

LOSING IT

HELEN LEDERER

PAN BOOKS



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Note: *Losing It* is fiction. The relationships and organizations are totally invented.

LOSING IT

ONE



AFFIRMATION 1:

'I radiate generosity. Unless it is my round'

MONDAY 3 MARCH

Millie Tucker allowed herself a brisk check for glitches as she paused in front of the small hall mirror. Escaped nasal hair would, after all, be an avoidable own goal. The eyebrows could do with a tint, which was depressing. She smiled. This was a new habit. And would need practice. She experimented with what might be considered a warm expression and enunciated carefully from *The Pocket Book of Life Affirmations: an Inspirational Handbook for Busy People*, 'I love myself and behave in a loving way to all people, including people I'm not that close to or don't even like that much.' The book encouraged the busy reader to adapt the suggested affirmation according to their own needs. Millie had many of these.

Florence was Millie's second-best friend. No one has first-best friends after fifty, reflected Millie. They were either dead or too successful. She allowed her black jacket to flap open, to give an illusion of tailoring without the

strain. How women had the audacity to wear belts over jumpers was beyond her.

Also, Florence wasn't married, which helped significantly. There had to be at least some parity if one was to invest in a night out of single-sex drinking. After all, what would one talk about otherwise?

By the time Millie got there, Florence was already in position on the plastic sofa in the window at the Bolt Whole. She smiled at Millie and raised her hand in greeting, leaving it there while she continued speaking into her phone. A selection of silver bangles tinkled down her freckled arm. Millie walked past her and towards the bar, irritated. Florence continued her conversation, keeping the arm skywards in a salute as Millie swiped the cocktail menu off the counter.

She sat on the cushioned bar stool and unconsciously began caressing the furry fabric of her jumper dress over her thighs, but stopped when she felt the girl behind the bar staring. No need to advertise she lived alone.

She was aware the menu had two cocktails that began with an 'M', but as her readers were on the floor of her Ford Escort, she had to commit to one of them. She knew she liked one and not the other. She tapped her acrylics on the shiny grey bar top. If she got it wrong and ordered the short one that came in the triangular glass which took ages to assemble but hardly contained any liquid, it would inevitably colour the evening. But she needed a drink. And she wanted a cocktail. Millie ordered herself a margarita, thinking it was a mojito.

Florence was clearly oblivious to these concerns. She looked up from her plastic banquette in the window and called over to the bar. This seating unit was meant to be a

winning feature of the Bolt Whole and had glass poppers embedded in the back to signal that it wasn't afraid of being camp.

'Just had kittens.' Florence pointed at the phone.

Millie vaguely remembered Florence did something with cats every year, but had never been the kind of friend who felt obliged to take an undue interest.

The whole point of Florence being second-best friend was that she was available, so Millie would have to overlook the weird cat obsession or it might become a problem.

'Don't worry too much about the salt!' Millie forced a light little laugh as the barmaid began to rotate a glass in a grimy saucer of speckled salt. She noticed a student ring binder open next to the list of margarita ingredients: 'Screen and Musicology, Year 3'. Surely the bar staff weren't allowed to do homework on the job? Worse, Millie now knew she had ordered herself the wrong drink. She was getting the short, annoying one. Millie caught sight of her troubled round face in the bar mirror and pouted to give her lips a chance of featuring. Her jacket was straining over her too-tight jumper dress, making her top half look decidedly bulky. She looked like a Russian doll in a chunky knit.

'Is that it, then?' Millie enquired, looking at the only drink placed on the shiny counter. It was not the one she wanted.

The girl looked confused.

'Yes? Oh. Do you want a straw with that?' she asked.

'Will that take long, do you think?' asked Millie.

'No, I don't think so. They're just here.' The girl pointed at a straw holder next to Millie's glass. She didn't

seem overly concerned. But then she was probably too young and thin to be able to relate to Millie's trauma at seeing her reflection.

'I could bring it over to you if you'd like.' The girl planted a straw in the glass and looked pleased.

'I'll take it with me, thanks,' Millie said firmly. She'd finally received an alcoholic drink. With a straw. She just had to make the best of it.

Millie drank as she walked. Half the contents disappeared in two sucks. Why had she left her readers in the car? And why was Florence wearing popsocks? This was new. Where were the usual denim leggings, which Florence always called jeans?

Florence had clearly not made her usual frothy 'look at me – I'm not really sixty' effort, which was the opposite of Millie's 'trick the eye downwards' method. She was sipping peaceably enough from a tumbler of Baileys, but the beige popsocks made her legs look as if they'd been in an accident, and fought with the allure of the lace and floral tiered skirt. Or perhaps it was the way Florence was sitting – knees apart and leaning forward to take her call. She looked vulnerable – as if there'd been some kind of distraction when she had got herself dressed. And Millie wasn't quite sure, at this stage, if it was going to work for her, to be seen sitting with such a person – especially tonight.

'Millie, how *are* you?'

'Well . . . you know, still here.'

'And how's the gym going?' asked Florence.

'Didn't I tell you? I haven't been going.' It hadn't seemed worth a phone call.

Florence was different from Millie. She had an inoffen-

sive figure. Bosomy, short, but three classes a week of bums, tums and abs had kept her body in the normal range for an older person. She also did early morning yoga, which Millie found excessive.

‘Well, it’s hard, isn’t it, to keep it up, what with everything.’ Florence looked at her sympathetically.

To Florence, a gym was a temple; for Millie, it was a place to drive past.

‘And sitting down for hours on end like you have to with your work increases your bottom circumference without you even having to do anything. It just spreads.’

Florence was only able to offer this judgement, Millie decided, because she lacked her own complexity and awareness around the whole keeping-fit imperative. Millie felt justifiably defensive.

‘Mine hasn’t been increased by sitting. Anyway, I get up early to do things.’

‘I know you do,’ agreed Florence hastily. ‘Do you want to see the cats?’ Florence held out her phone. ‘Just quickly. They’re so cute.’

‘Absolutely,’ Millie lied. ‘Who’s looking after them?’

‘Jack.’

‘The one you met on that dating thing?’

‘Yes.’

Florence was sixty-three.

‘Jack is looking after your kittens?’

‘He’ll be all right. It’s lovely to see you.’ Florence crossed her legs and yawned without raising her hand to cover her veneers. There were the popsicks again and a glimpse of white, which was unfortunate.

Florence handed over her phone. Millie peered at the screen and was immediately taken aback. Then appalled.

The hairless beings did not appear to be catlike in any immediate way at all, which was quite disconcerting. But they had been referred to as ‘cats’, so cats they must be. Millie was moved to make a comparison with her own cat, if only because Vernon was covered in hair – a fact that, until now, she had rather taken for granted.

These were a cross between greyhound and E.T., and carried a worried expression.

‘Aren’t they cute?’ asked Florence.

‘Very much so,’ replied Millie, and quickly handed the phone back to nudge a close of topic.

Millie and Florence had met at a school open day ten years ago, when both of them wanted their child to get in, but since Florence’s testosterone implant, their intimacy levels had intensified considerably and Millie was very grateful. Florence had become more open, while she had become more solitary.

She’d been hoping to hear more about Florence’s Belgian truck driver, whom she’d met on holiday in Spain and snogged in a cafe, then met up with again a few weeks later in Belgium. Of particular interest was the fact that Florence had been asked to bring high heels when they’d met up again in Belgium. Florence’s beige patent wedges had to be worn throughout their lovemaking, which only took place in a set order of positions. This was proof the Belgian watched porn, apparently. Millie had absolutely no idea why this should be. At least the Belgian had been ‘tidy’, Florence had told Millie.

‘Tidy as in . . . ?’ Millie was still in the dark.

‘Considerate,’ had been the reply. Millie had no idea what that meant either, but asked if Florence had told Jack about the Belgian and the shoes. Florence hadn’t,

which to Millie showed an impressive lack of morals and passion for life. These detailed exchanges about sex were life-affirming, since it was Millie's only window into how life had been once – only without the shoes.

Since Florence had been given the trial implant, she'd gone from 'sensible parent' to 'sexed-up cougar in lace cardigans' in three months. The facelift was relatively subtle, and the hair extensions helped matters hugely, particularly from behind.

'So how's Mary?' asked Florence.

'Fine. Enjoying it. Yes. What about Amelia?'

'Still with the same one, unfortunately.'

'Oh no.' Millie offered Florence a sympathetic face, as this was expected, before resuming her more diverting enquiry. 'And how often does your implant have to be topped up?'

Florence looked slightly surprised at the speed of subject change.

'I mean, does it fade?' said Millie helpfully, to rephrase the same question.

'They do it every month. I get a bit jumpy straight after, but I really notice it dwindling, so I do need it. I might be due another one, actually.' Florence looked around vaguely, in case anyone might be available to do it then and there.

Millie looked around as well. She was pleased to feel complicit in this artificially induced sexual radicalization of her friend. For Millie, as a topic, Florence's implant dosage had more scope than either of their daughters or the cats. Mary lived abroad, and she could never remember what Amelia actually did. Something with hair, or possibly event management with hair, or just hair on its own.

Florence's well-being had been very cheaply transformed by the NHS and Millie needed to hear more.

'And did you tell Jack and the Belgian about your implant?'

'No!' said Florence, laughing.

Millie was struggling to imagine how Florence, who was actually older than she was by a few significant years, could now be so fearless when it came to men. How could she be so brazen at taking the initiative, or at least be so responsive if she got a sniff of interest, which she appeared to get with great alacrity? How did she actually make the transformation from being fully clothed and upright in a room to lying down and naked in a bed and then, well, probably looking somewhat ungainly for a few short moments if memory served, and all without feeling the slightest bit awkward?

'But didn't you get inhibited when you had to get into the bed with him, or even when you first met him at the airport?' Millie had tried to imagine how she would feel meeting a man in a foreign city, at an airport, when she might be carrying hand luggage and pulling a suitcase at the same time, and looking a bit tired, a man with whom she'd only exchanged emails after one meeting. This might be worse than actually being inside the bed. Or having to get out of a bath with the door open. Or wearing a swimming costume for the first time in the hotel whirlpool.

'No,' said Florence again. She seemed surprised. 'But then I hadn't eaten for about a week before, so I was feeling OK about myself.' She appeared to be looking at Millie's overly stretched jumper dress.

'You could try classes?' Florence moved her bag to the

floor so Millie could spread more comfortably across the banquette. Again, Millie took this personally. She only needed one seating unit. Her bottom hadn't spread that far since she'd been in Florence's company.

'What for?'

'At the gym.'

'I get angry in classes. I can't keep up.'

'What if you stay at the back?'

'I always stay at the back.'

Millie took stock. So far she was not enjoying her night out at all. She'd had to look at pictorial evidence of three inbred kittens and now was being made to feel she should be signing up for further unpleasantness in a gym.

'But the gym's been redone. Haven't you been?'

'The one by the roundabout on the corner with the automatic doors?'

'Yes.'

'No.'

Local people were excited that the council had singled out their postal code for a spanking new facility. Sydenham had yet to be awarded such a luxury, which made the Dulwich folk even smugger.

'You can pay as you go.'

'I'd find that quite a commitment.'

'There's a trainer there who trained Natalie, called Paulo or Paul. I can give you his number. He's hot.'

'Why would you want your trainer to be hot?' Millie felt the implant came between them at times. She wouldn't want a hot trainer. She wouldn't be able to pant in front of someone attractive.

'Well, anyway, I can get his number off Natalie if you want it.' Florence never took offence.

'Who's Natalie?' Millie wasn't sure she wanted other people being told she needed to be found a trainer by way of an SOS from Florence. Also, she thought it quite rude when people mentioned names that meant nothing. She told Mary not to do that.

'She was at that Christmas party you asked me to. At QVC 2? Natalie? Head of something or other?'

Millie remembered. Natalie was head of QVC 2 and hadn't given her a job. Millie had only invited Florence because she needed someone to walk in with and for the first half-hour who could then be relied upon to leave of their own accord. Florence was always good at this. One of her more agreeable traits. As it turned out, Millie went home at the same time as Florence because the party had fizzled out by nine.

'Anyway, you know what Amelia did for my birthday?'

'No. Oh no. When was it?' Millie knew she had to respond, as one decently had to with birthday talk, but was more concerned that her glass was empty.

'Last Thursday.'

'Last Thursday? Oh no. Sorry. What did you do?'

'On the actual day?'

'Yes.'

Millie looked at her glass again. She nodded at it as if it were a child being told it would be fed as soon as the grown-ups had finished being boring.

'Jack came over.'

'That's nice.' Millie looked at Florence's pleasantly arranged features and expertly stretched forehead and felt a flash of jealousy. Florence was lucky to have someone to come over and see her, especially someone who liked her a lot. Millie only had Harry, who while being consistently

adoring, was also a next-door neighbour and therefore exempt from having any significance. Florence was much more organized. She had a proper boyfriend as well as an occasional Belgian lover who liked her in shoes. Millie's was only a neighbour projecting his own loneliness and rather pitiful need to be loved.

'Has Amelia met him?'

'No. She hasn't, actually.'

'Does she know about him?'

'I *think* so.'

'She must do.'

This was Florence's grey area. For an uncomplicated person, Millie decided Florence had a blind spot when it came to her love life and her daughter. Whereas Millie was careful to tell Mary everything. It was just a shame there was never anything to tell, and also that Mary wouldn't be interested even if there was.

'Shall I go and get us another set of drinks?'

'I'm all right, actually.' Florence twirled her tumbler absent-mindedly, which could have been on purpose, to show Millie she didn't use drink in the same way she did, as a social anaesthetic. Or it might have been because she was thinking about the kittens. Either way Millie didn't care.

'Well, I'll just get one more for me, then, shall I?'

'OK, then. You must be missing Mary, are you?'

Millie got the feeling she was being judged.

'Papua New Guinea's not the other side of the world, Florence.'

'It is, actually,' Florence corrected her.

They laughed.

'What exactly is she doing?' Florence looked puzzled.
'She's been there for ages, hasn't she?'

'She's researching periods in young girls.'

'Isn't that a bit . . . personal?'

'Not overtly. She's not a doctor.'

'No.'

'She wants to see if the girls get bitten more by mozzies when they're on their menses.'

'Do you say "menses" still?'

'You have to. For the research.'

'And does she get paid for that?'

'Yes, as far as I know. It's not voluntary work, Florence.'

'But what does she do?'

'She's trying to prove that girls get bitten more by mosquitoes during their, you know, whatsits and that makes them more likely to get malaria.'

'Why?' asked Florence.

'Because some mosquitoes carry malaria, which they inject when they bite, so she's collecting up all this data about daily bites during their cycle and then all that information . . . gets sorted out and . . .' Millie tailed off.

'Yes?'

'Could very possibly change the world, actually, in terms of global world health.'

Florence nodded in a smiley way but said nothing. Millie would have preferred a bit more reaction. A compliment about Mary's extraordinary academic record perhaps, or even a slight intake of breath. Not everyone's daughter went off to the Third World to do good for others. Especially in what she assumed to be quite cramped conditions at night-time. Mary was brave. Braver than she had ever been, and Millie was very aware of it. She was also slim with slender feet and hands, and quite graceful when she moved, but Millie tried not to

think about things like that – it was too much . . . She filled the silence.

‘And, um . . . how’s Amelia’s hair work going?’

‘She just needs to get her insurance and she can go into people’s homes.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Yeah.’ Florence didn’t look that thrilled.

Millie decided to order two margaritas at once, since they were so small, and pretend one was for Florence. She didn’t want to swap over to a mojito now, because that would flag up her original mistake to the bar girl. And in a funny way, the sour taste was quite agreeable once you got used to it. She went up to the bar with a twenty-pound note and left her empty purse on the table for Florence to notice.

‘So what did Amelia do for your birthday?’ she asked, sitting back down again. The purse hadn’t been moved.

‘She booked me a feng shui session,’ Florence announced proudly.

‘That’s nice.’ Millie would honour the new mood and embrace this change in subject even if it didn’t appear to be entirely enthralling.

‘And I got sent a wonderful lady called Dr Joan Le Measurer. We’ve become friends now.’

‘What does Joan do?’

For the first time Florence looked just ever so slightly impatient.

‘Feng shui.’

‘Oh yes.’

As Florence began a detailed description of Dr Joan’s clothing style – which she described as being mostly ‘understated Peter Jones’, which Millie thought to be a contradiction – Millie caught sight of the second round of

margaritas being placed on the counter. She found herself saying, 'Yay!' which was not usual.

Florence sipped her first Baileys and Millie her second and third margaritas. She was glad she'd ordered two. It showed foresight.

'And what does a feng-shuier do when they actually feng-shui?'

'Well, I can only speak about Joan.'

'Of course.'

'So she uses a compass and a diviner and helps you place things in the house to usher in good spirits and good fortune.'

Millie thought about this as she slumped back on the banquette. There was a bit of ice left in her glass. Maybe Florence would get the next round.

'What about the kittens?' Millie crunched.

'They were fine about it.'

'I meant, did they have to be moved at all?'

'No.'

'So did you have to move bits of furniture?'

'Not much. Well, apart from in the kitchen. I'd got the microwave opposite the sink.' Florence raised her eyebrows knowingly.

'Is Joan against ready meals?' asked Millie. She wouldn't be surprised. There was a growing purism spreading through Dulwich. The skips were full of microwaves and rice cookers.

'It's like putting fire opposite water, Millie.'

'Is it?'

'It's the worst thing. I binned the microwave while she was still there.'

Millie had become agitated. No more ice cubes and now an empty third glass.

‘I’d have had it. For when I rent out Mary’s room . . . If I do.’

‘You’re never going to rent it? You couldn’t live with another person. Could you?’

‘Might have to.’

Millie was now tearing a bar mat into fragments and feeding tiny pieces of cardboard into her mouth.

‘Millie?’ Florence looked at the disappearing fragments.

Millie became conscious of what she was doing. This had to be a new low. She was now eating cardboard. She emptied the contents into a tissue and cupped it in her hand. There didn’t seem to be anywhere to put it.

‘I’m a bit stressed.’

‘Shall I get us both some olives?’ Florence said this very gently. ‘Or are you past olives?’

‘To be honest with you . . .’ began Millie.

‘What?’ She waited.

‘Crisps would be better.’

‘I know, but they don’t do them, which is why I said olives.’

Florence took the tissue containing damp beer mat from Millie’s hand and placed it into her bag before wiping her hand on the floral skirt. Millie knew this was a kind act of friendship. She certainly wouldn’t have done it. Not even for Mary.

‘What’s happened, Millie?’

She sighed. She hadn’t planned on sharing the problem when she’d invited Florence for a drink, but now Florence

had done that, and with such a genuinely sympathetic face . . .

‘I’m involved with this loan shark.’

‘For . . . ?’

‘For money. They help you if all other avenues have failed.’

‘Oh. Like Go Compare?’

‘Almost. But no, not really. They’re called QwickCash. So I asked them for two grand, quickly, because I’d be homeless if I didn’t pay the mortgage.’

‘Why couldn’t you pay the mortgage?’

‘Because I didn’t have the money, Florence.’

‘Oh. And these people just gave you two grand?’

‘Yeah, except now I have to give them a hundred pounds every week in interest until I give the two grand back.’

‘Hang on – they get more than what they gave you in the first place then.’

‘And every time I’m late paying the hundred pounds, they put on an extra fifty quid.’

‘What if you can’t pay?’

‘Bailiffs.’

Florence looked shocked. ‘Bailiffs don’t come after middle-class people.’

Millie nodded.

‘Do they?’ Florence was now unsure.

‘My ones do. They’re very good apparently.’

Florence’s face was really concerned. Her cat birthing was now forgotten. She peeled herself off the plastic seating, and waved at the girl behind the bar. Then she shouted that they needed to have whatever they’d had before ‘drinks-wise’. The request would have been more authoritative had Florence’s skirt not got caught in the

crease of her bottom, but Millie successfully tugged it out before she sat down again.

‘Thank you,’ said Florence, unsmiling but apparently grateful. Millie would have been mortified.

‘No, thank you,’ said Millie.

‘So, I mean, how did you get into such debt?’

‘My mother moved to Hythe.’

‘Why?’ asked Florence.

‘Good question.’

Florence looked pleased.

‘She sold her house and bought a smaller one in Hythe.’

‘Why?’

‘She wants to live out her twilight years in a gated community.’

‘Why?’ asked Florence.

‘She doesn’t want to end up having blanket baths from itinerant Polish people, she says.’

‘Is she near death then?’ asked Florence in a sombre voice.

‘No, she just wants an on-site hairdresser and Chubb locks everywhere. So now the trustees own her house, and she can’t bail me out when I can’t pay the mortgage.’

‘Did she do . . . a lot of that? Nothing wrong with that, of course, but did she?’ Florence looked a bit uncertain about asking this. Millie didn’t answer. Florence nodded.

‘Which is why I . . .’ She sighed again. ‘Why I got a loan from QwickCash.’ She winced.

‘But they’re loan sharks.’

‘I know that, Florence. You go to them when there’s nowhere else to go.’

‘You must have been desperate,’ said Florence, which

Millie felt was unnecessary. Her surgically altered face was managing to look almost creased with concern.

‘It was that or the bank repossessed my house.’

Millie swallowed. She hated weakness. Especially her own. She also hated Florence for listening with such gravity and judgement. A light remark could have taken the sting out of things. Instead, Florence shook her head sadly.

‘I had no idea.’

The bar girl, quickly this time, came to the table with Florence’s emergency order. She carried a tray bearing two margaritas and one Baileys. These were Millie’s fourth and fifth. There was also a bowl of nuts. Millie’s first.

‘I thought you might need these.’ The girl looked at the nuts and smiled at Millie.

Had Millie missed something? Were they friends now?

‘Thanks.’ Millie put a handful into her mouth. She wondered if they were being rather loud. On the other hand, it wouldn’t be difficult to sound a bit rowdy. They were the only customers.

‘Let me pay,’ said Florence, scrabbling in her bag. She took out the tissue of damp beer mat and put it on the table as she searched for her purse.

‘I can pay,’ said Millie.

‘No, she can’t,’ said Florence to the girl, adding darkly, ‘Don’t let her pay, will you.’

The girl looked at Florence and said, ‘I’ll come back later.’ She raised her eyebrow very slightly at the tissue on the table. Florence missed this, but Millie busily placed the tissue back in Florence’s bag as if it contained a home-made snack. The girl nodded and went back to the bar.

‘But can’t your mother lend you something, if it’s an emergency?’

Florence was beginning to annoy Millie now.

‘No, she can’t. It’s all tied up in the new home, so there’s nothing until she dies.’ Millie didn’t want to think about this. She was readying herself for the fourth and fifth margaritas.

But Florence wouldn’t let it go. She seemed to be intrigued, which could get tiresome. ‘But you wouldn’t wish an early death on her, would you?’

Millie sighed. ‘No, but she’s got this girl Friday called Julie who always phones me up to say, “Hi, Millie. Just to let you know Mrs Tucker would like to place a call with you today,” and I have to remain all polite and enabling and say, “Thank you so much, Julie, and do you think you could get my mother to phone me herself next time, because she might be getting deskilled, don’t you think?” But they’re very close, so what can you do?’

Florence bent down to collect the glass she’d just dropped. Millie wondered if she might be a bit drunk. There was a rash across the orange freckled chest and a glow about the delicately tightened-up face.

‘You know what, Millie? This is the time to use your savings.’

She knew Florence was only trying to help, but really, who had savings in this day and age?

She would need the sixth and seventh ordered in good time, since the fourth was now done with. She started on her fifth but decided to sip this one, without the straw, to slow down.

‘Do you have savings, Florence?’ Millie asked as pleasantly as she could, given she had none.

'I don't need any.'

Millie braced herself to hear why.

'My dad bought me my first flat when I was twenty-one. It had nearly tripled in value when I sold it in the 1980s so then I bought two smaller flats, and I still live off the rent of one.' Florence smiled at this luck.

'Mm.' Millie's jaw tightened. She flexed her cheeks into a half smile of acknowledgement but no more. People who made money out of selling flats slightly annoyed her. It didn't seem like a job. As it was, Millie was having to be bought drinks out of the profits of other people's rent. In fact, Millie's margaritas were indirectly tainted. Luckily this didn't affect the taste.

'So no savings then, from your . . . earnings?'

'No, Florence, no savings.'

Florence shook her head happily, evidently pleased at the fiscal foresight of her dad.

Millie felt tempted to say something quite mean about the popsocks, but then she stopped herself. She was supposed to be practising being loving to people.

'So was it easy to get the loan?' Florence sensed she'd said the wrong thing, and put her knees together to focus better.

'It's all done on the internet. They made me get Harry to send a reference, which involved acts of depravity, of course.' Millie shuddered.

'Sex?'

'As good as. I had to watch *Countdown* with him. That's a whole afternoon.'

'Is Harry the naturist?'

'Only in the summer, but yes that's him.'

Florence nodded. She remembered about Harry.

Millie closed her eyes dramatically.

'I'm living a nightmare.'

'Do you fancy any more nuts of some kind, Millie?'

'I will if you are. So now I owe two grand, need a thousand for the mortgage and can't pay off the extra hundred, which goes up by fifty quid every time I'm late. They're earning interest off me even now as we sit and finish our . . . fifth cocktail.' Millie was pleased with her maths, which had been forced to improve recently.

'Well, at least you've got your job. You're always doing something interesting.'

'I just make it sound interesting.'

'I always read your columns. At the hairdresser's.'

'Which one?'

'Which column?'

'Hairdresser's.'

'Covent Garden.'

'I thought you went to one in the Lane?'

Florence looked affronted.

'Not for ages. I go to Covent Garden, Millie. You get wine if it's a Friday, when the extensions lady comes.'

'Nice.' Millie looked at her glass. Maybe she'd go there as well. If it was a Friday.

'It was the one you did about mugs and rugs that go together in a complementary way. You should do more like that.'

Millie wanted to do more, but the editor's middle-aged son had suddenly materialized from nowhere and expected to be given work, which was all very annoying.

'The son of my editor's after that side of things.'

'That's a compliment to you. It means the *Good Woman* magazine appeals to men as well.'

'Not really, Florence. He likes cars.'

'But they pay you there, don't they?'

'Only a retainer of three hundred pounds.'

'A year?' asked Florence.

'A month,' replied Millie. 'That's why I was thinking of getting a lodger.'

'But then you'd have to share the landing, and see their pants on the line. I wouldn't do it.' Florence smiled gently as if to soften the blow.

Millie was defeated. She knew this was true. She needed her space.

'Trevor had to sleep downstairs even when we were married.'

The couple counsellors had decided that Millie had been 'angry' and Trevor had been 'disengaged', and when Millie suggested she might be angry because Trevor was disengaged, they didn't reply. This was why Millie and Trevor stopped going to therapy. Why pay to be silent when they could do that for free at home?

'I thought you said he was an insomniac. That might not have been down to you.'

'Did I? God, can't remember now. How awful.'

'How do you sleep when Mary's there?'

'No trouble. Anyway, she doesn't count. She's a relative.'

Millie felt the divide between them. Florence wouldn't understand about work and how important it was for Millie. Being a property person, all she had to do was make sure things like taps worked when they were supposed to. Florence had finished her second Baileys. Millie pounced on this progress.

'Do you fancy . . . ?'

‘I do actually, Millie. And some nuts.’

‘You go this time – the girl likes you. Two more margaritas and whatever you’re having. Here, take some of mine.’ Millie opened her purse knowing there wouldn’t be much left from the twenty-pound note. There wasn’t. But at least she found some raisins.

‘I’ll use my card. No worries,’ said Florence, heaving herself off the banquette again.

While Florence was up at the bar, for hopefully margaritas six and seven, Millie took the opportunity to put on some lip liner without a mirror. A man had just come in and was standing by the bar assessing the ceiling. Florence came back with a tray of drinks. She’d cottoned on to Millie’s ‘buy one and get another one while you’re up there’ ordering system, as well as ordering one more Baisleys for herself. She failed on the nuts, which was a disappointment for Millie.

‘Bloke. Six o’clock. Watching.’ Florence was looking at her with some expectation, so Millie crossed her legs in what she thought might be an eye-catching way and shook her hair from side to side – as far as it could be shaken in a huge hair clip. There was no response from the man at six o’clock, who still appeared to be interested in the ceiling. Millie noticed Florence frown at the hair shake, so Millie gave up trying to be like Florence and resumed the questioning about feng shui.

‘What if the microwave’s *adjacent* to the tap?’

‘It isn’t.’

‘Mine is.’

‘You’ll have to book a session, Millie. Honestly, Joan’s brilliant.’

‘How much?’

‘Well, that’s the thing. She’s half-price if I introduce her to you – Dr Joan Le Measurer.’

‘Got that. And how much would that be?’

‘A hundred and twenty-five.’

‘That’s quite a lot.’

‘She’s half-price for your next follow-up if you introduce her to someone.’

‘So I’m full price?’

‘Yes.’

‘And how have you experienced stuff to be different since she’s been?’

‘I had the kittens.’

‘You were going to have the kittens in any case. You couldn’t have stopped them coming.’

‘I could have had dead ones.’

Florence could not be faulted on this. From a seated position Millie managed to catch the eye of the girl at the bar, who was now draped over the counter sucking a pencil in a thoughtful way. Millie felt drunk. Nearly seven margaritas was quite a lot in one sitting – even for her – and she’d need water quite soon to avoid falling over. This would be particularly important as men were now present.

‘Could we have some tap, please?’ Millie called loudly from her tightly crossed leg position. She had added a pointed foot. ‘That’s water, from the tap.’

How come Florence was so happy and supportive tonight? Was it because the feng shui person had told her that all would be well once the microwave had been safely removed from danger, or was it because she had Jack, who enjoyed giving her pleasure?

‘Water?’ Florence was brandishing a jug. She’d refreshed her lip gloss with a blob in the centre of her

lower lip. It looked almost like saliva. Millie felt it was sensible to stick to liner – being the owner of dwindling lips, she thought definition was more needed than shine.

‘Do you need a mirror, Millie?’ asked Florence.

‘Not really. Unless you think I do?’ She was defensive. It seemed so unfair to have lips that disappeared over time, like cliffs.

Florence looked as if she was going to say something, but decided against it. Millie looked across at the bar area.

‘You know what, Florence? I might just make do with a bottle of house white next time, don’t you think? For when you go back up.’

Florence nodded.

‘It’s much cheaper. Well done,’ she added encouragingly.

Millie hoped Florence’s card would stretch to cover their total bill. The night out was proving to be quite promising. She noticed that the man assessing the ceiling had very pink skin, which, whilst unusual, was not unattractive. There was a lot of it on display due to the shorts and trainers without socks, which Millie felt was quite plucky for early March. He looked rather ethereal, sitting up at the end of the counter, but this may have been because all his clothing was beige and it had caught the light.

‘When’s the boss in? Do you know?’ Millie could hear him ask the musicologist.

‘It could be later on,’ said the girl vaguely. She was listening to some music in her headphones but had taken one ear out to show willing.

‘I’ll wait if I may.’

‘You’re very welcome.’

The man pulled out an evening paper from his back pocket and shook it out to read.

Millie thought she could see him glance across at her on the window banquette. She checked. There was still no one else in her section of the Bolt Whole at this moment. It had to be her. Florence was using the waiting time to call Jack. She was parenting several cats at once, after all.

Millie breathed in and flexed her foot again. The man looked up from his paper and smiled. Was it at her? It wasn't. Was it? She smiled back very slightly. Remembering to push her lips forward, rather than to either side. This was more flattering, she felt. Another man wearing a safari jacket and carrying a canvas tool bag stamped his feet at the door before noisily greeting his mate. The smile had been for him. Millie swiftly redirected her pointy smile at Florence, who obligingly smiled back. At that moment everyone inside the Bolt Whole was smiling. Except for the musicologist.

The men talked in energized, upbeat voices. The man in the safari jacket was bald, and the man in shorts had shaved his head, which Millie felt ever so slightly gave him the edge out of the two.

Florence came back to Millie with a bucket of ice on a tray, a bottle of wine and one wine glass. She added these to their collection of glasses – some on the floor and some not.

'Did you see?' said Florence.

'I did,' said Millie.

'The bald one looks nice. Well, OK, bit fat.'

'So am I.'

'Not that fat.'

Florence saw the expression on Millie's face and misread it.

'Really, you're not. That fat.'

Millie wished she hadn't added the last bit.

'And how old is Jack again?'

'Oh, don't,' Florence laughed.

'No, really.' Millie needed to punish Florence.

'Thirty-two.'

'Blimey.'

'But I'm not like you, Millie.'

Florence seemed suddenly uneasy. Which made Millie feel guilty. And she certainly couldn't cope if Florence was going to be vulnerable. She didn't want any emotion. It was all quite simple. Millie wanted to get drunk, hopefully talk about sex with Florence for a bit of recreation, go home. As far as Millie was aware, Florence didn't have deep feelings. She didn't need them. She had her implant.

'I don't have a good relationship with Amelia's dad. I've got no one else who's as interested in her as I am.'

'Well, you wouldn't, would you? Nor have I. Not anymore.'

'Well . . .' Florence's face had become anxious. She couldn't hold her drink as well as Millie. Millie hoped she wouldn't have to offer advice about the daughter. She knew nothing about hair, except that it cost the same as her mortgage when you totted it up.

'At least Mary's got a degree.'

This was true. Mary liked studying, so much so she had to go as far as Papua New Guinea to live the dream of doing even more study as a fieldwork research anthropologist. If it kept her happy, Millie was thankful. She was in a hut-share with a girl from Bournemouth, but at least they

had Skype. And more recently a relationship had blossomed with a son of a tribe leader, which, apart from being unusual, did prove she wasn't a lesbian, which would be fine as well, of course . . . but in a different way. Mary was an enthusiast and had horizons way beyond Millie and her struggles. She was pretty, and unbelievably nosy about how people lived their lives, unless it was about her mother. Then she could switch off quite effortlessly.

'Well, they're very different . . . characters, aren't they?'

'I wish I'd paid for extra tuition.' Florence now looked very sad indeed.

Millie couldn't remember anything about Amelia. And she couldn't help feeling a bit smug about Mary's achievements in comparison, but didn't want to allow herself to feel complacent, in case something went wrong the next time the two of them spoke. She loved Mary much more easily from afar. Longed for her at times, which was all rather troubling.

'No point having regrets, Florence. Amelia's got great . . . energy, hasn't she?' This seemed a reasonable sort of thing to say, given the lack of detail available. 'She probably gets that from you.'

'She does, actually.' Florence perked up.

'Well, I wish I had half of her energy, Florence. Honestly. I need it right now.'

'Didn't you get the new column at the magazine? The "Lovely Things" one?' Millie had the decency to feel a bit guilty that Florence had remembered this information and was touched.

'Sort of. But I'm only allowed to do it every other month.'

‘Why?’

‘Esther’s way of controlling me. She said I can job-share it with Nathan.’

‘Who’s Nathan?’

‘The son who’s having a crisis at my expense. So when I suggested doing a poetry page while he was doing my column, she said no, my poems weren’t suitable. She can’t have read any of them properly. I gave her five.’

Millie poured herself a refill of white. The readers of the *Good Woman* deserved more.

‘Oh, hello,’ said Florence.

‘What?’

‘He’s looking,’ Florence whispered.

‘He’s not. Which one?’

‘The fatter one.’

‘They’re both fat.’

‘The one with the shaved head.’

‘Bald?’

‘Shaved. In the shorts. Pink legs. No socks.’

‘I can’t look. It’s too obvious.’

‘Oh, hello again,’ Florence said with more interest.

‘What?’

‘The leggings.’

‘What?’

‘They’re looking at her.’

Millie gave up. She had to see. The musicologist had come out from her hidey-hole behind the bar and was now perched on a bar stool strumming a guitar. The one in the shorts, and no socks, had been waving an empty beer glass around, but when the girl broke into song, Millie noticed he quietly slid it back on the counter. The

two men were clearly disappointed that the bar service appeared to be on hold while the waitress had a musical moment, and looked over towards their banquette. They exchanged a slight nod before the one with the empty beer glass hitched up his shorts. It looked like they had decided on a plan. The other smoothed his hand over his bald head before they sauntered over, quite slowly, which gave Millie and Florence time to prepare themselves. Florence thrust her bust area upwards and smiled. Millie wasn't quite sure what action might complement this, settled on quite a ferocious pout, only stopping when the men reached the table.

'May we join you two ladies?' said the shorts man. They both looked hopefully at the bottle of white on the tray. There was a bit left, but not much.

'Feel free,' smiled Florence. 'Millie and I don't start singing till later on, do we, Millie?'

'No, we don't,' repeated Millie obediently, although she sensed a joke had been made.

Both men laughed. It was generous of Florence to name-check her twice.

Florence had this knack for making men feel as if they were really interesting. Millie had trouble with this.

'I'm Al,' said the shorts man in an easy way, 'and this is my partner.'

'And do you have a name as well?' asked Millie in a high-pitched, completely different voice to the one she'd used all evening.

'I do. Stan. Our card. We're doing the Bolt Whole's electrics. Complete makeover. Floor lights, side lights, over lights, the lot.'

‘Ah, the twenty-first century . . .’ said Millie.

Florence gave her a sharp look. Which was out of character.

When Millie began to see double, she knew for certain she was drunk. It was quite a nice feeling, but better when one had the luxury of lying down. Efforts would have to be made to get home with dignity. Florence had called Jack on her mobile to collect her. She said she didn’t want to be away from the kittens for too long, in case the mother started eating them, which was certainly one way of getting Jack to collect her.

Eventually the doors of the Bolt Whole were closed behind them and Stan remembered he had to get back to his wife, who might still be up. This left just Al, Millie and Florence gathering on the pavement to agree what a good night it had been in spite of the singing. Eventually Jack drew up beside them all in a rather small car. He leaped out to shake everyone’s hand, which made Millie think he might work in hospitality, and guided Florence, who was now very unsteady on her feet, into the front seat. He was even mildly good-looking. How did Florence do it?

Millie set off to find her Ford Escort and wondered why she hadn’t visited the ladies’ before she left.

‘Promise me you’re not going to drive,’ said Al, who had hurried up behind her, zipping up a large parka at the same time.

‘I’m fine. I’m very adept.’

They had reached the car. Millie leaned on it to stop spinning before grabbing the door handle.

'I'll walk you home.'

'No point – it's really close.'

'Come on.'

He took her arm and for one second she thought he was going to kiss her. He leaned forward and with one rough jerk managed to prise the door handle out of her grip. She was left feeling excited and also full of dread. She was not the kind of woman to connect with an electrician on a female-only outing. But he didn't make her feel as nauseous as Harry had when he'd reached across with his biscuit breath to claim the remote. Was this attraction?

They walked to her house and Al fished the door keys from her duffel bag.

She managed to teeter into the kitchen and made it onto the sofa – any thoughts of going to the loo would have to wait. Hopefully.

Normally when she was this drunk, Millie would head to the fridge and pounce on the stash of chocolate she'd secreted there for a *freddo* feast. Topics and Milky Bars, but usually Kit Kats would transform her into a happy person for the amount of time it took to rip the wrapper off and bite down.

Tonight any thoughts of chocolate had to be put on hold. In any case, there was only cheese. And eating slabs of cheese in front of a man was unthinkable.

Al seemed to be very at home in her kitchen. He gave the cat a male sort of cuff with his big hand and allowed Vernon to lick his knuckle by way of a matey reply. Al shook a few tins, laid out some mugs and switched on the kettle before looking at her. She suddenly felt so shy she could hardly bear to meet his eyes. Al took off his big

parka and sat next to her. They waited for the kettle to stop boiling.

They waited some more before it got quite noisy and it became obvious the kettle had got stuck. There was just enough time for Al to mention that he was separated from his wife and ate a fair amount of Indian food. Millie couldn't quite believe that a man was now sitting in her house, with a boiling kettle. She'd forgotten what she should look like in such circumstances. Apart from a pressing bladder, she was very hot. She didn't want to take her jacket off, so they both sat there, paralysed. Vernon watched their stillness proprietorially from the sink unit where he'd been drinking out of the tap. She must remember to put out a bowl.

Eventually, Al got up and switched off the kettle.

As he sat down again, he licked his lips and turned to her.

Millie waited. Was this a precursor to a kiss, or was he going to tell her something dramatic?

'I missed my tea today,' said Al.

'Did you?'

Neither of those, then, thought Millie, only half disappointed.

'It's in one of these.'

Al suddenly thrust his pelvis upwards. Millie felt a sudden dip in her stomach. What was required? Cook him an omelette or straddle him, tabletop-style? Neither seemed right, but either was perfectly possible, in principle, which was pressurizing.

He said, 'Feel this,' and took her hand and gently guided it into one of the many pockets in his shorts.

Al was very comfortable with himself.

'Found it, I think.'

'That's good.'

Al took out a brown bag. In it was a chapatti wrap.

'Can I heat it up perhaps?'

'By all means, yes. The microwave is over there opposite the sink.' Oh God.

Then she stood up. She was going to be sick . . .