

PRAISE FOR SNAKE ROAD

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Nudge

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The Skinny

‘Poetic prose... The insight into dementia and its impact upon a family is poignant. The novel strongly evokes the Scottish countryside, its link to the past and the secrets it keeps’

We Love this Book

‘Peebles goes from strength to strength with her new novel... The carers’ group scenes are mini-masterpieces of poignant comedy, although it is Peebles’s empathy with fraying minds that gives the novel its power’

Guardian

SUE PEEBLES

Sue Peebles's first novel, *The Death of Lomond Friel*, won the Scottish First Book Award and the Saltire First Book Award, and was shortlisted for Scottish Book of the Year. *Snake Road* has been shortlisted for the Encore Award 2013. Sue was born in Arbroath in 1955. She spent some of her childhood in Detroit before returning to Scotland, where she now lives.

SUE PEEBLES

Snake Road

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A Clear Midnight

*This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes
 thou lovest best,
Night, sleep, death and the stars.*

Walt Whitman



So Soreen

THIS IS all I have to go on, this waxen face slipping under a July moon. I often gaze at it. Sometimes during the bright summer nights I prop myself up on one elbow and watch him sleep. He looks much older asleep than awake. Already his skin has started to sag a little and the slight slip towards the pillow creates lines he hasn't seen yet, an emerging map of cutaneous folds that suggest the older man. In particular, the flesh of his cheek slides nose-ward, giving him a hoggish look.

I wonder where he came from?

Awake, he is boyish, needs a good scrub. Mud freckles all over his clavicle and up his neck, but not on his face. His face is clear. 'Such a lovely complexion,' his mother said, in a tone that suggested his skin made up for something else, the hair perhaps, or the femurs that weren't quite long enough. 'Just an inch would make all the difference.' Diana Thackeray has a way of saying things, marking the place where a 'but' ought to be with a tiny, silent barb. She and her husband David adopted Alasdair when he was just a baby, a tabula rasa with no previous history and no other claimants. I can imagine their optimism, the joy of finding a baby so entirely theirs, but that notion of entirety was

where they went wrong, I think. They failed to reckon on the ghost in the machine.

I suspect Alasdair blames himself for what happened. Of course, no one's to blame; blame doesn't come into it. But if anyone *is* to blame it's me, although I probably haven't really said so, or at least, not in a very convincing way, possibly because I think he can carry the blame more easily, having had all that practice.

WE WERE in the orchard when Alasdair first warned me about his general culpability, how he had learned from a very young age that things were usually his fault. I was lying in a hammock, dangling between two old apple trees, wishing I'd never climbed in because when I did I dropped like a dead weight cut loose. With the trees too close and the hammock too old there wasn't the tautness needed to support me in the easy elegance I had envisaged, where my body settles into a wave of gentle curves, slight and careless and swaying in the summer breeze like a Fijian palm. Instead, I condensed into a great ungainly bulge, as if in a sack. There was no fighting it, my only option was to roll out sideways, but suddenly Alasdair was talking and although I couldn't see him, the source and carry of his voice told me he was lying on the grass with his face to the sun. He must have closed his eyes and it felt important to listen and not distract him. He was telling me how lucky I was to have grown up in such an extraordinary place with such a lovely family.

'Your sun is amazing,' he said. 'It's so bright, even in the trees.'

And right away I knew there was something unusual about him, or at least something unusual about his relationship to the world.

'It's your sun too.'

'No, it's not.'

In the pause I listened to the starlings blethering in exotic riffs.

‘My mother—’ He stopped. I heard his body stretch, a long sigh; imagined his hands clasped behind his head, his feet probably crossed.

‘My mother—’

But he had no words for her, and things petered out. I sensed a beginning, though, the start of something. The jungle chatter of birds rose and fell and I knew that by the time the starlings left we would be together. I tumbled from the hammock as gracefully as I could, levering myself round on the heel of my hands and landing beside him. He was lying exactly as I had pictured him. I propped myself up on one elbow and took my first long look at his face. It was quite an audacious thing to do, I suppose, since we hadn’t long met, but that’s when you stare the longest, at the beginning, and again at the end – just as I am doing now.

I’M NOT sure what happened that day in the orchard, whether it was love or something else, but as we walked back to the house I felt different. I know Alasdair felt different too, having spoken for the first time about the persistent cloud of disappointment that had tainted his childhood – the sense that whatever he did, he fell short. For instance, when he told his mother that he had scored a ninety-eight in chemistry it was the missing two per cent that struck home. ‘What happened?’ she’d said, and explaining the consequences of mistaking an alkane for an alkene only made things worse, her patience running out when he confessed to the erroneous double bond. She was often angry with him, sometimes for reasons he didn’t understand; not that she ever hit him – Diana (call-me-Di) Thackeray abhorred violence of any kind so nothing like that went on, it was all in the looks, the sudden cold that might descend at any moment. He called

it the grey mist and said it was always out there, hanging about – each sunny day bringing the possibility of haar.

When Alasdair told me this there wasn't a trace of self-pity or anger in his voice, but there was sadness, and I sensed something else about him, an oddness I liked, so different from anyone I had been involved with before.

'Christ, I haven't thought about that for years. It's all coming back. Saturated hydrocarbons. Oh my God.'

He spoke slowly, and there was a fondness somewhere – as if Saturated Hydrocarbons were an old friend back from the dead after twenty years. While he lay on the grass with his eyes closed and enjoying the sun I gazed at the freckles spilling out from the neck of his shirt, then slowly I worked my way down to his feet and back again, back to those beguiling marks. They were drawing me in, tempting me downwards. I wanted to lie with him, clamber on top of him there and then, and I might have, but we were positioned quite close to the house and despite the trees we were probably visible, certainly from the upstairs windows. I sat up to drink from the small bottle of water that he had carried with him all afternoon as if it were an elixir, something to mask the taste of an unpalatable life. As I unscrewed the cap I noticed how symmetrical he was, his forearms extending from his head to form a neat kite-mark; log-straight body and legs tied at the ankles. It was a strong, confident pose, but I could see he was shielding himself, his brawny limbs flexed against whatever might assail him, even here amongst the soft mosses and ancient trees. Already falling for this unexpected treasure lying in the grass, I tipped the bottle to my lips and took a long drink. The water was so delicious I scanned the label, searching for the source – a mountain spring in the Cuillins, its tumult a blend of glacier melt, warm snow running down my throat, and the temptations of idle love.

★

FIRST AND foremost there was pleasure. Body and brain pleasure, the taking and the giving of, each as seductive as the other. It began with brain. We met at a British Psychological Society talk entitled 'Anomalous Memory'. These university talks were open to the public and each free ticket entitled you to one glass of wine. Tickets collected beforehand were limited to two per person, and it was when we collided at the wine table for the second time that we remembered colliding the first time, fifteen minutes earlier.

'Did we just meet, before?'

'Possibly.'

Normally this would have been a straightforward recollection, but we had just listened to a Ph.D. student from Bristol explain the various theoretical perspectives of déjà vu, so we weren't sure. I was in my second year at university and had come along because my gran was losing her memory, but not in a straightforward, amusingly forgetful way, she was remembering too, talking about the strangest things, things she'd never spoken of before. Hard to describe or understand, it was as if for each forgotten thing she would conjure up another, from further back.

Clever really, but then she is.

Dad says I've got her brain and I've always been very happy about that, but less so now. I thought from the title of the talk that I might learn something new about how memory works. Alasdair had come along because he was interested in amnesia, for reasons he didn't explain to me until much later. Frankly, there was enough in that one talk to keep us braining for a lifetime. And it wasn't just neurochemistry, we spoke about neurophysics too; not long after that day of strange resurrections in the orchard we moved on to bodies. I was leaning towards a theory of cryptamnesia whilst Alasdair had concluded that déjà vu was nothing more than one eye catching up with the other.

‘There’s only one way to settle this,’ he said.

‘How?’

‘We need to approach it more scientifically by removing as many uncontrolled variables as possible.’

Then, using no discernible method, we took off our clothes.

FOR THE rest of the summer we spent most of our free time together, neglecting friends and family yet loving them more than ever in that resurgent, generous way that sweeps over you when you yourself feel loved. I still drove back to the house every Sunday to spend time with Gran, and each time she made the same observation based simply on what she saw before her.

‘You’re happy!’

Mum said it too, but was more cautious.

‘You seem happy today, Aggie.’

Dad didn’t say anything as such, but he might hum a song as he pulled on his jacket – something schmaltzy like ‘Love is a Many Splendored Thing’ . . .

Which it was.

The starlings began to gather and flock over the Tay, an impossible Escher cloud cutting from light to dark. Autumn was tinder-dry and crisp, the trees petrified and the sharp splinters of grass frosting the earth, wondrous through our crystal lens. Keen-eyed and new, we delighted in all of it, even the darkness, *especially* the darkness – all that night to make love in! By January (lovely January, long and dark and piercingly cold) we were married. Alasdair wanted me to take the Thackeray name, which surprised me but didn’t bother me, since it didn’t matter. What mattered was our own family – the one we were now so set upon creating; less braining and more brooding, making love in a bluebell wood, our bodies sticky in the crushed stems.

Spring was a rushed affair. We didn’t take it in properly

– the blossom and the birds and the smell of wild garlic. I suppose we assumed there'd be another just like it. Suddenly it was summer and still nothing had stuck; the bluebell glue hadn't worked. Mum said we should stop worrying and just take our time, we were both still young, and anyway, I had my degree to finish. 'Focus on that,' she said, sounding odd because she was holding a peg between her teeth, hanging out the washing with her face to the wind and the sheet smacking against her body. I was lying on the garden bench like a spirit level, flat out and unable to help because I'd spent the morning with Alasdair having urgent sex and was keen to let everything settle.

With the sheet tethered she carried the basket back and threw it into the porch so it wouldn't blow away.

'Budge up.'

I moved, but only slightly since she took up so little room. Letting her shoulders drop she slowly rotated her head to ease her neck.

'She's so much worse, Aggie. I don't know what's going to happen.'

She wiped the damp sting from her eyes and closed them against the warm wind. I closed mine too, joined her in the true dark, where everything is stored. We were both thinking of Gran and remembering how things were; different recollections of course, but the feeling the same. I'd already seen Mum engage in small acts of longing – resting her hand on the back of Gran's chair, or setting then un-setting her place at the table because she prefers to eat in her room now, where things are familiar. At first this change of habit brought a kind of liberation. We no longer needed to spread out the tablecloth or fiddle about with cups and saucers – all that washing-up! And the teapot, clad in its ghastly knitted cosy and topped with a woolly rose, no longer sat in the middle of the table. Meals were eaten with less ceremony and ended

more quickly once we gave up the cheeseboard, and although nobody missed the stewed tea and the Cracker Barrel cheddar that Gran swore protected her bones, we all missed her, so Mum restored some of the ritual, beginning with the tablecloth (to protect the table), then the saucers (to protect the cloth), and so on.

The cosy, however, went on Gran's tray, since we felt sure that she would miss it, despite having no memory of it.

A fragrance rose from the laundry and blew over us, scenting the air. I couldn't recall the sheets ever smelling like that before, a sickly perfume that reminded me of the Silver Jubilee soap Gran had kept since 1977, not because she was a royalist but because the box might come in handy. That soap had been in the family longer than me. Lying on my back with my feet resting against Mum's thighbone, I was trying to picture her and Gran as younger women, mother and daughter sitting here on the same bench sunning themselves, when suddenly the wind dropped and they were gone. This terrible prospect seemed to come from nowhere, imposing a momentary stillness before a slight hush in the grasses bore them both back. It was almost immediate, but nevertheless I was scalded by this small fright, pushed upright and catching my breath in the thin air.

Mum moved closer in and we both held on to the outside strut of the bench as if we were bracing ourselves, our arms locked straight and a slight lean into the wind.

I went back to the start, to what we were talking about when she first came out with the washing. I was trying to explain the urgency of things, how I felt weakened by a dogged sense of time running out, and that it was all somehow connected to Gran.

'I think that's why I'm in such a hurry to have this baby, so she can meet her great-grandmother. I want them to get to know one another.'

Mum let go of the bench and started brushing pollen from her long black sleeves. She was frowning, still picking her sleeve as she spoke.

‘You shouldn’t keep saying *this baby*, you know. You can’t just make one up.’

WHEN AT last we did make one I knew right away. I didn’t test for another two weeks because although I was sure, I wanted Alasdair to be sure too, and even then a clear blue positive wasn’t enough. He insisted on coming with me to the clinic. The moment the results came through he put on one of his perversely dated albums and we danced round the room singing the first part of the baby’s musical legacy. He’d been working on this for some time apparently, compiling an eclectic mix on the iPod of pretty much everything, with the exception of opera which he regarded as tainted by the sensibilities of those who owned it (‘Nessun Dorma’ being the epitome of self-sacrifice). After the dance he sat me down, held up one splayed hand to indicate five minutes and left the flat without even closing the front door. I swung my feet onto the sofa and lay down for my first official ‘rest’, opening my eyes occasionally to look about or smooth out my clothes or hair. This attempt at serenity was short-lived and boredom was soon pushing my smile into a range of pouts and grimaces, so when Alasdair got back, breathless and bearing a single Hamlet and a malt loaf, my face was exhausted.

‘You look tired.’

‘Do I?’

The observation pleased me. I watched him peel the waxy paper from the Soreen, a whimsical purchase he’d never made before.

‘Didn’t they have any Madeira cake?’

‘Yes, but this is better for you,’ he said, passing me a huge

slice before lighting his cigar and standing up to smoke it. I waved him to the far side of the room.

‘Open the window.’

‘Yes! Good idea.’ (Like I’d had some kind of brainwave.)

With the cigar clenched between his teeth he pushed back the snib and pulled down the upper window, then he finished his smoke and sat down.

‘Listen, I’ve been thinking. Maybe we shouldn’t tell anyone just yet.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know. I just think we should wait.’

‘But I have to tell Gran.’

‘Right. Well, I don’t suppose that matters. She won’t remember, will she?’

‘No. She won’t remember.’

And I ate my Soreen, washing it down with a swill of strong coffee that made my heart race.

As soon as he left the flat I picked up the phone and told Fiona, just out of habit really, and to practise saying it.

‘Guess what.’

‘What?’

‘I’m pregnant!’

I’ve known Fiona since primary school. I was drawn to her pencil-thin legs, the attraction of envy, I think, and empathy too, as I watched the other girls grab her and tie her tights together at the knees. I can still see her, chicken legs and hen-toed – like a wishbone; she’s pulling at the knot, furious, and I think that’s what I liked best about her, that fury, an indignation that suggested she knew she was worth something.

‘Oh my God, that’s wonderful! Does Alasdair know?’

This is typical of Fiona; only she would consider it likely that I would tell her before I told anyone else, including my husband.

‘Yes, of course he knows. We’ve already celebrated.’

‘Aw, that’s lovely. Did he bring you flowers?’

‘Kind of.’

I didn’t tell her about the malt loaf because although Fiona understands a lot, she doesn’t understand everything.

Broken Hearts

SHE WAS wearing a pair of shoes I'd never seen before, two-tone slip-ons with a side button and a small square heel. The buttons were wrong. They were on the inside of her feet instead of the outside, so that took a while to sort out. It's the kind of thing that used to make me laugh but now it upsets me – Gran wearing her shoes on the wrong feet. She was bemused by it. 'Whose done that?' she said, surrendering her feet. With the shoes sorted I told her I had some exciting news. I was pouring tea from the woolly teapot and she had already started teasing the edge of her Jaffa Cake, rooting for jelly with her dark marbled tongue. She was so intent on it I had to stop and touch her arm to get her attention.

'I've got something to tell you, Gran.'

Smacking her tangy mouth, she seemed not to hear me.

'Gran, listen, I'm going to have a baby.'

I didn't expect her to say anything so it was a surprise to hear her, never mind what she said. Whenever Gran is caught by an unexpected moment of happiness she doesn't speak, she just presses her palms together and holds her hands to her closed lips; the joy goes inwards, but you can see it in her eyes. I've watched those eyes all my life, taken them as my guide.

‘A baby?’

‘Yes!’

And then she said the strangest thing.

‘My baby had a watery mouth.’

‘What?’

‘She wasn’t right. Never even opened her eyes. I don’t know how long, just the rain on her face and then she died.’

There was no drama to it. She sounded so matter-of-fact I thought I’d misheard her.

‘What do you mean?’

But she wouldn’t answer.

‘What do you mean, Gran? – about the baby?’

She was drinking her tea, holding the saucer under her chin and tilting her head with a sudden gentility as she lowered her cup – a curious refinement after the noisy smacking and licking of lips, sucking on her own tongue. I wanted to hear more about the baby but there was an odd look about her that stopped me from asking again. She was concentrating on the line of gilt that edged her Japanese teacup, following it round as if checking for flaws. I felt a sudden protectiveness towards her, but I also felt disappointed at the way my baby had been so quickly usurped by another, a watery-mouthed fiction who came out of the blue, or the not-so-blue – who fell from a rainy sky.

Later that day I sensed a new darkness, as if my gran’s illuminated heart were slipping away from me. I was alone in the kitchen when it happened, on my own and thinking about the baby’s heart, not hers – puzzling over how a pulse begins, that very first spark of being. Suddenly a shadow cast across the room and when I turned to look out of the window there was a blue portrait of sky hanging there, strangely bright in the gloomy interior.

I didn’t sleep at all that night, and now I wonder about the strange umbral shadow that swept through the house.

Was that the instrumental darkness? Or is it madness to think of it that way, the possibility of an elemental conspiracy – both hearts stealing off into the black night?

ALASDAIR WAS right, she didn't remember about the baby and I didn't mention it again. I thought it would be easier to wait until the first slight swell of belly, that lovely rise. It would give us something to focus on. Gran has an eye for detail and is a habitual chronicler of change; typically she charts the weather, but since the forgetting took hold there has been a paring back and now we could chart anything, including the baby's progress. It's something we could do together using an ordinary measuring tape; we could make a graph or something, plot a few points. We both love a good graph. Of course, there would be no lasting trace for her, it would only be those moments – but each immediate pleasure would be shared and that's what would be familiar, the two of us together, living the present just as we lived the past, and with so much more to come.

Three weeks later, on a day soaked in fog, I felt a dull pain low in my abdomen, a pain so familiar I knew immediately, recognised the tenacious claw and that awful downward pulling – and then the blood, but no relief from the deep sinewy tug. I stood like a blank wall as she was dragged out.

Alasdair had called her a moon seed because she was the size of a grape but with a single crescent heart, and although he sang to her in a crooning voice there was still a kind of guardedness, as if he knew. I'd wanted to buy her one of those little French giraffes but he said we should wait, mark each stage as it comes. Then we lost her and it was too late; buying something afterwards felt morbid. I wanted a keepsake not a memento mori.

'We should have bought something.'

'You keep saying that. Why do you keep saying that?'

We took no comfort from each other, he and I. There was a brief hour of holding, but then we got on with ordinary things, moving around in the same domestic spaces, careful of each other.

And at night, lying under the same empty sky.

I TOLD Gran anyway, said about the bleeding and that I'd lost the baby – and this time she seemed to take it in without distraction. She cried out a little with the shock of it, because it was shocking, a terrible disturbance that spread outwards and gathered strength. There had been a numbness up until then, but when I sat on the floor in her room that day and said it out loud her sorrowful eyes showed me how to feel, just as they always did when I wasn't sure.

Bird in a Tree

ALASDAIR AND I have been married for almost two years now. As soon as we got hitched we decided to have a baby, and with each as keen as the other there was no reason to delay. I couldn't help worrying, though.

Here's why—

My great-grandmother was an only child, and my grandmother was an only child, and my mother was an only child, and I am an only child. That sounds like the start of a riddle, and in a way it *is* a riddle – a paucity that has been described as 'idiopathic'. If I draw out my maternal family tree and turn it upside down it makes a series of neat steps that climb up to me (assuming we are looking at my descendants face on, with the man always to the left of the woman, like those wee figures on a wedding cake). I don't know how far back that genetic neatness goes; perhaps my great-great-grandmother was an only child too? I've certainly never heard my gran talk about any great-aunts, or any great-uncles, and I don't think these great-offshoots would be over-looked in such a tall, linear tree. In particular, any great-uncles would certainly have been noted, since we are all girls.

'Always girls.'

When Dad (also an only child) made this sage observation he feigned disappointment, shaking his head as if to provoke us, but smiling too; it was an intriguing smile – happy enough, but with a slight camber to the mouth that suggested life was complicated, that it was possible to both accept and hope at the same time, like someone who still bets each way even though their horse always comes in second.

This proclivity, the fact of our girlie ancestry, did not escape the notice of my father's mother, who, concerned that the family name might disappear within one generation, did everything she could to stop my mother from hunting down and marrying her son (for that was how she saw it – my mother the pursuer, a predatory siren with her eyes fixed on the main prize – a hundred acres of arable land, including a house and various steadings). On the day of the registry wedding my father's side of the marriage room was almost empty, and as they took their vows, his mother was vowing elsewhere in the presence of her solicitor. That's why I grew up in a tall, skinny house with a long skinny garden full of apple trees. It's why I shared a bedroom with my gran until I was seven (when I descended to the basement and the unsought privacy of my own room – with its new partition wall and a WC equipped with extractor fan and a tiny sink). It is also why my father never bets to win.

These are things of great consequence, and sometimes I wonder which of my two grandmothers influenced my life more: the one I grew up with, or the one I never met. I think about this a lot – the way people who are missing can fill your life. They stand at the window of your house and watch you through the glass, whether you know it or not.

MY GRAN is called Peggy. She lives at the top the house, having risen through the ranks, from all those mornings

spent in the basement, storing the apples and washing the clothes, then occupying the chair by the kitchen window, where she directed Mum in matters of husbandry, and next, ascending to the comfort of the first-floor living room, with its carpets and soft furnishings, the wide-screen TV, and a view of the garden. The bathroom is on the second floor, next to what is now my parents' bedroom; this part is split-level, with just four steps leading to Gran's room. The house is like a Japanese puzzle box, full of structural irregularities, yet looking, from the outside, like a straightforward terrace. Even the name is a puzzle. It is called 'North' but it doesn't face north and nor is it located in the north; the village sits in the east, just below Scotland's humpy back. From the top-floor windows you can see the river Tay, reed beds swaying on the pull of the North Sea. Perhaps that was it – the notion of tidal forces pulling us northwards. It is the only house at this end of the High Street with its own name, and even though there are other, quite similar houses, the naming sets it apart, and if that was the intention it worked, since the house seems to bulge slightly, as if it were being squeezed as well as pulled. There are bulges inside too; they groan, wanting to be touched and hugged.

Ouch, I say, resting my cheek against them and giving them a pat.

'These walls need strapping,' says Dad, regularly and to no one in particular, as he runs his hands over the various swellings, and I imagine the house all trussed and bolted like a bonsai.

Not everyone notices the name that is painted in plain blue letters above the front door – it is more often referred to as number eight, and since there is not much coming and going underneath that lintel, those who feel obliged to fill in the gaps have developed a mild curiosity about Gran,

bestowing her with something I can never quite put my finger on – a kind of celebrity almost, a separateness that has suited her well. Mum was seven when they moved here, and I was born here, but it was never Gran's intention to stay. They arrived in Plum Town (that's what she calls it, on account of all the fruit trees) on a return ticket, having travelled on what turned out to be the last passenger train ever to stop here. After that it was just goods traffic – a loading point for locally grown seed potatoes going to England. Gran always maintained we didn't belong – that as soon as the trains started running again she would use that ticket to get us out. Every New Year's Eve she would close the curtains and assiduously ignore the torchlight procession that marched past the house at midnight. 'That's not for us,' she'd say, pulling me away from the window whenever she caught me looking. When she spoke about moving I could tell she had somewhere in mind, a place she missed more than anything, or a place she had yet to find, but she wouldn't be drawn on it.

During the day Gran rarely leaves her room except to reach the small bathroom, which is four steps down a narrow stairway that has banisters on both walls; she refuses to go any further, claiming she's making her way to heaven (that's what she sings, 'Four Steps to Heaven' – she doesn't realise she's overshot). She is less fond of heaven in the middle of the night and often descends all the way to the kitchen, indulging in earthly pleasures while the rest of us sleep (except Mum – who frets, but has learned to stay put). Eventually, morning comes – bringing surprises: shoes in the oven; spoons neatly wrapped in newspaper and hidden in a towel; a liberal sprinkling of couscous on the floor, like she's been feeding hens.

The forgetfulness has shifted from being a part of her to not being a part of her, it is overtaking her; it's the