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**Memoria**

Thriller

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## 1

The train stops in the middle of nowhere, which is nothing new, really. The wooded area some 300 metres from the tracks is on fire. Also nothing new. What's unclear though is whether the two things are related.

An automatic announcement is played asking for patience, instructing the passengers to keep the doors closed. Harriet has left herself plenty of time, she could even handle a two-hour delay. She usually leaves herself a lot of time; even short distances can be unpredictable. The last time she got stuck sitting on a train someone had hacked the controls and crashed the whole system. Wasn't the first time, either. But usually, a train stops because there's something lying on the tracks or caught in the overhead lines, or an embankment is on fire.

The next announcement is not made by an AI voice. It suggests that the passengers leave the train and stretch their legs a little, they can't say how long the delay will be, but there is a major disruption on the line due to a large wildfire, if they look out the window, they can see one of the spot fires. The bodyless voice starts waffling: the fire spread very quickly, the main

focus right now is on evacuating a nearby retirement home, and only after that would they be able to take care of the tracks.

When the doors open, it's like walking into a wall, the midday heat slams against the cold, conditioned air from inside the train, and in a matter of seconds, the stench of smoke creeps into every single carriage. The first people get off the train to look for the retirement home. Harriet is among them, and when they look toward the end of the train, they can see a large building complex with numerous buses waiting out the front; the evacuation seems to be in full swing. The other passengers get their phones out and zoom in as close as they can; out of a mixture of boredom and morbid curiosity, some of them walk away from the train and start to drift across the field. The fire is being pushed westward by a gentle but constant wind; the fire trucks, bulldozers, and helicopters are maybe a kilometre away from the complex, and Harriet thinks to herself that it looks like they are trying to put out a bonfire with a water pistol.

She turns around. Lots of people have stayed on the train. Some of the women who work on the train are standing outside, they've pulled out their fans, and from where she's standing, it looks as if enormous butterflies are fluttering around their faces. A few people unfold a blanket on the grass and sit down, and two of them open their umbrellas to create some shade. The main group, which has set off toward the retirement home, has stopped halfway; the fire is now just a few hundred metres from the building complex, and the first buses have driven off with the residents.

Somebody suggests to Harriet that they should also head over, that maybe they can help. Of course, he doesn't mean help, he means gawk, but there's nothing else to do. Other than sitting on the train. Or hanging around outside and wilting in the heat. She joins him half-heartedly, and he picks up a couple of other randoms as they walk across the parched, pre-plucked strawberry field. The wind picks up, and she holds her sun hat down with both hands to keep it from flying away.

The retirement home must be what they call a senior living community, and is made up primarily of a white, five-storey building shaped like a horseshoe, with a flat roof and little balconies with flower planters hanging from them full of brightly coloured blossoms. To the right, there is a rectangular building in a matching style. In front of the horseshoe is a long, single-storey building, connected to the rest by a covered pathway. Probably a cafeteria or some kind of multipurpose hall, Harriet thinks to herself. The buses are queued up in front of the hall. As Harriet and the others get closer, the crackling of the fire grows louder and the air more suffocating. Every now and then, a voice can be heard, panicked cries, the elderly people are crowding together in the courtyard, forming small packs, scraps of speech waft over: remain calm, there is room for everybody on the buses, nobody will be left behind, please put down your suitcases, everything will be taken care of. And again: remain calm. The fear of the old people is palpable from the other side of the strawberry field. The evacuation seems structured and well planned. They don't need any help, thinks Harriet, but she says nothing because the pace of strangers walking beside her starts to slow anyway, and eventually they come to a halt. They start filming and taking photos again. She feels uncomfortable standing next to them, so she starts walking in the direction of the approaching fire. She hears someone yell out to ask if they need help, and a No booms over from the buses, while the voices of the old people buzz around in a confused swarm. The next bus starts to move, and two more are sitting there waiting to be loaded up with people and luggage. Even an evacuation has to be carried out in an orderly fashion. Especially when the people being evacuated are the residents of an obviously exclusive senior living community like this one. Not something Harriet would be able to afford – if she ever even got to be that old. It costs money to get to that age.

The second-last bus is driving off; she doesn't see it, just hears people talking about it. The fire has long since swallowed the trees all the way up to the crowns, where it can spread more quickly. It seems to have jumped closer to the facility again. She thinks she can feel the heat now. A fire like that is over 800 degrees Celsius, and the air gets more and more suffocating.

Harriet pulls a dust mask out of her pocket. With all the wildfires there are each summer nowadays, it's always good to have some with you. The first passengers have already started heading back; for the ones without masks, the train offers protection from the smoke. Somebody yells something, lets Harriet know that they're going to wait until the last bus has left. She turns around, but she can't see much of the person yelling to her, because their face is hidden by a red umbrella, blending in with a red, linen outfit beneath it.

Harriet nods and waves to convey that she has understood, but stays where she is for a moment, wondering whether she should head back to the train on her own or rejoin the others. She takes her backpack off, places it on the dusty ground, and takes her water bottle out. But she lowers her hand back down before she's even opened it. Right on the edge of the forest, she's spotted a skinny, unassuming little house, almost completely hidden by bushes. It's not far from the retirement home, but it's closer to the raging wall of fire. Then Harriet sees something moving behind the window. A waving hand. Harriet throws her backpack on, starts walking towards the house, picks up speed, and as she runs over, she sees that the person is beating on the glass with their fists. And then not just with their fists, but with an object, maybe a chair, and Harriet is surprised that the glass isn't giving in. She waves to the person. As she runs, she turns around and yells that someone needs help over here, and two or three people start to move towards the house. As she runs, Harriet loses her hat, but she doesn't even look back.

It is a two-storey wooden house, painted green, with a squat shed standing beside it. There is an unpaved road leading to the property, which has American oaks and acorns growing on it, and is separated from the surrounding fields by big redcurrant and blackberry bushes and a few dog roses. This close to the edge of the forest, the searing air is almost impossible to breathe. Harriet stops in front of the shrubs and looks back; the three people are heading over to her. She takes off her backpack, pours some water from her bottle onto a piece of fabric that

she sometimes drapes over her head and shoulders to protect her from the sun, takes her mask off, and ties the fabric around her mouth and nose. As she beats her way through the shrubs and runs toward the front door, she sees that the others are catching up out of the corner of her eye.

As she gets closer, she sees that the person in the house is an old lady. She waves and yells that she should go to the door. Harriet rattles the doorknob. It's locked. A second later though, she hears someone beating against the door and crying for help.

“Open the door”, yells Harriet.

“The key”, she hears from inside.

“Where is the key?”

“In my car! I left my key in the car and then the door slammed shut, I'm locked in! Help me!”

One of the other people from the train has stopped quite a distance away and is coughing worryingly, his whole body shuddering. A woman in her late twenties in khaki-coloured overalls is trying to smash one of the windows with a large rock, but she does nothing but create a few scratches. It must be bulletproof glass. Another woman, the one in the red dress, is standing a few metres away and has called emergency services, she is trying to give a precise description of where they are and is yelling into her phone: “Why can you not find my location using GPS?” She has tossed her red umbrella in front of the hedge, and it's rolling around slowly in the wind. She has a piece of fabric tied around her face as well. Harriet can hear other scraps of speech: retirement home, edge of the forest, fire in the treetops, about to jump across.

Harriet looks around. If there's a car here, it has to be in the shed. She runs over, opens the door, and there is a green four-wheel drive inside, a proper old jeep, not an SUV. The driver's-side door is open, and there is a set of keys lying on the seat. She snatches them up and runs back and opens the front door. The old woman storms past her with an overnight bag in

her hand, and then suddenly stops still, gasping for breath, and looks back at Harriet. Harriet grabs her by the arms and tries to help her. The woman shakes her head, shrugs her off. “How did you find me? You’re not supposed to be here”, she says. At least that’s what Harriet hears. Then the woman falls to the ground, unconscious, letting out a sigh that sounds like Harriet’s name.

## 2

Harriet kneels next to the unconscious woman, pats her on the cheek.

“What did you mean just now? Do we know each other?” she asks, confused, and turns around to see what the others are doing. The woman in the red dress is still on the phone, but she slowly lowers it from her ear and stares past Harriet. Harriet follows her terrified gaze and sees that the fire has really jumped closer now, and it won’t take long for it to reach them. She can feel it getting hotter, the roar of the flames, the cracking of the burning trees has become unbearably loud. The woman in red is screaming into her phone, Harriet can’t understand her and yells: “Are they coming?”

The woman shakes her head and rushes over to her. “They don’t know if they’ll get here on time.”

“What does that mean?” Harriet feels the panic rising within her. “We can’t just leave her lying here!”

“Why have to get her away from here.”

The woman in the overalls comes running out of the house. “There’s no one else there.” She realizes how close the fire is. “Shit. We’ve got to get out of here!”

Harriet grabs the unconscious woman’s shoulders and sits her up, shaking her. “You need to wake up!” she pleads with her, but there’s no reaction. The woman’s head just flops back and forth.

“Is she breathing? Is her heart beating?” asks the woman in overalls.

“She’s just unconscious”, answers Harriet. “At least I think she is.”

“We’ll carry her over to the field.” She grabs hold of the woman’s ankles, goes to lift her, motions to Harriet to grab her under her arms. Right then, they hear a mighty bang. The fire has raged even closer, and an enormous tree has fallen right in front of the house.

“There’s no time for that”, yells the woman in the red dress. Harriet thinks she can already feel the fire on her skin, in her hair. Her heart is racing. She wants the woman she’s holding in her arms to wake up and explain what she just said to her. She wants the fire to stop, the heat to stop. She has an idea, and it feels like her brain is switching to autopilot. “You take her”, she yells to the woman in the red dress. Harriet runs to the shed and jumps into the car. She starts it with one of the keys on the keyring and drives over in front of the house. The two other women lift the unconscious woman into the passenger seat, climb into the back, and slam the doors.

“Go, go, go”, yells the woman in the overalls. And Harriet hears another bang. The next burning tree crashes onto the house.

Harriet hits the gas, looks in the rearview mirror, and sees what the two women are looking at through the rear window: a tree has crashed onto the shed. The shed starts to burn as if it had just been waiting for it. Then there is a loud boom. “God, what did she have in that fucking shed? Jerry cans?” says the one in the red dress.

“With this old hunk of junk, it could well be.” The woman in the overalls coughs.

Harriet puts her foot to the floor. The road takes them past the retirement home. And from there, the road is paved.

“That was close. For all of us”, says the woman in the overalls. “I’m Elin, by the way”, she says and starts to cough again.

“Doro”, says the other.

“Harriet”, says Harriet, and they all nod silently.

Elin looks back through the rear window. “I think the house is on fire now.” In the rearview mirror, Harriet watches as the fire seems to reel them in, despite the fact that she’s driving as fast as the car can go. Doro has also turned around too, and sits there swearing under her breath.

Shit, my bag, thinks Harriet, she must have left it somewhere in all the commotion. Everything she had with her will be burnt, she thinks: her phone, all her cards, her tools. Shit. She follows the road the buses had taken before. She keeps driving without knowing where they’re going, or where they are exactly, but they are out of danger. No trees around them. Open spaces, paved roads.

“Emergency medical centre”, says Doro, looking at her phone, “in two-and-a-half kilometres, take the third exit at the next roundabout, and then straight ahead.”

“Thanks”, says Harriet.

Every now and then, the unconscious woman seems to let out a faint groan. Elin is holding her shoulders from behind, speaking to her soothingly, but has to keep stopping to cough. She was the only one who didn’t have a mask.



At the roundabout, Harriet almost takes the curve too fast, starts to skid, but then gets the car back under control. “Not far now”, says Doro, “we should see it soon.”

“I don’t think that did my asthma any good”, say Elin, and pats at the pockets of her overalls until she finds her inhaler.

Nobody reacts. The old woman in the passenger seat mumbles something unintelligible. Harriet looks across at her; the woman still has her eyes closed.

They arrive at the medical centre. It’s located next to the fire station and looks as if it has just recently moved into the building of a former furniture warehouse, you can still see parts of the signage on the side. Harriet honks the horn several times and pulls up right in front of the entrance for the emergency room. Two paramedics come running out. Harriet points to the passenger seat. The men open the door, speak to the old woman, carefully lift her out of the car and place her in a wheelchair.

“No, we don’t know her name. We saved her from the wildfire. She was locked in her house. She passed out.”

Harriet remembers the travel bag. None of them thought to bring it with them. And now her house and all her belongings have probably been incinerated.

One of the paramedics disappears into the building with her, the other one stays outside for a bit talking to Elin, who is still coughing, and she goes in with him.

“Should we wait?” Doro yells after her. If Harriet had to guess, she’d say she’s in her mid-fifties. She’s tall and has broad shoulders, a figure like a wrestler. Her light-brown hair is already going visibly grey, she has deep furrows running around her eyes and across her brow. Her face exudes determination natural air that seem at odds with her bright-red linen dress. The dress is a little tight; maybe it used to fit better, or maybe she borrowed it. On her feet

she's wearing a pair of beat-up sneakers, also red. Harriet knows that Doro has noticed her looking at her.

Doro shrugs her shoulders. "Should we wait?" she asks Harriet, who is standing indecisively next to the jeep, the keys in her hand. When Harriet doesn't answer, she says: "Maybe we should park this monster so that it's not in the way, and we can sit and wait in the shade for a bit. The train must have turned back because it couldn't get through. According to the app, the whole line is..."

"Can you park it?" says Harriet, cutting her off, and her voice trails off, the words disappearing in a whisper.

Doro looks at her with an expression of bemusement. Harriet's lips and hands are shaking, her face is white as a sheet, and if she doesn't calm down, she'll be the next one inspecting the interior of the emergency room. Doro grabs the key, jumps in the jeep, slides the seat back with a dramatic gesture, adjusts the rearview mirror, and slowly and jerkily rolls the big green beast forward. Then she parks the car in a marked-out spot that couldn't be more than ten metres away and gets out and walks back to Harriet. Harriet is sitting on the ground, her back lent against the wall, her eyes wide open, darting about nervously without really seeing anything.

"Sorry", says Doro, "I haven't driven a car in ages. And certainly not an old gas guzzler like that.

"I ... I can't drive at all."

"What do you mean? You did great! If I'd driven, we'd have ended up in a ditch by the side of the road." She takes off her satchel, rummages around in it, hands Harriet a water bottle. "You need water. The shock is kicking in. Have a drink, I haven't touched it", she assures her.

Harriet takes the bottle and drinks a sip, then a little more. She puts it down and groans, looks up at Doro helplessly. "I can't drive", she says.

"Hey, no worries. It can stay where it is for a while, and with any luck, the old lady'll be okay, just a little dizzy spell, and in a few hours she'll have perked back up and will be relieved that at least her car is waiting for her outside."

Harriet doesn't interrupt Doro's little speech, wonders whether she should say more. There is a constant stream of people arriving, by car or by bike, sometimes on foot. They don't necessarily look like emergencies, but they rush to the main entrance, usually accompanied by family. Every now and then, ambulance sirens ring out, and they pull up at the other end of the building. Harriet tries to block out the hubbub around her and to get her head together. She's not sure what has just happened. How all of that could have happened.

Harriet never learned to drive, never got her licence, never even tried driving once for a laugh. It is impossible for her to have driven all that way on her own. But how is she supposed to explain all of that to a stranger? So she keeps quiet, closes her eyes, tries not to think about it, tries to concentrate on what's happening here and now instead, to stop the squall of thoughts in her head from gaining the upper hand. Breathe, nice and calm, just breathe. The woman's voice drifts off into the distance, and another voice mixes in with it, then a hand touches her upper arm, and Harriet can no longer ignore what's going on around her.

"Harriet? Are you coming?" It's a paramedic, she doesn't know if she has seen him before.

"Huh? No no, I'm fine."

He crouches down beside to her, looks her straight in the eyes and seem to take a deep breath, as if he's trying to summon the patience required to deal with a difficult patient. The

armpits of his white, short-sleeved top are drenched with sweat, and he has tied back his shoulder-length hair. The hand on her arm feels like it's on fire. "The woman you brought in is awake and she'd like to speak with you."

Harriet shook her head. "What, me?"

"Your name is Harriet, isn't it?"

"That's Harriet", confirms Doro, and hands her the keys.

Harriet stands up, but mainly out of respect for his well-meaning professionalism. He stands up too and walks ahead of her along the building, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder to make sure she's following him.