

Scene

CHAPTER ONE

Fin

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Fin

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Her wrist started to cramp so she rolled it a few times. She never wrote anything anymore except maybe birthday cards. But she was also the sort of person who always forgot about birthday cards and birthdays in general. It used to be something she felt ashamed of but, along with other things like biting her nails, eating too quickly and the fact she can't finish anything she has started (except food) all of that shame turned into reluctant acceptance when she hit her thirties. She placed her hand down on the list and scrunched it into a tight ball. A small pang of desperation hit her and she dropped the paper in her coffee.

It made her want to call up everyone she knows, or has ever known and ask them if they think the same way as her. She has often thought about creating an anonymous online survey, about all the many things she thinks about, just to see if she really is as alone as she feels, or if other people are just writing lists like she is and dissolving them in random coffees along their way.

Does everyone else have a burning need to be adored?

Does everyone else crave a Hollywood orgy once a month?

Do people change their minds as much as me? About clothes, about values, about having children?

Does anyone else think that coriander haters are part of a freemason conspiracy club just for shits?

Does anyone else feel like there isn't any point because everyone is lying all the time to a certain extent and so what is the point in living inside other people's false realities when you don't know what your own truth is and aren't facts all we can really hold onto? Or is it art? No sorry it's the only constant is change. Fuck that. Why do we have to change? Yes, change comes with sunsets and sunrises but it also comes with baggage and lies and betrayal and death and being scared all of the time.

She scrunches up her paper again, pockets it, bites her lip nervously and decides that three flat whites is too many flat whites for her anxiety and she may as well of done some blow at 8am. No, none of that.

Ten, or so, years earlier.

Archie

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'Well, that was two hours of my life I will never get back.' She placed her forearms over the fence he was leaning over, mimicking him. He knew she was deadly serious. Most people would pass the same comment over an under stimulating lecture or a delayed flight and never lose sleep, whereas Fin worried about things like that. About wasted time. A man with fingerless gloves handed them a flyer.

'Comedy show about the time I accidentally went on a date with a seven year old and left the church to make a Shrek-themed porno in Dubai'. Archie thanked a real life paedophile for the first time and probably the last time in his life whilst Fin cycled her fingers around the lip of her wine tumbler.

He pocketed the flyer and took her in. She was a lot thinner than the last time he had seen her. Her bones seemed almost too big for her now. Her green skirt was crinkly and reminded him of crêpe paper from primary school.

'I never know if these things are good or bad, to be honest with you', he said.

He wasn't being honest with her. He couldn't remember a single detail of the show, because he'd memorised the shape of her silhouette so perfectly he could draw it now, with his eyes closed. A little perfect nose almost covered by her long fringe. Her shoulder blades protruding like costume tinker-bell wings. A spill of light illuminating the baby hairs down her back.

'I didn't quite make the connection you'd be here, but of course, you know...' she gestured towards the group she'd just moved away from. It surprised him that she had left her group to talk to him. She'd never done that for him before. He blinked away the past and reminded himself they should both be entirely different people now.

'Shay?' he offered.

'Yes.'

'You guys kept in touch then?' she said. Her face expressionless as she raised the plastic tumbler of red wine to her lips. She wore back eye makeup and her lips were the colour of the wine, red; almost black.

'Yes, yeah, I suppose. I play rugby with her brother Rob. I see her at games sometimes.' He paused, and then, looking over his shoulder, nodded his head towards Rob who was hugging Shay around the waist from behind. They had always been inappropriately close for siblings. 'I actually came here with Rob', he added. 'So it's more him that I'm in touch with if you get what I mean?'

'Oh, so you and her never...?'

'No, no...we never.'

Her smile was almost patronising. He noticed she didn't have her small gap in between her two front teeth anymore, and her teeth were rich-white. A shade you couldn't acquire with crest whitening strips from Amazon.

'Because last time I heard you were making your way around'. She raised her eyebrows.

He took a sip of his red wine, it was lukewarm and syrupy.

'Really.' He smiled a kind of smile to convey that he found the whole thing amusing. He pushed his damp curls off his forehead. She didn't flinch. The beer garden started to spill over with people waiting to go into the next show and they were pushed tighter together against the fence now. He could feel her upper arm on his upper arm. He knew it all too well now; the oiled machine of the Edinburgh Festival. Each venue was a revolving door of a dozen different theatrical experiences starting at nine or ten each morning and rotating long

into the nights of August. It was the sort of place Fin would have loved if he still knew anything about her. And he still hated.

'Are you enjoying the festival so far then Archie?' Letting her shoulders lower, she turned to face him, resting her left elbow on the fence and sinking her weight into her left hip. He couldn't help notice her right thigh; white and slender exposed from the slit in her skirt. He suddenly felt the desperate need to tuck it away.

'I've been working for most of it. You can catch me on the Blue Moon bar at Potterow serving IPA and venom slushies' He rolled his eyes. 'So I haven't been, no.' He waited for her to ask what a venom slushy was, but she almost looked as though she hadn't heard him. 'Are you...enjoying yourself...Fin?'

'Oh, I'm just here for the weekend. I'm on set pretty much every day right now. Somewhat of a big deal, me'

'Oh shit Fin, I'm sorry!' He said 'here's me banging on about frozen cocktails and you..' He used his free hand to pinch the sides of his forehead together as he closed his eyes. 'Congratulations! Come here.'

And for a moment he forgot who they were and where they were. He picked her up from the waist and spun her around knocking her into several people. She squirmed awkwardly in his grip as red wine sloshed down her arm. Her rigidity was a sobering reminder of the distance they had gathered since the last time they had seen each other. He was still used to her body softening, like clay, in his touch. Instead, she had frozen and her eyes began to dart.

'I feel like a dick for not saying it earlier.'

'It's fine. It's nothing really. Things are going well for me that's all. But these things can go as soon as they come, so I'm just enjoying it whilst I can.' He wanted her to make a

bigger deal out of it.

'I don't know much about these things but I'm sure it opens doors?'

'Yes. I think I'll be taken more seriously from now on if that's what you're saying?'

'Nice of you to come for one of these then', he said waving the crumpled programme he'd folded around his wine tumbler.

'I'm still going to watch my friends!' She scorned.

'Of course, I did always think you'd be a bit of a narcissist if you got famous though'.

'Oh, there's still plenty of time for that', she said, now resting her back on the fence facing the group. 'I do want to be though'.

'Want to be, what? A narcissist?'

'No, famous'. She looked straight at him. Her eyes were big and wild underneath her black fringe. Her expression lightened and she went back to staring straight ahead.

'Archie?' She didn't look at him. 'Do you want to go somewhere a little quieter?'

He did.

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She bought two more wines from the bar. He assumed they were both for her, so he bought two as well. One drink in each hand, they made their way to The Meadows. He must admit the city did feel electric when you had somewhere to be. Three thousand small audiences making their way into the cobbled, singing streets past the most pierced woman in the world, escapologists and street acts fucking each other with fruit. They found themselves falling silent from time to time on the walk. It was the sort of silence that made him feel more comfortable than pleasantries. He wondered if she felt comfortable too.

'And Paul? How is he doing these days?'

The question took him by surprise. He hadn't spoken about his dad to anyone for a

long time, he always felt like a dirty secret.

'To be honest, I don't call as much as I should.'

'Darling, you don't call anyone as much as you should.' She put a hand on his shoulder, a motherly gesture. He wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean but he didn't say it out loud. The word 'darling' didn't suit her Aberdonian lilt. It felt tacky, like she'd picked up a souvenir and was wearing it as a fashion statement.

'I heard on the grapevine you're studying P.E or something? How is that?'

'Yeah, ok. It's called Sports Science', instantly hating himself for correcting her. 'I struggle with motivation sometimes, he added. And who's the grapevine?'

She ignored the question and gave him a concerned look.

He wanted to tell her that he had never felt so underwhelmed with life. That everyone around him seemed to be floating through the best days of their lives, whilst he would find himself having a panic attack over which cereal to buy. That he would sometimes spend an hour or so trying to decide what t-shirt to wear and searching desperately for the life he knew he had once felt excited for. Every morning, his body felt spent before he could open his eyes. His bones were heavy, and if he were to fall right now and crack his head open on this street curb, thick balls of warm, wet cotton wool would flop out. The isolation he felt at university was magnified compared to the days in high school after his mum died. He would often have the same thought of drowning himself in the bath. But this only made him more uninspired and ashamed that he couldn't even think up an exciting way to remove himself from existence. It was the promise of pre-season that was keeping his head above the bathwater. He was still making it to the pitch most of the time and that felt enough. Rob, had helped him to the team and helped him stay on the team. He found that when he was playing rugby he could make decisions at the same time as he not having to think at all. It was as if he

was watching someone else play the game. When he scored a try, he would smile because he should. Rob picked him up every Tuesday night for training and made sure he got to the games on a Saturday. After the game, Rob would take him to the pub and would always buy him drinks, every time assuring Archie he could get the rounds next week. Archie could see what Rob was doing, and most days he felt so shameful and burdening.

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'Yeah, it was a bit of a shock going from school to this. It's just...disorganised, short-staffed, and not as practical as I imagined it would be. You know me.'

'Do I?' She asked. Once again, he wasn't sure what she was getting at and the coldness in her voice began to irritate him slightly. 'Do you know what you want to do next?' Fin asked balancing on the curb-side as she walked.

'Not really, no. I suppose I'm not doing too well with that prospect. Is your Mum still taking bookings for career advice?' He joked.

'I have no idea what that woman is doing these days.'

'Oh really?'

'Yeah, they are off inter-railing right now.'

'That's... cool?'

'Would we call that cool? It's a good job I'm successful. With my parents' travelling habit, my inheritance is as fucked as yours.' He raised his eyebrows and his ears flushed red.

'Don't worry Fin, Mummy, and Daddy will always have pocket money for you', he retorted. 'And they moved down here right?'

'Yes, Queensferry way...'

They found a spot, and, after scanning the grass for needles, sat down, cross-legged and facing each other. The sky was turning black now and the faces on the Meadows seemed

to be less tipsy and more plain drunk.

He wondered what memories she might have had in the meadows that he'd never been a part of and would never know of. He wondered if she had ever been lonely or scared here? How many coffees she's walked through Mid-Meadow Walk with, in what seasons? Blossom, BBQ or snowdrop? What clothes she'd worn and if he'd have recognised them? What kind of conversations she'd had with what kind of friends he would never know of? Her phone lit up beside her and he accidentally glanced at her screen one time and apologised.

It was Aaron.

She smiled weakly.

He lit a cigarette as she walked round and round a tree about ten feet away from him, scuffing the grass with her feet.

'Who's all here? Oh, you know...just the gang. I'll probably order a taxi soon. No no, just going home. No, I mean to Mum and Dad's. I've not been on my phone much, sorry. I'm fine. Tired, I guess. No Archie isn't here. Why would he be? Why? Ok whatever, I shouldn't have to tell you where I am all the time and who I'm with. I'll call you when I get in. Yeah, I know. Bye.' She paused for a second as she put the phone in her pocket.

'Sorry about that', she said, joining Archie.

It's fine, he said as he rolled the cigarette and licked the paper painting it purple with wine.

'It's not going so great with him just now. We don't see eye to eye on a lot of things, and sometimes...'

She looked at him apologetically. Archie didn't say anything but offered her a cigarette which she declined. They watched the cigarette smoke dissolve into the black sky.

'...I feel like I'm just proving a point by staying.' She picked at the grass by her feet,

halving the blades, and then halving them again until she had little green smudges on her fingertips.

'You don't have to prove anything to anyone Fin', he said flicking the lighter and watching the flame lick the end of his cigarette.

A boy, no older than fourteen, threw up down the side of a tree on Jawbone Walk, and they both stopped talking to watch, but neither of them thought about helping. Their own situation suddenly felt more helpless than his.

Archie rested his hands on the ground behind him, smoking with his mouth, and looked away from her.

'I haven't forgiven myself.' she said.

'Honestly, it's that long ago it barely happened' he spoke through the cigarette.

'It doesn't feel like that for me.'

'It's forgiven, you know that. I certainly don't condone it, but its forgiven'

'It just changed me a lot and my opinion of myself.'

'I wouldn't go that far Fin. You were young, curious, and had a lot of male attention. Happens all the time.' He shrugged and then blew the smoke, away from her face.

She opened her mouth to speak again and then exhaled.

'Do you know those moments that kind-of define you as a good person or a bad person?'

'Fin I don't think it's really as simple...' he interrupted but she cut him off.

'Like when I broke Kayleigh's nose, or we stole that Walkman, or when I lied about there being no milk at the shop and bought sweets with mum's money instead?' Fin looked at Archie.

'Fin, how do you still hold onto stuff like that. If we held onto every stupid thing

we've ever done it'd eat away at us.'

'You know' she said 'moments that are sometimes for the better and sometimes, well... not.' Archie thought of his mum. Would a broken arm have defined him as much as his mum's death? Silly question, he thought, but would he still be playing rugby? Studying sports science? Do we always end up in the same place regardless of the things we have have been through? Is that what fate is? He flicked some ash onto the grass and wondered if other people's minds worked like his did.

'Well when that happened, things just turned a bit shite for me...'

'It wasn't too wonderful for me either Fin.'

'You didn't make bad choices though. Like I made a bad choice and then made bad choices after that. Like one bad choice breeding more bad choices. I got depressed and panicky and didn't want to eat and...I just hated...hate myself so much. I don't think I'm a good person anymore and I'm scared I never will be a good person.'

'You are a good person Fin'

She continued to pick through the grass and her eyes started to fill up just enough for them not to spill over. 'I keep trying to repent. It's like I'm trying to prove to the world I'm good when I know I'm not good. I try and wear the good things, even if I don't like them. I try and say the good things even if I don't mean them. I don't think I think good things you know? My thoughts are not good thoughts.'

'Fin...'

'No but before you try to interrupt, they're not good thoughts. I don't allow myself to think good thoughts or think about good things. I know that all sounds pretty deep...sorry.'

'I think you are a good person.'

'But you can't prove that. Nobody can. And, honestly hearing that, especially from

you, makes me feel even worse. You know they say you can't selectively numb? Like, they say if you numb the bad you numb the good?'

'Who says that?'

'They...people...I don't know. I've heard it somewhere and...well...it feels true.'

She started to tear the grass more ferociously now, 'I feel a bit like that with us, I think if I forgive myself, I'm taking the magnitude of the mistake away. Which may also take the magnitude of us away. I don't know what I'd do if I let myself numb or forget the way I felt for you. It feels like the only morally good feeling I know of'. Good, he had always wanted someone to describe the way they felt about him as morally good. He could vaguely hear two people arguing nearby. Someone sounded in trouble. Something he would have paid close attention to if it hadn't been for the way Fin was talking now. When Fin was with him and talking about something important to her, nothing could be as interesting. He sometimes thought that if inanimate objects came to life, or animals started speaking when she was around, he wouldn't notice. There was a scream far away that turned into laughter. Everyone was ok. He couldn't take his eyes off Fin who was watching whatever was unfolding across the grass. She rolled her eyes and her body softened.

'I think they are on drugs' she said.

'Lucky buggers' Archie smiled but she didn't smile.

'Sometimes it feels like it's the only map I have back to me.'

'Drugs?' Archie said.

'No you Archie. All I ever find myself trying to do is to undo the things I've done, or not think about the choices I've made since that day. I think I felt unscathed and likeable at my core, when I was with you. Before I did, what I did, is the last memory of me liking myself' She looked up at him and then back down at the little pile of shredded grass in front

of her. 'It makes sense in my head', she added. Archie took a draw on his cigarette. It felt disjointed to be sitting in a city they studied in and grew to know and love but both separately existed in. He suddenly felt far, far away, like he was watching this all happen on one of those small t.v screens at the opposite end of an airplane. They sat in silence for a moment and Archie just looked into her eyes, they were different eyes now. He could stare at them forever and never know who she was. She threw a small piece of grass in his lap prompting him to talk.

'Well, it obviously makes me feel sad to know you've not been happy', Archie said finally. 'I sort of convinced myself you were a lot better off without me. You've moved to London, signed a contract in L.A, I swear I even saw you on the fucking front cover of ELLE.'

'Which are all important components in the equation of happiness...' she said sarcastically.

'But isn't that what you've always wanted?'

'I suppose.'

'You suppose?'

'Yes. I don't know what I've always wanted. Or which version of me wants which life.' He exhaled through his mouth and lay back on the grass, bowled over by her one-liners which always made him doubt the point in it all.

'Hey, I think it's normal to want to go back to high school.' He smiled hopefully, although even saying the words felt traitorous to what they had been in high school. He knew he was making her sadder. It was a skill of his that he had accidentally excelled in, out of nowhere, in his sixth year of high school. One day, he was making her happy, wetting her pants with laughter, this one time he even saw milk come out of her nose when she laughed.

And the next day, he was making her sad. He continued to get better and better at it the more he tried not to. He would send flowers to the Town Hall when she had shows, which she seemed embarrassed by. He would set up date nights, rearranging the entire living room to resemble a restaurant, in which she would barely eat and seem irritated by him moving her stuff. When they broke up, she asked him to stay away from her, which he did and in return, she was sadder. And now she's hardly in his life, and she has everything she once told him she wanted and now she wants high school again. It was his speciality. Making her sad.

'I miss high school too', he offered.

'Yeah?' Fin smiled somewhat hopefully. 'You hated high school Archie.'

'Yeah,' he breathed. 'But it was better than this. I guess I miss almost everything about it.'

'I feel like I have to hold my shit together now, and it's so hard' Fin agreed.

'People have been trying to hold their shit together for a lot longer than you Fin. Some of us have been practising since we were seventeen.'

'You know I didn't mean to be insensitive,' she said cocking her head.

'I know' he nodded.

'Do you miss me? Or do you miss your Mum?'

'Did you mean to ask me that?'

'Shit sorry, I'm not making this some morbid competition, you said you missed High School. Was that the part when Kim was alive or the part when we were together?'

'Oh right, I see what you mean. Well, I miss her every day. It doesn't hurt as much anymore, which then makes it even more unbearable. Like I can't imagine a reality in which she would be here so it's easy...er if you get me? Like, sometimes have to look at a picture you know? To remind myself what she looked like, or otherwise, I sort of forget.' He took a

moment to flick his cigarette and take a draw. 'But I do miss you too. I don't think you needed to ask me that question.'

She liked it when he made her feel silly for doubting what they had once had. She often missed him like she would miss her ability to talk.

'I miss you a lot.'

They let the words hang in the air like cigarette smoke. Both tingling with warmth as if they'd just said 'I love you' for the first time.

'When did you start smoking by the way?' She asked.

'I don't smoke. Well, not often, sometimes after a game or when I'm drinking. It's good for me. I still get panic attacks when I drink without a cigarette.' He flicked the ash and then pushed the stub into the grass.

'How are the panic attacks?' she crawled towards him and rested her head on his shoulder. Her brown hair tickled his cheek.

'A fucking hoot', he raised his eyebrows.

'I meant' she said punching him playfully 'are they happening a lot?'

Archie inhaled sharply, thinking of something equally as sarcastic to say. Then he exhaled...

'Yeah. Most days actually. It's embarrassing. I feel like a freak.'

She lifted her chin and kissed him suddenly. Their teeth touched, to begin with, like two strangers who had never kissed before, and then they softened and she pulled away. He took her head in his hands and kissed her again, harder this time. Kissing her to try and time travel. Her cold hands moved to his waist, underneath his t-shirt and, they were on their knees now, fumbling to stay balanced. She could taste the red wine on his tongue. It was almost as if her out-breath was the air he needed to survive. Like he was built differently to most

humans.

And then, as quickly as it had started, he felt cold and hollow. He had a nauseating feeling that he had been here before, Fin kissing him, not out of desire, but out of sympathy. Sympathy for his panic attacks, his dead mum, and his depressed dad. Like she thought she could fix him. But her kiss had only ever really broken him more.

'I don't want tonight to end', she said, kissing him between words. 'Shall we open a bottle in your flat?'

'Yeah...uh...no', he said pulling away holding her at arm's length. 'I would invite you up, but I don't..uh...I don't think that's fair on Aaron and... I think I'm kind of seeing someone', he said looking at her phone on the grass. 'Will you call a Taxi? Or..? I'm just up here', he said pointing towards Gladstone Terrace. 'Look, I don't want to make you feel awkward or anything,' he breathed, sensing her hurt. 'I'm sorry that I just kissed you. I just think you'd regret coming back, you know, like, if you did.'

She looked like a wounded woodland animal as she drew her knees to her chest. Eyes glassy. She had left her map back to herself outside on a rainy evening and the ink was morphed and blotted. They sat in silence for a while. It didn't feel like the comfortable kind of silence anymore. The wine and the tiredness kept his thoughts teasing him only to disappear before they could become words.

'Did you ever think about fighting for me?' she finally asked.

'Fuck' he shook his head 'Fin, I don't think it was my responsibility, to stop you from doing what you did.'

'So, did you care about what I did to you?' her voice scratchy, she didn't look at him.

'That's absurd Fin'.

'You don't deal with things normally.'

'Is that supposed to be an insult? You don't think I know that?' He stood up and faced away from her.

'So do you ever want to talk to me about, like, what was going through your mind at that time?'

'I could do yeah.' he said not turning around.

'Ok', she said.

'Ok. I don't want you to feel like anything was more important than you, but it was just the way things got the better of me I suppose.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Well at the time when I felt everything changing, Dad wasn't well, and it was just hard to save both of you.'

He could see her tighten up. He noticed he hadn't spoken to anyone, apart from the paramedics and the police about this.

'It's ok.' She tilted her head trying to meet his eyes. 'You can talk to me.' He knew he could talk to Fin, but like many of the opportunities that had presented themselves in his life so far; his body had another idea. It was in these moments that he would think of Fin, holding his hand for the first time by a fire somewhere far away or when he was deep inside her in the shower in the early morning. He tried to let the panic flow through him, like diving under a threatening wave and hearing silence and feeling weightless, but sometimes he was tossed aside into the tumbling strength of the water, unable to breathe. He was drowning.

His throat closed, squeezing down into a pinprick, and his Lungs began to turn inside out.

Quickly, began the stabbing and squeezing in his chest and his eardrums began to burst with the rapid beating of his heart. The convulsing drew him to his hands and knees.

Everyone he'd known was looking at him getting smaller and weaker and uglier. Trying to open his mouth to speak, he could hear his own voice from far away, guttural retching. Shame. Freak. Soft. Stupid. He wanted it to kill him. It was only a matter of minutes.

'Open your eyes, look at me.' Fin was trying to steady his head in her hands. 'Look at me Archie, you're ok.'

He tried to open his eyes, but he couldn't see Fin. The stabbing in his temples was consuming.

'Breathe, you can breathe. It's not real. Breathe with me. Look at me Arch.' He tried again, this time his eyes met hers, deeply sad, gentle... frightened. Fin wrapped her arms around his neck and they sat there until the shaking had stopped. He had soaked through his t-shirt and onto her bare arms.

'I just didn't think you cared that's all', she said.

He let her pull away first and he could see now that she was crying. The tears running across her lipstick. He was crying too.

'Archie, I'm not scared about life when I'm with you.'

'I am.'

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Fin

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He had only been invited to the party because his mum had died six months ago at Christmas time and everyone must have felt sorry for him. The truth was she'd killed herself, but Fin's Mum, Valerie, had said it wasn't ok to say that. Fin must make it sound as if it were something of an accident, or illness, that she'd died. She said that would be more sensitive even though Fin knew it was a lie. If Fin were to kill herself, she would want the world to

know she had killed herself. Otherwise, what was the point? To add to the confusion, she couldn't wrap her head around the fact that someone, who wasn't known to be mad, would kill themselves on purpose. It had possessed her for several days afterwards. She had really wanted to go to the funeral but she had a dentist appointment, and her older sister Ola said it would have been a bit weird if she went. There were so many questions Fin would ask if it wasn't so insensitive of her to do so. So many jigsaw pieces that didn't seem to fit. Why would Archie's mum have wanted to leave Archie alone? Is Archie's dad a bad man? Would she still see him at sports day? What would happen to the hair-salon she owned? Who would cut her hair now? Would she have to go all the way out of town for a haircut now? Or would she grow her hair down to her bum? She had always wanted long hair. When Ola and Fin were younger, they would put their pyjama bottoms on their head and run around, bums out, pretending they had flowing locks when in reality they both had matching little, brown mushroom cuts.

Apparently, she was found at nighttime, hanging from a tree in her back garden; still swinging. And people said that it had been Archie that had found her. It was only a rumour though, she didn't know that for sure, but it made him really famous in school. And she was jealous of that.

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Archie had arrived on a bicycle that was too small for him. It had fluorescent green beads on the wheels that chimed when the peddles turned. It was a rather anticlimactic fanfare to what she hoped would be an eventful evening.

She watched Archie curiously, out of her bedroom window. The air felt like the south of France and midges dusted the air as the sun began to set into the tatty fields. Ola showed him how to organise the bottles into triangular groups on the paper cloth. He very

was meticulous for a boy and Ola seemed pleased by his neatness. Fin hadn't noticed him at one of Ola's parties before (which there had been four of) in the last school year. This particular one was more of a small gathering, compared to the other parties, which made it even more interesting that Archie Shafer was on the guest list. Two cars came rolling down the dirt track to the farmhouse. You could see them from half-a-mile away as clouds of dust erupted behind them. Fin was ready to laugh at their jokes and let them play with her hair, and tell her that she could be pretty if she tried. Archie didn't greet anyone. He looked down at his shoes the whole time. He clearly wasn't pally with anyone, which made his presence even more mysterious. For now, Fin would wait in her bedroom, sipping vermouth out of a plastic bottle stolen from her parents drinks cabinet until Ola was suitably drunk.

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Parties with older people always made Fin feel mischievous. She lay on her back on her bedroom rug and listened to the party spark into life in the garden beneath her. She felt excitement in-between her legs and when she squeezed that area she would feel her breath catch in her throat. She heard the voices of some of the boys in the year above sing her name up through her open window and she put her hand into her knickers. *Make them want me*, she thought. What fun.

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There were new drinks at this party that Fin had never seen before. Alex had brought a bottle of Ouzo back from his recent holiday in Corfu. Apparently he had been allowed to miss the last few days of term to go, which, to Fin, was a really bad idea. Everyone knows that the last few days of term are the most gossip-riddled of the year and now he was finding it hard to include himself in the conversation, but the Ouzo was a neat trick. The bottle was passed around the fire, nobody liked it, but everyone kept drinking it. Fin learned, from a young age,

that doing things you didn't like was very cool. Fin's mum Val, had made it clear that Fin was too young for spirits and had also told her, whilst cleaning up Fin's vomit from her wicker basket, that there had to be a delicate balance between appearing mature, and disgracing yourself. Which Fin agreed with. She had thrown-up at one party since, and the next day's lunch had been ruined. It had been prawn-wraps, which were Fin's favourite, and she vowed, there and then, not to let a party ruin a good meal again. The only other person to pass-off the Ouzo had been Archie. He had gestured to his beer when the bottle had reached him, and resumed his stargazing. Fin knew they had both seen the same shooting star. After it had disappeared, she'd looked around to see if anyone had glimpsed it and he was still staring at the place in the sky where it fell. His mouth was half-open, eyes like slits, scanning desperately for the rock that had disintegrated in orbit. She wanted to point out that the shooting star wasn't coming back, that he wouldn't see it again. But, gathering from his expression, he knew that. It was most interesting to watch, a strange way to behave at someone else's house party; gawking at the sky like a newborn baby lying under a colourful mobile; marvelling, in awe, at the new shapes and colours twirling before him in the sky. Had he never seen a camp-fire or drank a beer before? He wasn't as easy to figure out as the other boys, which made her feel uneasy, but for a moment she fantasised that he had been sent from the future; a world without fire or stars, and that he was now privy to secrets that nobody else knew of.

'Nice of you to join us this evening Archie', said Kayleigh, raising her plastic cup. They were sat in picnic chairs around the steel fire-pit. The firelight made everyone look a bit gaunt and menacing. 'Good to see you back on your feet!' Heads bowed awkwardly, and everyone looked over at Archie to see his reaction. He thanked her, with a smile, his two hands gripping his beer bottle. Fin noticed that his knuckles were white.

'Kayleigh!' Ola, Fin's sister, scorned.

'What?' She whined.

Kayleigh was the loudest and, what Fin thought to be, the most grown-up of Ola's friends. She was one of those girls at school who the boys called a 'Butterface'; they said everything about her was fit, but-her-face. Even her white-blonde locks couldn't hide *that* nose. Fin often found comfort in her own appearance when she thought about Kayleigh's nose. Life must be harder with a nose like that.

'I'm just saying, I'm glad you came tonight that's all.' She pretended to tip an imaginary hat and took a swig of her drink.

'That's what you'll be saying to him in a few hours from now Kayls!' Boomed Johnny, a boy who looked like he had spend too long in the front row of the scrum. He was panting, almost dribbling with enthusiasm at his joke. He got what he wanted; the group erupted into laughter.

'Oh, you know me John-boy'. Kayleigh winked at Archie. It made Fin feel a bit sick. Was Archie cool now? He wasn't cool last year. Would Fin be cool too if she killed off a parent? It was an insensitive thought, but she indulged it anyway. These days it was getting harder to keep up with who was popular and who wasn't. But Archie? He couldn't be, it just didn't add up. He rode a kids bike, wore his school uniform 24/7 and didn't talk to anyone. Fin tried to catch a glimpse of him without getting caught staring.

#

The conversation steered onto the topic of exams and Archie got up and walked over to the table of drinks. Nobody else seemed to notice him leave and (with little to contribute to the conversation because 1. she hadn't started exams yet and 2. She wanted to be famous) Fin followed him over. She would be sure that, if the topic presented itself, she would make it

sound like an illness or accident that his mum was dead. He stopped with back to the fire and his hands on the table, letting his head droop slightly.

'Are you having a nice time?' She asked, without looking at him. His head shot up and he turned to face her. He exhaled loudly as if she'd frightened him. Fin shot her hands up to show him she was unarmed.

'You can say no. It's not my party. I won't tell.' He pushed his curls off his shiny forehead.

'I suppose' he smiled, shifting his weight from one foot to the other nervously.

#

'It's not one of her best parties, I have to be honest with you. Last time we got so fucked up Johnny kicked a cow and we got chased by them.' He gave a small laugh. 'I know mental right?'

They stood in silence for a moment too long.

'Did you know, I'm actually in the year below you? But, people say I act old for my age.' She paused again. 'You don't talk much do you?'

He gave her an apologetic smile. 'I'm not sure we've met properly anyway, I'm Fin, Ola's sister'

'I know who you are.' He said with an expression of slight amusement on his face. His bluntness took her by surprise. She hadn't expected him to speak with such confidence. She hadn't imagined him speaking at all. 'I'm Archie.'

'I know. You're...' she was about to say 'famous', and then settled for nothing. She knew who he was, everyone did.

Archie raised his beer bottle towards the fire, 'I don't actually know Ola that well'. Once again, his voice took her off guard. It was quite a normal voice, and not in the least bit

strange.

'Yeah.' There was a mildly irritating silence again. Surely they should take it in turns to save each other from awkwardness? 'I know you don't know her that well, because you pronounced her name 'Oh-la' and it's just 'Ola'.'

'Ola' he repeated. 'Well it's nice of her to invite me. I don't normally get invited to these things so...' he paused as if they were in a drama class, and the pause was a cue for the supporting character to interrupt. 'It feels like a pity invite' he said, shooting the elephant in the room. Fin laughed in relief. 'It isn't very subtle is it?' he laughed.

She felt she was allowed to look at him a bit more now. His eyes were the green that Fin had always wanted her eyes to be. It had always stuck with her that people with green eyes were special. Only 2% of the world had true green eyes, and 79% had brown eyes, like her. She noticed that he could never pick an eye when talking to her and his gaze drifted from one to the other over and over again. It felt kind of nice. No other boy did that in school. He had short, mousy brown curls and his skin looked thin and slightly green in the glow of the fire. Which made him stand out from the rosy young farmers at school. 'Consider it a compliment, people want to get to know you, I guess'.

'There's not much to know'.

Fin tucked her hair behind her ears. *There was so much to know*, she thought. That's the thing about knowledge, the more you owned the more powerful you become. Not textbook knowledge, but life knowledge; knowledge about other people's lives. There was a lot of town mystery around Archie and his dad, and Fin possessed an incessant need to know more.

'Are you enjoying your summer holidays then?' She asked.

'Yeah, they're going alright. Could be better, could be worse. You?' The word 'alright'

made her stop and think before she answered. She'd been taken aback by his admission. Her question had been an invitation for him to compete with her. In her circle of friends, the summer holidays was always a competition as to who could have the richest, most exciting six weeks. You would never admit they were just going 'alright'. Last year she'd gone to Nepal with her family, and it had changed her. She'd even bought a few beaded bracelets and preserved her flaking Henna with brown sharpie to flaunt this profound change when she arrived back to school.

'Mine are going alright too' she said daringly. Either the vulnerability or the glass of punch gave Fin her next surge of boldness. It was time to investigate the scene...

'So...do you like Kayleigh then'

'Sorry?'

'Kayleigh, do you like her?'

He gestured quizzically in Kayleigh's direction.

'Yeah, she seems to have a big thing for you', Fin added.

'Oh right, ok.'

Her accusation was based entirely off of speculation and no evidence. She ladled some more punch into her glass.

'I suppose most girls have a thing for you though, right?' He slid his hands into the pockets of his school trousers.

'Why do you suppose that?'

Fin opened her mouth to speak and then shut it again and took sip of her drink. Why did she suppose that? She had never supposed it before, but after meeting him properly for the first time, she supposed it now. She liked how he did his own thing just like she did and she liked that he touched his lips a lot when he spoke. All she did was shrug and it felt like

she had just peed on a fire that had taken a while to make.

‘So would you go there with Kayleigh?’ She said pulling them back on topic.

‘I don’t really know her’

‘But you can see her right?’ Fin said seriously gesticulating the shape of Kayleigh’s boobs.

Archie laughed with his eyes.

‘That’s not really my style’ and then his eyes widened ‘Jesus is that really why I’m here? Have I been drafted in for that reason?’.

‘No! No.’ Fin exclaimed. ‘So who do you hang out with then?’

‘Mostly my Dad’

Fin laughed. ‘I mean like, who do you *hang out* with?’ She widened her eyes and gyrated her hips.

‘Oh. No-one. Yeah. Definitely not my Dad’ he said dryly which made Fin laugh a bit more. She waited for him to ask her back but he didn’t.

He picked up another beer and, to Fin's disappointment, gestured with his head, that they go back to the group. She wanted him to like her.

#

The girls had smudged ash into their cheeks in a diagonal '=' signs, and they beckoned Fin over to do the same. The boys went over to inspect the table-tennis table in the garage. Fin found herself giving Archie an encouraging smile as he followed them inside.

'You're not drunk enough' said Kayleigh, leaning in to Fin, to draw her war paint. She planted an extra line in-between her eyes. 'That line is for intuition. Your third-eye!'

'Intuition about what?' asked Fin.

Kayleigh's eye's widened. 'Oh Everything' she said.

Kayleigh and Ola sat peering over Fin, as if she was getting her ears pierced. Maggie leaned in to take a closer look. Fin enjoyed being this close to Maggie, she smelled of marshmallow and peach schnapps. She liked Maggie, she was always the one making Fin feel older than she was. Fin couldn't wait to wear perfume, like Maggie's, but she would have to be the same age Ola was when she first started wearing perfume. That's the way it worked. The age that Ola started wearing perfume would be the age that Fin would. Fin got her ears pierced when she was eleven and a half which was the age Ola was when she had her ears pierced. It was the same with Fin's first alcoholic drink, her first bra and her first pocket-money pay-rise.

'We need more shots over here' Maggie finally said.

'You know, you could be sexy Fin'. Kayleigh passed her the bottle.

'Kayls she's like twelve.' Ola scoffed.

'Well she's cracking boobs for a twelve year old Ola' Maggie said, cupping Fin's tiny bra-less breasts.

'How old are you now Finny?' Kayleigh cooed, lighting a cigarette.

'Fifteen'

'I always think you're so much older than that' Maggie said blowing gently on the excess ash on Fin's face.

'If she was older, I wouldn't be babysitting her tonight' Ola laughed.

'You love babysitting' Said Fin, who had been waiting for an opening. 'That's why you invited Archie Shafer right?'

Ola glared at Fin.

'I invited him because Mum practically forced me, OK? And then they buggered off for the weekend leaving me to entertain him at my own party!'

'God forbid. What a shame you have an empty house yet again Ola' said Kayleigh.

'Fuck off' hissed Ola.

'It's kind you invited him' said Maggie, fishing out the fruit at the bottom of her punch glass with her fingers.

'Mum used to get her hair cut by his Mum. I guess she feels a personal connection slash obligation to the family or something'.

'I think he's kind of hot.' Kayleigh remarked.

'Really?' piped up Fin, feeling smug with her recent rendezvous.

'Well, don't you?'

'I don't know' Fin said taking the shot that Maggie handed her. She winced and then added, 'I like his eyes'. The girls looked at each other and then burst out laughing. Hilarious, thought Fin.

'She's so cute Ola' squealed Maggie. Ola rolled her eyes and took another swig of her punch.

'Don't worry Fin, I think I understand what you're saying. It's his moody vibe. Do you know that women find vulnerable men more attractive?' said Kayleigh, taking a drag.

'Brash statement. Where did you find that one out?' Ola rolled her eyes.

'No it's true. I read it in Cosmo. When men are vulnerable, they let their partners into their lives a lot more which apparently leads to an improvement in' she wiggled her eyebrows furiously 'every aspect of their relationship. If you get what I mean girls?'

'Oh yeah, depression is so hot right now'. Maggie added. 'Although, I don't want some guy crying on me when I'm giving them head'. They burst out laughing. Fin joined in.

'I don't know, there's something about him. Underneath those grey, adjustable-waist, slim-fit trousers' Kayleigh snorted.

'You think everyone is hot' Ola giggled.

'I don't think Johnny is hot'.

'Nobody thinks Johnny is hot' said Fin quietly.

'I like her' Kayleigh laughed squeezing Fin's head in her hands.

'Is that why you've slept with him twice now? Said Maggie.

'You know both times were an accident!' said Kayleigh now theatrically burying her face in her cup.

'Huge penis though' They all erupted into laughter. Fin liked it when they talked about sex. They made it seem less of a big deal than her friends did, and she liked sex to be talked about as less of a big deal. Sex wasn't a big deal. It really wasn't.

#

Later that night, at the fire, she asked if Archie had wanted to share her blanket, he nodded with his bottom lip out. When she had put her head on his shoulder, he didn't even put his hand down her jeans under the blanket, which always happened to her at Ola's house parties. When she had explained to him that her tent was free, he had just shrugged and said, 'sure'. And then all of a sudden, the others had disappeared into their respective tents, too drunk to notice who was missing, and had left Fin with Archie.

'You don't have a tent now do you?' he asked staring blankly ahead.

'I did, but Kayleigh and Johnny have commandeered it.'

'I feel cheated'. Archie said, and Fin laughed. She liked that he was moving his thumb back and forth on her hand. She wondered if he was drunk yet and what that would mean for her. She turned to face his green eyes and decided it was now or never to do her investigating. Because what good are exciting thoughts if they aren't words meant to be spoken?

'What was she like?'

'Who?'

'Your mum'

'Oh'

'What kind of person was she?' Archie blinked and his eyelashes brushed the longest curls on his forehead. 'Everyone said it was a such a shock, I gathered it wasn't in her nature, to...you know?'

'Oh I see.' He let go of Fin's hand and pressed his palms together, resting his elbows on his knees.

'Sorry, we don't have to talk about it if you...'

'No, no. It's cool. I just haven't actually...talked...about it...with anyone'.

'With anyone? How could you not have talked about it with anyone?'

'I don't know. Nobody has ever asked me really'

'Wow.' Breathed Fin. She suspected that if her Mum had died she would talk about it with everyone. Fin didn't know what to say so she settled for 'She cut my hair.'

'Who?'

'Your mum'

'Oh right, yeah I know.'

'Oh you do?'

'Yeah' he turned his bowed-head to look at Fin. 'Kim was always talking about you girls. How you were doing in your dance exams and stuff like that'. Fin's mum never talked about Kim and Archie, it was always about whether she approved of her haircut, if the salon was clean enough and if her appointment was delayed because Kim was running behind.

'My dance exams?'

'Yeah, didn't you get like three distinctions this time around?' He asked.

'I did!'

'It's strange actually, feel like I know lots of weird stuff about you'

'Like what?' Archie held her gaze as if her eyes were a teleprompter of information.

'When you got your first period'

'You do not' Fin gasped.

'No, I do not'. He nudged her playfully.

'I was 13. On the ski trip bus. Thought I was dying'.

'You girls do not have it easy. My mum just gave me a condom and said 'don't knock up one of the Riley girls. They are too good for you and you know it'.

'Did she actually?'

'No!' Archie giggled, 'although she's bloody well right'. Fin rested her head on his shoulder again and took a hold of his hand, pretending she was inspecting it rather than holding it.

'That was funny' she said aloud. 'Do you miss her?'

'Uh yeah' his words hung in the air for a few seconds. Each of which Fin wondered what it would be like to miss someone. She wondered if she would ever know. 'To answer your question- she was my mum, you know? I don't know what she was like other than she was my mum. She made my packed lunch, I liked her hugs, she liked to watch shit T.V like X Factor at the crucial times when Dad and I wanted to watch good movies, she hated cooking, enjoyed her job...I think, asked way too many annoying questions and spoke to my friends for too long when they came over.' He paused to come up for air and then 'She drank a bit too much wine I think. I could smell it on her when she said goodnight. She was crazy about singing. She sang everywhere. She was always making tea or having tea or going for tea with friends. She changed her hair a lot. She was just mum. Nothing else. The police always

wanted something more than that. There wasn't.' Fin made a noise that didn't sound as sympathetic as she'd hoped and a little too much like a reporter. Half of her felt professional, as if she'd cracked a code, and the other half had never heard anyone speak so bluntly about something so mysterious and secretive. She would make a habit of asking direct questions in the future. It saved an awful lot of time.

'Do you ever think you have got more, like, stuff because of what happened?'

His eyes widened but he didn't seem put off by her bluntness. 'I do-yes. I mean, I know lots of people that should have got senior prefect over me and stuff like that.' Fin had contemplated kissing him and now she felt as though she shouldn't. If she kissed him now, he'd think she felt sorry for him, which she did. She never wanted to kiss anyone out of pity. Although, the fact he was famous made her want to kiss him. He could be famous for good things like sports or drama. It didn't have to be scandal-fame. But, She wasn't one hundred percent completely sure if she wanted to kiss him. Yes, his eyes were kind and she found him oddly nice to look at, like a piece of driftwood. But, he was painfully thin. The kind of thin you could snap in several places if you hit him with a swing. She had always preferred Ola's rugby friends like Alex, with his thicker thighs and bigger arms. She wanted to kiss a lot of older people. She wanted to kiss pretty much all of Ola's friends. If she had been alone in a tent with Kayleigh right now, she probably would have kissed her. Mostly because people would find out, because she'd tell people in a calculated way to make it look like she hadn't and then she'd be more popular. The whole situation was very confusing. She had never met anyone her age whose mum had died. It was so hard for her to imagine it. He had this interesting sadness to him that made her feel purposeful.

She asked him again if lots of girls fancied him now. He just laughed and suddenly she wanted to make him do that more. Almost as if she felt possessive over his smile, a smile

she hadn't seen since Kim died. A smile she felt personally responsible for. His smile was her's. It covered the entire lower half of his face and his dimples almost touched the outer corners of his eyes. The safeguarding, reminded her of a time she had made brownies for her history classmates, but they were too good to share, so she kept them in her schoolbag and ate them all on the bus home. She ended up being quite ill. She'd feel jealous now if she saw another girl make him smile. He told her he felt happy. It felt like such a strange thing for someone to say. Fin felt happy most of the time so it was interesting to hear that it was such an overwhelming feeling to Archie that he had told her.

'You could always just sleep in my room?'

They pulled the single duvet from Fin's bed, and the spare double-duvet from the guest-room and set it down on the floor. The presence of an older boy made her childhood bedroom vanish into thin air. Archie went to pull his top off over his head and paused.

'Do you mind?'

'Oh shit sorry', Fin turned her back to him. Archie started to laugh.

'No silly, do you mind if I take this off. It stinks of smoke'. Fin blushed.

'I knew that' she said. 'Mine too'. They undressed down to their underwear in front of each other and got under the duvet. As she lay there, his chest rising and falling against her back, breath staggered with her's, she had a disconcerting feeling that he wasn't bothered by her at all. He just went along with whatever she expressed or suggested. It was such an alien feeling not to be fancied. Everyone fancied her. She didn't have to try, it was something she was just born with. Did he not fancy her? The thought made her insecure. She decided to take hold of his hand again. He let her put her fingers between his like they were boyfriend and girlfriend. It was a far more intimate gesture than she'd anticipated. It felt as if they had time-traveled to post-sex and the sudden sense of closeness made Fin let go and roll onto her back

with her hands behind her head.

Life had been boring the last few weeks since school had broken up, and boredom made her jittery. She had been very much looking forward to this evening. It would come with eventfulness, even if she had to make it happen herself. Maybe arching her back to make her breasts look bigger would make him want to touch them? Kayleigh would have had sex with him by now, she thought. She gazed up at the ceiling. Regrettably, Fin didn't know the ins and outs of who-liked-who in Archie's year, but she assumed, as he kept passing off the question, that he probably had a lot of female interest now. Like Kayleigh. Fin would make them all on The Sims 2 next week, and watch them have sex with Archie and with each other. Whenever they disappeared into a cloud of smoke underneath the covers, she would close her eyes, imagine what they would be doing, and touch herself.

‘Should we just be friends then?’ Fin asked.

‘Yeah sure. I’d like that’.

‘Do you want to have sex with me?’ She said gazing up at the roof.

‘It’s actually ok Fin. I’m a bit drunk’ Archie laughed. She didn’t understand why he was laughing. She wanted to ask why he didn’t want to have sex with her. And then it dawned on her that maybe Archie knew all about her. Maybe he’d heard rumours about what had happened last Christmas and he didn’t want to touch her. Maybe nice boys don’t want to touch her. Maybe he thinks she is not special enough. Maybe he thinks she is ruined. He turned to face her laying his head on arm.

‘You know you shouldn’t just ask people point-blanc if they want to have sex with you’.

‘Why not?’

‘Do you do that a lot?’ He was finding this too amusing.

‘No’ she sulked turning away from him.

‘Good’ he said. ‘So are you going to hang out with me at school then?’. Fin thought about this for a moment. She thought about how her current friends bored her and how mysterious she would seem hanging out with Archie. She wondered what it would be like to see his green eyes up close every day and how much it would infuriate her to be around his uniquely unbothered and secret demure. She thought about making him finally want to have sex with her and how it would feel to win at that game.

‘All the time’

JUST FRIENDS

#

CHAPTER TWO

Archie

#

Earlier in the evening, they had all been by the fire. He had laughed at other people's jokes; the ones he found funny, answered the questions posed directly to him, and got up to check that Alex was fine after he had fallen back over a guitar amp. He remembers certain shapes of the fire more clearly than the conversation, and bats- diving into hoards of midges, high above the smoke, the number of piercings on Maggie's ears and a shooting star. It was the same in school. He could remember the height order of the raindrops racing to reach the window sill before any page of a textbook or lecture from a teacher. There were twenty-five street lamps on the High Street and they were only on the left-hand side if you were walking to school from his house. At his mum's funeral, he remembers not the poems or songs, but;

the flowers -white lilies and these small yellow ones that looked like buttercups. He remembers the whistling of the wind through the cracks in the church window next to his pew and the small inscription into the wood below the shelf in front of him that read...something illegible 'too. They travel to God when we can't speak. 56:8'. It was clear why his dad sometimes called him 'soft' and 'stupid' when he daydreamed. In his exams, just passed, he had tried his best, but Archie hadn't received any marks higher than a C. It perplexed him why it was important to learn about the Highland Clearances and the anatomy of a leaf when his mum had just died. During study leave, he had been learning how to drive and cook and make money and save money. He knew how to open a bank account, how to get out of bed when his body felt like a dead-weight, and how to write a convincing sick-note when his Dad needed looking after.

#

This was the first party he had been invited to in over a year. Ola Riley had invited him after the last exam. She had caught up with him on the stairs out of the P.E hall and tapped him on the shoulder, to get his attention. It was the second time she'd spoken to him in school. The first was when he'd fallen asleep in Maths class just shortly after Christmas, and she'd woken him up with a sympathetic squeeze on the arm, and then used hand-sanitiser very quickly afterwards.

The invite was a crumpled up piece of SQA paper with the words 'come if you're keen!' on the bottom.

'I'm having a party', she looked around anxiously to see if anyone was looking.

'No discussing exams until you have passed the changing rooms!' shouted one of the invigilators after them.

'Jesus' she breathed, 'not like I can change any of my answers now right?'

He searched for something witty to say, but ended up opting for silence and gazed down at the invite.

'It's not a big deal I mean we hardly know each other so...' she bit her nails. 'Don't worry if you can't make it'. And she vanished.

#

He had heard of, but never been to one Ola's parties before. He had seen pictures on Facebook, always massive events with the whole year group invited and even some pupils in the year above. It would be a nice way to get out of the house. Like his mum used to say, if he didn't enjoy it, he could always leave without anyone noticing and say he had a tummy ache. Could a teenager still use that as an excuse? He wouldn't be able to use her advice for much longer as it would always be advice that should be given to a 17 year old.

#

He was the first to arrive, and as he set out the table, it became clear by the number of cups and drinks, that this was not going to be like Ola's other parties. He had been invited by pity. There was no other way he could have been invited to a party of seven. He often concluded, in the last six months, that all of the joyful things in his life were now gifted to Archie through pity. It made it difficult to judge a character and where he actually stood in society.

#

Archie knew a fair bit about the Rileys: Valerie was a head-teacher, not at Rosehorn, but some private school over the Cairn O'mount. He couldn't remember what Malcolm did, but he knew they owned a big house and he saw on Facebook that Ola had been given a car for her sixteenth birthday, so it was probably something in oil. He also knew Ola had a little sister. Her name was Fin and she was in the year below. He didn't know of her because she was always winning awards, which she was. He knew of her because each time he saw Fin

Riley, he was accompanied by a strange feeling that he knew too much about her, without knowing anything about her at all. Rosehorn High School was small. Six hundred pupils. Everyone half-knew everyone. Yes, he'd noticed her more in this summer term than he had done before; he had watched her win the annual Young Musician of the Year competition in the school hall, and she had been in the same picture as him, on sports day, in the local paper with her medal hanging down to her belly button, but, this was a different feeling of knowing.

#

He'd catch her eye in the corridors at school, and often find himself unable to look away. He felt like he knew something almost perverted about her that gave him, and only him, the private information that she was far less innocent than she acted. He had only ever seen Fin in passing, and now he had spent the last few hours sat around the fire with her, and he began to feel more comfortable in her presence. He quite liked the way she held her own in a group of older people. She hadn't worn a dress like the other girls and she didn't talk as much as them either. Above all, she was the only one of them who had acknowledged why he'd been invited, but managed to do it in such a way that she didn't make him feel odd or pitied. Both he and Fin were the black sheep of the party. There because, where else would they go?

#

'Fucking Twat' laughed Alex throwing his racket down on the table-tennis table. 'How the fuck are you so good at this?'

'He's only had one beer the whole evening' said Johnny. 'When I'm playing there are four fucking balls I'm so hammered'.

'Nah, I've known him since he was a babby. He's always been great with balls'. Said Alex, shaking Archie's hand.

'Gay', said Johnny. Archie laughed.

'Seriously pal, when are you coming back to the rugby team?'

'Ahhhh' Archie scuffed his feet on the floor. 'I'm taking my time'.

'Yeah alright Pal' said Alex. There was an outbreak of laughter from outside.

'That Kayleigh wants it man' Said Johnny playing keepy-uppy with the ping-pong ball. 'I'm going for the hat-trick tonight lads'.

'Here, if she's drunk enough she'll have sex with anyone'. Alex joked, intercepting Johnny's rally with his hand.

'She's been up for it after one shot before though like' he said, 'we did stuff, but we decided not to, you know, because...' he looked around as if the answer was obvious, 'well she was on her period wasn't she?'.

'Fucking hell' Alex took a swig of his beer. 'What about you Arch, eyes on any prizes tonight'. Archie laughed again, it was followed by silence.

'I don't know.' He smiled down at his feet. 'You know me... I'm only good with balls'

Alex threw a ball at Archie, and just like that, it felt as if they were team-mates again.

The Riley's had many white carpets and many pieces of dark oak furniture; one piece in every room and two in the library. It was a barren house, given character with many delicately fitting trinkets from different countries: wall hangings, rugs, and wooden carvings. He felt like he was in a museum. She showed him the house, her voice scripted and sing-songy:

'Mum and Dad cruise a lot.' Fin had said when Archie touched the frame of the two of them outside the Taj Mahal. 'That was a three day trip from the coast, apparently. If you're questioning geography. They met the ship again in Goa. '

'Right', breathed Archie. 'Yeah, I did think that', he lied. 'Do you do this too?'

'Couldn't think of anything worse. Mum and dad go on these charter cruises. They are themed and stuff. Sounds shite. Makes the house look great though.'

He couldn't imagine feeling safer anywhere else than this large home. The cream carpets absorbed his feet like a giant marshmallow. His white socks looked perfect here. The windows caused the thin yellow curtains to flutter free into the rooms. The toilet rolls smelled of talc and they had pear soap with bits of flora stuck inside waiting to be freed with human cleanliness. He imagined Mrs. Riley waving her arm, like a magic wand, and the flowers blooming in their vases, a soft hum of classical music on the radio, the fast motion rising of bread in the oven. Even when Kim had been alive, their house would grow and shrink from swollen party balloons to shrivelled, floppy condoms. Sometimes for weeks-on-end, they would have daffodils, always refilled, and fresh salads with dinner. Their house would pulse with Carmen McRae and Ella Fitzgerald and she would make blueberry pancakes with fresh honeycomb brought back from a client at the salon. But that was really only until he got to high school. Some days he would be certain that he imagined it all along.

He could see the school from her bedroom window, over the fields and farms below. Seeing school, from bed, would panic Archie but Fin said it motivated her.

#

There were probably unwritten rules about this sort of thing; it was Ola's party and Ola had invited Fin, and so it was probably ok that they were talking, alone in her bedroom together. He hadn't tried to kiss her or anything. He wouldn't even know how to?

#

She had turned over now and was looking at him inquisitively...prying. She didn't really have the best hair-style. It reminded him of Jesus, but she was prettier than her older sister. Maybe it was the small gap between her two front teeth? He liked that she had smile lines. He was

just noticing it now...Archie had always thought that there was too much of Ola. Too much hair, too much limb, too much nose, too much makeup. Fin had Malcolm's genes; smaller, not slimmer. Smaller...everything. She said his name with a hard 'r', harder than the normal Aberdeenshire, and acted more confident than her looks granted her to be. He liked that part.

She kissed him then.

It had come out of nowhere and taken him by surprise. He knew his lips were dry, from the fire, and he couldn't move his head much, because he was lying down on his back. She pulled away for a second and he waited for her to kiss him again, this time he wanted to hold her head in his hands, so he did. It was silent, except for the sound of kissing. Somewhere in the tangle, she had taken off her top and he told her she was beautiful. It felt weird to say; like he was trying to be someone else. But she did look beautiful and he wanted her to know. She told him then:

'Do you want to have sex with me?' she asked. He fumbled onto his forearms and turned his head to one side, mid-kiss, her lips brushing his cheek. She was fifteen, and having sex with Fin would mean he would no longer have any of the friends he may have made tonight. He made up some lie about being too drunk and she looked at him and cocked her head. Once again he was confronted with the strange feeling that he knew something fragile about her, something that nobody else knew of.

Her eyes flickered down to her body like an invitation for him to do the same, but he didn't want to. He didn't deserve to see her like that yet, he wasn't enough.

Finally, she shrugged and wiggled her way into his arms. He felt stupid. It was times like this where he knew he wasn't normal. She would tell people at school and they would think he was gay or something and, they would care that he was apparently gay and he wouldn't care. They listened to his heartbeat slow down for a few minutes until she said she

was cold, so he hugged her.

#

The next morning they drank a pot of coffee between the two of them and ate toast and bacon. By midday, she asked him if he wanted to charge his phone and call home. He faked a phone call, knowing that his dad wouldn't have noticed he was gone.

#

The invitation was an impulse, perhaps from the same family of the impulse he had felt when he told her she was beautiful when she was naked on Friday. The impulse had vanished as soon as the text had been sent, and he was left feeling confused as if he had woken up on the kitchen floor after fainting.

The doctor had said that her death had been impulsive. It was one of the only pieces of information he knew from the post mortem and he had overheard it from one of the girls in physics who's dad was the doctor on call that night. They had found evidence of struggling on her hands and wrists. He had explored every single version of what that might have meant. From missing nails to rope burn. Apparently, that's what made it impulsive. Would a person who truly wanted to die, struggle when the moment finally came?

#

It was a word he hadn't thought much about until he heard it everywhere. That's the thing about words. You don't notice they exist until you know their weight. Like, there was once a time in his life where he didn't know that tomato juice was a real drink that people actually enjoyed. He saw it once in the shop across the road. After that, he saw tomato juice everywhere. Impulsive was a word he had heard over and over like water torture in the days following her 'impulse'. It was in the deafening whispers around him at the funeral. It was on bits of official looking documents left on his dad's desk. That word had once held all of her

excitement, her sense of adventure, memories of nights on the beach and days off school for no reason other than to go ice skating in the frozen ponds out of town. It was a word he watched every superhero embody growing up. He had never known what being impulsive could be in the wrong hands. He placed his phone and elbows on the counter and knelt his chin in his palms, staring at the blank screen. He swore not to be impulsive ever again until five minutes later, when his phone lit up causing his elbow to slip from the counter and he bit his tongue.

Sounds great!

And suddenly impulsive didn't seem so bad. The short message contrasted to his meticulous, thought-out invitation. He was careful not to miss a single detail. Another text, to rectify any mistakes, was another 25p. He included the time, dress code and address with parking and directions to avoid the high street. After staring at his phone for a few minutes, hovering his fingers over the buttons to reply, he decided best not to. He felt as if he was floating above himself now. The Archie down below was paralysed. The Archie above was somersaulting with a fizzing anticipation. Earlier that day, he had taken five pounds from his wallet to buy some things for dinner. It had been the five pounds that he kept in his wallet for emergencies, folded up into a tiny square. His mum had given it to him before he started high school. In case you ever miss the bus, she had said. What could he cook with five pounds? He thought of the food he had seen in Fin's Kitchen at the weekend. How could a skinny family have so much food? Archie scanned the fridge; a jar of sour cream and a can of fruit cocktail in syrup. The Riley's had a fruit bowl. It was filled with things he had never seen before. They had a machine that made fresh coffee and another machine that purified all of the fruits he had never seen into some sort of drink. In the last few months, Archie had taught himself how to make a cheese omelette, Shepherd's Pie, and homemade chips. At the shop, he bought

some potatoes, an onion, two carrots, some price-reduced mince, a pack of three tea-lights, and a small bar of dairy milk. By four O'clock he had tidied the house, steering clear of his father's room, and emptied the bins of week-old chippy paper and yellow stained carry-out foils. He had picked daffodils from the road-side on his way back from the shop and found a mug to rest them in.

#

By five-thirty, he had showered and had started to chop the vegetables. Fifteen minutes later, he saw Fin walking down the cul-de-sac to his house. She bounced when she walked, on the balls of her feet. He rinsed his hands and wiped his eyes which were stinging from the white onion, and opened the door before she had knocked. They smiled at each other.

'Archie', she said.

'Fin'.

She was wearing a small flowery t-shirt-dress and trainers, her hair was still a little damp and he caught a whiff of peppermint and tea-tree as she passed him in the hallway and he remembered that she wouldn't always smell of woodsmoke.

'Did you walk here?' He asked as he followed her into the kitchen.

'Mum dropped me off, just on the corner.' She took a seat at the table and looked around. 'I didn't know you lived here.'

'Oh, we moved about four months ago. Do you want a drink?'

'I'm good.'

'Are you sure? We have orange diluting juice.'

She agreed to the juice.

'I like it! It's cosy. Plus you can walk to school! I have always wanted to be able to walk to school. I'd come home for lunch and stuff. '

The air around them felt zig-zagged and fused. She looked younger away from the fire-light and the morning after. He handed her the glass of juice and she continued to scan her new surroundings. He got busy and opened the packet of mince and heated a little oil in a pan.

'Do you like Shepherds pie?' He smiled.

'I'm vegetarian.'

'Oh right ok.'

'Sorry.'

'Is that where you don't...?'

'I don't eat meat.'

'Right. '

'Didn't you eat bacon on Saturday?'

'Oh, I eat bacon' she answered.

'Oh ok!'

'It's totally fine. I'm not actually too hungry. So that's good. '

'Aren't you Jewish?'

'Mum is.'

'A Jewish vegetarian who eats bacon.' He laughed. Then she laughed and apologised and he said he could make chips, to which her eyes lit up. As he washed and peeled the potatoes, she chatted. Her voice, like a continuous stream of water. An accent somewhere between English and Scottish, consonants lost in vowels. She spoke more words in the space of twenty minutes than the house had heard in the last four months. He liked how little he had to speak to know he was involved in the heart of the conversation. He noticed that she didn't talk about the things that other people in school spoke about. She didn't talk about school at

all. It was all about her and all about the future. She mused over days that Archie hadn't even imagined would ever come. When she was twenty she wanted to be studying acting, by twenty-five she wanted to be on a film-set and by thirty she wanted to live in America.

'You're not what I thought you'd be like Archie.' She had said as he took the chips from the oven. He noticed that his hands were shaking slightly.

'Oh, ok...what did you think I'd be like?'

'I didn't put much thought into it.' She tugged at a frayed thread on her trainer. 'But I guess', she exhaled out of her nose and her shoulders dropped. 'I guess ...I thought you'd be boring.'

'Oh right.'

'I don't think that now though.'

'People say that to me now, yeah'

'You are different from other people. I like it.'

Different because his mum killed herself? He thought as he closed the oven door with his foot and placed the gloves over his shoulder.

'Is there somewhere I could wash my hands?' She asked. He pointed her up the stairs to the bathroom and began serving the chips into bowls. Dusting them with a little salt and vinegar. He lit the tea-lights and poured her a glass of water. He wanted her to undress herself again and he wondered if she would. He knew this time he would follow his impulses. On Saturday morning, at breakfast, Ola had said they were cute together. It had felt like a blessing. And this time he felt like he knew her better.

#

'Um, Archie?' She was at the bottom of the stairs now. Her face looked different. I don't think

your dad is very well. For a moment Archie didn't compute. She sensed this and pointed up the stairs. I think you should come...now. He passed her, taking the stairs three at a time, trying to recall if he'd missed Paul's return from work when he was at the shops. Had the car been in the driveway? His shoes by the door? He could feel anger start to burn his ears and fear...of course... there was always fear.

He found his father hugging the toilet bowl, dressed in his work clothes, and resting his left cheek and his mouth on the rim. He was crying, his face shimmering, wet and sunken.

Fin stayed at the doorway.

'Should we call an ambulance?' He lifted Paul's head from the bowl and, taking him under the arms, dragged him to the bath and propped him up against the side.

'He's fine', said Archie.

Once again, Archie felt himself floating up and looking down on the bathroom. He looked down at himself, holding his father's wet cheek in the palm of his hand. Delicately. He looked down at Fin, in her flowery dress. He wanted to cover her eyes, to wipe her memory, and to lie to her that his father had a sickness bug. But he couldn't save both of them at once. He knew the boy down below, the real Archie wasn't feeling the shame and sadness that he was feeling from the sky. The bathroom Archie wasn't feeling anything. It was easier that way.

He sat there for about ten minutes. Neither of them spoke a word. Paul apologised every so often and, devoid of emotion or words, Archie could only reply with: 'It's fine.'

#

Finally, Archie looked up at Fin. 'You can leave if you want'.

Fin froze, she opened her mouth to speak and then closing it again, nodded, and closed the door to the bathroom. Archie flushed away the sick. He grabbed a flannel, ran it

under the cold tap, and softly wiped it over Paul's face and the back of his neck.

'Do you think there's more to sick-up?'

Paul shook his head.

Archie helped him to his feet, the weight caused his knees to shudder. In the bedroom, he undressed his father and wrapped him in his dressing gown. He placed the dirty clothes in a plastic bag, filled a glass of water from the bathroom tap, and placed a towel on his pillow.

'We're getting used to this, aren't we?'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's fine Paul. Get some sleep.'

Back in the bathroom, Archie splashed his face with cold water, ran his hands through his hair pulling the skin of his face back and felt the numbness start to flow into the drain. In its place was the humiliation. He promised himself that he would never use the word beautiful again. He would never text Fin again, and he would never have anyone through the front door of this house again. Who the fuck do you think you are? He mumbled to himself in the mirror. At school, everyone would hear about this. It felt like a predictable ending to a terrible film. On his way downstairs, Archie peered through the crack in the door at Paul. He was asleep, on his side. Like a small dying bird. He didn't want to see the chips he had made them, he wanted to throw them in the bin as quickly as possible.

#

She was on her knees, on the counter peering into the back of a cupboard.

'You should do a food shop. What kind of fucked up house doesn't have ketchup?' she smiled. 'Please don't tell me you eat salad cream with oven chips?'

His first thought was, should he still throw away the chips if she hadn't left? And then he realised that he, most definitely, had acquired a new friend. A proper friend. He wasn't sure

when the precise moment had been. Was it when he didn't have sex with her when she wanted it? Or when she had seen his dad being sick and crying at the same time?

'I thought you left' he said. Still standing at the foot of the staircase. Unable to move. He was very aware that his hair would be wet and his face blotchy from where he had slapped it with cold water. She looked confused.

'No? Can we watch T.V?'

They sat on the sofa. Archie wasn't hungry so Fin ate all of the chips. With sour cream. The TV flickered in front of them, but he kept seeing the picture frame to the left of the TV. Kim and Paul by the river. He was two and wore a red sun hat. She wore a purple and white swimsuit. Paul- a basketball cap and had lots of hair poking out the sides. They were all eating mint-choc-chip icecream.

Before she had died, he had often felt as if his dad had an off/on button when it came to being a father. There were no other channels. When an occasion presented itself where he had to engage in his family, he would. Occasions such as after the inter-school championships at the end of his second year at high school. When Archie had won a race, the three of them would stop off at Roos Leap, in Montrose on the way home from Camperdown:

'You can have anything you want off the menu Son. Anything at all! Even the Bone-in-Ribeye' his dad would say wiggling his eye-brows in the overhead mirror and driving little perkier than usual. He talked about the race, even asking questions about pacing and strategy, and they spoke about sponsorships and even touched on the subject of girls. His dad would come alive in moments like these as if he needed a massive trophy in the back seat of his car to affirm he wasn't failing as a father and subsequently giving him permission to talk to Archie. This unusual behaviour trouble Archie. Could you live your whole life with someone, and not know a single thing about who they are?

It's not as if he hadn't tried to fuse with his dad; after receiving help with maths homework he would often ask for help with religious studies, or English in a bid to have a conversation with his dad that wasn't moving towards a definite numerical answer. When Archie was younger, he used to relish looking through photo albums of his dad as a child, desperately searching for some personality or quirk that seemed to be so deeply locked away or broken inside of him since as far back as he can remember. His favourites were his dad aged 7, smiling in school shorts on the front doorstep of his house, his knees grubby posing with binoculars. And one from somewhere in the archives of when he and Kim fell in love, a picture from a holiday in Italy of the two of them, lined up with their arms around some old friends, tanned, appearing to be laughing so hard they couldn't stand up straight. Sometimes Archie has found himself picturing that image when he wanted to hear his father laugh. And now the on/off button was broken.

#

They sat in silence until Fin got up and cleared away the bowls. A few moments later she lay across his thighs and fell asleep.

...

#

She asks the question if he'd come to her wedding if he wasn't the groom. Lately, she had developed a habit of asking questions like that, and every time she did, he indulged her, without question. They were complicated questions extinguished with uncomplicated answers. He grunted sleepily and pulled her back into his chest, making a swooping noise.

'I don't think I could no.'

'I think I could, if I knew you were happy'. She wasn't sure she meant it, but she was supposed to say that if she'd asked the question.

In her mind, he is standing in the front pew whilst she is getting married to someone else. The image causes a tightness in her body, trying to fashion a thick armour preventing the thought from reaching places that it could hurt the most. She screws up her eyes and tries to focus on Archie at then alter, in a bid for some relief, but all of a sudden it's making her feel odd...caged. And then there is a voice, and it's telling her to pick one, yelling at her that it is the biggest decision of her whole life and it will change everything. She feels the tears start to prick in her eyes, and even though she is sure Archie has fallen asleep, she begins the impossible task of crying in bed with someone without them finding out. Fighting the ragged breathing and the small uncontrollable shudders of the body. She spends the next few hours courting the possible scenarios of the future. She is at his wedding as the bride, as the friend, as the one who shows up without an invite, as the one marrying Pauline, or Rebecca or Ashley. He is at her wedding- he stops the wedding, he kills her fiancé, he runs away, he dies, she dies, they die together on their wedding day and it turns into a funeral. She isn't sure where day-dreaming turned into dreaming, but as she wakes up the next morning, the voice in her head is still there. It is telling her to make a decision.

#

#

Fin bent down and picked up the hem of the dress, exposing her knees, and then let it fall back down around her ankles. The material reminded her of the blue quality street wrapper. It was perfect, she was the coconut éclair that nobody liked. Valerie would place little bowls of them around the house this time of year. It was almost as if she'd sewn together her dress from the lonely blue ones that were left-over. Fin reached down the front of the dress, and flattened out her chest even more. She had burnt last year's dance dress in an oil drum, down by the tractor shed. The fire had consisted of that dress, her standard grade past-

papers and a New Look scarf she'd felt guilty for stealing. She'd expected the memory of last year's Christmas dance to die along with the dress.

She watched it disfigure into the flames, but she hadn't felt very different at all.

#

Ola pushed the door open.

'I've been shouting on you' she said through their reflections in the mirror opposite.

Ola looked like the gold finger Quality Street. Her blonde hair fell down to her waist and was delicately waved at the tips. She wore gold, sparkly eyeliner, a tight sparkly gold dress and a pair of gold heels. She'd had a spray-tan the day before which had developed on her skin perfectly except for the gaps in her fingers which had crusted like burnt toast.

'Oh sorry.' Fin mumbled. Ola's eyes wandered down to Fin's dress.

'This looked better on the hanger'

'I agree. Yours is good though' Fin gestured to Ola's.

'I know,' she squealed, 'I'm a bit behind! I haven't eyelashed up. Anyway, your friends are downstairs'.

'I heard them. I'm just hiding'. Ola caught her eye in the mirror.

'Cool.' She tapped the wooden doorframe twice and retreated to her bedroom muttering 'eyelashes'.

#

They ate mince pies and brownies that Rebecca's mum had made. Fin didn't touch the brownies. She liked to be around her friends to just be around people. Fin liked going down the high street for lunch with them when Archie was on prefect duty. She liked to ride the bus with them home because Archie could just walk to school. She liked having people she could count on to sit beside her in class, or pick her for their volleyball team. But, they laughed a

little too much for her liking. Two of them were still virgins and the other was one of those friends you would only hang out with if the other two were around. Fin would laugh with them too, but her mind would always drift to more important things.

Fin always wanted to be with Archie. Which resulted in her friends now telling jokes and laughing for too long about occasions when Fin wasn't there. She swore they did it on purpose, to make her feel bad for having another friend.

#

'Ashley's going for a bit of leg and cleavage tonight girls' said Pauline. She always had a way of being passive-aggressive. She could never just say, 'your figure looks amazing in that', always with connotations of her friends being more slutty than her.

Just making up for the lack of skin that this one, over here, is contributing tonight, Ashley gestured at Fin, who made a face back at her. 'You've got a boyfriend and turned into a nun all in six months!' Added Ashley.

'He's not my boyfriend Ash, we are just friends. I wouldn't touch him like that with a barge pole' she added.

'I love it Finnegan, said Rebecca pouring herself a glass of Cava. You look classy.' She walked over and placed her hand on Fin's thigh and Fin rested her head on Rebecca's shoulder.

'Ladies!' Said Pauline, raising her glass.

'Hang on, hang on', squealed Ashley. 'Finny doesn't have a drink.'

'Oh, I'm ok. I can pretend.'

'We'll wait' said Rebecca as she nodded towards the bottles on the table.

'I'm ok right now' Fin said.

'What's the problem?' Pauline tried to sound innocent.

‘There's no problem, I'm just good for now Pauline, I can pretend’ Fin laughed.

‘It's not Pythagoras angel, just pour yourself a wee something.’ It was between Pauline and Fin now.

‘I not wanting anything at this moment.’

‘It's a toast Fin. It's polite, y’know?’

‘I can just hold this wee plant pot here’ Fin joked.

Pauline reached over and knocked the pot out of Fin's hand, sending soil over the white carpet.

‘Are you pregnant or something? Grab yourself a fucking bevvy!’ The room fell silent and the girls looked at Pauline who was red in the face. Perhaps she wasn't aware that she had just yelled at Fin. She gave a small smile and shrugged-

‘Well? Are you?’

‘No, I'm not pregnant.’

‘Alright then. All I was going to say was, here's to the biggest night yet. But not for Fin because she's being a little pussy and taking it slow tonight.’

‘I don't need any Dutch courage’ Fin Said.

‘What does that mean? Just because you have a boyfriend, doesn't mean you're fucking better than everyone else Fin. You act like you are, but you're not.’

‘I don't have a boyfriend and I don't think I'm better than you P.’ Mumbled Fin, getting to her feet to go and grab the Hoover. She left the room, shut the door behind her, and headed down the stairs to the utility room. Hearing whispers behind her. Fin leaned her forearms on the sink and looked across the frosted glass through the window of the summer house. Ola and her girlfriends were in there, huddled around the fan heaters, and drinking champagne. The fairy lights made it look like a mystical treehouse. They all wore white and

smoked cigarettes and looked like a painting. Fin found herself wishing she could be in the painting, frozen in time, never having to face the night ahead. She pulled an incense stick from her bra, lit it on an outside candle and pretended to smoke it. She wanted to feel like somebody else. The smoke licked up into the night sky and she thought of her family holiday to the Himalayas last October.

#

It had been a whole year since it had happened. She wouldn't be drunk this time so bad things wouldn't happen to her. The short dress was in ashes and she had put less makeup on tonight. Maybe she would dance a little bit less, or not at all? She was a different person now.

#

When she returned to the library with the hoover, the girls were sat around Pauline on the sofa who was crying.

Fin put down the hoover and closed the door with a click.

'Don't cry P, your mascara will look shite' Fin said as she walked over to the girls.

Pauline wasn't a pretty crier. She had crying hiccups as she tried to talk-

'Let us just get to the fucking dance shall we?'

It was a mystery to Fin how the dining hall, a place where by day was the home of sweaty teenagers queuing for ladles of gloopy custard with sponge or gritty mince and peas, became a place of such electricity in the evenings the week before Christmas term ended. The transformation was made with a few strings of multicoloured fairy lights, and a table of top-hat marshmallows, and of course, a room filled with horny teenagers in kilts and dresses. All of them waiting for something miraculous to happen. She'd fallen for it all last year.

#

Everyone was very hyped already, and they had purposefully arrived at twenty-past eight, so not to be the first ones there. In previous years, it had taken some time and encouragement for the boys and girls to mix, but the senior dance was less frigid and civilised, however, the dancing was in full swing. Ellie Jefferson had already bruised her arms, and was very pleased with herself. Fin held onto Archie's arm as they handed over their tickets.

It was a-given that she would see him tonight. She saw him most days in school, but the minute she entered the dance hall, it all felt more sickening and raw. Mr Campbell was chatting to a Kayleigh, and a few of her girlfriends from the netball team, by the stage, and she wanted to go and prize them away for their own safety, or set fire to the hall so the dance would be cancelled. She felt voiceless. Was it by choice that she couldn't speak about it, or had there been some threat overshadowed by the physical pain? But somewhere there was a twisted desire she was suppressing. A desire that had come after that night. A desire for confirmation that she was still lusted over in that way. That was the most confusing thing. She wanted to be the only one, but for two very different reasons. Kayleigh beckoned the two of them over.

'I can't believe we got here before you guys. Maggie was really drunk, she had to take a second shower to sober up'. Fin made an expression as if to say 'no way!' as she Kayleigh gave a dainty hug so not to spoil her up-do. 'Archie' she said, giving him a squeeze on the arm. The band announced the 'Dashing White Sargent', and Kayleigh grabbed Mr Campbell and Hamish by the arms 'Ahh perfect!' she squealed. 'We have six! Archie, you can go with

Jenny and Sir, and Fin and me will go with Hamish'. Fin looked over at Archie and smiled at the panic on his face.

'We do this every day in P.E and I still get this wrong every time.' He laughed.

'I'll go gentle on him Fin!' giggled Jenny. Fin raised her eyebrows. The dance floor was filling up. Fin could see Mr Campbell giving Archie a pat on the back.

'It's nice not to be supervising the young ones this year isn't it Pal? Said Mr Campbell, wiggling his bowtie. 'He really is your Knight in shining armour Fin'. Fin felt her cheeks flare up brighter than the stage lights. 'Nice to see you're wearing a bit more this year Fin' said Hamish jokingly.

'I liked your dress last year' piped up Kayleigh. 'You're always a bit of a fashion icon at the dance Fin'.

'I do try' offered Fin.

'Surprised you saw it Kayls, she spent most of her time in the bathroom last year' Hamish added.

'Oh I saw it at Ola's. Jesus Hamish, maybe she was on her period or something. You have no idea what we women have to go through in order to keep it all up'. She gestured around her face and body furiously. It was meant to be an I got you girl moment, but as soon as the words left Kayleigh's mouth, Fin felt her heart drop out of her body.

'She wasn't on her period' Hamish said laughing and looking over at Mr Campbell. And suddenly Mr Campbell was gone and Archie was coughing. At first Hamish was laughing, patting Archie on the back and saying 'alright there pal?' a few too many times, and then he realised something was wrong. Fin was frozen to the ground she was standing on. She felt like part of a cruel hypnosis where she couldn't move her body, but her mind was sprinting in every direction.

'Here, I think he's having a heart attack'. He wasn't having a heart attack, thought Fin. This had happened before. She knew how to make it stop. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out, only a dry croak. The dining hall lights came on, and people started to stare. Kayleigh began to scream as Archie fell on to the floor and clutched his chest. Mrs Fryer, the RME teaching, pushed passed Fin knocking her sideways and out of her trance.

'Out of my way' she ordered, as she knelt down next to Archie. 'Stop crowding him, give the poor boy some space'. Fin pushed passed the group, now tightly huddled over him.

'It's happened before' she hissed. 'I know how to make it stop. Can you get everyone out of here please?'

Mrs Fryer looked at Fin, a look of shock on her face, momentarily confused as to whether to shout at her for ordering her about, or to thank her for coming to the rescue.

'EVERYONE OUT OF THE HALL. NOW!' she yelled. Everyone shuffled out slowly, trying to get a glimpse of Archie crying on the floor.

'It's not what you think' said Fin stroking him on the back. 'You have to believe me.' She tucked herself into him and pressed her nose to his cheek. 'You have to breathe for me Arch. It's ok. It's going to go away. You have to breathe. We're going to go home now. I'm here. I'm right here Ok?' She felt him soften in her arms. His shirt was soaked through. 'Let's go home' she said tilting his head up. Archie nodded, without looking her in the eye.

'It's a panic attack' said Fin gently to Mrs Fryer, as she helped Archie to his feet. Mrs Fryer looked more petrified than Archie. 'You know...' Fin lowered her voice, there was a strong tone irritation in her voice 'racing heartbeat, short of breath and all that?' Mrs Fryer nodded. 'We're going to leave now. He'll be ok'.

Kayleigh had collected their things,

'Was there anything else?' she put her arm around Fin. It seemed a more attention-

seeking than comforting.

'Just the car, but we'll pick it up tomorrow.' They walked into the hallway where everyone was gathered in a, sort of, post-match celebration tunnel. Archie didn't say a word, but shook himself out of Fin's support and walked a few steps ahead of her out of the hall. Mrs Fryer told Fin to call her mobile when they arrived home, and suggested they both take the day off school tomorrow, which seemed a bit extravagant.

#

Outside it had began to snow. Tiny, spaced-out, slow flakes. For a fleeting moment, she felt herself existing somewhere far away from the school car-park, a long time ago- half-way through dinner, fish pie, six years old, running out into the snow to catch the flakes on her tongue, wearing a her pyjamas. Heart skipping, squeals of delight filling the air. The first snow of the year. Fin suddenly felt a deep stab of resentment towards Archie. It was as if he'd taken the VCR with 'first snow 2001', written in sharpie on the side, and taped over it with a documentary about something important that she wished she'd never watched like 'Schindler's List'. Archie was quickening his pace. She took a gulp of cold air as she followed him, a few steps behind.

'Are you ok?'

'I'm fine. You should go back inside' she stopped walking. Archie turned over his shoulder and stopped too. She was carrying both of their jackets in her arms. 'I'm fine.' It took her by surprise.

'I told you, it's not what you think. If you'd let me explain...'

'No, honestly, Fin. I just think I just need to be by myself tonight. I'm sorry. I wish I didn't, and I wish I knew how to navigate tonight better. You know, being normal and stuff? But I can't. I couldn't.' He swallowed, wiped a drip from his nose and gave a defeated smile.

'You say it's fine but it's clearly not fine. I don't want to go back in there. Tonight wasn't about me anyway, it was about being normal with you. That's what you wanted'.

'I know. I'm sorry. I think I'd have been ok if it wasn't for...' he gestured at the school hall which was strobing and throbbing in the snow.

'I'm sorry too. But, can we talk about this properly. You never talk about stuff. It's not fair on me'. Archie looked up at the sky, as if he'd just noticed the snow which was now falling thicker and starting to lie. Almost as if he had sensed that he'd ruined something special for her, he let his head fall.

'I'm sorry'.

She watched him walk away, searching for empathy, where there was only a hot envy.

Why did her experience, of this day last year, have to stay invisible and Archie's was like a V.I.P badge? Why could he play the victim and she had to walk back into the ring?

#

#

They sat in a circle around the keyboard- a full company vocal call. This production saw three neighbouring high schools come together: Seamoore Academy, Auchenrell Academy, and Rosehorn High School. Fin sat in the front row. It was important to be noticed right from the start, even though the principal auditions weren't until Wednesday evening, two days from now, she had to play her cards right. She scanned her new family, playing mental 'duck, duck, goose' with the cast. The Seamoore students, even in their regular clothes, were extremely distinguishable, they all had John Lewis schoolbags. Not a pimple, a stray wispy baby hair, a squint tooth, or a fat-roll was present. It seemed as if the conditions for acceptance into Seamoore were:

#

1. Money...

#

2. ...but too stingy to send their kids to private school

#

3. not so stingy to wrap up their children a mini-cooper on their fifteenth birthday.

#

4. To have parents who weren't Scottish nor farmers, nor cousins. Hard to find in the North East.

#

Auchenrell, on the other hand, were all farmers; rosy cheeks, spud-like and wholesome. Jeans and a bobbly fleece, lights-are-on-but-nobody's-home kind of kids....

Rosehorn...well... they were a hodge-podge, the small crispy bits at the bottom of a chippy fryer- underrated, but the best ones.

#

Mr. Wiley shuffled in. Rosehorn students lowered their heads and stopped their conversations abruptly. It gave Fin great pleasure to have the inside knowledge on how he ran his show. Her eyes darted around the room at the other students awaiting the inevitable 'ground rules' speech she'd heard over a hundred times before. He was a small, balding man, with tremendous eyebrows. His strung-glasses seemed to defy gravity, always stuck to his forehead and he hugged a gathering of papers to his chest, balanced in the upper groove of his small belly. He wore a strict scowl, like a badge of honour. First and second years were petrified of Mr. Wiley, but by the time you hit your senior years, you'd be sipping whiskey with him and his wife after choir practice out in the back yard of his house.

Thank you Roseshorn! He slapped his hand down on the lower end of the keyboard. There were a few Seamoore squeals. Silence.

Thank you...other schools. He gave a warming smile and a wink at Fin. Fin smiled back. The inter-school racism had started.

I jest...we are so excited to host this year's inter-school musical ...Les Mizeraab. There was a stagey cheer from the company. Congratulations to you all for making the cut. The standard this year was better than ever before, and I am looking forward to casting our principles, his eyebrows did a small dance, on Wednesday evening! The company murmured and shot nervous glances around the room. As you will have read in your welcome packs, we are asking you for your best thirty-two bars from the show, ideally chosen from the character you wish to play. Now, without further ado, he tickled a flamboyant C major chord from the keyboard, all rise! On an 'ahhhh' five, six, seven, eight...The company startled to their feet, chests open, chins dropped, belting through the scales. No need for a warm-up...This was a display of talent, part of the audition, the final performance. The females getting more shiftier and higher up on their tippy-toes as the scales drew closer to the dangerous passagio change around C, D (at a stretch) were they all, one by one, flipped into their soprano range. Some cracked early, faces flushed...wondering how it all could have gone so wrong so soon. The last survivors making it to an D#, squeezing enough oranges under their armpits to quench the thirst of Monaco. It was here that the budding Cosettes had to make themselves known...warbling their arpeggios with the widest, forced vibrato. Fin could sing, she just didn't overthink it. She had never doubted her voice and therefore never cracked. Just like she never washed her face and never had spots.

After the warm-up, they did a series of 'bonding' exercises. The first one saw people running around the room until Mr. Wiley called out a number which correlated to a different

body part that you had to connect with someone else. Fin found this game tedious and beneath her until she found herself touching noses with a boy from Seamoore. He unnervingly looked her straight in the eyes and breathed a hi. It was friendly. His face was satisfying and pristine like a putting green.

The next game was a challenge to hold a ping-pong ball in between two foreheads. Fin was paired with a girl from Auchenrell who dribbled slightly as she laughed. As they let the ball fall for the hundredth time, Fin glanced over at the boy who had said hi to her. He was perfectly balancing the ball with a very tall ginger girl from his school. Both of their arms were extended behind them like penguins, and they moved very slowly. Fin enjoyed watching him. She wanted to watch them kiss. They were taking it very seriously, looking at each other in the eye, almost kissing without kissing. She suddenly felt a pang of jealousy towards this girl who was now starting to tickle the boy, sabotaging her own team-mate. There were a few more rounds, but despite the objective of the exercise being to bond with the other schools, nobody branched out of their comfort zones. The last exercise saw all of the potential parts group up together; Eponines in one corner, Valjeans in another, and so on... The potential candidates would number themselves off in their groups and Mr. Wiley would call out character name and a number, asking that number to step forward into the middle of the hall. When the characters met, he would give a scenario to improvise and set the timer for one minute to watch the 'chemistry'- as he called it. Fin joined the Eponines. There were four of them. The tall, red-haired girl from earlier, and two non-identical twins. All three from Seamoore. The ginger, who introduced herself as Shay, numbered them off. Fin was two. The improvisation was predictable and uninspiring. She especially enjoyed a skit between the nose-touching boy who was in the Marius group and a potential Cosette. The scenario was that Cosette was trying to approach the subject of Marius' friendship with Eponine but

through mime. It became quite apparent that the Cosette had mistaken mime for contemporary dance, which left the boy very confused. His name was Aaron. Fin knew this because it was very clear that Shay was in love with Aaron or something. That's Aaron, he's probably our top candidate for Marius. You should hear him sing. He plays rugby too. And guitar. Look, look at him act though. I should probably have been numbered off with him. No offence to her, she gestured at the girl who was now cat-spinning on the ground, but we have a lot of on-stage chemistry.

That's great, said Fin, a little too enthusiastically. The other two girls just nodded and made approving noises. Shay had started twitching as if she was Aaron's rugby coach and he wasn't being passed the ball to show the world what he could do. It was a long minute. More numbers were called and scenario's acted out. Shay was called up with a Gavroche and they did a mime of when the barricades fell silent and hammed up how strange and confusing that must have been: Shay starts to fake cry and Gavroche consoles her. Not what Eponine would do, noted Finn, but a very moving performance.

When it was Fin's turn, Aaron had to go again due to odd numbers.

This should be interesting, said Mr. Wiley as if he'd coordinated the whole situation. Your stimulus is... he turns over a cue card in his hand, 'nobody knows Eponine as Marius does.' Before Fin had a chance to think Aaron had cupped his hands around hers and told him to trust her.

#

Three... shouted Mr. Wiley.

#

Press your forehead to mine, like in the game before, whispered Aaron.

#

Two...

#

Look me in the eye and don't move.

#

One...

#

Don't be nervous

#

I'm not

#

Action. Aaron smiled at Fin and moved his body close to hers. He was so much bigger than her and he had to hunch his huge shoulders to touch his forehead on hers.

#

This isn't supposed to be a mime, whispered Fin, suddenly feeling self-conscious of how close their lips were and if he could smell her breath. She desperately tried to recall what she had eaten for lunch. She'd never felt self-conscious before. She had heard some of her peers feeling self-conscious in P.E if they had forgotten to bring their kit and had to take some out of the lost property, or if they stumble over their words in assembly, but things like that didn't even occur to Fin to feel anything particularly strongly about.

#

And? Whispered Aaron. His breath smelled like cigarettes. ...I didn't say we had to mime.

Nice to meet you.

#

Oh right. You too, breathed Fin. I'm Fin, I go here.

#

I'm Aaron Hemingway. I go to Seamoore.

#

I guessed. Aaron Hemingway. She emphasised his last name to make him feel silly for using it.

#

I like your fringe. She wasn't sure if he was joking or not. Up until now, she had liked her fringe too. Now she wanted to like what this boy liked.

#

I hope we get to see much more of each other, he whispered and his brows furrowed as if this was the most serious thing he had ever said. It suddenly made Fin feel important, probably the most important thing to him. She had read somewhere that if two people stared into each others eyes they could fall in love in just four minutes.

#

TIME'S UP, shouted Mr. Wiley. Fin pulled away rapidly as if she'd burnt her forehead. She felt slightly disorientated; unsure of herself and where she was. Very interesting indeed he exclaimed.

Aaron kept looking at her for a few seconds. Wiley started to clap and a few other students reluctantly joined in. Fin noticed that Shay wasn't clapping. She walked back to her spot with the other Eponines.

#

Well, that was lovely, Shay said flatly. He's done that one before, always a crowd-pleaser. Fin felt herself blushing.

#

After rehearsals, Mr. Wiley asked Fin if she could stay behind and put the chairs away. She knew Archie was already waiting in the car, but she obliged. She was a 'favourite' of his. It was almost as if he chose them, during induction days before S1, to take under his wing for their whole time at school. Disappointing him was not something she ever wanted to do. A few minutes later she was grabbing her bag and heading out of the assembly hall- where the company rehearsals took place. As she pushed the door out into the car park, Aaron- who had been leaning up against the wall outside, suddenly threw down his cigarette and paced after her.

Fringe! he called out. Fin, who had been marching towards Archie's red Ford Fiesta, stopped and turned around.

Hi, she pushed her fringe out from her eyes.

What's the rush? Fin gestured towards Archie, who gave a half-smile from the car and nodded his head.

#

That your boyfriend? he said.

Uhh yess. She lied.

#

You seem sure about that. He poked.

#

Yes, that's my boyfriend. Aaron waved at Archie. His wave was weird to Fin. He waved his hand over his head and looked at him as if he was peering over his glasses. He could well have said 'yoo-hoo'.

Alright, pal! He shouted.

Archie smiled again and pretended to fiddle with the radio. Aaron turned his back to the car.

#

Let's be honest, I think you've got Eponine in the bag and, I'm confident I'll be Marius.

People are talking of more interactive auditions, you know like... he gestured to the school, like we just did, sort of, and I want to practice with you. Are you free tomorrow night?

#

I think so

#

Cool, I'll text you

#

You don't have my number

#

It's on the company sheet

#

Oh yeah

#

Great

#

She dodged past him towards Archie, leaving him standing. As they pulled away she noticed him watching the car, smoking a newly-lit cigarette.

#

Archie was playing 'Run' by Snow Patrol, she turned down the music.

Why are you playing that song? It makes you sad.

I dunno, he hit the off button, how was it then?

#

Yeah, good!

And then she added, I have last-minute audition-prep rehearsals tomorrow after school.

He put one hand behind her head and stroked the back of her neck.

#

Good.

#

The next morning she woke to a message from Aaron

#

Fringe. Can u come to Seamoore? My car broke. See u at 4.30 out front. Don't be nervous.

A.H

#

Fin pulled her hair into a ponytail and clipped her fringe back. She noticed a few stray eyebrow hairs at the top of her nose and decided that she should pluck them if she were to be improvising with Aaron again. The Seamoore girls had shoulder bags and so she changed her schoolbag from a backpack to a shoulder bag and borrowed some of Ola's perfume without asking. She felt on the precipice of something incredible; like her life was about to begin. Her driveway was dusty and hot and the air smelt of sweet rapeseed and grass. She ate breakfast at school before the bell rang. An option available to kids who's parents forgot about breakfast. It was always something Fin was jealous of; parents who forgot about breakfast. That must mean they were important people, or busy people or had family problems. All the cool people at school had family problems. Fin felt electric. Everyone knew she was in line to

get Eponine. The news had spread around the school overnight. Even the teachers were flirting with her. She'd made it. She didn't even notice that Archie hadn't turned up to school until after morning break-time when he didn't turn up to history. She pulled out her phone under the desk.

Hey, are you at school?

F x

#

Hi, morning. Dad not well but I am coming in now.

Arch x

#

Fin put her phone away and stared down at her textbook.

Fin sat on the teacher's desk, her knees dangling over the edge whilst Aaron pretended to read his libretto.

#

'You're teasing me with those long socks and tiny skirt'.

#

'Sorry'

#

'I don't think you are'

#

'I am. Truly. I'm sorry that you find my school uniform so provocative.'

#

'Do you have to wear those socks like that though?'

#

'I could wear tights, but they aren't so easy-access'

#

Aaron blew out his cheeks and snapped his lib shut with one hand. Fin remained expressionless. She loved how objectified she felt, and how much she could see his arousal. The more she saw his arousal, the more frustrated she felt with the lack of progress she was making with Archie, the more she wanted to be objectified.

#

'Practical' he smiled as he took a seat beside her on the desk. She watched his gaze move towards the opening of her school shirt, his ears starting to turn pink. He didn't kiss her but slid his hand down her top tugging at her right breast.

'I love your tits'. Fin knew she didn't have tits which made her insecure. Insecurity was a new emotion for her. Everything about Aaron made her insecure, she liked that, feeling like she had to work to gain the reward of his attention. He started to kiss her, he tasted of cigarettes.

'You taste of cigarettes' she said feeling his tongue softly against hers. He said nothing and moved his hand up her skirt, fingering her underwear to one-side.

'Fuck, you are so wet'. She didn't know why he said this. Was it hot to be wet? Wasn't she always wet? She felt nervous to touch him. She knew he was hard, she could see it through his trousers.

'Fin?'

'Yeah'

'Touch my dick'. She did from the outside of his school trousers. He started to unzip his trousers, then led Fin off the table and pushed her onto her knees. He tasted unclean. She

liked how dirty the whole thing felt. Aaron put his hands back onto the desk and told her to 'go until I come'. She felt like somebody else when she was with him, someone she never thought she could be with her perfect childhood and undamaged existence. It was all part of the job, character work, professional exploration.

#

A successful after-show party must provide enough scandal to kindle the drama society until the next end of year show. It must also expand over three venues. First, a party venue, often the theatre after the 'get out'. Then onto an after-party venue, a local club/ bar/ pub. Finally, an 'all come back to mine' venue hosted by a member of the cast, or in this particular case, Mr. Wiley, who lived in a huge barn conversion fifteen minutes walk from the outskirts of town. There's a fuse of chemistry that runs through a production, gently sparking with the inevitable promise of the explosion of sex at two-AM at the end of the run. Predictions and speculations are squashed countless times by the romantic leads of the show; 'we're just great actors!', 'oh god no, don't be silly! We're like siblings'. Then later to be found slinking away together before the end of the night. Deciding what to wear was always a challenge. It would be the topic of conversation for hours on various MSN groups, girls sending pictures of multiple 'options'. It was such a tricky criteria; theatre, club, and night comfies all in one outfit. Fin always wore jeans, several sizes too big, and pinched around the waist. It was a trick of hers to hook the button of her jeans into a belt loop and then buttoning them up as normal. The baggier the better. She had never developed breasts and so a bra was not necessary, just a baggy t-shirt crop and scrunchie. But now Fin was a principle, she felt tonight would have to be more special. The spotlight would almost certainly be on her, it was a strange new feeling to be caring about her outfit. She'd spent some time that morning trying on different possibilities. Very quickly, she realised that she didn't own anything remotely

formal, glamorous, or grown up and so she decided to raid Ola's wardrobe in the hope that she could create a better 'leading lady' image. She eventually decided on a black dress. When Ola wore it, it was extremely short and low cut, exposing a lot of leg and a lot of cleavage. When Fin wore it, it was tighter but much longer on the thigh and accentuated her flat chest. But it was classy. Small, skin-tight, and black. She had stuffed it into her bag along with a pair of black heels (also Ola's) and felt rather accomplished. Eagerly anticipating her 'Strictly Ballroom' moment when Fran removes her glasses.

#

They were at Mr. Wiley's house now. A short walk from the school, out of town. After the get-out, the girls had changed and started taking shots of Malibu. Fin was drunk. She knew she was drunk because she was now resting her right cheek on Blair's shoulder. He was sat upright, gesticulating vigorously with his whisky glass whilst talking about that time he was in Cats in 'town'. It seemed to Fin to be more effort to raise her head upright than to keep her connection with his shoulder. The evening so far had been slightly unsatisfactory.

#

A few hours before, when they were leaving the Town Hall, she had received a text from Archie.

#

You were wonderful, very realistic

#

This angered her greatly. It was a message loaded with implications that something was going on between her and Aaron and so what if it was? Why should that even matter to Archie? She wanted it to matter to him but got angry when it did. Blair had finished talking and slumped back into the sofa, sending the tip of his collar bone into Fin's jaw. She hadn't replied to

Archie. She was exactly as he had said: just a good actress and Aaron and was probably having sex with Shay right now, as she lay there cosied up with their middle-aged, gay choreographer. She could imagine Aaron having sex. She had done a few times. She imagined it would be harder than the way she and Archie had sex, that she would feel physically smaller, but more objectively desired than the way she would feel with Archie. She likes feeling smaller these days and Archie would make her feel big. She knew he would make her feel bigger than the whole universe. She hadn't spoken to Aaron all night although she was aware, at any given time, exactly where he was...up until now. It suddenly became apparent to her that the person Blair had been gesticulating to so vivaciously had been Shay, and therefore she couldn't be having sex with Aaron. Fin felt herself standing up, she was faintly aware of Blair commenting on her drunkenness, to which she gave a feeble giggle. She was going to find Aaron.

#

She found him outside with Mr. Wiley, sat next to the fire-pit. She must have been staggering across the gravel:

#

'Hello sailor' shouted Mr. Wiley causing Aaron to turn over his shoulder. She couldn't read his expression from here but was he amused slightly? She noticed then that she had bare feet, the gravel was piercing her, but she let it, having no recollection of taking off her shoes. Fuck, she thought, she must remember Ola's heels. She knew she was interrupting a conversation about Aaron's future options for his career on the stage. Not that Mr. Wiley had any real experience in anything proper, but he was a figure you wanted to impress and become one of his prodigies.

#

'My prodigies' boomed Mr. Wiley as he pulled Fin into his ribs rather forcefully. He smelled suffocatingly strongly of imperial leather soap, fire smoke, and red wine. 'Who wants a refill?' he said taking Fin's glass from her hand, that she hadn't noticed she had been holding all this time.

'I think Fin's had enough' Aaron said smiling.

'I'm fine' said Fin taking Mr. Wiley's seat.

'I shall be back' Said Wiley lifting his index fingers from the two glasses and wiggling them towards the pair.

#

They sat in silence for a few moments. Eyes on the fire. It was Fin who broke the silence.

#

'You've been avoiding me all night' she said coldly.

#

Aaron sat forward in his seat, and rubbed his hands together gently, avoiding her eyes.

#

'Have I?' The fire was embers now, with a few dying flames, licking up the smoke.

#

'I'm not sure why I came out here. I was sitting on the sofa a few moments ago. See, I thought you were upstairs having sex with Shay'.

#

'Oh right.' He looked at her, always surprised by her bluntness. 'I obviously don't want to fuck Shay'. She felt insecure and stupid by his use of the word obviously. Now that he had said it aloud, it was obvious that he didn't want that. 'I feel weird, not like post-show blues or anything like that. Just weird that I don't have an excuse to hang around with you anymore.'

She felt like such a cliché. It felt nice for once, to feel like she was having the experience that was supposed to happen, at the end of a show, between two on-stage lovers. It was a scenario she fantasised about often. She wasn't sure if she had feelings for him or the fantasy.

#

'Same' said Fin. She was aware that there were eyes on the pair of them from inside the house. Encounters like this were the wet-dreams of some of the first year chorus members.

#

'Did Archie enjoy the show?' he loved to mention Archie. It made her squirm.

#

'He said we were realistic'.

#

'Good man'. It was patronising.

#

'Enjoyed the kiss did he?'

#

'Probably not'. Said Fin, trying not to bite. Somehow It felt acceptable for her to patronise Archie, but it always made her defensive when it came from Aaron, who had kissed her for a lot longer tonight than any other night. It was supposed to be a forehead kiss. She had known he would kiss her on the lips that night. He had told her in a text message. She had replied with 'ok'. He kissed her for several seconds. She was uncomfortably aware of Archie's presence in the audience, but the kiss was thrilling and soft and Archie had never kissed her when he'd had the chance too. He had never text her telling her he was going to kiss her. He had no right to be bothered by that kiss although she knew he would be and she wanted him to be but all the while the whole thing was infuriating and made her feel confused.

‘I don’t know what your deal is with him Fin? You aren’t having sex with each other and you aren’t having sex with anyone else because of the other person’.

‘It’s not because of Archie I’m not sleeping around’ she half-lied.

Aaron raised his eyebrows and looked in the opposite direction, spying some first year faces duck under the living room window sill.

#

'Did you enjoy the kiss?' He asked.

#

'I don't know'.

#

'I can't stop thinking about you. Fin. Even when you're here I can't stop it'.

She thought it would be nice to hear those words from his mouth but it felt disappointing, like getting the thing you didn’t ask for on the menu because the thing you wanted was sold out. It felt nice in theory. He was all any girl ever talked about. She wasn't quite sure why he had taken an interest in her but she didn't like to fixate on that too much because it made her insecure. After rehearsals and during show week, she often plotted and executed a lot of different ways to make him think about her. Whether that was uploading something, she knew he liked, such as a song or a food or drink, onto her Bebo page If she saw that he had viewed it, she would feel happy and if he hadn't, it would make her feel irritable.

#

'I am getting fed up with this.' He finally said. She suddenly felt a nauseating sense of panic followed by a pang of desire to please him and prove him wrong, that he wasn't wasting his time. She wanted to say something good but her words kept escaping her or getting dissolved

by the alcohol.

#

'I want to kiss you' she finally said. She thought how nice it would be to be doing this now, at the party. She wanted everyone to know how much he wanted her. That he didn't want Shay, he wanted Fin.

#

'I want to kiss you too, but we can't. Not here. There would be too much cheering'. Another one who wanted her to be a secret.

#

'I know'.

#

#

Irritation was crawling around her body. Where did irritation come in the five stages of grief? She washed a head of lettuce in the utility room sink, the clumps of mud disappearing down the plug. Recently she had developed a habit of cleaning things repetitively, forcefully; her hands, her face, her phone.... in her apron, still no word from Archie. It had been two days since they had last spoken. And although she was mad, she wasn't mad enough to warrant two days without speaking.

They were obsessive texters, neither one of them could fall asleep without the other saying 'goodnight', and she would always wake up to a message from him. Truth is, he was ignoring her after the show, and she was ignoring him, bored of his sulkiness and failure to understand her blossoming career. That text after the show had been loaded with aggression, and

insulting to her talent. She needed someone who understood the life of a thespian, that understood her. She needed someone who was admired, spoken about, exuberant. Someone who could match her. He had arrived late, she had seen him creep in after the Prologue. On top of it all, he hadn't even sent flowers, which was embarrassing. She had contemplated that maybe he didn't know of the tradition, which made her more embarrassed.

#

Her body flooded with another hot wave of trepidation.

#

'I just don't see why you wouldn't ask me first before inviting Paul and Archie over' she had said coldly to her mother when Fin had arrived back into the kitchen.

'Well, I'm not a bloody mind reader, she shrugged sarcastically. I'm sorry that I wrongly assumed you'd want to see your best friend!'

Fin handed over the lettuce forcefully spraying droplets of water onto the floor. She checked her phone. Nothing. She didn't want to feel anything anymore. Her heart felt as though it had been replaced by a sharp block of iron, just sitting slotted horizontally in-between her rib cage. Who had turned their back on who first? When had she gone from being something spectacular to something laboured and effortful for him?

#

'It's fucking disrespectful,' Fin was now saying to her mum in the kitchen.

'Language'. The timer went on the oven and they both stared at the flashing red light for a few seconds, listening to the beep beep beep. Fin smacked her hand down on the timer and looked out of the kitchen window.

Don't be embarrassed Finny, it's not a big issue.

No Mum, I'm not embarrassed. I'm annoyed. Who is forty-five minutes late for

something like this?

It's very unlike him. Have you texted to see why he's held up?

She hadn't, but she nodded anyway. Fin had run out of credit in the early hours of this morning, after Kim had topped up her phone, for the next two weeks, the day before. Aaron had offered to pay, but it made her feel sick.

He said he lost track of time, she lied.

For the one-hundredth time that day, Fin anxiously tried to recall Saturday night. Mr. Wiley had returned with more drinks, they had been by the fire. There was a black hole in her memory, right there, just as he handed her a glass of red wine. Aaron would know. He would know why she had woken up naked beside him in the summer house. Once again she had been the one who had got carried away. But as long as her memory failed her, she was innocent, and she would put off finding out the truth for as long as she could. She had told Aaron not to get in touch with her again. Just like that, the whole thing was erased. She had been drunk.

'Is everything all right?' Asked Valerie.

'Yes'

'I mean, between you two?'

'What's Ola been mouthin?'

'She hasn't been mouthing anything. He's not Rainbow Bear Finny', said Valerie, as she placed an empty wine glass on the counter.

Fin shook her head- 'what do you mean?' Valerie drained the white wine into her glass.

'Rainbow bear. You're old favourite teddy.'

'I know who he is. What's your point? '

'Archie. Darling, he's not rainbow bear. You can't swap him out for a sparkly Nintendo and then expect me to feel sorry for you when you see him in the hands of another kid at the car-boot sale.'

'I have no idea what you mean, hissed Fin.'

'Excuse my French. But darling, just don't fuck this up'.

Fin grabbed the car keys.

'Where are you going?'

'Where do you think?'

'Be kind. That boy has been through a lot.' Val shouted after her.

It doesn't always get to be an excuse. Fin hissed, quietly under her breath, so that Val couldn't hear her.

#

When Fin was in first-year, Ola broke her arm in P.E. Suddenly, everyone, even her own sister, had something wrong with them now and she didn't. Every teacher and student wanted to sign her cast. People asked her if it hurt and she got let out of class, for lunch, five minutes early for a month. She quickly realised that, at high school, if Fin wasn't damaged, then she was a nobody. Research had to be done for her to fit in here. She had often witnessed lies tumbling out of her mouth, one after the other, to her friends that she'd had sex and smoked weed. After school, Fin would listen to loud music, steal her parents' alcohol in very small, unnoticeable quantities, and inhale her mother's incense sticks like cigarettes. She convinced, even herself, that there was something innately wrong with her. It made her cry by how sad the whole thing must be for her. In the evenings, after school, she would let her mascara slide down her cheeks and onto her diary, where she would blow the black tears into strains like a blo-pen. She drew little arrows attached to the writing. 'These are my tears', she wrote. Her

privileged happiness was a deep and dirty secret. But now she truly had a secret and ironically when you have one you can't share it or cry.

She had been craving a scandal such as this. One that she could control every step of the way. There was a tickling addiction and arousal to her newly found damage. A sickly feeling of success that she had created a situation where she was both the creator and the victim, one where she could control both the damage and the subsequent emotional impact.

#

The sky outside was still light as she drove. She passed the last lamppost on the left of the High Street. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel and, missing the turn-off to his house, she crossed the dual-carriageway.

HOW DOES LOVE GROW?

How does love grow?

What does Fin need from Archie?

What does Archie need from Fin?

Can it be really small town? Local everything.

Pink flowers on summer holiday?

#

#

His panic had turned into a wave of hot, flustered anger. She had felt like a toy water snake, from Deep Sea World, shooting out from his hands. It wasn't like the arguments his parents used to have. He had expected her to shout back, but she had just left.

#

It was easier for Fin. Everything was easier for Fin. Her UCAS personal statement was five hundred words over the limit. Her work experience was at the Dundee Rep Theatre and she got two weeks instead of one. She was a sports champion, young musician of the year, English and Drama prize winner and straight-1 student. He was a pitied senior prefect. During work experience week, he had a panic attack on his first day, in a primary school. It caused him to bang his nose on a chair, which bled, and it had scared the children so he couldn't return. It was six months now, surely he should be able to focus? How can you appeal your grades when both the prelims and the finals were after she died? He was stupid, maybe that was the reason why. He was stupid and Fin was smart. If he had been born into her family and her into his, perhaps things would be the same as they are now.

#

How could he get out of Rosehorn without somewhere to go? It was the one subject that he found impossible to talk to Fin about. He had tried to ask her for help with his application, but she hadn't even approached the topic of applications in school yet. It just highlighted the vast distance between them. The difference that, so quickly after they had met, made Archie want to handcuff their wrists together and throw away the key. She would ask questions, sharp and impatient- 'what do you mean you don't have an idea of what you want to study? Anything Archie? What are you good at? What are you interested in?' Beside Fin, he felt brain dead, like his whole mind was filled with dough. It was the same in guidance meetings at school. When Kim was mentioned, Archie would shut down. Fin spent most of her free time vision-boarding, a task where she would take clippings of books, magazines or print things out online and stick them onto a big sheet of card that was stuck to her bedroom mirror.

I don't want you to change. He sat on the bed and hugged his knees to his chest. It was a day of un-forecast rain showers without any clouds. The Scottish monsoon season, where rainbows were as common as ruined barbecues and t-shirt tans.

I'm not changing, I'm growing...bettering myself.

I don't see how you can be better. He bit the tip of his finger playfully. You are the best person I know.

That's a ridiculous thing to say. She snapped. If we can't get better then we might as well be dead. His face drained of colour. Something about the coldness in her voice made him frightened. What if he couldn't get better? Did she think he might as well be dead?

Look at this Fin, he said, picking up a small pile of her magazine clippings. You don't have to have this hair. Or go to this beach. Or have this bag. He crouched down to gather some of the pictures she had mapped out for glueing. Or be on this stage. Or get this award. Or move to this city. I love your stained t-shirts, I like it when you wear my Canterbury's! Is this a juice cleanse?. Fuck me. He accidentally ripped the picture with his hand between his index finger and thumb, unaware he was holding it so tight. Fin, for the rest of your life, I want to watch you eat pizza by folding the whole pizza in half and refuse to order a calzone because you say it's too hot inside and you want to eat it straight away. I don't want you to juice cleanse. I like you this happy. I'm not saying you can't have dreams, but if you never changed, no...even if you "regressed", he gestured the quotation marks with his hands, I'd still think you were ace. She went to snatch the pictures from his hand but he pulled his hand away. I like that you can't say no because you are too much of a people pleaser. He flipped over a cutting in his hands and stared down at the beach-model on the paper. No no, no Fin, I love your tiny boobs and the short baby-hair around your ears when you wear your hair up in that tiny little...stump! I like it when you are short and snappy with your family. I

like that temper. I don't care if you're so indecisive with everything and you can never pick a movie to watch. I wish you would cry more but it feels almost nice when you do because I know you are feeling a lot. When you smile your right eye goes a tiny bit lazy and it's just... you, Fin. I don't want you to stop biting your nails. I don't want you to sort your teeth.

#

She looked around the room at the cuttings he had ransacked. Calmly and slowly she got to her feet.

'Fuck you Archie. You're supposed to say those things after I tell you everything I hate about myself. Not before.' she breathed 'sounds like you want to keep me in your own shitty cardboard house, in this shitty town, eating your shitty shepherds pie on benefits for the rest of your life'. And she shut the door.

He heard her walk down the hall, open the front door, grab her bike and, tires on the gravel, she was gone. Trying to recall what he had said to her was near-enough impossible like recalling detailed dreams. How could he have heart her whilst trying to tell her everything he liked about her. Was out of control? It wasn't like Fin to leave anywhere. Even when he saw her bickering with her parents, she ran circles around them with her wit and argument. How could he have made her leave? After he had finished talking, he had expected her to spread her hands over her clippings like windscreen wipers on a car, sending the papers flying, and jump onto him. The words had felt unfiltered. They had been pulled magically from his gut, like a rainbow scarf from the sleeve of his hoodie. Words that had been inside his head for so long, ruminating, begging to be released. And now, just like the word beautiful, when it had been set free a month ago, like a caged bird, he felt stupid. He held his breath as he walked downstairs, trying to plug the surge of tears rising from his throat. Val was in the kitchen unpacking shopping when he walked past the door, with his head down.

Give me a hand, will you Archie? He released his breath.

I was just...he indicated towards the front door.

Let her be, she said, waving her hand in the direction that Fin had vanished in. She's hormonal. I remember when I was that age. Nothing you say or do can ever be right Archie. Us women are a nightmare. We pull problems from thin air. The best thing you can do right now is to give her a wee bit of space. Valerie lifted a shopping bag and passed it over to him. You've done well to hold her down this long. I always thought I'd created a loose-cannon with that one. She smiled at him. He always felt worse after Valerie's kindness. She untangled her glasses from her hair and placed them on her nose to read the back of a wine bottle.

'So, I've been meaning to tie you down for a second, how is next year looking for you? It's the teacher in me!' She didn't look up, peering closer at the bottle, moving it closer and then further away from the end of her nose. You know, my eyesight is appalling Archie? This is what happens when you get old like me! Archie noticed that he couldn't see very well either. Something fell onto the shopping bag in his hands. It took him a few seconds to realise it was a tear.

Actually, I've been meaning to ask...

At first, the words hung in his throat like a bubble of pride, if burst it would never be put back together. He screwed his eyes

Could you help me?

#

They sat at the kitchen table nursing cups of hot tea in their hands. The weather was mild outside, but the warmth of the tea felt pleasant in his grip. By four O'clock they had an application, a bereavement appeal, and a pot of pea and bacon soup. He wanted to sleep. At the start of the day he was a big Russian doll, now he was the last one left, small, empty, and

breakable, yet nothing to hide.

#

They were still at the kitchen table, a few hours later eating soup, when Fin walked in. It must have started to rain, as her hair was sticking to her face and her arms were wet. It wasn't the right time to say it, but Archie found himself standing up and apologising.

I'm going to do some marking in the office, said Valerie, clearing her bowl into the dishwasher.

Be nice, she said to Fin as she left the room.

Fin pulled up a chair but didn't touch her soup.

Do you still want to be friends with me next year? He asked, picking at the crumbs on his side-plate.

Obviously. She tucked her hair behind her ears. He knew she had been thinking. It made him feel panicked and his eyes felt prickly.

To be honest, I don't know what happened. I just don't want things to change. His mum and dad had been happy until he came along and then his existence changed his mum. Then when she died, when it was just Paul and him, his dad changed dad too. Just by being, he seemed to manage to corrupt a perfectly good situation. Nothing he touched turned to gold.

But, change is good Arch.

I applied for universities today. Her whole body froze.

Fuck off?

She was smiling now.

Yeah, your mum helped quite a bit. She's good with that stuff.

She is good with that stuff! Fin flung her arms around his neck.

See, this is good-change Archie!

That night they drove to Aberdeen to see a film. All the lights were green and they were screaming 'thank you' to each traffic light in falsetto. They played The Wombats 'Let's Dance to Joy Division' eight times with the windows down on the dual carriageway.

#

His guidance teacher had told him that the first year without his Mum would be the hardest. It was almost the end of the uphill climb to Christmas. There was just one final push; the anniversary.

Whenever he thought of the months of the year, he saw a giant circle. Christmas time was at the top, and summertime at the bottom. It must have been an image of a calendar, or something, that he'd seen in nursery, or Primary 1, when he was learning the seasons and the months, but it stuck with him now. Somebody would ask when his birthday was, and he'd say March, and automatically think of the first, downhill, quarter of the circle. The last part of the circumference seemed steep, but he would scale it with Fin.

She had died on the evening of the third and fourth year's Christmas dance. He had been a prefect on duty that night. There were four prefects at each year dance. Archie, Mark, Hamish, and Alice. They had the jobs of ticket collecting and sales, bag checking; scouring out contraband hidden in water bottles, and motoring the toilets. He and Alice sat side by side at the desk whilst the ceilidh roared on inside. She sat on her phone most of the evening. Archie didn't have a phone, so he made himself useful on regular toilet checks and outside patrol. By the end of the night, they were both invited to dance the Orcadian 'Strip the Willow'. Alice reluctantly partnered with him and he made her laugh, a few times, accidentally. More out of her sheer embarrassment of him. It was hard to memorise the order of who to spin next, and he kept getting confused. At the end of the dance, the band struck up

for the very last dance 'The Flying Scotsman'. Archie shrugged hopefully at Alice and she shook her head. They needed another boy and with Hamish and Mark awry, they walked back to the desk outside and Alice made a phone call. At first, It was hard to distinguish it above the noise of Alice, and the thumping dance floor.

It was getting slightly louder, A banging coming from the boys' toilets. He took his responsibility seriously and his ears were attuned to disturbances.

Archie knew he was more muscular than any of the other boys at the dance tonight. Breaking up a fight, between two third years, wouldn't be the hardest job, but he hated confrontation. It was his words that always failed him, and exerting discipline was what he had written down on his prefect form last year. He wouldn't write it when he applied for senior prefect, he had been told not to by his guidance teacher in his application feedback session. He thought about something witty and respectful to say as

He pushed the door of the boys' toilets open:

Lots of noise coming from here boys. If you're banging around whilst taking a shit, you're doing it wrong.

The banging stopped and there was a bit of shuffling around and whispering.

Do I have to come in there? Because I would rather not. Archie said, his voice cracked, as he spoke. Puberty coming back to humiliate him three years later.

The end cubicle door opened with a creak, and to his surprise it was his Maths teacher, Mr Campbell, that walked out.

'All handled and under control.' He said patting Archie on the back. He brushed his nose with his hand and began guiding them both back out of the door of the toilets.

'Ahh, Sir, I'm sorry. I thought it was third years...'

'Teenagers' said Mr Campbell rolling his eyes and Archie watched as he walked back

inside the hall. Archie looked around and, making sure he wasn't seen to be undermining Mr Campbell, he pushed the door and walked back in. It was then that he heard something coming from the same cubicle. He gently squeaked open the cubicle and peered one eye around the door. There was a girl inside, back to him, slumped under the toilet bowl. She was naked down to her underwear and heels, holding her dress in her hands...crying. He instinctively leaned in closer to her and, so not to frighten her, reached a clammy hand towards her. He wants to wipe his hands. Would she think he has peed on himself? That he's a pervert with wet hands? That he's a sweaty man? He tried to say something but his throat felt dry and tight. The girl didn't look up at him.

'Leave me alone' she snapped, reaching for the door frantically and locking it in his face.

He should have checked if she was ok, but he didn't say a word. When he came out of the toilets, Alice was waiting for him outside. She was texting with one hand and holding out his jacket with the other.

We can go now, she said.

'There's a girl in there. She was crying'. He took his jacket and followed her towards the doors to the car park.

She doesn't look up from her phone. 'Is she on her period?'

'No' Archie stopped and ran his hand over the back of his head. 'I think you should go back in there and see if she's ok Al'. Alice rolled her eyes and shoves her coat at Archie.

'Hold this' she barked. Archie watched as she disappeared into the girl's toilets. He put his hands in his pockets and tried to place the almost-naked girl. She had looked too tiny to be a third year. He wondered why she wore a bra when she didn't even have breasts. Then he wondered why he had looked at her breasts. Would a good person be able to see an almost-

naked girl and just look her in the eyes? He hadn't seen her eyes. Seconds later Alice reappeared.

'Stupid girl couldn't handle her drink'

'Is she ok?' he marched after her.

'She's fucking fine'.

The memory of the evening was hazy, as when he arrived home, and went to brush his teeth he found his mum hanging in the shower.

#

They'd been hanging around by the pitches after school when he'd promised to pick the girls up from Fin's and drive them to the dance. Kayleigh and Johnny had been argue-flirting recklessly, which was always an uncomfortable time as Johnny was obviously desperately in love with Kayleigh. But she just enjoyed stringing him along for the attention.

'Come to the dance with me will you Kayls?' said Johnny as they stood in a rough circle throwing an abandoned beanbag around the group. The boys erupted into laughter and Kayleigh stuck her middle finger up at Johnny.

'You can go fuck yourself, if you think that's going to work with me'

'Quite the fucking Romantic' said Alex throwing the beanbag under his leg to to Fin.

'It's all overrated anyway.' Said Fin, missing the beanbag.

'My bad!' shouted Alex, waving his hand at Fin.

'Of course you would say that!' yelled Kayleigh. Fin threw the beanbag at Archie. It was news to him that Fin wasn't a fan of the Christmas dance. Maybe he should have asked her properly? But he'd just assumed she would go with him.

'Come on! Everyone just wants to get to the after party right?' Fin continued.

'You wouldn't know' said Ola, jumping in. Fin shot her a glare and Ola looked down at her feet.

'I had a really sore tummy last year'.

'Good luck woo'ing this one, next week, pal!' Said Johnny, to Archie.

'She'll come around' Archie joked, winking. He instantly felt like a knob.

'Here, I've got an essay to write before tomorrow' said Maggie. 'Fancy chumming me to the bakers Ola?'

One by one, they left the playing fields. Leaving Fin and Archie with the beanbag.

'We should return this.' Said Archie. 'No one likes a soggy beanbag'.

'That sounds like a really shite sex position'

'I can't promise you much, but I can promise you that you'll never have to experience a soggy beanbag with me'.

He loved the sound of her laugh. If he could set it as his alarm tone, he would.

'We don't have to go to the dance if you hate it?' he offered taking her hand as they left the carpark.

'I don't hate it'.

'We could stay in and not do soggy beanbags?'

'Nah.' She moaned, swatting the air. 'We are going Arch, it's your last one. Also, I'm looking forward to being at the senior dance.'

#

He wanted his dad to be there. Like at one of his running events, or rugby games. He wanted him to be sitting on the sidelines with a cup of hot coffee. He wanted him where he could see him. Just that night. Not always. He would call him a few times at the dance, and if anything

seemed off, he wouldn't go.

#

On the evening of the dance, Paul had a date. They got ready together and then sat on the sofa in silence. Archie played with his Sgian-dubh, pulling at the threads in his socks, and Paul kept checking his phone and texting with his index finger. They had said a few words to each other on Monday, which was the anniversary, taking turns to answer the phone and reading out cards. It was nice to have a few bunches of flowers in the house again. Archie would get rid of them prematurely so he didn't have to watch them die. He knew Paul was going on a date, because he'd told Archie, when he'd come home from work, that he was meeting a friend. If it had been Paul's work friends he would have stayed later and gone straight to the pub after work. If it had been Jim or Douglas, Paul's old high school friends, he would have said he was meeting Jim or Douglas. He was wearing jeans and a jacket, which didn't go together, and for a moment Archie had the thought that Kim would have sorted his outfit if she'd been here, but if she'd been here, well...she wouldn't have to, he corrected himself.

Archie left for Fin's twenty minutes early, he would drive the long way around. For the last year, Archie had been desperate to get out of the house and tonight he wished they could stay in together, get a takeaway and watch something nostalgic... 'Wacky Races' or even 'Scooby Doo.' He didn't know why they were both trying to carry on as normal. He knew Paul would be home late, as he wouldn't go anywhere local for a date. If he was spotted in the local with another woman there would, no doubt, be some small-town whispers.

'Will you just text me a few times Dad?' he said as he was leaving. Paul leant in and gave him a hug where they were both looking the same way.

The air was sharp, yet a thick fog hung around the street lamps as Archie pulled out of

the cul-de-sac. Why was Paul on a date when he wasn't able to pay for the household food? How could he pull out her chair, or hold the door open, when he couldn't put rubbish in the bin, or flush the toilet? Who would he be with another woman when he didn't know who he was around his own blood? Would Paul kiss her when he couldn't even look his son in the eye? Was this envy? Confusion? Despair?

Shit...he missed the turn off for the long way to Fin's. The fog would make it hard to U-turn on this country road, but he made the turn anyway and swung the back on it's course. It was still quarter to seven and he couldn't bare waiting in the car, or making small talk with the rest of the family, whilst the girls were inside.

Occasionally the reflection of the radio on the screen of his phone made him think Paul had texted, even though he knew he wouldn't be in contact tonight, despite his request. Who could he speak to, who could he ask to babysit his own father when he was out of the house? Could he call round the neighbours? Ask Val or Malcolm to drop-by mid-evening to 'bring over a christmas card'? The further he could keep Fin's perfect family away from his dad's illness, the better. It just made him feel so alone.

When he pulled up alongside the house, the girls were getting their shoes on in the front porch. Fin waved at him and gestured that they'd be one minute. She was wearing a long, navy-blue dress, sleeveless but not strappy and very floaty. It was Fin, and suddenly the whole evening seemed worth it.

The girls climbed into the back -seat and thanked him for the lift. Fin walked over the gravel to the car and jumped into the passenger seat.

'You look incredible' he said, finding himself fighting the overwhelming urge to lean over and kiss her in front of her friends.

#

Are you ok? Do I need to slow down?

Fin shook her head

Just tell me if I do okay?

I'm ok. I'll tell you if I'm not, she breathed.

I'm hurting you.

She didn't say anything.

He could hear his breath, small noises of air pushing out from his body, murmurs, and moans. They sounded like someone else was dubbing him. He could never feel this delectation in his lifetime.

She felt like clay, from the art department; malleable and wet in his hands. Wherever he touched her she would soften, change shape. Like she was his to make creations with. When they had finished he wanted to fall asleep inside of her. They lay there for a while, he traced his finger between the blonde hairs on her shoulder. She asked if he was still happy, and he said obviously. He was softly still a part of her.

She told him that she wanted that to be her first time and he told her it was his. He would never know what the room around them looked like, the colour of the sheets, or the books on the shelf. With her, he could hear and process what she said, he could feel what he was supposed to feel like a person and he could start to see days far off in the future.

#

The Riley's want to have us over for tea on Wednesday, said Archie. That's

Wednesday two days from now, in case you were wondering. He put the Chinese takeaway on the table in front of the TV and watched his dad reach for the chopsticks.

#

After the show on Saturday night, Archie had himself an early night. There were plans for a friendly with Seamoore the next day, and although he hadn't played rugby since fourth-year, they were short on numbers and he had found himself, pen in hand, signing up. The morning was already hot and he woke up in sweat-soaked sheets. After packing his boots, two sizes too small, a water bottle, and a caramel wafer, he headed for the playing fields.

Good to see you pal, said Mr. Sid shaking Archie's hand as he took a seat on the bench by the kit bags.

Fucking hell Shafer, it's been a long time no see! Yelled Johnny from the rugby posts. He jogged over to Archie, looking to Mr. Sid and then back to Archie in disbelief. How much d'ya pay him then coach? He joked, slapping Archie on the back which caused him to cough with the impact.

Mr. Sid smiled at Archie, he practically begged me to let him back in.

Now we all know that's a lie, said Johnny.

Very funny. Nah, put on a bit of chunk so I'm not going to get snapped out here anymore. Thought I'd join you lads for a friendly, Archie said.

Aye pal, said Ryan, passing Archie a tub of orange segments to place on the bench beside him. You look great man. Good to see you back on yer feet. Archie nodded.

'It's a' the sex he's been having', said Johnny. Archie smiled and looked down at his shoes and felt his ears turn pink.

'We're not having sex' Archie corrected him.

He had completely forgotten to tell Fin he was playing today. The opportunity hadn't

presented itself in the madness of her show week and he had only seen her once, from about fifty feet away on stage, in the last ten days. He would have texted her, but he'd forgotten to charge his phone after he sent a message to her last night, and it lay dead in his bedside drawer. He had enjoyed watching her in the musical, except the part where she had kissed that boy. Even though he didn't know a lot about this sort of thing, he knew she was good and he had told her. Before the show, he had a panic attack in the school toilets and was late in taking his seat. This made the plot seem difficult to grasp.

Johnny shifted his feet excitedly.

'She's a fine lass, he said and puffed out his cheeks. Good job there mate!'

'Still not having sex with her' Said Archie friendly elbowing him in the ribs.

'It's his dark and mysterious ways', added Ryan, throwing a ball to Archie which he caught, thankfully.

Sorry boys, I thought we were playing Rugby? Didn't know that I'd walked into the girls changing rooms. Joked Mr. Sid.

'Aye, not the first time Sir! Johnny suggested', jokily and Archie felt a pang of panic in his stomach. *Not here, not now.* He thought.

'Watch it big man'. Winked Mr. Sid. The bus will be here in a minute, give me a few laps of the pitch.

The boys finished lacing up their boots and started side-skipping along the white lines of the pitch.

It felt good to be back. Although he knew Fin should have been there. She had been the one who helped him get back in the game.

#

'Did ye hear?' Archie questioned.

Paul shook his head as if he'd just caught himself dozing off.

‘Aye aye. I work late on Wednesdays.’

Archie knew it would have come up sooner or later.

‘No, you don't Paul. You don't work right now.’ Paul looked up, quizzically.

‘I got told by guidance at school that I'm eligible to apply for more benefits. Don't know how the fuck they knew before me, but,’ he raised his beer in the air, ‘there you go.’

‘Aye, right’ Paul said, taking a sip of beer. There was a moment of silence. Archie gazed at his noodles, following the line of one until it disappeared into a pool of yellow sauce.

‘So will y’come?’

Their eyes met momentarily, and quite accidentally for the first time in over a year.

‘Aye, I'll come’.

#

In a few months he would be abandoning this man, willingly. He would pack the car and drive as fast as he could from this house. He would find a way to work over Christmas. He wouldn't call. How could he delude himself that they'd have more to talk about over the phone? He would only text if he had to. His father gazed at the TV, face gormless, mouth filled with beer and noodles; probably the first thing he had eaten all day. Food of Archie's money. There wasn't anything left to feel towards him but betrayal, for the last years of his adolescence that had been thieved.

This man wasn't his Dad, and because it had happened so slowly, it had been impossible to notice the moment where Archie had lost him. In the months after his mum had died, Paul hadn't shown any noticeable grief. He was constantly waiting to find his dad secretly crying in a cupboard, like finding the Christmas presents you weren't supposed to see

and not knowing how to deal with them. But he never saw his father waver once. At the funeral, his dad was able to look people in the eye and thank them, so sincerely, for coming. All the while, Archie couldn't lift his head to meet a sympathetic gaze. Who to be? How to act? The only boy in Rosehorn with a suicidal mother. He found himself wishing that grief could be something that everyone dealt with identically, like growing a wisdom tooth or stepping on a plug. His Father's stoicism made him want to scream, but too ashamed of his grief to let it out. Paul would go about his days exactly the same way he had done when Kim had been here and seamlessly navigating around the moments which she had once impacted. It was as if Archie had gone to school one day, and came back to a house completely devoid of any evidence to suggest she had once been present. Like Paul had hired a team of bioremediation specialists at 9 am to be finished by 3.30 pm. He didn't know how long these things were supposed to take, but he could have at least forgotten her toothbrush, or left her Filofax by accident. Without Kim, it was apparent that they didn't know how to exist together, though it was hard to remember if they ever had.

#

#

The Riley's had many white carpets and many pieces of dark oak furniture; one piece in every room and two in the library. It was a barren house, given character with many delicately fitting trinkets from different countries: wall hangings, rugs, and wooden carvings. He felt like he was in a museum. She showed him the house, her voice scripted and sing-songy:

'Mum and Dad cruise a lot.' Fin had said when Archie touched the frame of the two of them outside the Taj Mahal. 'That was a three day trip from the coast, apparently. If you're questioning geography. They met the ship again in Goa. '

'Right', breathed Archie. 'Yeah, I did think that', he lied. 'Do you do this too?'

'Couldn't think of anything worse. Mum and dad go on these charter cruises. They are themed and stuff. Sounds shite. Makes the house look great though.'

He couldn't imagine feeling safer anywhere else than this large home. The cream carpets absorbed his feet like a giant marshmallow. His white socks looked perfect here. The windows caused the thin yellow curtains to flutter free into the rooms. The toilet rolls smelled of talc and they had pear soap with bits of flora stuck inside waiting to be freed with human cleanliness. He imagined Mrs. Riley waving her arm, like a magic wand, and the flowers blooming in their vases, a soft hum of classical music on the radio, the fast motion rising of bread in the oven. Even when Kim had been alive, their house would grow and shrink from swollen party balloons to shrivelled, floppy condoms. Sometimes for weeks-on-end, they would have daffodils, always refilled, and fresh salads with dinner. Their house would pulse with Carmen McRae and Ella Fitzgerald and she would make blueberry pancakes with fresh honeycomb brought back from a client at the salon. But that was really only until he got to high school. Some days he would be certain that he imagined it all along.

He could see the school from her bedroom window, over the fields and farms below. Seeing school, from bed, would panic Archie but Fin said it motivated her.

CHAPTER THREE

Stuff with no order...

CHAPTER FOUR

Fin

#

Like many British actors, Fin Riley (22) has appeared in period pieces- ' Horseguards', on the BBC, in which she plays an outspoken young Leatherworker who, as Riley put it, "doesn't like wearing clothes as much as she likes making them" appearing in a different erotic scene in almost every episode, and 'The Poorly Guarded girl', a British television adaption of the 1789 French ballet 'La Fille Mal Gardé', originally choreographed by Jean Dauberval, in which she plays the best friend. But, she is best known for her breakout role in the BBC drama series 'Bones'. Riley stars as 'Maeve/Bones', the puppet master of series 1, a detached, thrill-seeker who is a mystery even to herself. A role that has propelled Riley into fame

overnight..

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'What's that?' said Aaron turning over in bed and glancing at Fin's phone.

'It's the New Yorker, they've published the interview I did'. Aaron stretched out in bed and let out a little moan.

'What time is it?' he reached over to tap his phone on the nightstand.

'Six fifteen' snapped Fin. Her eyes scanned over to the A day in the life paragraph and she winced. 'Do I sound pretentious? Listen to this: Riley orders an espresso as she asks the waiter to dispose of her empty, espresso-sized takeaway cup, that, on first glance through google images, seems to be a vital accessory for her. She looks at me and flatly states 'it is the glue that holds this whole show together'.

'At least it's not actual glue that holds you together.' Aaron joked pinching her nose.

'Yet' Fin rolled her eyes.

'No, I mean, it sounds like you' he mumbled. She switched off the screen, sat up in bed and gazed at herself in the mirror opposite the bed, planted there for Aaron's pleasure during all the sex they weren't having. It was always in the mornings where Fin was most comforted by her own appearance. Her bare-face was a secret transfixion of her's as it always transported her back to the farm, where she would have red cheeks from dawn to dusk. It was one of the reasons she never wore blusher, her grey complexion offered a stark reminder that she wasn't fully alive. The journalist had referred to her as heroin-chic in the New Yorker and Fin had heard the words 'it's not your fault' tumble out of her mouth in a whisper, as she read the article, to which a voice in her head replied 'yes...it is'. As her name was getting bigger, everything else, including herself, was getting smaller. With every new interview she recorded and every episode of 'Bones' that was aired, the big, white walls of her Notting Hill

flat seemed to close in on her, another inch every morning. She finally understood why celebrities needed such big houses, it wasn't to spend money or flaunt their lives, it was to try and breathe in a safe space, as the world outside became increasingly more claustrophobic. Her phone started to vibrate furiously in her lap, and she pushed back the covers, and headed into the en-suite.

'Hey mum'

'Hello Darling'

'Can I ring you back in ten minutes?' Fin whispered, glancing at Aaron who was now snoring with his mouth wide open.

*Sigh on the other end of the line.

'Yes, but be quick! I have to leave the house soon and I don't like talking whilst I'm driving'. She hung up.

Fin pulled on a black t-shirt dress, her Doc Martens and a small green shirt-jacket. She grabbed her keys from her handbag, put on some big sunglasses, applied her signature, blood-red, lipstick and, without brushing her teeth, left the flat. Outside, the morning was dark, as though the sun had slept through its alarm. She hurried down the steps to the front wall and, headed out on her usual 'vacation' commute to 'Drip Girl', just around the corner from Chepstow Villas. An Actors' vacation was a new concept to Fin. It was turning out to be more overwhelming than being on-set. She had flown back from Ireland yesterday, where Season 2 of 'Bones' was being filmed, for a week of holiday, which had quickly been filled with an intense week of Season 1 promo. Most days were filled with back-to-back with Television or magazine/newspaper interviews, and today would be no exception. It was not the day to ditch her vital accessory. Her phone vibrated again.

'Hi Mum'

'Hi darling'

'I said I'd call you back'

'I know, but you didn't'

'It's been seven minutes Mum'

'I'm not just at your dispense Finny, just because you're famous'

'Right' Fin said, momentarily distracted by the flash of a paparazzi camera waiting for her amongst the tables outside the cafe. Right on cue, she thought.

'Anyway, I'm not calling to see how you are. I'm calling to tell you that we've booked a holiday, with Ola and David, over Christmas.'

'Lovely' Fin tried to force some enthusiasm. She pushed open the door of the café, and raised her hand to the Barista for them to prepare her usual. The gesture felt novel and slightly wanky to Fin, which she liked. She knew that when the sight of people frantically pleasing you became normal, that it was time to worry.

'Where to?'

'Greece. We would really like it to be a family holiday Fin.' There was a manipulative tone to her voice and a heavy emphasis on the word 'family'.

'Well, David isn't family' Fin pointed out, as she picked up a cardboard coffee tray from the stack by the counter. She gestured at the Barista again to show she was 'helping' as much as she could. It made her feel phoney.

'I know darling, but you should bring Aaron too. Like a triple-date.' The words made her squirm.

'Aaron won't be coming' she said lowering her voice so nobody could hear her.

'Oh?'

'I mean, I don't even know if we'll be finished filming by Christmas. I think we have a

provisional extension week on the 27th. I could fly out for a few days. I wouldn't want to stress Aaron out like that.' She lied, unable to face a Christmas family holiday with a man she was almost certain she had come to hate. 'Besides, he has his own family.'

'Well let me know, flights are going at a good rate just now' she paused, as if realising what she had just said 'which wouldn't be a cause for concern for you', she added.

'I'll let you know'. The barista slid her coffees across the counter with an over-enthusiastic smile. 'Anyway Mum, gotta go' and then 'love you'.

'Ok, bye now, bye'. Fin shoved the phone in her pocket.

'Thank you.' She smiled at the girl. 'Pop it on the ...'

'...The tab. Already done. Have anything nice planned for the day?'

'Oh you know.' Fin winked under her sunglasses, and then, realising the girl couldn't see her eyes, shoved the coffees into the holder. 'Have a great day'. She turned over her shoulder and left the café.

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When she arrived at the flat, Aaron was still in bed.

'Don't you have work today?' Fin asked hopefully, handing him his coffee as he sat up in bed.

'Lead singer has laryngitis or something. So we're taking a day off', he answered taking a large sip...

'Be careful it's...' Fin began to say as he screwed up his eyes.

'For fucks sake Fin! ASK FOR IT AT A DRINKABLE TEMPERATURE! How many fucking times?' Fin apologised, with as much sympathy she could muster, whilst secretly her enjoying the morning ritual of Aaron scalding his mouth. She left him swearing at her and relocated to the living room where she sat down to sip at her espresso. She hated this flat. It

was her's but she didn't live in it. She'd never had time to make it a home, and every time she came back to London, it was messier and more neglected. It was almost entirely unfurnished, and Aaron had gotten into the habit of using things that weren't furniture as furniture; an upright cardboard box to hold the wifi router, an old curtain tied to the old curtain fixings to cover the window, an old suitcase as a chest of drawers. She could pay to have someone do it up, but she was never there and certainly not responsible for making Aaron's life more comfortable. She knocked back the last of the espresso with a Pro-Plus and two ibuprofen, and opened the calendar on her phone, and went to Today. 9.15- meeting with a director from L.A about a potential series which she would read up about in the car on the way there, a magazine interview with 1883 Magazine, and tonight she was appearing on **The Mac Reuben Show**. Aaron popped his head around the door in his underwear. He was hairier than he'd ever been, maybe a prerequisite to working as an audio engineer? She thought.

'Where'd you go? Don't you still have like an hour before you leave?' he rested his arm on the door frame.

'Calmed down a bit?' She couldn't help but notice that recently he had developed a small pouch, that flopped an inch or two over his boxers.

'Yeah, just can't feel my mouth'.

'Sorry, I have to get my head around today' she said looking down at her phone again.

'Think you could get your head around something else?' he suggested.

'I'm not sure I have time for what I think you're suggesting'. She didn't look up.

'You never have time'.

'I know, I'm sorry'. He walked over and plonked himself down on the coffee table in front of her.

'Every time you go away you're like, a little bit more fucking weird when you come

back'.

'A little bit more fucking famous' Fin corrected him, eyes still on the screen in her hands.

'But that shouldn't be a bad thing for the people you care about Fin. You've wanted this ever since I met you.'

'I know'.

'You just have to stop thinking about yourself all of the time'.

'Could you have come up with a better way to word that Aaron? I'm trying my best to manage everything'.

'Take a day off with me?'

'I can't.'

'Yes you can!' he said enthusiastically.

'It's not that easy'.

'It is that easy' he chanted, disarming Fin from her phone. She felt a surge of hot anger.

'Give me my phone' Fin said coldly.

'Look, it's easy, easy, easy, easy' he continued to sing, threatening to drop it into a half-empty pint glass.

'GIVE ME MY FUCKING PHONE' Fin launched herself at him and swung her arm at the glass, sending it smashing into the wall. Aaron froze, and raising his arms above his head, dropped the phone onto the carpet.

'I was just having a laugh' he said.

'I only wanted a fucking blowjob.'

'Sorry'

'Is that too much to ask from my girlfriend? You used to literally champ-at-the-bit for it.' It made her shiver. She hated herself, but not this much.

'I'm going to clean this up and then I'm going to go'. Fin started towards the broken glass and he stopped her, holding onto the top of her arms.

'You're literally like never here. I miss you. That's all'. He leant in to kiss her and she let him, his tongue felt swollen and burnt.

'I'm sorry I broke a glass. I'm just stressed and not feeling myself. I'll be home late tonight and I'll make it up to you.' she stroked his arm and then wiggled out of his grip.

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A few minutes later she left the flat and walked down the steps to the taxi, letting go of her breath she didn't know she'd been holding. The morning was lighter now, and so was the crushing feeling in her chest. Every time she was out alone, in London, she felt this strange electricity. There can be eight million people in a city, and you can feel the presence of one.

~~It dawned on her that as long as she was still with him, she was reminded of her potential to be evil.~~

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The meeting with her agent started twenty minutes later than planned and ran over by approximately ten minutes. She was now half an hour late to meet him. If only she'd arrived first, she could have ordered coffee and applied lipstick and perfume. Her fringe was sticking to her forehead, and her inside thighs were chafing with sweat. It made her feel fat. Thank

god she was wearing black.

#

He stood up, at the back of the cafe, as she walked in. Whenever she saw him she would always forget how to breathe; as if she'd stuck her head out of a car window, and it took a few seconds for her lungs adjust. The same as when she'd seen him walk into the beer garden at the Festival two years ago. She smiled at him and ordered an Americano at the empty coffee bar. He went to hug her, and she apologised for being sweaty.

‘Just the two of us then? No bodyguard or anything?’ He joked.

She laughed, melodically, placing her bag down underneath the table. ‘No no, we're not that big of a deal’. She watched him place his hands around the coffee mug.

‘I'm sorry, I ordered’, he said. ‘I wasn't sure what you'd want.’

She brushed this apology away. ‘I ordered as well. I'm glad you could come. To be honest, I wasn't expecting it at such short notice.’

‘Oh right.’

‘So, how have you been?’ she said taking a seat and then patting him on the side of his arm. It was a patronising gesture she instantly regretted. His grey t-shirt hugged his skin like clingfilm. He felt thicker, thicker skin, thicker arms. She had never felt so small beside him. All this time he had been swelling and she had been shrivelling. The barista arrived with her coffee and she thanked him.

‘Good.’ he breathed. ‘On the whole.’ He took a long blink. Archie had told her once, when they had been together, that he would always be able to close his eyes and see her without her clothes on and the memory always comforted her when she saw him. He always made her feel naked.

Steering the conversation away from himself, he asked her about Ireland.

Her shoulders softened and she felt her breath fall to a depth it hadn't in a long time.

'Ireland is...different', she said.

'Oh right? Good or bad?.'

'I haven't made my mind up yet.'

'Well, sometimes a place can be both. I suppose?' He offered. Are you there like, permanently or what?' he raised his mug to his lips. She noticed that his hands were shaking.

That's actually what I'm back here for today, a meeting about this new thing they are filming in L.A. So depending on that, I guess? It went well, so we'll see.

The barista came over with two complimentary chouquettes.

I love this place, It's just across from my agent's office. She pointed across the road. I always pop in when I'm in town. They do the best coffee, don't they?

It is good yeah.

So, go on, what is new with Archie? Once again she hated herself for her patronising manner, but she couldn't stop. The last time she had seen him, he had told her, quite clearly, that he could barely remember what had ever happened between the two of them. Her body tensed up. She shook it off.

What is new with me? He repeated. Fin wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer to her own question.

Well, I live in South East London now. We moved from Tooting. Must have been, what three weeks ago now? Just to be closer to the school I teach at.

She took a sip of her Americano, letting it burn the surface of her tongue and singe its way into her stomach.

Slowly getting the hang of this London thing now, he said.

Fin could feel her tongue grow furry and swell in her mouth as she tried to speak. She

didn't want to patronise, but it was as if her language was switched to a default setting and she couldn't change it back. French would have been more appropriate than this.

You'll get used to the city. It's smaller than you think, everyone knows everyone.

I have never heard anyone describe London that way, he said flatly. Neither had Fin. She wanted to tell him that she didn't know why she had said it.

So do you still live with Rob then? She said hopefully.

No no, he said laughing into his coffee. I haven't lived with Rob for a long time. He was laughing at her.

She would have to pry it out of him. They sat for a few painful seconds in silence.

You said 'we moved from Tooting?' she pointed out innocently.

With...uhh...Maggie. You know Maggie! He said enthusiastically. Fin took another scalding gulp of black coffee and waited for it to rip through her throat. She took a moment to pretend she was placing Maggie and then, acting the part rather convincingly, widened her eyes and nodded her head grinning manically.

Maggie! Of course. So are you guys a thing now, or what?

He looked down at his coffee and smiled nervously. She had made him reminisce and it nauseated her.

It's a funny story actually.

Is it really? She said sharply.

Well, we think it's rather amusing. She tried to focus on the story, but the words began to separate from one another and stand alone. They didn't come and go as normal words did, the sentences didn't form in her mind and she was now staring at her bug-like eyes in the reflection of her coffee. She wasn't aware that he had stopped talking:

Sorry, am I boring you Fin? He asked leaning back on his chair and putting his hands

behind his head.

No, I'm sorry.

You're not looking at me when I'm talki...

Are you in love with her? She interrupted him, and then after a small, shaken pause, she repeated in a smaller voice-

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are you in love with her?

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Jesus, he breathed, I hadn't really thought about that yet. We haven't even said that to each other yet so, I'm not sure this is the best time for me to say it out loud Fin. Why'd you have to make it so serious all of a sudden?

Right, no that wouldn't be right. I thought you were trying to cut-ties with home?

Maggie isn't home, he corrected her. Well, she's my home now, but she was always different. You know? More futuristic, cosmopolitan. Ironic, I know.

Yes, that is ironic, Fin agreed. There was a moment of silence. She pretended to take a sip from her, now, empty coffee cup.

I mean, she's allergic to hay and her parents are both Scandinavian so...

She normally enjoyed it when he was tongue-tied, but this felt excruciating.

There was some nervous laughter. She wasn't sure who it came from. Upon each of their encounters, in the last four years, a small piece of Fin had turned dead inside. And each time she couldn't imagine there would ever be a lonelier moment in her life than that one, until the next time they saw each other.

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They left the pastries, like two people on a first date.

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'How are you my darling?' he yelled, holding Fin by the shoulders. 'It's been so long!' She was almost positive that she'd never seen this man before in her life. In fact, the bar was filled with people she was almost positive she'd never seen in her life.

'Do I know you?' Fin said, throwing her arms up into the air and releasing herself from the strangers' grip. Her hair was wet at the tips with sweat, and her liquid- eyeliner had dripped down her cheeks. She wasn't dancing with anyone in particular, but she always had someone to dance with.

'But how have you beeeeen?' He was holding onto her hips now and trying to force Fin into some sort of bachata to Pitbull.

'I didn't choose this music' Fin yelled, freeing herself again to avoid the spray coming from his mouth.

'You are such a good dancer!'

'I'm going to get a cigarette.' She dropped her arms and began striding to the smoking area, before he could follow her.

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Fin let herself be cold, although she didn't feel it. She watched the goosebumps appear on her skin and enjoyed her breath swirling in front of her nose in the air. The sound of the base, coming from inside, made her bones rattle. Her sweaty hair stuck to the back of her neck, almost crystallising in the cold.

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'Fin?' said a voice. She wiped her face and turned around. It was security.

'Do you know an Archie Shafer?'

Shit! Archie. She dodged past security and tried to stifle the embarrassing memory of almost begging Archie to come to her Birthday party, knowing that he'd hate every single thing about this night and now he was here. Fin peered around the corner of the VIP cloakroom and caught sight of him, standing with his back turned, waiting to try and enter through the main section of the club. Every time she saw him he was more unrecognisable, not physically, per se, although he was always looking healthier and more 'rugby' than she'd every known him to be these days, but spiritually? God, that was a word Lilith used all the time. Lilith was always spiritually outgrowing someone, or spiritually on a different level. It made Fin want to vomit. Fin took a moment to shake it off and then, hating herself, the word 'showtime' tumbled from her lips before she turned the corner and ran towards him.

#

Something was wrong. Archie was the one who normally replied immediately to her emails. Almost as soon as she heard the swooping noise ring out from her Macbook, she'd see a brand new email from him waiting for her in her inbox. He usually wrote a lot less than she did, but she could always rely on him for a quick reply.

It had been three weeks. She had even phoned the sushi restaurant to check whether he had taken the reservation. He hadn't. The clipped woman on the other end of the phone refusing to reimburse the money, not that she needed it. She had even emailed him again.

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Just checking you haven't got food poisoning from the sashimi?

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F x

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He hadn't replied. They were ok, weren't they? She had re-read her email a dozen times over

in the last three weeks. She had called Maggie boring, but only ever quoted his own words in doing so. She'd even said that to his face a few times, and he'd always, sort of, half-heartedly, agreed. Like a paper cut in the corner of her mouth, she couldn't not think about him. And it was now evolving from worrying that she had upset him, to just worrying about him. She curled up in the duvet. L.A homes were not designed for colder weather, and especially Josh's house with his fetish for windows. He'd used his 'allowance' for walls on the giant red wall around the complex and the house was see-through. A glasshouse. She rubbed her eyes, which were dry and gritty from the lack of sleep last night. Getting to sleep was never an issue, she would pop a few Ambien and wash it down with some JW. She had finished off a bottle, which sat perched on on the nightstand, filtering the L.A sunlight, which was penetrating her temples like sharp skewers. She'd seen a painting in the National Portrait Gallery in Charing Cross titled 'The Nightstand'. It was a series of four portraits of a girl, not dissimilar to Fin, brown hair, pale skin, always in bed. In the first one, she is a child, and the focus is on her nightstand which holds a copy of 'The Tiger Who Came to Tea', a crayon drawing, a well-loved white toy bunny rabbit and a half-eaten bourbon biscuit. In the second portrait, the girl is asleep with eyeliner on, her nightstand holds a packet of cigarettes hiding under a maths textbook, a few bracelets and the well-loved white toy bunny. The third, there is a packet of condoms, a bottle of pinot noir, a copy of 'Sapiens' by Yuval Noah Harari, a picture of the girl in the portrait with another woman, and the well-loved white toy bunny. The fourth- a pair of earrings and a few packets of pills. No bunny. No picture. It had a lasting effect on Fin. She had stared at the painting for over ten minutes, lost in the life of this girl. It was so easy to see where she had gone wrong. If someone had painted Fin's nightstands, would the thousands of people who gazed at her portrait, be able to tell where Fin had gone wrong? This particular nightstand would be a strong teller- an empty bottle of

scotch, an untouched copy of 'A New Earth' by Eckhart Tolle she'd grabbed off Josh's bookshelf for some light holiday reading and a bag of coke on top of a packet of sleeping pills. She needed some coffee, her insides were eating themselves and the alcohol was almost certainly looking for somewhere, other than her organs, to soak into. She hadn't made coffee in his apartment yet, and although Josh had lived here for the last year, she wasn't sure he had either. She knew he would sleep in until midday. She would have time to call Archie if she was quick. Fin pulled on her jeans and a t-shirt, over yesterdays knickers, and slipped her feet into some sliders. She chose a blue baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses and, making sure she had her bank-card, she headed for the door.

'Where are you sneaking out to?'

Fin spun around, the jerky motion made her head pulse. She noticeably winced and was thankful for her sunglasses. There he was, topless and in faded grey sweats. A chiselled, tanned, espresso drinking mind-fuck.

'I'm grabbing coffee'.

'You were missed last night. How's your...?' he gestured to his lower stomach.

'My what?'

'Your stomach pain'. She had completely forgotten her made up story, last night. It was the first time, in her adult life, that she'd passed on a night out. She knew Archie had something to do with that.

'Oh, it's better. Thank you'.

'Good.' He patted to the sofa beside him, for her to sit. She obeyed, reluctantly, knowing he'd smell the antics of her 'quiet night in'.

'I missed you last night' he purred, his grey bristles brushing her cheek. Fin kicked off her sliders, and sidled up to him, resting her head on his chest. 'So that's where my whisky

ran off to.' Fin smiled and lips cracked. She knew he'd been with someone last night. These morning's where he was up early, were usually fuelled by the sex he'd had the night before. She found it both unbearable and inflaming when she let herself fantasise about having sex with Josh. Unbearable, when she met his twin girls, who were two years older than her and inflaming when she was this close to him. She knew his hips would be tighter, things would be saggier and skin would be rougher. She knew he slept with lots of girls her age, but the invite to L.A had been strictly business. He knew some people he'd like her to meet and he had wanted her to stay with him, so she didn't get into any trouble. By which, she knew he meant the type of trouble she was in when he directed her in the second series of Bones in Ireland. It had been strictly business when they had talked about it and she'd agreed, but as soon as she'd landed in L.A, the confusion began. They cuddled, like this, a lot. He would sometimes hold her from behind, when she was cooking or washing up, or kiss her goodnight when he thought she was asleep, and comment on how she dressed, sounding like someone between a lover and a father. He was noticeably jealous of any mention of a man in Fin's life, and she was jealous of the girls he slept with whilst refusing to sleep with her which was something she'd grown accustomed to with men she had wanted. She wanted know if they would ever have sex, but she knew it would ruin the fun for her, if not for both of them.

'Josh?'

'Mmmm'

'I really do need a coffee'.

'And I really need this cuddle'. Fin softened, it felt nice to be needed.

'When are we meeting your friend Mike?'. Josh gave a large sigh as if Fin had irritated him.

'I could see if he's free today?'. Fin lifted her head.

'Today?'

'I can give him a text, yes. If that's what you want?'

She'd been in L.A for two weeks now, waiting for this meeting, and she was just finding out now that all Josh had to do was 'give him a text'.

'I....' She opened her mouth to speak and then shut it again, like a fish. Josh reached into his sweatpants and pulls out his phone. He put his glasses on, and typed like her dad.

'I thought it was, like...like a thing you would organise?'

'So you don't want to meet today?' He scolded her like a child.

'Look at me. I look like I have been hit by a train'.

'Look' he said, putting his phone aside. 'Do you want the meeting or not Fin? Believe it, or not, I'm doing this for you.'

'Yes, yes! I do.' Fin sat up. 'Thank you, I do.' Josh stood up, leaving Fin on the sofa. He watched the muscles in his lower back sway as he moved into the kitchen with the phone to his ear.

'What's up? Can't complain, can't complain'. He glanced over his shoulder at Fin before disappearing into his bedroom. Fin pulled her phone from her pocket and quickly refreshed her emails. She wanted to tell Archie about this. A meeting with Mike Donohue. The director of Sixes and Jealous of the Maze. She would have to explain to him that a meeting didn't mean anything per-say, but it means that they have something in mind for her. This would be her foot in. Would he take a break from being mad at her, for calling Maggie boring, to be happy for her? Still nothing from him. Another flood of worry, of loneliness which disappeared as soon as Josh came back into the room. He opened his arms-

'So today is good. He'll be here in a couple of hours.' Fin could feel herself grinning.

'Why don't you go shower and pop on something cute, and I'll go get you a coffee.'

You really shouldn't go out like that Fin. It is like catnip for journalists.'

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Fin ran the shower and undressed as soon as she heard the front door shut behind Josh. She dialled his number and listened to the tone as if it were an ECG about to flatline in hospital.

'Pick up, pick up, pick up.' It didn't ring out. He'd cancelled the call.

The sound of his answering machine made her sink down the glass of the shower. She sat there for a few seconds after the tone, and then shut down the call. She wished they were both in the olden-days. A time when it wasn't so clear as to whether someone didn't want to speak to you, or couldn't speak to you. Where a letter could easily get lost. Today, of all days, that ignorance would be bliss, she thought. The shower was hot and stingy, as she swayed under the stream. Fin closed her eyes to avoid staring at her body in the mirror opposite. She knew what she looked like. Everyone knew what she looked like. She was in another country, with another man, in another room, and there it was; another strategically placed mirror. What could a mirror do that she didn't already have? Why did a mirror aggravate or arouse or motivate more than a feeling or a touch? It hurt less to look down at her body as the one who owned it rather than see it on a mirror or through the eyes of someone else. It didn't hurt her to touch her body, but the thought of watching someone else touch her did. She'd seen enough of herself; on billboards, on TV, on camera screens, online... and she had Aaron to thank for the latter publicity. She was now part of that Hollywood club. The worth of her body was the now priced at the effort to type [www](#). Into a search engine.

Josh's voice pulled her out of her daydream.

'Riley! You'll put us back into a drought' he joked, tapping on the door.

'Shit sorry'. Fin turned off the shower quickly and wrapped a towel around herself, just before he invited himself in. Once again, she felt like a child he'd just taken out of the

bath and wrapped a towel around, interjected with this frustration that he didn't just pull the towel down. He stopped and stared at her, his blue eyes covering every inch of her towel-covered body.

'Your coffee is on the breakfast bar'.

'Thank you. I'll be through in a sec.'

#

In the kitchen, Fin sipped her lukewarm coffee and nibbled at a blueberry muffin- trying to stifle the urge to shove it in her mouth. She had learnt pretty quickly that the food in L.A was to be looked at, and at most nibbled, by women like her. Pretty much everything she had eaten in the last few weeks, whether they had ordered take-out or sat at a restaurant, had been decided and ordered by Josh.

'She'll just have the salad. She's got a small stomach'. He'd said it enough times now for Fin to believe it was true.

'So the way this is going to go...' he leaned into her on the breakfast bar. 'You're going to be you, and you're going to agree to pretty much everything this guy says ok? He's one to win over'.

'Be me, but do everything he says?' Fin raised her eyebrow. 'Alrighty then'.

'Don't be like that'. He took her hand and made her put her coffee down. 'Just be willing, eager and enthusiastic. You can do that right?'

'Hey, I'm one of the best actresses of my generation. Your words not mine.'

'Try'na be smart?' he winked at her, which highlighted the wrinkles around his eyes.

'Don't try to be smart with this guy. He's one of those no-bullshit kind of people. And he's not a fan of English actors...'

'Scottish'.

‘Whatever.’

‘It’s not whatever’ said Fin.

‘Baby girl don’t be like that, you know my ancestors are scotch. I’m didn’t mean it like that.’ Fin didn’t have the energy to throw up at the word scotch. ‘He’s seen some of your stuff so he knows you. I’m sure he’s got you in mind for an audition’.

‘Thank you’.

‘Don’t thank me yet.’ He pointed his finger at her and she pretended to take a bite at it. ‘And don’t take anything funny this morning.’

‘I won’t’.

#

#

‘Pick up, pick up, pick up, pick up’. She had both hands pressing the phone to her ear as the call rung out.

‘Fuck’.

Fin smacked her phone down on the bathroom floor and starting hitting the sides of her head repeatedly.

‘Where the fuck are you?’ she cried, quietly under her breath. ‘I need you’. She wanted him to burst through the toilet door like he’d done in high school, to show her that she was more than her body and more than what a man could make her through the use of it.

Back inside the living room, Mike and Josh were setting up the camera equipment, and it was all some sort of sick joke. Fin pushed herself to her feet and stared at her face in the mirror.

‘You stupid stupid bitch’ she cursed, holding onto the bathroom sink, Josh’s voice

ruminating around her head: He's seen some of your stuff so he knows you. You're going to agree to pretty much everything this guy says ok?

Don't take anything this morning. How could she have not seen this coming? Of course she was taken from England, Mike Donohue was probably known for his shadiness in L.A, but how was she to know? And, of course, she thought, it made perfect sense that Josh hadn't made a move on her, he must be under some contracted agreement. There was a knock at the door.

'You ok baby girl?'. It was Josh.

'Be out in a minute. Stomach pains are back'. She heard his footsteps disappear, and some muffled voices from the living room. Fin located her phone and tried Archie again, knowing he'd still be awake, it was only eight. Her pulse was throbbing in her ears. All she needed was to hear his voice. To get some clarity. For someone to tell her what to do. There was no one else she could call. This time it went straight to voicemail. You don't have to do this to make it in L.A, she told herself. You can come back next year and try again. There was a way to break America without America breaking you first. Or did nobody tell you about this part? Was this the direct route of all the young, British girls? She tried to imagine the conversation; a negotiation of how much nakedness there would be, of how much sex she would have to have. She couldn't walk out? All her stuff was here. And she'd lose 'Bones'. It would be her word against their's. Two L.A directors against a name that nobody knew of in this country. An anger started to build inside her, she identified it as the feeling of betrayal. It was alien. Josh, somebody she'd felt supported by, safe with. Someone she'd handed over the integrity of her career to, Someone who had seen her sex tape with Aaron, and decided that he'd monopolise it.

There was another knock at the door.

'Sure you're ok?'. Fin pressed leaned over the sink and pressed her arms into the counter, steadying her anger.

'In a minute' she said, trying to stop her voice wavering.

'Ok, it's just that you've been in there for fifteen minutes' he lowered his voice 'this doesn't look good'.

'I know'.

'Don't fuck this up'. The last time someone had told her not to fuck something up, was eight years ago. She'd gone right ahead and done it anyway. Here she was, still trying to get over the mistake she'd made eight years ago.

I'm not going to, she thought.

#

She let the alarm on her phone ring out a few times before she turned it off. Fin had been awake for some time feeling desperately hungry. It was already light outside, and she could hear the fat raindrops splattering across the window. Most days, Fin got up around six thirty, she would make coffee, go for a run, shower and, after that, it would be a case of waiting for the day to end. She would avoid the news and calls from her old cast mates and agent, knowing there would always be a follow up email if it was important. Her doctor had alluded to depression, but Fin still felt things deeply, got up in the mornings and went running

regularly. She couldn't be depressed, although she'd taken the prescription and then the pills. Being sober was easier than she thought it would be. Drugs had only been necessary when there was somebody to impress or somebody to fit in with. These days it wasn't worth the effort.

#

She made her bed and put the coffee-pot on the stove top. After reading the back of a cereal box filled with cereal she wasn't going to eat, she changed into her running kit. She wore the same clothes every day and washed them every day. It troubled her enough to google whether it was something mad people did. She didn't want to wear anything else. Anything else made her feel too visible and too anxious. It had to be the same baggy black shorts and the same black, mesh sports-bra. She wasn't OCD because she knew nothing bad would happen if she didn't. She opened the fridge, pulled out the milk, poured a drop into the sink and then raised the coffee mug to her lips. The first sip of coffee made her nose tingle and her body responded with a grateful jolt. Recently Fin had begun dreaming about coffee, it was the last thing she thought about before she went to sleep and the first thing she thought of when she woke up. Her empty stomach waiting for something to give her some energy. But nothing was good as the first taste, and it was always gone too quickly. She had contemplated making a second, but she couldn't risk needing to visit the toilet in the middle of her run. Fin tossed her headphones into the bowl on the hall table. She'd begun having nightmares about her brain being electrocuted because of the rain. It would certainly be a quick way to go. The rain was falling thick and fast, straight down, smashing off the pavements and Fin's cheeks as she made her way down Ladbroke Grove towards the park. Beginning the impossible task of trying to outrun her mind and the memories of L.A. She had read in a book recently that the only worthwhile kind of exercise to do, if you were suffering from trauma, was to exercise

until you were physically exhausted. She knew she couldn't outrun the of the mistakes of going to L.A rather than her family holiday and of the start date of season three looming. Josh had been very apologetic and embarrassed. Somewhere along the way, he had been absolutely certain that she had agreed to that kind of work. He helped her pack her things and told her they would keep it between the three of them. She had watched as Josh crumbled, from this poised and powerful man, into somehow who was profusely apologising to Mark up the drive-way as he left. However, the anxiety that came with the start of filming, with him, made her nauseous. The harder she ran, the more her mind focussed on breath, on pain, on the next landmark to reach. The park was almost empty, except a few cyclists, clad out in day-glow waterproofs, spraying her as they went past. Both her underwear and her socks were soaking. Fin turned around after six kilometres. Her head was beginning to feel light and her right hip had been giving her some bother today since she had set out. She always made sure to do an out-and-back run, so that she would have to run back the way she came and wouldn't skip any of the distance. She hopped over tree roots and ran through the puddles knowing that no paparazzi would be brave enough to tackle this weather. She wonders how her old school and college friends are doing now. Worlds apart. She'd tried to keep them close but there was only so much you could do with failed actors when you, yourself were successful. They were all struggling actors, or struggling actors with babies or struggling actors with babies on the way. Despite being the successful one, she had felt phased out. She didn't know a thing about being poor, of failure, of raising a child. Sitting in a bar with a bunch of them talking about open auditions, promo work and working front of house just made her feel ashamed, guilty, alien. They never spoke about her success and soon she became the elephant in the room, the elephant who couldn't help her friends get an audition for parts, who couldn't financially support them without it seeming like charity, and who

would get V.I.P tickets to the events and shows her friends worked at, not in, at.

#

There had been a few stand-out occasions which had definitely contributed to her phase-out...

#

It was now a loneliness that hurt her bones. Fin walked the last hundred metres down her street, the rain slapping against the crown of her head and pouring through her eyelashes.

#

At first she thought he was a pap, a huddled up figure in one of their distinctive, grey macs. She's seen them outside the hedge before, but never on her front doorstep. Fin ducked behind the wall and, felt for her phone in her pocket, and got ready to take a picture of him before he noticed her. The rain caused her touch screen to malfunction, and after a few seconds of swearing, she shoved the phone back in her pocket and called out from behind the wall.

'You are one-hundred-percent trespassing on private property'. She'd never said anything like it before and feels half-strong, independent woman, half-phoney.

'Fin?' the voice immediately recognisable. She steadied herself on the wall behind the hedge, his footsteps started along the flooded path. A few weeks ago, all she would have felt was relief that he was ok. Now, her whole body surged with anger. She turned the corner and there he was. Big green eyes, floppy sandy curls, the look of surprise on his face. Just as soaked through as her.

'Get the fuck out.' Fin pushed past him on the path and started towards the house.

'Fin please! We have a lot to talk about'.

She turned around sharply when she got to the front door.

'You don't just get to talk to me when it suits you. You completely cut me out your life. No. Fuck you.' She fumbled with the key in the lock, her hands shook with fury. Most

men would take a strong 'fuck you' as a good indication to leave, but Archie started to try and help her with the lock.

'Just let me explain. Please'.

'Don't touch me'. Their eyes meet and Fin realised that Archie is no longer a friendly pen pal or a polite acquaintance in a coffee shop to a past lover or soul mate; he is a threat. Someone in her safe space that could hurt her even more than he already has.

'Fin can I just talk to you please?'

'And say what? Why you suddenly just dropped off the face of the Earth. Why I meant so little to you, you couldn't even send one tiny fucking email to put my mind at ease that you were't dead?'

'Aren't you a tiny bit relieved to know I'm not dead?' he joked.

'Fuck you. I knew you were bloody well fine. I saw you last month, in Covent Garden, with Maggie. Loving life'. Fin finally pulled open the door.

'I broke up with Maggie' he says stopping her from opening the door. Fin froze, and let the door click shut again. 'I just need to talk to you'. She'd visualised this moment since the day Archie had announced their relationship, all those years ago in the coffee shop opposite her agents office. The coffee shop that wasn't there anymore. She'd rehearsed what she'd say when she finally saw him again after all of the time they'd spent apart, sending email after email. And, up until then, she'd known, word for word, what she'd have to say to respect the girl who had been hurt and abandoned by him over the last few months. She searched desperately for something to say. Archie let his arm slide down the door and leant his shoulder up against it-

'Shall we do this in the rain or...?'

'No, no.' She squeezed the keys in her hand so hard she almost pierced the skin.

'Come in. I'll put some coffee on.'

#

Inside, they took off their shoes in silence. Archie stayed in the hallway whilst Fin fetched a few towels. She paused in the kitchen listening to the floorboards creek under Archie's feet in the hall. How could one person make her feel a thousand different things in the space of a few minutes? From blood boiling anger to hope; so electric she could feel her breath catch at the top of the lightest inhale forever, like a stuck CD. She flicked the kettle on and, caught her reflection in the microwave glass. She smiled the sort of smile that nobody was allowed to see.

'Arch?' she calls to him.

'Yes?'

'Coffee?'

'Yes please'.

She walked back through to the hall and threw him the towels.

'You can sit through there'. She gestured with her eyes to the door of the living room. He lifted his chin and tentatively pushed the door open leaving a trail of water from his socks. She made his coffee, gambling with what she thinks he would like. It used to be milky, but now she's sure he would prefer something bolder, stronger. She opted for a small, strong black coffee for him and a weaker, milkier one for her. She found him scanning her small bookshelf in the corner of the room by her the plants she never watered and the guitar she never played. He took the coffee.

'I know you're mad at me, but what is this?' he said looking at the cup. Fin rolled her eyes and swapped their mugs. 'When have I ever liked black coffee?'

'I think it's very clear we don't know each other'.

They laid out the towels.

'Because I didn't email you back?'

'It's insulting to use emails in this context.'

'You invited me in Fin. Why are you being so icy?'

#

Fin pushed herself into the corner of the sofa, making sure to keep her distance. There was something completely different about him. Something that she'd half-sensed, in his emails over the last year, but knew she needed to see for herself. Something impermeable where there used to be a thousand holes in his skin. The way he questioned her rather than taking the hit. The way he braced himself for the storm he'd created rather than retreating. He nodded slowly-

'So how is this going to work then? Do I just talk at you, or do you want to ask questions?'

'I don't know.' Fin hugged her knees to her chin, trying to settle the fizzing sensation in her stomach.

'I'm sorry I didn't call or message. Maggie made it very hard...'

Fin shot him a glare.

'... but that's not an excuse and I know it. I was so desperate to make one relationship work.' He leaned over to her and peeled a piece of wet hair off of her cheek.

#

"I've needed you," Fin said, then seemed to regret the nakedness of it.

Archie looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry."

He told her about Maggie then. How he'd tried, very sincerely, to construct a new life with her. How part of that had involved the careful, deliberate removal of Fin from it.

Except Fin had turned out to be surprisingly difficult to remove.

She was everywhere. In the corner shop, staring out from glossy magazines beside the chewing gum. On streaming platforms. On the side of the number 19 bus. Old episodes of *Mac Reuben* popping up at two in the morning when he couldn't sleep. Instagram, of course. Instagram especially.

It had felt, he said, a bit like trying to forget someone who owned half the billboards in London.

Fin folded her arms.

"So this is you resigning yourself to the fact that since you can't avoid my face, you might as well have the real thing?"

"That's not—" Archie hesitated. "You're a higher-value person than her."

Fin gave a short laugh. "That's bollocks."

"See, that's exactly what I said. Repeatedly." He leaned back in the chair, tired already of the argument he'd had a hundred times before. "But society rewards fame. The world had decided you were...worth more. More attention, more admiration, more everything. Maggie found that very hard to live with."

"And you?"

"My counter-argument," Archie said carefully, "was that I valued you more than her for reasons that would make absolutely no sense to the general population."

Fin watched him for a moment.

"And that didn't go down well," she said.

"No," Archie said. "Not tremendously."

She couldn't believe he had stubble now.

'It's actually so gratifying to know you make mistakes too' she smiled leaning back on the door. Archie looked down at his hands. 'And, even though I was in the firing line, It's actually so nice to see you do something with conviction for once.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Archie

#

She had texted him to say she was running a few minutes late, so he went ahead and ordered for himself. It felt silly to be drinking coffee at this time of the day, but, maybe that's what Fin did now? He wondered, ordering a latte. It occurred to him that he no longer had any idea of what she would want. They had never met for coffee before. Maggie would meet for coffee with her work colleagues or people she didn't know, but wanted something from, but it had never been a social habit that Archie had integrated into his life.

#

You in town?

Was the text he had gotten from her a few hours earlier. Before he had the time to think, he had already replied and pressed send. The little swooping noise rang out from his phone.

Yeah, you? Right away he saw her typing back.

Yeah. Got a thing at 7. Fancy a coffee before? He saw the three dots appearing again on his screen...

Had an audition with a director so only here for the day...

#

They had arranged to meet at a place on Marlborough Street in Soho- 'Vieliquide Gourmand'- a hole-in-the-wall french coffee shop and patisserie. He sat at a small table opposite the counter, holding his hands steady around his mug. Her messages were snappy. It was almost as if she was used to people bending over backwards for her presence. He wasn't quite sure how this was going to work. Wouldn't she have some sort of bodyguard with her? Or have to be hidden around the back, away from photographers? Could he hug her; should he hug her? He wasn't sure how they were supposed to be friends? His mind began to race and he felt the presence of an old enemy start to creep into his head. Not here, please not here. Not now. His throat started to tighten. Should he ask for a takeaway cup? He wished that he had been the late one. He glanced down at his watch, they were supposed to be going to Maggie's sisters, for dinner, in Maida Vale that evening at six, and it was already four four forty-five. It was already noticeably uncharacteristic for him to have announced he was meeting a friend at such short notice, it would only add to the pile if he was late.

#

Oh? Maggie said, looking over at him from her spot, sat by the mirror, straightening her hair. Maggie often got ready several hours before an actual outing. Who's the friend?

'Nobody you know.' He lied. 'A friend from uni', Archie said, looking at his phone, sitting on top of their bed, fully clothed.

'Oh?'

'It's just been a while.'

'Should I be worried?'

'Terrified', he said rolling his eyes. She smiled back and went back to straightening her hair.

'Will you get the wine then? On your way over?' Archie nodded and made an 'mhmm' sound.

Trying not to act any differently than normally when meeting a friend for coffee, he chose a white t-shirt and a pair of new-ish jeans. He was aware not to come across like he was making too much of an effort, and decided that aftershave would draw too much attention to himself.

'Where is it you're meeting? '

'Soho' Archie said, with his toothbrush in his mouth.

Ah, easy. Maggie delighted. She talked him through his journey; 'the 68 to Elephant and Castle and then the Bakerloo line to Oxford Circus. Or maybe the 12 straight through, but that'd probably add like fifteen minutes. Cheaper fare though. Literally by five quid.' She reminded him to walk to the London Road entrance at Elephant and Castle. And reassured him he'd get a seat, as it was the start of the line. It was a quirk of Maggie's to plan the quickest routes around London without looking at a digital map. It often meant that they would arrive at places extremely late, or embarrassingly early, but Archie chose to find it endearing. It was easier than letting the stubbornness irritate him. It was a technique he had learned from his psychiatrist; that he could take an emotional reaction to something and

corrupt it with an entirely different thought. Like a splicing DNA. For example, when Maggie would go for a night out and talk about her male friends with affectionate terms he would feel such a visceral sickness inside his body, but shortly after he would change this into thoughts of safety and comfort. When she would speak he would often imagine a distinct moment, when Fin would get a lift into town early, before school when her dad went to work, and climb into bed in her school uniform all freshly showered. The memories were like diazepam. He would soften like untouched water and cornflour. It had been a trick he'd learnt in therapy in the few weeks after graduation, and he had Maggie and Rob to thank for that.

...

'Archie Shafer?' Archie nodded his head at the woman. 'Lovely. I'm Laura. Would you like to come with me?' He did not want to go with her. He did not want to be doing this. It felt like an admission of defeat; that he had finally been rumbled for being broken; that his old life would catch up with him no matter how far away he would run, no matter how unrecognisable he was now to anyone back home where it all began.

'Archie pal, things like that aren't supposed to happen at graduation, if you didn't know?' Rob had said as he pulled up the student support website earlier that same week. Maggie put a hand on Archie's shoulder.

'We think it will really help you baby, both of us kind of thought this would be over by now'.

'Have you two been discussing this behind my back?' Archie asked flatly, he didn't have the energy to feel embarrassed anymore, after curling up on the steps of the Usher Hall and crying in his graduate cap and robes in front of his graduating year.

'We both care about you Arch'.

#

He followed Laura through the drama department. Here heels echoed through the corridor. She sounded like, what Archie imagined a Yoga teacher would sound like, when she spoke, aspirate and sleepy:

'This session today will be more about just getting to know each other Archie' she said as she led him into the room. He couldn't help noticing how young she was, and how much he'd expected to be talking to somebody older about this. Not a graduate. 'I take it you're not too familiar with the Merchiston Campus? We are very jealous of you lot up at the sparkling Sighthill.'

'Oh, it's not all that much' Archie said, taking the seat she offered him. 'It's got this very pervasive, new smell' he added, and instantly regretted it.

'I know the type' she said supportively. They sat facing each other and she opened her laptop and tucked her hair behind her ears.

'So I see you've actually just graduated?'

'Oh, right, yes. Will that be a problem?'

'No no, we offer post-graduate support for the first six months upon graduation.'

Archie nodded, and squeezed his hands between his knees. 'And I know you're probably thinking 'and then what?' she laughed 'but just know that we will never just leave you. We do provide follow-up services'

'To be honest, I'll be glad if I just get through this one today' Archie mustered a smile, and he saw Laura noticeably relax which made him more nervous.

'Do you want to tell me a little bit about yourself Archie, and why you are here? I have your basic questionnaire and information here but, if you'll allow, the more I can

understand about your situation, the more I can help'.

'I uh...' he chewed down on his lip, and took comfort in the distraction. 'My girlfriend, and my friend, recommended this. They are worried about me.' He paused, waiting for her to speak, but she just made a sympathetic noise and held his gaze. 'And, I've been having a few panic-attacks lately'.

'I'm sorry to hear that Archie. But, It sounds like you have a kind support-network?' she asked. Support network. Perhaps he did, he thought. 'Do you know what might be causing the panic attacks? As in, what triggers them?'

'No' Archie said in a small voice.

'That's ok' said Laura, widening her eyes, underneath her glasses, and pursing her lips into a small smile. She reminded him of a blonde Velma, from Scooby Doo. 'Can you remember when the panic attacks started?'

'About a month after my mum passed away'.

'Ahhh' said Laura, as if she'd just beaten him in a game of connect-four. 'I am sorry about your Mother, Archie. Were you and her close?'

'Kind of.'

'She sounds like a wonderful woman' said Laura, even though Archie had said nothing about her. 'And tell me, did you grieve when she passed?'

'What do you mean?' Archie asked quizzically.

'The reason I ask, Archie, is that death of a loved one can often cause a lot of complications further down the line, if we don't fully experience our grief. I am wondering now whether that will be a cause for the panic'.

He thought of the robotic quality to his dad in the months after Kim's suicide, the way he slowly deteriorated. How this avoidance of being weak had started to fester away inside of

him. His mind flashed to Paul's expression of shame when Archie had cried at the funeral, and knew that he may have well of placed a sign on their front door that read 'if you grieve, you go'. And then he thought of the guilt, that still beta-blocked the sadness.

'I don't think I did' he realised, out loud. Laura, made a soothing noise and then paused. He noticed that she didn't fully appreciate when it was her turn to speak, like a normal person did, she was always waiting in case he had more to add.

'I would recommend giving yourself unconditional permission to grieve. In fact, I prescribe it for you to make it your priority'.

'I'm not really feeling sad anymore'.

'Of course.' She shut the screen of her laptop. 'Panic disorder is often triggered by PTSD. Post traumatic...' Archie started to nod '...you know. Our nervous system is triggered into a state of fight or flight. Something you might find helpful, is to focus, meditate almost, on a deep sensory memory of safety.'

'You mean, when I feel one coming on?' he asked.

'Quite often Archie, we look outside of ourselves for someone to tell us what to do, to save us, to fix us. But this can often trap us further in a world of anxiety and sadness. Nobody else is the expert, no friend, doctor, therapist, parent. You are. Ultimately, we can soften and eventually heal the attacks with studying ourselves and what makes us...you, feel truly safe.'

'Right' Archie mustered.

'Do you have a memory on-hand?'

#

As he kissed Maggie on the top of the head, he realised was to doing everything in his power to stop himself shaking.

#

'Shit shit shit shit shit...' He heard her before he saw her. She screeched around the corner of the cloakroom, her heels pounding the floor. 'Wait!' She called out to the bouncer, 'he's with me! Arch is my deepest, closest friend in all the world!' She threw her arms around Archie's neck before he could ask if they were allowed to hug here. She smelled of tequila and cigarettes. The people in the queue behind him murmured and he could feel their eyes burning into the back of his head.

'Hey, happy Birthday' he grunted, having the air squeezed out of him, 'Closest friend, but I wasn't on the list?'.

'You're too special for the fucking list' said Fin. 'Welcome to hell'.

Releasing his neck, she took him by the hand and led him down the stairs into the club. The room was small with old sewing machines for tables. It was a speakeasy gin bar down an old staircase, in Soho that you would only know about if you knew about it. Very Fin. It was packed. How did she know this many people?

He followed her, his eyes on the damp hair stuck to the back of her neck, as she pulled him across the heaving floor area to the bar.

'I'll have a vodka soda, a jack and coke and two tequila shots.' Fin turned to face him, eyes wide, and black, grinning manically. 'You still drink Jack and coke right?

'Sure, it'll be a blast from the past.'

'Hey' she mouthed. He mouthed it back, over the pounding music.

'You look great!' He shouted. She ran her finger down her cleavage and laughed.

'I know what the people want'. He laughed too and reached for the small box in his pocket. It was still there. Thank god. Their drinks arrived.

'We have a tab' Said Fin pushing Archie's wallet away.

'It's your Birthday! He objected.

'Exactly'. They let the barman tip a little pile of salt onto the backs of their hands.

'To being fucking ancient' Yelled Fin. And they tipped the tequila down their throats.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and let her head flop backwards. Archie nodded at the barman to let him know she was ok, before lifting her head upright with his hand. She stared at him, and her face softened.

'I fucking love you' She said. 'Did Maggie not want to come then?' she said sucking the wedge of lemon between her teeth.

'Uhh no, of course not'.

'What's the deal with her anyway? I mean I'd rather you dated literally anyone else but her.'

'You tell me this every time we see each other. What have you got against her?'

'She knows me'

'Fin literally everyone knows you. Take a look around. I'm pretty sure I saw Ed Sheehan in the smoking area.

'You know what I mean.' She said batting the conversation away with her hand.

'Well, she's got nothing against you. She sends her love, by the way.'

'Oh, well she can keep her love.'

'I saw Nicholas and Lilith outside. Fat-help they were at getting me in, too. They don't like me'.

'They do like you'.

'No they don't'.

'Ok they don't. But it's only because they are intimidated by you'. She took a large sip

of her vodka soda.

'By me?'

'I know, it's hard to believe. They think I act different when you're around'.

'And do you?'

'Oh completely. It must be very disconcerting for them. I noticeably like myself more when I'm with you.'

'Your flirting is embarrassing' he said raising his eyebrows and she laughed into her drink. 'Only you would have a Birthday party here. I've never even heard of this place'

'It's old. Members only'

'Like a Soho House kind-of-thing?'

'Sort of'. He knew she wouldn't go into it. Probably some sort of drug club. Was that a thing? He wanted to ask Fin why had mascara down her cheeks and why Nick and Lilith had left, but she was dancing on the spot now, looking around, and the music was too loud to make any real conversation. Why did he feel a sudden pang that she was already bored of him being here? He wasn't at university anymore, he found it exhausting having to create 'fun' for her.

'Did you know, Arch, that all the women in this room would do terrible things to you?' she yelled.

'Is that so?' he pandered.

'Is Maggie good? You know, sexually?'

'Jesus you are wasted'.

'Hardly!' Her smile was menacing.

'You know you don't actually want to hear the answer to that question. You think you do, but you don't.'

'I might.' She was smirking now. 'I just feel like I could find you somebody totally wild'.

'I feel like my wild days are behind me'

'What wild days? You were the only guy I knew who ironed his boxers'.

'I need a bit of vanilla right now'.

'Pah!' Fin laughed.

'Maggie? Vanilla? I thought she'd be burning candle-wax off your bum and twisting clothes pegs into your balls.'

'I take it vanilla isn't a concept you associate yourself with then Fin?' He took a sip of his drink and brushed some imaginary dust off the bar.

'It's an extension of my work right now. I perform on set. I perform off set....' her face sunk. 'Fuck it, shall we dance?'

#

Maggie would hate this, Fin's tiny black dress and the sour taste to the air. It would be a subtle kind of hate. She would ask Fin if she was cold in such little clothing, or stick her nose up at the sticky floor or price of drinks. Fin would only rub salt in the wounds by removing her belt, or tipping the barman twice the price of the drink. He stopped encouraging her to join the two of them a while ago now. It always felt like she was a child that he'd accidentally brought into a 18+ movie, constantly on edge as to whether there would be drugs or sex or both. Whenever a picture of the Fin and Archie them leaked onto a magazine cover or popped up after a quick search on google images, Maggie would say she liked the ones of Fin drinking coffee and wearing jeans and a knitted cardigan. If they were photographed on a night out, when she was drunk, Fin would always be more affectionate with Archie and wearing a lot less. These were the pictures where Maggie would click her tongue and say 'god

I feel sorry for her she's such a lost little lamb'. They both knew it, but Archie would always find himself defending Fin. It seemed as if they both liked the same half of Fin, but Archie would just shrug as if he didn't notice she looked any different.

'She's not lost Mags, she just enjoys things you don't enjoy'. They were buying late-night ice-cream at the Tesco Express the night after Archie had attended the premiere after party of Fin's new movie. Maggie picked up a copy of the Metro which was lying face up on the street outside the shop. The picture was the two of them outside **The Sanderson in Fitzrovia** with the headline 'Who is Riley's New Man?'. It was the worst headline so far. One that implied he belonged to Fin.

#

It frustrated him, the more famous Fin became, the more paparazzi would hide in weirder places. There has been several pictures of the two of them in freeze-frames Archie could only swear were photoshopped. It was so easy to twist the plot of picture taken of him bending down to pick up glass into a story of him tying her laces. Or wiping a bug from her face, or scraping broccoli from her teeth, into a headline that reads 'Moments After the First Kiss?'. Every picture had a more truthful story behind it, that only he and Fin knew, and what must seem like a thread of excuses to Maggie.

#

'What's that supposed to mean? Do you seriously enjoy this kind of living?' Maggie asked pointing at the cover. Archie's red eyes were glaring at the flash and Fin's knickers were on display from her dress riding up.

'It's a Metro Mags. You know these things are all trash talk.'

'Yeah well, it makes me look like a mug'

'They always catch the worst angles. It was a classy night'.

'That's exactly how I'd describe Fin. If there was one word to describe that girl, it would be classy.

'Really?'

'No not really. Am I going crazy here? What am I supposed to do?' 'The whole of fucking London thinks you're her boyfriend!' Maggie hissed, smacking the paper.

'Can we please not do this outside Tesco? What do you want me to do Maggie? We both know I'm not her boyfriend. That's the important thing here'

'Why can't you stay away from her?'

'Why can't I...' he felt his cheeks flaring. She was drawing attention to them now.

'Why can't you stay away from her Archie?'

'Because she's my friend Mags'. It couldn't have sounded less convincing. Not because they were more than friends, but, because they were far less than now; both holding onto a disintegrating childhood comfort blanket that just needed to be discarded.

#

Fin didn't dance well. At Uni, girls would move their hips from side to side, and float their arms above their head every so often. Fin danced like a Bayblade, injuring half a dozen people with her obnoxious spinning.

'Hey hey, slow down' he said grabbing her by the waist, 'you'll take out somebody's eye next'. Fin scanned his face as if she'd never met him before.

'I'm going to the toilet' She yelled, over the music.

#

He found her, like he did all those years ago, slumped under the toilet bowl.

'Jesus Christ Fin'. She groaned, and curled herself up even more. 'This has to stop. You know who you look like right now?' Fin screwed up her eyes. 'Maeve'. He helped her to

sit upright against the cubicle wall.

'You watched it? She asked, struggling to move her mouth around the words.

'Of course I watched it. You think you need to screw yourself up to be a great actor, but you don't' he said wiping a strand of hair from her mouth.

'Ever think maybe it's the being a great actor that screws you up?' she smirked defeatedly.

'You've always been a good actor'. Archie tore a piece of toilet roll and wet the tip in his mouth, like his mum used to do when he had left over food on his face. 'Excuse me' he said wiping the white crust from her nose.

'I've never tried this stuff, is it any good?'

'It's not good' she bat his hand out of the way and her chin fell onto her chest. He dropped the tissue into the toilet and sidled up to her resting the back of his head on the wall. The bass was causing the floor to pulse underneath them, and he could hear two people kissing a few doors down.

'At least it's a boujé toilet. Fuck knows what diseases you'd catch off the floor in some of these places in Soho'. She exhaled softly, it was the closest thing to a laugh that she could muster.

'I don't know why you do this to yourself.'

'I think I'm struggling a bit. That's all'.

'You're just in the wrong crowd Finnegan'.

'It's not that easy'.

'It is though'.

'No it't not' she sounded more coherent now, more sober. 'I'm so tried of you looking down of everyone else's suffering like you're the fucking king of pain or something'.

'Where did that come from?' He tilted his head forwards off the wall.

'I know you've never had it easy, but it doesn't mean other people's struggles aren't valid'.

'We're not the same though' Archie said flatly.

'It doesn't matter. You treat me like this is all self-inflicted'.

'Well...honestly Fin. It is a little bit'. Her head snapped around to face him.

'Please, go on...' she said angrily.

'You create a lot of this' he said gesturing at her. 'You have always had the control over it'.

'I don't think that's fair'.

'It's like the minute you get bored of feeling happy, or safe, you go seeking these ways to be interested in yourself again. I feel like it's always a choice you can make Fin. To feel good or feel bad, to do good things or bad things. Not everyone has that luxury'.

'Get off your fucking high horse Archie, it's been seven years.'

'You will keep on hurting those around you, until you start to care about yourself. Until you stop trying to be interesting Fin and just focus on what makes you happy.'

'I am interesting Archie. Look at you, you've got a girlfriend and a whole other life and you're still obsessed with me.'

'God Fin, you're so right!' Archie clenched his jaw and clapped his hands together. 'I'm obsessed with you. I mean, look at you. You've got it all figured out.'

'You don't know what makes me happy'.

'I used to Fin. And it was you who told me I was the map back to that'.

'I was profoundly drunk when I said that'

'Because you're all sobered up now?

'Fuck that fucking map.'

'I'm going to leave now' Archie said quietly, pushing himself to his feet. 'Will you be ok?'

'Hey, it's all a choice right?' she said mocking him in a sickly tone. He went to open the door,

'Archie?' she squeaked. He turned to face her unwillingly. 'Just for the record. You act like the source of someone's pain matters. It doesn't matter.' Archie looked down at her, it felt strangely comforting, after everything, to know when the last time you would see someone would be. There wasn't another drop of friendship that either of them could squeeze out of the other. That your life and their life just no longer make sense to overlap.

'It doesn't matter Archie; whether your life damages your mind, or your mind damages your life.' Her body looked like a small deer that had been clean-hit by a car. 'Like, whether this is all self-inflicted or not; my mind is struggling to see a way out right now. I feel so worthless and then I feel this huge shame for not being able to justify that worthlessness with these big things like you can.' He could feel the panic start to simmer, and his remedy was sprawled on the toilet floor stoking the fire. 'Even though I was born into a healthy family that loves me, even though I have money and I'm, I don't know...successful, I can still be in pain.' It couldn't end like this, the two of them, on the floor, killing each other off like a Soho Romeo and Juliet. She went on: 'And that pain can feel addictive. I mean, I don't know who I am without it. And I've always...' she clenched her jaw and screwed her eyes up... 'I've always felt like I'm not good enough for you because of what you had to go through. I know it's fucked up. But you and I aren't that different anymore.' He had to get out, now. He needed to be out on the street, in the cold air, before the attack came and he couldn't save himself.

'Fin'

'Yes'

'You didn't need to break yourself for me to forgive you Fin. I did that before it even happened.'

'I know' she said softly.

'But, we are not the same. Because, you just have to accept my forgiveness to get better, to feel normal again. And I...I need to bring someone back from the dead'. And with that, he made for the exit.

#

'So you were a P.E teacher mate?' he shouted, in his thick essex accent, through from the gym.

'Uh yeah, yeah I was'.

'I fucking hate kids, me'. There was a loud clang of a metal bar hitting the squat rack.

'I'm sorry, do you need a hand? Archie side-stepped out from behind the reception desk. The gap seemed to be getting smaller and smaller, the more time he spent in this gym.

'No no!' there was a grunt 'So what made you want to quit your job and work at Sharky's?' He said the name of the gym as if he were chanting at a football match.

'Funny story. It was actually a drunken decision'

'Hey! Don't underestimate the power of a drunken decision. My Mrs? Drunken decision. My motorcycle? Drunken decision. Me? Drunken decision.' Archie laughed as he stuck his head around the door of the gym.

'What was your name again?'

'Joe' he said. 'PT here. Yours?'

'Archie'

'Archie, the drunk man who quit his proper job. I like that. Nice to meet you mate'. He clapped hands with Archie and pulled him in as they bumped shoulders. He was one of the most chiselled men Archie had ever seen in his life. Joe the PT. The man who took Archie's shoulder bumping virginity. It was an entirely different greeting than the 'Welcome to hell. We will get through this together' he used to get as a teacher. Everyone he had met at Sharky's so far had greeted him like he was at playgroup. A simpler time when you would ask 'can I be your friend?' and they would say 'sure' and suddenly you'd be in twenty new Whatsapp groups, and have a calendar full of gym socials.

'How are you getting used to these early mornings?' said Joe, following Archie back into the reception.

'I actually can't complain. It's nice to be up at this time y'know?' He gestured to the windows where the sunrise was hurtling down St John's Hill. 'The coffee machine helps' he added.

'It certainly does. I'm gonna grab a fifteen minute sesh before the squad get here. If you don't mind?'

'No no'.

'Catch you after Arch mate'.

Five reasons why relationships fail. He'd brought the screen up on his phone. The 6am class had just gone in, and he had forty-five minutes until he had to be enthusiastic again. Archie stared at the little animation of a chef throwing different relationship problems into a pot of

bubbling green goo. According to the first click on Google, they had all the ingredients to make a big, fat pot of failed relationship soup. Archie put down his phone and walked over to the coffee machine. He had been drinking a lot of coffee lately. Like a peanut butter lover with a peanut allergy that suddenly disappears; the panic attacks were almost non-existent. He watched the silky, ochre-coloured, liquid fill his cup. Coffee was simultaneously sexy, sociable, an appetite suppressant, a meditation and an accessory all at the same time. There was nothing about coffee that you could frown upon. It was an addiction that was celebrated and encouraged and there were ever supposed health benefits to a-cup-a-day. Coffee was clever. He wandered back over to the desk, catching a glimpse of the HIIT class inside the gym. High-Fives, smiles, sweat. Joe was yelling and churning up the air with his energy as if he were an olympic coach, not a Clapham PT. But honestly, at Sharky's, you never could be too sure. He'd seen influencers train here, olympians train here, famous sportspeople train here. He'd have to google Joe, perhaps he'd just shoulder bumped a very important man.

The thought of Maggie gave a small tug for attention his again. Always there, like a blister or a paper cut. She had always been his welcome distraction from life which was something he didn't want to need anymore. She'd become unwelcome. Everything he did or said these days felt hypocritical to the man she'd fallen in love with. Some of the things that came out of his mouth when they spent time together shocked even Archie, so he couldn't blame her for feeling like she was losing him. The worst part is that he was happy to lose her, and happy to be growing apart. They spoke another language now, and last night they had gone on a date to Mien Tay, which was 'their' restaurant, and it suddenly hit Archie that they were that couple who other couples felt sorry for; sitting on their phones and complaining about the food delay. Everything he said, that night, seemed to trigger her, she would address it and then it would feel for awkward than before.

#

'So this guy I work with at the gym...' Archie began as they sipped their wine. Maggie gave a small cough into her glass. He knew it was about something he had said. 'What? What is it?'

She laughed, trying to keep the tone innocent,

'No it's nothing'. Every big conversation starts with 'no it's nothing', thought Archie.

'Just tell me what I did wrong'.

'Well it's just...why can't you just say colleague? It's always, this girl or this guy, I work with, at the gym'.

Here we go, thought Archie.

'I don't know. I could say 'this person at work', but it doesn't quite feel like work to me.' Maggie pursed her lips. He knew she felt like he was judging her, like she was beneath him, because he was now one of those people they used to hate together, who claimed to love what they do. It used to bother Archie that he kept upsetting her without meaning to, but now it was a burden he had little patience for. She looked at him and rolled her finger at him to keep going. 'Well he's just got back from Australia right?' he'd forgotten why he'd started the story in the first place. Maggie was not the right audience. Although she was never the right audience for anything these days. Although he knew it really was a classic case of 'it's not you, it's me'. There should be a small dog-tag that came with a single person on their first date that explained the ways in which they could a) sabotage a relationship and b) display the percentage of how much that person had found themselves already and the likelihood of them running off doing strange and inexplicable things further down the line that may confuse said date when they are your girlfriend of three and a half years, like quitting a stable job and hiding self-development books underneath your pillow in your late twenties.

'So anyway he'd learned this new concept of breath-work... you know breath-work

right?' Maggie raised her eyebrows. 'He's taken this new concept and created this initiative where he's injected it into weightlifting. So there's this new class coming to the gym where we learn breathing for optimum lifting! Like, this is the shit I loved to study in my degree. It feels exciting to be at the cutting edge of this stuff'.

'As a receptionist?'

'Well yeah, but I get to try it out, and we are having coffee next week so I might be able to jump in and help. He doesn't have a degree and stuff so he might need some brains.' Archie grinned.

'I don't know why these people think they can just make this stuff up without education. No offence to this Australian guy.'

'Well no, he's a specialist Mags, he knows his stuff. Says there's a really big market for it over here'.

'Right ok. Well cool'. She took a sip of her wine and they went back to silence again. Silence was no longer something Archie enjoyed. When he was this excited about life, silence was to be spoken through constantly with people who were equally as excited about life as you are. He was aware that he was turning into one of the people that he used to be cynical of. The people he used to believe were lying to themselves about actually enjoying life. But everyone he was meeting now was in London for a reason rather than just ending up here like he had done from his placement. They were excited to be here. Excited and healthy. Everyone seemed healthier. They smiled often and seemed to delight over a small, weird things coffee delivery and a ski-erg. People didn't complain about things like they did 24/7 in the staff room of his old job, about things they couldn't control. These people complained about things they could control, like sore legs. Everyone who turned up wanted to do P.E.

The studio door swung open, and a gust of warm, sweaty humidity filled the reception.

Archie handed out sweat towels and various protein filled drinks and snacks. He enjoyed the fizzy energy that seemed to osmose into him through the moist air.

'Are these good?' Joe was scanning a protein bar over by the fridge.

'Honestly?' Archie laughed.

'Oh really? Forgot me breakfast didn't I?'

'I'm still on the great hunt to find a good one'. Joe scanned the back of the wrapper whilst Archie overanalysed why he'd admitted to being on a 'great hunt' just to find a specific snack. He had emphasised the words as if this had been his soul reason for living, his life pursuit. In the bid to try and come across slightly less keen he added-

'They just all taste so synthetic to me'.

'You should make one'.

'Nah'. Archie shook his head. 'I'm no baker.'

'You don't have to be. Get a small team on board, and come up with something tasty with good macros. It can't be that hard.'

'The market is saturated' Archie looked over to the shelf. He was right, they were a small gym and they sold over a dozen varieties of protein bar.

'You said it yourself. There isn't a good one out there.' He took a bite of the bar and made a face. Speaking with his mouth full he said- 'We thought we had tasted oat milk right? And then BAM new ones came on the market and every coffee shop I know sells this one brand. Mate, do it for the people. I would, but I don't have any time. You could sell it here as a start-up.'

'I am seriously not the person who has a start-up'.

'Let me tell you a big secret.' He said. His voice booming through the reception so that

the 7am class were also privy to this big secret. 'I used to weigh three hundred and thirty pounds. If I can look like this, you can be the person who has a start-up.' He shoved the rest of the bar into his mouth.

'7am let's do this thing'. He lassoed his arm above his head and disappeared into the gym, followed by a trail of clients clutching their water bottles and sweat towels. 'I want a full blown business plan by the time this class is over' he yelled through from the studio. Archie gave a small laugh to himself. He hadn't been on this side of things before, the one who was having a growth-spurt, and it came with emotions he had craved his whole life.

'Why stop now?' he whispered under his breath.

#

The door of the gym shut and the reception fell quiet again except for the shudder of the bass around the building. Archie sat himself down on the wooden bar stool behind the desk and refreshed his emails. They had been emailing a lot recently, and even though he would never receive more than one email every few weeks, he would find himself excitedly refreshing his mail app every hour or so, in case the odd one flew in. Fin was more talkative when she didn't have to talk, and he knew the same was true about himself. The last few times they had met in person, they might as well of been speaking different languages. Email allowed Archie to be funnier, to be a slightly more calculated version of himself. And, above all, you couldn't tell if you were hurting someone just by existing through an email, which is often how he felt when he was with her. The excuse for the emails- Fin was now in L.A. There it was, the little rush of dopamine that fluttered through his body when he saw her name, in bold blue font, appear at the top of his emails. He smiled to himself, tucking his phone into his pocket. He will save it for after his shift- get a coffee, somewhere on Northcote road, whilst he reads it.

#

The weather outside was warm for October, as he set out down the hill through a sea of office workers. He wore shorts and a pull-over, feeling like somebody going somewhere, for once in his life, against the stream of commuters, expressionless with their iPhone's glued to various extremities. He found a small bakery and sat himself down outside with the rest of the day at his fingertips, until around five, when he would be back at the gym for the evening classes. When he had taken the job, the idea was to sleep a bit during the day, but the bustle of the city always made him feel as though the day was just beginning, and life was too short for decaffeinated artisan coffee. A frustration of his- the only thing he could think of that was paid more highly for not being able to do it's job properly. Imagine phoning up to get a private GP appointment and the receptionist asked you 'you can have an actor, playing a GP for thirty pounds more. He can't do the job, but he can pretend? What do you reckon?'. He would put it in an email to Fin. She would find it amusing, if not slightly irritating. Archie ordered a Long Black and some scrambled eggs on toast- the price being what he'd earned that morning in the gym. The start-up was becoming more appealing. When his coffee arrived, he opened the email-

Shafer,

#

Do you know those people who you meet that don't ask you who you are and what you do? They just ask you to join in/jump in. That is what it's like in L.A. So like you come into a group of people and they are like 'ah' like 'catch this this ball' or like 'get in here and help move this bed' and then you get to know how somebody is in the situation rather than who they say they are and what they do and then it's better on both parts because that person isn't

haven't to, right away, say something and then for the rest of their relationship identify with that. They can be who they actually are on first meeting in a situation and be observed in that way as well. And I just love that. I love people who give you the chance to just come in and be you without having to put a title and a personality definition onto it.

How is London Town? It feels like forever since I was there. It couldn't be more different here. Is that blonde girl still singing in Covent Garden, you know, the one we bought the CD from? Does the classical music still play at Oval tube station? I miss that. I have no idea what the kids are listening to these days. It's all very obscure and I have to pretend I love it when I'm at these music parties. I stuck on some Wombats at the last one and, people in America are kind, they don't just call you a wanker and tell you to fuck off, but it's almost worse because they pretend they like it and then they switch the music back after one song. When it's my time to have a party, I'm going to stick a password on the spotify and give them a good education.

And how's Maggie? Still boring? No- sorry I don't mean that. It's just you make her boring in your emails. I quote 'Maggie wrote to our MP about the planned closure of the 171 bus' and 'I know I told you I'd try sushi because you rave about it, but Maggie doesn't like to eat anything new'. I'm sure she isn't as boring as a) I remember and b) you make her out to be.

The family is good thanks. To be honest, you always remind me to call home when you ask. So I did. And then I remember why I don't call as much as I should. They make me feel like I'm not part of the family anymore, and then, I don't know, I guess I sub-consciously play to that. I always put down the phone feeling guilty. Mum says things like 'oh I didn't think you'd be bothered' about something would clearly be bothered about, and makes it feel like it's my duty to ask whether she has breast-cancer every month when surely it's her duty to tell me. Mum has breast cancer. But she's going to be ok. She's told me not to come home.

She knows I'd go crazy there anyway, and she says it's all under control and she has nothing to complain about. But, if you happen to be passing through Edinburgh, could you pop in? You are a welcome extension of me.

#

I'm fine, thank you for asking. I stand on the left of the escalators when I should stand on the right, and I prefer to use words like 'trash can' and 'panties' (which always sound so much dirtier than knickers) just so I don't have to repeat myself. I'm sure that gives you a good insight into my life right now. If I know what 'bin' and 'underwear' is in the States. You know I won't be getting pregnant anytime soon.

#

I miss you like I miss British coffee. I sometimes wonder if I'll ever not miss you.

#

Fin x

#

P.s oh- and I've booked you a table at Sushi Samba, the reservation is attached and, it's paid for. Take someone who either likes, or is up for, sushi.

#

#

Her heels-boots clopped along the pavement as she chirpily spoke about her regular indian orders, and the top three indian takeaways of her life- rattling off the names of dishes like she was taking the school register. He half-listened to her and half-watched her breath swirling in the cold air, hoping that it wouldn't snow tonight.

'And I know...I know it's controversial, but I'm not the biggest fan of the poppadom'.

'Oh really?'

'I see it more of a vehicle for pickle'

'Mmmm. See, and you say I know everything about you'.

Maggie swallowed and, he saw her briefly suck the inside of her cheeks.

'And a vehicle for the poppandom game.'

'The poppandom game?' Maggie froze, mid-step, as if she'd been shot. Archie walked on a few steps and then reluctantly turned to face her, having little patience for the inevitable battering he was about to get.

'You have never heard of the poppandom game?' He looked down at his feet.

'Can we maybe walk and talk? We're already a few minutes late.' Tonight had been one of those journey's where Maggie had got the route wrong. Their bus came to a standstill for twenty-five minutes outside The Oval cricket ground. Maggie getting increasingly more defensive of her travel choices with Archie staring out the window at the crowds of cricket spectators, wondering how people his age could have so many friends.

The cookery school was located in Shepherds Bush. It was a clever idea to substitute restaurant date night, a nowadays frosty and cold affair, with a restaurant where they had to cook their own food and most likely converse about it in the process.

'No I have never heard of the poppandom game'.

'You haven't lived'. He gave an apologetic smile and reached out his hand, which she took.

'Shall we go and cook some indian food?'

He could sense this intelligent idea of Maggie's was giving her a new lease of life, a confidence, an optimism that maybe this thing that they had never done before, could be their thing.

Inside, they were greeted with champagne and, with the six other couples- all noticeably older and more married than Archie and Maggie- they were shown their counter. Everything was laid out in tiny bowls, much like the small kitchen space, where Archie was now recipe testing for his start-up. He was aware that Maggie had been telling everyone that Archie was transitioning into a culinary career, as her family and friends couldn't quite grasp the concept of protein-based, sweet treats. And, after starting to believe her own white lie, she had booked their anniversary dinner at the cookery school.

They watched the vegetable chopping demonstration. Maggie joined the other couples in making comments and asking questions as though they'd never seen a vegetable in their lives-

'That's such an interesting way to chop a chilli' or 'I am in shock at how easy it is to chop an onion. We've been doing it wrong this whole time.' It was the sort of organised fun that Archie hated. A way for someone to take all of the creativity out of cooking. Ever since they'd had the chat, there had been a noticeable change in Maggie. The only way he could describe it, was that she had become an amalgamation of several different genres of women. It started when she deleted all of her Instagram pictures, and started to fill her feed with cryptic photography that wasn't cryptic at all. He noticed her trying to hide her pop-culture addiction, as if it were a dark secret and recently she had been mouthing along to a lot of new indie stuff, that even people like Fin would call too abstract. There was also this incessant need to show she was spontaneous. So much so that she had begun to plan her episodes of spontaneity. Wednesdays and Saturdays were the nights he'd come to know she would be spontaneous on. She would diet on the other days to allow her to be that spontaneous girl who wolfed down a burger and a beer without a care. There was the lack of make-up too, but the extortionate permanent make-up procedures such as micro-blading and eyelash

extensions to make her effortful appearance appear effortless. It was entirely confusing for Archie, but he knew it would be even more so for Maggie. But he was almost certain it had been the chat that had started it all.

He'd got in from a late shift at then gym to find Maggie sat at their kitchen table on his laptop. Her face lit-up from the blue light, it reminded him of the way her face looked when he'd first met her, by the fire at the Riley's all those years ago- menacing and gaunt. She hadn't moved when he'd walked in. She didn't have to say anything for him to know she'd found the emails.

'You ok?' He knew it would be a long night.

'You find me boring?'

Should he play dumb? Probably not. He had to get up in six hours. Best to cut to the chase.

'That's not what I said'.

'You know you could publish a fucking novel with the material in here'.

'I don't have anything to hide, you know that'

'You tell her you miss her, seventy nine times, in total'.

'I'm sorry'.

'You take the piss out of me'. Her voice cracked and he felt a pang of pain, of guilt.

'No I don't. It's all harmless'.

'Is it?'

'Yes.' Archie put his keys down on the table, but kept his coat on, in the fear she might kick him out. He could sleep at the gym.

'How would you feel if you read shit like this?'

'Not good, I suppose'.

'No, how did you feel when you read shit like this?'

'We're just friends Mags'.

'I don't mean that. I meant, how did you feel when she did this to you?'

'It's completely different. Fin and I are not romantically involved'. Maggie paused for a moment and looked up from her fierce scrolling. She looked him right in the eye.

'Why not?'

Why not? Why not? He could feel all of the right answers on the tip of his tongue, being choked back by everything he knew he couldn't say. All the while, he was stuttering, stammering on the words 'well' and something resembling 'this is ridiculous'.

'Because I love you Maggie. I'm romantically involved with you'. She gazed down at the screen. He knew there wasn't anything that was more dishonourable, than what she'd already found. He reached over and gently closed the laptop.

'This won't happen anymore'.

'What do you mean?' he asked softly.

'You can't have her as your bit on the side'.

'Maggie...you know it's nothing like...'

'Just let me speak will you?' she snapped.

'Sushi Samba called tonight.' He felt the insides of his body hit the floor. 'They are overbooked for Saturday, by the way, so will Sunday do?'

'Ok, can I please just explain that one?'

'Were you going on a date with her or something?'

'No'

'I jest. I saw the email'.

'Ah, right, yes.'

'Who were you going to take then? Who, at your little gym, isn't as boring as me and likes sushi? Were you going to start dating a third woman?

'I was never actually going to go. You know that. It's just Fin, being Fin. She's just being kind'. He wished he'd chosen his words more sensitively. Now was not the time to be defending Fin.

'You don't get it. I think, you think that stuff like that is ok, but it's really not. All of my friends think I'm stupid and I'm always there defending you, and sometimes I use your own words to defend you when those are the exact words I can't stand! I'm always there like 'they are just really good friends' and 'who said exes can't be close'? But they can't. It doesn't work. It's like you're trying to have the best bits of both people right? Like 'oooh now It's not socially acceptable to shag two women, I'll just continue to access all the bits I can get away with'. Was that what he was doing? Was he picking out the parts of both of them that he liked so that he could tolerate his life that little bit more. A dash of Fin's wit, a sprinkle of Maggie's fidelity and pinch of each of their looks?

She was mimicking his voice like a child and gesturing wildly with her hands. Archie opened his mouth, but she cut in:

'It's embarrassing, and...and....it's making me look like a jealous crazy bitch, which I'm not. I don't understand why you can't just be like normal people and stay away from your exes.'

There it was, the unanswerable question.

'There is a reason you guys broke up, and a reason you aren't together again. So just don't talk to her.' Maggie paused, and almost like a superhero who had just won all of their powers back after a long battle, she said 'just don't talk to her' as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

He pulled out a chair and sat down beside her. She kept staring at the closed laptop as if it was going to bite her. Archie turned to look at her, this woman he'd been with for over three years, and yet she was someone he hadn't really been able to get to know. He'd been with Fin for a third of that time, and, six years later, he still knew every freckle on her skin and, could predict every move she would make. Now that they had salvaged something from their friendship, could he shut her out? He knew Maggie would dig deep into things he perhaps didn't know the answers to himself, if he didn't agree to stop talking to Fin.

#

Archie dropped his head and looked down at his hands.

'Ok' he said. She looked at him, an irritable expression on her face.

'Just ok?'

She looked like she'd come for more of a fight? Did she want more of a chance to persuade him?

'Ok.'

#

At the time, he didn't know that Maggie would then put all of her efforts into trying to fill the Fin shaped hole in his life, by being very shade of a women she could be. A slight backfire, as Archie had agreed to this to get to know Maggie more, not to be even more confused by her.

'Babe! Babe!' Maggie put her hands on top of his. 'You're cutting it wrong, didn't you watch the demonstration?'

'Does it really matter? It's going to be daal anyway. Daal is mush'.

'Yes, but this is a cookery school. We are learning how to cook. Not just taking our own habits and applying them to a recipe. Here let me'. He handed her the knife just as his phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He pulled his phone out as an automatic reaction,

knowing exactly who it would be, but it was too late. Maggie glanced at the screen. Fin. Archie cancelled the call, and watched Maggie's whole body stiffen. Her nostrils flared and she clamped her jaw shut. She started to butcher the sweet potato.

'She wouldn't call if she knew I was ok. Can I not just text her to tell her?'

'And say what? That Maggie said we can't speak anymore?'

'Well that's not exactly a lie'.

'I don't want to do this here' she hissed.

'Look, I'm turning it off'. He slid the 'power off' bar with his thumb.

'Of course she's ruining our anniversary. She probably has this date in her diary, just as a little reminder to be the fucking centre of attention'.

Maybe Maggie was right? Maybe as long as he had Fin, he had sub-consciously failed to get to know Maggie? At some point, in the last three years, she had grown from a university student into a woman. He didn't know when it had happened, but he suddenly felt immature. They were not students anymore, and he was in an adult relationship. A place where they would now have to make compromises. He knew, deep down, that they both deserved a chance at the relationship, without Fin.

'Let's forget about Fin ok? We're having a nice night.' He gently pulled her head to his and kissed her on the forehead. 'Ok?'. She didn't say anything, but started to be kinder to the vegetables.

#

He stands under the archway of the most expensive sushi restaurant he could find in Belgravia. The air is heavy for this late in the evening and, it gives him the feeling that he is

on holiday in Italy. There are small beads of sweat on his forehead, and he wishes that he were wearing a lot less and had drank a lot more.

He would never have taken Maggie to a place like this. He couldn't take someone in his current life to a place like this. Someone who knew him well right now. It was somewhere you took a stranger. Where you could courageously change up your drink order and publicly consider ordering the wagyu tacos for fifty three pounds, and then decide against it, without someone snorting their g&t out of their nose. If he had dined here with Maggie, they would have drank tap water and set their budget when they browsed the menu online beforehand. There would be agonising silence between them, and she would frown when he went to kiss her incase he ruined her lipstick. Fin pulls off her coat and hands it to the host and, like all the times that have come before, the line of her neck makes his breath leave his body. Although she was unrecognisable as the girl he had fallen in love with, back in Rosehorn, she had somehow matured into a something more refined and enigmatic to him. The Fin he once knew, would have wanted to share a giant bowl of calamari slathered in aioli and dance around the tables with the hotel band. Instead, he was taking her to a vegan restaurant at twenty-one pounds a california-roll.

'We'll take somewhere in the back' she tells the waiter.

They walk into the air-conditioned restaurant and all eyes are on Fin as she glides through. Archie notices the not-so-subtle smartphones peeping up from under tables to catch a snap of her. A teenage girl forgets to take the flash off, and dies of embarrassment in her booth.

'I don't understand all of this, you've taken a break from the series and, it seems relentless.'

She raises her eyebrows, 'how do you know I've taken a break?'

Fin slides into the booth. The blue leather seats match the colour of her dress. As if

her body wasn't small enough, she seems to disappear completely into the furniture.

'Dad told me actually.'

'An unlikely fan.'

'He asks about you'.

'You speak to your dad? The whole world is upside-down'

'Very funny'

'And what do you tell him?'

'That it's a good job I got out whilst I did'.

She orders champagne and he wonders- is she ordering champagne because she drinks champagne or, because she wants to be the person who drinks champagne, and with him, she can start again? He wants to point out that Fin Riley is drinking champagne with dinner on a school night, but knows this irony is lost in...well...2010. So he orders champagne.

'So what are you actually doing for work right now?' she smiles and looks him in the eye, as if it's a question she will die if she doesn't know the answer to.

'I run my own business'. She slaps her hand down on the table.

'Shut up.' The waiter arrives with the champagne and does his pretentious act of displaying the bottle to both of them. Fin doesn't play along.

'Oh I'm sure it'll be lovely' she waves her hand as he gestures for her to try it before he fills the glasses. It was a gesture that showed Archie that there was no façade here.

'You run your own business? Since when?'

Archie shrugged.

'Oh...since you blocked me out of your life?'

'Yup'.

'Well, what in? I mean what's the business? Tell me everything!' she reaches over and places a hand on his. Her nails are a deep blue, the colour of her dress. There was nothing brick-a-brac about her anymore. Everything pristine and manicured.

'I own a protein bar company' . She makes a ridiculing face. 'It's a result of spending too much time in the gym and not having anything half-decent to snack on. We're doing really well actually. Seems like I wasn't the only person who was in need of something a little less grainy. Pitching to Wholefoods and The Protein Pick n' Mix next week.'

'Archie that's huge'.

'See, that's the kind of response someone is suppos...never mind'. He wasn't here to grouch about Maggie. 'So what are we celebrating?' he says, reaching for the menu.

'That you are no longer a twat'. Archie opened his mouth to explain that he actually had never been a twat and that he was only trying to make things work with Maggie. But, Fin shot him a wry smile and Archie very quickly swallowed his words.

'Or? How about we toast to the fact that you're actually in London for longer than an espresso?'

'I'll drink to that'. She held his gaze and it felt like the most intimate thing he'd experienced in the last four years.

'What about you? You told me you were taking a break, but you never said why you were taking break'.

'It's a long story'.

'We haven't even ordered our food'.

'Right'.

'Come on Fin, you can tell me anything'. He felt stupid saying it. Who was he to know she didn't have a dozen other friends she would rather talk to about this now? Why would she

suddenly trust him after what he did to her. He thought whether he still trusted her, and even after everything, he knew he did.

'I ran into some trouble with the director' she said quietly. 'That's all'. Only Fin Riley would get away with saying I ran into some trouble.

'What sort of trouble?'

'You're actually the last person I want to talk to about this' she laughed.

'Sorry, we can talk about something else. You're paying for this right?' he mocks, widening his eyes at the menu.

'Always so smooth. Asking a girl for dinner and then making her pay!'

'What? This is a rain-check. It was your idea to take me out for sushi!'

'Touché.'

He wanted to pry about her break from the series, more than anything. Over the years, the few words or conversations that they have had have been carefully dissected and analysed and were often the source of small panic attacks or sleepless nights. There had been so few encounters that he could reel off the dialogue or text between them, each with its own spreadsheet of interpretations and subtext. A word wasn't a word, it was a painful inscription made with a small scalpel into his head or etched into his skin and it made conversation feel scary, calculated and regretful before it had even started. He couldn't bear the idea of tonight birthing the material for **eight** more years of analysing or birthing the regret for things he wishes he'd said. Why had she said 'you're the last person I want to talk to about this?'. She could have said anything. That she'd rather not talk about it, or that it wasn't a conversation for just now. But she had said the words 'you are the last person'. Meaning, she'd rather talk to the waiter, or the guy on the tube who ate two boiled eggs beside him this morning.

'Why did you say I'm the last person you want to talk to about this?'. He asks, maybe

speaking at the same time as her. He wasn't sure.

'I don't want to have this conversation here.'

Archie held his breath for a moment too long and then tried to exhale silently.

'Ok' he says.

'When it all happened I tried to call you like a hundred times.' The memory of his and Maggie's anniversary night came flooding back. How he'd turned off his phone and woken up to six missed calls from Fin. Maggie was with him the whole time. 'I just don't want you looking down on me. Especially now things are different between us now'.

'Are they?' He asks. She swallows and her eyes moved around the restaurant.

'Well I think so. Why don't we leave?'

'What?'

'Leave the restaurant? Go somewhere we can talk and dance?' She looks jittery, as if she is holding in a wee.

'We can't be those people' Archie hisses.

'I am those people. Come on Arch. This...' she gestures around the room, '...isn't us!' She beckons the waiter over. 'I'm sorry, but we have to go. It's a work thing'. She rolls her eyes. 'The gentleman will pay for the champagne'. She winks at Archie. 'We will be back sometime soon. It's been perfect'. The waiter, obviously having encountered this before, forces a smile and excuses himself to get the card machine.

Outside, the sun is starting to set, and London is beginning to whirr with theatregoers trickling from Victoria. Fin takes a deep breath through her nose, as if she is snorting powder, and her eyes light up in this feral way.

'My friend is having folk round tonight'. She says putting on her jacket. Archie slides his hands in his pockets and looks around.

'Good for them?' he shrugs. She leans over and thwacks him on the arm.

'I meant, we should go!'

'You've had one glass of champagne'. Trying to remember how they went from being in a quiet and secluded restaurant talking to going to one of Fin's 'friends' parties. She sticks her arm out for a black cab, like he has seen people do in films, and it pulls by the curb-side. It is small things like that, which make her seem foreign to him. Fin gives the driver a postcode, and she rolls down the window and sticks her head out the cab. He watches her for a while as she takes in the city flashing by. They pass Kensington Gardens. Their driver had taken the long way round so he could charge them more. He hated that he new this because of Maggie and loved that she wasn't present to argue the fare with the driver. Fin didn't mind. When she eventually closed the window she had tears streaming down her face. She gestured to them and laughed.

'Tried to keep my eyes open as a dare'.

'You dared yourself?

'Uhuh' she declared proudly as if it was a normal thing to do. 'I do it all the time. I hold my breath under water in the bathtub.'

Archie clenched his jaw and looked straight ahead.

'Who's party is it?' he asked.

'It's someone from Bones'.

'Who?'

'Venetia something? Veronica? Venetia I think'.

'Close friend then?'

'She's lovely. Really effervescent. Has a snake'.

'Fuck off'.

She squeezed his hand.

'Relax a little Arch. Let go. Have some fun'.

'I'm not doing drugs if that's what you mean'.

'You really don't know me anymore'. At first, her words felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach and then almost as soon as the feeling came, it was replaced by something different. A warm excitement. Could this mean he could get to know her all over again?

The uber pulls up alongside a house that wasn't too dissimilar to Fin's; white stone, high bushes, stairs to the big black door. It was almost completely dark out now and Archie felt Fin's hand slip into his as they approached the door. He felt completely blindsided.

#

How can nine years go by? Nine years of sparse coffee meet-ups, of rogue texts, of boyfriends and girlfriends and emails across oceans and therapy and parents dying and weddings and still there is this sense that nothing has changed between? Yes, he didn't know that she ordered champagne at restaurants but he knew why she did. He didn't know that she didn't do drugs anymore, but he knew why that might be. He didn't know the things that made her cry at night anymore, but he knew how to calm her down. He might not 'make himself at home' in her flat right away anymore, but he knew that he put her at ease more than the four walls around her did.

#

~~He did believe in souls. Of course he believed in souls. You have a body and then the other stuff, that's a soul right? However, the word soul or spirit wasn't something he would throw into his vocabulary as much as Venetia did. He played a drinking game with himself.~~

~~Intangible drink~~

~~Metaphysical drink~~

~~Profound drink~~

She spoke as if she was flirting with everyone. Her words seemed to require much less effort than other people used and the corners of her mouth would twitch as though the person she is the most amusing person in the room. It was her special talent. He'd never met anyone as magnetic as her.

<<<<◇>>>>

Text

Fin

#

He had only been invited to the party because his mum had died six months ago at Christmas time and everyone must have felt sorry for him. The truth was she'd killed herself, but Fin's Mum, Valerie, had said it wasn't ok to say that. Fin must make it sound as if it were something of an accident, or illness, that she'd died. She said that would be more sensitive even though Fin knew it was a lie. If Fin were to kill herself, she would want the world to know she had killed herself. Otherwise, what was the point? To add to the confusion, she couldn't wrap her head around the fact that someone, who wasn't known to be mad, would kill themselves on purpose. It had possessed her for several days afterwards. She had really wanted to go to the funeral but she had a dentist appointment, and her older sister Ola said it would have been a bit weird if she went. There were so many questions Fin would ask if it wasn't so insensitive of her to do so. So many jigsaw pieces that didn't seem to fit. Why would Archie's mum have wanted to leave Archie alone? Is Archie's dad a bad man? Would she still see him at sports day? What would happen to the hair-salon she owned? Who would

cut her hair now? Would she have to go all the way out of town for a haircut now? Or would she grow her hair down to her bum? She had always wanted long hair. When Ola and Fin were younger, they would put their pyjama bottoms on their head and run around, bums out, pretending they had flowing locks when in reality they both had matching little, brown mushroom cuts.

Apparently, she was found at nighttime, hanging from a tree in her back garden; still swinging. And people said that it had been Archie that had found her. It was only a rumour though, she didn't know that for sure, but it made him really famous in school. And she was jealous of that.

#

Archie had arrived on a bicycle that was too small for him. It had fluorescent green beads on the wheels that chimed when the peddles turned. It was a rather anticlimactic fanfare to what she hoped would be an eventful evening.

She watched Archie curiously, out of her bedroom window. The air felt like the south of France and midges dusted the air as the sun began to set into the tatty fields. Ola showed him how to organise the bottles into triangular groups on the paper cloth. He very was meticulous for a boy and Ola seemed pleased by his neatness. Fin hadn't noticed him at one of Ola's parties before (which there had been four of) in the last school year. This particular one was more of a small gathering, compared to the other parties, which made it even more interesting that Archie Shafer was on the guest list. Two cars came rolling down the dirt track to the farmhouse. You could see them from half-a-mile away as clouds of dust erupted behind them. Fin was ready to laugh at their jokes and let them play with her hair, and tell her that she could be pretty if she tried. Archie didn't greet anyone. He looked down at his shoes the whole time. He clearly wasn't pally with anyone, which made his presence

even more mysterious. For now, Fin would wait in her bedroom, sipping vermouth out of a plastic bottle stolen from her parents drinks cabinet until Ola was suitably drunk.

#

Parties with older people always made Fin feel mischievous. She lay on her back on her bedroom rug and listened to the party spark into life in the garden beneath her. She felt excitement in-between her legs and when she squeezed that area she would feel her breath catch in her throat. She heard the voices of some of the boys in the year above sing her name up through her open window and she put her hand into her knickers. *Make them want me*, she thought. What fun.

#

At the party, there were drinks Fin had never seen before. Alex had brought back a bottle of Ouzo from his recent trip to Corfu—though Fin wasn't entirely sure what kind of person *went* to Corfu, or why anyone would leave just as the last few days of school were rounding off. Everyone knew those final days were the ones saturated with gossip, the kind that practically wrote the script for the summer. But there Alex was, with his Ouzo, as if the last week of term were just a side note. People hated it, but everyone kept drinking it anyway. Fin couldn't help but wonder how much of life was like that—doing things you didn't really like, but sticking with it for the sake of looking cool. She'd learned that lesson young, from her mother, Val. Val had explained that there was an art to appearing mature, and that a delicate balance had to be struck between not disgracing yourself and *not* disgracing yourself too obviously. Fin had thrown up in her wicker bin the morning after a party once. The next day Val had made prawn wraps. Her favourite. She had vowed, with the residue of those prawn wraps still on her tongue, that no good meal would ever be ruined by a party again.

The only one who passed on the Ouzo was Archie. He'd looked at the bottle as it

arrived and, without even a flicker of interest, had gestured to his beer and gone back to gazing at the sky. Fin had noticed him. She always noticed him. The sky was clear, the air still. They both saw the same shooting star. After it had disappeared, she'd looked around, half-expecting someone to acknowledge it—some sign of recognition. But no one did. Archie was still staring, eyes narrowed in some strange, silent reverence, as if the star hadn't really gone, as if it was still hanging somewhere just beyond the edge of the visible world. She wanted to tell him that shooting stars didn't come back, but then again, she thought, he (of all people) knew that. It was a curious thing to witness, someone gawking at the sky at someone else's party as though he'd never seen a campfire or heard the sound of a can opening. It was disorienting to watch him, this strange, isolated figure who didn't seem to fit with anyone else, who felt like a boy out of time. Fin wondered for a moment—briefly and without conviction—if perhaps Archie had come from some future where people couldn't see stars anymore or sit around campfires, a future without any wonder.

“Nice of you to join us, Archie,” Kayleigh said, raising her plastic cup with that mock cheerfulness she reserved for moments when she was feeling particularly adult. They were sitting around the fire pit, the flames flickering and casting a strange, gaunt light on everyone's faces. “Good to see you back on your feet!”

There was a moment of awkward silence. Everyone looked over at Archie, waiting for him to respond. He smiled, gripping his beer bottle like it might somehow anchor him in this sea of faces, but his knuckles were tight, white.

“Kayleigh!” Ola, Fin's sister, scolded.

“What?” Kayleigh whined, still waving her cup with exaggerated casualness.

Kayleigh was the loudest of Ola's friends, and, to Fin's eyes, the most ‘grown-up.’ She had that kind of brash confidence that seemed to get her noticed, even if it didn't make

her particularly liked. The boys had a name for girls like her—a 'butterface'—meaning everything about her was hot, except her face. Fin had always found some comfort in her own appearance when she thought about Kayleigh's nose. Life, she thought, must be harder when your nose was all anyone noticed.

"I'm just saying, I'm glad you came tonight, that's all," Kayleigh said, tipping her head like she was about to take off an imaginary hat, then sloshing back another swig of her drink.

"That's what you'll be saying to him in a few hours, right Kayls?" Johnny, the sort of guy who looked like he had spent far too much time at the front of the rugby scrum, boomed with a self-satisfied laugh. The group erupted in the kind of raucous laughter that only boys like Johnny knew how to provoke.

Kayleigh winked at Archie, her gesture too sharp and too knowing. Fin felt a small twinge in her stomach. Was Archie *cool* now? It didn't seem right. He hadn't been cool last year. He rode a kids' bike, wore his school uniform *all the time*, and didn't talk to anyone. Fin tried to steal a look at him, but he was too far away to figure out.

The conversation drifted onto exams, but Archie, as if detached from the topic altogether, stood up and wandered towards the drinks table. No one noticed him leave, and Fin—partly out of boredom, partly out of curiosity—followed. She wasn't sure what she expected to find, but the empty space between them made her feel oddly bold. Maybe it was because she didn't want to be part of the conversation about exams, or maybe she just wanted to be famous at school like him. Either way, it felt like a good time to try and understand Archie. He had stopped with his back to the fire, his hands on the table, head slightly lowered.

"Are you having a nice time?" Fin asked, her voice casual, though she wasn't sure

why.

His head jerked up, as if startled, and for a moment, he looked at her like she was a ghost. He exhaled sharply. “You can say no. It’s not my party. I won’t tell,” Fin added, hands raised in mock surrender.

“I suppose,” Archie said, his voice quieter now, his gaze shifting awkwardly.

Fin offered a small laugh. “It’s not one of her best parties, I have to be honest. Last time we got so wasted, Johnny kicked a cow and we had to run from them.”

He let out a small laugh too.

“Mental, right?”

They stood in silence for a moment, the kind of silence that was thick with things left unsaid.

“Did you know I’m actually in the year below you?” Fin asked. She paused, watching him. “People say I act older than I am.”

Archie raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

Fin gave a small, awkward shrug. “I’m Fin,” she added, “Ola’s sister.”

“I know who you are,” he replied, without hesitation. The bluntness of it threw Fin off for a second. She hadn’t expected him to speak with such confidence.

“Well, I’m Archie,” he added, with a grin that was faint but real.

“Yeah, I know. You’re...” she said, before she could stop herself. She meant to say “famous,” but stopped herself.

Archie raised his beer bottle towards the fire. “I don’t actually know Ola that well,” he said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. His voice, plain and steady, threw Fin off again. She had imagined he’d sound different.

“I know,” she said, unsure how to fill the gap. “You pronounced her name ‘Oh-la,’ not ‘Ola.’”

“Ola,” he repeated, then smiled. “Well, it’s nice of her to invite me. I don’t usually get invited to these things.”

Fin frowned. “I think it’s because she’s sorry for you,” she said, before quickly adding, “Not in a bad way.”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “Yeah, feels like a pity invite.”

Fin laughed, relieved. “It isn’t very subtle, is it?”

Archie’s smile flickered, and for the first time, she felt like she could look at him properly. His eyes were green, the kind of green Fin had always envied. She’d always believed people with green eyes were special—something about them seemed *other*. Archie’s gaze flickered between her eyes, never settling on just one. It was... oddly comforting.

“Consider it a compliment,” Fin said, lowering her voice. “People want to get to know you, I guess.”

“There’s not much to know.” He shrugged

“Are you enjoying your summer holidays then?” she asked, hoping to keep the conversation going.

“Yeah, alright. Could be better, could be worse. You?”

Fin paused, caught off guard by the answer. In her circle, summer holidays were always a competition to see who had the most exciting, most extravagant six weeks. No one ever admitted they were ‘just alright.’ “Mine are going alright too,” she said, almost daring herself.

There was a slight pause. Then, taking another sip of punch, she shifted in her seat. “So... do you like Kayleigh?”

“Sorry?”

“Kayleigh,” she repeated. “Do you like her?”

Archie looked in her direction, then shrugged. “She seems alright.”

Fin leaned forward. “She’s got a big thing for you, though,” she added, watching him carefully.

“Oh, right,” he said, his tone nonchalant.

Fin suddenly felt uncertain. She had no evidence, no proof, just a gut feeling. She took a sip of her drink and glanced at him, trying to gauge what he was thinking.

“You suppose that most girls like you, then?” she asked, almost without thinking.

Archie’s eyes caught hers, and for a second, she felt like he was seeing straight through her. “Why do you suppose that?” he asked, his voice soft but direct.

Fin hesitated. She wasn’t sure why she had assumed it. Maybe it was because he wasn’t like the other boys. Maybe it was because he didn’t care what anyone thought.

“I don’t know,” she said, shrugging. “It’s just... a feeling.”

They both fell into an easy silence, and Fin couldn’t help but feel that the world, for a brief moment, was just the two of them—away from the noise of the party, away from everything that wasn’t real.

There were new drinks at this party that Fin had never seen before. Alex had brought a bottle of Ouzo back from his recent holiday in Corfu. Apparently he had been allowed to miss the last few days of term to go, which, to Fin, was a really bad idea. Everyone knows that the last few days of term are the most gossip-riddled of the year and now he was finding it hard to include himself in the conversation, but the Ouzo was a neat trick. The bottle was passed around the fire, nobody liked it, but everyone kept drinking it. Fin learned, from a young age, that doing things you didn't like was very cool. Fin's mum Val, had made it clear that Fin was too young for spirits and had also told her, whilst cleaning up Fin's vomit from her wicker basket, that there had to be a delicate balance between appearing mature, and disgracing yourself. Which Fin agreed with. She had thrown-up at one party since, and the next day's lunch had been ruined. It had been prawn-wraps, which were Fin's favourite, and she vowed, there and then, not to let a party ruin a good meal again. The only other person to pass-off the Ouzo had been Archie. He had gestured to his beer when the bottle had reached him, and resumed his stargazing. Fin knew they had both seen the same shooting star. After it had disappeared, she'd looked around to see if anyone had glimpsed it and he was still staring at the place in the sky where it fell. His mouth was half-open, eyes like slits, scanning desperately for the rock that had disintegrated in orbit. She wanted to point out that the shooting star wasn't coming back, that he wouldn't see it again. But, gathering from his expression, he knew that. It was most interesting to watch, a strange way to behave at someone else's house party; gawking at the sky like a newborn baby lying under a colourful

mobile; marvelling, in awe, at the new shapes and colours twirling before him in the sky. Had he never seen a camp-fire or drank a beer before? He wasn't as easy to figure out as the other boys, which made her feel uneasy, but for a moment she fantasised that he had been sent from the future; a world without fire or stars, and that he was now privy to secrets that nobody else knew of.

'Nice of you to join us this evening Archie', said Kayleigh, raising her plastic cup. They were sat in picnic chairs around the steel fire-pit. The firelight made everyone look a bit gaunt and menacing. 'Good to see you back on your feet!' Heads bowed awkwardly, and everyone looked over at Archie to see his reaction. He thanked her, with a smile, his two hands gripping his beer bottle. Fin noticed that his knuckles were white.

'Kayleigh!' Ola, Fin's sister, scorned.

'What?' She whined.

Kayleigh was the loudest and, what Fin thought to be, the most grown-up of Ola's friends. She was one of those girls at school who the boys called a 'Butterface'; they said everything about her was fit, but-her-face. Even her white-blonde locks couldn't hide *that* nose. Fin often found comfort in her own appearance when she thought about Kayleigh's nose. Life must be harder with a nose like that.

'I'm just saying, I'm glad you came tonight that's all.' She pretended to tip an imaginary hat and took a swig of her drink.

'That's what you'll be saying to him in a few hours from now Kayls!' Boomed Johnny, a boy who looked like he had spend too long in the front row of the scrum. He was panting, almost dribbling with enthusiasm at his joke. He got what he wanted; the group erupted into laughter.

'Oh, you know me John-boy'. Kayleigh winked at Archie. It made Fin feel a bit sick.

Was Archie cool now? He wasn't cool last year. Would Fin be cool too if she killed off a parent? It was an insensitive thought, but she indulged it anyway. These days it was getting harder to keep up with who was popular and who wasn't. But Archie? He couldn't be, it just didn't add up. He rode a kids bike, wore his school uniform 24/7 and didn't talk to anyone. Fin tried to catch a glimpse of him without getting caught staring.

#

The conversation steered onto the topic of exams and Archie got up and walked over to the table of drinks. Nobody else seemed to notice him leave and (with little to contribute to the conversation because 1. she hadn't started exams yet and 2. She wanted to be famous) Fin followed him over. She would be sure that, if the topic presented itself, she would make it sound like an illness or accident that his mum was dead. He stopped with back to the fire and his hands on the table, letting his head droop slightly.

'Are you having a nice time?' She asked, without looking at him. His head shot up and he turned to face her. He exhaled loudly as if she'd frightened him. Fin shot her hands up to show him she was unarmed.

'You can say no. It's not my party. I won't tell.' He pushed his curls off his shiny forehead.

'I suppose' he smiled, shifting his weight from one foot to the other nervously.

#

'It's not one of her best parties, I have to be honest with you. Last time we got so fucked up Johnny kicked a cow and we got chased by them.' He gave a small laugh. 'I know mental right?'

They stood in silence for a moment too long.

'Did you know, I'm actually in the year below you? But, people say I act old for my

age.' She paused again. 'You don't talk much do you?'

He gave her an apologetic smile. 'I'm not sure we've met properly anyway, I'm Fin, Ola's sister'

'I know who you are.' He said with an expression of slight amusement on his face. His bluntness took her by surprise. She hadn't expected him to speak with such confidence. She hadn't imagined him speaking at all. 'I'm Archie.'

'I know. You're...' she was about to say 'famous', and then settled for nothing. She knew who he was, everyone did.

Archie raised his beer bottle towards the fire, 'I don't actually know Ola that well'. Once again, his voice took her off guard. It was quite a normal voice, and not in the least bit strange.

'Yeah.' There was a mildly irritating silence again. Surely they should take it in turns to save each other from awkwardness? 'I know you don't know her that well, because you pronounced her name 'Oh-la' and it's just 'Ola'.'

'Ola' he repeated. 'Well it's nice of her to invite me. I don't normally get invited to these things so...' he paused as if they were in a drama class, and the pause was a cue for the supporting character to interrupt. 'It feels like a pity invite' he said, shooting the elephant in the room. Fin laughed in relief. 'It isn't very subtle is it?' he laughed.

She felt she was allowed to look at him a bit more now. His eyes were the green that Fin had always wanted her eyes to be. It had always stuck with her that people with green eyes were special. Only 2% of the world had true green eyes, and 79% had brown eyes, like her. She noticed that he could never pick an eye when talking to her and his gaze drifted from one to the other over and over again. It felt kind of nice. No other boy did that in school. He had short, mousy brown curls and his skin looked thin and slightly green in the glow of the

fire. Which made him stand out from the rosy young farmers at school. 'Consider it a compliment, people want to get to know you, I guess'.

'There's not much to know'.

Fin tucked her hair behind her ears. *There was so much to know*, she thought. That's the thing about knowledge, the more you owned the more powerful you become. Not textbook knowledge, but life knowledge; knowledge about other people's lives. There was a lot of town mystery around Archie and his dad, and Fin possessed an incessant need to know more.

'Are you enjoying your summer holidays then?' She asked.

'Yeah, they're going alright. Could be better, could be worse. You?' The word 'alright' made her stop and think before she answered. She'd been taken aback by his admission. Her question had been an invitation for him to compete with her. In her circle of friends, the summer holidays was always a competition as to who could have the richest, most exciting six weeks. You would never admit they were just going 'alright'. Last year she'd gone to Nepal with her family, and it had changed her. She'd even bought a few beaded bracelets and preserved her flaking Henna with brown sharpie to flaunt this profound change when she arrived back to school.

'Mine are going alright too' she said daringly. Either the vulnerability or the glass of punch gave Fin her next surge of boldness. It was time to investigate the scene...

'So...do you like Kayleigh then'

'Sorry?'

'Kayleigh, do you like her?'

He gestured quizzically in Kayleigh's direction.

'Yeah, she seems to have a big thing for you', Fin added.

'Oh right, ok.'

Her accusation was based entirely off of speculation and no evidence. She ladled some more punch into her glass.

'I suppose most girls have a thing for you though, right?' He slid his hands into the pockets of his school trousers.

'Why do you suppose that?'

Fin opened her mouth to speak and then shut it again and took sip of her drink. Why did she suppose that? She had never supposed it before, but after meeting him properly for the first time, she supposed it now. She liked how he did his own thing just like she did and she liked that he touched his lips a lot when he spoke. All she did was shrug and it felt like she had just peed on a fire that had taken a while to make.

'So would you go there with Kayleigh?' She said pulling them back on topic.

'I don't really know her'

'But you can see her right?' Fin said seriously gesticulating the shape of Kayleigh's boobs.

Archie laughed with his eyes.

'That's not really my style' and then his eyes widened 'Jesus is that really why I'm here? Have I been drafted in for that reason?'

'No! No.' Fin exclaimed. 'So who do you hang out with then?'

'Mostly my Dad'

Fin laughed. 'I mean like, who do you *hang out* with?' She widened her eyes and gyrated her hips.

'Oh. No-one. Yeah. Definitely not my Dad' he said dryly which made Fin laugh a bit more. She waited for him to ask her back but he didn't.

He picked up another beer and, to Fin's disappointment, gestured with his head, that they go back to the group. She wanted him to like her.

#

The girls had streaked ash across their cheeks in bold, diagonal lines, creating symbols that made them look like a band of guerrilla artists. They beckoned Fin to join them, and after a moment's hesitation, she stepped forward. The boys had gravitated to the garage, inspecting the ping-pong table with earnest interest. Fin found herself giving Archie a smile, something between a nudge and a wave, before he disappeared inside after them.

"You're not drunk enough," said Kayleigh, leaning in to paint the lines across Fin's face. She drew an extra line between her eyes, her voice almost conspiratorial. "This one's for intuition. Your third eye."

"Intuition about what?" Fin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Kayleigh's eyes widened, her expression serious as though the answer was something Fin should have already known. "Oh, *everything*," she said with the kind of certainty that made Fin wonder whether Kayleigh had unlocked some secret code of life.

Ola and Kayleigh both leaned over her like she was a blank canvas, while Maggie hovered nearby, inspecting the work with quiet approval. Fin found herself slightly disoriented by the closeness, but also oddly comforted by Maggie's presence—she smelled faintly of marshmallow and peach schnapps, a combination that made Fin feel both younger and older than she was. Maggie had that aura about her, the kind that made Fin feel as if she should be doing more—like she should already be wearing perfume and carrying herself with that same easy confidence Maggie had. It wasn't lost on her that she'd be wearing perfume at the same age Ola started, or that she got her ears pierced when Ola did. Life seemed to have an unspoken rhythm that Fin felt the need to follow.

“We need more shots over here,” Maggie said, finally breaking the moment.

“You know, you could be really something, Fin,” Kayleigh said, passing her the bottle with a wink.

“Ola, she’s like twelve,” Ola said with a slight scoff.

“Well, she’s got a lot going on for a twelve-year-old,” Maggie remarked, her eyes drifting, then catching Fin’s gaze.

“How old are you now, Finny?” Kayleigh asked, lighting a cigarette with a casual air.

“Fifteen,” Fin answered, unsure if she sounded as confident as she hoped.

“I always think you’re much older than that,” Maggie said, blowing a small puff of ash toward Fin.

“If she was older, I wouldn’t be babysitting her tonight,” Ola laughed, her tone equal parts teasing and exasperated.

“You love babysitting,” Fin shot back, seizing the opportunity. “That’s why you invited Archie Shafer, right?”

Ola shot her a look, sharp and direct.

“I invited him because Mum practically made me, okay? And then they disappear for the weekend, leaving me to entertain him at my own party!”

“God forbid,” Kayleigh chimed in, mockingly. “What a tragedy, an empty house... again.”

“Fuck off,” Ola hissed, but even the irritation couldn’t fully mask the edge of frustration beneath it.

“It’s kind of sweet you invited him,” Maggie said, casually fishing for the fruit at the bottom of her punch glass.

“Mum used to get her hair cut by his mum,” Ola added, shrugging as if this explained

everything. “I guess she feels some weird obligation to the family or something.”

“I think he’s kind of cute,” Kayleigh remarked offhand.

“Really?” Fin replied, the faintest trace of smugness creeping into her voice. “I kind of get where you’re coming from.”

“Well, don’t you?” Kayleigh asked, eyes narrowing with curiosity.

“I don’t know,” Fin said, sipping the shot Maggie handed her, feeling the burn slide down her throat. She grimaced slightly. “I like his eyes,” she added with a quiet confidence, making the girls erupt in giggles.

“She’s adorable, Ola,” Maggie squealed, leaning over to ruffle Fin’s hair. Ola rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a smile.

“Don’t worry, Fin,” Kayleigh said, her voice softer now. “I get it. It’s his moody vibe. Do you know that women find vulnerable men more attractive?”

“That’s a bit of a sweeping statement,” Ola said, her eyes rolling in playful disbelief.

“No, it’s true,” Kayleigh insisted. “I read it in *Cosmo*. When men are vulnerable, they let their partners in more, and apparently, it improves... well, everything.” She raised her eyebrows, clearly enjoying herself. “If you know what I mean.”

“Oh, *yeah*, depression is so attractive,” Maggie added with a grin. “Though I don’t want some guy crying on me when we’re... you know.” The laughter that followed was unrestrained, full of the easy camaraderie that only came with familiarity and trust.

Fin laughed too, joining in on the moment, but part of her was just a little bit confused. They made it all sound so... simple. Sex, relationships, emotions—it didn’t seem as complicated as her friends made it out to be.

“There’s something about him,” Kayleigh continued, her voice lowering with mock seriousness. “Especially underneath those grey, adjustable-waist trousers.” She snorted,

unable to hold back her amusement.

"You think everyone is hot," Ola said with a smile, taking another long swig of punch.

"I don't think Johnny's hot," Kayleigh replied quickly.

"*Nobody* thinks Johnny's hot," Fin muttered, almost under her breath.

"I like her," Kayleigh laughed, playfully squeezing Fin's head between her hands.

"Is that why you've kissed him twice now?" Maggie asked with a smirk.

"You know both times were accidents!" Kayleigh said theatrically, burying her face in her cup like she'd just told a major confession.

"He's got... *a lot going on*," Maggie said with an exaggerated wink, and they all burst into laughter again.

Fin liked it when they talked about things like this. It wasn't a big deal. They made everything seem less dramatic, less intimidating, and it was kind of a relief. Maybe she was starting to understand what they meant when they said life was about enjoying the moments without overthinking them. Maybe that was the point.

#

Later, around the fire, Fin asked Archie if he wanted to share her blanket. He nodded, his bottom lip poking out in a way that made her stomach do something odd. When she rested her head on his shoulder, she noticed he didn't slip his hand down her jeans under the blanket, the way boys at Ola's house parties always did. She had expected it, almost. When she'd offered him the tent, he'd shrugged, not looking at her. "Sure," he said, as if it were an afterthought. And just like that, the others disappeared into their own tents, too drunk to notice they were leaving Fin alone with him.

"You don't have a tent, do you?" he asked, his gaze fixed somewhere distant, blank.

"I did, but Kayleigh and Johnny took it," she said, her voice light.

"I feel cheated," Archie said, his voice strangely soft, and Fin laughed. She liked the way his thumb brushed back and forth on her hand. She wondered if he was drunk yet, and what that might mean for her. It wasn't something she'd ever had to figure out before.

Turning to look into his green eyes, she decided it was now or never. *What good are thoughts if they stay unspoken?* She asked herself, already halfway through the motion of leaning closer.

"What was she like?" Her voice didn't break, but she could feel the question dragging in the air.

"Who?" he asked, blinking, his eyelashes catching the firelight like the frayed ends of old curtains.

"Your mum."

"Oh," he said, the word like a sigh. He looked away for a moment, his face going still, and then the silence stretched between them like a rope that might snap.

"What kind of person was she?" Fin pushed on, unsure if she even wanted to know the answer.

Archie let go of her hand, pressing his palms together and resting his elbows on his knees. "Sorry," Fin added quickly. "We don't have to talk about it if you—"

"No," he said, cutting her off. "It's cool. I just... haven't really talked about it. With anyone."

Fin blinked, not understanding. "With anyone? How could you not have talked about it with anyone?"

"I don't know. Nobody's ever really asked me, I guess."

"Wow." Fin breathed the word out before she could stop herself. She couldn't

imagine *not* talking about something like that, if it had happened to her. Her mother wasn't dead, but if she had been, Fin thought she might have shouted about it from the rooftops.

To fill the gap, she muttered something that felt weirdly out of place: "She cut my hair."

"Who?"

"Your mum."

"Oh, right. Yeah, I know."

Fin raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"Yeah," he said, lifting his head to look at her. "Kim always talked about you girls. How you were doing in your dance exams and stuff like that."

"My dance exams?" Fin asked, surprised.

"Yeah, didn't you get, like, three distinctions or something this time around?" Archie asked.

"I did!" Fin said, a smile pulling at her lips.

"It's strange," he said, his voice turning thoughtful. "Feels like I know all this weird stuff about you." He seemed almost *too* curious.

"Like what?" Fin asked, leaning closer.

Archie didn't even blink. "Like when you got your first period."

Fin's breath caught in her throat. "You do not," she gasped.

"I don't," he admitted, nudging her lightly. "But I could tell. Wasn't it on the ski trip bus? Thought you were dying?"

She laughed despite herself. "I was 13. Thought I was dying."

"You girls do not have it easy," he said, his voice almost sympathetic. "My mum just handed me a condom once and said, 'Don't knock up one of the Riley girls. They're too good

for you, and you know it.'"

"Did she actually?"

"No!" Archie giggled, shaking his head. "Although she's bloody well right."

Fin rested her head on his shoulder again, and without thinking, she took his hand. She didn't know what she was doing. It wasn't about the touch, really. It was about something else, something bigger, like the unsaid things piling up between them. She pretended she was inspecting his hand, fingers lightly tracing the lines, when what she really wanted was to ask him *what now?*

"That was funny," she said softly. Then, her voice dropping a little, "Do you miss her?"

"Uh, yeah," he said. His words hung in the air, heavy and unreal. Fin tried to imagine missing someone like that, someone who had been *hers*, and she couldn't. It was like trying to picture a world without her own mother's voice filling the kitchen with chatter.

"To answer your question," Archie continued, "she was my mum. I don't really know what she was like, you know? She made my packed lunch, I liked her hugs. She watched *X Factor* at the wrong times when Dad and I wanted to watch good movies. She hated cooking. She was... obsessed with tea. Like, always having tea or making tea or talking about tea. And she changed her hair a lot. She was just... mum. Nothing else. The police—they always wanted something more, something *deeper* than that. But there wasn't."

Fin made a noise, something between sympathy and confusion. She had meant to sound more compassionate, but instead, it came out like an echo. *What was she supposed to say to that?*

Half of her felt like a professional, like she'd cracked some kind of code, while the other half of her was just *so confused*—why didn't anyone talk like this? She would ask more

questions like this. They got straight to the point, saved time.

"Do you ever think you got more, like, stuff, because of what happened?" she asked, her words sharp, careful.

His eyes widened, but there was no anger, no offense. He seemed to understand. "Yeah. I do. I mean, I know a lot of people who should've gotten senior prefect over me and stuff like that. They probably should've been the ones."

Fin hesitated. She had thought about kissing him. She had thought it a lot. But now, she wasn't so sure. She didn't want him to think she was kissing him out of pity. She didn't kiss people out of pity. That was worse than anything. She could *feel* how he was, but what if kissing him now meant something she wasn't ready for? Something too loaded?

It wasn't just that he was thin. It was something else about him—something she hadn't figured out yet. He wasn't the kind of boy she *usually* wanted to kiss.

She glanced at him, trying to decide if it was worth it. Maybe, with him, it wasn't about wanting to kiss. Maybe it was something else entirely.

She asked him again if lots of girls fancied him now. He just laughed and suddenly she wanted to make him do that more. Almost as if she felt possessive over his smile, a smile she hadn't seen since Kim died. A smile she felt personally responsible for. His smile was her's. It covered the entire lower half of his face and his dimples almost touched the outer corners of his eyes. The safeguarding, reminded her of a time she had made brownies for her history classmates, but they were too good to share, so she kept them in her schoolbag and ate them all on the bus home. She ended up being quite ill. She'd feel jealous now if she saw another girl make him smile. He told her he felt happy. It felt like such a strange thing for someone to say. Fin felt happy most of the time so it was interesting to hear that it was such an overwhelming feeling to Archie that he had told her.

'You could always just sleep in my room?'

They pulled the single duvet from Fin's bed, and the spare double-duvet from the guest-room and set it down on the floor. The presence of an older boy made her childhood bedroom vanish into thin air. Archie went to pull his top off over his head and paused.

'Do you mind?'

'Oh shit sorry', Fin turned her back to him. Archie started to laugh.

'No silly, do you mind if I take this off. It stinks of smoke'. Fin blushed.

'I knew that' she said. 'Mine too'. They undressed down to their underwear in front of each other and got under the duvet. As she lay there, his chest rising and falling against her back, breath staggered with her's, she had a disconcerting feeling that he wasn't bothered by her at all. He just went along with whatever she expressed or suggested. It was such an alien feeling not to be fancied. Everyone fancied her. She didn't have to try, it was something she was just born with. Did he not fancy her? The thought made her insecure. She decided to take hold of his hand again. He let her put her fingers between his like they were boyfriend and girlfriend. It was a far more intimate gesture than she'd anticipated. It felt as if they had time-traveled to post-sex and the sudden sense of closeness made Fin let go and roll onto her back with her hands behind her head.

Life had been boring the last few weeks since school had broken up, and boredom made her jittery. She had been very much looking forward to this evening. It would come with eventfulness, even if she had to make it happen herself. Maybe arching her back to make her breasts look bigger would make him want to touch them? Kayleigh would have had sex with him by now, she thought. She gazed up at the ceiling. Regrettably, Fin didn't know the ins and outs of who-liked-who in Archie's year, but she assumed, as he kept passing off the question, that he probably had a lot of female interest now. Like Kayleigh. Fin would make

them all on The Sims 2 next week, and watch them have sex with Archie and with each other. Whenever they disappeared into a cloud of smoke underneath the covers, she would close her eyes, imagine what they would be doing, and touch herself.

‘Should we just be friends then?’ Fin asked.

‘Yeah sure. I’d like that’.

‘Do you want to have sex with me?’ She said gazing up at the roof.

‘It’s actually ok Fin. I’m a bit drunk’ Archie laughed. She didn’t understand why he was laughing. She wanted to ask why he didn’t want to have sex with her. And then it dawned on her that maybe Archie knew all about her. Maybe he’d heard rumours about what had happened last Christmas and he didn’t want to touch her. Maybe nice boys don’t want to touch her. Maybe he thinks she is not special enough. Maybe he thinks she is ruined. He turned to face her laying his head on arm.

‘You know you shouldn’t just ask people point-blanc if they want to have sex with you’.

‘Why not?’

‘Do you do that a lot?’ He was finding this too amusing.

‘No’ she sulked, turning away from him.

‘Good’ he said. ‘So are you going to hang out with me at school then?’. Fin thought about this for a moment. She thought about how her current friends bored her and how mysterious she would seem hanging out with Archie. She wondered what it would be like to see his green eyes up close every day and how much it would infuriate her to be around someone who came across so unbothered by her. She thought about making him finally want to have sex with her and how it would feel to win at that game.

‘All the time’

#

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‘All the time’

Text

Archie

#

Earlier that evening, they had all been sitting by the fire, the kind that made everyone look a little more beautiful, a little more like a photograph someone might keep in a box for years. He had laughed when things were funny, real laughs, not the tight ones people do when they're scared of being left out. He answered the questions aimed at him directly, politely, like they were items to tick off a list. When Alex fell backwards over a guitar amp and tried to style it out, Archie got up without thinking and checked if he was alright.

Later, he wouldn't remember the conversation. Not the shape of it, not the words. But he'd remember the fire—its flickering edges, the way it moved like it had lungs. The bats, too, swooping in and out of swarms of midges high above the smoke, tracing invisible architecture in the dark. Maggie's ears glittering like tiny constellations—nine piercings, if he counted right. A shooting star he didn't make a wish on. Not because he didn't believe, but because he didn't want to pick the wrong wish.

That was the way his memory worked. Not in clean lines but in strange diagonals. He

remembered the raindrops on the classroom windows more clearly than the lesson inside. He could still tell you, now, that there were exactly twenty-five streetlamps on the High Street and they only lined the left-hand side if you were walking to school from his house. That sort of thing stayed. Not the anatomy of a leaf. Not the date of the Highland Clearances.

At his mum's funeral, he remembered the flowers—white lilies and those tiny yellow ones that looked like buttercups, even though he knew they weren't. He remembered the wind slipping through a crack in the stained glass window and the cold whistle it made as it passed his cheek. He remembered the carving in the wood in front of him, something worn and half-legible: *They travel to God when we can't speak. 56:8*. He didn't know what it meant, exactly, but he felt it like a bruise. It was obvious why his dad sometimes called him soft, or stupid, when he caught Archie staring out the window too long.

He'd just scraped through his exams. Nothing above a C. Not for lack of trying. He had tried. But trying felt like a joke when your mum had just died. While other kids had been memorising the differences between plant cells and animal cells, Archie had been learning how to drive a car and shop for food and remember what day the council picked up the bins. He knew how to open a bank account. How to fake a sick note with believable handwriting. How to get out of bed when it felt like lifting the lid off a coffin.

So this party—Ola Riley's—was the first one he'd been invited to in over a year. She'd tapped him on the shoulder on the stairs outside the P.E. hall after the last exam, like she wasn't quite sure he was real. He turned around, confused, and there she was, flushed and fidgety, pressing a crumpled piece of SQA paper into his hand.

"I'm having a party," she said, eyes flicking sideways like she was checking for witnesses.

"No discussing exams until you've passed the changing rooms!" one of the

invigilators called after them, bored and slightly shrill.

“Jesus,” Ola muttered. “Like I can change any of my answers now, right?”

He wanted to say something witty. Something low-effort and magnetic. But he just looked down at the note instead. At the words scrawled across the bottom in biro: *come if you're keen!*

“It’s not a big deal, I mean, we hardly know each other so...” She bit at the edge of her thumbnail and winced. “Don’t worry if you can’t make it.”

And then she was gone.

He’d heard of Ola Riley’s parties before—everyone had. There were pictures on Facebook, always oversaturated and a little chaotic, all red Solo cups and flushed faces. Half the year group would be there, sometimes kids from the year above too, which gave the whole thing an air of social mobility. But he’d never actually been invited. Until now.

It was meant to be a nice way to get out of the house. Something his mum would have encouraged. “Go for an hour,” she used to say, “if you hate it, you can always fake a tummy ache and come home.” That had always been her trick. Childlike and oddly effective. Could a seventeen-year-old still use it? Probably not. He was reaching the outer limits of her advice now—starting to outgrow the kind of parenting you only get once.

He was the first one to arrive. The Riley house looked bigger from the inside—more echo than furniture, like a show home they hadn’t gotten around to filling with life. He helped set out drinks on the kitchen island, counted out the cups. There were only seven. Seven cups. Seven names on the group chat, maybe. It became clear, as the minutes ticked past and no one else showed up, that this wasn’t one of Ola’s legendary parties. It was something else. Something smaller. Stranger. A sort of curated kindness.

He had been invited out of pity. He felt it like a truth deep in the bones, not cruelly

given, but given all the same. In the last six months, Archie had come to understand that most good things were now handed to him with soft eyes and sideways glances. Condolences wrapped in cellophane. It made it hard to tell who genuinely wanted him around and who just didn't want to feel bad.

He knew a few things about the Rileys. Valerie was a headteacher at some private school across the Cairn O'Mount. Not Rosehorn. Malcolm—he wasn't sure. Something in oil probably. The car Ola got for her sixteenth birthday looked like something from a TV ad. And then there was the sister—Fin. A year below. Quiet. Not famous in the way of school gossip, but known. Archie didn't know her in any real sense, but he'd always felt like he *knew* her, which was worse somehow.

It wasn't because she won awards—though she did. Music competitions, debating things, photos in the paper with medals that seemed too large for her frame. That wasn't it. It was something stranger. Something like *déjà vu*. He'd catch her eye in the corridor and feel briefly winded, like she'd seen something in him he hadn't meant to show. Like she carried a version of him inside her that he hadn't agreed to share.

That night, around the fire, he'd begun to feel a kind of quiet ease in her presence. Not affection, not yet. But recognition. She held her own in the group—not loud, not overly polite. Just still. She hadn't worn a dress like the others. Hadn't laughed too loudly or made a show of drinking. And when she acknowledged why he was probably there—the subtext of the pity-invite—she did it in a way that didn't make him feel like a project. It felt like being seen, not pitied. A subtle difference. A life-saving one.

They were, unmistakably, the black sheep of the evening. There because there was nowhere else they wanted to be less.

Inside, a game of ping-pong was unfolding.

“Fucking twat,” Alex laughed, slamming the racket onto the table. “How the fuck are you so good at this?”

“He’s only had one beer all evening,” Johnny offered. “When I’m playing, I see four fucking balls. It’s a hazard.”

“Nah, I’ve known him since he was a babby,” Alex said, reaching out to shake Archie’s hand like they were suddenly teammates again. “Always been good with balls.”

“Gay,” Johnny said, with the reflexive sneer of someone who’d never paused long enough to think about what he was actually saying. Archie laughed because everyone else did.

“Seriously, pal, when are you coming back to rugby?” Alex asked.

Archie shrugged. Scuffed his foot on the floor. “Taking my time.”

“Yeah, alright, pal.”

Laughter floated in from the garden—sharp, sudden.

“Kayleigh wants it, man,” said Johnny, bouncing the ping-pong ball with his palm.

“I’m going for the hat-trick tonight.”

“If she’s drunk enough, she’ll shag anyone,” Alex said, grabbing the ball mid-air.

They all laughed again. A little too easily.

“She was up for it after one shot last time,” Johnny continued. “We did stuff, but like—we didn’t *do* it. Because, y’know...” He trailed off, gesturing vaguely at nothing. “She was on her period, wasn’t she?”

Archie looked down at his shoes, tried not to flinch.

“Fucking hell,” Alex muttered, taking a swig. “What about you, Arch? Eyes on any prizes tonight?”

Archie smiled, small and tight. “You know me... I’m only good with balls.”

A ball came flying at his chest. He caught it, clean and automatic. Alex whooped.

And just like that, it felt—for one brief, traitorous moment—like they were friends again.

The Rileys had a white carpet in every room. Thick, cloudlike, silently accusatory. And dark oak furniture, singular and deliberate—like punctuation. One piece per room, two in the library. The house had that curated kind of stillness, like a hotel no one actually stayed in. It was beautiful in a way that made Archie nervous to breathe too hard.

Fin led him through the rooms with the breezy rhythm of someone repeating lines they hadn't written.

"Mum and Dad cruise a lot," she said as he paused at a photo of them, framed in polished silver. They were posed in front of the Taj Mahal, both in crisp linens, her mother's hand on her father's stomach like a claim. "That one was apparently a three-day trip inland from the coast. In case you're questioning the geography. They met the ship again in Goa."

"Right," Archie said, nodding as if he'd known that. "Yeah, I was wondering." He hadn't been.

"Do you do this too?" he asked.

"Couldn't think of anything worse," she replied. "They're themed cruises. Ballroom dancing, murder mysteries. All very... immersive." She made a face. "Still. Makes the house look great."

It did. He couldn't imagine feeling safer anywhere than in this sprawling, echoey place. The cream carpets swallowed his feet like marshmallow. His socks looked cleaner just

for touching them. Every room was still and slightly scented—like talc, or eucalyptus, or old money. The curtains were a pale, buttery yellow and the open windows made them breathe softly into the rooms, like ghosts too polite to stay put. The toilet paper was quilted. The soap translucent and embedded with dried flowers, like something suspended in resin, waiting to be released by a pair of clean hands.

He imagined Mrs. Riley moving through it all in fast-forward: classical music humming through the walls, bread rising impossibly quickly in the oven, the air perfumed with some imported spray. A domestic spell. An entire life curated into softness.

When Kim had been alive, their own house had moods. It expanded and contracted depending on how things were. Balloons for birthdays that would deflate and hang limp in the corners for weeks. Daffodils that she kept replacing before they had time to wilt. Ella Fitzgerald in the kitchen. Pancakes on Saturdays with honeycomb she said was gifted from someone at the salon. The house had pulsed with colour and sound—but only for a while. Mostly before high school. Sometimes Archie thought he'd made it all up. Misremembered a movie as a memory.

From Fin's bedroom window, you could see the school. It was far enough to blur at the edges but close enough to feel like it was watching. Seeing it from bed made Archie's stomach clench. Fin said it gave her structure. He didn't know what to do with people who didn't mind being watched.

#

There were probably unspoken rules about this kind of thing. It was Ola's party, and Ola had invited Fin. So it was probably fine, in a technical sense, that they were here now, talking alone in her bedroom. No one had interrupted. No one had said anything.

He hadn't tried to kiss her. He didn't think he would even know how to try.

She'd turned over onto her side, watching him like she was trying to find something out. Not flirtatiously, exactly. More like a puzzle. Her hair was too long for her face, and it always looked like it was about to get in her mouth. It reminded him of pictures of Jesus. But she was prettier than Ola. It might have been the small gap in her front teeth. Or the faint lines around her mouth, which he liked. He'd only just noticed them now.

Archie had once said there was too much of Ola — too much hair, too many limbs, too much makeup. Fin didn't think of people in those terms, like quantities. He had Malcolm's genes: quiet genes, unambitious ones. Smaller wrists. Less voice. Less of a presence.

She said his name again. There was a hard 'r' in it, sharper than it should have been, but she spoke like she wasn't self-conscious about it. He liked that part.

Then she kissed him.

It felt sudden, not rehearsed. His lips were dry — probably from sitting near the fire — and his body was at the wrong angle to respond properly. He didn't try to fix it. She moved away slightly and he let her. Then she leaned in again, and this time he reached for her, held the back of her head.

There was no noise except their mouths. At some point she took her top off, and he told her she was beautiful. It sounded false as it left his mouth, like it belonged to someone else. But he meant it. He wasn't even sure what the word meant, but it seemed necessary.

She said:

— Do you want to have sex with me?

It didn't sound like a question with consequences. More like something she had already decided about, and now just wanted him to say out loud.

He shifted onto his elbows. Her face was close. Her mouth brushed his cheek.

She was younger than him. Not dramatically, just enough for it to feel like a fact. If he slept with her, people would find out. They would say things. Probably about him. Probably untrue things, but not entirely untrue either.

—I'm too drunk, he said.

She tilted her head. He had the sense that she didn't believe him, but also didn't really care. He looked down, not because she wanted him to, but because she didn't. He hadn't earned anything. That's how it felt — like something earned.

She didn't say anything. Just curled into his side. Her skin was cold. He wrapped his arm around her and felt his own awkwardness, heavy and precise.

This was the kind of moment where he could see himself from above: how strange he was, how unlike other people. He felt like a failed version of someone.

She would tell people, maybe. They would talk about it at school, and someone would make a joke about him being gay. And even though he didn't care if they thought that, not really, it would still happen.

They lay like that for a while. His heartbeat slowed. Eventually she whispered that she was cold.

He pulled her closer

#

The next morning they drank a pot of coffee between the two of them and ate toast and bacon. By midday, she asked him if he wanted to charge his phone and call home. He faked a phone call, knowing that his dad wouldn't have noticed he was gone.

#

Text

They sat in a loose, fidgety circle around the keyboard — the full company vocal call — a sort of half-baked communion. Three schools had been smushed together like mismatched jigsaw pieces: Seamoore Academy, Auchenrell Academy, and Rosehorn High. Fin sat front row, legs crossed, chin slightly raised — an act of small, calculated war. The principal auditions weren't until Wednesday night, but Fin knew the game started long before the lines were drawn. She scanned her new castmates, mentally playing duck-duck-goose, casting and recasting them in her head. Ensemble. Ensemble. Potential Cosette. Definitely ensemble.

The Seamoore kids were impossible to miss. Even in civvies, they had that unmistakable private-not-private school sheen. John Lewis backpacks. Teeth like bank adverts. Not a rogue pimple or stray baby hair among them. They looked like they'd been focus-grouped into existence. The requirements to attend Seamoore seemed to be:

- 1 Money — obviously.
- 2 But not enough guilt to go full private.
- 3 Mini Coopers by fifteen.
- 4 Parents from Not Here. Preferably not even Scottish. Definitely not cousins.

Auchenrell were their inverse: cheeks ruddy from weather and rugby, limbs like young cows. They wore jeans and bobbly fleeces and smelled faintly of silage and Lynx Africa. Kind-eyed, but nothing going on behind them. Kids who waved at tractors.

And Rosehorn — her school — was a glorious mess. Like the burnt crisp-bits at the bottom of a chippy fryer: overlooked, maybe, but absolutely where the flavour lived.

Mr. Wiley shuffled in, and every Rosehorn student collectively flinched. Conversation evaporated. Fin straightened her spine, already knowing the exact cadence of his opening speech. He was squat and balding with a face full of chaos: wild eyebrows, glasses permanently perched on his forehead, and a belly that gave the illusion of holding up the papers he always clutched. First-years feared him. By sixth year, you were drinking whisky with his wife in the garden after Christmas choir.

“Thank you, Rosehorn!” he boomed, slapping the low end of the keyboard like it had insulted him. A few Seamoore girls squeaked.

“Thank you... other schools,” he added, eyes twinkling. He winked at Fin. She winked back. So it begins.

“I jest,” he said, without a trace of apology. “Welcome to this year’s inter-school musical. *Les Misérables* — or *Les Mizeraaab*,” he drawled theatrically. Someone whooped. A polite cheer. Mostly girls. “You’ve all made the cut. The standard this year is the best I’ve seen. I’m excited to cast our leads on Wednesday night.” His eyebrows did a little jig. Nervous glances zipped around the circle. “As you’ll have read in your welcome packs, we’re asking for your best thirty-two bars from the show. Preferably the part you want. That’s enough talk.”

He let his fingers fall flamboyantly onto a C major chord. “All rise!”

And they did. Chins dropped. Chests lifted. The room shifted like a murmur of

birds, launching into scales on an exaggerated “ahhhhhh.” No warm-up. This *was* the warm-up — a performative death match in disguise.

The sopranos — real and pretend — started inching up onto their tiptoes, chasing high Cs like it was bloodsport. Most cracked early. Red faces, swallowed shame. Some survived into the arpeggio danger zone, arms rigid like they were holding invisible bags of oranges under each armpit. Someone even hit a D-sharp, vibrato wobbling wide enough to register on the Richter scale.

Fin didn’t overthink it. She never had. She just opened her mouth and sang. That was her secret. She’d never doubted her voice, and so it had never betrayed her. Same as her skin. She never washed her face and never had spots. She was just... like that.

Then came the bonding games.

She hated the first one. Mr. Wiley shouted out a number, and you had to run to someone and connect with them using the corresponding body part. Arm. Shoulder. Nose.

She was mid-eye roll when she collided, nose-to-nose, with a Seamoore boy who held her gaze like it was something he intended to pocket.

“Hi,” he said, smiling like he’d rehearsed it. It was friendly, disarming. His face looked expensive and clean, like a hotel bathroom.

In the next game, they had to hold a ping-pong ball between their foreheads. Fin got paired with a girl from Auchenrell who drooled slightly when she laughed. Fin was distracted — her eyes kept drifting back to the boy. He and a tall ginger girl (another Seamoore kid, of course) were balancing their ping-pong ball with unnerving grace. Arms behind them like penguins, bodies slow, serious. Fin watched them like she was watching a scene from a film. The almost-kiss tension of it. The eye contact. The heat. She felt something — not quite jealousy, not yet. Just a flare of curiosity she couldn’t file away.

They moved to the final task: character groups. Cosettes to the left, Valjeans to the right, Eponines in the far corner. Fin stood with the other Eponines. Four girls total. All three others were from Seamoore, including the redhead from the ping-pong exercise, who introduced herself as Shay. Shay numbered them off with bossy confidence. Fin was two.

Then the improv scenes began. Mr. Wiley called out pairings and gave them mini-scenarios. Cosette tries to find out how Marius feels about Eponine — in mime. Valjean comforts a dying Fantine in three emotions. Fin watched. Studied. Enjoyed. Especially when it was the nose-touching boy again. Aaron, Shay whispered, like she was reciting scripture. “That’s Aaron. He’s probably our Marius. You should hear him sing. He plays rugby. And guitar. Look at him act.”

Fin murmured something noncommittal. Shay didn’t notice. She was vibrating with ambition, already directing scenes in her head

#

When it was Fin’s turn, she already knew Aaron would be her scene partner — the numbers were uneven and Mr. Wiley loved a twist.

“Well, this should be interesting,” he said, with the theatrical delight of a man pulling strings from above. He flipped a card. “‘No one knows Eponine the way Marius does.’ Off you go.”

Before Fin could even blink, Aaron was in front of her, hands warm around hers. “Trust me,” he murmured.

Three... called Mr. Wiley.

Aaron leaned in close, forehead pressed to hers — a continuation of the earlier game, but slower, loaded. “Look me in the eye,” he said. “Don’t move.”

Two...

“Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not,” Fin replied, because she wasn’t. Or hadn’t been. Or hadn’t thought she was.

One...

Action.

Aaron moved his body closer to hers, gently folding inwards so his broad frame could meet her smaller one. He smelled faintly of something medicinal — mint and smoke and something vaguely sweet. His forehead was warm. His voice was soft.

“This isn’t supposed to be mime,” Fin whispered, her breath catching, not quite from nerves but from something more confusing. Their lips were so close she could see the seam of his mouth. She tried to remember what she’d eaten for lunch — suddenly hyper-aware of herself in a way she never had been before.

“And?” Aaron’s voice was almost playful. “I didn’t say we had to mime.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, with a smile so small and sharp it sliced straight into her.

“Oh. Right. You too,” she murmured. “I’m Fin. I go here.”

“Aaron Hemingway,” he said. “Seamoore.”

“I figured,” she said, letting the name sit between them like a dare. “Aaron Hemingway.” She exaggerated the last part, made it sound faintly ridiculous, but he didn’t flinch.

“I like your fringe,” he said.

Fin blinked. Up until then, she had liked her fringe too — it made her feel French, or at least intentional. Now she wanted to like whatever this boy liked. Or be liked by him. She couldn’t tell which.

“I hope we get to see much more of each other,” Aaron said seriously, as if he were

proposing something sacred. And in that moment, Fin believed him — that this, here, now, was the most important thing in his life. She'd read somewhere that staring into someone's eyes for four uninterrupted minutes could make you fall in love. They weren't at four yet, but they were dangerously close.

"TIME'S UP," Wiley bellowed.

Fin jerked backwards, like she'd been burned. She felt unsteady, not just in her legs but in her sense of self. The room looked different now, blurred at the edges. Aaron kept looking at her. Wiley clapped — slow, satisfied. A few others joined in, reluctantly. Notably, Shay didn't.

Fin made her way back to the Eponine corner.

"Well, *that* was lovely," Shay said, voice flat. "He's done that bit before. Always a crowd-pleaser."

Fin felt her cheeks heat, as though she'd stepped into someone else's spotlight. The other girls made vaguely approving noises. Shay, meanwhile, watched Aaron like a coach benched from the game.

#

Later, after rehearsals, Mr. Wiley asked Fin to stay behind and help with the chairs. She knew Archie was already in the car, probably drumming on the steering wheel or listening to one of his sad-boy playlists, but she said yes anyway. You didn't say no to Wiley. Not when you were one of his favourites — handpicked from S1 like heirlooms.

When she finally left the echoey hush of the assembly hall, the air outside was soft and gold. That dusky hour when everything looked more cinematic than it deserved to. Aaron was leaning against the brick wall just outside, cigarette in hand, shoulders relaxed in a way that made him seem older than he was.

“Fringe,” he called.

Fin paused, halfway to Archie’s red Fiesta. She pushed the fringe out of her eyes.

“Hi.”

“What’s the rush?” Aaron asked, stepping forward.

Fin gestured toward the car. “That’s my... boyfriend,” she said. A lie. Sharp and impulsive.

Aaron raised an eyebrow, not quite buying it. “You seem sure about that.”

“*I am.*”

He squinted toward Archie and gave a strange little wave — too high, too flappy, like he was waving at a baby through glass. “Alright, pal!” he called. Archie lifted a hand in return, then stared pointedly at the dashboard.

Aaron turned his back to the car.

“Look — let’s be honest,” he said, voice low and quick. “I think you’ve got Eponine in the bag, and I’m feeling pretty confident about Marius. There’s talk of interactive auditions — like what we just did. I want to run something with you. You free tomorrow?”

“I think so.”

“Cool. I’ll text you.”

“You don’t have my number.”

“It’s on the company sheet.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Great.”

She darted past him before he could say anything else. As Archie pulled the car out of the lot, Fin saw Aaron in the rear-view mirror, lighting another cigarette, eyes following her like he hadn’t quite finished the scene they were in.

Inside the car, Snow Patrol's *Run* was playing low. She turned it down.

"Why are you listening to that? It makes you sad."

"I dunno," Archie said, and switched it off entirely. "How was rehearsal?"

"Good," she said, and then added, too quickly, "I've got a last-minute audition prep thing tomorrow. After school."

Archie reached over and gently stroked the back of her neck.

"Good."

The next morning she woke to a message from Aaron

#

Fringe. Can u come to Seamoore? My car broke. See u at 4.30 out front. Don't be nervous.

A.H

#

Fin pulled her hair into a ponytail and clipped her fringe back. She noticed a few stray eyebrow hairs at the top of her nose and decided that she should pluck them if she were to be improvising with Aaron again. The Seamoore girls had shoulder bags and so she changed her schoolbag from a backpack to a shoulder bag and borrowed some of Ola's perfume without asking. She felt on the precipice of something incredible; like her life was about to begin. Her driveway was dusty and hot and the air smelt of sweet rapeseed and grass. She ate breakfast at school before the bell rang. An option available to kids who's parents forgot about breakfast. It was always something Fin was jealous of; parents who forgot about breakfast. That must mean they were important people, or busy people or had family problems. All the cool people at school had family problems. Fin felt electric. Everyone knew she was in line to get Eponine. The news had spread around the school overnight. Even the teachers were flirting with her. She'd made it. She didn't even notice that Archie hadn't turned up to school

until after morning break-time when he didn't turn up to history. She pulled out her phone under the desk.

Hey, are you at school?

F x

#

Hi, morning. Dad not well but I am coming in now.

Arch x

#

Fin put her phone away and stared down at her textbook.

Fin sat on the teacher's desk, her knees dangling over the edge whilst Aaron pretended to read his libretto.

#

'You're teasing me with those long socks and tiny skirt'.

#

'Sorry'

#

'I don't think you are'

#

'I am. Truly. I'm sorry that you find my school uniform so provocative.'

#

'Do you have to wear those socks like that though?'

#

'I could wear tights, but they aren't so easy-access'

#

Aaron blew out his cheeks and snapped his lib shut with one hand. Fin remained expressionless. She loved how objectified she felt, and how much she could see his arousal. The more she saw his arousal, the more frustrated she felt with the lack of progress she was making with Archie, the more she wanted to be objectified.

#

'Practical' he smiled as he took a seat beside her on the desk. She watched his gaze move towards the opening of her school shirt, his ears starting to turn pink. He didn't kiss her but slid his hand down her top tugging at her right breast.

'I love your tits'. Fin knew she didn't have tits which made her insecure. Insecurity was a new emotion for her. Everything about Aaron made her insecure, she liked that, feeling like she had to work to gain the reward of his attention. He started to kiss her, he tasted of cigarettes.

'You taste of cigarettes' she said feeling his tongue softly against hers. He said nothing and moved his hand up her skirt, fingering her underwear to one-side.

'Fuck, you are so wet'. She didn't know why he said this. Was it hot to be wet? Wasn't she always wet? She felt nervous to touch him. She knew he was hard, she could see it through his trousers.

'Fin?'

'Yeah'

'Touch my dick'. She did from the outside of his school trousers. He started to unzip his trousers, then led Fin off the table and pushed her onto her knees. He tasted unclean. She liked how dirty the whole thing felt. Aaron put his hands back onto the desk and told her to 'go until I come'. She felt like somebody else when she was with him, someone she never

thought she could be with her perfect childhood and undamaged existence. It was all part of the job, character work, professional exploration.

Text

#

They had their first fight in May. His panic had turned into a wave of hot, flustered anger. It wasn't like the arguments his parents used to have. He had expected her to shout back, but she had just left.

#

It was easier for Fin. Everything was easier for Fin. Her UCAS personal statement was five hundred words over the limit. Her work experience was at the Dundee Rep Theatre and she got two weeks instead of one. She was a sports champion, young musician of the year, English and Drama prize winner and straight-1 student. He was a pitied senior prefect. During work experience week, he had a panic attack on his first day, in a primary school. It caused him to bang his nose on a chair, which bled, and it had scared the children so he couldn't return. It was six months now, surely he should be able to focus? How can you appeal your grades when both the prelims and the finals were after she died? He was stupid, maybe that was the reason why. He was stupid and Fin was smart. If he had been born into

her family and her into his, perhaps things would be the same as they are now.

#

How could he get out of Rosehorn without somewhere to go? It was the one subject that he found impossible to talk to Fin about. He had tried to ask her for help with his application, but she hadn't even approached the topic of applications in school yet. It just highlighted the vast distance between them. The difference that, so quickly after they had met, made Archie want to handcuff their wrists together and throw away the key. She would ask questions, sharp and impatient- 'what do you mean you don't have an idea of what you want to study? Anything Archie? What are you good at? What are you interested in?' Beside Fin, he felt brain dead, like his whole mind was filled with dough. It was the same in guidance meetings at school. When Kim was mentioned, Archie would shut down. Fin spent most of her free time vision-boarding, a task where she would take clippings of books, magazines or print things out online and stick them onto a big sheet of card that was stuck to her bedroom mirror.

I don't want you to change. He sat on the bed and hugged his knees to his chest. It was a day of un-forecast rain showers without any clouds. The Scottish monsoon season, where rainbows were as common as ruined barbecues and t-shirt tans.

I'm not changing, I'm growing...bettering myself.

I don't see how you can be better. He bit the tip of his finger playfully. You are the best person I know.

That's a ridiculous thing to say. She snapped. If we can't get better then we might as well be dead. His face drained of colour. Something about the coldness in her voice made him frightened. What if he couldn't get better? Did she think he might as well be dead?

Look at this Fin, he said, picking up a small pile of her magazine clippings. You don't

have to have this hair. Or go to this beach. Or have this bag. He crouched down to gather some of the pictures she had mapped out for glueing. Or be on this stage. Or get this award. Or move to this city. I love your stained t-shirts, I like it when you wear my Canterbury's! Is this a juice cleanse?. Fuck me. He accidentally ripped the picture with his hand between his index finger and thumb, unaware he was holding it so tight. Fin, for the rest of your life, I want to watch you eat pizza by folding the whole pizza in half and refuse to order a calzone because you say it's too hot inside and you want to eat it straight away. I don't want you to juice cleanse. I like you this happy. I'm not saying you can't have dreams, but if you never changed, no...even if you "regressed", he gestured the quotation marks with his hands, I'd still think you were ace. She went to snatch the pictures from his hand but he pulled his hand away. I like that you can't say no because you are too much of a people pleaser. He flipped over a cutting in his hands and stared down at the beach-model on the paper. No no, no Fin, I love your tiny boobs and the short baby-hair around your ears when you wear your hair up in that tiny little...stump! I like it when you are short and snappy with your family. I like that temper. I don't care if you're so indecisive with everything and you can never pick a movie to watch. I wish you would cry more but it feels almost nice when you do because I know you are feeling a lot. When you smile your right eye goes a tiny bit lazy and it's just... you, Fin. I don't want you to stop biting your nails. I don't want you to sort your teeth.

#

She looked around the room at the cuttings he had ransacked. Calmly and slowly she got to her feet.

'Fuck you Archie. You're supposed to say those things after I tell you everything I hate about myself. Not before.' she breathed 'sounds like you want to keep me in your own shitty cardboard house, in this shitty town, eating your shitty shepherd's pie on benefits for the

rest of your life'. And she shut the door.

He heard her walk down the hall, open the front door, grab her bike and, tires on the gravel, she was gone. Trying to recall what he had said to her was near-enough impossible like recalling detailed dreams. How could he have heart her whilst trying to tell her everything he liked about her. Was out of control? It wasn't like Fin to leave anywhere. Even when he saw her bickering with her parents, she ran circles around them with her wit and argument. How could he have made her leave? After he had finished talking, he had expected her to spread her hands over her clippings like windscreen wipers on a car, sending the papers flying, and jump onto him. The words had felt unfiltered. They had been pulled magically from his gut, like a rainbow scarf from the sleeve of his hoodie. Words that had been inside his head for so long, ruminating, begging to be released. And now, just like the word beautiful, when it had been set free a month ago, like a caged bird, he felt stupid. He held his breath as he walked downstairs, trying to plug the surge of tears rising from his throat. Val was in the kitchen unpacking shopping when he walked past the door, with his head down.

Give me a hand, will you Archie? He released his breath.

I was just...he indicated towards the front door.

Let her be, she said, waving her hand in the direction that Fin had vanished in. She's hormonal. I remember when I was that age. Nothing you say or do can ever be right Archie. Us women are a nightmare. We pull problems from thin air. The best thing you can do right now is to give her a wee bit of space. Valerie lifted a shopping bag and passed it over to him. You've done well to hold her down this long. I always thought I'd created a loose-cannon with that one. She smiled at him. He always felt worse after Valerie's kindness. She untangled her glasses from her hair and placed them on her nose to read the back of a wine bottle.

'So, I've been meaning to tie you down for a second, how is next year looking for

you? It's the teacher in me!' She didn't look up, peering closer at the bottle, moving it closer and then further away from the end of her nose. You know, my eyesight is appalling Archie? This is what happens when you get old like me! Archie noticed that he couldn't see very well either. Something fell onto the shopping bag in his hands. It took him a few seconds to realise it was a tear.

Actually, I've been meaning to ask...

At first, the words hung in his throat like a bubble of pride, if burst it would never be put back together. He screwed his eyes

Could you help me?

#

They sat at the kitchen table nursing cups of hot tea in their hands. The weather was mild outside, but the warmth of the tea felt pleasant in his grip. By four O'clock they had an application, a bereavement appeal, and a pot of pea and bacon soup. He wanted to sleep. At the start of the day he was a big Russian doll, now he was the last one left, small, empty, and breakable, yet nothing to hide.

#

They were still at the kitchen table, a few hours later eating soup, when Fin walked in. It must have started to rain, as her hair was sticking to her face and her arms were wet. It wasn't the right time to say it, but Archie found himself standing up and apologising.

I'm going to do some marking in the office, said Valerie, clearing her bowl into the dishwasher.

Be nice, she said to Fin as she left the room.

Fin pulled up a chair but didn't touch her soup.

Do you still want to be friends with me next year? He asked, picking at the crumbs on

his side-plate.

Obviously. She tucked her hair behind her ears. He knew she had been thinking. It made him feel panicked and his eyes felt prickly.

To be honest, I don't know what happened. I just don't want things to change. His mum and dad had been happy until he came along and then his existence changed his mum. Then when she died, when it was just Paul and him, his dad changed dad too. Just by being, he seemed to manage to corrupt a perfectly good situation. Nothing he touched turned to gold.

But, change is good Arch.

I applied for universities today. Her whole body froze.

Fuck off?

She was smiling now.

Yeah, your mum helped quite a bit. She's good with that stuff.

She is good with that stuff! Fin flung her arms around his neck.

See, this is good-change Archie!

That night they drove to Aberdeen to see a film. All the lights were green and they were screaming 'thank you' to each traffic light in falsetto. They played The Wombats 'Let's Dance to Joy Division' eight times with the windows down on the dual carriageway.

Text

Irritation was everywhere. In her jaw. In the arches of her feet. Crawling like static across her skin. Where did irritation fall in the five stages of grief? Was it between denial and bargaining? Or did it belong in its own purgatory—hot, sharp, and entirely unproductive?

She scrubbed a head of lettuce in the utility room sink like it had wronged her. Clumps of dirt swirled down the drain. Lately, she'd developed a compulsive desire to clean things—her face, her hands, her phone—like she could scrub herself into clarity. Into righteousness. The apron was damp against her chest. Still no word from Archie.

Two days.

She told herself she wasn't mad enough to justify two full days of silence, but the truth was slipperier than that. They were obsessive communicators, the kind of couple who texted through toothbrush routines and bad dreams. She couldn't fall asleep without his goodnight. Woke to his messages like a child to sunlight.

And now—nothing.

After the show, things had soured. He hadn't understood her performance. Hadn't understood *her*. His text had been curt, clipped, emotionally tone-deaf. She reread it three

times just to confirm the insult wasn't accidental. She needed someone who *got it*. Who knew what it meant to be watched. Admired. Talked about. To feel electric onstage and still crave more.

And Archie—sweet, soft, late Archie—had crept into the theatre *after* the Prologue. Hadn't brought flowers, which felt worse than an insult. It was embarrassing. She tried to forgive it by imagining he didn't know the tradition, which only embarrassed her more.

A fresh wave of trepidation rolled through her stomach like bad weather.

"I just don't see why you wouldn't ask me first, before inviting Paul and Archie over," she said to her mother, voice like a knife under silk.

"I'm not a bloody mind reader," Valerie shrugged, spinning toward the sink. "Sorry for assuming you'd want to see your best friend."

Fin shoved the lettuce at her, droplets flying. She checked her phone again. Still blank. Her chest felt filled with something metallic and fixed, like a block of iron slotting perfectly between her ribs.

Who had turned their back first? When had she stopped being magic and started being maintenance?

"It's fucking disrespectful," she said, too loud.

"Language," Valerie snapped.

The oven timer beeped. They stared at it for a few seconds, neither of them moving. Fin slammed it off.

"Don't be embarrassed, Finny. It's not a big deal."

"I'm not embarrassed," she lied. "I'm annoyed."

"Who's forty-five minutes late for something like this?"

"It's unlike him," Valerie said gently. "Did you text him?"

She hadn't. Her phone was out of credit. Kim had topped it up yesterday—two weeks' worth—but she'd burned through it in a night. Aaron had offered to pay. She felt sick at the thought.

"He said he lost track of time," she lied again, too easily.

Her mind spun back to Saturday night. Mr. Wiley with more drinks. The fireplace. A black hole where a memory should be. That was where it began: the forgetting. She had woken up naked next to Aaron in the summer house. The worst part wasn't even what had happened—it was not *knowing*. And as long as her memory stayed blank, she could stay innocent. Or at least pretend.

She'd told Aaron not to contact her again. Like it was that easy. Like secrets could just be deleted.

"Is everything all right?" Valerie asked, rinsing the wine glass.

"Yes."

"I mean... between you two?"

"What's Ola been mouthing?"

"She hasn't. I just—he's not Rainbow Bear, Finny."

Fin blinked. "What?"

"Rainbow Bear. Your teddy. You can't just swap Archie out for a sparkly Nintendo and expect me to feel sorry for you when you see him in the hands of someone else at the car boot sale."

"I have *no idea* what you're talking about," Fin hissed.

Valerie topped up her wine. "Excuse my French, but darling... don't fuck this up."

Fin grabbed the car keys.

"Where are you going?"

“Where do you think?”

Valerie’s voice followed her out. “Be kind. That boy’s been through a lot.”

Fin muttered under her breath, so quiet the car door almost swallowed it: “It doesn’t always get to be an excuse.”

#

In first year, Ola broke her arm in P.E., and for weeks, everyone wanted to know how it happened. Teachers. Classmates. Even strangers. People signed her cast like it was a yearbook. She got let out of class early. And suddenly, Fin saw it. To be noticed at school, you had to be broken in a visible way.

She didn’t have damage, so she made some.

She lied about sex. Weed. Got good at pouring just enough vodka from her parents’ stash to get a burn in her throat without getting caught. She smoked incense sticks like they were contraband, inhaling drama from the tips. At night, she cried for reasons she half-invented. The sadness felt real because the performance was sincere. She wrote *these are my tears* in her diary, then smeared mascara over the page like proof.

Her happy life was a dirty little secret. She didn’t know how to hold joy without apology.

But now? Now she had a real secret. And when the secret is real, you can’t cry about it. You can’t say it out loud. It just hums under your skin, slow and dangerous.

She’d wanted a scandal. A story with her name underlined in every chapter. Something to grip. Something she could control—until she couldn’t.

It thrilled her. The double role: victim and villain. Star and saboteur.

As she drove, the sky still pale with evening, her knuckles turned white against the wheel. She missed the turn-off to Archie’s house and crossed the dual carriageway without

blinking.

Text

His guidance teacher had said the first year would be the hardest. Grief had seasons, apparently, and he was nearly through the worst of them. Just one final climb left: the anniversary. Christmas. It loomed at the top of the year like a summit no one wanted to reach.

When he thought of the months, he saw a giant circle in his mind's eye. Christmas was perched right at the top, like some terrible prize. Summer sat lazily at the bottom. He must have learned it in nursery or Primary 1—a child's drawing of the seasons, all smudged crayon and smiley suns—but it had stuck. If someone asked when his birthday was, he'd say "March" and immediately think: bottom-left quarter, start of the downhill. The final stretch of the year—October, November, December—always felt steep, like the air got thinner the closer he got to it.

But he was almost there. He'd make the climb with Fin.

His mum had died the night of the Christmas dance, in the narrow space between third and fourth year. He'd been a prefect on duty. There were four of them—Archie, Mark, Hamish, and Alice—assigned the kind of menial responsibilities that made you feel like a version of adult: ticket checks, bag searches, a half-hearted hunt for vodka in water bottles.

Toilet patrol.

He and Alice had been on desk duty together while the ceilidh roared inside. She spent most of the night glued to her phone. Archie didn't have one—his mum didn't see the point—so he made himself useful, pacing the corridors and checking for disturbances that never came. By the end of the night, someone pulled them into the final Orcadian Strip the Willow. Alice paired with him reluctantly. He made her laugh a few times, but only because he kept messing up the spin order. It was hard to remember who came next. The band started playing *The Flying Scotsman* and Archie gave Alice a hopeful look. She shook her head. They needed another boy to make it work, but Hamish and Mark were MIA.

They drifted back to the desk. Alice made a phone call. He only half-registered it above the stomp of shoes and fiddle music, until a loud banging began in the boys' toilets. Archie's ears, always trained for potential conflict, pricked up.

He stood. Rolled his shoulders. He was stronger than most boys his age, but he hated confrontation. His guidance teacher once told him he was “soft-spoken in a way that didn't project authority.” Whatever that meant. Last year on his prefect application, under “area for growth,” he'd written: *discipline*. He hadn't dared include it again this year.

He stood outside the toilet door, mustering something firm but witty to say. Words always failed him at the worst times.

“Lots of noise coming from here, boys. If you're banging around while taking a shit, you're doing it wrong.”

The banging stopped. Whispering. Shuffling.

“Do I have to come in there? Because I'd rather not.” His voice cracked. The humiliating whimper of a puberty ghost.

Then, to his surprise, the end cubicle creaked open and out stepped Mr Campbell, his

maths teacher, brushing dust off his sleeves and nose.

“All handled and under control,” he said, giving Archie a brisk pat on the back. He ushered him casually out the door.

“Ah—sorry, sir. I thought it was third years...”

“Teenagers,” Mr Campbell muttered, eyes rolling, vanishing back into the party.

But something didn’t sit right.

Archie looked around—no one was watching—and slipped back in. The toilet smelled like bleach and stale Lynx. From the last cubicle came a sound. A kind of ragged breathing. He moved closer, slow and careful, and nudged the door open.

There was a girl inside.

She was curled under the toilet, her back to him, wearing only her underwear and heels, her dress bunched in her fists. Crying.

He hesitated, then stepped forward, heart racing, one clammy hand extended instinctively—but not too close, not too fast. He was suddenly hyper-aware of everything: his wet palms, the way his shirt stuck to his back, the fact he hadn’t seen her face. What would she think? That he was a pervert? That he’d touched himself? That he’d pissed his hands?

He tried to speak, but the words were caught somewhere dry and sharp in his throat.

“*Leave me alone,*” she snapped, without turning, her hand lunging to slam the door in his face. The lock clicked.

He stood there, unsure of what he was meant to do next. He should’ve asked if she was okay. But he didn’t. Not properly.

When he came out, Alice was waiting, still on her phone. She held out his jacket with one hand, thumbs tapping furiously with the other.

“We can go now,” she said.

“There’s a girl in there. She’s crying.” He pulled on his jacket, following her toward the car park.

Alice didn’t look up. “Is she on her period?”

“No...” Archie scratched the back of his neck. “I think you should go in. Just check on her, Al.”

Alice sighed like he’d asked her to donate a kidney. She shoved her coat at him.

“Hold this.” She disappeared into the girls’ toilets.

Archie stood still, jacket draped over his arms, trying to place the girl. She’d seemed too small to be in third year. And then, uncomfortably, he realized he’d looked at her body. Wondered about it. Not consciously—but still. Why was she wearing a bra when she barely had anything to fill it? Why had he noticed? What kind of person sees a girl crying and catalogues her?

He hadn’t seen her eyes. That felt like the worst part.

Moments later, Alice reappeared.

“Drunk. Couldn’t handle it.”

“Is she okay?” he asked again.

“She’s *fine*,” Alice snapped, already walking off.

The memory split after that. It went fuzzy at the edges. Like his mind didn’t want to touch it for too long.

And then—

Her.

His mother.

Hanging from a tree in the garden.

Exes

She wanted friends who talked about sex more. Not in the performative, perform-an-orgasm way, not like the scripted buzz of TV girls whispering their shame and bravado over twenty-quid cosmopolitans. She didn't want brunch confessionals or tips passed around like coupons. She didn't want Sex and the City-style sex talk—quippy, conflicted, always framed around how palatable it might be to men. She wanted women who talked about sex the way British people talked about the weather: constantly, casually, without needing a reason. As if it were a shared condition of being alive. Something worth observing out loud. “It’s a bit muggy today,” “I can’t stop thinking about when he put my whole hand in his mouth.” No build-up. No apology.

She wanted friends who were deeply, shamelessly sexually active. Women who *owned* their sex like a shameless red soled shoe or a well-used, business-class passport. Not just active, but abundant. Wild in a way that wasn't reckless, but curated—intentional. The kind of women who knew what kind of sex they liked the way other people knew what deodorant really worked on them. Women who could ask for it—*all* of it—and then take it

without self-erasure. Women who didn't cry afterward unless they meant to.

She was so tired of watching brilliant, soft-hearted women become statistics of male mediocrity. She didn't want to sit on more living room floors, half-listening to stories about men who couldn't find the clitoris but always found new ways to gaslight, breadcrumb and love-bomb. Men who used their hands like they were starting an old lawn mower. Men who learned everything they knew about women from the hub they'd started scrolling in 2005. She didn't want those stories anymore.

She wanted women who were luminous with confidence. Who moisturised with peach oils and bought baby-blue lingerie just for themselves. Women who were ambitious about pleasure, who sought it like she sought a good Picant —boldly, with criteria. Women who weren't afraid to make a damn good mess. Women who understood desire as both a language and a compass. She wanted to surround herself with friends in high places—professionally, spiritually, erotically. Women who dated men (and women) who *knew* women, who *craved* women—not just their bodies, but their chaos, their cleverness, their contradiction. Their delicious contradiction. Men who had money *for* women. Who invested in their joy. Who read books by women and didn't see it as homework. Did that kind of ecosystem even exist?

Somewhere between fantasy and possibility, she hoped so.

She longed to tell those kind of friends how he used to fuck her when she was eighteen. Friends who would lick their salt-rims and listen with knowing eyes. She wanted to tell them that he'd held her nose against his pubic bone over and over like an athletic interval session and then, afterwards, washed her hair silently and dutifully.

And she was tired—honestly—of the way she rationed self-love. Tired of the fact that her relationship with herself always felt like some kind of negotiation. She was exhausted by

the self-improvement loop, the idea that she had to *earn* softness toward herself. That love had to come with proof. It occurred to her, sometimes in a flash so clear it was almost violent, that maybe her whole gift was just how she existed. Not what she said or achieved or looked like. But the *effect* of her. The way she lit up space. How people's cheeks flushed when she was near. The colour she brought to the air.

She wanted to believe that was enough. That the way she *was* in the world—curious, luminous, insistently tender—was enough. That she didn't need to be a masterpiece. That maybe just being a mood, a memory, a spark in someone's day, was a kind of legacy leaving art too.

She wanted to let that be her whole thing which would certainly bore her. How hilarious. How deliciously contradictory.

One thing was certain: her whole life had been driven by this low, electric fear of being ordinary. It buzzed in her like tinnitus, like static on an old TV, that persistent noise of self-disappointment. It was the hum beneath every half-smile, every stiff drink, every time she laughed a little too hard at someone else's story. She didn't want to be famous for anything bad—god, no. She just wanted to be famous for something *good*. Something pure and bright and impossible to hate.

How could people *not* want that? She didn't trust anyone who claimed they didn't. Liars, the lot of them. There were people of society, and then there were people famous for doing something good—and between those two groups, she always felt stuck, neither one nor the other.

And that made her feel like a failure. Not the dramatic, crash-and-burn kind, but the soft, private kind—the sort that makes ordinary Tuesday mornings feel like personal betrayals.

But then, there were days.

Days where all she wanted was a summer game of rounders with no phones, no press, no curated feeds. Just sunlight, laughter, underwired bras, Sainsbury's meal deals and Scottish sunburn. Days when she envied ordinary people—people who didn't wake up with ambition coiled around their neck. Because *they* could be loved without suspicion. They could skinny dip in the dark and not end up in a tabloid. They could watch their children become strange and brilliant little humans without wondering whether it was them or their last name that got them into art school. They could go on first dates at cash-only Italian restaurants and not worry about being photographed with marinara on their chin.

They could age—actually age—without injectables, and no one would call it “brave.” They could, at 11:47 p.m., make a run for Pringles and Blossom Hill and stand under the fluorescents in their old college sweatshirt and still feel like they belonged.

But then—then there were the *good* famous people. The magnets. The ones who got to hobnob with the world's best storytellers. Who saw colour in places the rest of us only saw concrete. Who heard the beep-beep-beep of a pedestrian crossing and thought, *that's a key and a rhythm, that's a start*. They could be heard—*really* heard—across oceans without shouting. They could do no wrong and still be adored. Whispered about. Watched. Not just seen, but studied. Picked apart like myth.

And all the while, she stood somewhere in between—fame-curious, ordinariness-starved, trying to love herself in the echo of everything she hadn't yet become.

The thing was, she never really got to experience the clean, holy kind of love—the kind without angle or agenda. Not really. Because she was a shapeshifter. Not by conscious choice exactly, though it felt like a skill once, a kind of superpower. Maybe even a survival tactic. God only knows where it came from—maybe childhood.

She had this eerie talent: the ability to sense, almost instantly, the kind of person someone wanted her to be. It was like she could read it their coffee order or the way they answered ‘how are you?’. And without even trying, she’d begin to shift. Adjust the pitch of her laugh. Match their mood. Alter her accent. Say the right thing before they’d even thought to want it. She became fluent in the minor-key details that made her lovable to whoever was looking. She wasn’t lying, exactly. She’d fine-tune herself from a general genre into a specialised subject. But she wasn’t exactly telling her truth either. At this point, she didn’t know how. It was like being a human algorithm. She gathered data—expressions, preferences, offhand comments—and curated herself accordingly. Not in a sinister way, but in a...come to think of it...desperate one. She wanted to be chosen, not just liked, but *wanted* late at night by the men who had girlfriend’s they loved, by grandparents who swore they didn’t have a favourite grandchild and be the name on the lips of the therapists who tell their clients to channel her a little more in their day-to-day lives. And in doing that—molding herself into someone else’s perfect person—she lost the thread of herself. She could spend hours analysing how they felt about her, but ask her how she felt about them, and it was like asking a mirror how it feels about a face.

Turning thirty had, of course, become a cliché. She knew it, could feel the parody of it as she lived it.

She viciously spring-cleaned her flat, hauling bin bags of her twenties to the street like a bad breakup. She stood barefoot in her hallway one night and stared at her reflection for so long she half-expected it to age in real time. She Googled botox, then shut her laptop and put on Now That’s What I Call Music 2010 like it was a portal to a version of herself she couldn’t quite grieve properly.

And then one Saturday, there she was, surrounded by old school friends at a wedding,

half-drunk on prosecco and nostalgia, staring out at the same hills she used to take for granted. They were quilted in rapeseed yellow, the kind of view that makes you feel both very young and very ancient. Someone was laughing about something that happened in second year and she couldn't tell if she felt touched or totally unmoored by it.

There was a moment—just a flash—where she paused and tried to take inventory. To ask herself: Is this it? Is this what becoming a woman looks like? Plants and pavement and pretending to want what you're supposed to want? But then someone passed her another glass, and she smiled and took it, grateful for the distraction. After all, cliché or not, thirty had arrived. And it hadn't asked what kind of woman she wanted to be. It had simply handed her the mirror and left the room.

There were so many moments when she'd find herself in the middle of something objectively wonderful and she'd think, *I should be enjoying this*. Other people would. *Why can't I be inside it, feel it from the inside out?*

And yet, every so often, something would sideswipe her entirely. Unannounced. A tomato, plump and sun-warmed, sliced open in her kitchen or seeing kids, in their purity, finding those first memories of belonging on stage. Moments that didn't announce themselves as meaningful—but took her by the throat anyway. It wasn't ego. Not the smug euphoria of getting the part or hearing the applause. Not even the relief-laced high of getting through a groundbreaking scene responsible for many sleepless nights. This was something purer. Like crying at violin music spilling into the humid air of a wine-drenched night in Sicily, and for once, not needing it to mean anything at all.

She was sat in a small reception room filled with people she couldn't be bothered to get to know or talk to or impress. She knew they would all have a story. The boy with the little gen-z mullet who probably felt lost with his masculinity, who owned a black lab and

who needed this job the kickstart something better for him and his mum. The invisible looking woman who had come into this industry slightly later in life whilst her husband and his family talked about her being a dreamer behind her back and waited patiently for the day where she went back into nursing.

She could feel the propranolol working hard in her body to mute the feeling of impending doom. She didn't feel wide-eyed and spineless anymore. She just felt a tugging dread. She wanted to be offered roles or invited to audition in the final chemistry reads. She didn't want to see the girls who were younger than her, who were up for the same parts, looking more put together and ambitious than she had looked and felt in 10 years. She wanted to bounce into the room and make the panel (the panel she knew so well) to see her for the first time again. She wanted to see the excitement on their faces and the genuine thrill in their voices when they cannot contain their excitement that they had found their star. Instead, they struggled to place her. Her, with the mysterious gap in her CV that didn't quite make enough waves when she was fresh to warrant a career with the presence of fine lines.

She glanced down at her sides. Not even clawing her way through anymore—just holding on. She should have memorised it better. Instead, she'd learned the lines in that vague, dangerous way: the kind where, if she really concentrated, she could string them together word by word, with a few too-long pauses in between. One cough, one moment of silence too long, and the entire scene would white out.

The mullet-boy beside her spoke.

"Never gets easier, does it?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

She blinked, then smiled—eyes wide, feigning composure. "I've had way too much coffee."

He nodded toward his own trembling hands. "Same. They messed up my order and

gave me the wrong one for free. I literally can't waste anything."

"No, I'm the same," Fin said, polite and clipped. She looked back down at her sides, assuming he already knew who she was.

"Sorry," he said, lowering his voice slightly. "But it's kind of wild being in the same room as someone I used to watch on TV."

There it was.

She looked up at him, really saw him for the first time. He crinkled his nose and looked away, a bashful little performance. He had beautiful teeth and that kind of rustic health she remembered from the farmer boys back in high school.

"I'm Robbie," he said, holding out his hand.

She shook it. His palm was slightly damp, and her hand disappeared inside his. There was something oddly comforting...sensual even...about being briefly engulfed like that.

"Good to meet you," she said, shifting in her chair to face him. "Who are you in for?"

"Josh," he replied. "You?"

"Nora."

"I actually liked the script."

"I haven't read it."

He gave a short laugh. "The zombie apocalypse twist caught me off guard."

Fin managed a dry chuckle.

"I think I'm too young for this," he added.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

She smirked. "Ah. Then yes, probably. Or I'm way too old. You've read it—you tell me."

“You’re the right age for Nora,” he said, studying her.

She raised an eyebrow.

‘Robert Maddox’ said the runner appearing in the doorway.

‘Yup’. Robbie stood up enthusiastically, smiled and nodded at Fin and then followed the runner out of the room.

They fucked that afternoon. She’d never slept with someone younger before—He was relentless and hairless with soft skin and pillowy muscles. He smelled sweet. She realised how hard it was to stop a man in their flow when they are blinded by their own desire. How easy it was to just passively let it happen when there wasn’t any real future investment at stake. She could barely muster the energy to tell him to change his tempo once in a while or to use some lube. He asked her questions—earnest, mid-thrust inquiries about casting directors and whether she thought he should go blonde.

When it was over, he got dressed immediately. No pause, no quiet moment together. T-shirt back on, belt looped through with practised ease. He showed her a photo of his dog, one of those yappy half-breeds with a name like Monty or Hugo, was it? Not a black lab. He watched her follow him on Instagram like it was a small administrative task he didn’t quite trust her to complete. She pulled on an oversized hoodie and let him out the back door like a cheerful puppy who needed a wee.

A few minutes later, her agent rang. She’d got the recall. Great, fine. She stared at the kettle, thought about boiling it but didn’t. *Maybe I should actually read the fucking script*, she thought, rubbing at a patch of skin he’d kissed like it was pen smudge. She opened Instagram instead. He’d already messaged her. Probably before he’d even got to her garden gate. What a chase, what a tease.

Didn’t get a recall x

She reacted with a sad face emoji and unfollowed him. Not quite ghosting him, but... almost.

#

He took her face in his hands—so small it barely filled his palms, her little face. Her little lips. Her little chin. Delicate like something remembered from childhood. His gaze, starved and black, held hers. It was the look of someone who was about to ruin their life. The air between them suspended, thick with breath and history, humid like late summer—absolutely unbearable, magnetic. Their tremors met mid-air. His hands shook, not from fear, but from restraint. His hand moved under her shorts. And she let him. The air between them was stifling, too close, thick with hunger. Her breath caught when he exhaled—like she needed him inside her just to breathe properly.

“I can’t stop,” he said, voice cracked at the edges. “You... ruin me. And I want you to.”

#

He kissed her, not out of affection, but compulsion—it wasn’t sweet. It was savage. The kind of kiss that leaves bruises. She tasted like addiction. Like every reason he hated himself, hated her...loved her.

This time, when his hand found how wet she was, she didn’t speak. Didn’t flinch. Just let his hands stay there. Her eyes shimmered, not with tears, but with something harder—recognition, maybe. The brutal kind. The kind that said: *I know what you are, because I’m it too.*

“You make me forget what’s right,” he muttered into her mouth, his hands threading into her plait which he wrapped around his fist like a rope. He pulled her head back with one hand and fingered her harder with the other.

She pressed her body to his like she was begging to disappear into him completely. They held each other like a secret too dangerous to speak. Like people who had already made the worst mistake—and were about to make it again. Because the truth was, they couldn't survive this. Not really. But not touching was worse.

And still, they didn't let go

He kissed her like he was starving.

"You make me broken," he said into her mouth, the words mangled. "I am rot."

She laughed, short and sharp. "We're both rotten."

His voice was low when he spoke again, not quite human. "I dream about you like a sickness."

#

She closed her eyes, let him press her back against the wall, let herself open for him like a wound. There was nothing tender in it—just the terrible kind of intimacy that makes you feel seen in the worst way. The way only someone who mirrors your damage can see you.

And still, they held on—like letting go would kill them faster.

But outside this room—outside her skin, her breath, the ruin of them—there was life.
Real life.

Real life was nappies and half-eaten bananas left to brown on the windowsill. It was baby sick crusted onto shirt collars and arguments whispered through gritted teeth in doorways so the dinner party guests wouldn't hear. Real life was his wife—his *good*, fiery wife—who he loved in the honest way you love something. His wife. Who he loved. So fucking much. Real life was scheduled intimacy and early nights. It was joint calendars and meal plans.

Real life was brushing his teeth while she peed. It was Googling "how to fix a leaking

boiler” at 3am. It was paying nursery fees that felt like ransom. It was his father's dementia slowly eroding the man who once taught him how to treat a woman. It was late-night panic about money, about time, about whether this—*this*—was really all there was.

It was being told off for doing the dishes wrong.

It was skid marks in the toilet.

It was his wife hating the music he loved, the books he read, the clothes he used to wear—and him loving her anyway. Because love in the real world was compromise and the intimacy of a life well built together. Because comfort was quiet, and chaos was unsustainable.

But chaos smelled like her skin.

Chaos whispered, *You're still alive*.

And maybe that was the worst part of it. That here, in the wrongness, in the dirt of it, he felt more *himself* than he had in years.

And still—he would go home.

But just not quite yet.

Like many British actors, Fin Riley, twenty-two, had paid her dues in period dramas: *Horseguards* on the BBC, where she played an outspoken young leatherworker who, as she liked to say, “prefers making clothes to wearing them,” drifting through a new erotic tableau in every episode; and *The Poorly Guarded Girl*, a television adaptation of the 18th-century French ballet *La Fille mal gardée*, where she was the best friend, a wisp of character in a swirl of wigs and petticoats. But it was her breakout role in the BBC drama *Bones* that made people remember her name. In *Bones*, Fin was Maeve—known to some characters as Bones—a thrill-seeker with a razor-thin connection to herself, who orchestrated chaos from behind a mask of detached curiosity. Overnight, everyone knew who she was.

“What’s that?” Aaron asked, rolling over, blinking at the glow of Fin’s phone.

“The *New Yorker* just published the interview,” she said. He let out a low moan, stretching in the sheets.

“What time is it?” His voice was still thick with sleep.

“Six fifteen,” she snapped. Her eyes flicked over to the paragraph titled *A Day in the Life*, and her stomach clenched. “Do I sound pretentious? Listen: *Riley orders an espresso as she hands the waiter her empty, espresso-sized takeaway cup, which, according to a quick Google search, has become a vital accessory. She fixes me with a flat stare: ‘It’s the glue that*

holds this whole show together.”

“At least it’s not actual glue that holds you together,” Aaron joked, pinching her nose.

“Yet,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“No, I mean—it sounds like you,” he mumbled.

She switched off her screen, sat up, and caught herself in the mirror opposite the bed—installed for the sex they were no longer having. Mornings were when she loved her face most, its bare, secret frankness. The coolness of her own skin reminded her of mornings on the farm, cheeks flushed from the cold. She never wore blush; her pallor told her the truth—she wasn’t fully alive. The journalist had called her “heroin-chic” in the *New Yorker*, and she’d whispered, “It’s not your fault,” only to hear a voice in her head hiss, *Yes it is*.

As her name grew, everything else shrank. Every interview, every new episode of *Bones*, made the white walls of her Notting Hill flat press in a little tighter. She finally understood why celebrities bought cavernous houses: not to flaunt, but to have room to breathe when the world outside threatened to choke them.

Her phone buzzed violently in her lap. She peeled back the duvet, padded to the ensuite.

“Hi Mum.”

“Hello, darling.”

“Can I call you back in ten?” Fin whispered, glancing at Aaron, who was already snoring again.

A weary sigh drifted down the line. “Yes, but don’t be long. I don’t like talking while driving.” The call ended with a soft click.

Fin pulled on a black t-shirt dress, her battered Docs, and a small green jacket. She slid on big sunglasses, swiped on her blood-red lipstick, and, without brushing her teeth, left

the flat. The morning outside was dark, as if the sun had decided to sleep in. She hurried through the quiet streets toward Drip Girl Café, the first stop in her day of “vacation”—a word that meant something entirely different for an actor.

She’d just flown back from Ireland the day before, after wrapping a block of filming for *Bones* season two, only to be hurled into a week packed with press for season one. Most days blurred into back-to-back interviews, and today would be no exception. She needed her espresso. Her phone buzzed again.

“Hi Mum.”

“Hi darling.”

“I said I’d call back.”

“I know, but you didn’t.”

“It’s been seven minutes, Mum.”

“I’m not just at your disposal, Finny, because you’re famous.”

“Right,” Fin murmured, catching the flash of a paparazzi camera tucked among the café tables. Right on cue.

“Anyway, we’ve booked a holiday. With Ola and David. Over Christmas.”

“Lovely,” Fin said, mustering thin enthusiasm. She raised a hand at the barista for her usual. The gesture felt new, slightly ridiculous—and she liked it. She worried the day it felt normal was the day she’d lost herself.

“Where to?” she asked.

“Greece. We want it to be a family holiday,” her mother said, putting heavy emphasis on *family*.

“Well, David’s not family,” Fin pointed out, grabbing a cardboard tray for her coffees, waving awkwardly at the barista to show she was “helping.”

“I know, but bring Aaron too—like a triple-date.”

“Aaron won’t be coming,” Fin said, voice low. “I don’t even know if we’ll finish filming before Christmas. I might have to stay through the 27th. I could maybe fly out for a couple of days.” She lied. The thought of a family holiday with a man she’d grown to resent made her stomach twist. “Besides, he has his own family.”

“Let me know. Flights are cheap right now,” her mother added, then caught herself, “—not that money’s an issue for you.”

“I’ll let you know.” The barista slid her coffees across the counter with an eager smile. “Anyway, Mum, gotta go. Love you.”

“Bye now,” her mother said. Fin shoved her phone into her pocket.

“Thanks,” she said to the barista. “Pop it on the—”

“—tab. Already done,” the barista finished with a bright grin. “Got anything nice planned today?”

“Oh, you know.” Fin winked behind her sunglasses, then realized the girl couldn’t see. She grabbed the coffees. “Have a great day.” She left the café, coffees clutched like trophies.

Back at the flat, Aaron was still in bed.

“Don’t you have work?” she asked, handing him his cup.

“Lead singer’s got laryngitis. Day off,” he said, taking a gulp.

“Be careful, it’s—” she started, but he winced violently.

“For fuck’s sake, Fin! How many times? ASK FOR IT AT A DRINKABLE TEMPERATURE!” he snapped.

“Sorry,” she said softly, almost enjoying the ritual of his morning meltdown. She left him muttering and moved to the living room, where she sat and sipped her espresso. She

hated this flat. It was hers, but not a home—an abandoned stage set of half-unpacked boxes, a curtain tied with string, an old suitcase doubling as a dresser. She'd never had time to make it hers, and didn't feel responsible for making it his.

She drained her coffee, washed it down with a Pro-Plus and two ibuprofen, then checked her calendar. 9:15: a meeting with an LA director about a potential series. Later, an interview with *1883 Magazine*, and tonight, *The Mac Reuben Show*. Aaron appeared in the doorway in his boxers, hairier than ever.

"Where'd you go? You've got time."

"Trying to focus," she said.

"Could you focus on me?" he asked, voice playful but eyes hard.

"Not sure I have time for what you're suggesting."

"You never have time."

"I know, I'm sorry."

He sat on the coffee table, too close. "Every time you come back, you're a little weirder."

"A little more famous," she corrected, eyes locked on her phone.

"That shouldn't be a bad thing for the people you love."

"I know."

"You just have to stop thinking about yourself all the time."

"Could you have picked a better way to say that?" she shot back.

"Take the day off with me."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can." He snatched her phone, waving it over a half-empty pint glass. "See? It's easy, easy—"

“GIVE ME MY FUCKING PHONE,” she shouted, lunging. Her arm knocked the glass, sending it crashing against the wall. He froze, arms raised, dropping the phone onto the carpet.

“I was just messing around,” he said quietly. “I just wanted a blowjob.”

“Sorry.”

“Is that too much to ask from my girlfriend? You used to beg for it.” His words left her cold.

“I’m going to clean this up, then I have to leave,” she said. But when she bent down, he grabbed her arms.

“You’re never here. I miss you.” He kissed her; his tongue felt burnt and swollen.

“I’m sorry I broke the glass. I’ll make it up to you tonight,” she murmured, slipping out of his grip.

She left the flat minutes later, stepping into the pale morning light. The city felt a shade warmer, her chest a fraction lighter. London thrummed around her. It amazed her how, in a city of millions, the thought of just one person could shape the air you breathed.

The meeting with her agent had started twenty minutes late and overran by ten. Now she was thirty minutes behind. If she’d arrived first, she could’ve ordered something, reapplied her lipstick, fixed her fringe. As it was, the hair clung damply to her forehead, and the insides of her thighs were damp with sweat. It made her feel heavier than she was. Thank god for black clothes and big sunglasses.

She spotted him as she walked into the café—he was already standing, tall at the back, like he’d known exactly when she’d arrive. Seeing him always came with a physiological glitch, like her lungs had been thrown from a moving car and needed a second to catch up. Same as that summer afternoon at the beer garden, the Festival, two years ago. A

kind of beautiful wind-knock.

She smiled. Ordered an Americano at the empty bar. He went in for a hug.

“Sorry,” she murmured against his t-shirt. “I’m sweaty.”

He laughed. “Just the two of us, then? No bodyguard?”

She laughed back, melodic and reflexive, placing her bag beneath the table. “No no.

We’re not that famous yet.”

He wrapped his hands around a mug already halfway empty.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d want,” he said, gesturing toward it.

“I ordered too. It’s fine.” She slid into the seat across from him. “I’m glad you came.

Wasn’t expecting you to say yes, not on such short notice.”

“Right.”

She touched his arm, too lightly, and immediately wished she hadn’t. His grey shirt clung to him like skin. He’d filled out—arms, chest, something in the jaw. She felt like she was evaporating beside him. Whatever was expanding in him had only made her smaller.

“How’ve you been?” she asked.

He took a long blink, exhaled. “Good. On the whole.”

Archie had told her once, when they were still tangled up in each other, that he’d always be able to picture her naked. A weird comfort. He always made her feel as though she was.

He changed the subject. “Ireland?”

She let her shoulders drop. Her breath settled a little deeper in her chest.

“It’s... different.”

“Good different?”

“Haven’t decided yet.”

He nodded, thoughtful. "Places can be both, I guess. You there for good or...?"

"That's sort of why I'm back," she said. "There's a project in LA. Had a meeting. Went well. We'll see."

The barista arrived with two complimentary chouquettes. She smiled, gestured across the street.

"I love this place. Right across from my agent. They make the best coffee."

"It is good," he said, noncommittally.

"So," she said, too brightly. "What's new with Archie?"

Even as she said it, she hated her voice—polished and patronising. She couldn't seem to stop performing. Last time they saw each other, he'd said he could barely remember what had ever happened between them. Her body braced for impact. Then she shook it off, drank her coffee too fast.

"What's new with me?" he echoed. "Well. I live in South East now. We left Tooting—maybe three weeks ago? Needed to be closer to the school I teach at."

She swallowed another blistering sip. Let it burn through the ache in her stomach.

"Getting the hang of London now," he said.

She nodded, tongue fuzzy, swollen with wrong words. "You'll get used to it. London's smaller than people think. Everyone knows everyone."

"I've literally never heard anyone say that about London," he said.

She hadn't either. No idea why it came out like that.

"So do you still live with Rob?" she asked, trying to sound offhand.

He laughed, into his cup. "God, no. Haven't lived with Rob in ages."

He was laughing at her.

"You said *we* moved from Tooting?" she pressed.

“With... Maggie,” he said, with too much enthusiasm. “You remember Maggie.”

She made a show of recalling. Widened her eyes, smiled like she meant it. “Maggie! Of course. So... is that a thing now?”

He looked down, smiled into the steam. The kind of smile you make when you're holding a memory between your teeth.

“It’s a funny story, actually.”

“Is it?” she said, sharper than she intended.

“Well, *we* think so.” His story began, but the words didn’t land right. They separated in the air, floated past her like receipts caught in a breeze. She stared at her reflection in the dark pool of coffee—distorted, bug-eyed, not quite human.

“Am I boring you, Fin?” he asked.

She blinked. “No. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not even looking at me.”

“Are you in love with her?” she said, interrupting him.

A beat.

“Are you in love with her?” this time softer, the shape of it smaller.

He leaned back. Hands behind his head. “Jesus. I haven’t really thought about that yet. We haven’t said it. I don’t know if this is the moment, Fin.”

She nodded, tightly. “I just thought... you were trying to cut ties. With home.”

“Maggie isn’t home,” he said. “She’s... different. Cosmopolitan. More future-facing.”

“That’s ironic,” Fin said.

A silence cracked between them. She lifted her cup, even though it was empty.

“She’s allergic to hay,” he offered. “Her parents are Scandinavian.”

He was rambling now. She would’ve found it endearing, once. Now it just made her

want to crawl out of her own skin.

There was laughter. Nervous. Maybe hers.

Each time she saw him, something inside her curled in on itself and turned cold. And each time, she thought: this is it. This is the loneliest I will ever be.

Until the next time.

They left the pastries untouched. Like strangers on a first date

Chapter One

“How are you, my darling?” he shouted, seizing Fin by the shoulders like a man who’d just found his long-lost sibling in a train station.

“It’s been *so* long!”

Fin blinked. Stared. Politely panicked. She was almost entirely certain she had never seen this man before in her life. Not in childhood, not at school, not even in passing at an indie film screening or on a dating app she no longer had the login details for.

The bar was rammed, pulsing, every surface damp with condensation or beer or sweat. She didn’t recognise anyone. And that, on her own birthday, felt like something between a personal failing and a dream sequence.

“Do I... know you?” she said, throwing her arms upward and stepping backwards, like she was hoping to reverse her way out of the encounter entirely.

Her hair was damp with sweat at the ends, her eyeliner had slipped tragically down her cheeks, and she wasn’t so much dancing with anyone as orbiting around people, like a lonely moon. Still: she always had someone to dance with. That was the whole point of nights like these.

“But how have you *beeeen*?” the stranger shouted again, now gripping her hips in a way that suggested he’d once seen a couple dance bachata on YouTube and taken that as lifelong permission.

“I didn’t choose this music!” Fin shouted back, peeling herself away before she caught another blast of his breath. The scent of tequila and ambition.

“You’re such a good dancer!”

“I’m going to get a cigarette,” she muttered, already walking away before he could reply—or worse, follow.

She pushed her way into the cold, the bass still thudding inside her ribcage like a reminder to return. She let herself stand there, goosebumps crawling across her arms, and watched her breath twist in the air. Her hair stuck in damp strands to the back of her neck, hardening now in the cool air like it had given up.

“Fin?”

She wiped her face with both hands and turned. A security guard. Already, her name felt like a warning.

“Do you know an Archie Shafer?”

Oh god.

Of course. Archie.

She practically ducked under the poor man’s arm and made for the back of the club, heart suddenly tripping. She could already picture him: standing by the cloakroom, uncomfortable, waiting to be allowed through the thick-lipped velvet curtain into this chaotic, glittering hell. It was a miracle he’d come at all. He hated nights like this. Hated this kind of music. Hated being called “babe” by bartenders.

And still, he’d come.

She peered around the corner and found him exactly where she knew he'd be—back straight, arms crossed, dressed in something unassumingly neat and adult. He looked... different. Not in the way that made your heart lurch, but in the way that made you feel you'd maybe fallen behind. Like the world had gone on developing Archie in your absence.

Physically, he was still Archie. More robust maybe. His hair had been tamed slightly. But something else had shifted. A sort of steadiness. Less like a boy with a guitar and more like a man who did proper things, like build shelves.

He was, in short, becoming a stranger. A wholesome, well-moisturised stranger.

Fin took a breath. Then, without meaning to, muttered: "Showtime."

And ran towards him

Chapter Two

Something wasn't right.

Archie was usually the quickest replier in the world — maddeningly so. She would hear the little swoosh of her outgoing message and, almost instantly, there he'd be. A new email sitting there, smug and efficient, like a dog waiting with the ball before she'd even thrown it. Granted, he didn't write *much* — usually just a line or two, something dry or affectionate or both — but he always wrote back.

Now? Three weeks of nothing.

Fin had even phoned the sushi place. Just to check. Just to *see*. She'd said the name "Archie Shafer" like it was part of some espionage plot. No, he hadn't turned up. No, they couldn't refund. No, the woman didn't care that he was supposed to be *her guest*. The phone call was humiliating in a way that stuck to her for the rest of the day.

She'd emailed again. Trying to be light. Trying to pretend it didn't matter.

Just checking you haven't got food poisoning from the sashimi?

F x

Still nothing.

She re-read her original message for the sixteenth time. She *had* called Maggie boring — but it was something *he* had said first. Several times, in fact. And always with that shrug he used when he wasn't entirely sure if he was joking or not. The kind of shrug that absolved him of blame. She'd even said it to his face before, and he'd sort of agreed. At least, he hadn't disagreed.

Now though, it felt like a sin. Like she'd said something unsayable.

It was starting to morph from guilt to worry. Not just "Have I upset him?" but "*Is he okay?*" A different kind of ache. She was curled under a duvet that smelled faintly of old wood and citrusy aftershave — Josh's — and trying to find a warm bit. The house wasn't built for cold. L.A. houses never were. It was a glass palace, beautiful and useless, all windows and surfaces and expensive taps that didn't do what taps were supposed to do. Josh had spent his renovation budget on a perimeter wall like it was a fortress, but forgot that people need things like insulation.

Her eyes were gritty from lack of sleep. The kind of tired that isn't really tiredness, just a sustained state of unease.

She'd taken a couple of Ambien and washed them down with the remains of the JW from the night before. The bottle still sat on the nightstand, like a warning sign. Sunlight from the enormous windows sliced across the room like interrogation lights, turning her temples into drumskins.

It reminded her, in the worst possible way, of that exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. A series of paintings titled *The Nightstand*. Four versions of the same girl, all painted in bed. All variations on a theme. In the first: a child's mess — biscuits, a drawing, a toy rabbit with one ear folded. In the second: teenage clutter — eyeliner, cigarettes, a maths textbook with secrets underneath. In the third: adulthood — condoms, wine, a copy of

Sapiens, a photo of her with a woman. The bunny still there, just. Clinging on. And then the fourth: a stark little table with pills, earrings, and nothing else. No photo. No bunny. No softness.

It had stayed with her, that painting. Longer than she'd meant it to.

She tried to imagine her own nightstands — what story they told. This one was a particular low point: a crumpled packet of sleeping pills, a bag of coke she hadn't touched, a borrowed copy of *A New Earth* she was pretending to read, and that same empty whisky bottle. If someone painted this, what would they see? What would they decide about her?

Her stomach felt hollow in that particular way that meant she needed coffee or tears — ideally both. She hadn't even made coffee in Josh's apartment yet. Possibly no one had. He didn't seem the sort. He seemed like someone who *ordered* coffee, or had it brought to him by a woman named Candy. She still had time before he woke up — he never stirred before midday.

She threw on jeans, yesterday's knickers, a cap, sunglasses. Found her bank card. Moved like someone on the run.

And then—

"Where are you sneaking off to?"

Josh. Shirtless. Standing like the ghost of bad decisions, all lean muscle and smugness and the kind of early-morning confidence that should be illegal. Grey sweatpants. That look. That *morning after* look that made her feel both protective and vaguely sick.

"Coffee," she said.

"You were missed last night," he said. "How's your...?" He gestured vaguely at his abdomen.

"My what?"

“Your stomach. You said it was bad?”

She had completely forgotten her fake excuse. The stomach pain that had bought her a rare night in. First time in years she'd passed on going out. Because of Archie. Of course.

“Oh. Better now.”

He patted the sofa. “Come sit.”

She obeyed. Not because she wanted to, but because this was what they did.

Cuddling. Like kids, or pets, or lovers who weren't allowed to admit it.

“I missed you,” he murmured, brushing his stubble against her cheek.

Fin tried not to inhale too deeply. She knew he'd been with someone else last night. He always got up early after sex. It gave him a kind of smug, straight-spined glow. She hated that she could tell.

“I really do need coffee,” she said.

“And I really need this cuddle,” he said.

And for a moment, she let him have it. Let herself *be* needed.

“Hey—when are we meeting your friend Mike?”

Josh sighed like she'd just asked him to mow the lawn.

“I can text him,” he said. “See if he's around today.”

“*Today?*”

“I mean... if that's what you want?”

She felt like a fool. Two weeks in L.A., waiting for this meeting like it was an audition for life. And all it took was a *text*?

“I thought it was a whole thing?”

Josh just smiled like a parent being patient with a particularly slow child. Picked up his phone. Typed like someone in their fifties, which was comforting and slightly sad.

“So you *don’t* want to meet him today?” he said, scolding her.

“No, I do. I just—look at me.”

“Look,” he said, setting his phone down on the arm of the sofa. “Do you want the meeting or not, Fin? Believe it or not, I’m doing this for you.”

She sat up straighter. “Yes. I do. Thank you.”

Josh stood, the muscles in his torso shifting as he stretched slightly, then walked into the kitchen. She watched the way his back moved—loose and practiced—as he picked up the phone again. His voice turned casual, performative. “What’s up? Can’t complain, can’t complain.” He glanced over his shoulder at her before disappearing into the bedroom.

She pulled her phone from her pocket. No new notifications. She refreshed her inbox. Nothing. She wanted to tell Archie.

Mike Donohue. The director. *Sixes. Jealous of the Maze*. A meeting didn’t guarantee anything, but it meant something. They’d thought of her. That was enough, at least to start.

Would Archie care? Would he be happy for her, even now? Even after Maggie? Still nothing from him. The silence had a shape to it, familiar and raw.

Josh returned.

He opened his arms. “So today is good. He’ll be here in a couple of hours.”

She could feel herself grinning.

“Go shower,” he said. “Put something cute on. I’ll grab you a coffee.” He looked at her a beat longer than necessary. “You really shouldn’t be out like that, Fin. You’re like catnip for journalists.”

The front door shut. She turned on the shower and undressed quickly. Called Archie. The dial tone started. Then stopped. He’d declined. She listened to the silence of the voicemail, didn’t leave anything. Just sat on the shower floor, knees to chest, the water too

hot against her skin.

Another mirror. Always another mirror. She kept her gaze low, stared at her thighs instead of her reflection. There was a numbness to it now. Her body wasn't private anymore. Not really.

On billboards. On screens. Online, even more so now, thanks to Aaron. She was searchable. Consumable. She didn't cry. She didn't speak. She just let the water hit her like it was trying to remind her she still had a body.

Josh's voice, through the door: "Riley! You'll put us in a drought."

She turned off the shower. "Shit. Sorry." Wrapped herself in a towel just before he came in.

He didn't say anything at first. Just stood in the doorway, shirtless, watching her. His gaze moved over her towel-wrapped body with lazy familiarity. She didn't meet it. He took his index finger and untucked the hold of the towel and it dropped to the floor.

"Your coffee's on the breakfast bar," he said.

"Thanks. I'll be through in a sec."

She sat at the counter, sipping lukewarm coffee. Picked at the muffin, small bites. Women in L.A. didn't eat full meals. She knew that now. Josh always ordered for her.

"She'll just have the salad. She's got a small stomach." He'd said it enough times she'd stopped arguing.

He leaned in, bare-chested, arms on either side of her. "So here's how this is going to go. You be you, but you say yes to everything. Alright? He's not easy."

She raised her eyebrow. "Be myself but compliant? Got it."

He didn't smile. "Don't be like that." He took her hand, made her put down the coffee. His fingers were warm. "Just be willing. Eager. You can do that, right?"

“I’m one of the best actresses of my generation,” she said. “Your words.”

“You trying to be clever?” He grinned. The skin around his eyes creased. “Don’t. Not with this guy. No bullshit. And he’s not a fan of English actors.”

“Scottish.”

“Whatever.”

“It’s not *whatever*,” she said.

He exhaled through his nose. “Baby girl, come on. My ancestors were Scotch. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

She didn’t answer. There didn’t seem to be a version of this conversation that ended in him understanding.

“He’s seen some of your stuff. He knows who you are. My guess is, he’s got an audition in mind.”

She looked at him, his torso still bare, the casual dominance of his stance. She said, “Thank you.”

He pointed at her. “Don’t thank me yet.” She pretended to snap at his finger with her teeth.

“And don’t take anything funny this morning.”

“I won’t.”

‘Pick up, pick up, pick up, pick up’. She had both hands pressing the phone to her ear as the call rung out.

‘Fuck’.

Fin smacked her phone down on the bathroom floor and starting hitting the sides of her head repeatedly.

‘Where the fuck are you?’ she cried, quietly under her breath. ‘I need you’. She wanted

him to burst through the toilet door like he'd done in high school, to show her that she was more than her body and more than what a man could make her through the use of it.

Back inside the living room, Mike and Josh were setting up the camera equipment, and it was all some sort of sick joke. Fin pushed herself to her feet and stared at her face in the mirror.

'You stupid stupid bitch' she cursed, holding onto the bathroom sink, Josh's voice ruminating around her head: He's seen some of your stuff so he knows you. You're going to agree to pretty much everything this guy says ok?

Don't take anything this morning. How could she have not seen this coming? Of course she was taken from England, Mike Donohue was probably known for his shadiness in L.A, but how was she to know? And, of course, she thought, it made perfect sense that Josh hadn't made a move on her, he must be under some contracted agreement. There was a knock at the door.

'You ok baby girl?'. It was Josh.

'Be out in a minute. Stomach pains are back'. She heard his footsteps disappear, and some muffled voices from the living room. Fin located her phone and tried Archie again, knowing he'd still be awake, it was only eight. Her pulse was throbbing in her ears. All she needed was to hear his voice. To get some clarity. For someone to tell her what to do. There was no one else she could call. This time it went straight to voicemail. You don't have to do this to make it in L.A, she told herself. You can come back next year and try again. There was a way to break America without America breaking you first. Or did nobody tell you about this part? Was this the direct route of all the young, British girls? She tried to imagine the conversation; a negotiation of how much nakedness there would be, of how much sex she would have to have. She couldn't walk out? All her stuff was here. And she'd lose 'Bones'. It

would be her word against their's. Two L.A directors against a name that nobody knew of in this country. An anger started to build inside her, she identified it as the feeling of betrayal. It was alien. Josh, somebody she'd felt supported by, safe with. Someone she'd handed over the integrity of her career to, Someone who had seen her sex tape with Aaron, and decided that he'd monopolise it.

There was another knock at the door.

'Sure you're ok?'. Fin pressed leaned over the sink and pressed her arms into the counter, steadying her anger.

'In a minute' she said, trying to stop her voice wavering.

'Ok, it's just that you've been in there for fifteen minutes' he lowered his voice 'this doesn't look good'.

'I know'.

'Don't fuck this up'. The last time someone had told her not to fuck something up, was eight years ago. She'd gone right ahead and done it anyway. Here she was, still trying to get over the mistake she'd made eight years ago.

I'm not going to, she thought.

Chapter Three

She let the alarm on her phone ring a few times before finally switching it off. Fin had been awake for a while already, stomach grumbling, a dull kind of hunger that didn't quite go away. The sky outside was lightening, a pale promise of day, and the rain was tapping steadily against the window like some sort of nervous rhythm.

Normally, Fin would be up by six-thirty. Coffee first, then a run, a quick shower, and after that the rest of the day stretched out ahead, usually something to be endured rather than enjoyed. She avoided the news — too much noise, too many stories she didn't want to hear — and dodged calls from old cast mates and her agent. If something really mattered, they'd email, and she could respond on her own terms.

Her doctor had suggested she might be depressed, but Fin didn't see it that way. She still felt everything too sharply, got up every morning, and kept running like she meant it. She'd taken the pills at one point, had the prescription, but sobriety turned out to be easier than she'd expected. Drugs had only ever been necessary when there was someone to impress, or a group to fit into. Those days felt far behind her now.

She made her bed and set the coffee pot on the stove. Staring at the back of a cereal

box filled with cereal she wasn't planning to eat, she changed into her running kit. Same black shorts, same black mesh sports bra — the uniform she wore every day, washed every day. She'd googled whether it was normal to do that, whether it meant she was a little mad. She didn't want to wear anything else. Anything else made her feel too exposed, too anxious. It had to be this — the same, familiar, comfortable.

Opening the fridge, she grabbed the milk, poured a little down the sink, and raised the mug to her lips. The first sip of coffee made her nose tingle and sent a small shock through her body. Recently, she'd been dreaming about coffee — it was the last thing on her mind before sleep and the first thing she craved when waking up. Her empty stomach waiting for the little kick of energy. But nothing ever tasted quite as good as that first sip, and it disappeared too quickly. She'd thought about making a second cup but didn't want to risk needing the bathroom mid-run.

Her headphones went into the bowl on the hall table. Lately, she'd been having nightmares about her brain being electrocuted by the rain. It sounded like a quick way to go.

The rain was coming down hard, a steady drum against the pavement and splattering her cheeks as she ran down Ladbroke Grove toward the park. She was chasing something she couldn't outrun — memories of L.A., of mistakes, of the looming start date of season three.

Josh had been apologetic, embarrassed even. Somewhere along the way, he'd been sure she'd agreed to this kind of work. He helped pack her things, promised they'd keep it between the three of them. She'd watched him crumble — from a man who seemed so confident to someone who was just desperately sorry, mumbling apologies to Mark as he drove away. But the anxiety about filming, with him, made her stomach turn.

The harder she ran, the more her mind settled on breath, on pain, on the next street corner. The park was almost empty, save for a few cyclists in neon waterproofs who sprayed

her as they sped past. Her socks and underwear were soaked through.

After six kilometres, she turned back. Her head felt light, and her right hip had been nagging her since she started. She always did out-and-back runs, no shortcuts — so she wouldn't cheat herself out of any distance. She dodged tree roots and puddles, knowing no paparazzi would be brave enough to chase her in this weather.

She wondered how her old school and college friends were doing now. Worlds apart. She'd tried to keep in touch, but there was only so much to do when most of them were struggling actors — some with babies, some with babies on the way.

Even though she was the successful one, she felt like an outsider. She didn't understand poverty or failure or raising a child. Sitting in a bar with them, hearing them talk about open auditions, promo work, or waiting tables, she felt ashamed, guilty, alien. They never mentioned her success, and soon she became the elephant in the room — the one who couldn't help with auditions, couldn't support them without it feeling like charity, who got VIP tickets to shows they worked at, not in.

She was there, but somehow, she wasn't.

#

It was now a loneliness that hurt her bones. Fin walked the last hundred metres down her street, the rain slapping against the crown of her head and pouring through her eyelashes.

#

At first she thought he was a pap, a huddled up figure in one of their distinctive, grey macs. She's seen them outside the hedge before, but never on her front doorstep. Fin ducked behind the wall and, felt for her phone in her pocket, and got ready to take a picture of him before he noticed her. The rain caused her touch screen to malfunction, and after a few seconds of swearing, she shoved the phone back in her pocket and called out from behind the wall.

'You are one-hundred-percent trespassing on private property'. She'd never said anything like it before and feels half-strong, independent woman, half-phoney.

'Fin?' the voice immediately recognisable. She steadied herself on the wall behind the hedge, his footsteps started along the flooded path. A few weeks ago, all she would have felt was relief that he was ok. Now, her whole body surged with anger. She turned the corner and there he was. Big green eyes, floppy sandy curls, the look of surprise on his face. Just as soaked through as her.

'Get the fuck out.' Fin pushed past him on the path and started towards the house.

'Fin please! We have a lot to talk about'.

She turned around sharply when she got to the front door.

'You don't just get to talk to me when it suits you. You completely cut me out your life. No. Fuck you.' She fumbled with the key in the lock, her hands shook with fury. Most men would take a strong 'fuck you' as a good indication to leave, but Archie started to try and help her with the lock.

'Just let me explain. Please'.

'Don't touch me'. Their eyes meet and Fin realised that Archie is no longer a friendly pen pal or a polite acquaintance in a coffee shop to a past lover or soul mate; he is a threat. Someone in her safe space that could hurt her even more than he already has.

'Fin can I just talk to you please?'

'And say what? Why you suddenly just dropped off the face of the Earth. Why I meant so little to you, you couldn't even send one tiny fucking email to put my mind at ease that you weren't dead?'

'Aren't you a tiny bit relieved to know I'm not dead?' he joked.

'Fuck you. I knew you were bloody well fine. I saw you last month, in Covent

Garden, with Maggie. Loving life'. Fin finally pulled open the door.

'I broke up with Maggie' he says stopping her from opening the door. Fin froze, and let the door click shut again. 'I just need to talk to you'. She'd visualised this moment since the day Archie had announced their relationship, all those years ago in the coffee shop opposite her agents office. The coffee shop that wasn't there anymore. She'd rehearsed what she'd say when she finally saw him again after all of the time they'd spent apart, sending email after email. And, up until then, she'd known, word for word, what she'd have to say to respect the girl who had been hurt and abandoned by him over the last few months. She searched desperately for something to say. Archie let his arm slide down the door and leant his shoulder up against it-

'Shall we do this in the rain or...?'

'No, no.' She squeezed the keys in her hand so hard she almost pierced the skin.

'Come in. I'll put some coffee on.'

#

Inside, they took off their shoes in silence. Archie stayed in the hallway whilst Fin fetched a few towels. She paused in the kitchen listening to the floorboards creek under Archie's feet in the hall. How could one person make her feel a thousand different things in the space of a few minutes? From blood boiling anger to hope; so electric she could feel her breath catch at the top of the lightest inhale forever, like a stuck CD. She flicked the kettle on and, caught her reflection in the microwave glass. She smiled the sort of smile that nobody was allowed to see.

'Arch?' she calls to him.

'Yes?'

'Coffee?'

'Yes please'.

She walked back through to the hall and threw him the towels.

'You can sit through there'. She gestured with her eyes to the door of the living room.

He lifted his chin and tentatively pushed the door open leaving a trail of water from his socks.

She made his coffee, gambling with what she thinks he would like. It used to be milky, but now she's sure he would prefer something bolder, stronger. She opted for a small, strong black coffee for him and a weaker, milkier one for her. She found him scanning her small bookshelf in the corner of the room by her the plants she never watered and the guitar she never played. He took the coffee.

'I know you're mad at me, but what is this?' he said looking at the cup. Fin rolled her eyes and swapped their mugs. 'When have I ever liked black coffee?'

'I think it's very clear we don't know each other'.

They laid out the towels.

'Because I didn't email you back?'

'It's insulting to use emails in this context.'

'You invited me in Fin. Why are you being so icy?'

#

Fin pushed herself into the corner of the sofa, making sure to keep her distance. There was something completely different about him. Something that she'd half-sensed, in his emails over the last year, but knew she needed to see for herself. Something impermeable where there used to be a thousand holes in his skin. The way he questioned her rather than taking the hit. The way he braced himself for the storm he'd created rather than retreating. He nodded slowly-

'So how is this going to work then? Do I just talk at you, or do you want to ask

questions?

'I don't know.' Fin hugged her knees to her chin, trying to settle the fizzing sensation in her stomach.

'I'm sorry I didn't call or message. Maggie made it very hard...'

Fin shot him a glare.

'... but that's not an excuse and I know it. I was so desperate to make one relationship work.' He leaned over to her and peeled a piece of wet hair off of her cheek.

#

"I've needed you," Fin said, then seemed to regret the nakedness of it.

Archie looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry."

He told her about Maggie then. How he'd tried, very sincerely, to construct a new life with her. How part of that had involved the careful, deliberate removal of Fin from it.

Except Fin had turned out to be surprisingly difficult to remove.

She was everywhere. In the corner shop, staring out from glossy magazines beside the chewing gum. On streaming platforms. On the side of the number 19 bus. Old episodes of *Mac Reuben* popping up at two in the morning when he couldn't sleep. Instagram, of course. Instagram especially.

It had felt, he said, a bit like trying to forget someone who owned half the billboards in London.

Fin folded her arms.

"So this is you resigning yourself to the fact that since you can't avoid my face, you might as well have the real thing?"

"That's not—" Archie hesitated. "You're a higher-value person than her."

Fin gave a short laugh. "That's bollocks."

“See, that’s exactly what I said. Repeatedly.” He leaned back in the chair, tired already of the argument he’d had a hundred times before. “But society rewards fame. The world had decided you were...worth more. More attention, more admiration, more everything. Maggie found that very hard to live with.”

“And you?”

“My counter-argument,” Archie said carefully, “was that I valued you more than her for reasons that would make absolutely no sense to the general population.”

Fin watched him for a moment.

“And that didn’t go down well,” she said.

“No,” Archie said. “Not tremendously.”

#

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Outside, a bus sighed to a halt at the lights and moved on again.

Fin rubbed her thumb along the rim of her glass. “So what is this then?”

Archie frowned slightly. “What is what?”

“This.” She gestured between them, a vague circle in the air. “Your grand return. The apology tour.”

“I didn’t know there was a tour.”

“Well you’ve started in the right place.” She gave a small shrug. “Front row seats.”

“I’m not on tour, Fin.”

“No?”

“No.” He hesitated. “I just... missed you.”

She looked up at that, quickly, as if checking whether it was a joke.

“And Maggie?”

“She didn’t miss you.”

Fin snorted despite herself.

“That’s not funny,” Archie said, though he was smiling too.

“A little bit.”

“Maybe a little.”

Another pause settled in. Not quite uncomfortable, but not easy either.

Fin leaned back in her chair. “You know what’s strange?”

“Go on.”

“You always do this.”

“Do what?”

“Disappear for months, sometimes years. Total radio silence. Then one day you just... turn up again. As if you’ve only been out buying milk.”

Archie thought about that.

“That’s not how it feels from my side.”

“How does it feel?”

“Like I’ve been trying very hard not to.”

“Not to what?”

“Turn up again.”

Fin considered this.

“And you keep failing.”

“Apparently.”

She looked at him then in the slow, measuring way she sometimes did, like she was deciding whether something was salvageable or already broken beyond repair.

“And why today?” she asked.

Archie shrugged, but it wasn’t casual.

“I suppose,” he said, “I ran out of convincing reasons not to.”

Fin let out a quiet breath through her nose.

“That might be the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Don’t.”

“Too late.”

Another bus passed outside.

Fin watched it go.

“You know this doesn’t fix anything,” she said.

“I know.”

“You can’t just walk back into my life every few years and expect...” She trailed off.

“Expect what?”

Fin shook her head. “That’s the problem. I never know what you expect.”

Archie looked at her for a long moment.

“Honestly?” he said.

“Yes.”

“I was hoping,” he said slowly, “that we might sit here for a bit.”

Fin raised an eyebrow.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“And then?”

“We’ll see.”

She studied him again, searching for something familiar in his face.

Annoyingly, she found it.

“Fine,” she said eventually. “We’ll sit.”

They sat like that for a while, pretending to be occupied with their drinks.

Fin had long since finished hers but kept the empty glass in front of her, turning it slowly between her palms. Archie watched the condensation ring it had left on the table.

“So,” she said eventually, “how famous am I this week?”

Archie smiled faintly. “Bus-side famous.”

“That’s a worrying category.”

“Front half of the bus,” he clarified. “Not the accordion bit.”

“Thank God.”

She looked at him then, properly, and something about the way he was smiling—slightly apologetic, slightly tired—made her chest tighten in a way she very much did not appreciate.

“You look older,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“I mean it kindly.”

“Of course you do.”

“Just... older around the eyes.”

“Years of staring at buses.”

Fin laughed softly, and for a second the room felt easier.

Then the laughter faded and they were looking at each other again.

Not dramatically. Not intensely. Just a little longer than necessary.

Archie shifted slightly in his chair, leaning forward without quite meaning to. Fin didn't move back.

The distance between them was suddenly small enough to notice.

"You've still got that scar," he said quietly.

Fin frowned. "What scar?"

"There." He lifted a hand, hesitating before touching the faint line near her eyebrow.

"From when you walked into the cupboard door."

"I did not walk into a cupboard door."

"You did."

"I was pushed."

"No one pushed you."

She tilted her head, considering whether to argue further, but his hand was still there, hovering uncertainly near her face.

Neither of them seemed quite sure what to do with it.

Archie's thumb brushed her skin almost accidentally.

Fin inhaled.

It was the smallest sound, but Archie heard it.

They both stilled.

For a moment the conversation—the years of it, the fights, the missed calls, the versions of themselves they'd been—seemed to pause somewhere just outside the room.

Fin's eyes flicked briefly to his mouth.

Archie noticed.

He leaned in a fraction.

Not enough to commit to it. Just enough to make the possibility very clear.

Fin didn't move.

And that was the problem.

Because Archie knew that if he moved even half an inch more, she probably wouldn't stop him.

Which meant she would absolutely hate him for it later.

He exhaled slowly and leaned back.

The moment snapped quietly in half.

Fin blinked, like someone waking up.

"Right," she said, clearing her throat. "Well."

"Yeah."

"Probably shouldn't do that."

"No."

They both nodded, with the solemnity of two people who had already done it a hundred times before.

Fin pushed her empty glass away.

"You see," she said, "this is exactly why we're terrible for each other."

Archie nodded.

"Very compelling evidence."

* * *