

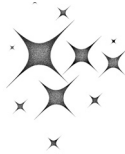
**LOVE
IN
COLOUR**

BOLU BABALOLA



HEADLINE

Orin



I AM ON WHAT IS POSSIBLY THE WORST first date of my life. On paper, it should be ideal. I'm at an open mic/DJ night Upstairs At The Ritzy in Brixton on a Friday night, the lights are dim, the bar is cosy, I see some familiar faces in the crowd. He is a friend of a friend, works in finance and is good looking enough for me to allow my friends to set me up with him. However, the problem is, he works in finance and is good looking enough for me to allow my friends to set me up with him. His head is so far up his ass he should be submitted to scientists as an anatomical wonder. He's talking about how brave I am to be in a field that is high input and low return, and while music photography is a novel profession – he's dabbled in photography himself, had I seen the series of pictures he took while on a firm retreat in the Alps last winter? It's such a *shame* for my law degree to go to waste. I smile and bite down the slight tingle of homicidal thoughts and tell him to pull out his phone and open his music app.

After navigating my way out of a podcast called ‘Money Matters: It’s A Man’s World’ (I give myself props for not walking out right then), I go to a Top Ten ‘Urban’ playlist and tell him that I have worked with six of the top artists. He chokes on his gin and tonic and tells me that he has never heard of them. He swiftly changes the subject and starts talking about how the gin he ordered – the most expensive on the menu – tastes like cat piss, and it’s nothing compared to the gin he tried while touring a distillery in the Cotswolds, where, by the way, he used to summer with his family. They had a country home there. I take a large gulp of rosé, hoping it might sweeten the acetic taste of him using ‘summer’ as a verb.

His name is Raphael Adeniyi Akinyemi.

‘It’s funny,’ he says, assuring me that the following sentence will be so aggressively bleak it may make part of my soul die, ‘that my name is Raphael, you know, like the angel, when I can be such a demon.’ He winks at me and my stomach turns.

‘And I know,’ he continues, ‘you’re thinking that Raphael may be a weird name for someone whose parents were born in Nigeria, but I think it’s, like, cool that I stand apart like that, you know? My parents call me Adeniyi at home, but I may drop it. Thinking of dropping Yemi from my surname too, though. Raphael Akin sounds so much more dynamic, you know?’

I lean back on my chair, resting my elbow against the back of it, having given up any attempt at feigning interest, as I understand now that I am a third wheel on Raphael Akin’s date with himself. Or, more accurately, I am an audience to Raphael Akin’s date with himself. I decide that looking at it from this angle is the best way to salvage

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the evening; this is *immersive* entertainment, The Modern Narcissus. An afrobeat song comes on while we wait for the acts and I start to shimmy, my waist immediately called by the beat, I find comfort in the song. Raphael chuckles and says, ‘Look at you go! Shout out to Burna Boy, innit!’ It is, in fact, Wizkid that is playing. My small moment of solace is unceremoniously shat on. I hear a sharp choke of what sounds like laughter and my eyes drift to the other side of Raphael, where a guy sits, trying and failing to cover up a smirk with a beer bottle that is lifted to his lips, eyes unashamedly glinting in my direction. I raise a brow as a question and he only smiles wider. A dick, clearly, who thinks the possession of a sexy smile is enough to distract from the rudeness of openly eavesdropping.

I’m grateful when the band starts setting up, eager for the sound of a white boy doing an acoustic folksy cover of Lil Wayne’s ‘Lollipop’ to distract me.

‘Do you know what my favourite sound is?’ Raphael Akin asks.

I smile widely. ‘Is it the dulcet sound of your own baritone?’

This time, the guy on the other side of us snorts. Raphael Akin doesn’t seem to notice.

‘No, I was going to say the banjo. Although I was in an all-male a cappella group at my college. We were called the Knightingales – with a K. They used to call me Lancelot. I was kind of a player.’

I clamp my jaw down on itself to keep my tongue in check, and the guy on the other side catches my eye and mimics a fascinated look. He is an asshole and, unfortunately, very cute. He’s sat back in his chair in a thin and loose wide-necked white T-shirt, jeans and a simple, fine gold chain that stands at stark contrast to the

chino slacks and button-down shirt with a tiny embroidered man on a horse that my companion wears. The more I look, the more I think that it is a very good white T-shirt. It really takes exquisite taste for someone to choose the perfect white T-shirt to make them look good; it is truly a barometer of style. Though the shirt is loose, it is clear that it hangs on a well-built torso . . . and here I am checking out another guy while on a date. My eyes snap up to see his are already fastened to me, full of something that elicits a tweak of warmth to dive into the pit of my belly. Was he just checking me out?

The sweet heat that rushes through me is quickly dissipated when a girl sits down next to him, all shiny hair, statement heels and a cloud of heavily scented floral perfume. Our gaze splits as he turns to her and, in greeting, she plants a long, complicated kiss on him that involves so much tongue movement that it leaves the confines of their mouths. The slimy, writhing tangle of pink looks like a living, breathing entity. Her hand trails down his chest and stops just above his belt. 'So sorry, babe,' she husks, 'the shoot ran late!'

I smile. The guy's date sits down and kicks her bare, shiny legs up as she crosses them. She is wearing an anklet. This guy's date is wearing an anklet. It would then follow that I am not his type and he isn't my type. I really cannot fantasise about a guy who hooks up with a girl who wears anklets with what seems to be butterfly charms on them; my imagination simply does not have the ambit for it. I sit back in my seat, somewhat comforted by this knowledge, while Raphael talks about the multi-media crime novel he's working on: 'What if, while you're reading on an electronic device, instead of

describing the car chase, there's a clip of a car-chase? I'd like to call the idea Novies. It's a novel and a movie in one.'

I wonder if I'm getting wine breath. I contemplate asking someone on our row if they have a stick of gum or cyanide.

The night takes an interesting turn when the MC announces that the next performer will be none other than the date of Hot T-shirt Guy. The urbane ease I saw in his face slips away with a swiftness.

'Wait— what?' Hot T-Shirt Guy asks quietly, with a stiff smile.

His date's perfectly puffed lips spread into a grin. 'Yeah! I wanted to surprise you!' She bops his nose with her finger, and proceeds to ascend the dingy stage, her heels and bodycon making her look like a diva doing community theatre as punishment. She takes the mic and flicks her hair and I flick a gaze to Hot T-Shirt Guy to see that his face is now comically frozen in a grim smile that barely conceals his utter terror. She clears her throat and taps the mic. It squeals in apprehension.

'Hey, guys!' She says it in the same exact tenor one might use to begin a YouTube beauty tutorial. She's fascinating. I like her. 'So, I'm Lissa. You can follow me on Lissa Underscore Loves on IG, by the way! Anyway, I'm going to be doing a Taylor Swift cover. Do you know any of her songs?' She turns to the bemused ankh wearing neo-soul specialising band, who stare at her as if she has spontaneously sprouted a second head. She frowns but is unperturbed.

'Really? Weird. This song's a classic. Anyway,' she waves her hand, 'it's fine. I'll just do it a cappella and you guys can catch up. Also, I'm giving it a fun twist, I have a little spoken word I prepared to go right in the middle!'

It is then I know that I am in love.

If it were possible for Hot T-Shirt Guy to go pale, I have no doubt that he would straight up look like someone who belonged in a Stephanie Meyer novel. As it is, his jaw is tight, and his eyes look arrested in a state of shock and horror. Well, this is wonderful.

The superstar-model has a singing voice that sounds like what candyfloss would sound like if it were a sentient character in a cartoon, with accents of drowning cat. It is so beautifully terrible. I'm having a great time, she's even managed to drown out Raphael. Her long lashes flutter as she focuses on her date, serenading him as he sits rigid on his chair, unblinking. I bob my head along to the song, and when she breaks into her spoken-word verse, which involves the line 'peng boy, don't play me like a toy', I click my hands in the air. 'Say it, sister!'

Hot T-Shirt Guy glares at me. I grin.

'Shout out spoken word!' Raphael says.

'Do you wanna get out of here?' Raphael's brazenness is staggering.

It's the interval and we're in the smoking area, where I am drinking my second glass of rosé and, judging by Raphael's increased proximity to me, where he thinks we're going to make out.

'... I don't live far from here, only Clapham, and I actually have a bottle of gin from that distillery. I can expand your palate. I don't have any of that fake wine you've been drinking all night. I mean, rosé? What are you, a Real Housewife? Haha. Nah, I'm joking. That ain't your vibe. Clearly. I mean, would it kill you to wear a dress on a date?' I am wearing fitted cargo pants, a black strappy crop top, an oversized button-down shirt that slips off my shoulder, sneakers

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and red lipstick, and he wishes he had such flawless drip. 'Haha, I'm kidding. Anyway, yeah, I can call an uber and—'

I hold a finger to my temple and release a long, loaded sigh as I try to gather what is left of my fast dwindling patience. 'Oh, man. Raphael, do you think this date is going well?'

He frowns, confused. The sheer unbridled hubris is almost endearing. 'I think it's vibsey, yeah.'

I know I should be more tactful, but rosé has eroded the ability to temper my words and my jaw is aching from keeping my laughter repressed, and his use of 'vibsey' has pushed me to the edge. So I shake my head, smile, and say, 'Lancelot is a super shit nickname to make up for yourself if you want to pretend that you were a player in university. When he proposed to Guinevere, she rejected him and he fled to a monastery where he died of grief. You might have known that I knew that if you bothered to ask me any questions, because then you might have found out that I took a history module in Ancient Mythologies. That, however, would require you to be less enamoured by the sound of your own voice, which seems to be physically impossible for you. Also *Novies*? I mean . . . objectively? That is not a thing that makes sense. I'm just telling you as someone who – okay, not exactly someone who cares about you, but somebody who cares about the state of our culture, that that idea is an abomination and an insult to the concept of both novels and movies.'

Raphael blinks at me, and, in a flash, I see the shock of rejection bypass self-reflection and sidle into something snide. 'Whatever, dude.' *Dude*?

The corner of Raphael's lip turns up in an ugly snarl that makes

him look like an evil Disney prince. Finally, something zesty. Ironically, I might actually fancy him now.

‘This date was a favour anyway. It was obvious from the beginning that you were intimidated by me. Plus,’ he runs his eyes across me, ‘why would I want to date someone whose dress sense is a cross between a stripper and a thug? You seem confused, love.’

This makes me laugh hard, because though I adore the idea of a stripper and thug aesthetic, I *know* that someone who’s a walking complex racial allegory fit for a Jordan Peele movie isn’t calling *me* confused.

I gather myself up and open my mouth to say just that, when a cool, low, bemused voice says, ‘You’re joking, right?’

Raphael and I both look towards the direction of the voice to see Hot T-Shirt Guy, leaning over the balcony, beer in hand, smirk on his face.

Raphael scowls. ‘Excuse me?’

Hot T-Shirt Guy laughs and straightens up, rubbing the stubble on his chin. He shrugs. ‘Sorry, it’s just genuinely amazing to me that you have the audacity to say that she’s intimidated by you. Like . . . of what, man? A store brand Carlton Banks?’

My hand flies to my mouth and covers my elegant gasp and snort combo while Raphael splutters ‘Mind your fucking business, dude’, and when this fails to get the response he desires, he says ‘Man, fuck off, *nigga!*’

Our part of the balcony falls into a stunned silence that is more confounded than awkward. Hot T-Shirt Guy’s eyes are bright with delight, but he fixes his face to look grave.

He flattens a hand across his heart as if stabbed, and says, with Sidney Poitier gravitas, ‘Wow. That hurts, brother.’

I clear my throat to disguise my laugh and shake my head, pulling out my own imitation of intense disappointment. ‘Yeah. No need for that kind of language . . . dude.’

Raphael looks mortified. He is blinking a hell of a lot. He turns to me and opens his mouth before realising – probably by the exaggerated devastated look on my face – that there is nothing to be salvaged here nor is there any way to save face. He storms back into the bar, leaving a plume of Ralph Lauren cologne behind him.

A few more moments of confused quiet passes before laughter breaks free from both Hot T-Shirt Guy and me, bubbling over as we double over, our chuckles and wheezes and huffs layering over each other in giddy camaraderie.

‘Oh my God,’ I squeal. ‘Did that just happen? That was kind of incredible, right? I have never seen a black man say nigga like it was a slur.’

Hot T-Shirt Guy’s shoulders jutter as he nods, his chuckles rolling and infectious. ‘That was one of the best things I’ve ever seen. I am so serious. Also why did he *act* like he was saying a slur? Why did he say it like that? Nah, that was awesome. He has stage presence. Fuck a cappella, he should have been in a drama troupe.’

‘Oh, actually he was. Well, an improv troupe. You missed that part because you were on a bathroom break and not able to shamelessly eavesdrop. It was all male and called Fried Whiskey.’

He stares at me evenly. ‘Are you fucking with me?’

‘How could I possibly make something so dark up?’

He twitches his shoulder in a shrug. 'I don't know. I don't know you.'

I raise my brows. 'Oh, okay, but you're comfortable enough to interrupt what would have been a sublime drag? By the way, you didn't have to do that. I had him.'

Hot T-Shirt Guy turns to me fully, resting against the balcony railing, his beer hanging over the bustling street below. It's a mid-summer evening and the air is cushy and thick as it tucks us into the night with a lullaby of car honks, bus wheezes and weekend chatter. The breeze is scented with fried chicken, cigarette smoke and a pungency that is derived from the sublime blend of sweet weed and sour alcohol. For the first time in the entire night I feel utterly relaxed.

'Oh, I have no doubt,' Hot T-Shirt Guy says, with a dangerously sloping smile. 'I mean "the dulcet tones of your baritone"?' He releases a low whistle, 'Jheeze. Artful.'

I'm a sucker for a man who can quote literary genius. I bow. 'Thank you so much.'

He laughs. 'Nah, for real, I'm sorry for butting in. It was rude. It was just like an immediate automatic reaction to the sound of his voice. I mean his tone . . . like my whole body reacted to it, you know?'

I move closer and lean against the railing. 'Don't worry about it. I get it. He's annoying. He sounds like if a robot was made by Fulham bros who work at a tech start-up for the purpose of infiltrating the black community.'

Hot T-Shirt Guy snorts. 'And failing. I might report him for a hate crime.'

I choke on my sip of wine and he smiles again. Damn. He really is fine as fuck. His hair is in short twists and a fade, looking simultaneously soft and crisp, and his eyes are brimming with a brilliance that activates a long dormant warmth in my stomach, arising from embers that I had thought were long desiccated. When he smiles, I start to feel them glow.

‘My man has no idea what he’s talking about, anyway. Trash opinions. Rosé is great,’ he says, gesturing to my glass. ‘I just can’t handle it. It makes me slutty.’

I shoot him a wry look. ‘Huh, well I would hate to see that, considering the make-out session that I witnessed earlier. Pretty sure you violated a public health code. Where is your future Beyoncé, by the way?’

Hot T-Shirt Guy shakes his head and suppresses a smile. ‘That’s rude, man. I think of her more as a future Ariana Grande.’ He pauses, and scratches his cheek. ‘Uh, she actually left. She asked me what I thought about her performance.’

I nod soberly. ‘Oh, right. And you, of course, said the truth. That it was beautiful, soul-stirring—’

Hot T-Shirt Guy bites on his lip in a clear, increased effort to repress his grin. ‘I said that it was unique and powerful.’

‘Powerful like it could wake the dead?’

His grin spills out. ‘Wow. You’re mean.’

My smile widens. ‘Well, you just chased what could have been the love of my life away.’

‘I can’t take all the credit. I think it was a team effort. Clearly we work well together.’

The air between us draws tight, and it is only then that I am acutely aware that it is only us on the balcony. The interval is over and everyone else has gone back in for the rest of the show. Neither of us make any move to return. From the din of the bar, the muted melodies of a neo-soul song floats through the fire-escape doors and weaves itself through the chaotic symphony of the streets below. Hot T-Shirt Guy clears his throat and says, ‘Do you wanna go back in?’

My belly dives in apprehension. ‘Do you?’

‘No.’

‘Me neither.’

His face relaxes further, and the corner of his lip flicks up and pulls my pulse up with it. ‘Uh, so anyway, she took it as the compliment that it was, and then she said, “Well, why don’t you introduce me to the guys at your work?” Oh, I work in A&R at a record label by the way—’

‘Wait, really? Where?’

He looks wary. ‘Synergy Records.’

I smile. ‘Oh wow, cool. I’m a photographer, specialising in music. I’ve toured with some of your artists.’

He visibly relaxes and steps closer to me, eyes lighting up, ‘Seriously? That’s dope.’

‘Mmm. You thought I was gonna try and send you my Soundcloud link, didn’t you?’

‘I definitely, did, yes. I’ve been through a lot. I’m Deji, by the way.’ He holds his hand out, which seems like an oddly formal thing to do, considering we’ve live-witnessed each other’s romantic failings

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intimately. Nevertheless, I take his hand to shake. His wraps around mine firmly and my heartbeat jounces.

‘Um, nice to meet you. I’m Orin.’

His eyes widen and he steps back, as if to take me in. ‘Shit, are you Orin Adu?’

‘Yeah . . . how do you—’

‘I love your work. Seriously, it’s stunning. This may be a super nerdy thing to say, but I don’t give a fuck— I follow your photography account on Instagram. I’ve actually got one of your prints on my wall, Burna Boy in Paris? Incredible. Your stuff is real art. Am I fanboying? I’m fanboying, innit. I’m gonna stop talking now.’

His calm urbanity fractures further and gives way to something genuine and wholesome. He holds both warm and cool in his palm, easy-going without being nonchalant, affable without being corny. The sparking embers in my belly birth a beam that I feel spreading across my face, filling up my cheeks, spilling into my eyes. I feel like I’m shining with it.

‘Thank you. Seriously, I really appreciate that. Kind of makes me feel like my mum’s not-so-secret perpetual disappointment in me quitting law is worth it.’

Deji nods deeply. ‘Ah. I feel you. My Nigerian-Parent-Appeasement-Degree was Economics.’

‘Classic. Shit— Sorry! I interrupted! Look at me getting all Raphael Akin on you.’

He shakes his head. ‘Nah, not at all. That was a monologue. This is a great conversation. So, right, she tells me to tell the guys at work that I have discovered the next Rihanna, and I say, “I’m not so sure I

can do that”, so she says, “Well, why the fuck not?” He does what is quite an eerie impression of her voice and holds a sassy finger up. ‘And I go “I just don’t think you’re ready for that kind of career development.”’

I nod. ‘Very good.’

‘Thank you. Anyway, she goes “Well maybe you’re not ready for all of *this!*”, to which she gestures to herself. She calls me a fuckboi and then leaves. So that’s how I figured out that she was pretty much using me for my connects. Disappointing. If I’m used by a woman, I prefer it be for my body.’

I suck in some breath after I recover from my laughing fit. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry, it’s not funny.’

‘It kind of is. It’s fine, this was only the third date. We had nothing in common. That’s the last time I DM slide on Instagram.’

I look at him incredulously. ‘Are you sure?’

Deji shakes his head. ‘Nope. I mean, realistically, how is anyone meant to meet anyone? I’m working all the time and dating apps make me want to shoot myself in the head. How did you meet Carlton Banks? Excuse me if I’m wrong, but he doesn’t exactly seem like your type.’

I laugh. ‘Ugh. Yeah, he is essentially the antithesis of what I usually go for. Which is why I went for him. My job means that I’m on the road a lot with musicians, so my type tends to be guitarists, bassists, drummers, you get the drift, right? And it pretty much always ends up the same way: heartbreak. I was complaining about my lack of luck with guys at my friend’s baby shower, and one of her friends suggests that maybe it’s because I date the same type of guy.’

She works in finance and she's like, "You know what? I think I have someone. He's the only black guy in the office." And while corporate racism is a very real thing, now I think he's the only black guy in the office because he killed the rest. Anyway, I figure that maybe a change is good, and maybe my mother is right, and I should go for someone who wears a tie to work. Like, maybe my idea of romance is bullshit and finding someone who gets me completely is a fantasy and maybe I can put up with someone who is entirely the opposite of what I want if they treat me right. Like who needs excitement, right? Maybe it's impossible to have excitement and stability at the same time. But even my attempt to settle didn't work out. Maybe I'll just resign myself to being an extremely glamorous perpetually single artist who owns birds.'

I pause and turn to the blinking lights of the night and I taste the lie in my words. They don't fit in my mouth right; they leave a tang my palate rejects. I shake my head. 'Except I don't really want that. I want to be an extremely glamorous artist who owns a dog with a man who dotes on her. There's nothing wrong with that, right?'

Deji shoots me a small, gentle smile with eyes so soft I feel myself slowly sinking into them. I feel no need to be hoisted up.

'There's nothing wrong with that. I feel you. Dating is the fucking worst. First of all, there's so much pretence involved, right? Like, the first few dates you're basically performing a polished, cooler version of yourself. And that's even if you find someone you want to go on a date with. Then there's the pressure, you know? Both of you are on a date and you know it's for one purpose. You want it to work out. Then, when it doesn't, you're disappointed, and somehow, within

that disappointment, you gotta find it in you to build yourself up to do it all over again.'

I click my fingers in the air in affirmation. 'This. Is. It! I just wish you could skip the awkward clumsy beginning part and get to the fun part. Meeting someone who just gets you. Feeling that alchemy of time and circumstance. Right place and right time with someone who isn't so emotionally unavailable that they can commit to a pet guinea pig they take on a world tour but not you having a sock drawer in their apartment.'

'That came from a deep place, huh?'

'The bassist.' My dry chuckle rolls into a groan and I splay a hand over my face. 'Shit, why do I keep putting myself through this?'

Through my fingers I see Deji shrug. 'Hope, innit. That's not a bad thing. It's not a character failing.'

My hand slips from my face and it rests on the balcony railing, next to his. We're standing so close together that our legs are bumping and grazing each other. Deji's gaze glitters with an overflow of something roiling within him and it fastens me to the spot. A comforting warmth spreads and settles itself within me.

'By the way,' he says, breaking the silence, 'stripper and thug is an excellent combo, and if this is it, you pull it off well. You look like somebody's crush off of a nineties sitcom.'

I smile. 'Thank you. That's super sweet and super specific.'

'I had a huge crush on Ashley Banks.'

Heat soars up to my cheeks. 'I see you're a big fan of Fresh Prince.'

'It was my favourite show.'

I laugh. 'Imagine if all dates were as easy as this? Learning each

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other's favourite childhood shows, witnessing each other's romantic fuck-ups close-up, seeing how terrible the other is at kissing—'

Deji holds up a hand in censure, face dead serious. 'You're crossing a line. That was all her. There was no saving it. I'll have you know, Orin Adu, that I am a badman lipser.'

'Bold claim.'

'I don't talk shit I can't back up.'

His voice dips in tenor and its bass reverberates through me as his eyes pin breath to the back of my throat, slowing time. The muted thumping of the Erykah Badu song playing in the bar slows and inverts in my ear, as if we're rupturing through temporal and physical confines, because I have no idea how much time has passed now and the ground beneath my feet feels immaterial compared to the knowledge that I'm coming into. I can feel the weight of what this is pressing up against my chest, I can feel the heady fullness of what this could be making my heart giddy. There have been very few moments in my life where I have been staunchly confident, but at this very second, I have the unwavering assurance that not only is Deji a badman lipser, I will also not have to take his word for it.

He smiles with those plush-looking lips that look like they're fashioned from marble and cloud. 'You know, in theory, if we go somewhere else, get another drink and maybe a bite to eat, this can count as a first date. Technically, it's kind of perfect, because we don't have each other's numbers. If we have a shit time, we can both go home and forget about it. If one person asks for the other's number and the other isn't feeling it, they are under no obligation to say yes.'

'I'm sorry, is this your way of asking me out?'

‘If you’re about to say no, then no.’

I grin. ‘As long as you promise not to play me like a toy . . . peng boy,’ I say, paraphrasing the profound words of Lissa Underscore Loves.

Deji laughs and nods, the bright in his gaze dancing. ‘You’re terrible.’

‘And yet, you want to take me out.’

‘Yes, because you’re also, clearly, a really funny, smart, interesting and hot terrible person and I would like to get to know you more to truly understand the depth of your meanness.’

I press a hand to my chest and tilt my head. ‘That’s one of the sweetest things anyone has ever said to me. I guess now’s the time to tell you that I think that you’re a dick. Honestly, when I first saw you, I thought, “Ew, what an asshole”. Imagine my delight when I discovered I was right.’

‘Careful, or I’ll fall in love with you and it will be embarrassing for the both of us.’

At the restaurant, he orders a bottle of rosé and winks at me.

I am on what is possibly the best date of my life.