

The woman

who

disappeared

Aged 32, Naomi Jacobs went to sleep one night and woke up as a 15-year-old schoolgirl. She tells *Christina Patterson* how she coped with her rare form of amnesia

Portraits by *Paul Stuart*

One morning seven years ago, Naomi Jacobs looked in the bathroom mirror and screamed. She saw dark circles under her eyes, hair that was short instead of long, and lines where her skin should have been smooth. When she spoke, her voice sounded “hoarse and deep”. “Oh my God,” she shouted at the face that was staring back at her. “Oh my God, I’m *old!*”

She didn’t recognise the room she was in. She didn’t recognise the house. She didn’t recognise the toddler in the photo on the wall. What she did remember was the name Katie, and a phone number. But when she worked out how to dial a “strange-looking phone with no pull-out aerial”, she didn’t recognise the voice that picked up. So it was quite a big shock when the person at the other end of the line, who said she was her best friend, came round and told her that the toddler in the photo was her 10-year-old son.

When Jacobs woke up that morning in 2008, she expected to be in the room in Wolverhampton she shared with her younger sister, Simone, under a duvet covered with a picture of Marilyn Monroe. Instead, her sister’s name had started pulsing and flashing on the screen of a small machine on a bedside cabinet, but she didn’t know what it was or how to answer it. She didn’t expect to be in a council house in Manchester full of futuristic gadgets. She thought she was studying for her French GCSE and counting the days till the next episode of Red Dwarf. She thought she was 15, and that it was 1992.

Jacobs was actually 32. She didn’t know it at the time, but she had suffered from an episode of dissociative amnesia — a rare breakdown of memory that had wiped away 17 years of her life overnight. It would last for eight disturbing weeks.

“What I remember more than anything,” she tells me, over a cup of camomile tea in a hotel near Salford Quays, “is the emotion: fear,” she says, and then, after thinking for a moment, “terror”. It is quite hard to imagine the smiley woman in front of me in a state of terror. Jacobs may not look 15 — she’s now nearly 40 — but there’s something cheekily girlish about her stance and her smile. “Last summer,” she says, when I tell her that she doesn’t look her age, “I was buying turps in B&Q, and was asked to show my ID. That is why my sisters style me. I love hoodies and tracksuits. I freak out when I’m shopping because I don’t know what to buy.”

It’s her sister, Simone, and stepsister, another Katie, who have today made her look like a slightly Bohemian secretary in bright-blue trousers, a Chanel-style jacket and a nicely tailored blouse. The bangles and the pendant hint at her past as a New Age holistic therapist. The jacket has been picked to reflect her new status as an author, about to be photographed for The Sunday Times Magazine. An author, by the way, whose memoir, *Forgotten Girl*, has been optioned for film rights by Steve Coogan’s production company, Baby Cow.

For someone who had, in effect, woken up in Blade Runner, Jacobs sounds relatively calm in the book. The tone is sometimes even nonchalant. “Teen Nay”, as she calls herself, to distinguish the 15-year-old she thinks she is from the 32-year-old whose life she has forgotten, peppers her account with the slang of her era. Things are “wicked” and “bogus” and “smegging” (a word from her beloved Red Dwarf — whole series of which, it cheers her up to hear, can now be watched on CD-like discs called DVDs). Her universe has exploded, but she sounds, at times, quite chipper. Can she explain why?

“This is where I have this great reverence for the mind,” she tells me. “I know that my way of dealing with trauma is for my mind to split. That’s the best way I can describe it. I’m going to cut away this part, and I am going to put it here.”

Jacobs had been studying for a degree in psychology at the time she lost her memory, which was, in the circumstances, quite a stroke of luck. She came across a description in a textbook of something called “transient global amnesia”, which she thought might be what she had. When she told the GP about her memory loss, and her suggestion for a diagnosis, he laughed. He told her that she should go home for a nice cup of tea and a rest.

It was another five years before a psychiatric health practitioner told her that he thought she had actually suffered from dissociative amnesia. This, she explains in her book, “is a person’s inability to remember past events or important information from their life”. It “includes confusion and loss of memory about their identity”. She had, the psychiatric worker told her, “a very unique brain that works in a very unique way”. He suggested she was “a remarkable product of a remarkable life”. That, in the course of the memoir, becomes pretty damn clear.

Naomi Jacobs was born in Liverpool in 1975, to a Liverpudlian father and a half-Irish, half-Sierra Leonean mother, who had her when she was 17. Her parents split up when she was a toddler, and she moved with her mother and baby sister to Wolverhampton when she was four. Jacobs didn’t see her father for two years, and lived in “a lot of different houses from the age of four to seven”. When her mother worked, it was only doing casual jobs in cafes. Money was tight.

“I would say that we were working class with middle-class values,” says Jacobs. Her father, a painter-decorator, and stepmother, who ran a care home, made sure she and her sister had bikes, nice Christmases and treats. Her stepfather paid for her to go to dance school. It was only in her teens that she began to feel a bit deprived and that, she explains, was because she went to a “really good school”, as part of a pilot scheme to give ethnic-minority children better educational opportunities. She started comparing her home and holidays with those of her friends.

“My mother fought to get us in,” she says, but her father cared about education just ➤➤➤



Reading her diaries, Naomi came across an account of an event so traumatic that she had literally pushed it out of her mind for years. When she was six she had been raped

as much. “As soon as I could pick up a book, my dad would give me huge books to read. Sometimes, at weekends, I’d go and sit in the library all day.” When her father gave her *The Hobbit*, she knew exactly what she wanted to do. “I thought,” she says, with a flash of that huge smile, “I’m going to have great adventures and tell people about them.”

By the time she was 15, she wanted to be a journalist or a writer, or perhaps a doctor in Africa, saving lives. She thought she would live in a six-bedroom house with a paddock for horses and a pool. She didn’t think she would wake up one day in a tiny council house with “unkempt gardens” and a “broken gate”. She certainly didn’t think she would be an unemployed single mother, living on social security, or “the sosh”, as she called it.

On that day in 2008, she knew nothing of the previous 17 years. She didn’t know that her mother had started drinking heavily, and had then started taking drugs. She didn’t know that her mother had forgotten her 16th birthday, screamed, “What’s the f***** point of you?” and then thrown her out of the house. She didn’t know that she had, in spite of all of this, managed to study Chinese medicine, build a successful business as a holistic therapist and get a big house and a nice car. And she certainly didn’t know that she had ended up losing all of it, smoking too much weed and taking too much cocaine. And that at rock bottom she had ended up in a hostel, in a single room that she shared with her son.

Jacobs learnt these things from her sister, Simone, and Katie, the best friend she didn’t recognise. She also discovered she had 20 years of diaries, and began to build a picture of her life. Every day, as she read, there were new shocks. Every day, there were new disappointments, too. Most of us, I remind her, gradually learn to live with our disappointments. How on earth did she feel when she saw what had happened to her dreams?

For the first time, her smile fades. “I was devastated,” she says quietly. “I was so disappointed. But again,” she adds, “I was in denial: ‘This isn’t me. This isn’t my life. This isn’t my responsibility.’ I oscillated between anger and sadness for the first two or three weeks, and then it started to taper off.”

Jacobs had bigger things to worry about, like navigating the modern world. She had to learn how to choose from the dizzying array of foods in supermarkets that made her feel “like a small child wandering up and down the aisles of Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory”. And how to search for things on something called the internet, by typing into a tiny box on something called Google. Most importantly, she had to work out how to deal with the 10-year-old boy she was told was her son.

When she first saw a photo of him, the name Leo flashed into her head. Even though she didn’t know who he was, something inside her seemed to know his name. For a moment, she wondered if this smiley boy was her

brother. But when she and Simone went to pick him up from school, “something weird” happened in the centre of her chest. “He walked like me,” she says in the book, and had the same “chipmunk-cheeked, dimpled, toothy grin”. She knew straight away that he was her child, just as she had known his name. But she didn’t know how to greet him. “I followed Simone’s lead,” she writes, “and high-fived him.” He looked at her strangely, and laughed.

She does her best to tell me how she felt at that first meeting, but there’s such a long pause I start to wonder if she’s OK. “Just shock,” she says at last. “Complete and utter shock. It was so bizarre seeing him come out — and the smile. It was like looking at this miniature version of me. It didn’t seem real, it wasn’t real. But I knew he was real.”

It’s one thing to be told you have a child, but quite another to know how to look after him, when you are — or think you are — 15. How did she manage? Jacobs takes a sip of her tea. As a child, she says, she often had to be like a mother to her sister Simone; Simone in



WHO’S THAT BOY? Naomi Jacobs woke up one day in 2008 with no memory of her son, Leo (right)

turn has been like a second mother to her son. “He had two mothers, growing up,” she says. It’s clear that Simone helped with almost everything. “I knew the most important thing was keeping the fact that I was 15 hidden from him,” Jacobs says, “but he knew. I know he knew. He says, looking back, he’s got little things, where he remembers going, ‘Huh?’ But he’s so opposite from me. He says he hardly remembers anything, which is so cool.”

It might sound strange for a woman who lost her own memory to say that she thinks it’s “cool” not to remember, but in the book the reason for this becomes clear. What “Teen Nay” found out, when she started piecing together the fragments of her past, was that this was not the first big gap in her memory. In the course of reading her diaries, she came across an account of an event so traumatic that she had literally pushed it out of her mind for years. When she was six, she discovered, she had been raped. She didn’t tell anyone, but she knew it was true. Before it happened, she was “precocious and quite chatty”, happy to

perform on demand to any instant audience. “I’d take on characters and mimic the adults around me,” she says, “and I remember them finding me quite funny. But after the abuse, I turned more insular. I used to twist my jumper a lot, and stutter. When an adult saw me, they’d go, ‘She’s really quiet.’”

Throughout her childhood, Jacobs had no idea of any of this. The memory didn’t surface until she was in her twenties. But she isn’t at all sorry that she repressed it. “I don’t think I’d have survived if I hadn’t,” she says. “It still has me in awe, the power of the mind and how strong and resilient children are when they suffer through trauma or abuse. I feel like, in a way, my mind saved me.”

Jacobs, who has clearly done more than her share of New Age therapies, talks a lot in the book about a mental “house” she retreats to, where she finds the different parts of herself that have “split” at different times of her life. “I can see six-year-old Naomi in a pink dress,” she says, “and 10-year-old Naomi, chubby in a uniform.” (At 10, she says, she was abused again, but she doesn’t want to talk about it.) She can also see versions of herself at 15 and at 29, when she recorded in her diary that a boyfriend tried to strangle her. She has, she says, “split” from herself at these ages, and once again, two years ago, when she was under a lot of stress. It all sounds, as Dame Edna might have said, a bit spooky. And what goes along with it is an awful lot about “healing” and “self-empowerment”, which can sound more than a little bit tie-dye pantaloons.

Jacobs laughs. “I don’t pick up the self-help books too much any more,” she says. “I could write my bloody own by now. Before, I thought the answers were outside me, and now I know what’s important is stilling my mind and going within.”

It isn’t all that clear what brought her memory back after eight weeks. In the book, it happens in a moment, after a trip to Egypt full of musings about Egyptian symbols and their protective power. In real life, it was a bit more complicated. “Word count!” says Jacobs cheerfully. “I had to condense the Egypt experience, but slowly but surely it was like the adult me coming back into my mind and sharing space. It was like two identities occupying the same space at the same time. It was like a symbiosis, a coming together.”

Whatever it was that happened, Jacobs was able to go back to life as a functioning adult. She finished her degree in psychology and got a first. She wrote her memoir, and two other books. She has watched the 10-year-old boy she high-fived at the school gate turn into a 6ft 6in apprentice in digital marketing. “He’s got a confidence I just didn’t have,” she says. “When I was 21, I didn’t know how I was going to raise a rounded individual. But I pretty well did it.”

Is she scared of getting amnesia again? Jacobs looks out the window and then back at me. “No. I don’t think it’s going to happen. I have too many tools in place to prevent it.” And then, more firmly, “No. Life is too good.” ■
*Read an extract from *Forgotten Girl*, p43* ➤➤➤



SISTER ACT Naomi (left) with her sister Simone, 1992. Simone helped her look after her son when she lost her memory

“This wasn’t my life, this couldn’t be who I’d turned into”

Hold up, wait a minute, rewind, come again? I did what? Did I read that right? I started taking coke? As in cocaine? As in blow? As in that crap Daniella Westbrook from EastEnders shoved up her nose until it caved in?! I was horrified, mortified, disappointed, and dumbfounded all in one big ball of disbelief.

I put my old diary down. All the years I couldn’t remember, between 15 and 32, were there. My mind was reeling and I felt sick — trying to digest the words was seriously making me want to hurl my breakfast. This wasn’t my life; this couldn’t be the woman I had turned into. I paced the floor, wracking my brain, searching for any memory. But all I could think was, “Who the hell is Adult Naomi?”

Adult Naomi was sexually abused and assaulted when she was six years of age and it was the first time her mind had split from her

body. Years later, she had a boyfriend who tried to kill her. Tried to strangle the air from this body. I put my hand to my neck and I understood why, by the time she turned 18, she had turned to drugs. This body has been abused with drugs; she buried it all under drugs. And then Leo was born. This body was a mum, is a mum. Leo.

Adult Naomi had tried to save this body, and she had tried to save her mind. But it didn’t work. And that’s when I think she gave up on herself. I could see clearly now, the constant running away and drifting from place to place, smoking weed and taking drugs.

Over the weeks I had read in the diaries that Adult Naomi had dealt with a drug-addicted boyfriend, emotionally abusive relationships, being a single mother and trying to support herself running a business, a cocaine habit, a drug-induced breakdown... She had been declared bankrupt, lost all of her possessions, been homeless, and in effect had to start again.

I sobbed as I thought about everything I had read. All of it led to this future, the council house, the cat and the car and the son

who looked like her. A future where Adult Naomi tried to find some stability, some safety and security, but always felt like she failed. And all because I had buried me.

I turned my head into the pillow and screamed. I screamed so terrifyingly loud that I was surprised Leo didn’t wake up. The released emotion welled up like a giant wave crashing against me with such a force, my body repelled it in droves.

I threw up in the bin and screamed with rage, with anger at my mum, Eve, who drank too much; at the men who abused me; at the women who didn’t help. I screamed at the world for letting me down, at myself for allowing this to happen. For playing a part in the death of me. My head wanted to explode, but I couldn’t cry quickly enough. I curled my body into the foetal position and lay there on my bed for what felt like an eternity, and I cried out every pain, every heartbreak, everything I had ever done to myself ■

*Extracted from **Forgotten Girl**, by Naomi Jacobs, published by Pan on April 23, priced £7.99. To buy it for £7.59 (inc p&p), call 0845 271 2135 or visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop*