. Mud. Lemons.

If I were a dog and smelled books, coffee and ink in a slightly tweedy wool jacket, I don't know whether I'd think, *That man translates books*. But that is what he does.

I've always wondered why humans developed so many languages. It complicates things. *Makes things interesting*, says Gil.

Today, we are going to America, where we won't need any extra languages. Gil ruffles my hair but doesn't actually notice that I'm sitting beside him. He is deep in a book translated by a colleague. Occasionally he nods.

My mother plays the violin in an orchestra. Scrape scrape scrape, she says when it's time to practise, and closes the door. Tomorrow she will set off to Holland.

I narrow my eyes and focus on a point in the distance. I am subtle, quick and loyal. I would have made a good ratter.

Suadade. I wonder if Gil is feeling that now for his lost friend. If he is, he is not showing any sign of it.