

one

The evening of June the 12th was unusual for many reasons in the end, of course, but it was unusual mostly because the evening of June the 12th was the evening my girlfriend did not leave me.

Tom,

I have not left you. But I am gone.

Please just carry on as normal.

Love always

Hayley

I stared at the words and sat down in my chair.

tWO

I am not saying I'm not a trusting man.

I'm not saying you can't trust most people. But usually, when you meet someone you can trust, you know. It was as obvious with Hayley as her big blue eyes; as the curl of hair she'd keep tucking behind her ear.

Here, her – Hayley – *this* was a girl you could trust.

The second she gave me her number, I did the thing I always do when someone gives me their number.

I looked at it, then said, 'Wow, no way! That's my *favourite* number!'

It's a pretty good thing to say.

All you have to do after saying something like that is sit back and wait for the laughter to subside. It's a banker. A deal-sealer. If that doesn't get a laugh, you're doing it wrong, and maybe you should start questioning how you do everything else in your life, too, because maybe you can't even make a sandwich properly.

And now I sat in my flat, in the dark, on the chair in the corner, dialling that number again and again and again and again and again.

It was fast becoming not-my-favourite.

A strange thing, being left, while being assured you have not been left.

What are you supposed to do with that? Just switch to solo behaviour? Just think 'fine' and start buying meals-for-one?

Four hours had passed and I was still sitting in that chair. Jangling my keys. Listening to the dogs outside. Dusk had turned to dark. Confusion had turned to anger and settled, lump-thick, deep in my stomach.

Where had Hayley gone?

I guess that was my main question.

But also, and obviously ... why? How long would she be gone? Was she *gone* gone? Why didn't I *know* where she'd gone? Why didn't I know she was going? Why was she saying she was going but not gone?

Almost two years we'd been together. We had responsibilities. We had direct debits.

I'd left messages, of course, tonight. I sounded confused on the first one. Furious on the second. Worried on the third and fourth. Desperate as I hit the fifth, and sixth, and then silent seventh.

I'd texted.

Where are you?

Where have you gone?

Hayley, call me.

I'd made calls to other people, too. Lots of calls.

Her best friend, Fran. Her brother, her sister ...

'Annie, it's Tom,' I'd said, head down, shoulders hunched, headache starting, standing by the window, one hand against the wall, phone pressed too hard against my cheek, because this feeling, these nerves, they had to go somewhere. It was loud where Annie was. Restaurant? Maybe drinks? 'Is Hayley with you?'

A moment.

'No, Tom ...'

She knew. She knew she'd gone. It was right there slotted between the pause and where a 'What do you mean?' should have

been. So yes, her sister knew she'd gone, but worse – she'd known she was *going*.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Hayley wanted it to be a surprise for everyone.'

'A ... *surprise*?'

She sounded distant. What did that mean? Was Annie preparing to say goodbye to me? Backing off? Fading me out of her life? That was bad. The ex you can keep hold of for a while, they owe it to you while you talk things out, they're still in your life, but the friends, the family ... they start drifting away the second they see the iceberg from the ship.

'Well, it's definitely a surprise,' I said, loudly, angrily, trying to keep her engaged, stop her from jumping overboard. 'What does it mean, Annie? Where is she?'

'She's not left you, Tom, if that's what you're worried about.'

If that's what I'm worried about?!

But I had to play it carefully here. Annie sounded testy. Like I was overreacting. Like that was *typical* of me to overreact to the disappearance of a loved one. Like it was a *gerbil*, or something.

'No, that's what she says, Annie, and yet she *has* left me, if you look at the basic fucking facts.'

My voice was trembling now.

'Don't swear at me.'

'Where is she?'

'I don't know.'

'Bullshit.'

'Don't swear at me, and I don't *know*, Tom, honestly. Did she not tell you any of this?'

The backs of my eyes sparked with rage.

'Do you think I'd be phoning you up if—'

'Okay, Tom, sorry, yes—'

'Because this is quite a fucking shock to the system, and—'

‘Don’t *swear* at me, and look—’

‘Annie, she’s disappeared and you know where she is, don’t you?’

‘Take care, Tom.’

And there, in those final words, my biggest clue.

Take care, Tom.

Click.

She was gone, wasn’t she?

‘You know what’d be a good name for a band?’ asked Pippy, spinning in her chair. ‘REM.’

‘I think there’s already been a band called REM,’ I said, barely looking up, eyes sallow, skin dulled. ‘The world-famous band REM.’

It was 4am and I was at my desk.

‘I’m just saying, REM would be a good name for a band,’ she replied. ‘Not asking for you to recite all of musical history. I’m just saying, REM would be a good name if you were starting a band.’

‘It would be a terrible name,’ I said. ‘Because there is already a band called REM, and by that I once more mean the world-famous band REM.’

‘Because it makes you think of music, doesn’t it, saying REM?’ she said, oblivious.

‘It makes you think of the music of REM, yes.’

‘Bingo,’ she said. ‘So I say REM, you think music.’

‘Yes, I think REM music.’

‘Point proved, case closed, many thank yous and happy returns.’

Jesus, I wished Pippy sat somewhere else. Like maybe Belgium. She was nice enough – very short, heavy fringe, jumper with a dog on it – but such an unlikely producer for London’s #3 urban R&B station. You’d see her walking along the corridor with Bark and Lyricis like she was their care worker. She’s a little older than me, but acts a little younger. Wants to stay ‘relevant’.

‘You look knackered, mate, are you ill?’ she said. ‘Just sayin’.’

Pippy liked saying something insulting and then saying ‘just saying’ because she felt this meant she could be as insulting as she wanted without other people being able to take offence, because after all, she was ‘just saying’ it.

‘I didn’t sleep,’ I said, reading and re-reading the first line of my script again ...

It’s Wednesday June 13th, I’m Tom Adoyo with the stories you’re waking up to ...

‘Oh, you *need* to sleep,’ she said, like this was advice straight from the Dalai Lama. ‘Hashtag “earlies”, mate.’

I was covering for Kate Mann on Talk London’s *London Calling with Leslie James* all week. The breakfast show.

Two questions everyone wants to know the second they know you have a job like mine. The first is ‘what time do you have to get up?’. The second is ‘what time do you have to go to bed?’ The answer to both is ‘too early’, but here you go:

I aim for bed at 9pm. I Sky+ the things I’ll miss. I understand and accept this means I’ll always be slightly behind the national cultural conversation. I’m up at 3.45, on the bus at 4.10, in by 4.50, apart from days like today when being with Pippy at four in the morning is better than lying in the dark listening to the foxes mate outside.

Then I gather the news (by which I mean look at what the person before me has done), I plan ahead (by which I mean work out how to slightly change each bulletin to make it sound like I’m working), I check Burli for audio, then the wires – PA, Sky, Reuters – and then see if there’s anything in from the police.

(And those, by the way, are the releases that need the most rewriting. Why do the police speak in their own weird language? ‘*The suspect was seen proceeding in a westerly direction.*’ No one speaks like that. Not a single functioning human being on God’s green

earth. There was that pop star they caught on the A6 recently. ‘*At oh twenty-two hours a suspect was spotted driving erratically and upon bringing the vehicle to a stop the strong aroma of intoxicants from the forty-six-year-old male driver was immediately detected.*’ Dude – you stopped a drunk driver. You’re not writing a perfume ad.)

I write my copy, I read my copy, I’m in studio at six and done by twelve.

I’m well aware this is pretend news. Very few people are doing the actual heavy lifting. I just help spread the word. I’m just part of this mass illusion. But at least I write my own stuff. Or at least rewrite other people’s stuff myself. Some newsreaders just read news. They have writers, they swan in and swan out. They’re ‘show and go’. But that’s when mistakes happen. If you write it, you know it. You know your own voice, how you say things, just when to pause, just what to stress.

Talking of stress ...

‘You’re never going to up your game if you come in sleepless,’ said Pippy. ‘Just sayin’.’

Christ, I thought, if you’re just saying it, just say it. Don’t say it and then say you’ve just said it. That’s not just saying it. Just saying it is just saying it.

‘Yeah, well, there’s a lot going on right now,’ I tried, and immediately I ached for home. I’m not one of those people who hate my job. I like it a lot. Though sometimes I worry I like it because I find it easy. That said, what the hell was I doing here? Four am in a strip-lit office with bright blue chairs and grey, grey walls waiting to start my shift in a city that’s still an acquaintance and, despite a woman called Pippy, completely *alone*.

I wanted to talk about it, of course I did. But there’d only been Hayley and Hayley’s friends since I moved to London. Everyone in Bristol – my old boss, my dentist, my best mate Calum – told me it was a mistake. It was too soon; I hardly knew this girl.

Only dad remained quiet. I'd phoned him late one night – it was about lunchtime for him, I could hear his wife and her kids in the background, I think they were on their way somewhere – and he'd told me to do what I felt was right. That he was sorry he wasn't there to meet her.

But before I knew it I'd found myself a job, moved my stuff to Stoke Newington, and now here I was. So no: I hadn't slept. And no: I didn't want to raise this with my friends back home, because maybe it was just a blip, maybe couples do stuff like this all the time and maybe I didn't want to look like the total tool they'd all quietly predicted I'd end up looking.

All I'd done last night was make it from the chair to the bed and just lie there. Stunned. Running through the past few weeks, trying to work out what had happened, what had been the catalyst, what had made her go.

'How's Hayley?' asked Pippy, maybe sensing something. She's one of those people who fancies herself mildly psychic and I'd made it my job to disprove this whenever possible.

'Hayley is *wonderful*,' I said, and then stood up to be somewhere else.

'Is she still working at Zara?' she asked, as I was halfway out the door, and I stopped.

Because that was a very good point.

'It's Wednesday June 13th, I'm Tom Adoyo with the stories you're waking up to ... Four arrests after man's body found ... Teacher speaks out about classroom birth ... and in sport, it's all change at Chelsea ...'

London Calling with Leslie James. 6 'til 10 in the capital and beyond. Some people tune in online from the States, or Singapore, or Australia, for a little slice of home and the opinions of Leslie James. Let's just say he's an acquired taste. Cabbies love him – they say he's one of them. Tells it like it is.

WHO IS TOM DITTO?

Kate – his regular news presenter, or ‘desk jockey’ as he says, expecting a laugh even on the thousandth time – is on maternity leave, and I’m the guy the news department sticks anywhere that needs it. I’m moveable. A man without a home. If I was a suspicious man, I’d say I’m given the worst gigs. Early mornings, generally. Late nights. It’s up to Maureen in HR, a woman who took an immediate dislike to me, based, so I hear, on my ‘moods’. Some of this is my fault. The rest I blame on the fact that my natural resting face is one of dark concern. People think I look deep, troubled, like a poet or a serial killer or a judge on some talent show wrongathon. Sometimes I am troubled, of course, but really I’m just as likely to be thinking about a dog, or badminton. So she said I needed to work on them. And in the meantime, she’d do nothing to help. It would be unkind of me – so unkind of me – to say she is a woman who relishes her minuscule powers.

I checked my emails.

From: MAUREEN THOMAS

To: ALL

If you are UNABLE to place your pieces of paper in the GREEN RECYCLING BIN we will take these bins away from you as you are NOT FIT to use them. I am SERIOUS.

Delete.

So one day I’ll be on Talk London, the next evening attempting to subtly change my accent so I fit in with Bark and Lyricis on Vibe.

SoundHaus takes up two-thirds of a strikingly bland building just off High Holborn, the third-biggest commercial radio outfit in

Britain, home to Talk London, Vibe, Jazz Bar, Rocket!, Harmony, and one or two others. And I'll tell you what – not one of those stations I'd listen to voluntarily. No way. Are you mental? They're stations you hear as you drive home in an illegal minicab. And they're all struggling to keep up with the stations of Global or Bauer ... except maybe Talk London and its stand-out star, *Hitachi Commercial Radio Talk Presenter of the Year (1 million TSA plus)* Leslie James.

Leslie James is not a man who will apologise for his opinions.

Here are some opinions Leslie James will not apologise for.

'Fox-hunting. Bad, yes, but I see both sides of the argument. And I make no apology for that, and I say that sincerely.'

'Women should have equal pay, but – and I mean this, and I do not apologise for saying this – the work they do should be equal too. Or greater!'

Just yesterday:

'The Muslim world *has* to take some responsibility for the actions of some Muslims who do *not* represent them all but do do bad things in their name, and I make no apology for that, but I must be clear, I am *not* saying *all* Muslims.'

It's pretty controversial stuff.

On-air he can be a bit of a dick, but off-air, he's actually a bit of a dick.

'... and in showbusiness, another award last night for Jay Z as Beyoncé took to the stage, and later in your Showbiz Update with Jen Latham, she'll be talking to pop star Aphra Just about her move to France, and the new man in her life ...'

I'd rather be reporting on Syria.

'It's 6.32, and now you're up to date ...'

I gathered my stuff together. I'd be back before seven. I try not to stay in studio during the show.

'I've forgotten your name again,' said Leslie, as the ads played out. He pointed at me, vaguely.

'Oh, it's—'

'But I don't like you saying, "now you're up to date". I think it's pretty self-evident that people are now up to date because you've just updated them.'

'Ah. Thing is, it's from the news team,' I said. 'They want everyone on the station using it. Sense of unity.'

'Sorry, is this the station or is this my show?' he said, which was a tricky one, because the answer was 'both'. 'I'm telling you to lose it. So lose it. And now *you're* up to date ...'

Five past twelve, shift over.

I'd done my handover notes in a hurry, then just googled, clicked, read.

Facebook. No updates.

Twitter. No update since the restaurant the other night.

I'd even checked her MySpace, which is where she would always joke she'd go when she wanted to be alone.

No updates.

Do I tell people? Because I have no idea what to tell people.

I tried Fran, her best friend, again. Fran likes me. We understand each other. But I was getting nothing back and it made me paranoid. Did Fran know? Was Fran in on it?

But Pippy made a good point: Zara, on Long Acre. She's Deputy Store Manager. Her colleagues would know where Hayley was. They'd have to. She'd have told them, because you have to tell your employers these things, don't you, if you're not coming in any more?

But what if you *are* still coming in? What if it's just me she's away from? And if she's in there as usual, then great, I'll confront her.

Cause a scene. Ask her what she means by all this. Ask her where she stayed last night.

Jesus, *where did she stay last night?*

I could walk there in ten minutes, and by the counter: result. I spotted Sonal. We'd only met maybe twice before, but I knew her name. And also, she was wearing a name badge.

'Sonal ...'

'Hi ...' she said, half-smiling.

'It's Tom. Hayley's boyfriend.'

'Tom! How are you? Did she forget something?'

'Oh. So you know?'

'I know what?'

'You know Hayley's gone?'

Busted. Gotcha. You knew, you bitch.

'Yes, I know she's gone,' she said, brightly. 'Of course I know she's gone. What do you mean, I know she's gone?'

'I didn't know she was gone.'

I sounded panicked and crazy. A couple of women holding a black dress – they're all black dresses in Zara – turned to look at me. Sonal lowered her voice and clearly hoped I'd lower mine.

'You didn't know she was gone?'

'Where's she gone?'

'Sorry – you don't know where she's gone or you didn't know she was gone?'

'Either. Both. I got a note last night.'

She blinked at me, once or twice, eyes widening for a second, then back.

'A *note*?'

'Where is she?'

'Hayley? She's gone *travelling*, I think.'

She called over to a colleague.

‘Jo? She said she was going travelling, Hayley, yeah?’

Jo nodded. All hooped earrings and scraped-back hair.

‘She said she was going travelling,’ said Sonal.

‘Travelling *where?*’

‘She said she didn’t know where.’

‘Oh, so just general travelling? Just like that? Sudden aimless travelling?’

‘Well, not just like that – she gave her month’s notice.’

‘A *month?*’ – fuck! – ‘You’ve known about this for a *month?*’

‘It was her leaving do last week,’ said Jo.

My knees weakened.

‘She had a *leaving do?* Sorry, just to be clear, my girlfriend had a *leaving do* last week and has now gone travelling?’

Sonal tried a smile, then a shrug, both unconvincing.

‘What night?’

‘What?’

‘What night did she have her leaving do?’ I said.

‘Um, Thursday, I think,’ said Jo.

Thursday. She has Pilates on Thursdays.

My head started to spin.

She’d known for a month. A month at the minimum. She’d even celebrated.

‘Well, this is very unusual,’ said Sonal, shaking her head, and now the world became just noise, just till rings and door beeps, just traffic and wind, and ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘This is very fucking unusual indeed.’

[1]

**Kosinski, M/Columbia Journalism School 3/15/84
Michael Berg Award entry**

AN INTERVIEW WITH EZRA COCKROFT

It is Christmas 1982 and Professor Ezra Cockroft sits at his table at Keen's on 72 West 36th Street and picks at his salad. Like me, he has ordered for himself the recommended house salad with a twist and left the beets and candied walnuts to the side in one neat little tower.

He is a tall man of eighty with delicate hands and long limbs, still tanned from an autumn spent in Floridian sunshine, though dressed now in New York black.

He sips at his drink – a thin green daiquiri, which I too ordered because I happened to notice the recipe was the very same my great-aunt had at this time of year so often used.

I ask him about this.

'You ordered with confidence,' he says. 'I invested in your confidence. Investments made with confidence tend by their nature to carry lower risk – it implies assumed knowledge, and thereby affords those you carry along with you a greater chance of reward.'

He takes his napkin and cleans a corner of a leaded casement window. A barman prepares another daiquiri behind a robust mahogany and brass bar.

My steamed Finnan Haddie with drawn butter arrives, as a heartbeat later does his.

three

‘Thursday June 14th, I’m Tom Adoyo with the stories you’re waking up to... ...’

I’d managed maybe two or three hours of fitful sleep. Got out of bed, somehow, and made my way to the nightbus. Ah, the nightbus. My people.

It’s actually pretty full at just gone four. You’d think it’d be empty. But there are people. Cleaners, mainly, heading into town, keeping a low profile for an invisible job. A couple of the homeless upstairs, bedded down for the night, pale faces pressed heavy against smeared windows. The people you don’t treat as real.

‘... Thousands trapped after Mexico storms ...’

The nightbus is where I write my weather. It’s pretty simple. Of course, I check the BBC website. But you have to check the Met Office app, too – you can’t just rely on the BBC. I don’t know how they get away with it. It’s people like me that get the grief for it. All day, you’d get people complaining to the station, texting in, saying ‘you said it was going to rain today and it has not rained today’. Well, why are you texting me about it? Just enjoy it. Grow up.

So I tapped it all out, checked the news, and emailed myself the script. I sometimes wonder what people must think if they’re reading over my shoulder. ‘Wow. This guy writes *very* formal emails about so many topical world events.’

Anyway, highs of nineteen today.

‘... US officials say North Korea could be planning multiple missile launches ...’

My eyes are so heavy in this studio. Pits musty. I haven’t showered, just topped up with Lynx. Adewale, the security guard on reception, had made a joke when I floated in. I didn’t listen, just pushed through the heavy doors to the corridor, where today each of the six LCD screens had been programmed to read WELCOME TO OUR FRIENDS AT AIG INSURANCE!, a couple of small pink animated balloons juddering from side to side.

‘... Benefits cheats to face ten-year terms ...’

I had to blink hard to focus on the copy on the page. I’d spent last night at the Builder’s Arms, on the chair by the door, thinking, not wanting to be in the flat, not wanting to be just listening out for the scratch of a key or waiting for a text. I don’t drink, really. I just wanted to be around people who did. That’s when you hear the really heavy laughs, the guttural *woofs* of shared joy, building, rising, exploding like fireworks in a dim pub sky.

‘And later, in showbiz, which pop star has drawn criticism from the Vatican after filming the video for new track “Carry On” just metres from the papal residence ...?’

Shoot me now.

‘It’s 6.03, currently four degrees in Soho, with highs of nineteen this afternoon – and now you’re up to date.’

Finger point. Sweeper. Ads.

‘Hey dickhead,’ said Leslie, as I rose, his eyes dead. ‘Thought I told you to drop that.’

‘Sorry Leslie,’ I said.

‘Fucking *know your place*.’

I checked my phone. No messages.

Jesus, nothing? *Nothing?*

I sent another: 'Where are you?' and watched it whoosh away to nowhere.

Travelling. She'd never mentioned wanting to go travelling before. We didn't even have a holiday booked. I'd been on at her for months about a holiday. Anywhere, I told her. Egypt. The Algarve. Didcot Parkway. Just anywhere but London. It'd do us the world of good. I guess at least one of us had taken my advice.

There were other people I'd tried, as I'd sat in the pub.

I left word with Fran again.

Hayley's dad in King's Lynn. I had to look that one up, remind him precisely who I was, and have him gruffly deny all knowledge.

I tried other colleagues, friends I had numbers for. I tried our landlord, Mohammed, who seemed mainly concerned that I'd still be paying in full and wasn't trying to negotiate some kind of discount.

No one seemed worried.

'Oh, she'll turn up,' said our neighbour, Edith, ninety-four, and you can imagine how reassuring that was. 'Have you tried calling her?'

Her phone, of course, was constantly turned off. Though it still went to voicemail. She was still paying the bills. She still needed a phone.

So who had she told? Who do you tell when you want to disappear?

'Maybe she found you smothering,' said Pippy, just a thick Kilbride accent like a knife through London around her. She put her hands up defensively. 'I'm only being honest.'

She took a bite of her garlic bread. We were in Eatalian, on the corner. I'd ordered nothing, just water. Pippy hadn't noticed. She'd drawn love hearts and shooting stars on her hand again.

'It's just so frickin' hashtag "mental",' she said, still only being honest.

I knew I needed to run through all this with someone. Pippy would do for now. Though I was slowly working out she wasn't exactly delicate.

'Do you think she's met another man?' she said.

I stared at my drink.

'Or does she have a history of ... anything? You know. Mental illness, or whatever?'

'She seemed fine. She even did a Sainsbury's shop. Online. She *knew* that was too much food. Who *does* that?'

'Mad people.'

'She's not mad.'

'Evil, then.'

'Bit strong.'

Pippy is single. She'd tried match.com but had her fingers burnt when she began her profile with the words 'I am a thirty-seven-year-old Scottish girl' and then didn't get any replies. It was three weeks before she realised it was because what she *actually* wrote was 'I am a thirsty seven-year-old Scottish girl'.

'Maybe the shopping ...' she said. 'Maybe that's what she meant by "carry on as normal". Maybe she just wants you to just carry on as normal.'

'Really?' I said. 'So she wants me to cook two meals a night? Set two places at the table?'

'You eat at the table? Not in front of the telly like everyone else in the world?'

We never eat at the table. We'd bought that table together in IKEA in Edmonton, imagining we'd have friends round, and make homemade salsa and buy rustic breads, then eat dinners with interesting figures as we talked long into the night about Vladimir Putin and high finance. In reality we put our keys there.

'Sometimes we'd eat at the table, yes, we're not animals.'

‘It’s just so *weird*,’ she said again, sighing, and I was just grateful to have anyone at all agree.

Back at home, that evening, I sat on the floor surrounded by her clothes, my head in my hands.

Above me was her wall calendar. Full of things that would now never happen. 23rd – Janey’s wedding. 10th – Fraser & Iona/dinner at ours. 12th – Cinema?

I’d torn the wardrobe apart. I’d lost it. Forty-five seconds of rage – at the lack of information – at the limbo she’d left behind.

There was a suitcase missing – the middle-sized suitcase of a set of three. What did that imply? A week? A month? Maybe it implied she might be back. If you know you’re going forever, you take the big suitcase, right?

Unless you realise there’s so much you just want to leave behind.

I stared at myself in the mirrored doors of the wardrobe.

What was wrong with me?

I’m not bad looking. Tall, like my dad. His Kenyan genes give me that, though he remains leaner than me. Mum was French, and I’m told I have her doleful eyes. She always said they’d make me a heartbreaker, but so far it’s been pretty much an even split. Other than that I strive for neutrality. Neat hair, mainly black clothes. I don’t think there’s anything there that would immediately make someone run away.

So hopefully it’s my personality.

I’m quick to anger but speak up rarely, though when I do I speak clearly and well.

I don’t suffer fools gladly, but I do suffer them.

Instead, it brews and boils inside me. Makes me moody and quiet and want to be alone, though not alone like this.

And then the doorbell rang.

It was 8pm. That’s an unusual time for visitors.

She's back. It's over.

I scrambled to my feet, clunked my shoulder on the doorframe and fast-limped to the hallway, heart racing, blood pumping to my head, grabbed at the door handle ...

'Sainsburys, mate,' said the man, surrounded by blue crates and orange bags.

I'd wondered why she'd ordered so much. She was looking after me. Making sure I ate. That I got my five-a-day.

That scheming bitch.

I ate at the table that night, making myself a little corner amongst the keys and bills and paperwork and takeaway leaflets and magazines.

I'd begun slowly to resent the flat. This one-bed with ideas above its station, five minutes from the chip shop but just around the corner from Clissold Park, and lazy Sundays by the paddling pool in the summer. Mohammed had said we could decorate, but I'd begun to dislike it for how little it now represented me. The bright pink feature wall in an otherwise magnolia lounge. The 'quirky' kitchen cupboard knobs from whatever that shop's called ... Apostrophe? Apology?

All this was Hayley's personality. Or, at least, what she'd quite openly *decided* was her personality. She'd spend hours marking the pages of back issues of *Living Etc* when we first moved in, circling Cole & Son wallpaper or Farrow & Ball paints and writing weird words like 'Rockett St George' on brightly coloured Post-its. I tried to remind her this was a one-bed in Stoke Newington, not Babington House, but she kept buying, kept circling. Hayley likes magazines. *Heat*, *Grazia*, *Stylist*, *Elle*, *Cosmo*. A great big pile of them, dog-eared, bruised, rumped by bath water. The enemy within. Had they given her ideas about me? Were they talking about me behind her back? Suggesting she was unfulfilled, in this rented flat in North London, with an average man in his average clothes

and their average life together? I picked the top one off the pile, looked at its cover.

FASHION. STYLE. FOOD. GLAMOUR. TRAVEL.
For the woman who wants it all – and usually gets it!

These magazines did not think I was good enough; that I was a slob; a Neanderthal.

I threw them down, and pushed my plate away. My kebab had gone cold anyway.

And then, in the corner of my eye.

A small red light, blinking on the floor by the sofa, in a pathetic attempt for attention.

The answerphone.

I clicked Play.

‘Hello Ms Anderson, this is Mark, the Sainsbury’s driver, just confirming your delivery slot of between 8 and 9pm.’

My heart sank.

I sank to the floor, with it.

But the answerphone kept going.

‘Wednesday. Eleven ... Nineteen ... am.’

An old message. Already listened to.

I went to delete.

‘Hayley ...?’

A man’s voice.

four

Half past five and I sat, staring at the screen, the cursor blinking back at me.

I hate that wink.

‘Go on!’ it’s saying, full of beans, always bouncing. ‘Write something!’

Yeah, cursor? Why don’t *you* write something?

‘Morning,’ said Pippy, as I stared at my blank page. ‘You grabbed that audio?’

Some report or other. We’ll have one reporter in the field in the morning, another to take over at lunchtime, recording on their phones, sending stuff back to us. They pretty much go and get vox pops. So someone gets stabbed in east London, they’ll find someone to say, ‘You just don’t expect this kind of thing to happen round here.’ That’s the job. Getting people to say, ‘You just don’t expect this kind of thing to happen round here.’ It’s the same every day. You could just use the same person’s disembodied voice in every report for every story. Mugging in Kilburn? You just don’t expect that kind of thing to happen round there. Lottery winner in Kennington? You just don’t expect that kind of thing to happen round there. It’s like no one expects anything to happen anywhere at all.

I clicked the audio open and found my headphones.

Someone hadn’t expected something to happen to them, and for the first time, I knew exactly how they felt.

Because who the hell was Andy and what was ‘the place’?

I’d played and replayed the message.

‘Hayley... it’s Andy from the place.’

One more time.

‘... Andy from the place.’

Again.

‘... Andy from the place.’

So I say again: ... who the hell was Andy and what was ‘the place’?

It continued.

‘Just wondering if you’d made your arrangements after all. I’ll try you on your mobile.’

The voice – flat, emotionless. No obvious class association. Generic English accent.

‘Just wondering if you’d made your arrangements after all.’

After all? So whatever these arrangements were, there’d been doubts? Had she been talking to Andy about going? Had she been confiding in him? He didn’t sound like a man calling a lover. He sounded like a man checking someone had done a spreadsheet, or forwarded an email.

‘... Andy from the place.’

No pause as he said ‘the place’. No hesitation, no thinking necessary. He always called it that. No emphasis on the words, either – he wasn’t making any concessions, wasn’t putting imaginary speech marks around them, he didn’t have to explain. She would know. Hayley would know exactly what the place was.

And it wasn’t a bar or a restaurant or a place called The Place. This was the place – not The Place. Casual, throwaway, familiar, secretive.

Secretive.

You probably think I’m insane, analysing in this way, but look – I know words. I know how they sound. I read for a living. Out loud.

For strangers. I can see those words in the air as I hear them, like subtitles in a film only I'm watching. I can *feel* words.

And these words felt *weird*.

Seven-forty-five am, and Leslie was performing a paid-for read.

These are tricky. Sales & Promotions people love them, but they're not in S&P for their writing skills. You could see Leslie trying to make sense of the words in front of him, correcting their spelling, moving words around, trying not to spit them out with disdain, trying to act like it's completely natural he wants to tell you that ...

'... if you're anywhere near Lakeside in Thurrock today, don't forget to join Tony Ram and the Talk London street team as they hand out vouchers for a whopping 20 per cent off purchases over £15 at The Body Shop!'

The veins in the side of his head were throbbing ... the problem with S&P, he'd tell you, was that they saw him as a mere *vessel* for their words, not as an *artist* trying to *cope* with them ... his fists clenched, now ...

'Though remember! Terms and conditions do apply, and all the info is on our website!'

He plastered on a smile, coming through the worst of it ...

'Find the crazy gang at The Body Shop, shopping level two, just opposite Foot Locker! And tell Tony to buy me some foot scrub for my cracked heels! Happy shopping!'

Jingle. Ads. Done.

'I hate these bloody things!' he said. 'I'm not a salesman. I'm an ideas man. Why am I talking about 20 per cent off body bollocks at Lakeside? I should be talking about Iran!'

He wouldn't be talking about Iran. He'd be talking about a new survey in the *Daily Mail* that says nine out of ten dog owners wish their dogs could talk.

‘Happy shopping? Why did they put that? Why do I have to say “whopping”? Just give me the facts and let me get on with it! I added that bit about the foot scrub and the cracked heels.’

‘It was very powerful,’ I said.

He scanned my face, coldly, for signs of mockery, then gave me the benefit of the doubt.

‘*Exactly.* That’s how you bring something to life. That’s how you get Mrs Bingo in Stroud Green to sit up and take notice! Not “terms and conditions apply”!’

Janice, the producer, scuttled out of the room. She could sense the darkness coming.

‘How much is Tony Ram getting paid for doing that?’

The red ‘phone’ light lit up.

Someone didn’t mind the cracked heels stuff as it was on message but didn’t think Leslie should be referring to the street team as the ‘crazy gang’ in case it made people uneasy in their presence.

Leslie told them where they could shove his heels. It was a startling image which took some working out.

The news travelled upwards.

Ding Ding.

A text message.

Hayley?

I was home, now, the day a wasted blur, waking up on the sofa. I rubbed my eyes, focused on the words.

Tom. It’s Fran. I’m sorry I’m late to reply. Can we talk about Hayley?

I hadn’t seen Fran in what seemed like forever.

This city can do that to you. Pure intentions fade with time and distance and exhaust fumes until barely there, like a tube map left in the sun.

The last time I'd seen her, we'd had fun, the three of us. We'd been full of 'we should do this more often!' and 'next time come round ours!' and talk of picnics and roasts.

For a while, Hayley and Fran had seemed glued together and with a shorthand impenetrable to others. They'd met one day a few years ago in town – bumped into each other in some shop, went for drinks, got on furiously. They'd found an easy friendship in one another. I liked her, and I sat, waiting, at the Daily Grind on Clerkenwell Road, another one of those places that wasn't there yesterday and probably wouldn't be tomorrow. All wrought iron and stained wood and elaborate eggs Benedict, a 'Director of Coffee' behind a brushed steel counter, ordering beautiful Latvians to bring out more £5 croissants.

I stirred my coffee and stared at the wall, feeling heavy as I did every day at the moment. A black cloud over my head and under my eyes. I knew this feeling.

I decided that maybe I'd got it wrong. Maybe Fran was here to tell me about Andy. That made sense. We get on, me and Fran, perhaps Hayley thought it best to send in a third party; someone to ease the blow and make caring faces and say things like, 'she still loves you, Tom, but she's not *in* love with you,' and 'Andy's a really great guy, I really think the two of you would really get on.'

And now she was here. Vintage dress. Red lipstick. Handbag on the table. Furrowed brow.

'Tom ...'

'Hey, Fran ...'

'You look ...' – struggling to find the right word as she sat down, brush a curl of red hair behind one pale ear – '... well.'

I lift a spoon to check my reflection. I think it actually makes me look better.

'I'm sorry for ... what you're going through,' she said. 'It's so ...'

She shrugged, shook her head, looked to the waiter and ordered her coffee.

Fran paints small trees on plates and then sells them for a fortune to hipsters at markets. I don't know how she does it. They're just small trees painted on plates.

'I don't actually know what I'm going through,' I said, noticing her brooch. It had a small tree on it. 'Hayley's been a little unclear about things.'

'So that was it? You got that note and nothing else?'

'Did she say anything about it to you?'

Fran raised two thin eyebrows in mock-surprise.

'Tom, I hardly ever saw her.'

I narrowed my eyes.

'You *always* saw her.'

'When was the last time I saw her?'

'I dunno. Couple of weeks back?'

'January.'

I frowned. Her coffee arrived.

'We had a fight,' she said, as the waitress left and we could talk again. 'She didn't tell you?'

'No, nothing,' I said. 'Wait, what? You had a fight about what?'

'I said things that I meant at the time but which probably seemed a bit harsh.'

'What things?'

She took a moment.

'We were out one night,' she said. 'Mayfair. She seemed so distant, like she was more concerned with what was going on at the table next to ours. I couldn't get through to her any more. Seemed like she was always on the lookout for something better, or someone more interesting.'

'She'd been unhappy at work,' I said. 'Maybe she was just distracted.'

'She was always distracted,' she says. 'And I told her as much. I made up some excuse about iffy tapas and said I had to go, but she

hardly even took that in, just kept listening to these guys banging on about their Christmas bonuses or something and so I told her how much I hated it that she'd changed so much and ...'

The words were starting to wash over me. None of this made sense. I was drowning. I waved her back.

'Wait – stop. Changed how?'

Now it was Fran's turn to frown.

'You don't think she'd changed?'

'No. She was just ... Hayley. Maybe it was you that changed, not her.'

Fran gave a small smile, and said, gently: 'Who's the one you're sitting having coffee with? Who's the one that's actually *here*?'

I stared at my reflection again.

'I just felt she was trying to be somebody else. Small things at first. The hair.'

The hair. So what? She'd changed her hair. People change their hair. I'd noticed that she'd changed her hair and said 'nice hair'. We'd talked about it. That had been us talking about it.

'The clothes.'

And? People buy new clothes. People buy whole new wardrobes sometimes.

'The make-up.'

Jesus Christ.

'And then there were the other things ...'

Oh, what was she going to say now? She'd started buying Crest instead of Colgate?

'She wanted to go to all these new places all the time.'

Travel. I started to feel a little sick.

'Places that weren't us. And that I just didn't think were all that *her*. It was fine at first, because it just felt like adventures, but it was starting to get really ... pompous.'

Pompous?

‘I mean, I love a good restaurant. But she was like, “let’s go to Nobu!” Pricey, you know? And it’d be fun so you would, but then the next day she’d be texting saying “let’s go to Roka!” Or Hakkasan. Or, like, *nightclubs*. I’m too old for nightclubs! I’ve got a job, I need to be on site at eight, I don’t—’

‘Hang on,’ I said, relieved I could join in on this one, relieved I wasn’t totally in the dark. ‘She did mention clubs. She said there was an indie night at the Islington Academy and that we should go sometime. Britpop, old Suede, that kind of stuff.’

‘No,’ said Fran, leaning in, pointing a finger at me. On the finger was an oversize ring with a small tree on it. Hayley had one of those. ‘I mean, like, *Chinawhite*. Boujis. You know?’ She laughed. ‘*Those* places. Places Russian Oligarchs go to get off with Moroccan pop stars. And if I said no, she’d get all funny and say I was acting like a loser – she actually used that word – and I was boring and all this stuff. And that’s basically when I told her to fuck off.’

Sitting back in her chair, Fran fiddled with her brooch defensively. ‘*Chinawhite*?’ I said, startled.

She’d never once mentioned Chinawhite to me. We used to just go to the pub. Maybe pick up a bottle on the way home. What the hell did she want to go to *Chinawhite* for? I didn’t even know where it was. I’d read about it in the papers, of course, and Fran was right. It’s just people from reality shows and David Hasselhoff and girls in short skirts looking out for Prince Harry.

It was all a bit ... tacky.

‘When did she have the time to—’

But I stopped. I’m brushing my teeth by 8.30. Often she’d just be getting ready to go out. But not to clubs. To ... well ... see people like Fran.

‘When I first met her, that day in Topshop, she was this ray of sunshine. I turned round and there she was, out of the blue, telling me she loved my necklace, and where did I get it. I didn’t want to

talk to you about it because I thought the old Hayley would grow out of it and come back,' said Fran, 'and it just felt disloyal going to you. And I thought you'd think I was boring, saying no to Nobu, or whatever, because I'd started to think that I must be.'

'I ... I don't know what to do with this information,' I said. 'I thought she was just going to Pilates or seeing you guys, or—'

'But didn't you notice? The changes? Come on, you must've noticed.'

'She changed her hair, yes, I noticed that, I told you,' I said.

'Don't be a cliché. Don't lie to yourself. How could you have lived with her and not seen it?'

'Fran – genuinely. She never once mentioned going to a nightclub or wanting to eat at ... wherever. Never once. I would remember. I would have taken the piss *relentlessly*. Because that's just not *us*.'

Fran leaned back in her chair. I let the words hang. And I realised that maybe I was the problem after all.

'Can I ask you something?' I said, and Fran nodded. 'Who's Andy?'

'Andy?'

'Andy.'

She looked blank while she thought about it. I shifted, prepared myself. If Hayley had been seeing someone, she'd have told Fran. And Fran would have told her to put an end to it. Fran's good, she's moral. Maybe that's why they fought. Maybe that's it.

But: 'I don't know who Andy is,' she said.

'What about "the place"?' I said, now feeling a little desperate. 'Did she ever even once mention a place she called "the place"? Or do you know what "the place" might be?'

'I don't know,' said Fran. 'Oh, God, do you think Andy is ...'

'I don't know either,' I said. 'Did she ever mention a man?'

'I wish I could help you ...'

'I'm so *angry*,' I said.

And she reached across the table and squeezed my hand, and it was then that I realised I was crying.

I felt heavier than ever as I got home. Hayley was a magnet beneath me.

I sank to my knees as I walked through the door.

Reached behind and slammed it shut.

Darkness.

Limbo.

I was powerless. I had no moves.

What can I do, here? I can leave her, but how can I leave her when I can't even tell her? I can do as she asks, and carry on as normal, but there *is* no normal, because she took that with her, along, it turns out, with most of the crazy.

All I can do is just ... be here.

What do I have left? A job that I like but which doesn't make me *happy*, a flat I share with someone who's gone, no real friends in the city, no idea where to turn.

I closed my eyes and lay down on the floor, the rough prickles of the sea grass mat scratching at my cheek, the smell of must and dust and mud dancing around me, my energy sucked through my pores, and I thought about things for a minute, maybe an hour, maybe much longer.

And when I was at my lowest, I turned my head and stared at the phone cord, the taut, white phone cord, thick and strong and unbreakable, fastened to the wall with gun-grey staples, and I reached out and touched it, and a thought I'd not had before came to me.

five

'It's 6.01am, Saturday June 16th, I'm Tom Adoyo with the stories you're waking up to ...'

The last text I'd had from Hayley I knew off by heart.

It read: 'Five mins away. Passing wine shop. Cheeky bottle of sauv blanc?'

I'd replied, 'Sure.'

Just that. The last text I knew she'd got.

'... and in showbiz, Jay-Z remembers Glastonbury, and who won the double, with two MTV Europe Awards in Paris ...?'

Saturday today, meaning no Leslie, thank Christ. He'd be at the Yewtree – his vast faux-Tudor Surrey pile – where I imagine he'd be flabbing about by his indoor pool or twatting golf balls with his neighbours, all of whom seemed to be fading radio stars, big in the 80s, bitter now.

Leslie hated it here. He didn't get the respect he deserved, he said. He constantly referred to 'Management' and their 'Ideas' and made liberal use of visual quotation marks. He was on his second warning with the company, after swearing at a vegetarian on air, and for some vague rumour of bullying a suddenly-no-longer-there intern, but that's just idle gossip, and I don't deal in that. The plus side was that he now tended to keep his rants within studio walls.

'There's a reason the canteen only has eggs on a bloody Friday,' he bellowed once, while the ads were on. 'And it's to keep the workers

docile. They want us compliant so they starve us of fuel. Feed us fucking porridge like we're Dickensian orphans. Crush our spirit so that the advertisers from Tango know we won't have a bloody meltdown. That's all they fear, "Management" ...' – there go the fingers again – '... freedom of expression! What's the obvious way to quell it? Pretend you can't have fucking eggs delivered in London in the twenty-first century except as a fucking treat on a Friday!'

Still. We were free of him on Saturdays.

'... *with highs of nineteen in the Capital today* ...' I finished, and then, from force of habit ... '*And now you're up to date.*'

Oops.

Mic down. Red light off. Ads.

'Sorry, it's Tom, yeah?' said the girl at the mic. 'I'm Cass?'

She said her name like it was a question, held her hand out and I shook it. She had a limp handshake, like she expected everyone else to do all the work. On the plus side, she'd fit right in.

'I shouldn't have said "now you're up to date" just then. Sorry.'
'You what?'

I knew who Cass was. She'd been here maybe three weeks. I hadn't covered Saturdays before. But Cass used to do drive on Key 103, up north. Won a Sony Rising Star. Interviewed bands. She was a music presenter, really. A jock. Not a *serious* presenter, or a 'broadcaster', as Leslie would have it.

'Leslie doesn't like it when I say "now you're up to date". But I keep doing it, because I feel like I've just updated people and that now they're up to date. And also, it's just something to say.'

Cass laughed. This ... cackle. Her eyes were bright and I noticed her arms. Tanned, lithe. Her laugh went on a little too long, though. Particularly as I hadn't actually made a joke.

'You serious? He cares about that?'

I drained my coffee and quietly put down my mug. I glanced at Janice in the corner. She'd usually be behind the glass, but I guess

she was in here for the first month with Cass to make sure all went well. She didn't look up. She'd been Leslie's producer for years. She acted like his PA, too, making sure he had his Starbucks ready and waiting when he got in, making sure he got his eggs on a Friday. There were rumours she made sure he was comfortable in other ways too, but that's just idle gossip, and as you know, I don't deal in that. But the fact was, Leslie expected a lot from those around him. It's a brave move to laugh at Leslie James. Everything gets back to him. *Everything.*

Then Cass said, 'That guy's a dick, man,' and got on with her show.

.....

From: MAUREEN THOMAS

To: ALL STAFF

Will newsreaders PLEASE remember to take their mugs back to the kitchenette when their shift is done. I do NOT expect cleaning staff to have to do this. PLEASE REMEMBER we are a COMMUNITY and we DO NOT pick up after one another.

.....

I went to get my mug and then picked up my phone.

'Hi, I'm just calling about my girlfriend's phone bill ...'

This had been my idea last night. My big idea. What if she'd phoned Andy back? She'd have used her mobile ...

'And are you the account holder?'

'I just need to get access to it is all.'

'I see, and are you the account holder?'

'No, my girlfriend is the account holder, but I am my girlfriend's boyfriend.'

'Well, I would need to speak to the account holder.'

'She says it's absolutely fine.'

‘Well, I would need to speak to the account holder to verify that.’

‘I can give you all her details?’

‘I would need to speak to the account holder.’

‘Ask me anything.’

Hayley Grace Anderson (phone carrier: TelSun, payment plan: PayMonthly, account password: Hayl3y1) gave me her number the night we met (07700 etc, etc) and I made the joke I always make when someone gives me their number which I told you already and which you’ve probably already decided to use yourself.

And Hayley had laughed and laughed at this, because remember, it’s a great thing to say, and I had beamed so widely and felt so good about life that I suppose I must have seemed very attractive at that moment, because then she immediately took the slip of paper back, amended it, and handed me her *real* number.

Hayley’s friend had won tickets to a gig on Bristol CitySound 98.8. We were a small team, sharing responsibilities, and gave them out in person instead of posting them because we were spending too much on first class stamps. But we were assured that ‘this was a fantastic opportunity for us to engage with the listeners one-on-one’.

I could only imagine Leslie’s fury at that kind of thinking.

‘They see us as thick bloody sheep!’ he once yelled, banging his fist on a filing cabinet, as everyone around him pretended it wasn’t happening. ‘Just sitting around in this horrible office waiting for their wonderful pronouncements! “Great news, guys! We’re halving your wages! This will be a *really exciting opportunity* to get back down there on the floor, to remember our roots, to see how we earn our money. This is a great chance for us to really make our budgets stretch and *get the best out of our money*. Nice one, everybody!” Well they’ve got one spin and it’s absolute bollocks.’

So anyway, we used to ask these competition winners to come to reception, and more often than not they were these confused

middle-aged women who couldn't remember what tickets they'd won. There's a whole network of them. Bored housewives who all text each other when they hear there's a competition on and then share the prizes. Doesn't matter what they are or what station it is or whether they've ever heard the show before. Tickets. Trips. Tiaras. Greedily snuffing about for whatever's going. Pete Lawson on Vibe calls them GigPigs. He did it on-air once. No one noticed.

But Hayley and her friend looked different. They looked like they might actually listen to the station.

'Do you listen to the station?' I asked.

'No,' they said.

Then the friend, Laura, who Hayley used to see all the time – and I don't know why she doesn't any more, now I think about it – said, 'How many tickets is it again?'

'Four,' I said, and I handed them over.

'There's only two of us,' said Hayley.

I never went out back then. Well, hardly. A couple of nights a month with Calum, before he got the job offer in Dublin. We'd been mates since school, and he'd helped see me through the things that had happened ... but he'd always been that little bit ahead of me – he had a family, these days. A proper, grown-up marriage with date nights and anniversaries and big family parties. Trampoline in the back garden. A back garden! Corporate car, a home mobile and a work mobile, the trappings of adulthood. But back then, even with someone I knew so well, I felt I should spare the world my company.

That night, though, I had fun. I let go. Went with the flow. Did what my old doctor used to say I should do – 'do what everyone else is doing!' It was at Colston Hall, Abbey Grant, the last gig of her first tour, signed by Universal and on her way, rumour had it, to America ... but here in Bristol first.

And it was Hayley, Laura, me and a stranger from the queue we'd given the spare ticket to. The girls had asked me straight away

because they didn't know anyone else in Bristol and I fancied Laura so said yes straight away.

'She's got an aura, hasn't she?' said Hayley, when Laura had gone to the toilet. 'I call it a Laura-aura.'

And then I felt a bit ashamed that I'd been so obviously into her. And like I'd been rude to Hayley. So I started talking to her more, as we found a bar down by the marina. And the more I talked to her, the more I tried to impress her, the more important it became to me that she liked me too.

They were in town from Stockport for a few days for a friend's wedding in a chapel near Frome, but they'd grown restless.

'I thought you two were sisters,' I said, when Laura sat back down, and I thought I saw her bristle slightly, like I'd said they were wearing the same tops or something.

'We've just got very similar tastes,' said Hayley.

Things moved fast.

We'd met up the next day, the three of us, and I'd taken them to see Clifton Suspension Bridge, and I've no idea why, because as impressive as it is, you're still just taking someone to see a bridge, so we found ourselves food and we chatted and hardly noticed when Laura slipped away.

And the next day, when Laura said she had a headache and just needed to get some work done, we hit the countryside on our own, walking the two miles along the canal from Bath to the George in Bathampton, sinking slow pints by the lock in the sun as kids played cricket over the bridge. It was easy, talking to Hayley. It sounds too simple and childish, but it was like everything that was my favourite was her favourite too.

Bands. Albums. Specific *versions* of tracks.

Countries. Cities. Specific *areas* of cities.

TV shows. Characters. Specific *lines* delivered by characters.

And the weirder it became, and the more we pretended to be freaked out by it, the more we loved it, because it meant we didn't have to take responsibility for this – it was like the heavens themselves were willing it.

'Laura? It's Tom ... Hayley's Tom ...'

My voice was upbeat, friendly, delightful. I'd rehearsed, and I can *do* delightful.

'Tom?'

Her voice wasn't delightful.

'Yeah! Hey, can you speak?'

'Not ... not right now, not really, Tom ... what's this about?'

She was distant, unfriendly. Maybe because she knew? Was she hiding Hayley? Had I cracked it already and she was struggling to work out how?

'I was just wondering ... have you heard from Hayley at all?'

A pause.

'I have not heard from Hayley, no,' she said.

I waited. I'm not sure for what. A question, maybe. Some concern. But nothing.

'Do you know where she might be?' I asked. 'I'm only calling because—'

'I haven't heard from her and I don't expect to,' said Laura, and I thought that would be the end of the sentence, but something crackled and spiked in her voice, like flint against steel, some small spark of fury and impatience, and she said, 'And I thought I made that really, really clear, so if this is some kind of set-up, or some kind of trick, then I'm not interested, Tom.'

I blinked.

'Sorry?'

'She's a bloody psycho. Please don't call again.'

And the line went dead.

[2]

Cockroft takes a sip of his wine. It is a brooding, blood-red wine – a 1975 Chateau Patache d’Aux. He raises his glass, holds it to the light, tings the crystal with a single blackened fingernail.

All the while, a couple at the other table drink their bottle of wine, oblivious.

‘It’s delicious,’ he says, one hand softening his now-silver beard, ‘Berries. Black licorice. Full body. Long finish. Try some.’

‘You like that one?’

‘Never had it before. Never even heard of it, truth be told.’

I smile, I can’t help it. I notice the long-stemmed churchwarden pipes behind him, once smoked by Roosevelt, Hoover, Ziegfeld. Once, for \$5 a year, patrons could keep their own pipe here. When a member passed away, the stem of their pipe would be cracked. Cockroft would look good with one of those pipes. The bar-room philosopher; the thinker.

‘You’re resisting,’ he says, and I realize he’s been staring at me for some time.

‘I guess,’ I say.

‘You avoid the water I order, you don’t take of the wine ...’

‘I’m not trying to be rude,’ I say.

‘This happens a lot,’ he replies, and I notice his body language mirrors mine. I shift, uncomfortable at the thought he might think me in his awe. ‘But you must know, you are already in. A stage hypnotist will

WHO IS TOM DITTO?

tell you that the people who go to his show are already hypnotized; they believe; that's why they are there. Why are you here?

'Not because I believe,' I say. 'Because I'm a journalist.'

'You report. You see the world from afar. Do you never feel you want to engage? Why choose to report? Why not choose to *involve* yourself?'

SIX

6.27am. Monday. Second bulletin.

I feel restless, distracted.

Adewale on reception had given me a can of Tango. He'd drunk three himself already today and he couldn't stop moving his knee. He sat, grinning, next to three more, under a giant plasma screaming WELCOME TO OUR FRIENDS AT BRITVIC PLC!

He could not believe his luck.

A bloody psycho, eh?

I sat down, checked the wires.

Oh, great. A story about First Capital Connect. I bloody hate First Capital Connect. Too many *kabs*, too many *chks*.

First. Capital. Connect.

Who named it? Who thought that was a catchy name? Try saying it fast. Now try saying it fast, on air, with half of London listening. First Capital Connect. You have to spread the words. First. Capital. Connect. Slow it down. It just doesn't flow. What were they thinking? Why wasn't there a meeting? I dragged my eyes across them once more. I had to stay focused.

Psycho. Psychopath. Someone thinks my girlfriend is a psychopath.

Is she even my girlfriend?

Christ – Stanislas Wawrinka was playing Murray tonight.

I'm no tennis fan, I know nothing about it, my job is simply to sound like I do, to deliver words and numbers with authority, to

learn the most effective way of implying knowledge, to know how to pace ‘six-two, six-two, six-four’, or ‘twenty-two under-par’ or ‘two hundred and sixty-five for seven’, but I genuinely wish Stanislas Wawrinka nothing but ill in his career. I hope he loses, badly, then immediately decides to retire, preferably after changing his name by deed poll to something like Bobby Easyname.

Stanislas Wawrinka.

The arrogance of it.

‘Tom,’ said Pippy, standing next to a clean-shaven kid of maybe nineteen in a bright lime hoodie, nervously running his hand through messy brown hair. He was still proudly wearing a grubby wristband from Rock Ness. He also looked knackered. Like until this moment he hadn’t even known there *was* a 6.28 in the morning. ‘This is Work Experience Paul, he’s starting with us today, and ...’

‘Stanislas. Vav-rinka,’ I muttered, barely nodding then pushing through the studio door, and picking up from some subtle clues that Leslie was less than happy.

‘Those absolute *pricks* with their fucking gas of words and corporate speak – billows out of their mouths like a fog, a green fog, filling the room, suffocating ideas, any new way of thinking, anything that isn’t theirs or been proven by a focus group ...’

He looked at me, wild-eyed, then back at Janice.

‘Have you ever seen these focus groups? Have you? Slack-jawed simpletons paid in Pizza Hut vouchers. And *they* have a say in what *I* do.’

His eyes flicked to his screen. Forty-two seconds ’til on-air. He relaxed, and pointed at the cupboard.

‘You know what they did last month?’

Here we go.

‘They said we couldn’t keep jam in there. They sent a fucking company-wide memo to say we could not keep jam in that specific cupboard.’

I looked at the cupboard. It was just a cupboard. He shrugged his shoulders, bewildered.

‘It’s empty, that cupboard, and yet we can’t keep a simple pot of jam in there in case a client walks in—’

‘It’s Britvic today,’ I said, trying to interject.

‘—and for some unknown *bloody* reason Billy bloody Britvic decides to look in a cupboard, sees some jam, and thinks, “I don’t think I’ll spend any of my hundreds of thousands of pounds of advertising budget on any of the radio stations in this group because once I opened a cupboard and there was some fucking *jam* in it.”’

‘Isn’t the kitchenette the proper—’ began Janice, never expecting to finish.

‘The *kitchenette* will see the end of that jam in less than five seconds flat, because the engineers bloody stand around the fridge eating jam with their spoons, Janice. I’ve seen it. It’s disgusting, they’re barely a rung up from focus groups. Honestly these people, these bloody people up there ...’

He pointed at the ceiling, jabbed his arm up and down ...

‘... they’re fucking *ideas jockeys*, they thrive on it, they see us as their pets, just tame and docile, and they leap on our creativity and they ride it to death. Why don’t they just build us a fucking exercise yard and be done with it?’

What amazed me about Leslie was that he still didn’t get it. Thirty-five years in radio and still the penny hadn’t dropped, shrouded and cosseted as he was in his own arrogance. The ads aren’t there to support his show. His show is there to bring in ads. He’s just a placeholder, someone who can hold a room, keep everyone listening until the next Kwik Fit ad or paid-for read comes round.

‘So in the next bulletin—’ I said, hopefully, but he was off again.

‘Fucking *blotterjotters!* It’s a constant battle with these nitpicking sods! I watch them walk in, in their bloody pink bloody shirts, invent

a problem, magnify it, and walk out like they've *solved* something. What a way to earn a living!

I glanced down to concentrate.

'Devoid of talent! Devoid of empathy!'

Fifteen seconds 'til on-air. I tried to point at the screen with my elbow but now Leslie was really going for it.

'They piss about the place in their ill-cut suits, chosen by wives who stopped caring *long* ago, or turning up in new ones from Burton, which means they've got a mistress or an eye on one, and they don't walk, they leer, they prowl. You know what they might as well call themselves? These fucking sods? They're Programme *Prevention* Officers! They're bloody PPOs, the lot of them!'

And then, like the pro he is, it was ads done, mic up, voice low ...

'... *just coming up to 6.30, so let's get your news, weather, travel, sport and showbiz, with ...*' – he looked at me, searched my face for a name, relaxed as he realised it didn't matter – '*... Kate Mann.*'

Eyes down. Mic up. News bed.

Usual three stories plus sport from me, plus the inevitable warning about the Blackwall tunnel, finish on the highs.

Stanislas. *Wawrinka*.

'*It's Monday June 18th, I'm Tom Adoyo with the stories you're waking up to ...*'

I was starting to think that maybe Hayley divided opinion.

I mean – What. The. Hell.

Laura's words whirled thick through my head.

I was also, I think, starting to hate Hayley. Really hate her.

I sat at my desk, my world under a cloud, and I bent a pen until it creaked, until it teetered on the verge of snapping.

'Is there anything I can do for you?' said a voice, and I immediately snapped my pen.

It was Work Experience Paul. He looked so keen to be of service, so happy to help.

Ding.

From: MAUREEN THOMAS

To: ALL STAFF

Will newsreaders PLEASE remember to take you're mugs back to the kitchenette and NOT JUST LEAVE THEM BY THE SINK. You're mugs are YOU'RE RESPONSIBILITY and if you cannot use them PROPERLY we will take you're mugs away and you will have to bring you're OWN MUGS IN.

Oh, why does she have to send these to ALL? She knows it was me. Everyone knows it was me. Why the need for such passive aggression? Why the need to embarrass?

But this was the least of my worries. Because I started to consider: what if I *needed* Hayley? What if I couldn't live without her? What if I fell ill? What if there was a problem with one of our parents? What if I got hit by a bus? What if our flat burned down? Who would I turn to? Who would the authorities contact? And just how did she think I'd react to this?

This wasn't just selfish. No, this was now cruel.

'Not a coffee or a tea or anything?'

Jesus, Work Experience Paul was still there.

'I'm fine, thank you,' I said. 'Maybe just take a seat and if I think of something I'll let you know.'

He wandered off to find a chair as I considered this nagging doubt, this element of fear, that I was to blame for Hayley's disappearance. I had noticed but not cared that she'd seen Fran

less. I didn't question it. Same with Laura, before her. It's just what happens. You're in a couple, you see your friends less. It's relationship maths.

And of *course* it must be difficult for someone like Hayley – flighty, an enthusiast – to be with someone like me. Tied to my hours. Early to bed. Ever-less-inspired. God knows *what* she'd been doing, I now realised. But I'd trusted her. We'd been a couple.

A good couple, too, I'd thought. Not like Calum and Joanne, of course, because they were always on about being soulmates. But people always said to us, 'you've got so much in common!' or 'you're like *peas in a pod!*', and that had seemed enough. She'd stayed with me more and more on Bragg's Lane, and Bristol is where I'd wanted us to have a life, but she wanted to go where the opportunities are. Laura had moved to London the year before, and Hayley had been planning on moving in with her but chose me instead.

It felt like the first time I'd ever been chosen. By anyone. For anything.

I sighed.

Her phone bills were paperless and inaccessible. I'd tried her passwords, all the usual ones, from Hayl3y1 to And3r50n to whatever else, but no, nothing, none of them worked. I suppose that showed the level of trust between us now. Not just her keeping her passwords to herself, but me trying to *guess her passwords*.

I wanted Andy's number. I wanted to speak to Andy. Speaking to Andy was *necessary*.

'Not being funny,' she said, not really having to tell me that. 'But you are asking me to break the law.'

'Only a little. Is that a problem?'

'No, I don't care,' she said. 'I'm just saying. I'm not being funny but that's what you're doing.'

I bristled but tried not to show it. I needed Pippy for this.

'I'm just making you aware that that is what you are doing. You are reaching a certain point in life where you are risking a very steep downwards spiral. I'm only being honest.'

'I can cope with this,' I said.

We were in the corridor, by the stairs, under a giant photo of Bark and Lyricis from Vibe. Lyricis had his hand on Bark's bald head and Bark was finding it funny. We quietened, as an engineer walked past.

'Weather today?' he said, spotting me.

'Highs of nineteen,' I said, and on he strode.

'And what are you going to do if you get his number?' hissed Pippy. 'Are you going to—'

'I'm not going to attack him, don't worry. Look, I just need you to say you've forgotten your password and get them to take you through security. I've written it all down for you. Date of birth, middle names ...'

She took the details.

'You owe me,' she said, one finger in the air.

I left her to it.

It was just past 10am. I took my mug back to the kitchenette, washed it to the company's exacting standards and got back to my desk. I had to tee up the next reports, get them ready for Colin Jay at midday.

A footballer bit another footballer.

Blackwall Tunnel's cleared. Traffic stacked back to Clacketts.

Lady Gaga has dressed unusually. Aphra Just says she's keen to settle in Paris with rap star Blaze.

Highs of nineteen in the city today.

I think I'm pretty good at my job. It's not as hard as it seems. There's just a few tricks, is all. Like, for a lead story, you're looking at forty-five seconds. But you want audio for at least fifteen of those. You need to mix it up. Now, that's not a problem if someone's

grabbed some off Sky News. You'll roll on a press conference, clip it, whack it in the in-queue. You add what we call a 'slug' – BLAIR AUDIO RAW, maybe – and boom, if it's big, you snap it. Get it on the twelve o'clock and you sound like you went round his house yourself.

But you might not have any audio, and that's when you have to get inventive. Let's say there's been a smash and grab at Westfield Stratford. When you're prepping, you'd write, 'There's been a smash and grab at Westfield Stratford ... *my colleague Simon Lamp has more ...*'

Then you'd saunter down to the kitchenette, maybe stopping at the vending machine to see if they've replaced the Topics on the way, and you'd find Simon Lamp making a cup-a-soup in someone else's mug.

'Read this out,' you'd say to Simon Lamp, and then Simon Lamp would put on The Voice (we've all got The Voice we use) and hey presto, suddenly it sounds like Simon Lamp has been chasing down the big story himself, probably with hundreds of other dedicated journalist newshounds, pounding the streets of London for scoops, sources and snitches, flatfooted and grim-faced, press cards poking out of their whiskey-stained trilbies, cocked fivers in hand, all '*maybe this will refresh your memory ...*'.

In reality, Simon Lamp wouldn't even know what he was reading and now he's halfway back to his desk with his cup-a-soup, probably stopping at the vending machine to see if they've replaced the Topics on the way.

It's necessary smoke and mirrors. It's its own little showbiz.

'And now you're up to date.'

Ten am is always my best hour. *LC with LJ* was over, and the workers with regular hours had started to arrive, still bleary-eyed despite their comparative lie-ins, clutching their Costa lattes or their

slicks of greasy croissants pressed up against Pret bags. Constant dings of the lifts.

Top floor: management (with full access to roof garden). Third floor: marketing teams (with full access to café). Second floor: sales (with full access to coffee *and* snack machines, *and* first stop for the sandwich man). Our floor: reception and station teams (with full access to some toilets). I think you see the varying levels of importance here.

It might have been nice to socialise with some of the others, I'd sometimes think. But the hours ... it's always the hours. I'm finished just as they're thinking about what to have for lunch. I could hang around for a bit, but then I'd be the office sad case. I could come back into town later, but that looks desperate too. Permanently out of sync, the best I could hope for was a leaving do, or retirement drinks, and when the retirement drinks of a sixty-five-year-old man you've never really spoken to is the best you can hope for you have to start radically reassessing your life. I wanted to talk to someone about Hayley. But how could I raise it? You work with people you barely know, you can hardly drop something like that into conversation too soon. I suppose I could just say we split up, me and Hayley. Go for the sympathy. But these days people always want to know *how* you split up. It's like the first question, after 'why?' How fast would their concern turn to gossip?

No. Better I internalise this. Better I keep this solely between me and Pippy.

'So I heard your girlfriend fucked off!' said Leslie, towering over me, one hand on my shoulder while I sat at my desk. He was saying it loudly; loudly so the whole office could hear how witty and brave and how wonderfully un-PC he was.

Leslie hated 'the PC brigade'. He hated how political correctness had gone mad. He hated how these 'do-gooders' were always doing good.

'These bloody do-gooders!' he'd say, flicking the pages of the *Telegraph* or the *Mail*, shoulders tense at the thought of meddlers telling him there is real concern about the polar ice caps, or that people should drive slower near schools.

I sometimes thought he hated do-gooders more than do-badders. But this? What had happened to me? He loved stuff like this.

'She's just gone travelling,' I said, my face flush, knowing every ear in an office of sixty was on me.

'Where to, then?' he said. 'Where's she gone?'

I wanted to say something witty. Now was the time. If only I could say something witty.

And then, like lightning, like *magic* ...

'I'm not sure.'

Leslie rocked his head back and hooted. I'd never heard anyone hoot before, I don't think I've ever even used the word, but he hooted and honked and he wanted everyone to know how funny he found this; a river of laughter in full flow.

'But she didn't break up with you? She just went?'

'Yep,' I said, and his shoulders began to shake from the sheer joy of it.

'And you're still with her? You haven't ditched her?'

And all I could do was listen and smile, because 120 ears and 120 eyes needed to know I found this as amusing as Leslie did, otherwise I was just part of the bloody PC Brigade. A bad egg. Someone who couldn't take a joke.

'You poor bastard!' he exploded, and the laughter went on for a day if it went on for a minute, and when the torrent finally slowed to a brook, his hand left my shoulder and off he tramped to Soho, this garrulous, polo-necked, razor-burned man, so he could record a

concerned voiceover for a dementia charity ‘very close to my heart’, for just £400 for the hour and only five grand in usage.

I collected my things, started to shut down my computer, cast a glance around. So now they knew. Amazing how people you don’t know that well react to news like mine. They don’t know you, so what’s happened isn’t like something that actually happened. It’s not an event. It’s like a bad thing you read about, or a disease or something, and they don’t want to catch it or jinx themselves. Girls avoid your eye because you’re a boy, and a boy who’s been left, and they don’t want to give you the wrong idea or be seen to be moving in. Boys avoid your eye because boys want an easy entry into friendship – a common bond, an interest, a mutual friend, an opinion – not this heavy stuff, not straight away, not right from the start.

No one wants to be a counsellor except a counsellor.

I should call Calum. Calum would make it all right.

I caught Pippy’s eye as I left. She was unwrapping a new mobile. I gave her a hopeful thumbs-up and a raise of the eyebrows.

‘Not yet, my love,’ she called out, holding up the slip of paper I’d given her. ‘Totes on my list!’

I sat on the 73, letting six cups of Nescafé trickle from my pores after a sweaty half-jog to catch it. My head throbbed from the caffeine, the watery coffee with its cheap beige foam. They order catering tubs at SoundHaus. That can’t be good for you. I’m sure they cut in some cheaper stuff, too, bought off some spiv in some alley round the back of Chinatown. Leslie doesn’t have to worry. He keeps a vacuum-packed bag of Carte Noire in his pigeon-hole. For a while he tried to make interns bring him cafetières. Then the company bought some of those instant hot taps. Now you just hold your cup over a sink and you’re done in four seconds. It’s how Leslie says he imagines they make coffee in prison.

‘They might as well rename the terrace the bloody exercise yard!’ he’d fumed.

He made that joke maybe once a week.

A weak rain began to speckle the windows as I wondered whether to call Laura again. It wasn’t the sort of conversation I wanted to have on a bus, next to a man who may very well have won awards for his cough before. It was the only thing to do today. My work was over. My chores done.

I’d picked up my prescription. Got my pills. Ended up telling Dr Moon the whole story – missing girlfriend, missing sleep. He was a good man, and he’d smiled, sympathetically, though with one eye on the clock. So I’d left and bought a crayfish wrap.

My afternoons seemed to have so many more hours in them now that Hayley was gone. Calling Laura was a great big highlighted tick on an otherwise empty calendar, whether she wanted to speak to me or not. And why didn’t she? Because she thought I was *part* of something. What, though? Some conspiracy? Some plot? Plus, she thought Hayley might have put me up to calling. Why?

I drafted a text as we motored past Sicilian Avenue on Southampton Row. I’d keep it in my phone, I’d wait for the right time.

Laura. It’s Tom again. Sorry. I only rang yesterday because Hayley’s gone. She upped and left. But need to know what you meant by her being a ‘psycho’. I promise I’m not one. Please? T x

I wondered what could have happened between those two. They’d seemed such kindred spirits. There was something familial about them. You know those people who are the best of friends one minute, and enemies the next? Frenemies? And when they’re in a frenemy phase they say, ‘we’re just too *alike*, that’s our problem!?’

It was that way with those two. *Peas in a pod*. Which is what made Laura's attitude all the more strange.

I shrugged. Shook my head. How did everything change so fast?
Everyone is insane.

I pressed Send on the text.

And, half an hour later, as I walked down Church Street, towards Albion Road, my phone buzzed as I searched for the keys in my pocket.

Laura. It had to be Laura.

Number unknown.

Hi guys! This is my new number! Pip pip! Pippy xxx

Sour, beaten, I pushed open the door of our flat – my flat – and there was that moment again, the one I'd become so familiar with. The listening, the making sure, the sheer silence. No one home. Everything the same.

I stepped in, my shoe sliding on something for a second.

A menu from Wok 'n' Roll. Another from Thaitanic.

I kicked them aside, wiped my shoes on that mat, and then saw, just next to them ... a picture.

I stood above it, not yet ready to pick it up. I took it in.

A mass of small cars, circling an arch. A deep and powerful blue stretching out above it all. Not one cloud in sight.

A word in the middle. Block capitals and underlined.

A name.

seven

Tom,

I'm sorry I've been so distant, I am just elsewhere.

You must be so confused and wonder if I still care.

Hope you're just carrying on as normal.

Love

Hayley

I wasn't angry, as I read, as much as I was fascinated. What could be going through her head?

'Love' was not a fair word to end on. Love equals hope but what if love is intended as friendship or pity? So stick your love where the sun don't shine. Stick it in Ecclefechan.

So, er ... WHY DID YOU GO? I mean it, now. I just want to know.

Then: Sorry you've been so distant? Yes, you're pretty fucking distant. You're in Paris.

Next, *WHY ARE YOU IN PARIS?* You have never once mentioned Paris.

So of course I'm confused. At least you know what's going on, and knowing what's going on is the basic requirement for *not* being confused.

But yes, yes I bet you do hope I am 'carrying on as normal'. Because that would relieve you of all guilt and responsibility,

wouldn't it? You wouldn't need to worry about me then, would you? This is a selfish sentiment and you are a selfish person.

There. I said it. And I said it all out loud, as I got up, got out of bed, stormed around the flat, fists slamming hard on tables, stairs kicked, a single shoe booted down the corridor against a door where it now lay, confused and sad, like a little leather puppy.

And then I saw all her magazines, lying on our table. And I thought about what Fran had said, about Hayley's changing look, her changing clothes, her changing tastes, her change in location ...

FASHION. STYLE. FOOD. GLAMOUR. TRAVEL.

For the woman who wants it all – except her boyfriend!

I swept them off the table and let hard spines and staples and pages clatter against the wall and slide to the floor, where dog-eared pages spilled open and small neon Post-its next to shoes and tops glimpsed out.

I got my phone out, saw Pippy's text still there on the screen.

Number unknown.

Hi guys! This is my new number! Pip pip! Pippy xxx

I pressed CALL BACK. She answered straight away.

'Hiya!'

'Have you done it yet? Can you just do it? I feel like I'm going mad.'

'Cool your jets,' she said. 'First of all, did you tell Work Experience Paul to sit on a chair and await your instructions?'

'What? No. I mean, I told him to take a seat and if I thought of anything—'

'He was there five hours. He skipped lunch.'

'Pippy, did you call Hayley's mobile people?'

'I just talked to them.'

'And?'

‘They said they couldn’t help. They asked me my “secret question”. I had no idea who her favourite teacher was at school so I just said Mrs Barbara Teacher.’

‘Bollocks.’

‘But then I begged them. And I said it was a matter of life and death. I said I had to be able to change my password because I was afraid my abusive boyfriend had it so he could check who I’d been calling.’

‘Abusive?’

‘I used that word, yeah, so I imagine the authorities may be in touch. The girl seemed to understand.’

‘So you got a new password?’

‘No, but she said she understood.’

So I couldn’t check her bill. I paced, both of us silent on the phone.

‘Can’t you trace iPhones?’ she said, a beat later.

‘Tried it,’ I said. ‘She’s turned that off. But I know where she is. She sent me a postcard.’

‘Oh, that’s ... thoughtful?’

‘She’s in Paris.’

A pause.

‘Paris,’ said Pippy. ‘Someone mentioned Paris the other day. Who was it?’

‘What?’

‘Someone mentioned Paris just the other day. I’m certain of it. Because I remember thinking, “Oh, Paris”.’

‘Lots of people mention Paris. It’s pretty famous.’

‘Yes, but this was some kind of *special* mention,’ she said.

‘Who mentioned Paris?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘*Think*. Who mentioned Paris?’

Another pause.

‘I think it was *you*.’

Why would I mention Paris? I would remember mentioning Paris. Perhaps she’d confused me with someone else. Maybe I *was* going mad. I still wasn’t sleeping properly. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept well.

I’d phoned Calum. I needed his take. He didn’t answer. I guess it was maybe bath time for the kids, or story time, or bedtime. But he’d texted back.

jesus, man. did i not tell you she was an oddball? did i not call it? are you still up?

I didn’t want to talk, now, two hours later. Calum hadn’t been a huge fan of Hayley. I reasoned some people just don’t gel. But now came the self-pity. I felt ashamed. I felt embarrassed.

I leaned against the wall of the living room, slid down, sat in silence.

I should probably tidy up the magazines. That’s what Calum would have done. Calum with his sorted life and his flexible mortgage and his Waitrose home delivery. I flicked a page or two, pages Hayley had highlighted. Outfits she liked, I guess. Retailer numbers. Website addresses. Shoes. A few things I recognised, too – a navy blue top, some bright yellow heels. Stuff she’d bought for her trip, maybe. I flicked to the next marked page.

Another list of numbers. Phone numbers.

Retailers?

But no, hang on, because these were 07 numbers. Mobiles?

These belonged to *people*.

So why were they on a bright pink Post-it on page forty-seven of *Harper’s Bazaar*?

'It's 6.01 on June 19th, I'm Tom Adoyo with the stories you're waking up to ...'

Autopilot.

Phone numbers. Post-its. Postcards. Paris. Psychos.

Leslie was barely looking at me. He was fuming. There was an email open on his computer.

.....

From: MAUREEN THOMAS

To: ALL

ONCE AGAIN: CUPBOARD'S MUST BE KEPT EMPTY AT ALL TIMES. These are not YOU'RE cupboards, they are the COMPANY'S CUPBOARD'S and must be treated AS SUCH.

.....

He was shaking his head, his fingers hovering over a keyboard, priming themselves, warming up, ready to respond with a sharp shot of sarcasm and bile.

'Sir Alex Ferguson wades in to Manchester United referee storm ...'

I was pleased he wasn't looking at me. Imagine how he'll look at me when he finds out about the postcard. Oh, God, he'll love it.

'Child protection system "creaking" say MPs ...'

My phone was off, as is studio etiquette. You just do it automatically, you don't need to be asked; the way a man clambering up a cherry picker doesn't need that sign to tell him to pop his hard hat on.

'... and police chiefs call for "drunk tanks" in the capital ...'

Was she depressed? People hide depression from their partners. They can find sneaky ways of distracting from it. They can mask it. They can act in hugely unusual ways. Maybe she was depressed and this was her solution. She'd had a breakdown. That had to be it.

‘... *highs of nineteen in the city this morning ...*’

No one had replied last night, when I’d sent the texts out.
Why not?

‘... *and now you’re up to date.*’

I stared at the screen. Blinked.

Was I done?

Sweeper. Ads. Yes, done. All done.

‘These fucking cupboard *NAZIS*,’ said Leslie, eyes on his laptop, barely moving his head to the left to indicate he was addressing me. ‘I’d happily see every one of those *cunts* up against a wall and shot if it meant I could keep my fucking jam in my fucking cupboard.’

I was just pleased he hadn’t noticed I’d ended with ‘now you’re up to date’, and as I spilled back in my chair and looked round to murmur some vague notion of support I caught Janice’s eye behind the glass.

She looked terrified.

Properly terrified.

She’d just walked back in, coffee in hand. She’d been away from her side of the desk.

I guess that was quite a word for Leslie to use – the worst – but acting offended? This was something else. She was on another level. Eyes wide, her hands clutching papers, now raised to her head, barking something to someone. Urgent.

I frowned.

How had she heard us from behind the glass?

‘Absolute fucking *Nazis*,’ said Leslie again, oblivious, and as my eyes searched the room, searched for the source of the fear, I saw, just above his head, on the wall, by the clock ... the bright red light.

Lit.

eight

Leslie and I were suspended on full pay before the papers could make the decision themselves. Janice received a formal warning and now couldn't look anyone in the eye or herself in the mirror.

'You cretin,' Leslie had spat, inches from my face, so close I could inhale the Weetabix from his teeth. 'You absolute bloody cretin!'

I wanted to defend myself. The light was on! The fader was up! You could've seen it! But it was my mic. My fader. My responsibility. If Janice had had a chance to slap the Dump button she'd missed it when she hot-tapped a coffee. I could sympathise. The news was on. None of them listened to the news. It was just a break for them. What could happen when the news was on? They'd caught the end of it, of course, but the main meat – the word – that had slipped out of the studio and into half a million little radios, in homes, in cafés, on school runs ...

And out of the studio Leslie had stormed, his agent already dialled, and I watched him as he paced back and forth, one arm on his forehead, the veins in his neck strained and blue, angry fingers pointing every now and again at me through the port-hole window, not quite sound-proofed enough to mute his rage.

He apologised straight away on air – profusely, professionally – but Twitter wasn't on his side. Radio Today tweeted a link minutes later. The *Media Guardian* jumped on it with glee. Radiofail preserved it for all eternity and the *Standard* managed to get it on

the streets, in black-and-white, irreversible, unchangeable, by the end of the day.

TALK LONDON LESLIE'S MAD NAZI JAM RANT

Leslie was mainly concerned they kept referring to him as a 'local DJ'.

'London's as good as *national*,' he kept saying, over and over. 'We're on DAB! We're online! It's pretty much *international*.'

That didn't really help his cause. All it meant was, he'd sworn all over the world.

He'd been summoned to the fifth floor in minutes, and it wasn't to look at the roof garden. Mike Brundell was told to start his show two hours early, and I could hear him now, sitting outside Jenny Gardener's office, talking about immigration through a sleek walnut Revo, just opposite a poster of a grinning Leslie wearing acid-washed jeans and a waistcoat and giving two thumbs-up.

I knew I'd be back on in a week. It was my mistake. I'd do a studio etiquette refreshers course and sign some forms to say I had, but I wasn't the one who'd said the 'C' word on air, and it turned out that was the element a lot of people had chosen to focus on.

I could hear nothing from the office in which Leslie now sat, where no doubt he'd be explaining himself to Jenny Gardener. Janice should've been on hand to stop the offending moment go out, he'd be saying, so why was she making a coffee when the news was on?

But it was still him that had said it.

By the end of the first day, fourteen complaints had been filed with OFCOM.

Two hundred and sixty-six by the time the *Mail* had made its outrage known the next morning.

Leslie's suspension was over.

Leslie had done his last show.

It had distracted me from the wait for replies from people, I'll give it that.

Problem was, waiting for replies had distracted me from my job.

I'd remembered Pippy's text, the night before.

Number Unknown.

Here's my new number.

And it struck me how people trust that kind of text. You accept it. You just do. No one bats an eyelid. *This must be my friend. How could it not? It's come to me!*

So I'd tapped it out, to see how it looked.

Guys. Lost my phone! This is my new number. Hayley.

Anyone who got that would just think, 'oh, Hayley's lost her phone'. Not 'oh, I appear to be about to engage with the disgruntled partner of a friend or acquaintance of mine adopting the guise of their loved one'. They'd just assume. I mean, I'd believe it, and I'm the one that typed it.

Then they'd reply, and if I played them right, by a process of elimination, I could work out which, if any of them, was Andy-from-the-place. Because one of them was bound to be Andy-from-the-place, right?

But nothing. Nothing at all. From any of them.

Sent home, staring at my phone, I wondered whether to text Leslie to apologise again. He'd left the building that afternoon and headed straight for the Nellie Dean with Janice. Apparently she'd sat wordlessly nursing a flat Pepsi while he hit the Macallan and railed against the industry, saying, 'They'd been *looking* for a fucking

excuse. Well, the listeners won't stand for it. They want to see the revolution that'll hit, come Monday morning. They won't know *what* to make of it.'

Even before he'd stormed out of SoundHaus, I could sense his anger turning to glee. For Leslie, his sacking was just proof of the conspiracy against him. He was too old, he was too white, he was too experienced, he was too powerful, he was too expensive. They feared him. How do you contain fear? You crush it. Well, you don't crush Leslie James. He'd be back. Maybe he'd start his own station. You only needed a microphone and some sort of equipment. He could do podcasts, set his own hours, do it from home. This could be the best thing that ever happened to him. And who would replace him? Mike Brundell? Good luck. No, they'd have to bring in a Titchmarsh or an Edmonds. Maybe poach Nick Ferrari, if he'd come back to local. But were any of those going to quell the uprising? Not on your Nellie Dean. Leslie was on fire. Leslie was fury.

So no, I didn't text him in the end.

Instead, I picked up the home phone, and I dialled a number.

'Hello?'

'Don't hang up.'

'Who is this?'

'It's Tom, I'm ringing from home ...'

'I already—'

'I cannot *stress* how much I need to meet with you right now.'

A pause. Uncertainty.

'*Please.*'

nine

I checked my emails as the sun stretched across the table. Flies skimmed the water, lit as they chased through a calming amber.

The canal looked pretty tonight; ducks quietly bothering each other by the houseboats, the dull thunder of another train leaving King's Cross a half-mile or so away. The tall, arched windows of the red-brick factories in the distance lined up, ordered, uniform.

FROM: MAUREEN THOMAS
TO: ALL STAFF

ALL STAFF PLEASE NOTE from 2pm tomorrow that ALL STAFF ARE EXPECTED TO ATTEND a STUDIO ETIQUETTE and BASIC DESKWORK WORKSHOP which ALL STAFF MUST ATTEND due to several indiscretion's of late which CANNOT be aloud thank you.

Did that mean me? I was suspended. Which rule should I respect? I'll respect the suspended rule.

Laura had agreed to meet here after several assurances that we were on the same side. I suggested her place or mine: she chose this pub. It was unsaid, but clear she wanted to meet in public.

I hoped she had the sense that I now had a greater feeling for what she'd been talking about. And I wasn't a wounded boyfriend any more. I wasn't the victim I'd felt previously. It was odd, but I was almost a bystander now. A witness to a crime. And when she finally got there, forty minutes late, already I would guess a glass or two of wine in, I was quick to back that up.

'I know what you mean by bloody psycho now,' I said, swirling the last of the Coke in my glass.

She furrowed her brow. She hadn't changed a bit. How reassuring that is, when someone doesn't change a bit.

'I think she's had some kind of breakdown or something. But I know she's in France now.'

'She's in France?'

'Paris. She sent me a postcard. But I don't know where and I don't have a number for her apart from her mobile and she doesn't reply to emails. And I think I sort of know why she went even though I don't at all understand it, and—'

'The problem is she hasn't changed at all.'

I smiled a false smile, pretended to be distracted as a man threw some bread at the ducks.

'I'd take issue with that statement, I think,' I said, as lightly as I could.

'You serious?' she said. 'You didn't notice? You never spoke about it?'

'Please just say whatever you want to say.'

Laura leaned in, dropped her voice.

'When Hayley met me she fell in love with me. That was how she put it. How long had we known each other by the time we met you in Bristol?'

I shrugged.

'I don't know. Ages.'

'Two months. We'd known each other two months.'

That didn't seem right.

'I thought you'd, like, grown up together, or ...'

'Listen, I thought she was fantastic. We had exactly the same tastes. Hit it off brilliantly. It was like, I could say whatever, and we'd find a connection. Any old thing. Favourite film? *You've Got Mail*. Both of us.'

'She hated *You've Got Mail*. She said she hated that film. I remember, it was on last Christmas, she said she hated it.'

Laura laughed, smacked the table, spilled her wine.

'No – you hated *You've Got Mail*. You hated it.'

She rocked back in her chair, stared at me, waited for it to sink in.

'What else did she hate?' she said, as I sat there, stumped.

'Tacos? Talent shows? Oh – rosé.'

'And which of those do you hate?'

'So you're saying ...'

'She's a pleaser. That's what I think. She tries to please, she tries to fit in, she moulds her tastes around stronger personalities. And then she stays like that, for whatever reasons she has, until something else comes along. Something bigger. With me, it was you. Do you have any idea how much rosé we used to drink? Do you remember what you said when you saw us together in Bristol? You thought we were sisters.'

'Or ... or cousins, it's—'

'The hair, yeah? The clothes. The bloody sunglasses. Everyone thought it. Do. You. See. What. I. Am. Saying?'

But I was ignoring her now, because I was thinking of the walk we'd taken, the walk to the George in Bathampton, and the chats we'd had ... deep and meaningful and staring straight into each other's eyes and laughing at all the stuff we had in common, all the things we'd liked, all the plans we coyly shared in the hope the other might have the same ...

'I hated it when I realised. Because that's not friendship, is it? That's creepy and sociopathic. I told her where to go, and she just

kept turning up everywhere she knew I was going to be. You two were going out at that time, thank God, and you have no idea how pleased I was when she found you, so that I could ... well ...'

'Get rid of her.'

'Yeah.'

'She's always been someone else,' I said, and it hit me hard, and suddenly I wasn't just a bystander any more, I was very directly affected by it. I felt ... robbed of something.

'I don't know what to do,' I said.

'Move on,' she said.

'But how do I—'

'Just move on. Don't look back. Told you last time, I'll tell you again. People like that aren't good for you. You're better off out. Especially after ... well, the way you were.'

I waved that away, made it seem like nothing.

'A girl who could do this to you after all that,' she said. 'After you credited her with getting you out of it. After you said she *helped* you.'

'Okay.'

'Well, I mean it. You used to say she saved you. And now look at her.'

A thought struck me.

'I've forgotten how you two met?'

'I was in Topshop. She was just suddenly there. She tapped me on the shoulder. Told me she loved my necklace.'

I felt sick. Was that her thing?

'There's something else to all this,' I said. 'I think there's a guy involved.'

'Oh, Tom,' she said, sadly. 'She's capable of anything.'

Somewhere close by, a dog barked. Ducks took flight.

I walked up Caledonian Road and crossed over, towards Barnsbury, past the tall Victorian houses, now updated with slats and fake

plants, too green to be convincingly British. Richmond Avenue, with the strange pyramids and coal-black sphinxes standing guard out front, though no one ever seemed to know why, or be curious enough to ask.

I'd left Laura upset. Part of her missed Hayley too. Or, at least, her version of Hayley. She'd texted me straight after, saying it was good to see me, and that we should meet up again sometime, but we both knew that we wouldn't. Our link had been Hayley – at least I'd thought it had been. Now we didn't even have that. We were just two people who'd met, once.

My phone vibrated in my pocket again, but I couldn't face another text from her, knowing it'd be a 'chin up' or a 'sorry' or a sad face or something. I'd wait until I'd found a cab. I didn't want to walk home tonight.

I waved down a black cab near the Regent and climbed in.

'Stoke Newington,' I said, and the cabbie nodded.

'Good night?' he said.

'Can we have the radio on, please?' I said, shooting that down.

He obliged. Some dance track and a DJ with ideas above his station. Quick joke about the weather, time check, song intro. One link, one thought – that's what they tell you is all the public can stand. Maybe they're right. Sometimes you want radio to not listen to.

I pulled my phone out, wondering how to reply to Laura.

But the text wasn't from Laura.

Number unknown.

Hi love. Good luck. A. x

A?

A for Andy?

My heart raced. It had to be him. Come on. 'Hi love', with a kiss? It *had* to be the guy.

What do I write back?

Or do I phone him?

He'll think it's Hayley – he'll answer.

But then what? How do I keep him on the line? How do I get answers?

I stared out the window as we took the back route round Islington, towards the roundabout.

And then ...

'Mate ...' I shouted. 'Mate!'

The cabbie, startled, turned.

'What?'

'What is this?' I said, panicked. '*This*, what is it?'

'This *what?*' he said.

'This music!' I said, trying to be as quick as I could so I could still hear it, but it was slowing, it was ending, 'What's this *music?*'

It was still in my head as I got home. I kept it there, repeating the words over and over.

I was sure I'd heard what I'd heard.

But what if I hadn't? What if I was going mad?

I'm sorry I've been so distant, I am just elsewhere.

You must be so confused and wonder if I still care ...

I grabbed the postcard from the table. Read it. Sank into my sofa.

The words. The words were the lyrics.

I got my phone out again, ready to dial, ready to launch into something at this Andy guy, but then I thought wait, wait ... be clever, here. You have his number. Bide your time. There must be a better way.

I flipped open my laptop.

DANNY WALLACE

Tapped his number into google.

One result.

CC UK - Wednesdays. 6.30pm. Holiday Inn Express.
Wandsworth.

Then the last few words ...

Call Andy, on ...

[3]

I sit on the Eames chair in the corner of his apartment on Bleecker.

There is a fresh pot of coffee on the stove, and *Saturday Night Live* plays out on the television set in the corner of the room. Comedian Eddie Murphy is pretending to be the musician Stevie Wonder, at which the audience whoops and hollers.

The old man tends to the plants at the window, kneeling on a patchwork ottoman.

'The aspect many have trouble grasping,' says Cockcroft, standing up to turn the television off, 'is that most people are other people.'

'How so?' I say.

'Their thoughts are someone else's opinion, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.'

'Is that true of you?'

'I should say so,' he says, turning to me. 'I just quoted Oscar Wilde.'

'How did you fall into it?' I ask, as he sits down at the table.

'I did not fall into it,' he says. 'I leapt into it. I leapt into it with great vigor, and longing, and passion.'

'But why?'

He lays out two cups, and pushes a bowl of brown sugar toward me.

'Because I had found something.'

I take a sugar cube and drop it in my cup.

'Was finding it enough?' I ask. 'Did you not have enough?'

'I had found something, and no, finding something is not in and of itself enough. To know you have found something worth finding, you must first have lost something worth losing.'

He takes a sugar cube and lets it slide down the curve of his cup.

I say nothing, allowing the silence to drown out what is unsaid. What I would have asked the last time we met is not necessarily what I might ask now. I would rather he tell me than I ask him to.

He takes a breath.

'I lost Mae first to another man, and then to the Gods.'

American Airlines flight 330 out of Chicago.

'She was coming back to New York, maybe to tell me, maybe not.'

It was 1965. They knocked on his door that night. He did not yet know, but he had already lost her to the man she'd booked a seat next to.

'I struggled with it all, of course I did. When she was gone I was struck by what was left. Me. Only me. Our infant daughter, of course, but our memories halved. And I was left not with a bitterness that she may have sought comfort elsewhere, but left instead with the fact that she was gone and I was not.'

He could not cope. He could not look at his life. His past was gone, ruined with his future.

And this was when Ezra Cockroft first realized there must be something else he could do.

ten

The Holiday Inn Express, Wandsworth.

Thirty minutes of free Wi-Fi per night. A new snack menu in the lounge bar including Chicken Tikka Masala (£9.95) and Chilli Con Carne (£8.95). Free hot breakfast with (selected) hot items. Work desk and hairdryer in every room. Just metres from Trinity Road roundabout.

I know this because I'd checked the website on my phone as I sat in a Costa nearby, and now that I was here ... well, was this where they always met? Hayley and Andy? To have an affair? Or do ... whatever it was they were doing? Why the Holiday Inn Express? Why not just treat yourself, and go for the Holiday Inn? What was the rush?

The lounge bar was quiet. Bucket seats. Faint music – prominent clarinet – the odd thwoosh of someone cleaning a milk frother or banging a coffee pot behind a thin wall.

On my left, an unhappy couple sat silently at a too-small table.

She was younger than he was. Pale skin, straight black hair, skinny jeans, maybe mid-twenties. He was a larger, older, black man with a copy of the *Mail* and a plate of eggs, trying to avoid her eye.

He took a sip of his water, and she took a sip of hers.

He put his glass down gently.

They sighed.

Bad news? Fresh argument? Or just misery in sync? A tactic to avoid conversation, based on years of experience? Neither looked up

as I crept past, trying not to catch whatever they had. She stared at him. He now stared at the window. No one ate the eggs.

I found a seat near the back, on a low, stiff sofa where I could see the whole room. Just me, skinny jeans and the egg man so far. And then, on a wallpapered pillar, just below an ineffective lampshade, I saw a small and laminated sign.

CC →

I sat a moment more.

Got up.

Followed the arrow.

The thing that Laura mentioned. The times that Hayley got me through.

Let me just clear that up.

Let's say Hayley, for the sake of it, is a mild depressive. Let's just say that, and let's just say it's mild. But strong enough to affect.

Because mild is what Dr Moon calls it, and I suppose compared to the depths to which others slip, it is, but to the person involved at the times you feel it most, it's not mild. It's no more possible to call it mild than it is to call a murder mild, or for someone to suffer mild death. It's not mild. It just is.

Think dank, at first. Foggy. Blurred. Think the moss on an otherwise normal tree, think the oil that coats the water. A growth, a barrier, think of it however's easiest. It's not glass-half-empty, either, before you confuse it with pessimism. It's a total and consuming belief in one's own worthlessness, hopelessness, helplessness, which affects everything the moment you notice what I know some have called that black dog ... it's in your peripheral vision, now. You don't have to look at it to know it's there, you hear it panting, you hear it settling, and immediately whatever sense of well-being or self-worth

was there rises like a spirit from your body and like in a dream where you can't find your footing there is nothing you can do but watch it go and allow despair and fatigue and emptiness their place at the table. Watch the water rise, watch the fog glide in, watch the dog strain at his leash.

So let's say Hayley, for the sake of it, is a mild depressive.

She isn't.

But if she were, then she'd be just like me.

And now you know why I need clarity about Hayley. Now you know why I need purpose. My days are foggy enough when it hits. Actually, 'hits' is the wrong word. Creeps – that's better. And when it *creeps* – just as it's crept every day since I was sixteen, stretching this gauze across my life – I need to push through it; break the surface for breath. I wanted to know what was going on here. And I needed to stop my spirit rising from my body.

I'd had it under control these days. I could laugh instead of cry. Sometimes I'd do both.

But I had to know.

Because times were changing. And I felt like I was going mad.

You'll find that the meeting room at the Holiday Inn Express, Wandsworth, has access to a coffee machine and benefits from full air conditioning. It also has ten seats around a lacquered pine table, eye-straining carpets and tartan curtains.

When I approached, and hovered by the door, four of the seats were taken.

What was this? Where was Andy? Was this ... a support group? Swingers?

'Pia may or may not come,' said a woman, middle-aged, small cheap glasses. The kind of woman who's always happy to have information others don't. 'And Jeremy's not coming, of course.'

I cleared my throat and a huge maroon jumper with a man in it looked up at me. He was mid-forties – salt and pepper hair, huge anticipatory grin, big badge saying ‘I’m Tim!’

This, I thought, was not Andy.

‘I’m Tim!’ he said, apparently delighted to see me, one pale hand reaching for mine.

‘Hi Tim,’ I said, low-energy. ‘I’m ...’

‘You here for ...?’

He stopped short of saying it loud, instead opening one palm for me to deliver the answer ...

Clever. What was I supposed to say?

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m just ... I was looking for someone, and ...’

‘Uh-huh,’ said Tim, and I noticed he was still holding my hand. This handshake should have ended by now.

‘Yeah, I was looking for my mate, and ...’

He wasn’t letting go, and now the woman had got up – a slip of a woman, just bones and oats, and she looked at me hopefully, and I noticed her badge.

CC ME.

‘CC?’ I said, changing tack.

‘Oh, *Italian*, are you?’ said Tim, now smiling, now finally letting my hand drop. ‘*Si! Si!*’

He laughed a lot at this, his eyes searching the room for someone to enjoy it with. But he was clearly letting me stay.

‘It’s £5, then, just to cover coffees and biscuits and the like,’ he said, and I scabbled about in my pocket for change. This really didn’t seem like Hayley’s scene at all. Not even what I thought had been her new scene. £5 for coffee and biscuits does not equal a Chinawhite crowd.

‘You just ignore Tim!’ said the lady, sitting back down at the table. ‘He’s always doing his Italian joke to newbies!’

‘Guilty,’ said Tim. ‘Guilty as charged!’

‘I’m Jackie and you’re very welcome,’ said the woman, who looked like she was probably a knitter and goes to sci-fi conventions for little-watched eighties cartoons held in grim Derbyshire boxing halls. ‘What’s your name, poppet?’

‘... Serge,’ I said.

Serge? Where the hell had Serge come from?

A thick-set orange teenager looked round from the coffee machine.

‘Where’s Andy?’ he said. ‘Andy should be here by now.’

The hell was that? Fake tan? Jet black hair, too, the kind of pure black nature can’t compete with.

The fourth of four stood by the window, fiddling with one tartan curtain, staring out at the road.

‘That’s Victor,’ said Jackie. ‘It’s his first time too.’

Victor did not turn round.

But Andy was coming. *Andy*.

Because this was *the place*.

And then Andy walked into the place and he was not what I was expecting at all.

‘First off,’ said Andy, who was a hundred and fifty pounds if he was ten. ‘Let’s meet the new folks and assess their expectations.’

He was late thirties. Khaki combat trousers. A huge checked shirt. Bifocals under a thinning mop of long, curly hair and red clipboard in hand.

He did not seem a natural nemesis.

‘So Victor – you first! What first drew you to us?’

Victor shrugged.

‘Okay, that’s fine,’ said Andy. ‘But what do you hope to get out of it?’

Victor shrugged again.

‘Dunno, not sure.’

‘Uh-huh, uh-huh,’ said Andy, nodding. ‘And how did you hear about us please? Because as I always say: the first rule of CC is no one talks about CC!’

Tim started to laugh so hard at this that he slapped his thigh. Victor just shrugged.

How the hell did Hayley fit into this? This bunch of ... *dweebs*.

‘How about you, Serge?’ said Andy, and the room turned to me. ‘How did you hear about us?’

I hadn’t expected this. I didn’t know what to say. I could make something up, I suppose. Or I could just play it straight. Get the upper hand early on.

‘My girlfriend told me about you,’ I said.

‘I see,’ said Andy. ‘Ordinarily people don’t ... I mean, is she a member of this chapter, or another, or ...?’

‘When you say “this chapter”, you mean ...?’

‘I mean, does she use this CC? Or does she attend another CC, perhaps—’

‘Her name’s Hayley,’ I said, and the only person who did not react when I said that name was Victor.

‘Hayley Anderson?’ said Jackie.

‘We don’t use full names here,’ said Andy, eyebrows down, face darker.

He turned to me.

‘*The* Hayley?’

I’d expected to be angry. I’d thought I might knock things over. Yell. But instead, I sat, eyes fixed on my shoes.

‘Hayley takes it very seriously, Tom,’ said Andy, nodding, the room in rapt silence around him.

Jackie had been pretty quiet since realising. Tim wasn’t finding much funny any more. The orange kid – whose name I now knew

was Felix – just stared at his thumbs. Victor had left when he worked out this wasn't a swingers thing.

'And we were there for her,' he said. 'Always there for her.'

'There for her how?' I said, not looking up, not yet able to.

'She'd only recently joined Wandsworth,' he said. 'She'd been with ... Highgate before that, was it, Jackie?'

'Highgate, yes.'

'And Stockwell before that?'

'Stockwell, yes.'

'But she didn't find them particularly ... inspiring.'

'How long?' I said. 'How long has she been coming here?'

'I don't have that on record.'

'Did she say why she started?'

Andy shook his head.

'Or *why*? No offence to any of you, you all seem perfectly ... but why would she need this in her life? Because I'm sitting in a Holiday Inn Express in Wandsworth and *I don't know why*.'

'We help people,' said Andy, and that stopped me.

'What people?'

'Lost people. People who don't quite know who they are any more.'

I stared at him.

'I don't understand.'

'People can run into trouble,' said Tim, gently. 'It's like a car. Sometimes the battery runs down. And you need another car to help jumpstart it. We sort of provide the leads.'

'You help people who are lost or whose batteries are flat. So far you sound like the RAC. So I'm going to ask you again: what do you do?'

Andy shifted in his chair, leaned in, spoke with care.

'Sometimes someone might be in an unfamiliar city.'

'Hayley *knew* London.'

‘They might not know what they’re doing with themselves.’

‘She had a *job*. She *liked* it.’

‘Maybe they moved here and they left their friends behind, or their family, and they look around and they’re alone.’

But Hayley had *me*.

‘Or something might happen in their life which catches them off guard and throws them off balance and they suddenly think, “Who am I?” You know? “What am I doing?” They might have a history of something. They might feel completely *uninspired*. And we are all about *re*-inspiring them. Recharging their batteries. Showing them who they could be again.’

I looked around the room. Felix with his leather bracelets. Tim eating coleslaw from a tub. Jackie’s cheeks, rhubarb red and with faint silver hints of glints of hair.

‘So it’s self-help? It’s a self-help group? You sit around and read mottos out to each other?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Andy, with patience, and perhaps a little drama. ‘That’s not exactly how we help.’

‘How, then?’ I said, embarrassed, because maybe only I knew this, but at some point – around the time we started talking about inspiration, about someone losing sight of themselves – it seemed like we weren’t just talking about Hayley any more.

‘We copy,’ said Jackie, breaking the deadlock.

‘You copy,’ I said, but the words made no sense.

‘We copy others,’ she said. ‘We follow, we copy. We copy others.’

Andy nodded, gently.

‘Why?’ I said. ‘What?’

‘You go to bed,’ said Andy. ‘You get up, you go to work, you go home, you go to bed. You eat the same dinner every night and shop in the same supermarket. You buy the same things and you eat them in the same place.’

‘So?’ I said. ‘Loads of people do.’

‘I don’t mean you specifically. I mean people generally. And what we do is help combat that. It’s so easy to fall into routine. To think that your way is the only way.’

He smiled, took a Sharpie from his top pocket and pointed it at the window.

‘But if you pick someone out there—’

‘Someone you think is the way you should be—’ said Felix, out of nowhere.

‘Then maybe you’ll learn to be you,’ said Jackie, and I blinked a couple of times, took in the whole scene.

‘This is insane,’ I said.

‘Something you should know is, you will never know our full names. We protect our members’ identities.’

‘And who’s protecting the identities they’re nicking?’ I said. ‘Hang on – is this even legal? You’re stealing identities—’

‘Yes, Christ yes,’ said Andy, flustered, wagging his finger.

‘There’s no law against it,’ said Jackie.

‘What I mean is, you’ll never know my surname. You’ll simply know me as Andy Double. Everyone here does.’

I shook my head. This was insane.

‘That’s Felix Echo over there.’

Felix raised a hand. I noticed he was wearing an ironic ‘N Sync t-shirt.

‘They call me Jackie Ape,’ said Jackie, smiling. ‘I thought that was quite fun.’

‘You’ll like this,’ said Tim. ‘I’m Timitate.’

This was the most *uncool* conversation I had ever had. This was *so uncool*.

‘So some people start with simply following,’ said Andy, still with that gentle tone, still with those kind eyes. ‘A new route home, a different park. Some do it jogging, because it’s less suspicious that way. Maybe they’ll go to a different shop, try a different meal. It’s

about broadening horizons. Finding the best options. Ones that excite you.'

'Or being someone else entirely,' I said. 'Why would you do that?'

Andy leaned forward, put his hand on mine.

'We like to say, "We're *Replicans*, not *Replican*'ts".'

A gentle titter from Timitate.

And I stood.

And I said, 'Well, it was lovely to meet you all.'

Their faces fell. Andy, it seemed, had thought he was getting somewhere.

'And it's great to see that Hayley used to spend her time sitting in a hotel meeting room in Wandsworth with a bunch of weirdos to talk about copying people.'

'Oh dear,' sighed Tim. 'Uh-oh.'

'There's actually no law against it,' said Jackie, again. 'It's honestly not weird. It's just a tool. We just say it's just a different way of subscribing to life.'

'Where's Hayley gone?' I said, now as forthright as I could manage. 'Someone here knows and you need to tell me right now.'

Andy held his hands up.

'I can't.'

'Yes you can. Yes you will, or I'll phone the police right now and have this whole thing shut down.'

'There's actually no *law* against it, actually,' said Jackie again, and it worried me that she'd had to check.

'I can't tell you because I don't know,' said Andy. 'Her story is her story. What she's decided to do is something I personally advised her against but all I could do was advise.'

'You knew she was going. You knew because you left a message on my phone and that's how I found you. You did nothing about it. You knew she'd do this to me and you did nothing!'

And calmly, Andy stood, and looked me dead in the eye.

‘Tom, look ...’ he said. ‘The thing you have to understand, the thing that’ll help you to know, is that Hayley didn’t do this *to you*, Tom.’

He lay two fat pink hands on my shoulders.

‘She did this *for her*.’

Out of the Holiday Inn Express, Wandsworth I stormed.

Left at the roundabout, and over the bridge, my head down, my pace fast, never looking up as cars and vans and bikes shot by.

How was I going to explain this to people?

‘How’s it going with Hayley? Oh, not bad. She decided to meet up with a bunch of oddballs in a hotel to copy strangers and then went to France. But don’t worry, she did it *for her*. Have we still got the flat? Oh yes. And me? Yes, I’m fine. I get up in the dead of night every day to read out loud and my name’s a footnote in a story about a man complaining about jam on the radio.’

On I blazed, because I just needed to move, to get away, to pound the streets like I had a purpose, because I was now redundant, just a purposeless chimp a girl would rather run away from than be anywhere near. And so I turned right on the King’s Road and walked up, past the turning for the World’s End estate, and on, up to Green Park, down Pall Mall, the Strand, never looking up, never looking around, and when my feet could take no more I veered onto Waterloo Bridge, leaned against its triplet of white railings, legs aching, and stared with a face full of accusation at the city that had done this.

I’d almost have preferred it if Hayley had gone out of spite. Or left me for another man. But the fact that she left ‘for her’ made it impossible to get it out of my head. Her life was lacking.

Well, you know what? So was mine.

So what should I do?

Move back to Bristol, that's what.

Sack this whole thing off.

Tell Mohammed he can stick his flat.

Tell Talk London they can stick their job.

Just get home, home to familiar things, familiar people.

God I missed Bristol. The bridge, the cathedral. The butcher's in Southville. The floating harbour, the Tobacco Factory, the gorge. Once it had seemed boring. Now it seemed manageable. Safe. Unsurprising. Perfect.

So that's what I'd do. Forget progress, forget London. Forget my career. Go back to where people don't do as many strange things in as many strange ways. Embrace Bristol, good people, spend my days in the pub by the canal, maybe get a job on a farm, *anything*.

And as I felt for a pill in my pocket, chased it from corner to corner, I could feel the shadows of the city – the phallic Gherkin, the arrogant Shard, the Eye, Big Ben so proud and so full of itself – all of it so big, all of it towering over me, mocking me for having the temerity to stand here, mocking that brief window of genuine optimism I'd somehow allowed myself, and I cast a glance to the right and I caught someone's eye.

I was being followed.

[4]

'Come,' he says, one arm over my shoulder, paternal, nurturing. 'Let's try it.'

'Try what?' I say.

'You want to be immersive,' he says. 'Then immerse. Channel your inner Salinger. Go Gonzo. Choose someone.'

I smile, then laugh.

'I'm serious,' he says. 'Pick a toy.'

'They're toys to you?' I say. 'These are people.'

'You must think of them as toys. You cannot be subservient. Make no mistake: you are the master. They are your subjects. If you bow down to them, you will never rise up; never be anyone but a pale imitation of everyone else. They are the toys, you are the child.'

I look around. We are back in Greenwich Village, on West 3rd Street, next to Golden Swan Park.

'Him?' I say.

A man leaves Café Reggio, and skips across a road, holding a briefcase.

'No,' he says. 'You've chosen someone just like you.'

I look at the man. He's not like me.

'You chose a white man, similar age, similar build, similar clothes, probably a similar mother, probably a similar guy. You chose something you know, you chose familiarity and familiarity is not what discovery is about.'

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He knows what I'm thinking.

'Yes, okay, Berlin, you're right. I was drawn to the familiar. But remember – it was also alien to me. Because my choices had taken me down a very different path. That man was living a life that was absolutely not like mine. It was like a shadow of what could have been. Put simply, I knew what I was missing. You on the other hand think you have it all worked out. Ergo, you *don't know* what you're missing.'

He pushes me forward, and we fall in behind a Chinese man furiously barreling through the crowds.

eleven

There was a Tesco Express on the corner.

I could lose her in the crowd.

She'd tailed me right across the bridge, and that was fair enough, because your options are fairly limited on a bridge, but she'd crossed the road when I did, paused when I did, doubled-back when I did. She'd put a jacket on since the first time I'd seen her. Big blue parka. Army boots over black jeans. Grey beanie pulled back over hair. She looked like a little Eskimo.

I kept my head down as I went in, eyes flicking up to the CCTV screen in the corner, circling the newspapers for a second, and picking up *The Times*. I flapped it open and let my eyes rest on the automatic doors.

I shouldn't have come in here. I should've just got a cab home. But I was intrigued. People don't follow you in real life. This was just a series of extraordinary coincidences. Must be. Had to be. All I had to do was break the cycle. Get some distance.

The doors opened and in she came – Christ! – eyes darting around, searching, hungry. I closed the paper, shoved it back and turned.

My neck prickled.

She saw me, followed.

I slowed at the jams to allow her to pass. She didn't want to talk. What, then? I stared at some small packets of jelly until she went by. I turned and went the other way.

I darted down an aisle to the milk, picked up a small red-top of skimmed, checked my sightlines, moved on, grabbed some sausages. I wanted something in my hands, I hated looking suspicious.

She was nowhere to be seen.

Part of me wanted to laugh. This was ludicrous. But I was too certain I wanted to be annoyed to let the absurdity show. I'd been like that with Hayley when we fought – too determined to be angry to smile when she said something funny, when the tension could have been broken. How much time had I spent choosing to be angry rather than letting something go?

I padded on, thought I saw her, then kneeled at the booze aisle, picking up a half-bottle of rum and flipping it round as if I needed to study the label. A young lad in a Tesco tabard swaggered by holding tall green bottles of elderflower cordial, laughing at something a distant colleague was shouting, a vapour trail of hair gel and Lynx in his wake.

Then she rounded the corner, raised her eyebrows at me, half-smiled and continued on.

Black hair, skinny jeans. Small badge on her lapel: 'I LOVE VEGANS'. She hadn't been in the meeting, this little Bjork. But I'd seen her. Sitting in silence with the big fella at the hotel, not eating his eggs, trying to look like he was ignoring her.

She sauntered past, all wide eyes and innocent, freckled face, and as she did I looked down, and in her basket she had a small bottle of red-top milk and some sausages.

I scanned my sausages in the self-service aisle, then scanned my milk. Then the jelly. Peanuts.

Maybe it was my medication. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, the early mornings, the confusion of Hayley and all that she'd done.

Each *be-bloop* of the till was joined by another a half-second later from directly behind me.

The rum.

'*Age restricted item,*' said the voice from the machine.

Then, a second later, from behind me, the other machine: '*Age restricted item.*'

On the screen: '*Please wait for a member of staff.*'

Jesus.

I turned and scowled at the girl.

Her screen: '*Please wait for a member of staff.*'

She avoided my eye now, looking for whichever member of staff was going to get us out of this one.

We stood four feet apart in complete silence.

She knows I know, I thought to myself. *She knows I know and she knows I know she knows I know.*

Her eyes rested on mine.

'What are *you* staring at?' she said, with enough attitude to make me feel *I* was the weirdo.

'Why are you following me?'

'I'm not. I'm shopping.'

'You were.'

'What?'

'Following me.'

'I know.'

'Why?'

'You seem interesting.'

I stared at her. She stared at me.

'SANDRA!' – *wow*, that was loud. 'SANDRA!'

A Tesco woman under a cloud of thin orange hair was waving at someone I could only assume was Sandra. Let's call her Tesco Sandra.

'*I'll* do it!' she shouted, waving at Tesco Sandra to remain where she was, then looked at the rum, looked at me. 'Sorry, I need my fob.'

She strode off. We were stuck.

‘Where’s your mate?’ I said.

‘What mate?’ said the girl.

‘The big black guy with the eggs.’

‘What big black guy with the ... oh, the big black guy with the eggs at the hotel?’

‘Yes, that’s the big black guy with the eggs I meant. Where’s that big black guy with the eggs?’

‘Where I left him, I s’pose. He’s a senior manager at Foxtons.’

I shrugged.

‘I just thought that was an interesting detail. No, I don’t know where he is. I don’t know him. I read the Foxtons thing on one of his bits of paper he kept putting up to his face.’

She was pretty. In a sort of damaged goods way. Pale, with that constellation of light brown freckles and two green eyes.

I’m not sure why I said ‘two’ there.

But what did she *want*?

‘We never talked, me and that guy,’ she said.

‘You were eating with him.’

‘No I wasn’t. I was sitting opposite him. We never talked.’

‘The place was empty.’

‘And?’

‘Did you sit with him or did he sit with you?’

‘I sat with him.’

‘You just sat down, in an otherwise empty room, at someone else’s table?’

‘He seemed interesting.’

A micro-shrug, a tilt of the head, the implication being: *what’s your problem?*

‘Look, I know you’re one of them. One of those ... from that thing.’

‘I know. It’s pretty obvious. And I also knew you’d know that.’

‘Right!’ said the woman with the orange hair, and we fell silent as she took the bottle from my basket. ‘Rum, is it? Ooh, very nice.’

She swiped or tapped or did whatever it was this great gatekeeper of goods had to do, using her vast power to allow me to buy a half-bottle of something I’d never drink, while I struggled with how to be. This girl, was she friend? Was she foe? Did she know Hayley? Had she encouraged her?

‘And now, you, m’love ...’ said Tesco woman, turning to the girl, and then, noticing her stuff: ‘Oh, you’re *shopping* twins!’

She pointed at the items, her excitement growing.

‘Milk, skimmed – sausages, same brand – the exact same bottle of rum!’

We both just stared at her.

‘Peanuts – jelly ...!’

She made a huge open-mouthed ‘surprised’ face.

‘Sandra!’ she shouted. ‘You’re *never* going to believe this!’

Outside, I hovered by the doors. Mad Girl stepped outside and magicked out a roll-up from a deep blue pocket, limp plastic bag hooked over one thin wrist.

The orange-haired woman had tried to get us to agree to get married one day. All the guests at the wedding would have to eat sausages, jelly and peanuts, she said. And drink milk and rum. The Mad Girl said that sounded like the worst wedding ever and accused me of copying her shopping. That was when the orange-haired woman had started glancing around, looking for security.

I moved off, glowering.

She lit her fag and started after me.

‘You’re *still* following me,’ I said.

‘I live this way,’ she said. ‘Deal with it.’

‘Your whole life?’

‘What?’

'You *live* your *whole life* this way?'

'No,' she said, scrunching up her nose, and pointing down the road. 'I *live, this* way.'

I stopped in my tracks, frowned at her.

'Well, I'm walking this way.'

'So?'

'So follow someone else.'

'Nutter,' she said, overtaking me, slipping an earphone into one ear and hitting Play on an unseen iPod, and turning round once – and only once – to quickly flick me the V, then smile.

twelve

I'd been called in for a meeting at work. I knew what it meant. I was being shelved. Taken off London Calling to make way for Mike Brundell and his sidekick, Sharon News. She'd been called Travel Sharon for ages, but it was felt that made her sound like something you'd buy from Halfords, after you'd popped into the supermarket to get yourself a Tesco Sandra.

Radio does that. Compartmentalises. Pigeon-holes. It's understandable. You need simple, identifiable figures, with simple, identifiable jobs. I'd escaped it so far. I think Adoyo as a name helped make the station sound more multicultural. I think it made it sound like they'd bussed me in from Kenya, rather than asked me to get the 17:30 from Bristol Temple Meads.

Halfway down Great Portland Street a jogger buzzed past me and padded on. Moments later, so did another.

Since CC and the girl on the bridge, I'd been keeping an eye out. I saw followings and followers everywhere. Who's to say it wasn't going on all around me? Or that it hadn't been happening for years? What if everyone was at it?

The girl, there, leaving the newsagents, now walking behind the old lady weighed down by bags. What if that was something? Why couldn't it be?

Or the man running to catch the bus. What if it wasn't the *bus* he was after? I mean – these people meet up, for God's sake. They hire

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rooms at the Holiday Inn. Where had Andy mentioned? Stockwell? Highgate? Where else were Tims and Jackies and Felixes meeting up? They said it was like a support group. Who else had left, the day Hayley left? Who else had jacked it all in and for what?

And why would you give it all up? Who in their right mind would want to live *someone else's life*?

Ding.

FROM: MAUREEN THOMAS
TO: ALL STAFF

Please do NOT bring your OWN WASHING UP LIQUID TO WORK.

Delete.

I'd had to hand my ID over to Maureen the week before, like a renegade cop rather than a disgraced local newsreader, but I still got her emails.

Adewale kept his eye on me as I sat in reception, waiting to be picked up and led upstairs by some work experience or other. I looked around.

‘WELCOME TO OUR FRIENDS AT BONJELA.’

And next to that screen, in huge letters painted right across the wall, the SoundHaus mission statement:

WE ARE THE VOICE THEY HEAR!
One voice, unified, passionate! One voice for London,
one voice for the United Kingdom!
We are here to serve, to entertain, to inform – this is
SoundHaus Plc.
And you're welcome to it!

It had been an internal competition. Jonathan in Online had won. He called it ‘One Voice’. That was on all the stationery now – ‘*SoundHaus – One Voice*’. Jonathan got a night in Barnsley House for his trouble, and even with a prime Cotswolds dinner it was maybe 3,000 per cent cheaper than paying an actual marketing company to do it instead. The only stipulation was that it had to use the word ‘passion’ because they’d done some audience testing and ‘passion’ was ranked top by almost two in every three ABCIs in the coveted 18–34 demographic when asked to identify most-looked-for attributes in modern music or speech-centric commercial radio endeavours.

I found my way to the newsroom. Generally, I avoid this place, because this place is not a fun place to be. Eight desks, six computers, two tellies, strip-lit, windows facing a stained brick wall. Sky News running constantly at just above a whisper. Head of news in a small office to one side. It’s the travel people you really avoid. Eight hours a day looking at cameras, studying tailbacks. It’s not conducive to very good anecdotes.

‘It’s stacked back to Clackets,’ they’ll say, most days, shaking their heads very slowly. It’s always stacked back to Clackets.

Bron poked her head out of her office door and beckoned me in.

‘I hear your personal life is suffering some strife presently,’ she said, one eye on the screen. Was she reading this? Did she get an email from HR with a script? ‘Please know we wish you to feel supported and hope this does not affect your work.’

My work. That implies ...

‘So here it is and brace yourself,’ said Bron, her voice suddenly changing as she clicked the email away, the buttons at the bottom of her shirt straining as she leaned back in her chair, her Telford accent as thick as she was. ‘You’re back on breakfast from Monday.’

I mustered up a smile.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Thank you for your understanding.’

‘OFCOM are going to rule against us. Of course they are. We broadcast the very worst word you can. Have you seen the list?’

She pushed a file across the desk towards me.

There they all were, the words, neatly divided into sections.

Slang words for sex.

Insults with sexual connotations.

Everyday words.

Ethnic words.

People with disabilities.

Terms of racial/religious faith abuse.

Religious words.

Body parts and/or bodily functions, eg ‘tits’.

And there – right there, right at the top, in bold, so you couldn’t really miss it.

The word Leslie said.

‘There’s no way round it,’ said Bron, shrugging, reading an email off the screen. “*Radio broadcasters must have particular regard to times when children are particularly likely to be listening.*”

She made a face that implied this could arguably include breakfast time.

“*The transition to more adult material must not be unduly abrupt.*”

I made a face that implied I accepted it could be said Leslie’s outburst could be described as unduly abrupt.

‘I suspect we’re looking at a fine that could well be record-breaking. You’re lucky to be here at all, but it wasn’t your fault.’

It kind of was.

‘It was Leslie’s responsibility,’ she said, swatting a fat fly away and watching it go. ‘It was Leslie that had to take the fall.’

Her gaze found me again and she half-smiled. That said it all. Leslie was right. They'd been looking for an excuse.

'Of course ... Leslie has a different opinion. He might be coming after you, press-wise. If he does, please just alert HR, I'll make sure they're across it.'

A full-smile now, with sly eyes.

'Have you seen the videos?'

Oh, I'd seen the videos. Leslie had gone viral. JAM NAZI was massive. Six hundred thousand views in five days. The show had been removed from Listen Again almost immediately, but not before the website crashed under the weight of traffic, and the audio stuck up on SoundCloud. There were dozens, now. Some set to music. Some animated. Some just with a sombre black-and-white publicity photo of Leslie someone had found of him holding a kettle while presenting the 2004 *Which?* Awards. There were the usual parodies and remixes – a screaming Hitler, a dubstep version, something with kittens. It had even made a few in-roads into America, but it was over, done, yesterday's viral, replaced almost immediately by someone else's mortification. A fat woman stuck in a McDonald's high chair, maybe, or a naked drunk man running into a wall.

'It's actually had a few upsides,' said Bron. 'Station awareness is ... well, statistically word-of-mouth has increased. Chris Evans was talking about it on Radio 2.'

Radio 2? Oh, Leslie would be delighted. He'd taken it hard, truth be told. He was yet to understand how quickly it spread. He still thought the internet was probably just one big 'forum', and that live radio was gone the second you'd finished.

Well, he knew all about it now. The engineer who'd been told to take Leslie's stuff and drop it round at his house said he found him in his conservatory, hunched over his PC in a short navy dressing gown, railing against 'the trolls', demanding to know what PMSL

meant, a bottle of Glenfiddich broken in the corner, one more in the wastepaper basket.

‘So I’m working with Mike Brundell, I guess?’

God, Mike Brundell was boring. His career had peaked in 1988 with an ITV version of *That’s Life!* called *What’s Your Story?* He’d been a newsreader on BBC Northwest up until then, had a column in the *Reader’s Digest*, still pops up on ‘Dictionary Corner’, and wastes no time in telling you about the time Noel Edmonds performed an elaborate Gotcha! on him, and how if it hadn’t been ‘cut from the show due to time constraints’ it would have changed *everything*.

‘No, not Mike Brundell actually.’

Who, then? Tony Ram, with his jumpers? Passive-aggressive Ray Singer?

‘We’re switching things up. Reflecting the changing tastes of the key demographic. We haven’t announced it yet, but you’ll be working with Cassandra Tailor. Though we’re just calling her “Cassandra”. That’ll be her name. Or maybe “Cass”. We’re testing both.’

They test names.

‘Cass?’ I said. ‘But isn’t she ... I mean, she’s a *jock*, isn’t she, not a *broadcaster*, and—’

‘This has always been the plan. That’s why we gave her weekend breakfast. It was supposed to be another year or so.’

Just in time for Leslie’s contract renewal.

‘She’s ... less experienced,’ said Bron, by which she meant cheap and malleable. ‘We’ve done three off-air pilots already. She’s good. *Fit*, too ...’

She flashed me a dinosaur smile, face hard as steel when her teeth were bared.

‘... and I’ve specified she’s not to talk about her cracked heels. Leslie talked about his cracked heels a *lot*. Said it made him one of the people. I said it made him one of the people with cracked heels.’

I shrugged my agreement.

‘So we want you there for stability. Familiar voice for the listeners. Just until Cass has settled in. So welcome back.’

Cass was in today. She’d been dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s with her agent. Apparently she wanted to see me before I left, so I hung around the kitchenette and kept an eye out.

‘Tom!’

I span round. Pippy, dragging Work Experience Paul behind her.

‘I just got some good news,’ I said.

‘*You* think you’ve got good news?’ she said, beaming, sidling up to me, pleased as punch.

‘Oh yeah?’ I said.

She tapped the side of her glasses. She doesn’t normally wear glasses, Pippy, much less glasses like these, because these were *statement* glasses.

‘The man who made these glasses ...’ she said, ‘was nominated for an Oscar!’

I blinked.

‘Wow,’ I said, a little confused. It wasn’t Oscars season. Was I missing something? ‘Who is he?’

She leaned forward, conspiratorially.

‘Tom Ford,’ she said.

She leaned back, tapped them again.

‘Tom Ford ... the designer?’ I said.

‘Exactly,’ she said.

I was struggling to work out how this was good news.

‘And ... do you know him?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘But he directed a film, and it was on telly last night, and the bloke announcing it said that Tom Ford had been nominated for an Oscar for it, and then I remembered that I had a pair of Tom Ford glasses.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘And are they ... bespoke?’

‘No no,’ she said. ‘Bought them in a shop.’

‘Well,’ I said, doing my best for her. ‘That is good news.’

‘I couldn’t believe it,’ she said, shaking her head, like she was telling me she’d milked a cat and pumped out liquid gold. ‘I was like, Tom Ford? Oscar?! He designed my glasses!’

She glanced at Work Experience Paul, who did not look as enthusiastic, and she held his gaze until he did. Poor kid still had nothing to do, except scratch.

‘Have you told Bron?’ I asked.

‘Do you think Bron would be interested?’

‘I think Bron would *love* to hear this piece of good news.’

‘I’ll away and tell Bron.’

‘I’m *stoked*, man,’ said Cass, coming in for the hug. ‘So stoked.’

‘Yeah, it’s great news, Cass,’ I said, not knowing where to put my arms. I was sure there must be a rule. Maureen was probably hovering around her keyboard just waiting to fire something off. ‘Congratulations.’

‘No, I’m stoked to be working with *you*. I *asked* for you.’

She smiled, flashing a row of perfect teeth made for billboards.

‘They’re going to keep an eye on us for a while. Plenty of snoops, apparently.’

Snoops. Great. An hour after the show to listen to random segments and be told why they’re awful. Jen Latham once had a snoop in which they told her she was saying her own name wrong.

‘I obviously feel bad for Leslie, though, man,’ said Cass. ‘That was really ... unfortunate.’

‘That’s one word for it. I guess you’ll be in charge of the mics.’

She started to laugh. She found that funny. It wasn’t even a joke.

‘This is why I wanted you, man. The bants.’

Eek. She used the term ‘bants’. This could be a warning sign.

I'm not sure I can work with someone who uses the word 'bants'. Mind you, I just used 'eek'.

'Though Christ, I hate that word, "bants",' she said. 'If I ever say it again, slap me down. It's my sister. I live with her. She overuses it. We need a bants ban.'

'You just said it again.'

'You're funny,' she said. 'Literally.'

I was literally being literal, but I let that one go.

'I'm heading out with my agent for a drink, I was going to get Janice to come along and maybe Pippy – she's had some good news of her own today, have you heard?'

She winked at me.

This was the first time I'd been invited anywhere in forever.

'Sure,' I said, warming to her already.

Janice couldn't make it. I think she still felt bad about Leslie. She'd worked with him for years – since his Radio Trent days. And she'd followed him faithfully through the regions, to Rock Radio for the Love Hour, his late-night call-in show on West Country Gold, and all the way to London Calling. London – the big time. And there'd always been rumours about those two. And she'd been getting more and more mysterious calls that meant she had to leave the room of late. But that's just idle gossip, and as you know, I don't deal in that.

Serena from Ketsu Talent put her card behind the bar of the Punch & Judy and drifted off to smoke and run her Blackberry down. She'd started the company, dragged a bunch of clients away from Allied Agents when she left, and only recently discovered that accidentally leaving the 'i' off 'Ketsui' meant it was no longer the Japanese word for 'determination' but instead a Japanese slang word for 'bottom'. She was currently coming up with new names.

'So come on,' said Cass, touching my arm. 'We're going to be working much more closely together. Tell me everything.'

‘What? About the job? About what to expect?’

‘Well, I meant about you, but yeah, if you want to tell me about the job – go on.’

I thought about it.

‘Well, you’ll sort of know this from working on the weekends, but when you’re out so early during the week ... well, you’re out before London even wakes up. Before the sun rises. And London is all orange and dark and sort of abandoned ...’

She leaned in. Gestured me on.

‘Well, I mean ... you get to know the sound of a milk cart, the sound that the bottles make, which you’ve probably forgotten from you were a kid. And you notice little things as you stop at the traffic lights or whatever.’

‘What things?’

‘I dunno. White vans with their ceilings all nicotined. Men flipping back doors open to get newspapers out or whatever, and they’ve got their radios up far too loud for that time of the morning. And ... you know ...’

It felt like it was just me and her, now, despite a man three tables away who just kept finding excuses to stare at her.

‘Battered estate cars. The last illegal minicabs of the night, taking drunk single girls back to wherever they slurred they needed to go. And the girls have got their sticky windows down for air, and you just know they’ve got damp fivers clutched in one hand and their purse is all spattered with Sambuca.’

‘Sounds magical.’

‘It sort of is, in some dirty way. You’re seeing the tail end of something. The hangers-on, who nearly made it into your day, and they’re finishing the story of their night. Like clubbers. Or a couple of Rorys in tuxedos sitting with a bottle of red by a statue, fresh from some corporate marketing awards where they lost out on – I dunno – International Outsource Team of the Year to the guys from

Capita but still toasting their own good fortune. And they don't know how lucky they really are because just metres away—'

'“Rorys”. Remind me of that one day.'

'—because just metres away you see piles of newspapers left outside shops by overturned bins and flaps of kebab skin, all dead and grey because no one's cleaned them up yet, and men with hoods and backpacks circling stacks of milk by the Tesco. Everywhere's just nervous eyes and faked bravado. You're in the night bus and you see this shadow, papering up the inside of the phone box with bits of old Metro so he can smoke his crack in peace. Or the woman in the alley off Theobalds Road looking out for stragglers before ...'

'What?'

'Before *we* get there.'

'You make it sound horrible. And sort of beautiful.'

'It sort of is. I mean, it's much, much more horrible than beautiful, but it can be beautiful because it's real. It's not manufactured or controlled. No one's cleaning it up. It just is. People always talk about the listeners waking up to a show, the ones in bed, or listening in the shower. I like to think of the people who aren't listening. Who are oblivious. Untouched by ... radio chatter. Pop. Who wouldn't know what to do with a traffic update.'

'I thought when you said you were going to tell me about the job you meant “the coffee machine's usually broken” and “Maureen in HR likes an email”.'

'And then it's dawn,' I said, registering what she'd said, acknowledging her smile, but on a roll now, with more somehow to tell her, 'and it's the Poles and the Nigerians and the Afghans that pour out of the buses, all in black, heads down, so they can clean our offices or man our casinos or get us ready, and then they slink back to their estates or bedsits and they turn on the radio ... and they hear Leslie James telling them how unneeded or unwanted they are.'

‘Well,’ she said, picking up her glass for a toast. ‘Here’s to change. Let’s lead London to a brighter dawn.’

She laughed. That was pretty clever and she knew it. But it also made her sound a bit like Hitler.

‘I’m not a leader,’ I said, clinking glasses.

‘Fine by me,’ she said, and that man, probably Italian, found another excuse to look at her. ‘Here’s to followers.’

A pause, as she built up to something.

‘Now tell me about *you*,’ she said. ‘And what happened with that girlfriend of yours ...’

‘You know about that?’

My neck prickled.

‘Dude,’ she said, putting one hand on mine. ‘*Everybody* knows about that.’

They didn’t know the half of it.

I felt hopeful after that. She’d asked for me. And as I walked down Parker Street, trying to find my way to Kingsway and the tube, night falling all around me, one easy eye out for a lazy cab home, belly full of Ketsu Talent pinot, it was the other half of it I was thinking about when I turned my head, slight right, and began to feel uneasy.

There was a man and he was close, so I started to cross the street and as I did so I realised in that gut-wrenching, heart-sinking way that you do, that once again I was being followed.

For a second I considered stopping, and laughing, and introducing myself, because how often do you get followed twice in quick succession, but he was big, and he was closer now, so close his foot clipped at my heel and as I stumbled the side of my thigh was barged and I found myself walking backwards in an alleyway off the main drag as this man now inches away, hand on my chest, pushed me, pushed me back, neck craning to see if we’d been spotted, and I realised this wasn’t what I thought it could be, and I pushed back

against him out of instinct, tried to turn, but now he had a grip on my neck, and the grip tightened and my head was forced round and forwards, pushing hard towards the wall, my hands rising to protect my face but my body clashing hard against the wall, my hip bone striking and scraping and the first splinters and shots of pain firing down through my legs like a nail through bone.

thirteen

The grip tightened, then released.

‘Money.’

‘What?’ I said. ‘Oh, fu—’

The first punch was to my kidneys, the second, straight after, a little higher. Back of the ribs.

‘Gizzit,’ he said again, as my knees began to buckle and I could open my eyes again.

‘I haven’t got—’

The next strike was harder. Kidneys again. I felt something give, and God, you imagine something like this happening, and you imagine fighting, but really, I wanted to cry.

The hand was back on my neck, now, and pushed me round, my head clipping the wall, but my legs were going and I didn’t want to see who this was, because if I couldn’t see, maybe they’d just stop or cut their losses or something.

‘I haven’t—’

And then my eyes sparked and the stars came out as he slapped me, hard, fast, loud, open-handed and round the cheek.

I cowered now; my hands up.

‘I’ve got a phone,’ I said, quickly. ‘Here, I can give you my wallet ...’

I searched around in my jacket for it, looking up at him now and for the first time. Blood-red eyes, veins as one. Broad. Thousand-mile stare. *On* something?

That was the worst bit. You can't reason when they're on something. I'd meet them sometimes, outside the building, waiting for security to let me in. They were friendly, generally, but there were some who'd let the madness take them over. And these were the ones who could turn. Fast. Aggressive. They'd approach, maybe asking for money, maybe asking if I had a light, circling like a shark. If there was one of them you were usually okay. Two and you could have a problem, but you were *never sure*. If they engaged you in conversation, all you could do was listen. You had to smile. Placate. Give them nothing to be paranoid about. Say nothing smart. Act like everything they say impresses you and everything they say is news to you. Make them feel you believe them, whatever it is, whether it's about the government or the dole office or the man that gave them those cuts, that broken nose. You calm them, you never contradict or patronise, and while you keep your hands out of your pockets and ready, of course, you give them no reason to dislike you. They'd dislike you if they thought you reckoned you were above them. They'd dislike you if they thought you found them in any way amusing. Funny; funny's usually a trait people covet.

'I've also got an iPod,' I said. See? Show willing. Offer them something they didn't know was there. At best they'd think it was just weakness, congratulating themselves on their cleverness for finding the right target. At worst, pity and maybe just a slap for fun.

Over his shoulder, London carried on. People shot past the alley, eyes down, headphones on.

But 'What else?' he said, and 'That's it,' I replied, and with a flash of anger he brought another mighty fist down on my cheek, the contact not registering for a second, and then my skin screaming as the shock turned to pain and the taste of hot metal crept over my tongue as blood crawled around my gums and between my teeth.

'Mate, wait,' I tried, and *boom* – another open-handed slap to the face and now this wasn't just for effect, this wasn't to punctuate his points, this was an *attack*.

I just wanted him to go, he felt like a giant and I wanted to be safe, and I reached into my pocket to grab anything, anything else at all to offer him, and I clutched at a fiver and some mints and pathetically held them out in front of me as I stood, bent, no longer a man, no longer someone with a name, just six foot of useless in an alley off the main drag.

Then: 'Yoohoo!'

A girl's voice.

Yoohoo?

The whole world stopped. Silence. No car moved, no bird sang.

I stole a glance, my hands still up ... the man turned, shocked, ready for another fight ...

Big blue parka. I LOVE VEGANS. Phone out in front of her. The unlikeliest of angels.

'Big smiles.'

The world burst into action again. She was recording. I didn't know how to feel. Relief, that help had arrived? Humiliation that it had arrived like this? The man hid his face. Turned away. Realised it was too late. Turned back to intimidate. Shoulders up, chest out.

'Oh yeah, that's good, that's a better shot,' said the girl, backing away, backing into the street, where now there were more people, not many but more, and they could be witnesses, they could have cameras too. A woman had to stop in her tracks then go round her, sighing, oblivious, like she was the most important woman in the world and her hurried walk home the only thing that mattered.

'Yeah, come into the light,' said the girl, backing off, but no fear in her voice. 'Nice one.'

He had my iPod. He'd grabbed it from my pocket the second he'd seen it. The wallet and balled fiver he'd leave. He wasn't taking them on camera. He wasn't doing anything else on camera, either. He tried to shrug his head into his shoulders, and swaggered off, hood now flipped down, past McDonald's and on, people curving around him, sensing his mood, avoiding his eye.

I staggered to my feet, one hand on the wall behind me, stabs of pain from my back as I shifted my weight.

‘Are you okay?’ said the girl.

Bruised cheek was the worst of it. Red on the other side where he’d slapped me. Slapped! Who gets *slapped*? Mind you, who says *yooohoo*? Rib-ache, too, but otherwise I think his moves had been designed to intimidate, not hurt or show.

I looked at the girl in the seat next to me as the taxi hit a sharp left on Amwell. Great. Speed bumps for the next three miles. *Slow, slow, quick quick slow*. The cab driver’s foxtrot.

‘You were following me again,’ I said.

‘Complaining?’

‘It’s a bit weird.’

‘You *are* complaining!’

‘No. No, not this time, no.’

We’d grabbed the first cab we could. I just wanted out of here. I just wanted to go home. The girl had climbed in with me. It seemed fair enough. My ribs ached, but I was grateful to feel anything. Shock would come soon, I suppose. Weirdly, right now, I felt pretty good. Adrenalised.

‘I’d only been following you since you left the pub,’ said the girl.

‘Well, how did you know I was in the pub?’ I said.

‘I followed you there.’

‘Yeah, so you’d been following me for longer. How long had you been following me?’

‘Only since work.’

I sighed.

‘And how did you know where I work?’

‘There was the fact that you’ve named your crotch.’

This girl was mental. Well, why not? Why not share a cab with a mentalist, who claims to be able to tell your name by looking at your crotch?

And then she pointed at the ID dangling from my belt.

My name in big blue letters.

‘Couldn’t help but notice last time we – you know – met.’

‘The last time you *followed* me,’ I said.

A thought struck her and she turned to me, very seriously.

‘Hey, I googled you. I’m so sorry to hear about the whole Jam Nazi thing.’

Jesus.

‘Yeah, that was unfortunate.’

‘There are some great videos. Have you seen the one where they—’

‘I’ve seen them all, yeah.’

‘We should call the police.’

‘Yes,’ I said, realising, remembering. ‘God, of course. Christ, it’s so crazy ...’

‘What?’ she said.

‘You just don’t expect that kind of thing to happen round here.’

I hadn’t thought about the police. My head wasn’t yet clear. But of course we should phone the police.

‘We’ll do it from your place,’ she said. ‘I’m your witness.’

‘And you’ve got the video.’

‘Oh, I wasn’t videoing,’ she said. ‘I was just *implying* I was videoing.’

‘What the hell is your name, anyway?’

She smiled.

‘Lincoln Racksmackle,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘I’m Pia,’ she said. ‘My name is Pia.’

I made for the bathroom while Pia – who I found a very unsettling presence – made herself a cup of tea.

I kept an ear out, in case I heard drawers being opened. I don’t know what she’d find in there to steal. A few takeaway menus. A quid or two.

I stared at myself in the mirror. When had I stopped trusting people?

Oh yeah, that's right ...

Man, I was going to be bruised. I'd always wondered how I'd react if I was mugged. I suppose at least now I knew. I'd put my hands up and collapse.

I found an extremely old bottle of TCP and some cotton wool.

'Why are you doing it, Pia?' I called out, dabbing at the one area the man had broken skin. 'Why follow? Why me?'

'You should know,' she said. 'You went to a meeting yourself.'

'Yeah, but I didn't go for that reason. I didn't go because I was *missing* something.'

'That's exactly why you went.'

'I went because of my girlfriend.'

'Who was exactly what you were missing.'

In the living room, she now sat with her feet up and an open tin of Christmas biscuits I didn't even know we had.

'You smell nice,' she said, and then pretended to vomit.

She was very confident, I'll give her that.

'I like your place, though,' she said, looking around. 'Oh, and there's the woman herself ...'

She pointed at the mantelpiece. A picture of Hayley, the day we moved in. Hair in a scrunchie, collapsed on the sofa, surrounded by boxes.

'Do you know her?' I said. 'From those meetings?'

'I know her a bit. As much as you can know anything at those things. I'm not sure she knows me.'

'Did you know she was going to do what she did?'

'Yes.'

I stared at her for a second or two.

'Yes?'

‘Yes, I knew from day one. She walked in, and I knew. She was so into it all. Full of ideas. She’d been to other meetings. She wasn’t doing it to help herself.’

‘Why, then?’

‘I’m not sure if there was something wrong with her,’ she shrugged. ‘Something compulsive. Because she kept pushing it.’

‘But did you know she was going to run off?’

‘I think she wanted to ... win. She wanted to show her commitment to it. That she’d drop everything and become someone else. I think she was doing that for Andy.’

Andy?

‘For him? What, you mean – she found him *beguiling*, or something?’

‘Andy is not beguiling. I’ve been round Andy’s house. He lives near that big Lucozade sign in Brentford. He’s got an extension cord on the floor with eight Ambi Purs plugged into it. It’s like walking into a field of toxic lavender.’

She made the vomit face again.

‘You should chill,’ she said. ‘I mean, she didn’t drop you, technically, did she?’

‘Did you ever talk to her about it?’

‘I never actually spoke to her. I listened at those things. That’s what I thought it was all about. Listening. Not pushing your own agenda.’

‘How often do you do it?’

‘What?’ she said.

‘Follow. Copy.’

‘It’s only if I find someone interesting. I find you interesting.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of what happened to you. I wanted to know what it would do to you.’

I shook my head at her, still standing, looking down on her.

‘I think it’s *you* something’s happened to. Because you’re a proper fucking oddball.’

‘You should try it.’

‘Try what?’

‘Following.’

I laughed, bitterly. Yeah. Sure. Definitely.

She reached into her giant parka pocket and brought out the half-bottle of rum she’d bought the other day. She twisted it open, took a swig. How do I get rid of her?

‘Has she been in touch, at all?’ she said. ‘I mean, considering what she’s done to you, it’d be cruel not to.’

‘Once. Yes. A postcard.’

‘Can I see?’

I thought about it. I hadn’t shown this to anyone. I’d stared at it a lot, though. Stared at it at night. I’d emailed Calum about it. He called me, sounded concerned for me, suggested a trip over to Dublin to clear my mind, but I told him I needed to stay in London. I had to be here just in case. But just in case what? She called the landline? She suddenly reappeared? Calum told me to take care, that he was thinking of me, to call him straight away if anything happened. Said he had a presentation to prepare for a conference in Utrecht next week, otherwise he’d have been on the first flight over. I could hear his kids in the background, *Peppa Pig* finishing up, his life calling him back. I felt silly. This was humiliating, and it was childish, and I felt small.

But why not show this girl? That didn’t matter. She was all but a stranger.

She read it to herself.

‘The weird thing is,’ I said. ‘I think it’s lyrics from a song.’

‘What?’

‘I was in a cab and I heard this song and I googled the words but she must have changed them a bit.’

‘She’s sent you *song lyrics*?’ she said. ‘Instead of an explanation? Oh, you should totally start doing it yourself.’

I put my hand over my eyes and smiled.

‘You *should*,’ she said, and I sank down onto the sofa, another laugh coming from nowhere.

‘Who do you want to be, Tom?’

I crossed my legs then crossed my arms.

‘Stupid question.’

‘Who would you like to be *like*?’ she said, passing me the bottle.

‘Honestly?’

‘Honestly.’

‘A *million* people. Axl Rose. Bradley Cooper.’

‘Why?’

‘Stop it. I’m not a child,’ I said, a quick swig of rum and then the cap back on, twisted shut, tight. ‘I can’t just be like those people. I’m not even sure why I said Axl Rose.’

‘Okay, someone from real life, then,’ she said. ‘Who do you know that you’d like to be like?’

I was humouring her. I don’t know why. To make sense of it all? To talk to someone? To think of something else? To *have a conversation*?

‘From real life?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I wouldn’t say any of the people I know in real life are particularly ... inspiring.’

‘Because of how they are or because of how you engage with them?’ she said, taking the bottle, immediately untwisting the cap, flicking it across the room.

She offered it to me. I put my hand up to decline.

‘Medicinal,’ she said.

I relented.

‘Come out with me,’ she said. ‘Right now.’

‘No.’

‘We’ll follow someone. I’ll show you. It’s fun.’

‘You’re out of your fucking mind.’

‘There’s a whole world out there. Billions of people doing billions of things. Do you honestly think that not one of those billions of things is better than what you’re doing right now?’

‘What I’m doing ... what I—’

‘You’re saying “this is it?”, are you? “This is all I want? Keep your billions of interesting activities and pastimes, not one of them can interest me?”’

‘That’s not what I’m saying at all—’

‘What do you think Bradley Cooper’s doing right now? Do you think it’s better or worse than sitting in your flat after a botched mugging without a girlfriend you’re not sure is your girlfriend, probably already thinking you’ve got to get up at quarter past three or whatever mental time you’re supposed to get up?’

‘That’s a good point,’ I said. ‘I should probably rest. How about Axl Rose? I wonder what Axl Rose is—’

‘What does Hayley think you’re doing right now? And what would show Hayley?’

She pointed at the photo on the mantelpiece. Held up the postcard.

‘What would piss her *right* off?’

Ah, my weak point. Well played. Because yes, maybe it was time to hit back. Hit back even if she couldn’t see it. Pia saw she was onto something.

‘You. Out there. *That* would piss her off. You, showing her how to do it. Then getting on with your life.’

Bottle to my lips.

But no.

‘Much as I’d love to see how you follow people about,’ I said, handing it back, ‘the resting thing sways it for me, and—’

‘Why rest when you don’t *do* anything? What are you recovering from? At least do something to rest from!’

‘Pia, I’ve just been beaten up.’

She smiled.

‘That’s a very *passive* activity. You even let someone else do *that* for you.’

She stole a laugh from me.

‘One hour,’ she said.

‘I shouldn’t leave the flat! I should be calling the police and—’

‘Come on. Come with me! Give me one hour. I know it sounds crazy, but you have to *see*.’

I thought about it.

No.

Maybe?

‘You *owe* me.’

‘Well ... I need milk.’

‘We’ll get milk. We’ll go out to get milk. If anyone tries to attack you again I’ll duff them up. Come on. I saved your arse tonight.’

I couldn’t argue with that.

‘And then,’ she said, taking another long, sweet swig from the bottle, ‘we’ll see what happens next.’

I sort of wanted to see what happened next.

[5]

'Why do this?' I ask, as we take cover from the rain in the entrance of Delmonico's on South William.

The Chinese man is long gone, swapped for a mustachioed homosexual in a leatherette sailor's cap on his way to a party downtown. We followed him until the rain ran slick through our hair.

'Come,' he says. 'Inside.'

We take a table in the center of the room. He wipes the rain from his brow, and takes a menu.

'You know this place?' he says. 'First printed menus in the US. First tablecloths, too. This place has a lot of firsts. First place to use the term Baked Alaska. Claims to have been the first to make eggs Benedict. Manhattan clam chowder – started right here, in those kitchens just three feet through that door. And you know the best one?'

I remove my jacket and shake my head.

'The Hamburg Steak.'

I have never heard of it. Cockroft looks startled.

'The first hamburger!' he says. 'Here. Right here. In 1834. So you see, it pays to be original, it does, you need that moment of inspiration, for you will forever hold your place in history!'

I look around, because I sense that's what he wants me to do.

'And yet,' he says, leaning toward me now. 'What if you don't do anything with it?'

He holds my eye and takes his time.

'You know how many McDonald's we passed on the way here today? You know how many there are in the country? Nearly 6,000. They made \$7 billion last year. This place? Sells maybe twenty burgers a day, I don't know. You can buy a 39-cent burger in *London* now. Tokyo – can you imagine! But did McDonald's invent the idea? Did they diddely. They followed. They took inspiration. You could argue the hamburger belongs to them now. And therein one sees the power of an idea.'

'But you're not in this for money,' I say, and I am reminded of the question he so elegantly avoided out in the rain. 'Why do you copy?'

'Hmm?' he says.

'Why copy?' I say.

'Why copy?' he says.

'Yes,' I say.

'Yes,' he says.

'Yes?' I say.

'Yes?' he says.

I sit back, unwilling to play.

He shoots back in his chair, too, an exaggerated look of confusion across his face.

'I'm sorry, I'm joking,' he says, his wild blue eyes softening. 'Copy? I just told you. We all copy. It is in us. It forms the greatest part of our own personalities. You think we are all born original? We are not. Every book you've read, every movie you've seen, every idea you've ever thought was yours ... all of them were somewhere else first. If we see further, it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants.'

'That's a nice way of putting it.'

'I didn't put it that way. Isaac Newton did. But the fact remains ... I mean, "Books serve to show a man that those original thoughts of his aren't very new after all." Abraham Lincoln.'

'I see,' I say.

'Pretty original thought. Although Marie Antoinette said it before him. On it goes. Shakespeare, all of them. Everything that can be put has already been put. Everything that can be done, be felt, be heard, has already been done, felt and heard.'

'I'm not certain I understand what you're saying.'

'What I am saying is what others have said and it is simple: why not take a short cut and get to the good stuff? Why go through all the legwork, the tedious invention of the thousand and one things that have to happen before you discover a thought, a moment, an intention – why not just find someone who's already there, or on the cusp, and *piggyback their joy?*'

fourteen

We stood on Stoke Newington Church Street, outside 5 Star Cleaners, underneath the lamppost by the bus stop.

Another bus went straight past.

‘Well, this is fun. I can certainly see what all the fuss is about.’

‘You just have to be patient,’ said Pia. ‘What about him?’

She pointed with one elbow – her hands deep in her parka.

‘That guy? You want to follow that guy?’

Fifty feet away, a man in his mid-thirties crossed the road from the town hall, looking both ways as he did so.

‘Why not? Look at his shoes. Converse. That shows he’s grounded.’

‘Or cheap.’

‘Laptop bag, worn leather. So he’s professional, but probably creative. Bag from the wine shop.’

‘So he’s going home.’

‘He might be going to a party. He might be going to a wine-tasting. You don’t know.’

‘He looks very ... normal.’

‘Don’t you want to be normal?’ she said. ‘Get a mortgage? Order the same curry every Friday night from the same place you always use? Get an office job, answer the phones, “*Good morning, Kitchen and Home Supplies, Tom speaking ...?*” That’s what most people want.’

‘So you just want to follow normal people as they order their favourite curries?’ I said.

‘Sometimes I see the value in that. Sometimes I see the value in “*Good morning, how can I help you please thank you?*”’

‘What’s your codename, anyway?’

‘My what?’

‘Andy Double. Felix Follow-everyone-about. What’s yours?’

‘Mine’s double-barrelled,’ she said. ‘Pia Likewise-Xerox.’

‘You just made that up.’

‘I did. I find all that *so* uncool,’ she said, scanning the street, looking down towards the library. ‘What about her, then?’

A teenage girl in a pink velour tracksuit barked loudly into a cheap handset, a box from Luigi’s in the other hand. Her words floated over us.

‘*Lemme abks you a question, right? ... Nah, lemme abks you this ...?*’

She walked past John’s Garden Centre, then stopped to shout into her phone.

‘No thank you,’ I said.

‘I’m just saying. All these people are going somewhere. They’ve each got a story. A destination. Isn’t that interesting?’

‘Nope.’

‘Come with me into town. Let’s go to Trafalgar Square. Do you know how many stories start there? At this time of night it’s a story a second!’

‘We’ll end up following a tourist to Heathrow. That will be our story. Standing in WH Smith as they buy a travel pillow and some mints. And how do we know when to stop? When we hit Osaka?’

‘Hey – look ...’ she said, ignoring me, and I followed her eye.

Now this – this *was* interesting. A gentleman. Not a man. A *gentleman*. Older. Maybe mid-sixties. Hat. Classic Burberry trench in almond. He’d been in The Fox Reformed – the wine bar with the red frontage I’d always fancied going to but never felt I’d fit. He stood for

a moment under the bust of Edgar Allen Poe and fixed his hat by the orange blush of the streetlight, leaves fluttering around him.

‘He’s brilliant,’ said Pia. ‘Check out his briefcase.’

It was old, cared-for. Brass locks over dulled maroon leather. He wore brogues, and tan leather gloves. A beard and small round glasses, face rich and flush as the bottles of red on the Fox’s wine list.

I took it all in. I think it was the longest I’d ever really looked at a stranger. I saw them all the time, strangers ... just never *looked*.

The man checked his watch as he approached and smoothed down his jacket as he passed.

‘Let’s follow,’ she said, and she tugged at my sleeve.

‘I don’t feel comfortable with this,’ I said, staying where I was.

‘Just for a bit,’ she said. ‘He’s going ...’

She stared at me, like a little girl on an adventure who can’t believe her boring uncle won’t join in with the make-believe.

And so I humoured her. We kept our distance. We walked down Church Street, a hundred steps behind.

He turned right on Green Lanes and then upped his pace.

‘He’s late for something,’ she said, upping hers. ‘He’s got to *be* somewhere. That’s exciting.’

‘He could be going anywhere,’ I said, annoyed. ‘Slow down ...’

‘The *whole point*,’ she said, ‘is that he could be going anywhere!’

On Green Lanes, he broke into a pained jog as the 141 approached, raising one hand to catch the driver’s attention, but the bus didn’t even slow, didn’t even raise a ‘sorry’ hand as a basic courtesy. Everyone’s busy. Everyone’s got some place to be.

‘Okay,’ I said, surprised to find I’d been jogging too. ‘He’s missed his bus. That’s that. We’d have followed him to a bus stop and then watched him go. Can’t believe we missed out on that.’

‘Your sarcasm bores me,’ said Pia. ‘Look – he’s got a plan.’

He checked his watch again and continued to stride down Green Lanes, past the Brownswood and on, past the Pirate’s Playhouse.

‘He’s heading for the tube,’ she said. ‘Manor House. That’s the Piccadilly Line. Where’s he going? Kensington?’

‘That’s the glamorous way of looking at it. He might be going to Uxbridge. Or Heathrow.’

‘You up for it?’

‘Uxbridge? No! Pia, we’ve followed a man to a bus stop and now we’re walking to a tube station. It’s ten to eight, I sort of feel I’ve had enough for one night.’

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘You’ve got an Oyster Card. You’ve got an Oyster Card because I stopped someone *nicking* your Oyster Card! And what’s the difference? Let’s give it an hour. You can be tucked up in bed by half nine, I promise.’

Something in her eyes had changed. They were shining now. And only now did I see how dulled they must have been before. This was what she wanted to do. I could stop it all in a heartbeat. Or I could go with it. It was only a tube ride, after all.

‘Tucked up in bed by half nine,’ I said.

Into Manor House we ducked, swiping our Oyster Cards behind the man, who was moving quickly now, skipping down the steps, hand trailing lightly on the banister. She was right. He had to be somewhere. I suppose it was interesting. I suppose part of me now wanted a hint of where he could be going. Some minor resolution.

‘First test,’ said Pia. ‘Northbound to Cockfosters, or Southbound to *excitement*?’

We watched the man study the signs. He chose Southbound. She gave me a nudge in the ribs. A look that said, ‘See?’ ... and we followed him down to the platform, deep down below the streets and flats and parks of London, and when the train arrived a minute later we jumped on board, five or six steps behind him.

‘Fiver says it’s King’s Cross,’ I whispered. ‘And that’ll be that. I’m not just going to spend my evening doing someone else’s commute.’

‘We have to keep our distance,’ she said, pulling me to the other end of the carriage. ‘What’s he doing now?’

I cast a glance to the other end.

‘He’s sitting down. He’s got a newspaper out.’

‘Which newspaper?’

‘*Telegraph*.’

‘So he’s a traditionalist,’ she said, and I rolled my eyes.

‘Are we supposed to make up a story for him now?’ I said. ‘Like we’re young lovers in a Simon & Garfunkel song? Are we supposed to say he looks like a spy?’

‘He *does* look like a spy!’ said Pia. ‘We should get a copy of the *Telegraph* later, though. See what he’s reading. It might give us some ideas.’

‘Later?’ I said.

On we rode, past Finsbury Park, Arsenal, Holloway Road ... at King’s Cross we prepared ourselves, knowing he’d probably alight here, minding the gap and heading for the Metropolitan Line, or the Circle, or maybe heading up into the vast Georgian arches of the station above to find his train back to the provinces.

But he remained in his seat, ruffled his paper.

‘He’s going into town,’ said Pia, squeezing my arm. ‘We’re off!’

And past Russell Square we bounced, then Holborn, then Leicester Square, Covent Garden ...

‘He’s getting up,’ she said, hushed, in my ear, pretending to be looking somewhere else. ‘He’s getting his things together ...’

‘Okay, so, Piccadilly Circus ...’

‘He might be going on a date! Maybe there’s some cool, out-of-the-way restaurant only people like him ever know about! Or a sex club!’

‘You would follow this man into a sex club, would you?’

The train slowed, tracks screeching, and we tensed ourselves to deal with the moment of hard stop.

The man was already at the door.

‘You’ve got another thirty minutes,’ I said, and she made a miniature triple-handclap like I’d just told her that, actually, we were going to Disneyland.

Up the escalator he climbed, and we climbed after him, moving quickly past still passengers, gently squeezing the odd tourist to the right, and through the barriers we pushed, up the stairs and out, beneath the huge neon signs of the Circus.

He moved with speed now, checking his watch again, adjusting his hat and moving head down, gently using his briefcase to guide slower pedestrians out of his way and nipping gracefully between them. It was a busy night in Soho, all crowds and buses and cabs, and we moved with him down Shaftesbury Avenue, past Rupert Street – Chinatown and stag parties to our right – until we found Soho fire station. He raised his briefcase in thanks to the bus that let him cross and dashed over the road.

‘He’s doubling back on himself,’ I said. ‘This looks weird.’

‘He’s no idea we’re following him,’ she said, as we pounded across. ‘He’s heading into Soho. Maybe Ronnie Scott’s. He looks like a jazz musician.’

But we passed Frith Street.

‘Maybe he’s a theatre director. Maybe he’s late for the opening night of his own musical.’

He turned right on Dean Street.

‘Maybe he’s going to Pizza Express,’ I said. ‘Maybe he’s going to eat a pizza.’

‘I think you’re wandering into the realms of fantasy now,’ she said, then: ‘Look.’

The man was sidestepping a group of paparazzi outside a grey building with giant red flags outside. He was trying to get through, politely raising one hand but not afraid also to *accidentally* bash one in the small of the back with his briefcase.

‘That’s the Randolph,’ I said. ‘Private members bar. Well, I guess that’s that.’

‘Why is that that?’

‘That’s that because we can’t go in. You have to be a member.’

The man was through the door. And the door – vast and black and solid – was closed.

‘No, you don’t have to be a member,’ she said. ‘I mean, you *do* have to be a member. But you can also just *act* like a member. Which is good for you, because you’ve been acting like a member all night.’

She rabbit-punched me in the ribs. It really bloody hurt.

‘Sorry!’ she said. ‘No, you just walk in.’

We stood outside, away from the photographers.

‘I’m not just walking in. All they’ll do is ask us to leave. Don’t you have to have ID or something?’

‘Not in a place like that. They daren’t ask for ID in case you *are* someone. And you just don’t let them ask if you’re a member. They’ve got a guestbook. You just say, “Hey everyone!” and act like you’re always in there, or you say, “Is upstairs open tonight?” and before you know it you’ve signed in and they just assume you’re someone who belongs there. You think these places recognise all their members?’

‘You seem remarkably comfortable in situations like this.’

‘Come on. You take the lead. Just say, “Hey everyone!”, sign in, and keep walking.’

‘Absolutely not.’

She pushed me, along the pavement, towards the doors.

‘No. Fun’s over.’

She kept pushing. I tried to play it off, tried to make it look normal, but now one of the paps had turned round, sensing something. He raised his camera, just in case.

‘Stop it,’ I said to her. ‘People are looking.’

I did not want to be the centre of attention. I had to act normal. I got to the door and pushed it open while Pia giggled behind me.

Inside a small anteroom, smart girls in black looked up from behind a tall oak desk. Three sets of bright red lips, three friendly smiles.

I raised a pathetic hand.

‘Hey, everyone!’ I said, so they wouldn’t ask me if I was a member.

‘Hi,’ said the first girl, her smile fading now, and then: ‘Are you a member?’

Shit.

I looked at Pia, who was already at the guestbook, pen held in one clenched fist like a child, already trying to move things on.

‘No,’ I said, shrugging. ‘Nor’s she.’

‘We’re actually *meeting* someone here,’ said Pia, shooting me a look. ‘And *they*’re a member.’

‘And what’s the member’s name please?’

‘Matthew Channing,’ she said, without missing a beat.

Who? I looked again at Pia, confused, then saw she had a finger on the guestbook. A random name. Someone who’d already signed in. Matthew Channing.

‘Is Matthew expecting you?’ said the girl. ‘He didn’t say he was expecting guests.’

‘We’ve been texting,’ said Pia. ‘It only just came up. He said to swing by. Said he was sitting his usual spot and to ask you where that was.’

‘Okay,’ said the girl, walking round her table and opening the door. ‘He’s in the upstairs bar ...’

Through the doors, laughter. A mahogany bar, art on the walls – a Damien Hirst? – fat leather club chairs, espresso martinis, piano music.

Only she stood in our way.

‘I’ll just take you to him,’ said the girl.

‘Oh, you don’t have to do that,’ I said, suddenly panicking, because we could really do without being presented to a blank-eyed stranger. ‘It’s fine. Honestly. We’ll find him. I mean, it’s not that big up there. Or is it?’

‘We *usually* take people to him,’ said the girl, and I could see an out here. ‘If they’re not members.’

‘Well, that would be *very kind* of you,’ said Pia.

What?

‘Please do lead the way.’

Inside the main bar, on our right, was the man we’d followed all the way from Stokay. His hat was off now, and his trench, too, revealing a jaunty yellow jacket and polka-dot tie. He’d opened his briefcase and pulled out sheet music ... then moved to the piano, in the shadow of a Peter Blake original. Old Man Stokay was the resident pianist. And he was *good*. Pia shot me a look as we walked through and up the stairs, brushing past a rock star hand-in-hand with that-girl-from-that-thing.

‘This is better than Pizza Express,’ whispered Pia.

‘Pizza Express is highly underrated,’ I said.

‘Matthew always takes the upstairs bar,’ said the girl, smiling, and as Old Man Stokay hit his stride with ‘Paint It Black’, immediately I realised we were about to meet a man named Matthew who was not expecting us at all.

‘Hi Matthew!’ she said, brightly, flirtatiously, and a handsome man in a well-cut midnight blue suit put down his cocktail menu and looked up. ‘Your guests are here.’

‘Hi!’ said Pia, brightly.

‘Hi,’ I said, quite quietly.

I thought about how we looked. A small girl in a big blue parka. A tall man with a now very swollen cheek who now realised he'd used far too much TCP.

'Hello ...?' said Matthew, slender eyebrows arched over dark green eyes. He had a confident moustache; the type of moustache only the truly handsome or murderers of the nineteenth century could really pull off.

'Hi!' said Pia again, while the girl in black looked on, and then she sort of stooped, awkwardly, to kiss him on the cheek. 'How are you, honey?'

'I'm fine, I'm fine,' said the man, playing it off. 'How have you been?'

He was pretending he knew us.

'Is everything okay, Matthew?' said the girl in black, pretending she was asking about the drinks or the seat, but really saying, 'Just checking these clowns are with you?'

'Everything is fine, Berenice, thank you ...'

'I apologise for that smell,' she said, sniffing around. 'Someone must have been cleaning the tables.'

She left, and Pia leaned towards Matthew and said, 'Can I come clean?'

God. This was quick.

'We're not your guests.'

'Sorry?' said the man, and I began to inch away.

'We're friends of Lucy,' said Pia.

'Oh! Ha!' said Matthew. 'Thank God, because I was struggling to recognise you. Which Lucy? Lucy Parker?'

No!

'Yes. Lucy Parker.'

What was she doing?

'How *is* Lucy?' he said, reaching for a memory. 'Is she still working at the Tate?'

‘You know Lucy,’ said Pia, who I was fairly certain didn’t. ‘Work work work. Tate Tate Tate.’

‘I haven’t seen her since Berlin. God, sorry, were you there too? Is that where we ...’

‘In Berlin? No, we didn’t meet in Berlin. What was Berlin?’

‘Edgar’s thirtieth. Oh, I hope I haven’t put my foot in it ...’

Pia made a that’ll-explain-it face.

‘Ah, well, I don’t actually know Edgar all that well, so no, you haven’t!’ Then: ‘*Sorry*, I’m being so rude. This is Tom.’

‘Hello Tom.’

‘Hello Mister Channing.’

Mister Channing?

‘Haha. It’s Matthew. So is Lucy here tonight?’

He seemed familiar, suddenly, this Mister Channing.

‘She wanted to be. But no. So we’re just—’

‘Can I get you any drinks?’ said a girl in a tight skirt, smiling. She was holding a small tumbler of Twiglets, which I remember thinking was odd.

‘Yes, sit, sit,’ said Matthew. ‘Now it’s *me* being rude, not that *you* were being rude, please, join me for a drink, and then I’m off to dinner ...’

And suddenly I knew who this was. It was the way he made us sit. The flustered Brit, full of self-deprecation and generosity. Where had I seen it? Jonathan Ross? Graham Norton?

‘You’re an actor!’ I said, sitting, finding myself too-low in a surprisingly small chair. ‘You’re Matthew Channing the actor!’

The waitress cast him an awkward glance which he smiled away, a nod to say ‘it’s okay’.

Matthew Channing wasn’t just an actor. Matthew Channing was one of the hottest young actors in the country. He’d been tipped to play Dr Who, he was a name that came up when they mentioned a future James Bond, he’d made his name leading *The Valley of Fear*

at the National, been nominated for an Olivier but lost out to Colin Firth, made it onto the cover of *Vanity Fair* (inside flap). Now, Scarlett Johansson was said to have chosen him to be Mister Darcy in a more rock 'n' roll adaption of *Pride & Prejudice*. He was on the cusp. He was *that* Matthew Channing.

He looked mock-surprised, like I'd caught him. A weary smile, implying can't-I-just-be-*me*?

I kicked myself for playing his game. But Christ – why had Pia chosen *his* name? Why not someone innocuous? Someone with a normal name, like Bill Fletcher? Sally Pipe? If it had to be media in a place like this, why not just someone who worked at ITV2, or writes the back covers on DVDs?

'I'm an actor, yes,' he said. 'But I'm also a drinker. I'll have a negroni, please ... God, I'm so sorry, I've forgotten your name?'

The waitress blushed, and broke into a huge smile, perhaps imagining this man below her, all but on his knees, was moments from proposing.

'It's Alice.'

'A negroni please – Alice.'

He shut his eyes as he said her name – showing he was committing it to the vast vault of women's names in his mind, giving it a special shelf all of its own, giving her an I Know Who You Are. Her pen tapped her order pad, excitement finding a way out, the way bubbles of air find their way to the surface.

'Well, I think I'll follow suit,' said Pia, raising her eyebrows at me, making sure I knew she was showing me how it was done. '*I'll have a negroni too. Tom?*'

'What's a negroni?'

'Three negronis then,' she said.

'Actually, it's *negroni*,' said Matthew, and though this was the kind of thing that I'm sure would normally have made her thump someone, Pia laughed and laughed ... and it struck me how she'd changed since

she'd walked in here. She was more confident, louder – maybe even posher. The *voicc*. She was blending in. Aping. Following. Suddenly that parka didn't look scruffy. It looked ... creative.

'What *is* a negroni, actually?' I said. 'Only I'm a bit allergic to gin.'

I'm not allergic to gin. I was only trying to join in. Pia was a master at this. It was effortless. I couldn't do it. I tried, and immediately started assigning myself fictional allergies.

'Well, there *is* gin in it, I'm afraid,' said Matthew, kindly, as if he was telling me that although it had put up a fight, it was time to put my puppy down. 'In fact, it's pretty much gin-based. Shall I cancel it?'

'Nah,' I said, waving his concern away. 'I'm sure it'll be fine.'

'So what are you working on?' said Pia, leaning in, fascinated, and I looked around the room. I'd heard about the Randolph. It was always in the papers. I never thought it would look so much like a British Airways business class lounge, though. Carpeted floors, sleek bar, brass fittings. A splash of colour here and there, low lighting, with dark slats keeping Soho at bay. Around me, people sat – the dominant or more powerful of each group sitting with his back to the wall, facing the room, to see and be seen, eyes flicking up and over shoulders every time someone new walked in. Strange pauses in conversation whenever a story was interrupted by a new arrival, as the teller considered for a half-second whether it was worth ditching the thought to welcome the newcomer instead. Vast canvases on the walls. A spot of neon. Denise Van Outen with a face on. Bloody hell! Brandon Flowers at the back, sitting back as a coked-up man in a suit (but no tie, so he's cool, he's basically one of The Killers) talked passionately and with constantly bobbing leg about something Brandon couldn't seem to care less about.

'Wow!' said Matthew, and my head snapped back to the conversation. I had no idea what he was wowing about. 'That must be so much fun. And what about you, Tom, what do you do?'

I looked at Pia for clues. What had she said? Had she lied about what she did? Actually – what *does* she do?

‘I work in radio,’ I said, nodding my head to help his reaction along. ‘Yeah, I work in radio.’

‘Oh, what station?’

‘Talk London? I read the news on Talk London Breakfast. London Calling. Or it was. Now it’s not. Or, soon. Anyway.’

‘Talk London. What did I read about that recently?’

My heart sank.

‘What was it?’ he said, his arms now crossed, his brow furrowed, one finger tapping his lip. ‘It was something about ...’

‘The Jam Nazis?’ asked Pia, helpfully.

‘YES!’ shouted Matthew. ‘The Jam Nazis! Oh, that was brilliant. The Jam Nazis. “No jam in the cupboards! But I want jam in the cupboards!” Oh, man.’

‘That was him!’ said Pia, pointing at me.

‘Well, it wasn’t me—’

‘That was you?!’ he said, lurching forward, his hand on my knee, a look of unfeigned excitement across that face.

‘No, it was ... it was me who left the fader up, and—’

‘HA!’ said Matthew. ‘A. MAZING. The guy sounded like a twat, was he a twat?’

Pia looked delighted. Matthew was all over me.

‘Well, he’s ... a little twat-like.’

‘Are you all pleased to see the back of him?’

‘Um ...’

‘Genius. Genius. Wow. Have you seen the videos? The videos are brilliant. I forwarded one on to a guy I know in the States. A director, actually. Oliver Stone, as it happens. His reply was, “Fuck yeah!” He’s a man of few words, Oliver, but he’s able to convey the correct emotions through them.’

Oliver Stone knew about Jam Nazis. He knew about the *cupboard in our studio*.

‘So, wow, here you are. Internet celebrity. I want a picture with you. We can’t take one in here, they won’t allow it, but outside, okay? I want a picture with you and I want to send it to Oliver Stone.’

This was not a sentence I’d ever heard before.

Outside, three *negróni* later, a flushed Matthew Channing burst through the doors of the Randolph with me in a headlock under his arm, manicured fingers ruffling my hair before I was free.

‘Why take a shitty photo on a phone when we can just do this?’ he said, and the paps went mad.

He grabbed me again as they did their thing, lighting us up with a thousand flashes from a dozen cameras. On the other side of the street, by the Thai place, people stopped and stared and pointed. Now he span me round, pretended to dance with me, then held my arm aloft as photographers jostled and elbowed for space.

‘Just go online later and google my name,’ said Matthew. ‘You’ll find the pics, they’ll have ’em up in five minutes, I bet. And I’ve got your number, I’ll text you mine, right?’

We watched him walk away, as Alice in the black skirt guided him to his Addison Lee, the paps following, still wanting one last shot, still not quite convinced that any of the previous million might suffice.

I turned to Pia.

‘Well, that was—’

‘*Fucking Jam Nazis!*’ was the last thing we heard as he roared past, one clenched fist held from a straight arm salute from the open window of the car as it disappeared down Dean Street.

‘Who are you, mate?’ said a man, suddenly next to me, camera round his neck, piece of paper in hand.

‘Tom,’ I said, confused.

‘Tom *Adoyo* from Talk London,’ said Pia, and he scribbled it down and wandered off.

‘That was awesome,’ she said, digging in her pocket for a roll-up. ‘Where now?’

‘Ha!’ I said, booze in my veins. ‘I think I’m finally over my gin intolerance!’

‘You don’t drink much, do you?’

‘I don’t really drink,’ I said. ‘But I am currently experiencing an *enormous* sense of well-being.’

‘Ditto,’ she said. ‘Hey – I know who you are! I’ve got your name!’

‘Eh?’

‘Tom *Ditto!*’ she laughed.

‘I do not want a nickname,’ I said.

‘Tom Ditto!’

‘I genuinely find it a bit sad,’ I said.

And then, as a group of drunk Irish lads in rugby tops started playing up to the paps, ‘Who now? Where now?’ she said. It was kicking out time at the pubs. The lads were looking for a bar.

‘It’s ... Christ, it’s 11.30,’ I said. ‘It’s so late, Pia, I need to—’

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘One more thing. Let’s do one more thing.’

She was hailing a rickshaw.

‘No, no,’ I said. ‘Look, we’ve ...’

‘Where to?’ said the rider, all legs and backwards cap.

She grabbed me, pulled me on board. Just ahead, a tall black guy I vaguely recognised – boyband? DJ? – was stepping into a cab, its yellow light flicking off as two girls in short skirts carrying bottles of something tailed behind him.

‘Follow that cab!’ yelled Pia.

‘Who *are* you?’ I said, as the rickshaw lurched forward.

fifteen

‘... and the traffic on that route, as usual – stacked back to Clackets ... highs of nineteen in the city today, which means, at 6.31 on Monday morning – now you’re up to date.’

First show with Cass. I felt energised by it. There was something in the air. A new start. The clouds were clearing.

Dad had emailed. A round-robin. Pictures of the family on a trip to Dunedin, the kids dancing round an extinct volcano. I replied and he wrote straight back, asked me how I was, how Hayley was doing.

I said fine.

‘Thanks, Tom!’ said Cass, hitting the music bed.

I silently wondered if Leslie would be listening.

‘So good morning London, such a pleasure to be with you, you’re with the all-new London Calling with me, Cass Taylor ... coming up ...’

Big, dramatic music. The show sounded *important*.

‘Mayor Anthony Jackson joins us by phone ...’

I gathered my papers together and got ready to go. It had been quite a weekend, in all sorts of unusual ways, but now I had the next bulletin to prep, and also I fancied a—

‘Tom, before you go ...’

—coffee. Hang on.

‘What’s happened to you?’

The dramatic music had stopped, cut short.

I stood, confused by the silence. What was happening here? My eyes shot to the On Air light. Yes. We were On Air.

‘No. What? Nothing,’ I said. I was startled to be spoken to. ‘Sorry, what did you—’

‘Your face, mate. What’s going on with your face?’

Silence. Dead air. Awkward.

What was I supposed to say? Fell down the stairs? Walked into a cupboard? I had to speak. Six seconds of silence and the emergency tape would get ready to kick in. London would inexplicably start listening to Elton John instead of topical debate.

‘I ... my face. Yes. It’s ...’

‘Have you been *beaten up*?’

I looked at Janice, through the glass. Was this okay to talk about? Or should I laugh it off?

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I, um ... I got mugged.’

I expected the music to come back up. Maybe she’d hit a sting, or a stab, all of which now sounded a little too violent. Maybe just a glib remark and a let’s-move-on.

‘Where?’ she asked, leaning back in her chair, no urgency to move the show on, sounding genuinely concerned, the only thing that didn’t make her prying a little offensive. ‘Did they take anything?’

Suddenly I could feel the weight of my words. London was listening. Focus on me. Normally I’m a voice but right now I’m a person.

Through the glass I could sense Work Experience Paul, sitting down with nothing to do except stare at me.

‘My ... iPod,’ I said, nodding, the unwilling centre of attention, still trying to keep things a little bright, a little breezy, a little breakfast. ‘Though of course other MP3 players are available.’

‘Scumbags,’ she said. ‘Proper scumbags. Maybe they’re listening. And if you’re listening ...’

Dramatic music back, now.

‘You’re a *scumbag*. What is going in London that this can happen? Have *you* been the victim of crime in the capital? Or have you been a witness? This is something we should raise with Mayor Jackson when he’s on the show after eight this morning. That’s what we’ll do. That this can happen in a—’

And suddenly, she wasn’t talking to me any more.

I moved to leave, but she put her hand up to stop me and smiled.

‘And we’re going to talk more with Tom about what happened, too ... morning London, this is Talk London Breakfast with me, Cass Tailor – and scumbags ain’t welcome ...’

Swoosh. Ads. Done.

She turned to me, concerned.

‘I’m amazed you’re in today,’ she said, concern on her face.

‘Couldn’t miss the first show,’ I said. ‘Anyway, it was Friday.’

‘Friday after you saw me? God, you poor thing. Did you report it? What did you do after?’

‘After the mugging?’

‘Yeah,’ she said, her face now maternal, now comforting. ‘Did you call someone? You could’ve called me. What did you do?’

I thought about how to phrase it.

‘I got on a rickshaw and went to Chinawhite.’

Pippy grabbed me as I left the studio for the newsroom.

‘You’re in the paper,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘You’re in the newspaper! How the hell do you know *Matthew Channing*?’

She held out a copy of *The Londoner*. There we were, look. The lads. In the Wild Weekend section.

The caption: ‘*On triumphant form after his win at the Oliviers last week, actor Matthew Channing celebrates with friend Tim Adoyo in central London.*’

‘Oh ... he’s just ... I met him and we got on.’

‘He’s the new Mister Darcy!’

‘Yeah, well. He doesn’t like to be labelled. He was just very flattered that Scarlett asked him. He’s worried that might be an albatross round his neck.’

‘On his back.’

‘Anywhere near him, really.’

‘Why’s he got you in a headlock?’

‘Oh, you know,’ I said, shrugging. ‘Bants.’

‘Amazeballs?’ she said, like a question. Fact: there is no answer to a question like ‘Amazeballs’.

‘Hashtag: think-you-know-someone ...’

I smiled, as I sat in the tiny box near the kitchenette, sourcing audio for the next bulletin. That was pretty cool. Matthew Channing. Imagine if Hayley saw that. Maybe she’d see it on some celebrity site. That’d teach her. She’d be desperate to know why I suddenly kept such glamorous company. *Desperate*. I checked what else had come through to the news team. Oh, look, Blackwall Tunnel’s clear. Updated statement from the Vatican about those cardinals. Another Manchester City player in a fight in some try-hard champagne bar. And—

‘*Tom! Get in! Quick!*’

The door was open. Pippy again. Wild-eyed. Manic.

‘Get in what?’

‘*Studio!* Cass needs you!’

‘What?’

I panicked, dropped my papers, started to pad towards 4K. I slapped my ID on the lock, opened the first heavy doors, heard the muffle of her voice, saw the sober red On Air light, peered through the glass wall. Cass saw me, beckoned me in, eyes wide.

I pushed through the next door, as quietly as I could, found my chair, heard Cass saying, ‘But surely, Mister Mayor, the problem is not what you *are* doing, it’s what you *haven’t* done?’

Jesus. The Mayor? Why was I here? Leslie wanted a clear studio for his cosy chats with the Mayor.

I grabbed my cans, pulled them over my head, heard the tail end of his reply.

‘Mister Mayor,’ said Cass. ‘The next voice you’ll hear will be that of Tom Adoyo ...’

She nodded at me.

‘Hello?’ I said, and immediately wished I hadn’t said it as a question. I sounded like someone trying the first telephone.

‘Hello Tom,’ came the response, and you could tell he was wary, because he was using my name, and why was he suddenly speaking to me, what trap was this, what might this be? A muffled moment, a question to an aide, a hand over the receiver, then clarity again.

‘... and just this weekend, Tom was pushed into an alleyway and robbed – at knifepoint – by a criminal who is still very much at large on the streets of this city ...’

Well, yeah. I hadn’t reported him. And hang on – *knifepoint*?

I did the best mime I could to show there’d been no knife, pointed or not. She frowned and waved it away.

‘Well, obviously, Tom,’ said the voice I knew so well, from TV, from radio, from press conference after press conference, ‘let me first say this – I’m obviously appalled by what happened to you and in any—’

‘What are you going to do about crimes like this, Mister Mayor?’ said Cass, interrupting.

‘Well, the question is not what we—’

‘That’s precisely the question, with respect sir, which is precisely why I asked it.’

‘Let me be absolutely clear—’

‘I *want* you to be absolutely clear, Mister Mayor – what are you going to do about crimes like those suffered by Tom?’

‘In any—’

‘And what’s more – as our elected representative – the Mayor of the greatest city on Earth – are you going to *apologise* to Tom, because I’m looking at his poor broken face right now, sir, and breathing in the very faint whiff of TCP, and whatever you’re doing ... it ain’t working.’

She had him on the run. I knew this would be on all over the building.

She gave me a little thumbs-up, like I’d done anything to make this happen at all.

‘Absolutely brilliant, guys,’ said Bron, straight after the show. ‘Top-notch. Honestly. We’ve clipped that Mayor interview and sent it out already. We’re running promos throughout the day. I mean – an *apology*—’

‘It wasn’t really an apology, it was—’

‘An *admission*, though – from the Mayor! That something isn’t working! On your first show! Well done. *Both* of you, well done.’

Cass put her arm in mine, and squeezed.

My phone buzzed as I stood in Frank’s where a fat man was arguing with another fat man. I answered.

‘Yo, Tom Ditto,’ she yelled. ‘Wanna go out later?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, automatically. ‘Yeah, okay.’

‘Great, because I’m right behind you. I’ve been following you for the last forty minutes.’

I span around.

Nothing but fat men in a café.

‘Only joking,’ she said.

We were starting to get a shorthand, me and her. She’d crashed on the sofa at mine after we got back from Chinawhite, sometime around 5am Saturday morning ... the guy we’d followed turned out to be a low-level TV star from that Welsh dance studio reality

show. *Last Tango in Powys*, or something. Late Saturday morning turned into a moment-by-moment deconstruction of what had happened over Co-op cheese and onion sandwiches. How the man had led us where he'd led us, the whole Matthew Channing incident, the clinging to the tail-end of the *Powys* group to sneak into the club ... then microwave beans on toast, a snooze in front of *E!*, and then miraculously it had been Saturday night and we'd headed out for food.

I took her to the vegan place on the corner of Albion Road.

She took one look at the menu and scrunched her nose up.

'Is this not good?' I asked.

'Avocado quinoa and kale?'

'I thought you were vegan,' I said, pointing at the badge on her lapel.

'What? No, I just took one because someone else did. Followed him to a conference of some kind. He had some pace on him. A remarkable energy. Made me rethink my whole diet.'

So we got up and headed down the road, and wandered aimlessly, and mock-bickered about what to do, until she spotted a couple who looked like they knew *exactly* where they were going.

We sat at the next table. He looked to be a banker, and from what she was saying, she was taking a year off to redecorate the house. She couldn't decide whether to paint the hallway in London Clay or Cornforth White and it was really getting her down.

We all ordered the fish.

'Did something happen?' I said, gently. 'To make you do things like this?'

'I felt sort of born into it,' she replied. 'And look! It worked out! Fish instead of kale nuts and asparagus balls or whatever.'

'Yeah, but ... come on. You can't have just got up one day and thought this seemed like a good idea.'

'No, that's true.'

‘So ...?’

She shrugged. Moved her knife and fork around.

‘You only ever wear black, don’t you?’ she said.

‘What?’

‘You only ever wear black. It’s like your whole life is a funeral.’

‘Don’t change the subject. And I find black flattering. How did you start? Who did you follow first?’

‘Some girl,’ she said. ‘She looked ... sorted. Happy.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘Walthamstow. She was going to a house party. I stood outside for half an hour and then went home.’

If I’d been expecting inspiration, I was sorely let down.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘But you continued.’

‘It was better than being at home.’

She looked fragile, now. Small.

‘Meaning?’

‘What do you mean, meaning?’

‘Why was it better than being at home?’

‘Look, there was a guy,’ she said. ‘It was serious. It didn’t work out.’

‘It was serious?’ I said. ‘You look about *nine*.’

What I meant was, this girl didn’t seem the commitment type. She didn’t seem the type to commit to anything – a restaurant, veganism, anything, let alone something serious.

‘And you split up?’

‘Mm-hmm.’

‘Whose fault?’ I asked, sensing I was pushing it.

She shrugged, bit her lip.

‘It’s not as simple as that.’

‘Do you still see him?’

Again, *Are you over him?* is what I wanted to say. Is that why you do it? Is that why you follow people?

‘Yeah, sort of. We talk. It didn’t end badly. Well, it did end badly, but you know what I mean.’

‘What does he do?’

‘Do you mind if we *don’t*, actually?’ she said. ‘I’m tired. And I’m not very hungry. And I’d prefer to just keep things ...’

‘*You ask me* questions,’ I said. ‘Questions about my life.’

‘You need me to, is the difference. I need you not to.’

I wanted to know more, of course. What do you do? Where do you work? How old are you? Where do you live? What’s your favourite colour? Despite myself, I liked her. I found her fascinating. She didn’t make sense to me. I didn’t get her. All my life I thought I’d been able to work people out. Get the gist of them the second I saw them. So much for that. Hayley proved me wrong. So now maybe I shouldn’t try and do that. I should just go with the flow, and discover people as they develop in front of me, like film in a dark room, the way Pia let a story unfurl in front of her. But there was something about the way we’d met – the strangest way I’d ever met anybody – that made her like my secret. Something in my life, maybe the only thing, that Hayley didn’t know about, and therefore a victory in some way. I wasn’t going to pretend to be anyone else for Pia. I’ve never seen the sense in reinventing yourself for the sake of a new friendship. Seems to me if you do that, the only thing you’re inventing is the friendship. And it seemed weird thinking all this about someone I’d just met. Because as far as I could tell, as we nibbled at our fish, I would never, ever see her again.

‘I heard the show this morning,’ she said, and I snapped back to the phone call, still standing outside Frank’s. I guess I might see her again, then. ‘I thought it was very nice of the Mayor to apologise to you personally for the mugging.’

One of the fat men next to me had called the other a wanker and walked off. I caught sight of my reflection in the window. I was

wearing all black again. It just seems to happen without thinking these days.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Though it wasn’t really an apology, so much as—’

‘You forgot to mention you’d been saved by a girl much shorter than you.’

‘It didn’t seem the right time.’

‘So where are you right now?’ she said. ‘What do you want to do?’

‘Great Titchfield Street,’ I said. ‘We could get a coffee?’

A pause. This had not filled her with excitement.

‘Yeah, maybe,’ she said.

‘Or ... cinema?’ I tried, but I knew what she wanted to do, I knew she wanted me to do it too, and as I waited for her response, my eyes came to rest on a guy on the other side of the window – fifties, jaunty, German phrasebook, *excellent* pipe. He opened his jacket – Harris tweed, waistcoat underneath – and brought out a silver pocketwatch.

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘I’ve just spotted an interesting man ...’

‘Yeah?’ she said, her voice rising, a trill of thrill now there. ‘Shall I come to you?’

How had this happened?

‘No,’ I said, now out of the café and halfway down the street, getting ready to cross when he did, a flash of pink lining exposed as he tucked his pocketwatch away. ‘I’ll let you know where to meet us ...’

sixteen

As often happens to a Monday, two days later it was Wednesday.

I arrived at SoundHaus to be greeted by three six-foot pandas and a woman called Eileen.

‘Hi, do you work at SoundHaus?’ she said, flanked by the giant bears. ‘Only they wouldn’t let us into reception.’

She made a pleading face.

‘Well, three of you are dressed as pandas,’ I said.

This was always happening. PRs and marketers trying to create a buzz around completely invented ‘national conversations’ like National Bread Week (in association with Warburtons bread) or British Pie Day (in association with Jus Rol pastry) or maybe Egg Week (The Egg Council) or Shed of the Year (Cuprinol wood stain) or British Sausage Week’s Global National Day of the Sausage Month (when Simon Rimmer might turn up outside the studio with a small plate of Plockwurst and a smile).

‘Yes, but it’s just that it’s International Week of the Red Panda,’ she said.

‘In association with?’

‘Why does it have to be associated with anyone?’

‘Who’s it associated with?’

‘Epping Forest Safari Adventure Park and Zoo,’ she said. ‘Just off the M11 near Chigwell. I’ve got your Panda Packs to drop off.’

I knew the deal. There'd be a stuffed red panda. Maybe a red panda baseball cap. A press release talking about the plight of the red panda and the latest two-for-one family-friendly deals at Epping Forest Safari Adventure Park and Zoo, just off the M11 near Chigwell, complete with suggested hashtags and interesting on-air talking points. Leslie used to rail against this stuff. 'We're here to report! Not to *help!* You can shove your bloody hashtag!'

'Do you think it's something you might talk about on-air?' she said. 'Do you work with Bark and Lyricis on Vibe?'

'No,' I said, and her face fell.

'Well, you can take one anyway,' she said, holding out a bag, sulking.

One of the panda men took his head off.

I sat down at my desk and turned my computer on.

Ding.

FROM: MAUREEN THOMAS

TO: ALL STAFF

Owing to recent events, PLEASE DO NOT ALLOW UNAFFILIATED STAFF onto the BUILDING PREMISES even if they USED TO WORK HERE.

An incident yesterday evening in which a FORMER member of staff attempted to gain entry to the STUDIO'S means ALL STAFF must now attend a SECURITY AWARENESS briefing run by Adawale on the third floor THIS AFTERNOON. NO EXCUSE'S.

'It was Leslie,' said Pippy, eyes alight with the joy of it. 'He was after you!'

‘What?’ I said, closing the fridge door when I realised absolutely everything inside it had someone else’s name on. Who puts their name on a cling-filmed *carrot*?

‘Gary the engineer let him in,’ she said. ‘He said he’d forgotten about the whole Jam Nazi thing.’

‘Oh, yeah, that little thing,’ I said.

Leslie had been in town, recording a voiceover for Denbigh’s Rally Kart and Paintball Centre. He’d usually use the ISDN line in his house for such small jobs, but fancied a trip to the city, and while he was round the corner, rage brewing over a balti in Shikara’s, his ears being filled with the injustice of it all by Len Barker who now covered overnights on Radio 2 of all places (‘He used to make me tea!’ Leslie used to rage, pointing at his tiny name in the ever-smaller radio section of *Time Out*. ‘I bloody taught that little oik!’), he decided to pay SoundHaus a little visit. Gary had let him in just after five, and he’d come looking for me on the news floor, gold pack of fags bent and wet in one tense fist.

‘What hours does he think I work?’ I said. ‘Does he just think I’m here all day and night?’

But that’s exactly what he thought. He had no idea because he just associated me with the place. He didn’t know what time I got in, he’d never asked about my home life, either, save for that one day he took such pleasure in ridiculing me.

He couldn’t find me, of course. He’d hovered by my desk for a while and then made his way up to the studios, rattling the doors of 4K until Jess ‘Drivetime in My’ Carr alerted security and had him removed.

‘You wanna watch out,’ said Pippy, importantly. ‘You wanna watch he doesn’t start following you ...’

‘He’s about sixty!’ I said.

‘That’s the problem,’ said Pippy. ‘Who’s hiring guys like him?’

*

Later, I resisted the urge to text Pia. But here's the thing.

The forty-eight hours I'd spent with her were all it had taken to make London look brighter, make life look a little better.

The interesting man I'd seen in Frank's had led us first to a meeting with an interesting woman in an interesting hat in an interesting building which turned out to be an open council planning application meeting, and that had been less interesting, so we'd left.

Outside, and almost at once – a group of jolly older men dragged us in their wake with the pull of a planet as they headed towards Wardour Street wearing t-shirts that said 'Ale Trail' ...

'What's an ale trail?' I said, and Pia laughed, and said, 'Does it matter?'

And so we'd spent an hour in the midst of these real ale freaks – Roger, Michael, Roger and Stan – moving from the Dog & Duck to the Three Greyhounds to the Pontefract Castle, laughing with these sixty-five-year-old men, friends from university on their annual pub crawl, making up names for unusual beers and brews and Indian Pale Ales with them.

'The Beast!' I tried.

'The Rat Bastard!' yelled Pia, a little too loudly.

'Oh – Pia is an anagram of IPA!' said a Roger, at one point, spitting as he talked but pretending he wasn't. 'That's interesting!'

That was when we decided to leave them.

We tramped through Soho until Pia nudged me and we matched an eccentric couple step for step as they headed to Old Compton Street, all silver PVC ponchos and silver hair and gold sunglasses and black cigarette holders, and we held our breath as they led us into an erotic bookshop, which turned out to have a man standing at the top of some stairs with a clipboard, taking reservations for whatever hidden bar lay deep within. We skipped down the stairs, lit red by neon, and sat by a mirrored bar and ordered whatever the people next to us ordered, then skipped out again as a gaunt, interesting,

slick-haired gent in a waistcoat unwittingly led us to Frith Street, and Garlic & Shots, where he ordered a Bloodshot, an All Black and a Sweet Death all within the space of ten minutes.

‘He’s a vampire,’ said Pia. ‘He’s totally a vampire.’

Making up stories about the people we followed didn’t seem necessary. They were showing us their stories. Little slices of their lives, small moments, bite-sized chunks.

And at five to one in the morning, a smile now aching across my face, we followed a couple into Chinatown, and we winced as they chose Mr Fu’s, we eavesdropped as they talked about the show they’d just seen.

She was Jane. He was Steve. They were down from Middlesbrough for the night, these two, and it had been disappointing, because one of the actors that was supposed to be in it wasn’t in it. Some guy they’d voted for on X Factor. Never mind, said the man, all Burton slacks and top. In a few months they could probably see him for free in Nando’s.

Pia and I burst out laughing at that, and he’d turned and looked at us, three tables away, in this otherwise silent restaurant.

We moved tables when someone more interesting walked in.

‘Half a crispy duck to start,’ he said, this man, with his copy of a theatre programme and his wife in her sparkly dress. ‘Then one kung-po chicken, one beef chow mein, one sweet and sour pork, two special fried rice, and ... the *special* tea, please.’

He winked. The waiter noted it all down.

‘We’ll have half a crispy duck to start,’ Pia called out, not missing a beat. ‘Then one kung-po chicken, one beef chow mein, one sweet and sour pork, two special fried rice, and the *special* tea, please. Whatever *that* is.’

The man looked at his wife. They sat there in silence.

Pia winked.

‘I can’t do this forever,’ I told her, later that night. ‘But it’s fun for now.’

She cocked her head, and poured me another covert shot of post-licence beer from the teapot.

‘Why can’t you do it forever?’

‘Because eventually you have to live your own life.’

And she put her fork down.

Minutes later it occurred to me how much we’d laughed that night. More than I could remember laughing since I was a kid. I forgot.

All this made me *forget*.