

Kimberley
Allsopp

Love and Other Puzzles

'Warm, witty, charming and romantic, *Love and Other Puzzles* is a glorious debut. It's so clever and satisfying, and I can't wait for the world to get their hands on it.'

Jessica Dettmann

**Life doesn't
always go
perfectly
to plan.**

'*Love and Other Puzzles* has more heart than *Harry Burns*, more zingers than *Daniel Cleaver* and is hotter than *Fitzwilliam Darcy* emerging from a lake, partially clothed. If you love rom-coms as I do, you will meet-cute with this wonderful twist on the genre.'

Lauren Sams



Kimberley
Allsopp

**Love
and
Other
Puzzles**

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

Dedication

For Hazel

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Dedication

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SATURDAY

This would be the third window I'd climbed out of in my life. The second this week. The first where I was escaping myself.

This had all grown out of good intentions. I'd click on the app when I was waiting for the bus or if I was watching a particularly drawn-out episode of *The Great British Bake Off* – you know, one of those where nothing *actually* happens, so the whole episode is just fake tension about whether or not Pietro's soufflé will rise (it does) or Janet's croquembouche will topple, crushing her spun sugar village (it does not).

The app was a daily habit. Hardly something you'd lump in with vices like smoking, refined sugars or sticking with your chair instead of a standing desk. If anything, I thought it was an exercise in self-improvement. I'd listened to what people who loved me best had said about my narrowing life choices and I'd done something about it. I should be awash with applause, not shame. I certainly didn't see the app as the monochromatic noose it had revealed itself to be.

But here I was, huddled in the corner of what had been my bedroom for the past two years. Listening to boxes being scraped across the wooden floorboards, paintings being parted from hooks and work-in-progress Post-its with Stephen King Prawn and other literary edibles being delicately untacked from corkboards.

The smart thing would have been to go for a walk. At the very least, I should've brought my earphones in from the kitchen counter so I didn't have to hear our life being heaved out the door. This could be a new reality show for the property porn channel: *Renovate Your Life with One Easy Mistake*. *When dismantling everything you've spent years building, don't forget to force yourself to listen to the convivial banter of removalists*

talking about which team was playing on the weekend, interspersed with gentle grunts and heaving huffs. It's a must.

I listened to Lucas good-naturedly agree that the refs had been completely biased in last Sunday's game, even though he would rather have been caught at a Peppa Pig concert and stayed for three oinkcores, than watching organised sports. He continually apologised for the half-arsed attempts he'd made to properly secure the boxes with packing tape – he hadn't had much time. It was a last-minute decision. He made a joke and the only word I could decipher from the punchline was 'women', delivered in an exasperated tone. I hoped the removalists' laughter was feigned in a ploy to get back to their van faster; going along with sexism was a real time suck, and they had another job today. I could tell they were now uninterested in the conversation because they'd realised that Lucas wasn't 'one of them' – as if his sockless brogues hadn't given it away – and had no sportsball insights to offer up.

Nobody commented on why half of the furniture wasn't being removed. Why the grey three-seater was still sitting pride of place in the lounge room – though now facing an empty white wall instead of a mounted television screen. Why a novelty mug that I'd been gifted in my first and last participation in the office Secret Santa, declaring its owner 'Utterly useless until I've had my third cup of coffee!', lay abandoned in the sink. Why the framed poster of Tom Hanks as Woody was taken off the wall but Tom Hanks as Joe Fox remained hung.

Maybe the good folk of Movin' On Up Removalists were sartorial spiritualists and thought it didn't matter anyway because the pilling grey sofa didn't really go with the pristine leather recliner that was being hoisted onto their shoulders.

The removalists were right. They had been gathered as individual pieces, in the apartment that we stood in today, with such hope and joy. They made sense in that early iteration of 'us'. Now the recliner was collateral damage, from an obsession that I'd lost hold of. It was no longer a happy union.

I couldn't take this anymore. I cracked open the bedroom window, careful not to make any noise and draw attention to the only room in the apartment with the door closed. *His* bedroom belongings had been scooped out the night before. I threw a black hoodie over my pyjama top and

climbed out, avoiding the loose nail, whose purpose I never fully understood.

I felt the distinct squelch of a fallen jacaranda flower under my bare foot. I turned around, hoisted myself onto a wheelie bin and climbed back up the way I'd come, taking particular care to gather any remaining spider webs that I hadn't picked up with my face on the way down. I slid on my 'if there's a fire' pair of shoes that lived under the bed and climbed back out again.

I couldn't care less what people on the streets of Sydney's inner west thought of a grown woman wearing her pyjamas out in public at 11 am on a Saturday. Let them judge me over the tops of their steaming cups of ethically sourced coffee beans. I might have been in a position to join them on their lofty perches a week ago.

This was not a week ago.

MONDAY

Five days ago

Six am sounds like tinny birdsong.

Earlier in the year, I'd read an article on the Swedish word *gökotta*, which extols the virtues of rising at dawn to hear the birds sing. The journalist was perky. She'd rediscovered a seam of creativity that had been hidden under the rock formation of motherhood. Her hope had inspired me. For a week.

By the eighth day, I'd abandoned the 5 am wake-up calls, but I'd kept the birdsong. Sort of. Hastily chosen from the alarm-tone options on my phone, the digital nightingales seemed to whir more than chirp as their tones rang out from an Apple forest.

I open my eyes as soon as my alarm sounds. I don't hit snooze.

I *never* hit snooze.

I think it's one of the reasons my relationship has lasted as long as it has: no passive-aggressive sighs while choral tweets go off every five minutes.

Lucas sleeps until his body decides to rise. That's what artists who are propped up by pillows of inherited wealth get to do. I've inherited a host of things from my family – a stubborn streak, an uncanny ability to drop any ball thrown my way and a journalistic legacy that hasn't necessarily come paired with blazing talent – but sadly, no financial security. At 6 am I have to rise.

Lucas rolls over, turning his pale back to me, as I soft-shoe over the pile of his clothes from the day before on the way to my hanger on the back of the bedroom door. On it is my outfit, selected, with consultation from the

weather app, the night before. A mossy-green skirt and blue collared shirt, with my bra, black tights and undies hooked over the top.

I sweep up eighty per cent of my hair, which is all I can fit in my tortoiseshell clip. An ongoing punishment for pretending to be breezy with a new hairdresser, who promptly rewarded my efforts by making my brunette locks three inches shorter than what I asked for.

I put a moisturising face mask on and leave it to soak into my skin while I eat the chia pudding that's been expanding in the fridge overnight. The combination of the air conditioning in the office – always running five degrees cooler than ideal – and the cheap free-standing heater that blasts out from the ornate but non-functional fireplace in our lounge room has my face in dire need of relief. I don't need to wash off the mask when I go to put on my make-up; the cream is soaked in, my pores like greedy roots sucking water from the topsoil.

As I undo the deadbolt on our door, I hear Lucas roll over in bed, grunt once, and then everything in the apartment is quiet again.

* * *

When I first moved to Sydney, everyone and everything felt sped up. I was on a five-second delay. Now, the only time when I feel like I'm back in Paddington, Brisbane – a place I know so well, where I can predict how the rest of the day will roll out in thirty-minute intervals – is if I put my earphones in when I'm waiting for the 7.03 am bus to work. Sometimes it's a 7.06 am bus, but rarely. There's just not that much traffic at that time of the morning. That's the beauty in catching public transport while other people are in bed ignoring metallic birdsong. With my music playing, I can't hear the trucks and sirens that careen along the main road that runs across the marginally quieter street that I live on. I'll see them as we turn the first corner, then I'll switch to a podcast where I don't mind a pause in discussion marked by a car horn, but in the ten minutes that I wait for the bus, the Sydney traffic doesn't exist.

I'd never known that you could have a regular bus driver in Sydney. They should put that in tourism campaigns. In the first place I lived in after my move from Brisbane – a damp house with four mildly wet people (Who came first? The people or the damp?) – there was a new bus driver for every

trip. And every Wednesday morning, that day's bus driver would pull over to the side of the road and count in another driver three minutes into the start of the journey. They couldn't even wait to finish the route before tapping out. Now, by some miracle, the public transport gods have given me a regular bus driver. A lovely older man who smiles and asks about my absences when I've missed a morning on the 334 because of illness or a rare holiday.

It's a very small segment of society that can offer you a wrapped boiled sweet from their pocket that you accept without hesitation. Although he's at least twenty years younger than my grandma, he has that warm understanding about him, that boiled-sweet aura. I'll never be able to move to a house on another bus route again.

* * *

The offices of *The Connect* are polished concrete and white pylons. A large open space, with a giant white table in the middle that always looks obscenely shiny before it's marred with the excess moisturiser of twenty resting arms for eight hours. It looks like your layouts will slide off the sides. A shellacked infinity pool.

I feel like my voice will echo around me if I shout out 'hello'. Which I would never do because you are *never* alone at *The Connect*. The other side of the world is wide-eyed and making decisions about trade conditions and the viability of further *Bachelor* spin-off shows, while Australia sleeps. The night news team are still propping up the four corners of the room when I walk in at 7.36 am. They look dusty after spending all night typing up 700-word pieces built around 120-character gaffes from the northern hemisphere.

Over the past fortnight, David has been one of the nightwalkers. His mother-in-law is staying with him and his wife, to help with a new baby, so he's working on the night news shift while she rocks the baby at 3 am (giving his wife a partial night's sleep) and he's attempting to be there for the day duties and doing their toddler's daycare drop-offs. I don't know how he makes it to daycare on time when he's still here, slumped at his desk, until 8 am.

He's forgoing sleep. His skin seems heavier. It's like the last bits of honey moving down the plastic bottle to the nozzle for your crumpet. Excruciating and thick. He'll switch back to day shifts at the office when his mother-in-law leaves next week and he can start the process of returning to normal circadian rhythms. I doubt that will equate to his face becoming lighter.

I don't think he ironed the pale blue linen button-ups that are his personal work uniform before the baby, but now the creases are even worse and spread like deep vein thrombosis up the sleeves and curl up his collars. One day last week, he came to the office in a shirt that advertised the happy hour of a bar that he said once sponsored his university AFL team. He isn't a great poster boy for the sartorial benefits of having children but, last Wednesday, I really craved a \$6 margarita.

When his eyes are clear and don't have red veins climbing his whites like jasmine vines, I would call David my mentor. Not within earshot of him but socially to anyone that I'm trying to impress at a party, for example. He has been with *The Connect* from day one – since they started as a left-wing offshoot of a much larger media conglomerate. Back then, they were so small that they wouldn't have featured on the first five pages of the company's financial holdings document.

He started out writing community announcements ('Our Oldest Resident Is Still Alive and Eating Cake!', 'Confusion at the Local Council about a Meeting Agenda that's in Comic Sans Serif Instead of Times New Roman') and now he is head of *The Connect's* digital news team. *The Connect* is big enough to have heads now. As bigger papers have been whittled away and consumers answer the decline by demanding a less black-and-white point of view to share on their Facebook pages, *The Connect* has moved up in importance and status.

It was my dream to intern here. It's why I moved to Sydney. My grandad always said that you just had to get your foot in the door at a paper, get your first big story and the rest of your career would look after itself, as long as you sat at the desk every day. I doubt he could have imagined that, when it came time for me to sit at that desk, all the stories would be online and the desk would be communal. We didn't even have a shared family computer at home when he died.

I hand David a coffee, which I pick up for him every morning from the hole-in-the-wall coffee bar across the road. I'm worried that if I don't do this, he'll veer off the road on his way home. He has one of the three parking spaces that afford him the leisure of napping on a steering wheel, while the rest of us have to make do with squashing our drooling faces against the safety glass on public transport. There's a light stubble that's sprung up over the lower half of his face since he came in, when I left, at 5 pm yesterday.

'You're a total saviour. At around the 4 am mark, I nearly tried the instant in the kitchen, that's how desperate I am for anything with caffeine in it. You being here also means that I have eighteen minutes left before I can flee. If I wore a watch, I could set it to you. You're the Admiral Boom to my George Banks,' he says, as I pass him a takeaway cup constructed from environmental betrayal.

'I'll come back to that little *Mary Poppins* quip once I've worked out if I'm offended or not,' I say. 'No need to thank me for the coffee – you're my current charity project. Think nothing of it. Unless, of course, you have a story coming up that you want to put me on.' I raise my eyebrows in an attempt to be playful because I know he's going to say no and if I say it sincerely, it somehow makes it worse. He always says no.

'You need to find your own stories. You need to cultivate a voice and specialty that makes you the natural choice of any of the editors when particular news breaks. We've talked about this, Rory.' He says this in an endlessly patient way that reminds me of both my grandad and Alan Alda. I lower my eyebrows.

He turns back in his chair to look at the clock on the bottom of his laptop screen. Even David doesn't have an allocated desk. Only Mathia, Queen of our hive, has the luxury of putting a clock in a permanent position. David is lumped in with the rest of us transients, roaming with our laptops strapped to our backs. Homeless turtles.

I put my hands together under my chin in false prayer.

'Oh, please tell me again about how you broke into journalism, oh wise one.'

'I really love it when you make it sound like I used to travel to school by steamboat. I'm trying to help you.' He does a faux-annoyed face to counter my real-masquerading-as-faux pleas for his advice.

‘I’m sorry, and I know you have to go, but how am I supposed to have a signature voice if I’m never put on any stories? I don’t want to whinge but it feels like a bit of a catch-22.’

‘I can see that it’s really bothering you having to whinge. Is that a grey hair? You need to make your own opportunities. I think you’re a great writer. You can hit the key points and your voice is strong, but you need to go to the stories. Don’t wait for them here.’ David gestures around the room, just in case I was thinking he was referring to the other ‘here’. ‘I know you find doing the TV-guide crossword each week laborious and editing the classifieds frustrating, but that’s what your job currently is unless you sniff out a story. If you want to make it more than that, you need to put in the extra time and go where the news is happening. Go and get good stories. Ones that people care about. Stories that aren’t just about the timelessness of the commentary in *Sex and the City*.’

He hoists his beaten leather saddlebag off the floor – probably untouched, until now, from when he’d dumped it yesterday afternoon. I’d lecture him on being a hypocrite in telling me to hunt down stories when I doubt he’s got up for anything outside of a toilet break since starting his shift, but, of course, he has the excuse of covering a country he doesn’t live in. He has a licence to sit.

‘I know I sound like I’m 150 years old, but this is good advice, Rory. Absolutely worth you still getting me a coffee every day.’

‘It’s great advice. I mean *Sex and the City* remains one of the most popular shows ever and that was in your time, before streaming, but, hey, you’ve earned your shot of caffeine.’

I smile and go over to stake my claim on one of the rare spots at sea from the isle of co-workers. David raises his free hand as he goes towards the exit.

‘The show was its own think piece, Rory. It doesn’t need your takes on it. That was what Carrie did. Carrie wondered and then she spelt it out for the audience, at the end of each episode.’

I wish I could take my coffee back.

* * *

Every Monday morning the whole office gathers around *the* desk and gets allocated the big issues for the week. It feels very collaborative, but it's a show. Posturing. The editor-in-chief, Mathia, has more often than not already put together who will be paired with what before she does the first clearing of her throat.

Ahem.

It's completely unnecessary pageantry because the whole office becomes quiet as soon as she nears the table. The staff track her with the corners of their eyes whenever she leaves her office.

It's like when you see anyone mildly famous at the grocery store or at a pub. You first clock them as if they are a mere mortal who's in your way, your eyes pop for a second when you realise who they are and then you spend the rest of the time putting on a pantomime of indifference while constantly, and in no way subtly, keeping them in your line of vision. Mathia is our A-list celebrity adorned in casual Miu Miu, buying a vitamin B enriched cereal.

Today, she's in an Acne Studios black tuxedo with a white collared shirt, which would make me look like a ventriloquist's dummy or a cocktail waitress, but, paired with her fuchsia heels and sharp red bob, it makes her look like she's Nicole Kidman strolling down a Cannes red carpet. No one's about to ask her if there are any mini quiches on the way.

'It's a new week, which means it's a new opportunity to get people to connect with *The Connect*. While David is *still* working the evening shift, I'll read out the roster of the big events that we need to be covering and who will be doing said covering. Please shout if I've missed anything.' Once, a new starter had, in fact, tried to point out that Mathia had missed something and Mathia had turned her head, just an inch, as if she'd smelt gas, and when after a second sniff it was gone, she went back to what she was saying. Never acknowledging the staffer who was almost mistaken for a gas leak. It was a levelling experience. 'The situation in Syria continues to escalate and alarm – Celia, can you pull together a piece on the lack of action from the rest of the world on the matter? I'd like to run with it as a lead on the homepage on Wednesday. The Oompa Loompa rages on in the US – David will be looking after the rolling coverage on that. Please send through any new angles you think of to him throughout the day and he'll come back to you when he's in the office. A Kardashian has no doubt done

something to inflame the internet – Sophie, can you do a piece on why we should care?

‘And finally, we have the local council elections coming up and rumour has it that a new contender has thrown her designer hat into the ring; morning-television darling Elle Chambers will apparently be running. This is something I care about and, by definition, that means you and the rest of Australia care about it too. The woman is click dynamite. This is an open office call – anything on Elle Chambers is something I want. For someone who is watched by millions of gawping viewers five days a week, we don’t know anything about her. I want a photo carousel of her top awards-night looks, I want to know about her personal life, and, most importantly, I want to know why she’s running. I want to know *now*.’

She casts her eye around the room. Making sure it lands on all of us for a beat. I can feel the ‘now’ being burnt into my brain.

‘Of course, as always, please let me or David know if there’s anything we need to be talking about. We *must* remain the agenda setters for Australia.’ And with that she gives a little nod, as if acknowledging her own greatness, and walks into her office.

I turn back to my open Word document and continue to delete any words that might be deemed offensive or that I just don’t understand from the classifieds page on the site. When I first started, I would look up the acronyms to make sure that this is the only one needed when I thought I was deleting a flexible and sticky sex act I wasn’t in fact removing a technical carpentry term, but it was always the former and someone in HR had to talk to me about my browser history so now I don’t second-guess myself when it comes to the classifieds.

In all the stories my grandad had imparted to me about his years in journalism, eyes misty while my grandma rolled hers, over a roast dinner that she’d spent hours in the airless kitchen putting together, I don’t ever recall a gripping tale where he pieced together a singles ad for someone who was putting a list of very good reasons why people should avoid an interaction with them, in fifteen words or less.

There are only two big editors at *The Connect*: David, over on the news division, and Melissa, who is tasked with holding up the gigantic banner of entertainment, a glossy strand of bunting that sits over anything that anyone might glean any enjoyment out of – listicles, puzzles, reviews, photo

galleries of very attractive people wearing disasters on red carpets. My bunkbed is in neither camp. I'm in purgatory. Classifieds, the TV-guide crossword and the occasional foray into intellectual head-scratchers like 'The Top Five Times We Wanted to Run Away with Colin Firth'. (Spoiler: number one is always Mr Darcy coming out of the lake on the way to Pemberley.)

There were five interns that started at the same time as I had. Two of us have gone on to have permanent positions. Catherine made friends with everyone. She asked people what they were doing on the weekend over drinks on a Friday afternoon and then followed up with them on Monday morning. She put her hand up in the daily meetings, asked questions, gave unsolicited ideas. They weren't always good ones, but David and Mathia always said they were 'interesting' (bad) or 'worth considering' (less bad). Now she is officially assigned to the courts and is always in and out of the office, always 'following up a lead'. I was in my seat by 7.45 am every morning. I did my busy work by deadline. Because people knew that I'd moved states for the job, it was generally presumed that I was incredibly dedicated. Enough of a tick in my column, in the minds of the powers that be – or David in a good mood – for me to go from balancing trays of other staffers' coffee orders to choosing to buy one for David every morning, out of the slightly larger salary I was able to take home.

I hadn't got drunk like one of the other interns – Greg – and come back to the office to sleep because I'd missed my last train and stripped off in front of the night staff. Another tick in my column. No by-lines yet in the News section of the paper or website, but I do maintain one of the cleanest classified lists in town and none of my colleagues have seen my genitals. No one has plumbed their router on my watch.

* * *

My mum shoots through a text.

'Did I lend you my copy of *The Alchemist*? Cazzie NEEDS to read it.'

To a layperson, this would appear to be a message from my mum – who is too old to know someone named *Cazzie* – standing in front of the bookcase in her lounge room looking for a specific spine to lend this *Cazzie*

and coming up short. As a last resort, my mum thinks I might have taken said book, one that I have no interest in and would have never borrowed.

But because it's from *my* mum, she could be standing in front of a used bookshop in London, The Strand in New York, or a tiny table tucked in between jewellery and spice booths in some heady town anywhere on the globe. Ideas and questions just pop into her head and she spits them right back out again. She's a camel meets Magic 8 Ball.

I take comfort that she still is very much a mum, in that she's put this Cazzie person's name in the text as if I have any idea about who they are. If I bothered to question who Cazzie is and why she so desperately needs 200 pages about a shepherd travelling on a quest for enlightenment, I'd get a prompt: 'You know Cazzie, sweetie. I worked with her on *Mad Men* and she gave you that cigarette case.'

As if I was on the set while she worked on *Mad Men*, or that it was appropriate to gift a tween a cigarette case, or that I have an encyclopaedic knowledge of all the crew members on the sets that my mum has worked on. Typical mum behaviour.

I reply: 'No, it's not one that I have.'

And wait for her next missive about red-threaded shoes, or a cup of the *best* coffee she's ever had, from a place I will never, ever visit, from wherever in the world she might be.

Still, she's my mum, and for all her faults and the gulf-like differences in what we think 'mum' means, a nugget of guilt forms when I realise that I haven't spoken to her in a week.

I was due to call her after my run tonight, anyway. Her name is in blue biro in my diary. Though I have been toying with phoning her earlier so I don't get frustrated right before bed.

A new email arrives, asking me to pull together a list of the top five charting podcasts in Australia to run as breakout box on the website. Next to another staffer's *actual* article on the rise in popularity of podcasts as a whole. They've ended the request with a weird emoji that has hands the size of its head. I take this to mean thank you and not as some commentary on the drop-off of miming as profession. I hunker down in ratings charts for the rest of the afternoon.

* * *

On the hour-long walk home – which is the only way I can hope to keep my step count up to a consistent 12,000 a day – I shirk a podcast telling me about all the things I must read, watch and listen to and, instead, try to work out what exactly it is that I'm doing with my life.

When I moved to Sydney five years ago, I left my grandma's stilted Queenslander and my mother's curio-filled apartment. My grandma's house, which used to be my grandparents' house, is full of furniture that was made 'when people knew how to make things that lasted' and talcum powder puffs that surprise you when you open certain cupboards. Booby-traps marking you with their lingering scent as a snoop.

My mum's place is a two-bedroom apartment that I half-grew up in, a place that looks like it has taken its interior design inspiration from the third kitchen drawer. Each room covered in a hodgepodge of souvenirs, rubber bands and things we might need one day. I left both of these homes to be a serious journalist. It was hard to write anything insightful and explosive in a town whose main newspaper had a front page that was a roster of stories about the under-11s footy team and the local pet shelter canned-food drive under lyrical headlines like 'Cans for Cats' and 'Little Kids Kick Big Goals'.

When I left them, and Brisbane, I cried on the plane as the familiar jagged coastline disappeared and smoothed into a regimented curve. I judged all the other people that were on the sticky, urine-scented train from Sydney Airport to my new neighbourhood as if they were in the midst of contributing to the aroma.

When I alighted, it seemed like there was no room for sunlight between the houses. It looked as if each house was reliant on its neighbour to stay upright. They stretched back like rectangles on their blocks, lean and long. The polar opposite of the streets that I grew up on. Where you had space to put a cricket pitch between you and next door (and people frequently did). I didn't know how these conjoined houses were ever going to feel like a home.

When I turned up at the share house, no one else was there. The keys were under the chipped pot of a dying fern and I spent the night sleeping on the wooden floor next to the bed that was supplied, not trusting the hygiene of its sheets. But the next morning, as I walked around the city's Myer department store with my discounted cotton sheet set (with only a Sesame

Street-level of maths required for the thread count) under my arm, I started to feel hopeful about my future. New sheets can do that to a person.

Now I've left that house and am the co-owner of an actual bedframe, but it doesn't feel like I've done much else. There seems to be a Grand Canyon-sized difference between the people who sit beside me at work and me. Their names have been bolded on the website. Mine is still in a tiny print that you have to dig through terms-and-conditions listings to find.

There is a list of things I was going to do in first five years of moving – I'd laminated it with the machine at the old newspaper office – that lives in the top drawer of my bedside table:

1. Become a feature writer.
2. Own a Celine handbag.
3. Be engaged to my forever person.
4. Have 10% of a housing deposit saved.

It's lucky that I laminated the list, otherwise I would have torn it into a million pieces by now. A shiny torture device, full of failure but impervious to coffee stains.

How long am I supposed to wait before the next step happens at *The Connect*? David keeps promising me that I'm on the crest of catching my wave, but I can't see over the curl. (David frequently speaks as if he's just come back from a bonfire at the beach instead of a windowless pressroom.)

This career listlessness is the kind of thing I would have talked to Lucas about before our communication was reduced to the grunts and life admin that comes with shared domesticity. Now, all our conversations are: How are you? What's for dinner? Have you made plans for us on the weekend? What do you mean you're not eating lamb anymore? They've always been baby sheep!

Right now I need the Lucas from when our questions used to be: Why do you smell so good? How have you not told me before that you had your own newspaper column when you were a tween where you covered showbiz news? When did you have time to do this painting of me?

Back when we were at that stage of questioning, if I'd told Lucas I felt like I was in journalism purgatory, he would have told me not to worry, that

I was destined for great things and then bought us a bottle of \$10 wine to brainstorm those great things in bed.

If I was to call up my grandma, first she'd tell me not to call when the news is on, and second she'd say that I have to make my own change – and she'd be right. If I bring it up when I call my mother tonight, she'll just mention something about a new alignment in the stars or a planet being in retrograde. The lack of suitable options is exhausting.

As I near the now familiar brick-clad train station, a man barges me into the gutter as he runs towards a train he has no hope of catching. He doesn't turn his head back to assess the damage. That man is never going to be the Peter Gallagher to my Sandra Bullock. Obviously not a *While You Were Sleeping* fan or rom-com person in general.

If you did a straw poll of the people whose opinions carry some weight with you about their favourite moments in romantic comedies, forty per cent would scoff at the suggestion that they'd watch such saccharine fare (this percentage would include the gutter pusher) and sixty per cent – the honest people – would rattle off scenes like Andie MacDowell telling Hugh Grant that she doesn't even know that it's raining or Bridget Jones kissing Mark Darcy in the middle of the road, with a cardigan over her underwear and snow falling around them.

It would appear that most of us enjoy public displays of affection in inappropriate weather, and, more importantly, the moments where it all comes together. At least, that's what I surmised in a piece I submitted to a popular pop culture site, back when they paid freelancers for their points of view.

What I didn't say in that piece, that was no doubt read by twelve people, including my mum and grandma (after lots of coaching on links and scrolling by the ever-patient Doreen next door), is that the climaxes are not why I watch romantic comedies. I watch them for the establishing scenes: Meg Ryan buying a festively plump pumpkin on the way to open *The Shop Around the Corner* in *You've Got Mail* and Cher selecting her clothes via a rotating display of her closet on her computer at the beginning of *Clueless*. Those are the moments that lay the foundations for all that follows. They tell us who the people are. Why you should want things to work out for them. Everything else that follows is to a formula, but those opening

moments feel like fresh hints to build the kind of life that deserves the happiness that inevitably follows.

Every Friday night, my grandma and I would watch a rom-com and record whatever British crime drama was on the ABC for the following evening. It was our way of checking off the week and putting the past seven days behind us. Things would work out. I, too, could have Tom Hanks holding my hand as we jumped into a volcano or a Nancy Meyers kitchen if I just kept my chin up and didn't talk during the news.

So that's what I did. I kept my chin up, at least for thirty minutes at 6 pm when the news was on at grandma's.

* * *

I don't know how, with everything I've learnt from those shiny and warm romances, Lucas and I are the current version of us.

The night Lucas and I first met – at a gig that a visiting friend from high school had dragged me to, starring three local bands I hadn't heard of and wood-panelled floors that were so gummy I could feel their grip through the soles of my shoes – I spied him at a table populated by people who looked like they had stepped out of a Sonic Youth video clip (they wish). He was smiling and laughing. I was smiling and laughing. And somewhere in that Venn diagram of smiling and laughing, we overlapped, and I went back to his share house.

One of his roommates was smoking weed in the lounge room and watching *Scrubs*, so we went into Lucas's room. He pulled out an ancient game of Monopoly. We set it up on his bed. He was delighted that I kept trying to enforce the rules. I thought his attempts to cheat were endearing. The board dipped into the mattress whenever we moved. Property deeds were lost in the folds of the sheets. We never finished the game. He distracted me with kisses. Our lips were swollen from them. When the sun came up, he fell asleep and I tiptoed around the room, picking up pretend money that had floated away and tokens from the floor and returning them to the box. When we both woke from the heat of the midday sun, he didn't mention the tidied-away game.

Now, as I open the door to our apartment, a shirtless Lucas is crouched over his workspace, an old architect's desk that dominates our lounge room.

It looks out the only window in the room, which, due to how the building faces north, means that you're either sweating because the sun is yelling at you or freezing because it's giving you the silent treatment. He doesn't look up to acknowledge me until I make a point of stomping past him to put my shoes and *his* away in a basket that I'd bought specifically for the purpose. I can't remember if I bought it at the homewares store or the slightly creepy magic shop two blocks away. All I know is that ninety per cent of the time it seems to be invisible to Lucas.

'I was going to pick those up once I finished this piece. The light is going.'

He speaks to the desk rather than turning in my direction. His hair, such a dark brown that it could be black, is developing curls that bob when he talks. He can't be bothered getting it cut. He's still in the t-shirt he'd worn to bed, but, annoyingly, on him it comes off as artistic and looks so soft that I want to lie down on it. If I wore my pyjamas all day, by the time 6 pm rolled around, despite my best intentions, they would be covered in cat hair (even though we don't have a cat) and salad dressing.

Lucas and his obsession with the light. Always the light. Why you need a particular light to draw a black outline on white paper is something I just can't wrap my head around. I guess that's why I write articles around the philosophy of early noughties sitcoms and he can call himself an artist in his Instagram bio.

Lucas used to paint on canvases that would take up walls and frequently blocked doorways. At one disastrous going-away party that he and his housemates threw for a friend – Oliver, who was heading to India for a year 'to find himself', an indulgence available to those with money and the time to ponder such questions – a partygoer who had been over-serving himself since lunchtime was in such a rush to get to the bathroom (which had a line six deep anyway) that he ran through a canvas that was blocking the upstairs hallway. You know when football players are running out from the changerooms to the field for a big game and they burst through a banner with their team logo on it? It didn't look like that. It looked like *that* uncle – the one who hits the open bar early at a wedding and sings 'Come On Eileen' like he's been waiting for her in the car for a good thirty minutes and they're going to be late – bursting through a mass of mauve and crimson, with a tearing sound that I still hear in my dreams sometimes. It

was a scene that put me off the idea of having children for at least another five years.

Lucas's artistic output has changed significantly since then.

'I'm happy to do it. I was putting mine away – why not put away both?' I say, not entirely believing my tone.

'I'm feeling really good about this one,' he says, gesturing to the canvas on the desk. 'I think it could be big.'

I look over his shoulder. Tim Wonton.

His canvases have shrunk. Instead of paintings full of texture that make you question why you now feel an emotional connection to the colour blue, Lucas now dominates the niche market of artworks that combine both the literary and the gastronomical.

When he told me that I was his muse and, because I loved reading so much, he had decided to go into books, I thought he was going to move away from submitting the occasional piece in semi-regular university exhibitions and go into book-cover design. Who would have thought that my fondness for yum cha and *Cloudstreet* would culminate in Tim Wonton?

A line drawing of a pony-tailed wonton.

'It's really funny, hon.'

'It's *not* meant to be *funny*.' He turns away from me, back to his Post-it-sized piece of \$10 card.

'I'm sorry. I mean *funny* in an off-beat kind of way. Unique. I've lost my ability to form full words and complete sentences. Penning classifieds will do that to you.'

'I've lost the light. It's gone. I'll order us dinner.'

He opens up his phone and I look at the fridge. In the fridge are all the ingredients I'd bought on Sunday for tonight's dinner. The pink chicken breast, shallots, adorably crisp baby bok choy. The udon noodles are in the cupboard. One packet for tonight, the second packet for Thursday. I silently start bagging the chicken for the freezer. I can't remind him about our meal plan. It's stuck on the fridge with a monkey magnet that my mother brought back for me from Bali. I swap out the plan each week (don't say I'm not fun); it means that we can save our money and the stress of worrying about what to eat each night. I'd made a PowerPoint presentation on the idea. He'd agreed to it by slide two. I'm chalking that up to my powers of persuasion and not him trying to end the experience. But now I've offended

him with my *funny* comment, so I can't say anything that has the possibility of antagonising him for the rest of the night. I'll find a way to put the bok choy in my lunch tomorrow.

Now that he's gone rogue and ordered dinner and the light is gone, Lucas moves over the brown leather recliner that Patricia, his mother, bought us as a house-warming present. Although as she's the one who also bought the apartment, I guess she bought herself the sofa. It looks like it would happily be at home in Matthew McConaughey's loft in *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*, but when you're in shorts in summer, the underside of your legs sticks to the leather and in winter, when I'm in flannel pyjamas, I've been known to slide off it. One of those set pieces that is perfect for movies and uncomfortable in real life.

Lucas turns on the television while I change into my tights and shirt so that I can't make any excuses about not going for a run after dinner. We don't say a word to each other when the Nepalese delivery arrives. One *Simpsons* rerun merges into the next. He drops a chunk of fried goat from a flimsy takeaway container onto the floor and ignores it. It congeals on the Persian-esque rug. If I clean it up, it'll look like I'm doing performative cleaning; he'll take it that I'm saying he can't do anything right, not even eating, and close himself off. Then, for the rest of the week, he'll bring up me pulling a Cinderella every time I do anything around the apartment. I put my bowl next to the sink and rinse out my container so it can go into the recycling bin on my way out. He nods goodbye to me as I shut the door.

* * *

A missed call from my mum. I'm still debating whether to return it when she calls again. I answer while I'm heading down the narrow staircase to the street. Cazzie must really need that book. Mum doesn't wait for me to say hi before she begins talking. I'm surprised she waited for me to answer the phone and didn't just start the conversation with the person next to her.

'Aurora, it has just dawned on me that I haven't seen you in six months.'

From watching movies, I know that this opener would normally be delivered by a mother complaining that her child was too busy for her. That they hadn't called in forever and were they too good for their mother. (Like

you'd imagine Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* would be if her daughters were ever allowed to leave the house before marriage.) In the case of my mum, it's that she's too busy for me and has almost no concept of time. You wouldn't pick me as her daughter.

'What's brought that revelation on?'

'Your grandma called yesterday and mentioned that I'd been gone for a while.'

'That's good of her to remind you about the passing of time, Mum, but I'm fine. Things are the same with me as when I last saw you. Nothing has changed.' To my chagrin.

'Something about you feels off to me.'

'Instead of it being me that feels off, could it be something to do with you and your immediate surrounds? I don't know if your psychic reach carries as far as you think it does. How many oceans would it need to travel?'

'I'm your mother, Aurora. I know things. Not about oceans, as such – I'm no marine biologist – but many other useful, non-geographical things.'

'There's nothing to know.'

'Here's a thing I know. Right now, you're heading off for a post-dinner run.'

'A lot of people have a standard time of day that they exercise, Mum. I don't think you knowing that makes you psychic.'

'What about this? Today is Monday so you had a chickpea salad for lunch.'

'So you've remembered that I have a weekly menu of sorts. This is not *Only You* and you're not a Ouija board telling me my soulmate is Damon Bradley. You do not have ESP. This is you having a daughter who likes a certain amount of routine and you shouldn't use that knowledge to flame unreliable twinges that pop into your head about the current state of my life.'

'I think what you have is beyond *routine*, Aurora. The only thing more predictable than you is the hangover that will come after I accidentally have a fourth martini when we wrap up for the day. And it's charming, Aurora. You are charming, not the hangover. You're happy with a strict schedule. None of what I'm saying is meant to be taken as a negative.'

'Mum, I need to go.'

It has just hit me that I'm retrospectively offended about David's Admiral Boom comment that morning and I decide he'll be getting skim milk in his coffee first thing at work tomorrow. Let's see how George Banks's tastebuds like fewer calories.

'Will you please call me when you realise what I'm talking about?' she says. 'I'm going to try to be in Sydney as soon as I can get away from this shoot.'

'Don't rush, Mum. I'm fine. Ignore whatever colour my aura is throwing up and any guilt traps that Grandma is laying for you. You'll visit when you can. I'll be here. As you've pointed out, I'll be doing the same thing I'm always doing.'

'I love you, Aurora. I'm sorry I'm not there. Will you also look again for my copy of *The Alchemist*? Cazzie needs a gentle realignment of her priorities. *She* had the good sense to mention something was off, so that I could help her fix it.'

'I have to run now, Mum. I'll call you later.'

Mum has a seam of guilt that runs up her spine, which is occasionally mined by my well-meaning grandma. Grandma must have had her pickaxe out when she called my mum yesterday. It's a complicated relationship, the only ones mothers and daughters seem to be able to have in our family, but I love that my grandma plays such a big part in my life. Her hatred of grasshoppers and her strict adherence to the importance of tea breaks with no set limits on the accompanying biscuits made for some of the best moments of my childhood, but she does have a tendency to treat me like her daughter and my mother like a flighty au pair.

My grandparents supported my mother's decision to have a career *and* a life while she raised me, but the parental roles between all three of them were blurred. The terms and conditions were faded. You'd need one of my friend Kitt's (she's the Mike Nichols to my Elaine May) microscopes to read them.

When I was in Year 8, I'd caught one of their clashes. Normally, they had them well out of my earshot, which is what they *thought* they were doing this time. Grandma and Mum were sitting at my grandparents' kitchen table. Directly across from each other. In complete silence. I'd half expected an umpire to come into the room and flip a coin to determine who would be first up to bat, that's how intensely they were staring each other

down. I'd excused myself to go to sleep when they hadn't addressed each other directly in the forty-five minutes I'd been in the kitchen. Grandma, at one point, had asked me to ask my mother if she wanted a cup of tea while the kettle was on, even though Mum was sitting right next to me.

I was in my bedroom with my ear firmly pressed up against the pale pink door (a colour choice my grandad had made for me when I was four) when I finally heard voices coming from the kitchen. Another bad omen that a showdown was on the cards had happened earlier that afternoon when my grandma decided that she had to do something in the garden in the middle of *Murder She Wrote*. Something big must have happened for her to abandon Jessica Fletcher while there was still a murderer loose in Cabot Cove.

'You can't expect me to let you take her to the *Amazon* in the middle of the school term.'

'I don't need your permission, Mum. Aurora is *my* daughter. Unless I've taken leave of my senses and am taking her to have a likeness of Mike Tyson inked on her face, I don't *need* or *want* you to interfere in my parenting.'

'Aurora lives *here* eight months of the year. With me. It's lunacy to think that you don't need to include me in big decisions about her. And if you were here more often, you'd start calling her Rory. That's what *everyone* calls her. That's what *she* calls herself.'

I imagined my mother running her finger around the lip of the teacup that would be sitting in front of her. Inappropriately trying to lighten the mood by playing a tune on it like she was in a primary school talent show. Conjuring some calm.

'Mum . . .' I could hear sighing through the wall. 'Mum . . .' Now she would be reaching across the table for my grandma's hands. 'I appreciate everything you do for me and Aurora. I would not have my career. I would not get to spend most of the year – as you've so helpfully pointed out – doing a job that I love, if you and Dad hadn't given your home and heart over to her. I am incredibly grateful. But she is *my* daughter. I know it's bad timing with school to take her with me on this trip but I think she'll love it, once she gets there. I get that she's not great with change and I'm sure like most things that's probably my fault. But it's only for two weeks and she's so strict on herself. She could do with a break in her routine.'

There was the sound of a chair moving sharply across the linoleum and my grandma scooping up, with a series of clinks, the now cold cups of tea.

‘We’ll ask Rory in the morning what she wants. Let her decide. She’s thirteen. She’s capable of making the right decision for herself.’

The next day, over a plate of pikelets that Mum had made with as much guilt as flour, I told her I didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to fall behind at school. Which was true. But I also couldn’t begin to work out how many pairs of underwear I’d need to pack, and how a person would wash them in the Amazon. To counter my betrayal, I never corrected Mum again when she called me Aurora.

I text Mum and tell her I’ll have a proper look around the apartment for *The Alchemist*. I know, of course, that I most certainly do not have a copy in my possession, but I don’t want her to think I’m not on her side.

* * *

Because of daylight saving, or as my grandad and any other Queenslander worth their maroon jersey would call it, ‘a confusing waste of literal time’, the sun is still sitting fat in the sky when I’m on the street, despite it having evaded Lucas an hour earlier in our apartment. I wait for a mother and her pram to clear the path before I can stretch. I try to rein in my impatience, which is, no doubt, firmly set across my face – it’s always quick to betray me. I bounce from heel to heel.

My grandad didn’t have a lot of patience either. One of his less endearing traits, which I’ve inherited. He had a long memory, a short fuse and an itchiness that developed quickly in unfamiliar landscapes. The complete opposite of my mother, a person who’ll book a flight to Paris at the mere mention of cigarette pants, ratatouille or bribing judges. But Grandad was proof that you can be those things and still be kind. He just didn’t suffer fools, or drive further from home than an overnight stay, unless he absolutely had to.

Once I started primary school, Grandad had a good excuse to push back on stories that his editor assigned him that involved packing a change of clothes. My grandparents only had the one car, a bronze (never to be called brown) sedan with an interior that was vacuumed daily, and that day’s paper was always on the front seat with a pen nestled in its crease. It was sage

forward planning. You never knew when you'd have to wait in the car and would need something to pass the time. You never knew when your daughter would have a last-minute job that she had to run off to and you'd need to pick up your granddaughter from the school gates. A car trip that – at least in the early days – would involve soothing a young kid who was determined to ask questions that you didn't want to give the answer to.

'Where has she gone?'

Insert random place. Sydney. LA. Bendigo.

'Why is she always leaving?'

'She has to for work, pet'

'Why can't she work here and stay with me?'

'That's not the nature of the job, kiddo. You gotta stick with a job that makes you happy and this one makes her happy.'

'Why aren't I enough to make her happy?'

'You are plenty. You're a bag of sunshine and you make me and your grandma very happy too. You are all our happiness. Now, why don't you finish this crossword for me? I can't work out 38 Across.'

I wouldn't know Mum had gone until I saw him at the front gates. He'd always be sitting in the car. Never standing with the rest of the parents over by the brick wall that enclosed the school. I think he didn't want to do anything that might single me out as different. No one else's grandad picked them up most days. For other kids it was a treat – they were going away for the weekend or it was a special sleepover because Mum and Dad were going out, which they loved because at their grandparents' house they were allowed chicken and chips for dinner. Or maybe Grandad didn't want my mum singled out as a parent who was too busy to pick up her daughter.

It quickly became routine to see the sedan instead of Mum's VW Beetle at 3 pm. Eventually, I stopped asking where she was when I climbed up in the front seat, placing the folded paper on my lap. If it was longer than three days, I'd get a postcard. Why ruin the surprise?

My grandma, grandad and I had our own rhythm. Up at 5.30 am. Dressed by 5.45 am (my uniform laid out over the back of my desk chair the night before by Grandma – a woman who had planned her own funeral by the age of twenty-five because it was always better to be prepared and she didn't want to be a bother when she was gone). We'd talk through the day over honey, crumpets and tea (milky for Grandad and me, black for

Grandma). Grandad would drop me at school and then drive to the office. I imagined, during those hours I was at school and he was at work, Grandma just sat back in her recliner and read all day, occasionally getting up to peer out the window to make sure no one in the street had sneezed in the past hour. Because when you're a child you don't realise how much work it takes to make your house look as if there's nothing to clean. Three pm, Grandad picks me up. Drops me at home. Drives back to work.

And then, just as I felt comfortable with the pattern of our days, Grandad and I would walk through the door at 3.10 pm, and the house would smell like sandalwood and acrylic paint instead of synthetic lemon. My mum was back to pick me up. Unmooring me from the routine that my grandparents and I had, and plopping me back into the rudderless apartment with her. There would be a new handmaid figurine (always from the markets, never from an airport gift shop) on the table, sitting between two cups of tea. One item of Mum's clothing would inevitably look like cardboard, stiff from being handwashed in a bathroom sink with a packet of laundry powder and not being rinsed enough times. Who had time for all that? She never wanted to overpack so that she had space to bring things home from whatever far-flung place she'd been. That way when she was back and sitting on the cracked vinyl kitchen chairs, she could reclaim her space, with her usual spillover.

By spillover, I mean my mum can't be contained. The sum of her parts was and is everything in a ten-metre radius of her person. In the way that you can knock over a cup of coffee that has a sip left and need to use an entire roll of paper towel to mop it up and *still* find caffeinated rivulets running through the valleys of your keyboard for days to come, my mum alters the landscape around her. It's a wonderful trait in a set designer, someone whose trade is to create new worlds, but less desirable when you're the parent of a child who must finish every task that she starts.

When I was ten, I'd been working on the daily crossword, which I'd gradually taken on as my own, from start to finish. Grandad had left it blank for me so that I could start it on the sticky car ride home from school and finish after homework and dinner. I'd put the alarmingly blank grid (it was a tough one) on the kitchen table while I stored my schoolbag away in my room and then jumped in the shower to wash the newsprint off my hands and to give fresh sweat its time to shine. It was the kind of day that

Sydneysiders would label as ‘boiling’ and Brisbanites would concede was ‘a bit of a warm one’. When I came back, the crossword for Tuesday 28 May was in strips hanging off the back of the kitchen chairs. Great clumps of Clag glue coated the clues. Every third piece seemed to be sliding off the chair and hitting the linoleum with a sickening thwack.

‘What’s happening?’ I shrieked. For a second I couldn’t see anything but razed grey carnage.

My mum, face reddened from blowing up a balloon, grinned at me. I didn’t even know she was back. I should have clocked the quilted bag that had been dumped at the door and the shoes that had been kicked off in the middle of the otherwise immaculate lounge room, but I was too busy trying to think of the solution to 3 Down, a word that means ‘high piano tone’.

‘It’s papier-mâché! I thought it would be fun if we made some hot air balloons that we can hang from your ceiling. It’ll be like you’re living in the Barossa Valley. God, it’s beautiful this time of year.’ Mum looked out the window as if lush, green vineyards were dotting the landscape instead of a group of teenage boys who were walking past the window, thwacking the back of each other’s legs with sticks. ‘Yesterday, when we were doing some landscape shots to use for scene transitions, a wallaby hopped right in front of the camera and started sniffing the grass. We were all frozen in respect. It just shows how amazing and varied this country is. But until you’re allowed to come with me, I thought these balloons would be a nice reminder of the world outside of Brisbane. You gotta have dreams.’

‘Who are you talking to?’ I looked around the room for another person because surely she couldn’t be talking to me.

‘You! It’s fun. Start thinking about what colours you want to paint them once they’re dry. I’m thinking pink and yellow, but don’t let that sway you.’

‘I was doing that crossword.’

‘What crossword?’

‘The one that’s now in pieces. Pieces on the carpet, pieces on the chairs, pieces stuck to Grandma’s table. She’s not going to like that. Are you going to be the one to clean this up?’

‘Aurora. Sweetheart. You can do the crossword again tomorrow. We’re making hot air balloons!’

She bobbed the orange balloon she was holding up and down as if it were sitting on the waves of an ocean instead of floating through the air,

which was the look I imagined she was going for.

‘It won’t be the same crossword tomorrow. It’ll be a different one. I need to finish today’s crossword first.’

I tried to wipe away the glue from the strips closest to me. The grid was bleeding into the Hagar comic strip. His speech bubbles were disappearing, which I wasn’t upset about, but so were the clues.

‘You don’t need to finish the crossword, sweetheart. You need to take some deep breaths and relax. You’re a child. Soon to be a child with hot air balloons in her room. You’re not an octogenarian. You do not *need* to do the crossword in the local paper and then catch up on *Midsomer Murders*. You’re a *child*.’

‘I’m not allowed to watch *Midsomer Murders*, Mum. I have to wait until I turn thirteen. Please give me my crossword back.’

Hot tears rolled down my face. Mum let out a resigned sigh. She dropped the balloon, which was no longer bobbing, and it settled on the cream carpet, which let you know that you were now in the lounge room and not the dining area. She slipped her sandals on.

‘I’ll go buy you another paper, Aurora.’

By the time I’d cleaned up she was back, with a crisp new paper and a bright pink, glittery pen.

‘The pen is for fun,’ she said as she kissed me on the forehead. My mum doesn’t have it in her bones to harbour a grudge or resentment (‘a complete waste of valuable time and energy’), but I knew that I’d disappointed her, even if she wasn’t going to hold it against me.

The true constant in my life, which I couldn’t control, was violently missing her when she was gone and then internally sighing with relief, exhaustion and a smidgen of irritation the moment she was back. But always love. Every shade of it.

* * *

I snap myself out of my reverie, comforting as it is to think of my family when I’m feeling shaky about my life in Sydney. I’m still impatiently waiting for the mother with the pram to move away so I can warm up for my run without an audience. My bouncing from heel to heel annoys her enough that she coos something to her baby about bath-time and how nice it

must be for *some* to be able to go for a run and continues walking. I call Kitt as I stretch out my legs, the silver reflective band on the outside of my tights lengthening and shortening with each bend, something that's barely required to alert passing bikes and cars to a jogger's presence at 7 pm in late October, but it's a safety recommendation if you're going to run in the evening and I'd hate the Roads and Traffic Authority to say I told you so if something ran into me and I was running around in all black.

Kitt's still at the lab. Mixing bacterial cultures and making a difference to the future of humanity. Without even meaning to, the words falling out of my mouth before I realise, I tell her that I'm feeling stationary bordering on stagnant. I imagine her switching off the little lamp over her workspace as she rubs her eyes, tired from focusing, preparing herself to listen to my existential whingeing.

'Kitt, do you remember when you got your degree and then spent two weeks not sleeping and ingesting your weight in salt and vinegar chips because you didn't know what to do next?'

'How could I forget? I had a rash from the vinegar around my lips. It stung whenever I touched them. Now I can't even look at a packet. It's a pity – I really loved those chips.'

'What made you finally make up your mind? What told you to go back and get your Masters in Biology? You could have got a job without it. You could have done anything science related with your degree.'

'The rash. I looked like The Joker. And appearances aside, it fucking hurt.'

'I mean, obviously, the chips played a big part, but were there any other factors? Something that happened that sounded a little bit more like a divine calling and less like you should have changed your speciality and gone into dermatology or nutrition?'

'I just wanted to help. *You* can help people by sharing their stories and educating them about what's happening in the world but that's not where *my* talent lies. I'm good at noticing tiny changes and the big impacts they can have. I also look fetching in starched lab coats, and there's limited options in terms of career choices if those two are your must-haves.'

'You could have got a job in a lab without your Masters.'

'I could have but then how would I have actual proof that I'm smarter and deeper in debt than some of my colleagues and you?'

‘You just need to open your mouth. The brains are evident. Even when you’re talking through a mouthful of fried potato you come off as wise. You’ve got it all figured out.’

‘Rory, I absolutely do not. Believe me. Until I have a child who is going to an accelerated learning class, my parents are not going to see anything I’ve done as a worthwhile contribution to the world. Non-traditional choices, and by that I mean ones that don’t feature marrying men who are completing a degree in accounting, are non-starters. But I don’t think you’re asking about my academic choices because of anything to do with me. Something is clearly wrong with you. Is this line of questioning about work or about Lucas?’

‘Work? Lucas? Both? Chips? Everything.’

‘You know that it’s unlikely that any incarnation of God is going to send Mark Ruffalo as a ghost to guide you, right? *Just Like Heaven* isn’t an aspirational documentary.’

‘And I highly doubt that I’ll be able to go back to when I was thirteen and make a different wish in a den cupboard that will stop this moment. There’s no Ruffalo Revelation on my horizon.’

‘You need to make your own change. Why don’t you do something you’ve never done before? Try something new. Catch the 7.15 am bus. Get soy milk in your coffee. Don’t plan your outfit the night before.’

I wince. ‘Thank you for making me sound like the most boring person in the world.’

‘You know I don’t think you’re boring, but you are very . . . regimented. It wouldn’t hurt you to veer off course a little.’

‘I can veer. I’m capable of doing that.’

‘You’re capable of everything, Rory. I believe in . . . Shit!’

‘Kitt?’

‘I’ve just knocked over my yoghurt from lunch, which is now precariously close to another kind of culture. I have to go. You’re capable!’

She hangs up and I keep jogging. Tracing the footsteps that I’d taken yesterday and the day before and the day before that.

Kitt has new life forms to create. I have eight more blocks to circumnavigate, and approximately fourteen men in suits to circumvent – men who will find a way to dominate the entire length of the footpath while they bore women on Tinder or WhatsApp about upcoming deep-sea fishing

trips with other men in suits that they went to school with and whose names all end in -o – before I can get back home to finish my daily crossword. The one that I didn't compile for work. A crossword that's decidedly less smudgy than the one I'd do in the bronze sedan and while the late news was on as my grandma gently snoozed beside me in her understated shellfish-pink recliner, though no less comforting. It's the only app I never contemplate deleting. An activity that I never debate about how much time it takes away from me finding something to write that people would care about. I put a lot of sway and countless hours in *The New York Times* daily crossword. It's the one guaranteed sense of achievement that I get each day.

Despite my fanaticism, I acknowledge that the crossword is not perfect. With approximately 32,000 clues and answers every year, it would be near impossible to not have an incorrect pairing of answer and clue. But it's incredibly rare. In 2006, Will Shortz, the editor of *The New York Times* crossword puzzle, listed ten mistakes made that year. I can't do the maths on that – my talent isn't for numbers – but it's a small enough percentage for me to feel like I can rely on the puzzle to arrive each day and know that it can be solved. There is a finite amount of words required to finish it, they already exist, and the clues aren't going to catch a flight to eat some croissants for the fun of it six minutes in. They'll be there until you're done. That kind of reliability is nearly as rare as a man admitting he's made some mistakes in his career.

I have a reasonable level of self-awareness. I know that I like to plan, that checking items off lists fills me with joy and a sense of achievement. I know that not everyone likes mapping out their hours, days, weeks, lives. Kitt was being kind using the word 'regimented' instead of rigid. But having everything in order and diarised isn't working for me anymore; I'm no closer to reaching any of my five-year goals than when I first laminated them.

But I know that I can change.

People do it in movies all the time and they end up exactly where they are supposed to be – which is often very nicely decorated and has at least one white slipcover sofa. I don't have John Cusack's phone number scrawled in a copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, serendipitously waiting for me in a second-hand bookshop – but that has always seemed a little too woo-woo for me, anyway. I could choose for my divine sign to be Kitt

joking about my bus timetable. Not that I'll be changing my morning bus route, ever.

But I do need something. A sign. An omen. I wish Lucas was in the mood to talk, but honestly, I'm not going to get the insight I need from a man who has drawn Beetroot Potter and called it art. I need advice from a trusted source. My pocket buzzes in response to my internal plea. A text with a crying emoji next to a packet of salt and vinegar chips. I'd forgotten how much Kitt missed those chips. I wish I hadn't brought them up.

7 ACROSS

My finger, slick with sweat, slides down and opens *The New York Times* crossword app. I want to start it now, but I should wait until I finish my running route so I can do it next to Lucas, while he sulks about the light and me describing his life's work as funny. That's what a supportive girlfriend would do.

I pause. That's what the old, omenless Rory would do. She would wait until she got home to do her crossword, but maybe this new Rory, who things are going to happen for, and who people will describe as 'normal' and 'willing to discuss alternate dinner choices', won't wait until she gets home to do the crossword. No, this new Rory will be too free to worry about missing her 12,000-step target by a thousand steps because she is going to enjoy a little unscheduled rest against a frangipani tree, doing her crossword, and life will be good.

In my head, the pitch of my voice gets higher, even as I'm having the thought. But there *is* something to it. I can feel it in my terrified-of-change waters.

I look down at my hands, holding my phone. This is it. *The crossword*.

Why not let the creators of the black-and-white grid guide me for a week? Let its themes be my themes. A week isn't long enough to do any lasting damage, and if it doesn't work, I can just find something else to help me, or resign myself to a lifetime of chickpea salads on a Monday. A life that I don't mind; I just don't *love* it and it's not really working for me

anymore. The crossword is my constant. No matter what house I've slept in, where Mum has been or what mood Lucas might be in, the crossword has always been there. Where's the harm in instilling a modicum of power in the grid, in the hope that it might empower me?

I stop at the end of the block and pull up the crossword on my phone. Sweat drips from my forehead onto the screen. A salty smudge. A neon sign flickers on above my head.

7A A bovine Baskin treat.

Cows are truly the most generous animals: milk, cheese and, of course, in whatever flavour you want, *ice cream*.

That settles it.

Well, that *should* settle it.

What sane person would ignore a directive to eat ice cream? I'm a sane person. A sane person who knows that ingesting a kilo of sugar and happiness this close to going to bed is not going to help me sleep. Which means that I could be tempted to hit the snooze button tomorrow morning. I could miss my beloved bus. David would have left the office when I finally arrive, so I wouldn't be able to carry through with my skim-milk revenge. Which would lead to me exacting my need for vengeance on a larger scale and dropping his computer mouse in the bin and putting it back without telling him or setting a small fire in *The Connect* kitchenette. Both offences that could greatly affect my employment. I could lose my job, have to rely solely on Lucas's family money while I try to get another job, which I wouldn't be able to because of my pending arson charges and I'd end up having to move back to Brisbane, single and awaiting a criminal trial.

All because I had a dessert at 8 pm on a Monday.

Even as I think this, I know my catastrophising is a further indication that I might not be as spontaneous and carefree as I keep having to tell people I am.

No, the crossword is my only hope. I *have* to buy the ice cream. If I keep living this way, I'm going to be stuck in the same day for the rest of my life.

I walk under the glowing neon sign into the corner shop, pass the aisles of tampons, tap washers and Chicken Crimpies, and pick up a tub of

Cookies 'n' Cream. My breath catches, and for a beat I feel my chest seize. The way that my body is reacting to this small change is surely a sign that I *do* need to do something. Without this ice cream, I can see myself eating my breakfast chia pot at the same desk, brushing grey hair from my eyelid while one of the new twenty-year-old interns asks me again why I've never decided to leave the classifieds. Is it my passion for used mattresses going cheap?

I grip the ice cream tub and slam – as much as one can with a door in the chilled section – the glass shut.

I'm not just going to veer – that's for people in go-karts; I need to swerve. But I'll just go around the block one more time in case, because the crossword hasn't said anything about failing on my daily step count.

TUESDAY

Four days ago

Six am. Birdsong with a hint of citrus.

Lucas's pile of clothes that I deposited in the hamper yesterday have been replaced by a new set and they stink. Double denim infused with blood orange and clove cigarettes. Bespoke cocktails based on your childhood pet and the delusion that if something smells fruity it might not be bad for you. It's the naive reasoning of teens returning from Bali with a carton of Gudang Garam cigarettes and Katy Perry's perfume Indi.

Lucas remains blissfully unaware of the waking world. Resting on his side, he's so close to the edge of the bed that if I whistled, the burst of my breath would topple him over. I want to reach out and run my fingertips across his shoulder, tracing the outline of his body, but I worry that he'll recoil because he still resents my response to Tim Wonton. It's getting harder and harder to predict how he'll react to me.

I'd thought he was home all night. I'd returned from my run, eaten my crossword-mandated ice cream, showered, checked the weather, laid out my clothes for tomorrow and gone to bed to read *Why Not Me?* He'd continued to watch *The Simpsons* and, on occasion, picked up his notepad to doodle something. As far as I'd known, those were his sole plans for the evening – at least from what he'd shared with me. Maybe he'd switch to *Bob's Burgers*? That's as far as I'd expected him to deviate. I didn't know that he'd go out after I closed my book. It's unsettling. Even though we rarely go to bed at the same time anymore, I still like him being in the apartment. It's a comfort. It feels like he's keeping watch over me. Guarding against murderers, thieves and any number of *X-Files* creatures of the week that religiously pop into my head as soon as I turn out the lights.

In the early days of us in this apartment, that first week of us moving in together, Lucas made himself a costume while I was at work. He constructed what I mistakenly thought to be knight's armour from one of the cardboard boxes that had housed the makings of an Ikea Billy in brown ash bookcase. He said it was an Iron Man suit. The memory of it warms me down to my toes. Lucas's pledge that day, of protecting those that dwelt within these walls, had felt more romantic than comically nerdy, and now I don't even know when he's in the next room.

Despite the smell of burnt cloves, which has seeped into the fabric of our walls, I feel like while I slept I was sprinkled with magical lashings of 100s and 1000s that I should have bought to top off last night's Cookies 'n' Cream. Letting the crossword play a bigger part in my life feels like the start of an adventure. Yes, I might feel more like Joan Wilder at the start of *Romancing the Stone* rather than *The Jewel of the Nile*, but that is the point of the week. To push myself. You have to bump along with chickens in buses before you get to be bored and moored in the South of France.

It is more painful than usual to have to wait for the new daily crossword to drop. I have no idea where my day will end up. I'm not glancing down at the weather forecast and adjusting the inclusion of a cardigan or not into tomorrow's outfit. At the merest suggestion of an outside party taking over, my brain is taking a well-earned break from macro future planning and letting the crossword take the wheel of the present.

I know I haven't woken up a different person, just a lighter one. Last night, before bed, I'd thought about my plan and knew I'd need to try to ration the amount of times I could use a daily crossword for guidance. I couldn't possibly incorporate *all* the answers into my day. I'd need to cap it at three answers that caught my eye, or I wouldn't get anything else done. I also carved out the times of the day that I'd go to it looking for inspiration. On the bus on the way into work or at a similar time on the weekend, at lunch and on my walk home. Times where I had some space to think. I know that Kitt will continue to make fun of me, but there's nothing wrong with structured whimsy and the rules have made me feel slightly less wobbly about the plan.

I look for clues to point the way to what Lucas might have done once I'd gone to bed last night. On the sofa, three or four balls of paper have made homes in the cushion creases. Lucas's notepad is on the floor. His

black lines are shaky. Maybe he hit a creative block, went to a bar to clear his head and returned with the seed of what would become Roald Daal. At least, that's what I presume the lentil with the Roman wreath of fine white hair in front of a chocolate factory is supposed to be. I'm glad that Lucas is still in bed because the nicest thing I can say about this drawing is that he's incorporated a landscape. Lucas normally lets the characterised object speak for itself. I'll need to find another positive before I come home tonight. The landscape comment will only land me another sulk and more limp bok choy.

* * *

David is sighing at his emails when I approach with his skim-milk morning coffee. It's hard to tell why. It doesn't matter if it's a missive from the place that he bought his last olive-coloured t-shirt from or if it's from a source in the White House. He's a one-sigh-fits-all kind of guy.

'Mathia wants me to lead an out-of-cycle brainstorm session this morning.'

'I thought you weren't working past 8 am until next week,' I say as I hand him the hot coffee cup, so hot that it feels like it's burning my fingerprints off. I don't bother to warn him. His hands are fire resistant.

'She wants it to happen first thing, so she helpfully suggested that someone else in my family look after the daycare drop-off today. She'd do it herself – the session not daycare . . . can you imagine? – but she's got another meeting to go to. Yet another strike in the cons column that my mother-in-law has been keeping since I wore shorts to the Christmas lunch six years ago.'

He sips the coffee and winces before taking a gulp. I don't know if it's because of the skim milk or the temperature.

I blow cool air through the hole in the lid of my cup. 'How short were these shorts?'

'What? Are you itching for another session with HR again, Rory? The length wasn't the problem. It was the location of the lunch that was the issue, not where the pant hem sat.'

'Fine. Where was the lunch?'

'It was at a restaurant near Liz's parents' beach house.'

‘You wore shorts to a restaurant?’ That was the formal dress code year-round for Paddington, Brisbane, but even I knew that it didn’t extend across the border.

‘I didn’t know it was a restaurant. It was near their beach house. I hadn’t been to the house before. Liz and I were still new. Serious enough for a family gathering but still very new. Bodily functions were still private endeavours. The term shack is a generous descriptor of any other beach house that I’ve ever been to. When I heard Christmas lunch at a place near Mum and Dad’s, I thought it would be a café and that we’d be scraping chairs over cobblestones as we joined two aluminium tables together. It wasn’t that.’ He takes another generous gulp of the coffee.

‘What was it?’

‘It was a one-hatted place full of starched white linen – both on the table and the patrons. I didn’t realise how much money her parents had. I apologised the whole time.’

This sounds alarmingly like my first meeting with Lucas’s parents, sans the bare knees.

‘And her mother is *still* holding it over you?’

‘That’s what her family do. They remember weakness. They store these slights away until they can subtly mention them to Liz as further proof of my flimsy character when I’m at work instead of looking after our children.’ The dark circles that have gathered under his eyes like clouds before a storm make me think that pouring coffee directly over his head might be a more effective way of administering the caffeine.

‘Marriage might not be for me,’ I say (even though it most certainly is for me), as I swap my cup between hands so that it doesn’t dwell for so long in one place the heat will make me drop it on the floor.

‘My marriage is great. Liz is great. It’s her family that are the sour lining.’

I laugh at sour. Even on slivers of sleep, David can deliver paper cuts with his tongue.

‘I’m going to let you take amusement from my in-laws’ unwarranted cruel judgement of me because I’m so fried that retaliation is beyond my reach. Also, because I know that you’ve got a fun email waiting for you in your inbox about a jumbo-sized crossword that’s needed for this Sunday.’ He shoots me a Cheshire-cat grin.

My laughter stops. How could one crossword bring my life new meaning and another sap my will to live? My toes reflexively curl inward.

‘And before you ask about the morning meeting because I know you’re procrastinating from doing actual work, it’s about Elle Chambers. Mathia’s obsessed with getting a piece on her and she thinks that someone in this office *has* to have a way to make it happen. So I’m going to continue to cast the contact net wide, in the hope that we can get this done and then move on.’ He throws his empty coffee cup at the bin and it hits the rim before bouncing on the light grey carpet.

‘Mathia mentioned it yesterday but no one put their hand up. I doubt anything has changed in the last 24 hours. You should just go home,’ I say.

‘I can’t just go home, Rory. This is part of the job. I can’t just ignore a directive from Mathia. It’s not an option. It’s what I’m paid to do. There are things you want to do and there are things that you have to do, even though you know they’re likely to get you nowhere. This falls firmly in the category of the latter but is still most certainly a have-to-do.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Every conversation between me and David ends in a lecture about hard work. As if I’d been gifted this job and was making obscene amounts of money for sleeping at my desk.

‘Please don’t say you’re sorry, Rory. I’m tired. It’s been a rubbish night. If I were you, I’d spend my time thinking of a way to talk to Elle Chambers. You keep saying you want to write something for the paper. Find a way to make this be your story. You’ll be doing both of us a favour.’ He scoops up the cup from the floor and drops it in the bin.

It feels like a gentle verbal pat on the head. David has no faith in me to actually contribute to the story. He just wants me to leave him alone to groan in peace at his screen until he can call the meeting and go home.

34 ACROSS

In the toilets, I have my phone on silent and I open the crossword app looking for divine intervention, already breaking one of my cardinal rules by doing it twice before lunchtime. One day into this experiment and I am

already a new person. I'm touching my phone in a bathroom. I can sense errant germs flocking to my screen, but I focus on the crossword – I can wipe it down later. This Tuesday brainstorm meeting is my chance. The first real test of the new Rory. Terrifying. I just need a prod to tell me exactly what I'm going to do in it.

34A What you do before you speak in class.

The outer bathroom door swings inward with such force that it rebounds off the side of the wall. Heels clack over to the cubicle next to mine. It must be Mathia or one of the interns. Everyone else remains as low to the ground as possible. This isn't the motivation to get moving that I was looking for. I hoist myself up. Wash my hands, just in case whoever is next door thinks I've actually gone to the toilet, and then, noticing the dent left in the bathroom wall by the person-in-heels's forceful push as they'd entered, retreat to the darkness of the mailroom.

People used to work in cubicles. Snapped into individual compartments like weekly pill planners. Now it's like *The Valley of the Dolls*. Pills are scattered around everywhere. Uppers are mixed in with downers. Valium is being mistaken for a vitamin. We're told our open-plan workspace is good for collaboration. Generating ideas. Stabilising moods. Horseshit.

There are only three places that you can garner any kind of privacy at *The Connect*. Place number one (no pun intended) – in the toilet, where you'd be lucky to get five minutes before someone bursts in with a greater need. Place number two (pun intended) – Mathia's office, which might as well be the Oval Office in terms of access to the public. When I first started, two of the other interns, Jacob and Louisa, and I had got drunk on some cheap promotional alcohol that had been sent to Mathia, which she wouldn't have touched with a ten-foot pole (there was a cat and a love heart on the label). We'd stood around the kitchenette giggling, whispering rumours we'd heard about Mathia, and then Louisa had dared Jacob to go into *the* office. He was so terrified that he pleaded a forgotten Tinder date and scarpered. As it is, David is the only person I see go in there with any regularity, although Catherine received an invitation a week ago, just before she ascended to the court reporting beat.

I'm currently pressed up against the wall in the third and last option – place number three. The mailroom. A room with half the amount of light required to see anything that's more than a metre away from your face. It also boasts incredibly poor ventilation. The atmosphere holds on to the sweaty sunscreen scent of people who have run in from lunchtime netball games to send a last-minute package before changing back into their workwear. I used to think someone had been just around the corner eating a curry before I realised that a misguided soul had eaten their lunch in here once – probably ten years ago – and now it forever lives in the walls. It isn't a popular room.

'If you stand like that any longer, people will start thinking you've had some kind of a psychotic break.'

Catherine drops a fat yellow envelope in the outbox. Although we started at the same time as interns, she has already been put on the court circuit. She's lovely, which is infuriating because she's also talented. I've never found her standing alone in dimly lit rooms contemplating her life choices. She exists in a glow. Catherine is the kind of person who goes to the gym at lunchtime, but you only know it because of the backpack she returns with. Her hair is never plastered to her face as if she's been running with a plastic bag over her head. Her skin is never so red that you can feel its heat pulsing outwards. Catherine is the last person I want to see when I'm having any self-doubt.

'I'm waiting for inspiration to strike,' I say.

'By staring at a wall? In the mailroom? Are you hoping to do something on the structural integrity of Sydney's architecture or go a little cosier and delve into the world of paint versus wallpaper? I think the colour you're looking at has the lyrical name of mud puddle.'

'I didn't think it would be the busy thoroughfare it's turning out to be. I just needed to shake things up a little bit. Looking at my emails wasn't lighting any creative fires so why not give mud puddle a chance to evolve to pond scum and throw a little transformation my way as well?'

I don't want to say I'm deciphering crossword puzzle answers for direction in my life. We don't have that kind of judgement-free / unlikely-to-leap-to-a-straitjacket-option relationship. We don't have much of a relationship at all, which is a pity because it would be lovely to talk to someone about work, someone who isn't a forty-year-old man with young

children and the same spiel locked in and ready to go whenever I come to him with a problem.

‘I don’t think this wall is the shake-up you need. No matter what the colour is.’

‘I read somewhere that if you look at a blank space, it helps you clear your mind. Then it is free for you to ask it questions.’ I was sounding like my mum.

‘I think I’m going to start calling your in-case-of-emergencies. Does HR have your list?’

It’s worrying how many times HR has been brought up in conversations with me – even in jest – this morning.

‘I’m trying to be Zen. I’m trying to project a brilliant idea that will make for a brilliant article that will get lots of clicks and make Mathia and David want to lift me off the classifieds and offer me a full-time writing position.’

‘I feel for you. *Really* I do, but if one of the editors walks past and sees you staring at a wall, they aren’t going to see you as someone who’s trying to prove themselves. They’re going to see you as a millennial slacker chewing CBD gummies while you count down the hours until you can stuff yourself with enough avocado toast you’ll never have the means to apply for a mortgage.’

‘That makes sense.’ Annoyingly. ‘It’s bullshit bias but I can see that it might be perceived that way by everyone here who is twenty years older than us. You’re a thinker. There’s a reason why you’ve already been assigned a beat. We should get a drink after work one day.’

‘I would love that. It was a bummer when you couldn’t make it to those networking drinks last year. They were super cheesy but it was great to hang out with people in the same boat as us.’

I like Catherine saying ‘us’ but she’s certainly above my pay grade.

She continues. ‘And I think you’ll find that the reason I’m on courts is just because I was the only person in the office when Dana threw her laptop at the window – which she hadn’t realised was closed, embarrassing but safe – and resigned. They needed a body to cover a case in the court an hour later. If you’d been here, it could just as easily have been you.’

I *should* have been in the room to compete with Catherine for the story, just like I *should* have been at those networking drinks, but when Dana was

having her breakdown, I'd been helping Kitt sift through the aftermath of another horrible first date. For as long as I've known her, Kitt has never had a date that has extended past the main course. Having been in one long-term relationship – Lucas – seemed to qualify me that day to tut down the line every couple of minutes as Kitt catalogued leers and patronising comments about women in science. As for the night of the networking drinks, that's something I don't want to ever think back to again.

I'd be annoyed at my bad luck if not for the fact that I don't think timing has anything to do with it. Catherine is confident, eager and warm. She's a natural first choice for any upcoming reporting position. She is a classic colour like ivory and I'm somewhere on the Francis Bacon palette. I'm middling – around third place in a race of two.

David's voice echoes through the mailroom, summoning everyone, and once Catherine sees that I'm not immediately moving, she walks back into the light, her hair bouncing off her shoulders. Frustratingly buoyant.

34A What you do before you speak in class. *Raise your hand.*

This is why the crossword is a perfect rudder for me. It offers me clear and practical instructions. Even if, at the thought of raising my hand, my right eyebrow seems to have developed an uncontrollable twitch.

* * *

People have already gathered around the table by the time I peel myself from the safety of the mailroom wall. The last time I spoke at an all-company meeting was when I officially become a staff member. Upgraded from invisible intern to twenty-denier person. David introduced me as an official member of the team. I said thank you and one person started clapping until they realised no one else was and then they stopped. I had slowly backed away from the front row of the huddle, so I was standing behind Sandra, a lovely woman who covers the live-arts scene, is a head shorter than me and was wearing a bubblegum pink jumpsuit. Not the best person to try to meld into the furnishings with. Since then, nothing. I'm about to double my combined input in these meetings as of today and so I stand on the opposite side of Sandra, just in case.

David is on one side of the infinity table. The rest of the staff are gathered around the other side, standing behind people that have been forced to set up their laptops at those stations. It's like an episode of *The Twilight Zone* when after forty minutes you realise that the confused adults you've been watching are, in fact, children, who have been cursed to age at a rapid rate because their school was built on the grounds of a witch-hunt. Now that they've realised the repercussions of poor town planning, their official school photograph shimmers from them all standing straight to being hunched and glassy-eyed just how the staff at the huddle now look. Terrifying.

I stand beside Gary, who is wearing a nice neutral button-up. A perfect wallflower look.

'I'm sorry, everyone, for the earlier than usual get-together. As you know, Elle Chambers is a big get and Mathia would like her got. Sooner rather than later.' I can't imagine a world in which Mathia would ever want something later. 'The further the word spreads about Elle Chambers running for council, the less likely we are to get the exclusive. No doubt a Sunday-night current affairs show will jump at the chance to throw \$100,000 her way in order to offend her and Australia by asking about her hair and why she's not got any children. We would like to ask her actual questions about policies and only one about the anti-ageing eye creams she swears by, so let's be the people to do that.'

The room is silent, but then Max in sales asks David if he is back on day shift.

David rolls his eyes. 'Let's stay on topic, people. No one is allowed to get back to their computers until someone throws me some sort of a plan around how we might get to Elle. I have a family that I need to get home to and disappoint.'

I know that now is my time. I just have to put my hand up like the crossword said. But what if everyone laughs at me? What if someone asks me what my name is? Someone I've been sitting next to for years. What if someone thinks I'm responsible for the new dent in the bathroom wall and brings it up in front of everyone? What if I say my piece and someone asks me to speak up and say it all again? What if people think I'm responsible for the mailroom smelling like curry?

Amanda – who is not responsible for the odour in the mailroom but is responsible for the page of gossip that we are encouraged to indulge in once a week – shouts, without raising her hand, that she and Elle share the same hairdresser. Her hairdresser was indiscreet enough to mention it on Amanda’s first appointment at the salon before Amanda said where she works. That’s good enough for David. He has a family to answer to. Shorts to scandalise diners with. The meeting is over. I have contributed a grand total of nothing. I have fallen at the first hurdle (if you don’t count the ice cream, which I might need to start counting if I keep ignoring the crossword and don’t achieve anything else).

I have just spent thirty minutes in the mailroom, telling myself I could do something as easy as lying about having a loose connection to someone, and I haven’t done it. The starting pistol has gone off and I am still tying my shoelaces. If I were a man or Amanda, I wouldn’t have even thought about what I was going to say before speaking. There would have been no mantras or doubts shouting in my brain. I would have just done it, booked a blow-dry, and then gone back to my desk to write tomorrow’s front page. I wouldn’t have given it another thought. I’m a joke. I have to do better.

When everyone has turned back to their screens and my humiliation risk is minimal, I approach David. I have to raise my hand – the crossword demanded it.

‘What’s up, Rory? I need to get out the door before my mother-in-law changes the locks.’ He is staring past me to the exit.

‘I know Elle Chambers.’ The lie bursts from my mouth. In my head, I can hear a deafening ‘tsk’ in my grandma’s voice. I shush it.

‘What?’

‘I know Elle Chambers. I can get her to speak to us. To speak to *me*.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything about this earlier? You could have told Mathia yesterday or me this morning or, here’s a novel idea, mentioned it in that meeting that we just had for the very purpose of finding connections to Elle Chambers. Remember it?’

‘I didn’t want to big-note myself.’

‘No one would have thought you were doing that. How do you know Elle Chambers?’

‘My mother has done some set work for the studio Elle was based at. I’d get dragged along with her to Sydney, when my grandparents were busy at

lawn bowls meets they couldn't get out of. It was a while ago, but she'd probably remember me, or at least my mum. She loved my mum. Secretly really into tarot.'

'So you can ask her if she'd speak to us?' David stops his impatient fiddling of the strap on his bag.

'I can ask her if she'd speak to *me*. On the record.'

'Rory, I appreciate that you'd love that solo by-line. You wouldn't be human if you didn't, but this would be a big story for *The Connect* and you don't have the experience to pull the whole thing together. I'm happy to share the by-line with you but you'd need to work with me on this one.'

'I can handle it.'

'Rory, you're treating this like it's a discussion when it's me telling you how it's going to happen *if* it happens. Not that I'm not grateful for any information that you're able to provide to help get to the mysterious, tarot-loving Ms Chambers.'

'If I don't get a choice' (it sounds like I'd have a better chance of replacing Elle Chambers as breakfast-television's darling than getting the final word in this discussion) 'and if you think that's the best thing for the story, I'll do it.'

'I do. I'm going to going to call Mathia on my way home to let her know that you're our lead on this. She'll be thrilled. I'm not sidelining you, Rory. It's just too big to be your first by-line. But if you pull this off, I know it'll be the first of many.'

'Great,' I whisper.

'But Rory, you need to be able to deliver on this, because once Mathia knows, I won't be able to get her off my back about it. And my back will be *your* back. It's a whole camel thing.' He shuts his laptop with a flourish and turns to leave.

'I can do it. I wouldn't have put my hand up otherwise. Only a crazy person would do that, *right?*'

David walks out of the office. Saddlebag over shoulder. Completely unaware that Elle Chambers is living her glorious life while having no idea who I am and who my mother is. It isn't a complete lie though, not if I'm clutching at straws in the hope that I'll be able to sleep tonight. Sometimes when my grandad was sick, Mum did need to take me on set because my grandma couldn't watch me and we had no one else waiting in the wings to

help with boiled sweets and open arms. I just never went to a set with my mum that Elle Chambers was on. My mum works on movies and limited television series; she doesn't do news and talk shows. It isn't my fault that David doesn't know that. That's on him. He's the journalist. He should have asked more questions.

* * *

I'm going through a 1990s season casting list of actors on *Neighbours*, looking for names that start with S for this Sunday's 6 Down. When I'm working through the clues for the TV-guide crossword, I like to make sure that someone has been in at least eighty per cent of a season before I include them. A Satchwell or Spencer. It would be easy to throw in some obscure actor who had served a lead character their chocolate milk at the fake corner store – IMDB exists so that you can track those people down – but you need to be fair to the solver. Challenging but fair. Even for a crossword that sits under a listing of the free-to-air movies that 'can't be missed' this week. Movies that, despite your best of intentions, you've seen more times than you can count. Their plots so forgettable that it isn't until you're ninety minutes in that you realise you've seen it before.

The cursor flashes at me. Waiting for me to come up with the questions and not just nut out the answers. It's such a passive-aggressive act. The digital equivalent of someone tapping their foot in a doorway when you're running back inside to get your keys. It makes me want to dawdle, get my coat, and brush off imaginary dust from the lapel, instead of moving faster. The cursor is driving me to the kitchenette, its mounting frustration compelling me to abandon it to make myself a cup of tea.

As I rise out of my chair, a Cate Blanchett-pale hand floats onto my shoulder, shocking me all the more when I turn and see that it belongs to Mathia. It's deceptively light. I can feel the weight of it pushing the right half of my body down but she's barely touching my skin. I doubt she touches anything that doesn't have a designer label affixed to it. She's never acknowledged me before. Not in three years. If I ran into her at a café, I wouldn't be surprised if she gave me her coffee order and didn't apologise when I awkwardly told her that I didn't work there.

‘I’m so pleased that you’re going to get us Elle Chambers, Rory. Who knew that you’d be the one to nab my golden goose?’

I can’t believe she knows my name. She must have dipped into the staff directory before she came out. We were all forced to take a photo for it when we started but, in an act of kindness, they were all in black and white. The day I started was straight after my housemates had thrown me a welcome party (despite my pleas that I hadn’t wanted one) and had then continued to welcome me without me present, until 6 am – right outside my bedroom door.

No doubt, to be safe, Mathia has also checked with the person seated nearest her door if I was Rory. With an open-plan set-up, and no guarantee that the person you want won’t be out on a lead, nailing someone down in this office can be tricky. I wonder how long the person she had to ask about me took to answer before they could confidently point her in the direction of the woman with the hair three inches short from being just right. A point that Mathia would definitely register.

‘It’s nothing. No problem, really. Just good luck . . .’ I say.

(I’d been about to add ‘Mathia’ but suddenly I didn’t know how to pronounce her name. My tongue felt rubbery. Sliding around my mouth. Unanchored to sense.)

‘It’s not nothing, Rory. It’s *incredibly* important to me. I’ll be keeping a very close eye on this story and, by extension, *you*.’

And she walks off like she hasn’t just placed the sword of Damocles over my head.

I don’t know if Mathia has ever said goodbye to anyone, or if such pedestrian social cues are beneath her. As if in her bespoke book of manners (Emily Post is so generic), it’s redundant to farewell someone and *then* walk away.

The right side of me is still weighted to my chair, even without her hand hovering over it. It’s as if she’s left a bag of rocks on my shoulder, so I won’t forget that she’ll be watching me. I feel like I’ve just been given the Sicilian Kiss of Death – a reference that Meg Ryan asked Tom Hanks to explain in *You’ve Got Mail* – and that rocks will be tied to my feet as I’m pushed into the harbour if I don’t make this story happen.

12 DOWN

At lunch – turkey wrap Tuesday – the notification for the day’s *New York Times* crossword pops up on my phone. I’m having to work harder to keep the nerves from flying up my throat and out of my mouth. I need today’s crossword to give me less of a chance to do something that might upend my life. Just a tilt from my usual routine today, please, Will Shortz. I don’t know if I can be forced into many more lies that involve Mathia.

I skip over answers that would lead to buzz cuts and fleeing to a country ending with -stan. And settle on:

12D A Steve Martin 2010 novel.

I love Steve Martin. The answer is: *An Object of Beauty*. A young woman in the polished yet marred New York art scene. That clearly means I should go to Lucas’s friend’s gallery opening tonight. Over the weekend, Lucas asked me if I was interested and I’d changed the subject. Being in a tiny room with a bunch of people desperately looking for their face in any reflective surface isn’t my idea of fun but I’ve not been doing much with Lucas lately. That is, outside of not talking to each other on the sofa. We could use some time together in a social setting, with alcohol.

Having well exceeded my Recommended Rom-com Intake, thanks to my grandma’s excellent taste and our Friday-night movie sessions, I had expected fireworks when I first fell in love. Or a sparkler. At a pinch, a primary school sports day 100-metre race starting pistol. In reality, it was more like someone waving a torch around in a game of backyard Spotlight. It snuck up on me, told me that I was caught and then I went and sat somewhere out of the way so people could stop speculating about my whereabouts.

Our night of bedroom board games was so fun and easy. It was a relief that I didn’t need to go through another app-led drinks date (though the term date felt generous). Lucas and I hadn’t even needed an app. We just needed a good amount of beer and Hasbro. And one day Lucas told me that I was *it* for him. I was one step closer to the number three on my five-year-plan laminated checklist. Get engaged to my forever person.

I have adopted a rule of my grandma's where I dust every inch of my room and now the apartment each Saturday morning so that the house doesn't fall into disrepair during the week ahead. You never want to be ashamed should a visitor pop by on a Wednesday and there's some peach fuzz on your book spines. Imagine! Like my grandad, Lucas has always been less enthused. As he has pointed out every Saturday, when he is trying to sleep, unlike my grandma, we don't often have pop-ins, especially ones at an hour in which they would be sober enough to think that any dust wasn't just a real-life Instagram filter.

He used to make this point and then fling the sheets off, don a towel as if it were an apron and do a French-maid routine – which I really hoped was not modelled on his childhood – before we both ended up back in bed. I was a sucker for that highly questionable accent, though his cleaning method had a lot to be desired. I could see a future with that person.

I cared less about finishing the job back then. I'd spot-clean the rest of the apartment when Lucas wasn't looking, was distracted by 'the light' or was wondering if an exhibition full of seascapes should be called 'an ocean'. Time with Lucas was precious. Artistic. Funny. There was an understanding about the use of the shoe basket at the door. The understanding being that we both used it.

I was so excited when we bought that shoe basket. Our first couple's purchase. Shoes at my mum's house were piled up at the door. Shoved into cupboards that wouldn't close and, one time, beneath loose tomatoes in the crisper. A shoe basket signalled an organised life. A permanence and sense of order. The only thing I hadn't consistently been able to get from my two homes growing up.

The crossword wants me to have that with Lucas again.

I call Lucas. Get his voicemail. Hang up and text him, letting him know that I want to go with him tonight. He'll be so happy, and no doubt pleasantly surprised about my unprecedented, spontaneous change of heart. An hour later he texts back to let me know he'll meet me at the gallery. Not a smiley face or heart emoji to be seen. I had thought that we could go together. I hate walking into big group situations by myself. He knows this. I tell him I'll leave work early if he likes and we can go at the same time. He says he'll be at the art supplies store trying to find curry-green pencils so he'll just meet me there. He has either forgotten or doesn't care about

how I feel about walking into unfamiliar places and groups alone. I don't know which one is worse.

* * *

Catherine, decked out in a black blazer, pristine white t-shirt and bright red palazzo pants (I mentally add the whole outfit to cart), rushes up to me as I'm sliding my laptop into my backpack. An expensive backpack, which, despite my spending three weeks scouring the internet for negative reviews before validating the cost per wear in my head, still manages to grind my bra strap into my right shoulder. An important point that was never mentioned in any comments section.

She grabs my shoulders so that I'm facing her, her excitement practically exploding from her person. 'A man has just fallen into a manhole, two blocks over from the office. The only thing that stopped him plunging into the depths is an inflatable sausage roll that, for some reason, he was carrying around. I would like to find out that reason. No, I *need* to find out the reason. Would you care to join me? I know it's not the mailroom wall, but it might be a little fun, or, at the very least, make for a great human-interest story.'

'An inflatable sausage roll?'

'An inflatable sausage roll. Complete with a strip of tomato sauce on the plastic pastry. Apparently, it's a thing of beauty.'

Life isn't fair. Not only is this a homepage-worthy story – 'Sausage Roll Saves Man from Death', 'Too Many Sausage Rolls Is Now Good for Your Health' – but I also *really* want to see this play out and hear the origin story of this inflatable wonder. I push away a twinge of doubt that the crossword might be leading me in a wrong, pastry-less, direction.

No, I had to trust the crossword and go to the art show. There would be other inflatable pastry mishaps.

'I can't go but I really want to. I have to go to an art opening. I'm genuinely sorry that sentence just left my mouth, Catherine. You don't know how sorry.'

'You're absolutely making a mistake that you will regret for the rest of your life, but I'll fill you in about the inflatable filling tomorrow.' She grins

at me and runs off, and the three people that overheard our conversation – thanks, open plan – rush out after her.

I groan and lay my head on the desk for a moment, before resigning myself to my fate and picking up my backpack. Who am I to chase a human sausage roll if Will Shortz says I have to go to an art gallery?

* * *

Kitt and I first met at a karaoke bar, on a hen's night. The bride was Kitt's cousin and Lucas's friend from art school. I was never quite sure why I was invited; I suspect that the bride had been leant on by Lucas because at the time I didn't have a lot of friends in Sydney.

Kitt and I had both separately selected 'Jolene' to sing and only realised that someone else had picked it as well when we both made our way up to the one-step stage, which bore a close resemblance to a go-go dancers' platform. We practically had to straddle each other to fit on the tiny circle. Dolly Parton had brought us together and 'Jolene' would go on to become 'our' karaoke song. Something we'd play at our first dance if we threw a friendship wedding. Dolly was everlasting. Unlike Kitt's cousin's marriage, which had folded after a year when the bride decided to move to Greece without telling her husband. She wanted to follow in the footsteps of Charmian Clift – sans George Johnston.

Kitt and I, thankfully, have lasted longer than that marriage. We are a duet. I never feel quite in tune without her.

Kitt answers her phone on the third ring.

'It's not Pilates tonight, is it?' she says. Kitt doesn't keep a diary, which makes it amazing that I still keep a Kitt.

'No, I'm just walking home. I'm going to a gallery opening tonight. I thought you might like to come.'

'Is it for one of Lucas's friends?'

'Yes, it is, but there'll also be free wine. *Free wine*. You like alcohol that you don't need to pay for. Remember?'

'I think you know I would be paying for those drinks with the loss of significant parts of my tongue that I would have to bite off throughout the course of the evening.' Why must Kitt always be right? 'Despite that, I would come for the sole purpose of keeping you company because

obviously I love you, but I think tonight is going to be a late one. That's why I was worried that we might have a Pilates date. I feel like I need to keep doing what I'm doing for at least another couple of hours, or until my eyes fall out of my head. Also, did you know that some man is trapped in a sewer, near your work, with a giant meat pie?'

It's hard to be annoyed at someone who is eschewing a gallery opening for an artist she doesn't know because she's working on a project that could ensure the future of humanity. But I still am.

'It's a sausage roll, not a meat pie – please don't remind me – and I get it. You're important. I'll mainline cheap wine to get through conversations with men sporting overly exaggerated gestures, telling me why art as a national priority is slipping downhill and how that's a personal attack on them. Spoiler, it'll be because their university tutor – no doubt female – didn't appreciate their work. Which is the only work that will speak to us as a people and instigate real change in this country. I will also remember not to tell them that their work might be worth more when they're dead. Remembering that thought only cheers me up.'

Kitt laughs.

'Why are you going? You never let yourself be dragged along to those things anymore.'

'I said I would. I let Lucas know I was attending earlier today so I can't renege now. Believe me, I've thought about doing just that.'

'Earlier today? That doesn't sound like it was scheduled a month in advance, written in dark green – that's your events colour code, isn't it? – in the day planner.'

'Proof that I'm capable of breaking routine! You said I needed to shake things up a bit, so I've made my own sign from a higher, wordier power, sans salt and vinegar chips.'

'*Those* chips. Last night, I couldn't stop thinking about *those* chips and then I realised that they were the reason I ended up finding the wonder that is the Laneige Lip Sleeping Mask, so actually they were a silky blessing in a burning disguise. I might add them to my snack collection again, if I can sneak them past Elise, just to see what other magical skincare they bring into my life.'

I'm not sure when, suddenly, Elise's opinion factored into everything that Kitt did. If you can't eat chips at home without getting a housemate's

approval, what kind of world were we living in?

‘I love that you’ve found a balmy silver lining to snack-related skin rashes.’

‘Stop talking for a second. Don’t join me down an acidic chip-lined path. *You’ve* made a plan to be more spontaneous? You’ve shaken things up by making your own sign? What does that even mean?’ Her tone of voice goes so high in disbelief that I think my phone screen might crack.

‘It means that I thought about what you said. I re-evaluated where I’m at and I decided that something had to change. I’m Jack Nicholson and you’re my Helen Hunt. Things are *not* as good as they could get. I took a little inspiration from years of Friday nights with my grandma watching rom-coms instead of going to parties featuring spinning bottles, beer running down hose pipes and goon of fortune, and paired it with my love of the crossword. I decided that I’d let it steer me. It was a good idea of yours. So far, it’s garnered me ice cream and a shared by-line on one of the biggest stories of the year.’

‘Please don’t give me credit until I know more. I’m a scientist – I need all the facts before I make a call on my level of support for this experiment.’

Kitt was born for her career. She is someone who needs to know the method behind homogenisation, while not being able to keep track of what day it is. I could imagine her as a child, doing egg tests from her second-storey window while her pet goldfish floated to the top of the fish tank because she’d forgotten to feed him.

‘For every 24-hour period, I’m going to base my decisions on a maximum of three answers in *The New York Times* crossword. They won’t all be life-changing. It could be about what to have for lunch. It could be about whether I go to a gallery opening that wasn’t already in my diary. It could be about whether or not I fudge the truth slightly, in order to be taken seriously at work . . .’

‘How much fudging of the truth have you done? A sponge cake–mix level or a four-layer, gooey slab?’

‘A fudge brownie?’

‘Rory, it’s not like you to eat desserts on a weekday.’

‘The point of this whole thing is to not be like me. Or at least to be a more dynamic version of me. I didn’t like lying but I’ve done it now and I

have a shot at something as a result. I feel confident that I can make the lie a truth. I just need to be a little more bolshie than I normally am. Kitt, it's not like I've killed someone or am pretending to be a Texan Rancher like Rock Hudson in *Pillow Talk* trying to dupe Doris Day. Which, by the way, still worked out well for both of them.'

If I wasn't able to hear a murmured conversation in the background on the other end of the phone, I'd have thought Kitt had hung up. I love her but I need her behind me on this one. She's the only person I've told what I'm doing.

'Kitt, I have to go. I'm home and I need to get changed for the opening.'

Silence.

'Kitt, it's going to be fine.'

'Okay, Rory. Whatever you say. Have a good night.'

'I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Can you meet me at All Booked Up? I'll text you when I've left work.'

This time, Kitt does hang up.

* * *

Kitt and I have regressed from karaoke – a true art form – to spending most of our time together debating the merits of one cheese over another, the structural integrity of the crackers on which said cheeses lie and rotating our way through the back catalogue of Nancy Meyers-related movies – and then feeling bad about all the cheese and crackers and going to Pilates once a week to absolve ourselves.

It didn't take us long to settle into this routine. My personality lends itself to structured outings, but with Kitt, I'm just happy to be doing nothing. To eat in parks. To eat on sofas. To eat and not have to fill the space between bites with small talk. I haven't got past her complete disregard for clothes hangers (we don't spend a lot of time in her bedroom) and she pretends not to notice that I crinkle up my face when she puts her feet on her coffee table (something I understand she is entitled to do in her own home, but I can't help it).

When I was a kid, I only really had that easy relationship with my grandma and, most of the time, my mum. Interactions with the kids at school and my teammates in my short-lived foray into team sports – 'Go

Wildcats!’ – always made me feel like I was auditioning for a friendship. I believed it when people were told to just be themselves in fiction but I didn’t think that translated into real life. At least not mine outside of maternal bonds.

Until I found it with Kitt.

I know when we are both old and our skin is as fragile as tissue paper we’ll still be eating cheese next to each other, whether we can still digest lactose or not. Maybe that is a problem Kitt can solve in her lab before she retires.

One afternoon after a night that had leaked into a morning, we’d hauled ourselves to the supermarket, which felt like it might as well have been over the Berlin Wall, in order to build the sandwich of our dreams. It was the only thing that was going to put right *all* the wrongs of the 24 hours prior. Pastrami, Jarlsberg cheese, iceberg lettuce, roma tomatoes, fresh mayonnaise, all on a sourdough roll. It is the greatest thing I’ve ever been a part of and, a year on, I still think of it with a pang when I eat my salads (on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday) at the desk. I know that without having had Kitt to laugh with me in those fluorescent, screaming aisles and as my cheery enabler at the bars that lined the streets the night before – none of which we’d had the fortitude to walk past – it would have just been a sandwich and not the saviour of humankind that it ended up being.

* * *

No Kitt by my side, I walk solo into the gallery. Besides my hatred for walking alone into any space where I don’t know at least half the people there, it feels slightly off that Lucas and I aren’t entering rooms together anymore.

We used to be people who spent time together. I remember being happy the last time we went to the beach, on what had now become an increasingly rare daytrip away.

(Lucas isn’t a born beach person, as evidenced by his milky white skin – his mother, Patricia, has never liked how the sand sits in the bottom of her swimmers, despite the exfoliant properties of the experience – but he has desperately wanted to be one. I like Lucas at the beach. Once, I even saw him do a little skip over a crab running past him.)

‘I think I’m going to change things up a little bit,’ he had said as a wave threw itself at his chest. ‘No, I’m *going* to change things up. I’m not thinking. I’m doing.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I’m going to steer away from trying to get gallery showings. That scene is dead.’

‘How is it dead? Didn’t we go to, like, three gallery showings this past month?’

Another wave.

‘We did but it’s all for show. There’s no money to be made in them. You spend months, years maybe, working on pieces in the hope that some rich wanker like my father will decide that your painting will look perfect on the back of his toilet door, just so you can get enough money in the kitty to do it all over again. And in the end, some dickhead that you didn’t even invite to your party puts himself through a canvas you spent weeks working on, which was in the hallway because there was no one interested in even putting it on their toilet door.’

‘I thought you liked the experience of *creating*. I thought selling work was how you got to keep doing that without also spending your nights on the other side of a bar. These things take time, and you’re putting in the hours. Something will come from it.’

I automatically reached for his arm as a wave bobbed us up and down.

‘I want more than the possibility of *something*. Banksy has more than that.’

‘I don’t know how Banksy is making his money,’ I said, scooping out the end of my ponytail, which had gracefully dumped itself in my mouth after the last wave.

‘My sister is making a lot of money on Insta,’ he said, eyes firmly on the horizon, looking past me.

‘Is your sister Banksy? I’ll be honest; I didn’t see that coming. Kelsey is full is of surprises.’

‘I don’t want to be reliant on Mum and Dad for everything. I need to go bigger and make more coin. You and I don’t want to be living in that apartment forever. My mother has keys to where we live and we didn’t give her those keys. Do you want to keep living like that?’

‘So you’re going to start selling fake tan and pushing diet teas on Instagram? I don’t know if that really fits with your brand, hon.’ Sun-kissed skin was not Lucas’s selling point.

‘I’m going to start doing art that caters to an Instagram audience. Art that’s shareable, I can sell prints of and that I can then get sponsorships and bigger shows from. Maybe *The New Yorker* will publish some of it. You like *The New Yorker*.’

‘I do like *The New Yorker*, but I didn’t think you wanted to do cartoons – I’m also not sure how much cartoonists get paid. It might not be enough to get us out of your mother’s apartment. Maybe you could submit a cover? That’s always an option and they can still be paintings so you wouldn’t be ditching your style – what you love to do.’

‘Rory, you’re not the only one who has read *The New Yorker*. I know what they have. I’ll submit smart cartoons and I can still do oils, just not all the time.’

‘Whatever you want to do, I’m behind you.’

I wrapped my arms around his back and unsuccessfully tried to hoist myself up on his shoulders, looking more like a drunk kraken than some lithe girl on a Coke commercial.

He grabbed my hand as it slipped off his shoulder.

‘Thank you for being behind me. I need you.’

But how long has it been since I was really behind him, and when had he ever pledged the same thing to me?

* * *

The gallery is one large room that has repelled all furniture, with the exception of a fold-up table topped with glasses. A mix of clean and dirty, with varying amounts of liquid in each, so that it looks like someone is about to bring the room to a hush and start playing ‘Jingle Bells’ on them.

Lucas has the stage in a corner, even though it’s not his show. He’s put a clean shirt on, one that he doesn’t wear to bed, and is wearing a pair of black jeans that he’d had to buy when we were visiting my grandma and the weather unexpectedly dipped below sixteen degrees. He’s gesturing and looking knowledgeable. Maybe he’s waxing lyrical on the importance of light, the influence of capitalism on American art in the 1960s or capturing

the curvature of the kidney bean. Whatever it is, his audience is captive and hanging on his every legume.

The table that hints at the possibility of alcohol feels like a necessary first stop. On the right side, there's a group of glasses with similar amounts of white wine in them. I think they must have been pre-poured until I see an orangey-pink lip print on the edge of one of them. Poking out from under the white tablecloth is a box with cleanskin wine bottles in it. Given that I can't see anyone around who is about to serve me, I open one up and pop out of my purse a picnic wine glass that I always carry to these events, ever since Lucas took me to my first gallery opening and there were only half the amount of glasses for the number of attendees. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame and possibly an STI on me. After a sip of the wine, I realise that the cluster of mostly filled glasses are a Bermuda Triangle of wine that has been abandoned after the first acrid taste. Lost planes with a bitter fuselage.

'You're not supposed to just serve yourself,' says a man approaching me. His wavy brown hair looks brushed and his obviously ironed, buttoned shirt makes him look out of place among the newly purchased, faux-vintage t-shirt wearers that dominate the space. Still, despite being the odd one out (at least until I got here), he seems entirely comfortable. He's not worried about standing out. There's a lightness to him. If I reach out and touch him, my hand will probably go right through him.

'Sorry, there was no one else here to do it for me.'

The only thing that I'm sorry about is my constant defaulting to 'sorry' as an automatic response to anything.

'I was just getting something from out the back.' He holds up an empty wine box, and even though I don't know how that proves his point, I nod.

I put my phone on the table and go to help gather up the emptier glasses to put in his box. A reflex to be at service that's been drilled into me from a young age. Help people clean up; don't just stand there looking like a stunned mullet.

'I appreciate you wanting to help but if I'm going to grouch on you about serving yourself, I'm not going to let you serve me either.' He takes the glass out of my hand and gives me a smile that reaches the corners of his eyes. It's crisp and full-bodied, unlike the wine.

I suddenly wish I had made more of an effort when I got changed. I should have taken my make-up off and reapplied it fresh. I'm sure that's what women do who continue to make men's eyes crinkle like his are now and I can't think of a person alive who wouldn't want to watch him keep doing that. I had added a dusty pink blush to the make-up I'd already put on for work but it was now redundant, thanks to a bout of embarrassment-induced redness. Nothing dainty and Meg Ryan-esque about what was happening to my face.

I'd prefer to stay here, with him, clearing glasses, than go over to hear Lucas's TED talk. In my head, the bartender and I take the box of stained glasses out the back. We step over the drops of wine that seep through the cardboard bottom of the box he's holding. We laugh at the poor choice of transport for the empties. Then he'll get a new box for the next trip and I'll slip out the door. Even my fantasies have me going home to bed alone. Boring or not, it seems a lot more pleasant than going over and standing around with Lucas's friends.

'I don't mind helping. A small act of atonement for stepping on your toes and serving myself. I don't want to get you in trouble with whoever is running the exhibition tonight.'

'I promise that I will not be getting in trouble. If you feel the need to punish yourself, you can finish off that glass of wine.' He laughs and there's that smile again. Boy, that's a great smile.

'There's someone you remind me of, but the name totally escapes me. This is going to drive me insane. All my years of doing the crossword and I can't remember the character I'm thinking of,' he says, tapping his nose.

'You do the crossword?' Suddenly the wine tastes like honey instead of vinegar.

'Every Sunday without fail.'

'Not the rest of the week?'

'The one I do is only out on a Sunday. I buy the paper because of it.'

'Which crossword do you do?'

'The TV-guide one. I do the one that's in *The Connect* weekend edition. I used to do it in *The Sunday Tele* but they were reusing a lot of the same questions and where's the fun in that?'

'You do the one in *The Connect* . . .'

‘Yep, they’re mainly an online site but they still put out a Sunday paper, so I get to do the crossword in pen. I’m a bit of a purist in that way.’

‘A purist . . .’

‘Yep, a purist for pen. I only skim the rest of the paper. All filler for the crossword, really.’

‘Filler . . .’

‘Did you have a couple of drinks before you got here? You seem to be repeating a lot of what I’m saying back to me. Handy skill to have if you’re frequently taking oaths but less so in casual gallery settings. You’d better hand me that glass.’

‘I’m just processing. This is how I process new information.’

‘Ahhh, like a robot or a secretary in the 1950s who reads dictation back to their boss.’

‘A secretary . . .’

‘There you are – you’re doing it again,’ he says.

‘That’s incredibly rude.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.’

‘I find that hard to believe. Firstly, why am I the subordinate in the 1950s scenario? Is it because I’m a woman? And I thought when you first mentioned the crossword that you might be talking about *The New York Times*’s so I’m just a little surprised to hear you sing the praises of the TV-guide one. I mean, it’s a bit stupid, isn’t it?’

‘Did you mean to *offend* me?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admit.

‘It feels like you know. You called me stupid.’

‘I’m not calling you stupid. I just don’t know why you’d buy a whole paper to do that particular crossword. Why not do *The New York Times* one?’

‘Because I find the TV-guide one fun. It’s not a competition in coolness for me. I’m not doing it for bragging rights. I just like it. I’ve always done it. My mum would save it for me.’

If I were him, I’d be bright red and shocked at being grilled by someone I don’t know. I am being an asshole. I know that’s what I’m being but I can’t stop myself in the moment from being one.

To be fair to me, he did call me a robot so he isn’t without blame, but there is no reason for me to stoop to his level. Even if his level is light and

crinkly. I mean, I write that crossword, so I should be flattered. I shouldn't be calling people stupid who keep me in a job. It's not like I write the articles that he called 'filler'.

'I should go. I'm sorry. I'm glad you like that crossword.' There was that sorry again. Forever sneaking its way in to sentences that it has no place being in.

I have to leave before I say something worse. I walk over to the crowd that has swelled around Lucas. The initial group has replicated three times over, like cells in one of Kitt's petri dishes. I put my hand on Lucas's back so he knows I'm there but he doesn't turn to acknowledge my arrival. He just says, 'You know Rory,' to no one in particular, and continues talking about the lack of spaces to show their art in the city, as if I actually know any of the people in the carefully styled group. I can't stop replaying my comments to the bartender in my head. I'm mortified. I'd acted horribly. I'd practically called him stupid. I *had* called him stupid.

Someone taps me on my shoulder. It's the charmingly put-together bartender, who smells as good as he did in my head. Fresh, crisp, new sheets after the first wash, before you put them on the bed.

'You left your phone on the table,' he says, handing it to me. It's warm and sticky. I must have put it in a puddle of the wine.

'Sally,' he says.

'Sally?'

'You know how I said that you reminded me of someone and I couldn't put my finger on who? I remembered. You remind me of Sally from *When Harry Met Sally*.'

'You like that movie?'

'I like it a lot. Nora Ephron is a genius.'

'Absolutely. *Heartburn* is a tiny slice of perfection.'

'She, Tarantino and Richard Curtis are my all-time favourites.'

'That's surprising.'

'What do you mean by surprising?'

'They're just an interesting triptych of directors.'

'It's because I'm a man; that's why you're surprised. I should just watch films by Michael Bay or David Lynch, right?'

'No, I think you're also allowed to enjoy anything that Tom Cruise is in. I have an open mind about this sort of thing.'

He laughs. ‘You’re *very* generous.’

I was suddenly aware we weren’t alone. I was standing next to Lucas. My decidedly creased and uncollared boyfriend.

‘Thank you for returning my phone.’

‘My pleasure. Thank you for letting me have Tom Cruise. I don’t want him but I appreciate the gesture.’

That smile. *All* the way up to the eyes. It and the wine were making me floaty.

‘You’ll get what you’re given. We’re not in the 1950s anymore.’

‘My name’s Harry, by the way.’

‘Harry.’

‘Yep. You’re Sally, I’m Harry.’

He turns to go back behind his drink station. I clutch the phone to my chest before realising that I look like a moony teenager and slide it into my bag.

For the rest of the next hour that feels like a day, I keep looking over to the table. Not longingly at the alcohol – I’m not into self-flagellation – but at Harry. He moves with such ease and self-assurance. It suits him. He seems to know a lot of people in the room. He must work a lot of gallery events.

At one point, he laughs so hard that it bounces around the walls. Lucas grimaces at the laughter and whispers something to the girl standing on the other side of him. She titters at whatever he says. I can feel her eyes rest on me in between bouts of nodding at Lucas whenever he mentions his disillusionment with an ideal. By the time the eighth ideal has been abolished, her hand is resting on his arm. A noise that is the opposite of her graceful titters flies out of my nose and mouth in response to her obvious flirting with my boyfriend. She takes her hand off him and Lucas finally turns to me.

‘This is done. I thought that one of the culture writers for *The Guardian* might come but it looks like they’re a no-show. Standard, really. We’re going to go and get something to eat.’

‘Oh, okay. Should we go to that place two streets over and then walk home?’

‘These guys want to go to this place where Marissa knows the manager. I think they’ve already booked a table. I didn’t think you’d want to come.’

Do you want me to ask Marissa to call and see if they can include another seat at our table?’

I blush. Her Ladyship of Nodding is no doubt Marissa, and Lucas already has plans with her, despite me telling him that I was coming tonight – but maybe they can squeeze in a spot for me at the kids’ table so I won’t interrupt any arm touching! I’m mortified.

‘No. I’ll go home. I didn’t know you had plans. I wish you’d said something earlier.’

‘I didn’t know I had plans, then. Sorry, babe.’

He leans down to kiss me on the cheek and I leave. Too embarrassed to say goodbye to his friends and take a final look at the jolly bartender. Harry. Since when did Lucas’s plans not include me? I thought part of the reason you entered into a relationship is so that you always had a built-in plus one.

* * *

This time I know Lucas isn’t home. He’ll be too caught up in the circular conversation with his friends and *Marissa*, as they say why they should have been included in the evening’s gallery showing even though they couldn’t really care less about what other people think about their art anyway and don’t need sales to validate them as artists.

I can hear the silence of him not filling the lounge room with his constant scribbling and swiping.

The problem is that I can remember when he was there for me. There are moments that fuse you in a relationship. Where you can’t imagine taking a step without that person because they’ve seen you in a heap and they’ve still called you beautiful and extended a hand. At what point had Lucas slipped from caring to a crutch?

I think about the moment we were welded.

Lucas banging on my door. His raps escalating in frequency, sounding like a metal detector approaching an abandoned bottle cap under layers of sand. Me under the doona and any coats that were within arm’s reach in the journey from the door to my mattress. Desperately gathered as barriers between me and what had happened at work. What they had said.

He said, ‘Rory, are you in there?’ from the other side of the door.

I said something that had all the lilts and inflections of actual words without forming any that you'd find in a dictionary – Collins or Urban.

'I'm coming in. I obviously don't have a problem if you're naked so if you think I'll leave you alone based on me having any regard for decency, then you're shit out of luck.'

I heard his footsteps, through the blankets, tentatively approaching the emotionally unstable woman that he'd only known for three weeks. Lucas peeling off the layers of linen, me feeling like he was stripping away my skin.

'Do you need me to call anyone? Your grandma? Your mum?' he asked, his voice low and quiet now that he was not trying to get to me through a door.

'No. You can't. I don't know where they are. Or I do. But they can't fix it and I don't want them to worry. Unless you've got a time machine to take me back to the moment when I made the decision to come here, and stop me. I can't see how you can help. Actually, if you do get that time machine, can you go back earlier than that? Go back to my conception and jump between Mum and that man – that would make everything easier.'

'I haven't met your mother or grandmother but looking at that photo of them that you have on top of your bedside pile of books, I don't think she'd want you to not be in her world.'

'What I need is someone to call, someone I can't disappoint, to build me into the person that I need to be. The kind of person that has a shine. That can keep rebounding because they know eventually it's going to work out. The kind of person that you know success will come to because that's what happens when *that* kind of a person puts the work in. I need *that* person to tell me how they do it, so I can do it, because right now I put the work in and nothing changes, and even when it does, it's for a minute and it slips back.'

'What happened at work today?'

'It's not just work. It's me. Why did I think I could uproot my life? That the local paper wasn't good enough? It isn't the local paper that's lacking. It's me. I don't have strong enough foundations for levels to go up. I'm one storey at best.'

'Rory, I have known you for a sum total of three weeks and even I can see that you've got a high-rise ahead of you.'

‘Your surveyor’s licence should be revoked.’

‘You wonderful idiot. If I didn’t think you were worth the investment, would I be here? I’m in your room, talking you out of a blanket fort and whatever this is . . .’ (peeking out of my fort, I could see him picking up a bright blue, pilling bathrobe that used to belong to my granddad) ‘all because I know you enough to know that if you’re late to something, something is wrong. Even if that something is just samosas with me. I don’t do that for people that are lacking. I do that for people that I care about.’

‘You can care about people that are lacking. I used to care about my father, even though I don’t know anything about him other than that he’s not around. A man that’s so lacking he’s in deficit.’

‘Having a father in the same house isn’t necessarily better than one who isn’t. You can still be absent when you’re under the same roof.’

Now he was unfurling.

‘You’re right, and my grandma and my mum were ten times better than someone who isn’t there for you emotionally, when you’ve made a complete arse out of yourself.’

‘Or on your first day at school, or your soccer final, or even at the pantomime that is happy families around a dinner table,’ he said bitterly.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m comforting you. Don’t comfort me. *I’m* sorry.’

‘You know, I have a couple more coats in my cupboard, if you’d like to put them on. It helps. The added weight on your body helps.’

‘Sometimes letting go of some of that weight helps as well.’

He draped himself over me. I pushed myself against him. A seal containing my whole, stopping all of me, all of us, from spilling out onto the bed and losing ourselves through the cracks in the draughty floorboard.

Then it had all rushed out of me.

‘I made a stupid mistake and accidentally deleted Kelly’s piece on climate change. I was trying to show her that I was useful by fixing her computer, which for some reason had made all her type 24-point. I wanted to contribute, and instead I deleted something she’d been working on for a week, which was due to be sent to the printers for this weekend’s paper. Now there’s going to be a blank space of nothing or an ad for a sale on fridges because I’m an idiot. And I got so angry at myself and I hate being

angry. I cried in front of everyone. David sent me home. I'm a total embarrassment. I don't know how I'm going to walk back in there.'

'You're going to put your perfect left foot in front of this dainty right foot and you're going to keep doing that until you don't need to think about it anymore because you're too busy working on *your* article. Mistakes happen. You're an intern. They won't even remember this when you walk back in on Monday.'

'Let's stay like this,' I whispered into his shoulder.

'I can't think of anything else that's a better use of our time,' he said.

* * *

Lying in bed, breaking all the blue-light-affecting sleep rules, I distract myself from thoughts of Lucas by desperately searching for a way to get in contact with Elle Chambers. It's a social media snakes and ladders. For every post that looks like a lead, there is a hissing fan account behind it.

Until Claire Bartlett. She of the Paddington Bartletts. The family that runs a small auto repair shop back home in Brisbane, but more importantly, the Bartlett I went to high school with who had left the world of tyres for a similarly inflated position in PR. According to her Insta grid, she looks after some big skincare brands and I am willing to bet that at one point she would have been part of a plan to get Elle Chambers to endorse a cream or cleanser. Claire Bartlett will have her email address or, at the very least, her PA's email.

Claire Bartlett, who landed us all in detention in primary school when she fell off her chair while passing an elaborate note about which Hanson brother we were going to marry. Claire Bartlett, chooser of Taylor Hanson, will be my saviour. I will relinquish Taylor – whom I had previously called dibs on, something she'd claimed not to have heard before selecting him herself – to her if she can get me that email. I'm sure that the other woman who calls herself his wife and their seven kids will understand.

I'm still up at 3 am. Awake enough to hear the lounge room suddenly fill again with the sound of Lucas's scribbling and the now familiar scent of clove cigarettes while I'm alone in our bed.

WEDNESDAY

Three days ago

Six am is a noisy miner bird chirping from outside my window into my brain.

I didn't message Claire Bartlett last night. I was worried she would see the time stamp and think I'd been out drinking and reminiscing about passing notes and long-haired pop idols. Which felt like unstable ground to ask for a favour on.

Five past six feels like a good time. I could be up for an early-morning run. I could be felling emails in my inbox before a day of important meetings. I could be reading too much into a DM time stamp. I might be overthinking it, but I can't jeopardise my one shot.

Instead of picking up Lucas's freshly deposited pile of clothes from the floor and jumping in the shower, I go to the lounge room with a cup of tea and look out the window like people do when they're searching for something within, or, in the case of Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, coincidentally looking at the same night sky.

There's a smudge of moon still showing. A coffee ring in the sky reinforcing what the crossword has already told me. Raise your hand. Or, in this case, my texting finger. Because Claire obviously wants people to contact her, she has her mobile number listed on her Facebook page. Another sign that the crossword is going to make sure this all works out for me.

Claire! Long time, no see! How have you been? I just found out that we're both living in Sydney! How wild! Would you have time to catch up for a coffee today?! I know it's short notice but I'd really

love to hear what you've been up to and I have a proposition of sorts for you . . . I look forward to seeing you xxxx

The amount of exclamation marks I've just used churns my stomach, but I had to sound peppy. Claire is a person who responds to pep. My little lie, which is growing, feels like it's filling my circulatory system. Making my arms itch as it pumps around my body. I put my chia pudding in my lunch bag – taking the risk that it will sweat and have water beads spring up its sides when I go to open it – then, unexpectedly, Lucas pops his head around the bedroom door. His hair is mussed and wet. He must have stuck it under the tap in the bathroom while I was staring out the window because I didn't hear the shower.

'You heading off to work already?' he asks.

'Yep. Definitely a weekday. Gotta get to the bus stop.'

'Don't you normally have breakfast here?' And here was I thinking that he didn't notice anything I did anymore.

'I do but this morning I mucked about with this work thing I'm having trouble with so I've run out of time. I'm taking breakfast into the office. Just call me Loosey Goosey.'

'I really wanted to make you something for breakfast this morning.'

I want to shout, *Well, then you shouldn't have stayed up all night with Marissa and then only got up when I was heading out the door. Which just happens to be the same time I leave for work every weekday.* Instead, I say, 'That sounds sweet, hon, but I do have that bus to catch.'

'Can I please make you some porridge? It won't take me long and I feel like we haven't had time alone in ages.' He drags the 'ages' out like a toddler would when saying please for another biscuit.

I remove my chia pudding from my bag and open the fridge door again. It's already a little slippery from condensation.

'You're right.' He's not. 'Let's have breakfast. There'll be another bus.' It just won't be the reassuring one I desperately need right now because the crossword is making everything else shift like I'm on a circular track in a game of corners.

It's not until halfway through my claggy bowl of porridge, which has turmeric inexplicably sprinkled over it, that I realise I haven't told Lucas about my great crossword caper.

It's not that I have an issue with telling him, though I would like to reduce the amount of people I become a known liar too. No, it's that I've just realised I can't remember the last time he displayed any interest in what I'm doing at work. Or my family. Or anything. I am shown sheaths of his drawings, of varying degrees of success, consisting of puns and great writers now reduced to a lone legume. I respond with ahhs and encouraging phrases, which I admit may not always be genuine, but they're verbalised. I'm a one-woman cheerleading team for Lucas, bending myself daily into the physical representation of a 'rah'.

The times where he would sit rapt while I spoke about clicks or heavily biased pieces, where he would say that he loved my passion for telling stories, have gone the way of his dairy use. A gradual dip into wrinkling his nose at the suggestion of any milk that doesn't come from a nut. The barest of head turns as an acknowledgement that I've spoken at all. In his eyes, I might as well be a talking udder.

'My parents are coming down from the mountains tonight,' he says.

Ah, the reason for breakfast.

'That's nice. Did we know about this?'

'They called me yesterday but I didn't get a chance to tell you at the opening and then you didn't come to dinner.'

'I wasn't invited to dinner. I could have come to dinner.'

'Rory, this isn't about last night's dinner.'

'Okay. Are we going to see your parents while they're here or do they have to be at some gala, ceremony, meeting?' Please let them need to go to all three of those things. At once. Forever.

'They want to have dinner tonight. With you and me.'

'Tonight.'

'Yes, tonight and I know you probably have something else planned but it would mean a lot to me if you could make it. It'll be early. Eight-ish.'

'I have Pilates on Wednesday nights and eight isn't early. Unless you're talking about the am. Six pm is early.'

'Sometimes you can really tell that you were brought up by senior citizens, Rory.'

'Can you tell? Can you tell that my digestion is so much better than yours because I give my body time to process a meal before I go and lie down for eight hours?'

‘You know I love your grandma. So settle down. I didn’t mean it as a slight towards her or anyone who enjoys an early-bird special. Can you please come tonight? If you’re not there, half the evening will be them asking why you’re not there and the other half will be them suggesting I diversify and get an MBA because there will be plenty of time for art once I’ve had a heart attack at 50 and am forced into retirement, after working 80-hour weeks and knocking you up with three male heirs, all who look at home in starched tennis whites. Is it really going to hurt you to not go to Pilates on *one* Wednesday night out of the entire year? Are you worried that someone else will use your mat?’

I do feel for Lucas and the parents he’s been saddled with. At least my mum is only physically distant, and Lucas wouldn’t have meant anything by his senior-citizen comment – he *does* love my grandma. Even if he has stopped asking about how her quest for the perfect French onion soup is progressing. He has learnt guilt and the art of manipulation by overhearing his parents’ passive-aggressive conversations over pre-dinner cocktails. His reaction to meeting my grandma is one of the things I love most about him. He’d come with me when I’d gone home for a couple of days in case she needed a hand, post-laser eye surgery. She’d thought I was being ridiculous for fussing and wouldn’t let me do anything for her. I pushed her porcelain and jade figurines closer to the walls in case she knocked them over. She pretended not to notice me doing it. Lucas potted around her garden. Pulling out little green hints of weeds each day and smiling at my grandma and her frequent trips to the cookie jar.

On that trip, I realised that while I’d known our childhoods were very different, I hadn’t known how different they were. I saw that he wasn’t used to being around a family that liked being with one another. When my grandma made me coffee – ignoring my protests that I could do it myself – he thought it was odd that she knew how I took it. At his family home, it’s everyone for themselves and raised eyebrows. It’s against my grandma’s nature to be anything other than welcoming and I learnt, in those few days, that Lucas wasn’t used to acknowledgement in his life.

‘I take my own mat to Pilates, and of course I’ll come. Wouldn’t miss it,’ I say.

* * *

Mathia pounces on me as soon as I walk through the door. My brogues clunk and swell next to her delicate Louboutin slingback heels.

‘I’ve been waiting to hear when this interview with Elle Chambers is going to happen, Rory.’

David has already gone. A turmeric porridge–induced yellow stain had taken an age to scrub from my lips at home. A jaundiced smile befitting the evening ahead, which will be full of blocked topics of conversation with Lucas’s parents.

‘I hope to get back to you today about when it can be slotted in. Just finding time in her schedule with her publicist.’

‘Wonderful. Please let me know when you find out. Today, really, would be best.’

She looks down at my lips, suggesting that the scrubbing with my toothbrush has only exfoliated the first layer of yellow.

Catherine walks past and several people stand up from their chairs and clap. The man with the sausage roll has brought a record amount of readers to the site. Of course it has. Who could resist that visual? Mathia shoots Catherine an uncharacteristic thumbs-up.

I feel the coffee that I’d sipped in the lift rise up my throat. Catherine is getting standing ovations and thumbs-ups and yesterday was the first time in three years that Mathia had spoken to me. How is it so easy for her? Catherine shoots me a ‘you should have been with me’ look and I turn my head to pretend I hadn’t seen her or heard the applause.

I need to make this article with Elle Chambers happen or Mathia will skin me for display in her next exhibition of people who have failed her. I’ll be propped up like a high school science room skeleton next to the hairdresser who had gone more Ronald McDonald than Florence Welch on Mathia’s mane on the day of last year’s Walkley Awards.

I want to message Claire Bartlett something innocuous like a smiley face. Something that will push my saccharine attempt to catch up with her to the top of her DMs. Thankfully she responds before I make the call on sending a coffee cup emoji. A sign of desperation, on my part, if there ever was one.

I didn’t know u were in Sydney. AMAZING. Love to catch up sometime. This week is hard. Too many meetings but maybe next

week? Did u hear that Krystal has three children?!?!

I had not heard about Krystal. While that news makes my womb contract in fear and I have the urge to reassuringly pat my vagina and let her know that I'm not going to do that to her anytime soon, it isn't nearly as distressing as hearing about the meetings that Claire has, which are not going to save me from being decapitated and displayed on Mathia's mantel if I didn't hurry up and do something. I open the crossword app.

* * *

Things I should be doing right now:

1. Working on the TV-guide crossword for Friday's deadline. A deadline that I have never missed, even when Lucas had such bad conjunctivitis that I had to take the day off, to lead him around the apartment like I was a guide dog because his eyes were glued shut.
2. Doing admin on the comments section on the site. Weeding out the anger that has spilt out into any available text box. Paying special attention to any piece that mentions war or a new flavour of Vegemite.
3. Anything that I am being paid to do.

What I am doing:

1. Stalking an old high school acquaintance.

Which is a hobby I would normally frown on, but the entire crossword theme today is about spies.

Which is why I'm now hanging around the door of a million-dollar shearing shed that is home to a powerboard of start-ups, which seems like something a spy would do, especially if they can't wait around for a response from a positive DM from Claire where she suddenly has a coffee slot open up. I know how these texted conversations can just float away into the ether, and so I need to sandbag the balloon. This is the only course of action that my sleep-deprived brain could think up.

It has been two hours of sitting on a brick ledge, trying to look busy whenever someone walks past, and the sun is roasting the top of my head. I should have brought a book and a hat. Though a book might have looked a little less casual than what I'm going for. I want Claire to think it's a coincidence that we're on the same street on the first day that I've reached out to her in years, not that I couldn't find a newspaper to cut eye-holes in. I'm also thinking about Harry, which feels dangerous and like the last thing I need.

A tittering sound moves down the building's main staircase, nearing the glass front door. A chirpy tone that I associate with Claire. You never found Claire crying in a bathroom cubicle over a perceived snub or classroom admonishment. She operated on a higher pitch and plane.

They are a group of three. It is like they have been popped out of the pages of a magazine, like ice cubes from a tray. No rough edges or stray hairs. Barely discernible from one another. Brushing up against each other as they squeeze out the door with their oversized handbags. I wonder how many times they've done that without thinking to form a single queue or let one of them drop behind. A coveted Celine bag is held casually by the honey blonde. My chest suddenly feels very full of nerves. A pressure that is going to cleave in two and spill all over the cracked footpath. I'm not prepared to have to do my routine in front of a crowd. I centre myself. The crossword's theme was spies today. What would Mata Hari do?

Mata Hari wouldn't have mistaken a dusty brown mound on the concrete for anything other than chewing gum. I look down at my foot as it tugs away from the pavement, exposing a shocking pink resistance band snapping back my false bravado. As I approach the women, who have turned left at the bottom of the steps and started in my direction, I feel a piece remain on the underside of my shoe. Throwing my balance off.

'Claire? Claire Bartlett?'

I hope I didn't just sound as uneven as I feel.

Claire stops and the other two women immediately turn away from her to face each other. They are soldiers trained in indifference.

'Hello?' says Claire.

I see Claire's mind putting a tabbed cardboard cutout of our boxy school uniform over my black jeans and sweater. I will forever be a 2D paper doll

for so many people, people who struggle to define me past three descriptors. Smart. Nice. There. As in, 'I think she was there.'

'Rory Byrne?'

'Claire! It's crazy running in to you when we were only just talking about catching up.'

'Isn't it?!' she squeaks.

'I'd suggest getting a coffee now, but I think you said something about meetings and you're clearly headed off somewhere.'

'Oh, don't worry about that. We were just getting coffee ourselves. I have an hour free from meetings but not of tasks. Just refuelling before getting back to it.' She gestures over to her two friends, who resist the societal pressures that dictate that you have to acknowledge other people.

'Maybe we should get coffee now?' I ask.

Being pushy feels uncomfortable. It gives the gum on my shoe added weight.

'We were just picking up a takeaway and then heading back in. I've got to prep a ton of gift bags for a product launch that we've got on tomorrow.'

'I can help. With the bags. We could chat and I could help.'

Pushy is starting to feel like a polite term for how insistent and desperate I am sounding. Surely it wasn't this hard for Mata Hari. She would bat her lashes and be rewarded with file upon file of secrets. I am practically indenturing myself to Claire to fill shiny cardboard bags.

Claire shrugs. 'I guess that would be okay.'

One of the women swivels her face two centimetres in our direction.

'We can pick up your iced chai and bring it back, Claire. No need for *everyone* to come.' She draws the everyone out like a cat stretching in the sun.

'Rory, would you like a drink while Holly and Kristen are there?' Claire offers.

'I'm fine, thank you.'

The one who offered to pick a coffee up for Claire grimaces in our direction and then both she and her mate start to walk ahead. Their steps are synchronised, as polished as palace guards.

'Come up. I will warn you, though, it's quite a boring job to watch.'

I mimic the shrugs that seem so popular with the beauty set and tail Claire up the stairs. She leads me past a large room that could pass for a

Byron Bay influencer's sundeck. White walls. Wicker furniture. Distressed cabinetry built to display a lone mason jar. The room we enter has more in common with a janitor's cupboard than the headquarters of a sponcon maven. A rickety table, not unlike the one that held the cheap wine at the art gallery, strains under the weight of chihuahua-sized bags in various stages of adornment.

Claire says, 'My life's work,' and she stretches her arm out circa '90s primetime gameshow host.

'This is a *lot*,' I say, surveying the empty bags and boxes that seem to multiply the longer I look at them.

'All part of the job. Lots of people think it's all champagne and heels but most of what I do is admin and *this*.' There's that shrug again.

'That must be a bit soul destroying.'

'It's just the job. Everyone has to do their time in the trenches and this is mine. I honestly don't mind it.'

Claire's acceptance makes me feel like a real grump. David would love it if I was more like Claire. She won't be packing gift bags for long – she is one curled ribbon away from media-release construction.

'You must have done your time. Journalism, wasn't it? Is it your day off today? Where are you working now? You did say something about the media, didn't you? I hope I'm not being recorded for some beauty industry exposé. A piece with an uninventive title like "The Ugly Side of Beauty".'

I laugh. 'No piece like that, but I am at work today. In fact, what I wanted to talk about was more of a work proposition. Not a takedown piece – don't worry. It's just good fortune that we ran into each other.'

'Serendipitous. Isn't there a movie called that?' Claire asks.

'Yeah, *Serendipity*. Kate Beckinsale and John Cusack throwing themselves to the mercy of fate and hideous haircuts.'

'That's right. She's a total Benjamin Button. I wonder what she uses on her skin?' Claire looks up to the ceiling cornices for answers.

'Do you want a hand with these while we chat?' I offer.

'It's fine. The eye creams need to sit right in the middle of the bag, otherwise they throw the whole balance off. Easier if I do it, really. Thank you for the offer, though. What was your work question?'

'It's more of a favour. I need the contact details of someone that I think you've probably invited to events in the past. It's for a story my boss is very

eager I chase up.'

Claire doesn't look up at me. She's in gift-bag mode and our conversation is white noise to her glossy production line.

'I can't give out people's information. That would *absolutely* be a breach of privacy. Can't you just DM them or something?'

'No, they aren't on social media. It's incredibly frustrating.'

'That doesn't sound like someone I would have details for then. It's almost written in rose gold that *anyone* we invite, *anywhere*, needs to have a healthy following on social media.'

'It's Elle Chambers.'

'Right. She's an outlier because we do send her samples on occasion, but she doesn't come to launches. I guess because she's on TV when they normally happen. People like a breakfast launch. The light is better for the photos.'

'Maybe you could give me her email address?'

Some leftover gum on the bottom of my shoe sticks to the floor and I do an awkward bunny hop. Claire graciously ignores it.

'I can't do that. I'd get fired if I got caught and I don't feel great about snooping through people's files.' She pulls some ribbon through the handles of the bag she's working on. Rose gold, of course.

'Claire, you'd be doing me a *huge* favour.' I pick up the teeniest tub of cream, which appears to be flecked with gold, and place it dead centre in the bag in front of me. 'I'm worried that if I don't find a way to get in touch with Elle Chambers I'll lose my job.'

It is the most honest that I've been about my motivations all week. The words let some steam out. Claire reaches across and removes the tub from the bag I just put it in, without saying a word.

'Rory, this is a lot to ask. I don't even know where you work. I haven't seen you in years and you're asking me to do something that I think you know is wrong.'

'I'm at *The Connect* and I promise this won't be able to be traced back to you. I won't mention how I got her email address. I'll say that I guessed it, or it was from an old database that I found through googling. It won't get back to you.'

'Rory . . . I can't lose my job over this.'

‘I promise you won’t. Pinky promise.’ I crook my pinky at her, invoking the sacred solemnity of teenage secret keeping.

‘Okay. Fine. Pinky promise. I’ll DM it to you later. Please don’t mention my name. Please delete the DM. I like my job. I know it looks like glorified factory work to you right now, but I like it.’

‘You won’t regret this, Claire.’

‘Okay. I’m already regretting it.’

‘Please don’t. You’re a lifesaver. Thank you so much.’

I go to tell her my number and instead of putting it in her phone, Claire hands me a bag in return.

‘I said I’ll DM you. That feels more secure to me. I hope Elle Chambers can help you.’

It clearly isn’t in Claire’s nature to begrudge a pleading, desperate person. My grandma would love her. They could both sit down and write thankyou cards together over never-ending cups of peppermint tea.

I feel like a silent-film villain, twirling my moustache as I tie the innocent heroine to the shuddering train tracks. I do a walk of shame across the showroom floor, dangling the goody bag off the finger I’ve just sworn on. The bag feels as insubstantial as my current, only viable link to Elle Chambers.

* * *

Back at the office, my coveted corner spot is gone so I join the caffeinated throng vibrating at the island. No one looks up at me as I sit down. I’d thought about crafting my email to Elle Chambers on the twenty-minute walk back from the converted shearing sheds but was too worried my finger would accidentally hit send after a confusing and graphic autocorrect. ‘Anus’ instead of ‘and’. A punishment for using the pure nature of Claire for my own selfish gain.

My fifth draft email sounds like it could have come from a bot:

Dear Ms Chambers,

I hope you’re well.

I’m getting in touch because I’m a huge fan of your work. You’re an inspiration to women everywhere and I’d love to speak to you

about doing a profile that would reflect that sentiment for The Connect.

I've been on the staff here for years now and would appreciate having a moment of your time to talk about how we might work together in the near future.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

*All the very best,
Rory Byrne*

My previous drafts were more exclamation marks than words, much like my DM to Claire had been. A nervous tic of punctuation. Can't you see how excited I am?! I'm completely sane! I promise I won't bring any harm to you or your cat if you talk to me! You won't regret it!

Those introductions felt like they should have been formatted with cut-up magazine letters instead of Times New Roman. *Cosmopolitan* does Jack the Ripper. I'd take the blandness of the bot. Unless what I've now settled on is too bland and she'll feel like I'm not sincere? It's hard to inject warmth in an email to someone you've never met, while appearing professional. If I sound too familiar it might make her think I'm not a real journalist – which I'm not really, but I do spend eight hours a day around a lot of them. Features editor by osmosis.

Alternatively, if the wording is too removed, it will be the easiest thing in the world for her to hit delete instead of reply. I think I need a two-pronged approach. A flash mob paired with an apology à la *Friends with Benefits*? Too noughties. Driving up in a limo, with flowers and climbing up a fire escape à la *Pretty Woman*? Too New York and I don't want Elle Chambers to think I'm insinuating that she is a prostitute with a heart of gold.

Flowers. There is something in flowers. The resort of guilty boyfriends, mates that have forgotten your birthday and now desperate liars who have put their fates in the hands of crosswords and romantic comedies.

If Elle Chambers had an Instagram page it would be littered with images of her favourite blooms. She'd have one of those posts where people brag about how adored they are under the guise of thanking their friends in a public arena.

Instead, I have to go with my intuition and choose a bunch that won't kill any cats that she might have. I settle on azaleas. Bright and punchy. Heavy-headed and instilled with an enthusiasm I can't find the polished words to express via email. In season and not a succulent. Succulents have become the shower gel of gifts. They'd land me straight on some assistant's desk. A space no doubt already filled with Post-its and curling Polaroids from Christmas parties past.

Ordered.

* * *

I'd been assigned the TV-guide crossword puzzle after the third and last time I'd gone out with a group of people from the office. I was still trying to fit in with *The Connect* and my grandma had told me to network – a phrase she'd no doubt learnt from the *Sex and the City* box set I'd left in her spare room when I moved out.

An email had gone out from Steve Jeffers, a man who for some reason had designated himself the social coordinator of *The Connect* despite no such position existing or having been requested by anyone. Maybe his grandma had been watching *The Love Boat* and given him advice on making friends.

It was a trivia night at the bar on the corner and the winning team would win \$200 behind the bar and bragging rights. So the prize was \$200 behind the bar.

I'd thought David might be there, and I hadn't yet charmed him into being my unofficial mentor. I'd also wanted to show him – after my accidental deletion of Kerry's climate change piece – that I wasn't an idiot. David was not there. I didn't know it at the time, but no one who was the head of any section of the site would do more than give an invitation from Steve the courtesy of flailing around their inbox for a day before condemning it to the deleted-items folder. Everyone at the pub was in the same position as me or avoiding their other halves.

I blame my being in charge of constructing the TV-guide crossword on Mary Tyler Moore. Apparently, I was the only person at our table who knew who she was. The question from the trivia MC – who was overcompensating for something that didn't bear questioning by wearing a

sequined jacket – was who worked at the fictional television station MJM in Minneapolis. Steve posited John Stewart. An answer so wrong for so many reasons, and when no one corrected him, I spoke up and said Mary Tyler Moore. No one else knew what I was talking about and because Steve was holding the mini pencil, he put down John Stewart. It was wrong. Of course, it was wrong.

For one glorious Christmas break, my grandma had shelled out for pay television. A show that my mum was working on was airing on one of the channels and she wanted to be supportive. It was a show largely centred on a struggling family in medieval times who were trying to infiltrate a higher caste, so naturally I had no interest in it, but I did love Mary who aired every weeknight at 8 pm. Her pluck. Her style. Her determination. She became my hero. When they ran a Mary-thon over three days, I camped under the dining-room table and built myself a fort made of Mary's dreams of women's liberation, A-line skirts and the doona from my bed. Mary and my grandad were why I was at *The Connect*. They were why journalism was the only career that I'd ever considered. They were why I 'forgot' to buy Steve's beer when it was my round.

And while Steve never once mentioned my correct answer to me, Melissa, who at that time ran the puzzle pages (and flung a thumbs-up my way when Steve complained about his missing drink), gave my name to her direct editor in the hope that my proven knowledge of what she considered obscure and outdated television references would be the better fit for a crossword that she was always trying to offload to an unwitting someone else. I was new and infused with a Mary level of can-do. I was trying to prove that I was competent. I said I'd love to do it. Two years on, I now understand why Melissa was so keen to be free of it.

A TV-guide crossword should be easy to create. They're easy enough to solve as a punter. If you have a television, put it on in the background when you're at home. You'll absorb the endless names, canned-laughter tracks and theme songs. Have it on when you're making meals, and without knowing it, you'll have taken in a whole season of *Friends*. Ross and Rachel will have got together, gone on a break (or not) and then recoupled. You'll have made dinner and have the confidence to use pen, not pencil, on *The Connect* TV-guide crossword. The construction is tricky, though. It is the opposite of how you construct a normal crossword grid, where you do

the clues last. I have attempted themes in the past à la *The New York Times* crossword, but that isn't what *The Connect* solvers want. If you are unfamiliar with *Everyone Loves Raymond*, you don't want to feel like a dolt for a week. One misfire of a crossword and you lose someone for life.

I also learnt the hard way that you can't have more than three answers that are from 2010 onwards in the same puzzle. That isn't the demographic. Outside of Harry the crinkly bartender, of course.

I don't like repeating words or references two weeks in a row. I don't watch much free-to-air television outside of streaming services and *The Simpsons*, now that I live with Lucas. The crossword construction takes up a lot of my brain space. No wonder I'm still writing pieces on *Sex and the City*. I spend at least eight hours a week googling the past. I am as relevant as a sitcom where people met their future mates in bars instead of on apps.

I have never been to another work trivia night again.

* * *

It has been an hour and I can't get the bottom right corner of the crossword to work. The crossword I'm paid to do. My head isn't in it. I keep opening my Outlook in the hope that Elle Chambers has responded to my email. If I get up and do something else, an email will come. I go into the kitchenette to get a glass of water I don't want. I'd go back into the mailroom but I'm starting to worry if I keep being found in there, people will start thinking I was the one eating curry. I scull the water so that I have an excuse to go back to the kitchenette again and return the empty glass.

'Hey, hey. Looks like there's something in your blank-wall idea, huh,' Catherine says as she leans over me to turn the kettle on. I hadn't even heard her walk in. I was distracting myself from thoughts of my empty inbox with thoughts of Harry.

'What do you mean?' I'm so glad I didn't go back to the mailroom – I knew I was right to worry about getting a reputation.

'Mathia told me that you're going to write the Elle Chambers story with David. That's huge. You must be over the moon.'

'Oh, that. It's nothing really, I just remembered that my mum had an in with her.'

'I wonder why you hadn't thought of it before.'

Maybe Catherine isn't so nice.

'My mum knows a lot of people. I forgot.'

'Lucky you eventually remembered it,' she says innocently.

'Isn't it just?'

'I'd wondered when you were going to start working on something outside of the activity pages. David's spent so much time helping you out; it's good to see that it's paying off. I was getting worried. I need someone else our age to join me at the weekly planning lunches.'

I had never heard anything about a weekly lunch and thought Catherine was younger than me.

'I don't really have a lot of time for lunch but I'm happy that you no longer have to worry about me, Catherine.'

'You know what I mean, mate.' She does the kind of face that you'd expect on a kid that had just got busted for drawing all over the walls. Very 'who me?'

She starts scooping out the loose-leaf tea mixture into her tea infuser – an object so delicate and silver that you expect wafts of incense to come out of it like a religious rite. I hit my elbow against the switch for the kettle. Let's see how long it takes her to realise that the water isn't boiling.

'Congratulations on the sausage roll story, Catherine.'

'You should have been there with me, Rory.'

This time, I don't believe her kindness.

* * *

In my continuing campaign to be best friend of the year, I realise I haven't messaged Kitt about my leaving work so that we can meet at All Booked Out until I'm a block away from the entrance of the shop.

It is two levels of happiness set in an old building constructed with more moss than grout. The perfect bookshop and, as luck would have it, Kitt is already deep in the first-floor shelves, having come straight here rather than going home and back out again to meet me, which saves me from looking like the disorganised mess that I'm fast becoming.

'Would it be weird if I learnt French to impress my cat?' Kitt asks, thumbing through a shelf of European-language books. Judging by the stack of books sitting on the floor next to her, she left work early.

‘I don’t think it would be the sanest thing you’ve ever done. I know you said you wanted to further yourself as part of your resolution for this year, but this might not be the right way to go, and I say this as someone who is currently letting a crossword dictate her life.’

‘Look, I know it sounds a wee bit crazy but it’s only because I’m always talking to him in a muddled European accent, so I just thought it might make more sense to him if I actually mastered a couple of sentences.’ She has moved on to an Italian phrasebook.

‘I can’t argue with that sound logic. What does Elise think about this?’ I ask, grinning.

‘You know what?’ Kitt ignores my question about Elise. ‘I’ll just buy one of these French tourist guides. I only really need to learn the basics. I don’t think we’ll be conversing about anything too deep. Though now that I say it out loud, Andre is a very smart cat. Oh, well, I can always get the advanced edition if he starts talking French back.’

I can’t tell if she’s joking.

Kitt wanders off down the travel aisle and I hotfoot it after her, just in case anyone else overhears and has her committed.

‘Why am I learning to speak French to my cat?’ she says, speaking over her shoulder. ‘Maybe you and your crossword quest has inspired me to shake up my own life a little bit.’

‘As a language, it has a lovely lilt – maybe that’s it,’ I offer. ‘How about you volunteer somewhere or just focus on work? No one has ever called you regimented. Your life is good.’

‘Please stop talking to me as if I’ve lost my mind and you’ve found me wandering the streets, in my underwear, smearing ice cream on myself. I know what I sound like right now, but if I can’t voice these thoughts to you, who can I voice them to?’

‘Just don’t voice these thoughts to anyone else, not Elise, not even your cat; he’ll judge you and I can’t be held responsible for what he might say back. Also, I don’t want to have to go and pick you up from the police station or drop you off at an assisted-living home.’

‘Andre doesn’t talk back, Rory.’ Now she was looking at me as if I was the crazy person.

‘I thought you were teaching him French. What’s the point if he doesn’t talk it back to you? And off this subject, because we need to be off this

subject, is it bad that I can't stop thinking about a random bartender that I met last night?

'At the gallery opening? You met someone worth talking to at that thing last night? I don't believe it.'

'What's more concerning is that Lucas was there and I still went bright red in front of Harry. I also called him stupid, so I must like him.'

'Is Harry the bartender? Does Harry like cats?' asks Kitt.

'You need to stop spending so much time with your cat. I'm also wondering why Elise hasn't done anything about stepping in to stop this steep mental decline. You know that you have a very important job, don't you?'

'It sounds to me like you're deflecting because you've realised that you were just talking about a certain bartender like a moony teenager when you are currently living, and in a relationship, with a moody teenager.'

Was she studying therapy alongside French for felines?

'I'm never going to see Harry again. I have no doubt that he spends all his time offering drinks that are both oddly strong and tasteless to hundreds of women a week, all at venues that I do not attend. I felt like he liked me. I mean, he did call me Sally, but I'm sure it's all in my bloody head because I'm a bloody moron.'

'You don't know that it's all in your head.' She lowered her voice to match mine to the great relief of the bookshop staff.

'I do.'

'You don't, and first things first: are you aware that we are two adults talking about what the most appropriate language would be to teach my cat? I think we should go and get a drink before Pilates.'

'Please don't lump me in with the French cat situation.'

'Drink now then, or after Pilates?'

'Oh, my god, I forgot; I can't do Pilates. I have to go and have dinner with Lucas's parents. Lucas, who is my actual boyfriend, not someone I'm having an imaginary relationship with. I'm sorry.'

'No, I'm sorry. You'll be suffering tonight. I'll be bendy and I'll get Elise to open a bottle of something. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Kitt starts putting away the books she'd left on the floor and I head to the execution.

* * *

Patricia's eyes flick in my direction as I reach for the bread rolls sitting in the middle of the table. She's in all white because Patricia would never spill anything on herself. Delicate gold studs glint in her ears and her severe blonde bob looks like it's been trimmed with a ruler. Nothing about Patricia is imprecise. My winged eyeliner is a mistake; I've overcompensated for my useless blush last night and somehow Patricia knows. The bread rolls are an island of carbs in a sea of minimalistic sprigs of green and cubed beetroot, and I'd forgotten she doesn't tolerate carbs for herself or anyone else. I'm surprised she didn't have them removed when she and Greg arrived. They were here first, which would have annoyed her immensely.

Lucas had the flimsiest of reasons as to why he was running late and said he would have to meet me at the restaurant. It has only been an hour since his text and I've already forgotten it. It was too wispy a reason for me to remember.

The restaurant is spread out like a palatial home. It appears breezy and relaxed, in a very expensive way. They grow their own vegetables out the back, which sounds rustic, but the garden beds are set out like the Red Queen's in *Alice in Wonderland*. Nothing like the couple of terracotta pots that the café near our apartment grows its apple chillies in. I'd looked up the menu while I was on the bus and some of the mains didn't have prices listed. As if I needed further proof that this wasn't going to be a relaxing dinner.

I'd ducked into an enclave in a building across the road while I waited for Lucas, not wanting to face the firing squad solo. Of course, instead of his messaging me so that we could walk in together, Lucas just strolled in, presuming I'd already be at the table and then I looked like the straggler when I walked in two minutes after him.

No doubt they thought I'd been loafing around, ignoring the time on my grandad's watch, which Patricia no doubt presumed I wore for aesthetics only. Always Patricia, never Pat. Not even to her husband.

I take my hand from the bread roll, pretending I've mistaken it for something else. A nectarine? It doesn't matter; I'm fast running out of the energy it takes to try to impress Patricia. We see them maybe six times a year and she seems forever surprised that I still exist. It's like I'm a mark on

one of Lucas's shirts that she (or more accurately, her dry cleaner) is itching to apply the stain remover to but, until that moment comes, she just has to hope that I'll fade in the wash.

Lucas's father, Greg, gets up to greet Lucas's sister, Kelsey. I didn't know she was joining us. I'd mistakenly thought the extra seat was for Patricia's Chanel handbag. Kelsey is wearing a matching neon-green tracksuit with hi-top sneakers that engulf her legs up past her shins. They're in a shiny, scaly pattern that makes it look like she's slowly being eaten by a Yeezy boa constrictor. In my head, I wish the snake luck. Kelsey is sweet but vapid, and every time I see her, I see what retail staff must think as soon as she crosses the store threshold – here comes someone who mistakes spend for style. Kelsey has 250,000 followers on Instagram, so I could be wrong, but I don't think so.

'Sis.' Lucas beams with the misguided hope that Kelsey being here will mean that his parents' comments will be dispersed equally between them instead of being aimed solely in his direction.

Kelsey gives him an elaborate display of kisses, mwahs and gentle face slaps before sitting down next to him. She reaches over and pats my hand. 'Sooooooooo good to see you all. Sooooooooo sorry I'm late – my Uber took forever to get to me. I think I must have been waiting on the footpath for a good ten minutes before it finally turned up.' She releases a huge sigh.

'Don't worry, darling. Rory was late as well,' Patricia says.

Fuck it. I pick up the bread roll and eat half of it in one large bite.

Lucas once mentioned in passing that his mother has a personal shopper (and not the kind that I don't trust to pick me a ripe apple when I'm compiling an online supermarket order). This is a person who goes through each season at Fashion Week (all the Fashion Weeks) and pulls together a portfolio of outfits she thinks would suit Patricia, and then Patricia culls it. A jury selection for couture. 'Who did you vote for in the last election?' 'Have you ever used the words "socks" and "sandals" in the same sentence?' 'Please pronounce Hermès.' Her once fine, etched-glass features might have been transformed through an abundance of Botox injections into blown glass, but her words could still cut.

'Don't fill up on bread before dinner, Rory,' Patricia says. 'Kelsey, Lucas, what have you both been up to? Please tell us what we've been missing while we've been holed up in the mountains.' The 'mountains'

being an eight-bedroom residence that had a staff bordering on the scale of *The Connect*.

Lucas and Kelsey look at each other. I look down at the rest of my bread roll.

‘Not much, Mum,’ Lucas starts, forever the big brother looking after his little sister. ‘I feel like I’ve been on a bit of a roll with my work at the moment.’ I wish he hadn’t said roll because Patricia’s eyes dart back to me. ‘A couple more pieces and I’m hoping to have enough for a show.’ I didn’t know he was thinking of that. How much was Lucas not telling me?

‘When you say work, I take it that you’re referring to those doodles?’ Greg asks.

‘It’s art, Dad.’

That’s my cue. ‘They’re very good, Greg. You should come over on your next visit to the city and see them all. When they’re together, they really form a compelling narrative.’

This is why Lucas wanted me here. He doesn’t know that for the most part I agree with Greg when it comes to his ‘art’, but I hate how Greg has this insistent need to make Lucas feel worthless. I didn’t know my father, but I’ve watched enough episodes of *Alex Mack* and screenings of *10 Things I Hate About You* to know that isn’t what fathers are supposed to do to their children.

‘Darling . . .’ (this ‘darling’ refers to Greg; I can tell because Patricia moves her hand to his arm – when are we going to order? – and taps him lightly) ‘I’m sure we’re just too removed from the inner-city gallery scene to truly understand what Lucas is saying with his art.’

‘Maybe it’s an age thing?’ Kelsey pipes up. Patricia’s grin tightens. She doesn’t keep visiting Dr Barclay for ‘refreshers’ to have her daughter suggest she is old enough to have ‘an age thing’.

Lucas, forever grabbing at his mother’s hem, steps in. ‘It’s just a different form of art from what you both normally buy. I’m not offended.’ He was.

‘Cocktails!’ Kelsey shouts. ‘We should all have cocktails!’

‘Darling . . .’ (to Kelsey this time; everyone at the table but me wears the darling moniker – I am always Rory) ‘I don’t think this place does cocktails. I’m sure you could get a vodka soda though.’

‘Everywhere does cocktails, Mummy.’ And she gestures to the waiter who has been hovering at our edges, not wanting to interrupt. I can’t blame his hesitant approach.

‘Can I please have your cocktail menu?’ Kelsey asks.

‘We don’t have a separate cocktail menu, madam, but I can bring you over another drinks menu so that you don’t need to share.’

‘You’ve got that whole bar over there, haven’t you.’ From Greg, this is a statement rather than a question.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Are you telling me that if *my* daughter . . .’ (Greg stretches out his ‘my’ so no one can mistake where the emphasis should lie) ‘wants a cocktail, *that* bar over there can’t make it? That feels odd to me. Doesn’t it feel odd to you, boy?’

‘Yes, sir,’ says the waiter.

‘So, lack of a cocktail menu aside, I’m sure you can get my daughter what she wants to drink from that bar over there and then charge me whatever you see fit for it.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Can everyone please tell this young man what they’d like to drink?’

‘A glass of champagne,’ says Patricia.

‘Scotch, neat,’ says Lucas.

‘A Long Island iced tea, thanks,’ says Kelsey.

‘May I please have a gin and tonic? Thank you so much,’ I say, finally lifting my head to see that the waiter is, in fact, Harry. The bartender from the gallery. The man whom I insulted only a day ago and who is now the audience of the roving pretension troop known as the Kristoff Family Players. The person I’d just been gushing to Kitt about.

‘And I’ll have a Scotch, neat, like my son.’ A drink that Lucas has only ordered because it is what Greg drinks unless they are at the footy and he has to settle for beer.

I stage-whisper an ‘I’m sorry’ to Harry, which, like all stage whispers, is then heard by everyone within a two-metre radius. Greg shoots me a look, implying that I am the rudest person at the table. Harry gives me a nod. I have no idea whether or not he has recognised me. He retreats to the bar.

‘Kelsey, what have you been up to?’ Greg asks, as if he hasn’t just been responsible for all our meals being spat on in the kitchen.

‘It’s been a *big* week, Daddy. I’ve got three new sponsors coming on board. Dabbin says I’m his number-one client.’ When I’d first heard Kelsey talk about Dabbin, I thought I’d misheard Darren. I was wrong.

‘You’re really carving out your own path, my girl,’ says Greg, looking around to see where his Scotch is.

‘Thanks, Daddy. It’s very important to me that I continue to grow the business. Dabbin has heard that WeTea are looking for a new spokesperson, so fingers crossed.’

‘WeTea?’ asks Patricia.

‘It’s a new weight-loss tea that tastes like wheat grass.’

‘Ahhh,’ I say. ‘That’s what the We stands for. Would you believe that wasn’t my first guess?’

Lucas starts laughing, but Kelsey looks blankly at me.

‘Just one of Rory’s little jokes, darling. Carry on,’ Patricia says.

‘Kylie Jenner did a post for them so it’s a big deal.’

‘Sorry, Kels, of course it is,’ I say apologetically.

‘I’m just happy that *one* of my kids is bringing some money in. You know, you can’t just rely on us for everything,’ Greg says.

Harry, thankfully, arrives with a large tray of drinks. ‘Sorry for the delay; we had to run out to buy sugar syrup.’

When I can see that Greg isn’t going to respond, I thank Harry.

‘He’s just doing his job, Rory. No need to thank the lad, is there?’ Greg responds.

‘No, sir,’ says Harry.

I cannot sit here any longer. I mean, there is common decency, but this family doesn’t let that get in the way of a good time.

‘Excuse me, I just need to pop to the bathroom,’ I announce to the table. And I jump up before Greg can see the burning shame consuming my face. These people. They have burrowed under my skin and laid their eggs under the surface like botfly larvae. Is that how Lucas and Kelsey were born? Deposited in the arms and legs of an unsuspecting house cleaner, until the time had come for them to hatch and burrow out, ready to repeat the cycle?

I round the corner and settle against the hallway wall that leads to the three bathroom options. My mum would say that this is the perfect time to use a mindful breathing technique. She’d tried to teach me one year ago when she’d come back from India. She thought it would be perfect for me

as I neared exam time. It was a nice idea in theory, but, in reality, back then it appeared that the one thing I didn't want to be able to control was my breath. I liked that my body automatically knew what to do in that area. I found that comforting.

Learning to breathe in circles at staggered increments meant that all of a sudden I'd forget how to breathe entirely. It brought on panic attacks, where I'd start clawing at the air as if that would force it physically down my throat and I could push it into my lungs. Mum kindly suggested that I might grow into mindful breathing with practice. Grandma suggested that the less time I spent in my head, the better I would be. And so, taking slow, mindful breaths was not something that would help me now, here in this mortifying situation.

16 DOWN

Instead of mindful breathing, I open the crossword. I just need a couple of solves to remind me that something bigger is at play here. I know through experience that three answers are all it takes to settle me and slow my breathing down (of its own volition).

16D A saying that leads to opportunity.

The filled-out acrosses make it an easy one. *When one door closes.*

It's one of my favourite crossword answers, a saying that slowly reveals itself over a couple of linked solves and, of course, spies are always making unconventional exits.

My grandma has always said that when one door closes, and the other door is locked, then you should pop open a window. I like it. It completely butchers the original phrasing but I'm pro the idea that you can make your own luck. After all, that's what I'm doing with the crossword.

My eyes fall on the ladies' bathroom door and I know, both literally and figuratively, where my window is.

* * *

I have only climbed through one other window in my life and it was a lot bigger than this one.

It had been at Stanley Peck's house in Year 11. His parents, Sandra and Rob, were friends with my mum, which kept us tied together despite the fact that Stanley and I didn't have anything in common. I'd just watched *Can't Hardly Wait*, and it had convinced me that I was missing out on a lot by not going to high school parties, so the next one I was invited to, I went. What I hadn't quite got my head around was that there were parties and then there were *parties*. The one I'd agreed to go to was a Transformers party.

It was six sixteen-year-old guys, including Stanley Peck, who got out vintage Transformer dolls, which they called figurines, and played the old theme song on repeat from a speaker set up in front of a poster of Optimus Prime. Not recognising that Transformers wasn't code for anything but a robotic alien race was my first mistake. My second mistake was organising to sleep over at Stanley's because I didn't want to limit myself to a curfew, just in case Ethan Embry wanted to sing a Barry Manilow song to me. My third mistake was declining the weed when it was passed around.

Stanley did not decline the weed and later in the evening, when everyone else had left and I was in my sleeping bag on the floor of his bedroom and he was laughing hysterically about something Bumble Bee related, his parents barged through the door into the poorly ventilated room.

Then I saw all my mistakes clearly; I wished I'd just stayed home and remained oblivious as to why Transformers were 'more than meets the eye'. Sandra and Rob took Stanley out in the lounge room to speak to him and I decided to flee. I'm not good with confrontation. I pushed the flyscreen out of their bathroom window as I heard Sandra yell 'wacky tabacky' and ran up the street until I reached a payphone. I called my grandma to come and pick me up.

This window is smaller than the Pecks'. My hips are barely going to fit through it. It's tiny, but mercifully dust-free.

I lock the bathroom door behind me, thankful that women are always woefully under-catered for in the allocation of toilets in hospitality venues. I'm sure that in the men's bathroom next door there is a huge wall the length of a football field for them to piss on, and three stalls for them to use to play on their phones while avoiding their partners back in the restaurant.

But here I won't be bothered by anyone else coming in to use a neighbouring cubicle because there isn't one. A bathroom doesn't need cubicles if there's only one toilet. It does have very nice hand lotion and soap, though.

Helpfully, the budget for high-end toiletries hasn't extended to fittings and I easily remove the sliding piece of mottled plastic, doubling the width I have to squeeze through. I pull off the black tabs of the flyscreen and place them both next to the sanitary bin. Whoever uses the toilet after me will understand; it would have been practically impossible not to overhear Lucas's family's cocktail conversation from any of the surrounding tables.

I climb up onto the cistern. The only place my feet remain stable is on the buttons, which means I'm continually flushing the toilet. Every other spot is curved and my feet slide around dangerously. It's as if they don't want people exiting from bathroom windows.

I'll just have to take two-minute showers for the rest of the week to make up for this water wastage. I exit head-first. Scraping my boobs and cramping my shoulders as the top half of me goes through. I bend at my hips and find my nose touching the outside of the building. Dust is clinging to the sides of the red brick and I close my eyes so I can't see what is happening. If I'm about to go face-first into a spider web, I don't see how a forewarning will benefit me.

An avalanche of empty bottles that would rival a rugby union grand final party echoes from one of the large metal bins that's a hair's breadth away from being useful to me as I continue to try to push forward with my descent.

'Need a hand?' a familiar voice asks.

Oh, how I hope the question is directed at someone else.

'Are you okay?' Nope. It is directed at me.

It's him. It's Harry. I don't even need to crane my neck to know. Of course he's here, otherwise how else would my humiliation take on epic proportions?

'I think I've got it,' I say, not even believing myself and wishing he would go away.

'It looks like you're stuck.'

'I'm not.'

'What's the plan, then?'

‘I’ll keep sliding out in a moment. I’m just trying to live in the present. Take in the view.’

‘Looks like you’re trying to climb out a window and you can’t get your hips through it.’

‘I can get my hips through. My hips were made for this.’

‘It’s not a comment on your hips. These windows are tiny. I don’t think you’re meant to climb out of them. I don’t know how you got this far.’

‘I’m very squeezey.’

‘That’s what I thought last night. When I first saw you, I said to myself, that woman is incredibly squeezey – and possibly an alcoholic.’

‘Please shut up.’

‘Let me help you and I will.’

‘Fine.’

I hear him walk back into the restaurant, leaving me dangling out the window. Why is it that just when you think men aren’t total dickheads and you let one help you, he abandons you?

He’s probably seen a woman who isn’t stuck in a toilet window and has gone to talk to her instead. Well, that woman is welcome to him. Maybe my anger will make me so hot that I’ll burn a couple of extra calories around my hips and I’ll be able to slip to freedom. Why has no one from the table come to check on me? Surely, they must realise I’ve been gone for a while now. It’s insulting.

‘I’m back,’ Harry says.

I open my eyes. He is indeed back.

‘Where did you go? You were supposed to be helping me.’

‘For someone who needed a good amount of convincing that they needed help, you’re very snippy.’

‘Fine. Pray tell, where did you go, kind sir?’

‘I went to get this.’

He is holding an industrial-sized tub of butter, which he’s obviously lifted from the kitchen supply.

‘Well, now that you’ve done your grocery shopping, do you think you might pull on my arms?’

‘I’m going to oil you up and then you’ll slide on out.’

‘What?’

‘You need something to help you slip through. The butter will do that.’

‘That’s insane.’

‘I feel you don’t have a lot of options right now. A person with options isn’t normally wedged in a window. You aren’t going to come out by brute force. This is the only option available to you that isn’t you going backwards into the restaurant bathroom and then back to that table and, frankly – and this is nothing to do with your hips – I think even that will be a stretch.’

He’s right. I’m caught between a restaurant and a hard alley.

‘Butter me up.’

He gently tugs my shirt out from where it sits under my waistband. My skin now directly on the tiny brick ledge. I can’t understand why they would put a thick metal lip on the outside window, and then his hands are on me. First dabbing and then spreading the butter around, creating a yellow band across my midsection. He eases his fingers along my belly so that he can apply the butter to the sill as well.

‘Does this feel okay?’

A virtual stranger is asking me if I feel okay while he greases me up so I can fit through a window that I have voluntarily put myself through instead of being my boyfriend’s parental buffer. It’s hard to not start having more serious doubts about going to the crossword for life advice.

‘I feel like a chicken. Like you’re getting me ready to go in the oven,’ I say.

‘Making sure you stay nice and moist.’

‘There is never a time to use the m-word. Never.’

‘Surely . . .’

‘No. Never. And if you’re reaching for a time in your brain when it might be okay and you think you’ve stumbled on it, you’ll be incorrect, so don’t even suggest it.’

‘I think you’re wrong on that.’ He starts lifting me through the window. This is actually working. I feel like a sausage being massaged into casing but it’s working.

‘I’m not. I’m a journalist. I know words. I’m right.’

‘My moist little journalist.’

‘I’m going to throw up.’

And out I come. He holds me around my waist with my head dangling between his legs. We must appear as if we’re doing an interpretive dance

about clocks and we're acting out 12.30.

'Ahhhhh, it's a beautiful baby girl,' he crows as turns me right side up and places me on the footpath.

'I hate you. Thank you.'

'You're welcome. It was my mother's dream that I become a doctor. If she could only see me now.'

I look at him. I look at the butter on the floor. I feel a hula hoop of grease around my midsection.

'I'd better go,' I say.

'Come and have a drink with me. I want to hear why you were leaving the restaurant in the least accessible way possible.'

'Don't you have a job to do?'

'I'm going on my break.'

'How long is your break?'

'It's long enough to go and get a drink with you.'

Where else am I going to go? Eventually, Lucas will realise I'm gone. Patricia might not care about my absence, but he will. I don't want to be home when he returns. I think it would be good to give him some space to cool down and perhaps start on a new satirical sketch that portrays me as the chicken I am. He can call me Charles Chickens.

My keys are in my handbag, which is still inside the restaurant. Kitt has a spare set, but she'll still be at the Pilates class that I should have been in too. My grandma is another state away. My mother another country.

'I'll never say moist to you again,' Harry says.

'Okay. But you have to promise that, and also that you're buying.'

'I'll take care of the first round,' he says.

'You'll take care of all the rounds and a side of fries. I didn't get a chance to order any food.'

'You're a demanding date.'

'This isn't a date and I'm not demanding. I left my purse under the table in the restaurant.'

* * *

Harry swivels on the bar stool and looks me square in the eyes.

‘There’s something that I’m finding really comforting about being with you.’

We’d gone down three streets from the back of the restaurant and found the dodgiest-looking bar in the next suburb. I couldn’t risk Greg and Patricia wanting a nightcap and finding me drinking with some random man (they wouldn’t be able to pick their waiter out of a line-up – the help is the help, after all) when I should have stayed at the restaurant to be insulted by them.

Don’s looks like it has been open since the 1940s and hasn’t been renovated or wiped down since. The two locations – Don’s and the posh restaurant I’ve just beaten a not-so-hasty retreat from – are light and shade, and as soon as I saw it I knew there’d be no way we’d be caught here. I’d got the bartender to lend me a cloth so I could wipe down both our chairs before we sat. You can be incognito *and* sanitary.

‘It’s the butter. You find me comforting because butter is comforting, and now that we’re in a hot bar, I’m starting to roast. You’ve basted me like a chook.’

‘Lovely. Maybe we should order some baked potatoes instead of fries. If we’re going to have roast chicken, we should have it with all the trimmings.’

‘You won’t be eating me. I’m for display purposes only. I’m one of the chickens that remain in the deli rotisserie all day to tempt you into buying one of the pre-bagged ones.’

‘That *does* sound delicious, and if you like buttered things, I’ll be indulging in a mountain of popcorn at The Golden Screen at a Hepburn marathon if you’re interested.’

‘Watching you attack a pile of popcorn while watching one of the most graceful actresses in the world does sound like a fun time but I’m one of those wacky people that have a job during the day.’

Harry laughs and draws circles with the beads of moisture that are moving at an accelerated rate down his glass. It really is hot in here. If there’s reverse-cycle air conditioning, it must be broken.

‘Why were you climbing out that window?’

‘I appreciate that you’re being generous and using the word “climbing”.’

‘Don’t compliment me to avoid the question.’

‘I was at a horrible dinner with some horrible people, well, *two* very horrible people, and I had to get out. So I got out. You’ve met them. Surely, you really can’t be questioning why I fled.’

‘Using the door too pedestrian for you?’

‘Ha, no. I’m not the kind of a person who storms out of a door and makes a scene. I’m more of a hide-in-a-toilet-and-then-climb-out-a-window-without-thinking-it-through kind of person. Actually, I’m not that kind of person either. I don’t know what person I am at the moment.’

A week ago, I had been a person who wouldn’t have gone to the art gallery at the last minute. A person who wouldn’t have lied to try to get a story. A person who would never run out on a social engagement, even if it was one with people I didn’t like. A week ago, I had been a person who would currently be sitting through that dinner while Patricia delicately removed my internal organs and Greg sipped his way to cedar-smoked oblivion. I can see my other life running parallel to this new life. This one that has more Harry in it, which, guiltily, I’m starting to enjoy.

Another round of drinks magically appears in front of us.

‘You don’t need to worry about what person you are. You’re Sally. I told you last night.’

‘Have you said that line to a lot of women? Does it work?’

‘I’ve said it to exactly zero women. Sharing my first name with a popular member of the royal family used to work spectacularly well whenever I wanted to talk to a beautiful woman until the whole Megxit thing happened, so I’ve been able to keep the *When Harry Met Sally* line tucked away until now.’

‘I think you might have missed a trick there.’

‘Nope, it can’t be used on just anybody. I had to find a worthy Sally. Harry needs Sally. The movie doesn’t work without her.’

The other me, who was screaming with frustration in the restaurant, is cheering on the dingy-bar me. She’s jumping on Oprah’s couch for me. This is all too lovely.

‘Don’t you need to go back to work?’ It feels like we’ve been sitting here, with me being gently broiled, for hours and the last thing I want to do is get Harry fired for abetting my getaway.

‘They’ll be fine without me at the restaurant. It was the last sitting for tonight. And I want to make sure you’re okay. You seem a little unhinged –

but in a glorious way.’

‘I have to go.’ It has just dawned on me that I’m not willing to let the crossword add ‘cheater’ to my resumé, even if Harry is glorious. The ‘liar’ title is already sitting too heavily on my chest.

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m positive. I’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow.’

‘Okay. Next time I find you hanging out a window, have your wallet on you. It’s your shout.’

‘I’ll make sure to do that.’

Next time, I’ll carry my own pat of butter with me and I won’t need saving from random Harrys. I don’t need to add tingling-at-random-men to my list of problems.

* * *

There are people filing out in unruly groups from restaurants on the main street as I walk back to the apartment from where my Uber has dropped me. Thank God for phones. I’ve been gone for more than two hours and there are four missed calls from Lucas. I don’t have my keys. If Lucas is still out, I’ll have to wait outside the door.

Only now that I have a moment to think do I realise that it’s going to be hard to explain to Lucas what I’ve done and where I’ve been. He’ll understand that his parents were getting to me. They get to him too. What he won’t get is why I abandoned him with no text or signal and then disappeared off to a bar to have drinks with the waiter. Drinks that weren’t a date. I definitely told Harry it wasn’t. But it had started to feel like a date. I grinned too much and my eyes never met his, a sure sign that I like him.

It was dangerous, yet for all his Bean Koontzes and Mary Shellfishes, I love Lucas. We’ve been each other’s constants in a period where it feels like the ground has been constantly shifting. That has to mean something. I have to still love him.

I’ll apologise and not say anything about the bar. I’ll just say I went walking because I was worried about Elle Chambers, and explain that mess to him. I check my email again. Still no return missive from Elle Chambers. Maybe if I ask for Lucas’s help with my Elle Chambers mess, he and I can stay up and work it out together. That’s what we would have done a year

ago. If I had my wallet, I'd pick up beers and that horrendously chewy beef jerky that they display on the bottleshop counter and we could nut out the solution together. If he's remembered my bag, I'll run down and buy some for us as soon as I get home. It will all be alright.

Lucas will understand. It isn't like he hasn't let me down before. At breakfast, I avoided telling him about my Elle Chambers problem because I hadn't wanted to include him on the growing list of people like David and Mathia that I'd been lying to and now I'm rehearsing a giant lie by omission. Will he even recognise me when I walk through the door? Do I even recognise myself anymore?

I get home and try the front door. It's unlocked and I push it open, and notice that Lucas has remembered my bag. It's sitting on the kitchen counter. I also notice that the apartment is eerily silent and almost in darkness. He hasn't turned on any lights other than his desk lamp.

'I know I did something silly but you really shouldn't leave the door unlocked, Lucas. Anyone could walk in,' I say to him. He is barely more than a shadow on the sofa. Staring at me. He isn't even holding his phone.

'Where the fuck were you?'

I was wrong. Lucas does not understand. He is seething. Tonight is not a night that will end with jerky and beer.

'I was out walking. I've been really stressed about—'

'We were at dinner with my parents and you walked out without telling anyone.'

'I didn't walk out, Lucas. If anything, I climbed out.' Why am I arguing with him?

'You left. When we realised you were gone . . . that you'd just left me . . .' He is shaking.

'I didn't mean to frighten anyone. I'm really stressed at work and your parents were needling me *and* you, and I just couldn't take it anymore. Doesn't it make you angry that they do that to you? You can't tell me you don't wish you'd climbed out a window as well. It wasn't something I planned. I didn't even have my bag with me. If I'd planned to storm out, I would have taken it.'

'You plan everything! You embarrassed me – and my whole family. It's bad enough that you were late. You know how much my mother values people being on time. It was so rude of you.' I was feeling apologetic until

the ‘rude’ comment. ‘They’ve welcomed you; they are the reason that we’re in this apartment and all you’ve ever done is act like you’re better than them and now you can’t even lower yourself to sit through a whole dinner with them. Honestly, Rory. Where do you think you get off acting like this is all their fault?’

‘That is not what happened. Firstly, I was outside the restaurant waiting for you so that we could arrive together. I wasn’t dawdling on the streets. You just didn’t bother to think about me before you walked into the restaurant. Secondly, your mother hates me. She’s been waiting for me to do something that she could use to show you that you should be with someone else. Someone of her choosing. Thirdly, I don’t think I’m better than your family. I think I’m different. Thankfully, I’m different. Your mother is like Cruella de Vil, and you and Kelsey are the puppies. Can’t you tell when you’re about to be skinned to make a coat?’

‘Who does that make you in this *101 Dalmatians* analogy?’

‘I don’t know. Someone from the RSPCA?’

‘I begged you to come and support me. You know I hate being alone with them. Your job is to be there for me. Support me. If you seriously think my mother is like that, why would you leave me with her? Someone from the RSPCA wouldn’t do that. You should be the person lifting the man with the sausage roll out of the storm drain, not shoving him in.’

‘It was a manhole and hasn’t anything else happened in the Sydney news cycle in the last 24 hours? I told you and I don’t think you can call me out for being the unsupportive one in this relationship. I had to get away. I felt like I couldn’t breathe at that table.’

I kneel down in front of him so my face hovers directly across from his. ‘I fucked up, Lucas. I’m sorry. I’ll admit I did the wrong thing, but I would love it if you had the guts to admit that your parents aren’t exactly looking out for you and that your mother most certainly hates me. You wanted me there because you know she hates me and it takes the pressure off you. I’m your sacrificial lamb. You know that. You know me.’

‘I don’t know who you are anymore, Rory.’

And he stands up and walks past me. Straight out our front door. I feel like he has stepped through my body. I’ve become so far removed from the person he knows that I’m not solid; I’ve lost my lines and curves – he could walk right through me and not even lift his head and look me in the eye.

THURSDAY

Two days ago

I sit on the sofa until 1 am. Waiting for him to return. Resisting the urge to do work or clean so he knows I'm sincere in my apology. I'm angry at him but apologetically so.

I haven't even touched the crossword until I finally cave to the notion of sleep at 3 am because my eyes can no longer stay open. I go to bed, which is the signal for my brain to wake up and want to do a little polka around my head. I relent and open the crossword app.

I've upset Lucas to the point that I've become invisible. Plus I may have accidentally been on a date (despite my saying it was definitely not a date, but if you have to say that then it's definitely a date) with another man – a lovely man. And I am no closer to getting time with Elle Chambers, a fact that will soon become blindingly obvious to David and Mathia.

A smarter person would retrace their footsteps and come to the realisation that basing important life decisions on a crossword app may not be the most well-thought-out idea, but I'm not a smarter person. I'm stubborn and refuse to give up after three days. I am just suffering from some very large teething problems.

It isn't the crossword's fault – spies got my foot in the door when it came to an actual by-line *and* Elle Chambers' email. She hasn't responded to my plea yet, but it's in her inbox. Or in her junk folder. Maybe the crossword isn't working to its full potential because I'm not taking this far enough. If Mata Hari or James Bond wanted something done, they'd just go, do it and not be shy about it either (admittedly, James Bond could have stood to be a little shy). They wouldn't lie in bed wondering why they're wide awake at 3 am. They'd go straight to the target and get what they

wanted. I also highly doubt that either Hari or Bond would be alone in bed. They didn't seem the type.

I pull out my bedside notebook. My mother once suggested that I keep one next to me so that when I wake up panicking and full of to-do lists in the middle of the night, I can write my thoughts down and empty my head enough to go back to sleep. She so rarely gives me useful advice – see breathing exercises – that I was surprised when this turned out to be helpful.

I start a list.

What do I know about Elle Chambers?

I know her email.

I know she isn't so hard up for beauty products that she'd attend launches for a goody bag.

I know she is about to announce a bid for the council position.

She has two dogs. Both are older and walking them is her main exercise.

I know she is on television every weekday morning.

I know she is most likely waking up now, while I'm still struggling to go to sleep.

That's the sum of it.

Elle Chambers would be waking up about now. She'd need to be at the studio to go to air at 6.30 am. As I lie here, she is probably slugging back a green smoothie, wearing an eye mask, while she gets ready to drive to work. A workplace that's about twenty minutes away from where I am currently scheming sans smoothie – only fifteen minutes given the traffic at this time of the morning.

So now I have something else to add to my list because I know that when she drives into the studio gates, I will be there to introduce myself. Surely that level of Mata Hari moxie will mean something to the woman who slept in a tent outside parliament for three weeks until she was granted an interview with the prime minister when she was still doing long-form reporting.

Which means that I have to move now.

* * *

If I'd needed my six am alarm this morning it would sound like the theme of *Mission Impossible* – the original, no remixes cluttering my brain. Alarm clocks are for those who need to be woken. I haven't slept. I'm on an imposing slab of footpath, hidden behind a host of bottlebrush leaves like a garish Eve, waiting to make a fool out of myself, or, best-case scenario, make a career for myself.

My Uber driver is surprised when he picks me up. At 4 am, most of your fares aren't sober or dressed, all in black, like someone who should be clicking their appreciation to some spoken-word poetry in a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop. They're people stumbling out of pubs, buzzing with hilarious anecdotes that are indecipherable to anyone listening and you've got a one-in-three chance of dropping them off at the correct address. It all depends how accurately they, or the person geographically nearest to them, can hold a street number in their head.

The trick is to save your address as 'home' in the app. You can always remember that you want to go 'home', whether or not you can recall where it is.

On the other end of the scale are the workers. The bar staff who have stayed for a nightcap once everyone else has been kicked out, and the hi-vis army heading off to build and scale buildings.

The driver doesn't ask any follow-up questions after I respond with 'work' when he queries what I'm doing at this time of the morning. Not even when the drop-off address is in a quiet inner-city suburb that houses one of the biggest television studios in the country.

It is more likely my answer is his litmus test as to how likely it is that he is going to have to get his car cleaned after I get out. I'm guessing accidents in the back are a regular occurrence, given the huge cache of vanilla-scented Air Wick car plug-ins that are sitting in the tray underneath his passenger seat. My feet keep hitting the sides of the box and dislodging the ones on the top, releasing a synthetic puff of what smells like Impulse deodorant. It's making me feel queasy. I can taste it on my tongue.

As soon as he's established that I'm not a vomit risk (which may not be quite correct), he launches into an explanation of how Ponzi schemes work.

I'm still trying to work out why he was telling me about them, long after he's dropped me off in the studio carpark and driven away. The breeze slides up the back of my top, making me wish that I'd listened to my

grandma, who is a strong advocate of taking a coat – just in case. Normally, I do but when I was leaving the apartment, I worried that the more bulk I was carrying, the less streamlined I'd be. I couldn't be sure that I wouldn't need to slide through ceiling vents at some stage in my quest to interview Elle Chambers. There was always a possibility. It seems to happen in every spy movie I've ever seen. It felt foolish to not be ready for it.

The driver hadn't asked me if I knew how Ponzi schemes worked before starting his monologue. I tried not to read into it. I had given him the benefit of the doubt. Preferring to see him more as a stubbled music-box ballet dancer, going through the same routine no matter who opened the lid, rather than a man who immediately assumed that, as a woman, I'd have no idea about basic maths and people who exploited others to feather their own nests.

The only reason my mind keeps flicking back to the illuminating talk about a fella called Bernie Madoff – had I ever heard of him? No pause for response – is that waiting for a car to arrive, a car I don't even know the make of, is incredibly boring. I guess that's why in movies, when someone has to wait for an age, they make the scene thirty seconds long or they pair off characters. Imagine if *How to Steal a Million* was just Audrey Hepburn and no Peter O'Toole. I'd still watch it but probably only for an hour.

I'd been trying to look casual while I loitered on the corner to the entrance of the studio but decided it looked like I was soliciting for more than an interview with Elle Chambers, so I'd moved to a more discreet position – in a bush. Its branches are being more affectionate to me than Lucas has been in months.

So far, three cars have arrived. None have been her. There's a guard who popped his head out each time a car arrived to let them in the gate. For two of the cars, the gate had automatically opened. He'd unnecessarily shouted into the intercom as they'd arrived – 'Morning, Mr Rollins' and 'Morning, Miss Francis' – so that they could hear his greeting as soon as the front wheels slid onto the drive. The intercom was turned up to 11 and was the size of a post box. He was so loud that even if he'd just thought their names, the intercom would have blasted out his crackly voice. As it was, I could hear him in person, in his guard box as well as through the intercom. He was his own back-up singer.

The third car idled for a couple of minutes before he deigned to ask who they were and who they were here to see. He made them hold up some ID to a camera, which I realised was probably pointing at me whenever a car wasn't blocking its sightline.

The only thing that has saved me from being questioned so far is that the guard hasn't bothered to look at the camera unless there's a car. He's listening to talk radio and reading the paper. He seems to be disagreeing with a lot of what the announcer is saying. Loudly. Which is lovely because the presenter sounds like he belongs on Fox News – but it also raises the question, why is he listening to the person to begin with? When he turns the page of the newspaper, I can hear the licking of his thumb and pointer finger and then the corner being lifted up. The man has a real gift for projecting himself.

I size up the gates.

They aren't so much looming as they are Lego-like. Slick sides, totally impenetrable and not something you'd normally choose to take on with bare feet. I will have to wait for Elle Chambers to arrive and then sneak along the side of her car as the gates open. When she or her driver parks, I will introduce myself. It will all be very natural and not at all like I'm a crazed stalker.

Ten minutes later, the guard checks his watch and then slicks back a bit of his hair in a compact mirror that he pulls from his pocket. He puts down the paper and then changes the radio station. He obviously doesn't want the person he is expecting to think that he agrees with the shock jock's position about immigrants and sporting teams. He wasn't this attentive to how the previous cars' passengers might perceive him. It must mean that Elle Chambers is due.

A car arrives, and the gates fling open before its wheels hit the driveway. Instead of stopping at the intercom, the car stops inside the gate, bridging the gated and non-gated worlds, and idles while the guard climbs out of his box and approaches the driver's door.

Now is the time to move. Recalling the fire safety jingles of old, I get down low and I go, go, go. I crouch down beside the window on the passenger side, while the small talk kicks off. Did she have a nice night? Was it a busy day today? Had the dogs been scared by the storm? Her

gentle voice murmurs back. I can't make out her answers, because even as a professional orator, she cannot match the guard for volume.

What I do know is that it's definitely her. One of the few things I've picked up from watching some old interviews of her is that she has dogs. I also can't imagine the guard leaving his box for anyone that isn't Elle Chambers.

In the ninety minutes that he's unknowingly been under my observation, I can tell that he's a judgemental but warm man, one who would quite proudly tell the other members of his lawn bowls team that he is friends with Miss Chambers, and not mention any of the other employees of the station – anchors or otherwise.

After a good couple of minutes, the car starts crawling forward into the carpark. Speeding isn't an option. In every direction there is something designed to slow down anything on wheels. Raised markings that sound like popping tyres if you drift where you shouldn't go, and speed bumps every metre or so. This is working to my advantage. My nightly runs have not prepared me for crab-walking next to a moving car, and so I need a slow target. James Bond must work out like a demon.

It was wrong for the crossword to presume I have this level of fitness. It should have known better. I do the crossword every day, for Christ's sake.

Instead of following the clearly marked bitumen to where the other cars have parked, Elle Chambers' car takes a right and moves towards an entrance for underground parking. No. No. No. I won't be able to get out from under there. Through its slatted entry, I can see gate upon gate upon gate. Whoever designed this building had a real love of *Get Smart*. There is 60 centimetres of space left on each side of the car – it is that tight. It is not the kind of entry that was built to welcome intruders who would prefer to remain intact, and I don't have any Harry and butter with me in case I get caught in a tight spot.

I have to do something before the car reaches the ramp.

I panic.

I pop up.

I wave my hands high above my head.

I look like a deranged Marcel Marceau.

The screech of brakes runs through my ears and out of my toes. Nails running down the chalkboard of my nerves.

The guard, who has been standing in the middle of the entry, watching Miss Chambers drive away, dutifully keeping her safe, has not missed my evil jack-in-the-box manoeuvre.

‘Jerry!’ she yells from within the car. I can hear her clearly now.

‘I’m coming, Miss Chambers. Lock the doors. Don’t get out of the car!’

‘I just need a minute of your time, Miss Chambers,’ I say, trying to keep my voice even, so as not to make the situation worse. To think I’d been sweating about the tone of that email when my career was going to end like this.

‘Jerry!’

‘Miss Chambers, I’m not dangerous. I know I look like I’m nuts but I’m not. I just want to talk to you.’ It is like I’ve read a notebook of everything a murderous stalker would say and I’m reciting it, word for word.

She lowers her window.

I’ve always thought she looks beautiful on screen. Not in the same way that a lot of women on television are beautiful. I’ve seen nothing about her that looks like it has been bleached or contoured with a deep layering of various shades of foundation. She is always polished but not plastic. Now, in real life, she looks even more beautiful *and* furious. Her deep brown hair is sitting in a curled, loose bun on the top her head. There are no flyaways. Her eyes are large, dark and intense. There is no make-up. She has nothing to cover up. Some lines spread out from the corners of her eyes, like faint fortune lines on a palm, though instead of showing age, they show a life that is being lived. I can’t see those lines when she’s on television – the camera rarely goes in that close. I am happy to see that she hasn’t had them filled in. She doesn’t seem like the type of person to erase memories. She looks at ease with her appearance. She looks fuming mad.

‘What did you just say?’ she hissed, her eyes narrowing.

‘I promise I won’t hurt you. I’m a journalist. I just want to ask you a question.’

Jerry has nearly reached me. He is red in the face. Lawn bowls is not the kind of cardio that his eldest daughter told him he should be doing after his last cholesterol reading, and now he is paying for it, but there is no way he is going to let Miss Chambers down in her time of need.

I don’t have much longer before he’ll grab me. Both he and I are doing a lot of puffing and panting. Both of our limits have been extended past

capacity today and it is only 5.30 am.

‘Miss Chambers, I promise I’m not going to hurt you. I sent you an email earlier this week. I’m just trying to get a moment of your time.’

‘If you don’t want to hurt someone, may I suggest that you don’t try and run their car off the road?’ She is no longer yelling for Jerry, which is a good sign. Things are progressing in my favour.

‘I didn’t think I had a choice. I was running out of time.’

‘To maim me?’

‘No, I work for *The Connect*. I sent you flowers! I know you’re about to officially run for city council. I want to give you the opportunity to let everyone know what you stand for without harping on about what you’re wearing or what the status of your eggs are. Did you get the flowers?!’

‘You want to interview me and you thought the best way to do that would be to ambush me on the way to work?’

Jerry grabs my shoulder. We are both so sweaty that his hand slides down my arm to my elbow.

‘I’ve got her, Miss Chambers. You can go now. I’ll call the police.’

‘Just a minute, Jerry,’ Elle Chambers says.

‘Just let me explain, Jerry,’ I plead.

‘You don’t get to call me Jerry,’ says Jerry.

‘What’s your name?’ Elle Chambers asks.

‘Rory Byrne. I’m a journalist for *The Connect*. Please, I only need twenty minutes of your time. You won’t be alone with me. My boss will be there.’

‘That’s very reassuring, Miss Byrne, but I don’t give interviews. Especially not to people who care so little for my safety that they’d do something as manic as you’re doing.’

‘Go in, Miss Chambers. I’ll take her back to my office and call the police.’

I wonder if Jerry has an office or if he’s referring to his guard box. I have no idea how both of us would fit into that. The honking of a car from the gate startles us.

‘Answer that, Jerry. I’m sure Miss Byrne isn’t going to do anything else crazy. At least for the next two minutes.’

‘I promise I won’t. My job depends on this, Miss Chambers.’

‘Miss Chambers, I don’t think that’s wise. The cops should be notified,’ Jerry says.

‘I’m quite fine, Jerry. I don’t think she’s an actual threat, just very stupid.’

He bows his head and starts striding towards the gate. The disappointment radiates off him. He’s let her down. I got in on his watch. He’s a kicked dog, whimpering with his tail hanging between his legs in dismay.

‘I’m a good journalist. I’ll do a good piece.’

‘What else have you written? I don’t recognise your name.’

‘Mainly think pieces but I also pen something that’s pretty black and white once a week.’

‘What kind of think pieces? Please tell me you don’t recap soap operas.’

‘No, not soap operas.’

‘I’m known for calling bullshit when I see it, Miss Byrne.’

‘It’s one of the reasons I’m such a big fan.’

‘Then why are you treating me like an idiot?’

‘I’m not. I would never.’

‘I’m going to go inside now. I don’t want you to follow me.’

‘But . . .’

‘No. Jerry will let you out. I’ll call him from my car now. I won’t be pressing charges, so we don’t need to involve the police. I genuinely believe that you didn’t mean for this to go the way it has and that you’re *not* dangerous. What I don’t understand is why you or anyone else would have such a moronic approach to getting an interview. You’re a very silly young woman and I hope you get a bit smarter, sooner rather than later.’

I nod at her. I’m speechless.

‘Make sure you apologise to Jerry on your way out. He shouldn’t be running at his age. Send him some of those flowers of yours.’

Her window zips up and the gates to the underground parking open and then close behind her car. Elle Chambers, my pride, the wet handprints I made on her door and my last chance for redemption are whisked away. I feel hollowed out.

Jerry shakes his head at me as I pass the guard box. The fact he isn’t slapping plastic handcuffs from the prop room on my wrists means that Elle

Chambers was true to her word and has stopped him from getting me arrested.

‘I’m sorry, Jerry.’

He shakes his head at me again and opens the gates.

As soon as I’m back on the street, I burst into tears.

I keep walking for several blocks, as I’ve exhausted my slim Uber budget for the month, which is fine because I don’t want to be forced to explain to any prying drivers what just happened. Even my Ponzi-obsessed friend would feel compelled to ask how I am if I got in his car now. I get on the next bus that says ‘City’. There are only three other people on it. All of them are face-down in their phones.

One of them has a bacon and egg roll propped up against his leg and is taking bites in between swiping left and right with his sticky barbecue-sauce fingers. There are some real lucky women about to enter into an endless stream of what’s-ups with this catch. Maybe he’ll tell one of them about the woman who’s on his bus this morning, dressed in black with red eyes and a runny nose. Maybe he won’t – it isn’t exactly uplifting, sexy small talk.

All I want at the moment is *my* bus driver. He would understand. He wouldn’t ask me any questions. He would have a box of tissues on the little shelf that sits behind him and also a travel pack tucked into his front shirt pocket. Just in case.

No, I want the bronze sedan to pull up so I can move the crossword off the front seat and onto my lap. I want to smell Old Spice, Brylcreem and leather softener. I want my grandad. I wouldn’t need to tell him anything. I wouldn’t want to. God knows, nothing I’ve done since Tuesday morning would be anything I could tell him with a skerrick of pride. If I did, he’d probably sit there in silence, questioning all of the advice he’d given me over the years, tracing it back for a hint as to how I’d become the Rory now sitting next to him. No, I’d just sit there, alternating between looking at him, the crossroad and the lilly-pillies that line the side of the road. And that would be enough.

I don’t really know where I’m going. It’s too early to go into the office, without being asked by David why I’m there so early. I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to see Lucas. He’d think I was crying about our fight, which would be a reasonable assumption; I should be more upset about our

fight. Perhaps, as the day wears on, my sadness about Elle Chambers might morph into a sadness about disappointing Lucas and showing Patricia that I'm as flighty as she has always suspected I am. I'm sure she's thrilled. At the very least, I've made Patricia happy now. That truly is the very least.

Out the window, I can see people are turning on lights in their homes. Kitchens are being lit up by cereal, toast and cups of coffee. I imagine parents yelling upstairs to children who are going to be late for school – too busy pulling out tutus and searching for lost socks to worry about the first bell. They are kids; being late means nothing to them. They'll be ushered to their assigned desks and forgiven. They'll slip into whatever lesson has already started in their absence. They might not find the correct page immediately, but they will eventually. A friend sitting next to them will whisper the number to them and the teacher will tut but quickly forget about the disruption.

Shared bathrooms are being warmed with couples elbowing each other for sink space. Lucas and I had that casual domestic intimacy when we were first together. Now we wake up hours apart and the closest we get to a playful back and forth with toothpaste is when I clean the white smudges off the mirror that he has left because he can't seem to find the drain. All this is happening to happy people around me, while I sit on a bus gradually becoming jealous of the person sitting in front of me who, due to his one-handed approach to breakfast, is becoming more sauce than man.

And who can I call for help?

Right now, my grandma would be gently snoring with a library book open beside her. My mother would be out at a bar, sipping a drink – any drink – that comes with a maraschino cherry spear, possibly in New York, where she would be scouting for a corner of the city that hasn't been filmed a million times before. An indulgent, impossible quest.

Kitt would be doing her morning run with Elise. They'd be trading lists of what they need to buy at the supermarket on their respective ways home.

Maybe David, but he is very much a work colleague. One I coerce into small talk with caffeine and praise. Someone I'm about to be exposed to as a liar. No amount of coffee will be able to redeem me then. And then there is Lucas. I don't even know where he is. I don't know where I am. Even if I use Google maps to find the suburb's name, the letters will be fuzzy and meaningless anyway.

My brain hasn't been able to hold on to any place names that have come to me since age eighteen. Another reason, other than my looming criminal record, that I'm a lousy journalist. I *should* be writing soap opera recaps. That is where I belong. Droning on about someone called Cliff who is lost at sea and three women named Ashley who are all engaged to a tycoon called Maximus, on a blog that is tucked away on the fifteenth page of a Google search for *The Bold and the Beautiful* fan fiction.

I slide off the bus once it crosses the bridge. I can walk the eight blocks up to the office. It will give my face time to fade from red to pink and give me time to formulate a plan before I see David. The footpaths are filling up with couples who have moved from their bathrooms to affectionate partings at their respective office buildings. They look like they colour coordinated before they left home; however, it's more likely that the only clothes they wear from Monday to Friday are variations on grey, black and navy. In my incognito spy-wear, I finally fit right in.

I decide to call Mum. I don't care if I'm about to get advice from a gin-soaked Dalai Lama – I need her.

'Aurora, Aurora, Aurora. Finally, you call. You sound upset.'

'I haven't said anything yet. How could you possibly know I'm upset?'

'I can feel it through the phone.'

'I thought you said that phones emitted radiation. I didn't think feelings were a part of that.'

'Honey, will you please just tell me what's wrong? I know you haven't called me because you want to make fun of me. You normally wait for *me* to call *you* to do that.'

'I think I might have made a mistake at work and I don't know how to fix it.'

Saying it out loud was actually making it worse in my head.

'Do you think you made a mistake or do you know that you made a mistake?'

'I know.'

'Have you told Grandma and Kitt?'

'I'm hoping that I can fix it before I need to widen the focus group.'

Why have I brought my mother into this? I need to fix my own problems. I put my hand on the brick wall of an office building to steady myself. Rest my forehead against the concrete bumps until I can feel

indentations forming. I can't make out the words that Mum is saying but the ups and downs of her speech tell me that I've got a moment with the wall before she'll notice I'm not listening.

I can see where this is going to go. Mum will be flattered that I called her first and then she'll get worried and want to come over to fix everything, and Grandma will find out, because suddenly Mum is back in the country and then everyone will be worried about me. And then Grandma will probably resent that I haven't called her.

Every conversation I have with Grandma from now until my grave will have her asking me 'How *are* you?' for a minimum of three times and she won't believe any reassuring answer I offer up to her.

'Aurora, you've gone quiet, honey. You're not even doing that thing where you repeat words that I've said back to me. Do you need me to come to Sydney?'

'No. No. I just realised what I need to do.' (More lies!) 'Something you said must have knocked something loose in my brain. Must be that added dose of radiation from the phone. I've finally reached my recommended daily amount.'

'I know you're joking, but it wouldn't hurt you to hold the phone away from your ear.'

'Mum, I'm sorry I've worried you. I'll see you when you're back over this side of the world. Actually, where are you?'

'I'm in my hotel room, running a bath.'

So now I know what room my mum is in but not what country. It could be 2 am yesterday where she is. It could be midday.

'Sweet dreams, Mum. I have to go to work.'

'I'll see you soon. Promise.'

'Mum, don't do anything—'

And the phone cuts out. Or my mum has accidentally hung up on me in an attempt to take me off speaker. I let out a sob into the dead screen.

* * *

'No coffee?' David asks as I approach his desk.

'Sorry. No. I forgot.'

I've walked up to him like I always do, despite the lack of coffee. Lucas is right: I really do plan everything and stick to a routine.

'Don't be sorry. I'm just winding you up. You know you don't need to get my coffee every morning, right? I mean, keep doing it but you don't have to.' He is grinning at my apology.

Oh, how I wish I were David with his confident words and smiles, even though he has a massive sleep deficit and a mother-in-law who has more Egyptian cotton than kindness when it comes to him. She still sounds more human than Patricia, though, whom I can't imagine ever holding a baby – even her own. Things are easy for David. He is a warm knife through butter. I am a plastic spork.

'Are you okay?' he asks. 'Even for you this is early.'

'I'm fine. I just wanted to finish the bottom left-hand corner of the crossword so I can move on to something a little less puzzling.'

'You don't look okay. Why are you all in black? Did someone die?'

'David, you're wonderful but has there ever been a time where you've told someone that they don't look okay and it made them feel better? Or a time when someone asked if someone died and then didn't feel horrible to learn someone actually had?'

'I'm sure there's been a time where both those things have happened.'

'There hasn't been a time, David. I promise you.'

'Just let me know if you need anything, okay, kid?'

'Do you have a time machine?'

'I have a *Dr Who* Tardis that doubles as a cookie jar and a *Buffy* boxset on VHS. Will that do?'

'It's the closest thing I've got, so sure.'

'I'll warn you, it's a lot of tapes. You'll need to clear a bookshelf.'

'I'll make a fort out of the cases and wait out the next five years.'

'No forts until you've lined up that Elle Chambers interview.'

I don't say anything.

'You're supposed to laugh at that, Rory. It was a joke.'

'A joke?' I parrot back.

'I think you should go home and call in sick. You don't look well – forgive me for saying it – and you're just staring at me like I've thrown decaf or, worse, coffee made with *skim milk* (he's definitely registered what

I did the other morning) in your face. It's disconcerting and it's making me sad.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be sorry. Just go home and only get on your emails if you have an interview time with Elle Chambers to share with me. The crossword can wait. It doesn't need to be sent to the printer until Saturday afternoon. Friday is a false deadline. They just need to know what size it is to leave space for it in the layout.'

'I didn't know that. I've been compiling the crossword for more than two years and I did not know that.'

'It's the linguistic equivalent of paint-by-numbers, Rory.'

'Sorry, did you say that I'm making *you* sad?'

'I meant that as a good thing. No surprises. It means you can go home without feeling guilty.'

'Crosswords are more complicated than you think they are, David.'

'Most things in life are. Yet we forge on. Me from this desk until 8 am and you from your bed until you wake up and start being your normal self again.'

'Bye, David.'

'Feel better, Rory.'

As I exit the building, I see people spilling out of coffee shops onto the pavement, loading up on caffeine and enjoying the morning sun. I feel like I'm in the middle of an obstacle course, dodging suits on the footpath and cars on the narrow roads. Careening towards a distant end.

I call Kitt. She answers as she's buying milk on her way to the lab. All her colleagues have to take turns buying it – government funding doesn't extend to the tearoom.

'I don't normally get a call from you at this time. What a fun surprise. I love this crossword jag. Did 15 Down tell you to call your number-one lady?' The lightness in her voice buoys my heart.

'I'm just on my way home.'

'From where? Don't tell me that dinner with the Wicked Witch ended up kicking on?'

'The very opposite.'

'You got out of it?'

'In a way.'

‘Huh?’

My bathroom window hijinks are on the tip of my tongue but I don’t want to have to talk about my drink with Harry. If I bring it up, Kitt will have fifty questions and if I unpack it too much, it’ll grow into a thing that I can’t manage.

‘It just ended up taking up less of my time than I expected.’

‘You are being incredibly cryptic this morning. Did you switch the kind of crossword you’re consulting?’

I laugh. I cannot do cryptic crosswords. They might as well be written in Klingon. A mass of grey areas. Too unreliable. Too open to interpretation.

‘It’s spies until midday.’

‘I can’t imagine you as a spy.’

‘I’m a really bad one.’

‘What spy moves have you done?’

‘A little light stalking, a bit of last-minute escapism.’

‘Was a saw blade or laser about to slice you in half, vagina first? Did Dr No or, worse yet, Patricia tell you that she expected you to die and fillet you with her French manicure?’

‘It feels like it.’

‘Is this mood because of the dinner with Lucas’s family?’

‘It’s about a lot of things.’

‘Do you need me to come and meet you? I can call in sick.’

‘A very, very big selfish part of me would like to say yes, but then there’s the part of me that knows that the milk you’re holding needs to go into a fridge or there’ll be a bunch of cranky scientists, so I think I’m going to let you get on with your day and avoid anything curdling.’

‘What about once I put the carton of milk in a safe, sanitary environment? I could give you a call then without risking any curds. I can tell you all about how the cat is taking to Spanish. I’ve given up on French.’

‘Please stop. I’ll be okay. I feel a list coming on. I’ll call you later if I need you.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure. It’s the one thing I’m absolutely sure about.’

But I’m not. I’m not sure about anything, except that Kitt needs to stop talking about the cat.

‘I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

* * *

I don’t want to go home. I want to sit in the park. Watch people walk their dogs. Witness the ibises stealing sandwiches. Make a checklist for how I’m going to make everything better. But my red leather, blue-lined notebook that I use for lists is in the apartment. My stomach lurches at the hint of a confrontation with Lucas. Another fight or tear will cleave me in two. I’m keeping it together by only the most gossamer of threads. I need time for the silkworms to finish the job. I’ll go back home, keep my head down, get the notebook and then wait in the park, nestled in my slowly woven cocoon until I can emerge whole. Give the silkworms some time to do their job.

I don’t hear the voices until I’m in my lounge room putting my small black (black for sneaking around and hiding in bushes) crossbody bag on the sofa.

I freeze. Think that Lucas and Patricia must be dismantling me over eggs. Taking apart the brownness of my hair over oat milk. The unpolished state of my nails, while they push around sourdough that Lucas’s mother wouldn’t deign to eat anyway, she who is so unpuffed by gluten and extra grams. I imagine all the hard words that are about me but not meant for my ears until I realise that the woman’s voice isn’t as crisp as Patricia’s and it’s coming from the bedroom.

I approach and the stale clove scent hits me first.

The black, lacy bralette second.

My pillow – with its scalloped edges, borrowed from my grandma’s house – propping up that woman’s arse, that *Marissa* from the gallery, third.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. My mind is a news ticker with one word rolling across the screen. Fuck.

‘Fuck,’ Lucas says as he sees me. He’s sweaty and wide-eyed.

‘God, stop staring at my arse. It’s creepy,’ says the woman, who is probably Marissa but I’m at the wrong angle to know for sure.

‘Get off my pillow,’ I say.

‘That’s not very nice. Lucas, are you going to tell her not to talk to me like that?’ She pouts in *my* boyfriend’s direction.

'Fuck,' says Lucas.

I grab my pillow. The woman, definitely Marissa from the gallery, scrambles to the other side of the bed as if I'm Harvey Weinstein wanting to offer her a role.

'Fuck,' says Lucas again.

I go into the lounge room and pick up my crossbody bag.

Lucas has moved to the doorframe, separating the two defined rooms in our apartment, as if he's bracing himself against a gale. As if I'm about to rip his framed doodle of John le Current off the wall and smash it, and he'll have to stand there picking up the glass and taking my blows. As if I'm the one putting my arse all over other people's pillows.

'Fuck,' he says.

I close the door to his fucks behind me and head for the nearest laundromat.

* * *

My lone pillowcase is on its third delicates cycle.

One cycle didn't seem enough to get the sweaty imprint of her cheeks off the linen. Linen that has gone for generations without being used as a sex prop. At least I hope it hasn't. Linen that hasn't had the scent of stale cloves ground into its fibres. It must have come out in her sweat. Her pores have been purging themselves on *my* pillowcase. Purging me from *my* apartment. From *my* Lucas. Unless she used her arse to smoke them. Puckered it up and took a drag. I don't know what cool girls are doing these days; I've never known. I can't imagine Catherine inhaling through her anus and she is the only cool person I'm in regular close proximity to.

How long has this been going on? Had it happened when I wasn't one of the hanger-ons after the gallery opening? The night before, when he had left me alone during the night and then crawled into bed without offering up an explanation why? Or maybe this has been happening since he started sleeping through the Saturday cleaning ritual. Maybe it's better to not be able to pinpoint the moment when in his head we diverged, and they converged.

There aren't a lot of people at the laundromat at 9.30 am on a Thursday. I expect most people have jobs or school drop-offs that dominate their

mornings. I have a job. My face and general demeanour have made people too sad for me to be around them and do it today, but I do have a job. At least until Jerry eventually reneges on his promise to Elle Chambers and calls the police. Or Mathia grows impatient with my Elle Chambers connection short-circuiting and she sees me for the fraud that I am.

What is a journalist without ins?

Out.

Who am I without Lucas and my job? I'm a woman with a laminated five-year plan that needs to go in the bin.

The gentle whirring of the washing machine and hypnotic motions of the pillowcase are offering me the mindfulness that my mother has never been able to pass on. The slow crawl of the pillowcase up the sides, the swift drop that you know is coming once it reaches the top. It is lovely and predictable. I can see why Josh Hartnett became obsessed with loads of washing in *40 Days and 40 Nights*. He claimed it was because he couldn't masturbate and had to keep his hands busy but there's nothing hands on about laundry. You put it in. The machine washes the arse prints off. If you don't have a clothesline you put it in another machine. No, he definitely just needed a sudsy break from it all.

I don't have enough change on me for a fourth cycle. I've spent the small amount I had in my purse on little fabric softener sachets from a vending machine that is so old and rusty that I'll probably need a tetanus shot now that I've handled the flap on the drop chute. And the rest of my coins have gone in the washing machine's change slot.

I'm surprised I had so many coins on me when I got to the laundromat. If I'd remembered to buy the coffees at work this morning, I would have had nothing. My pillowcase would smell like the end of an us and arse, instead of synthetic lavender.

I should have seen this coming. I might not want to think about when Lucas gave up on me, but I know when it was that I'd started to question us, even if I'd kept burying it in order to keep up the façade that Lucas and I were okay.

A year after starting at *The Connect*, Catherine and I had both been invited to a big networking night for new starters in media: 'New in News'. After my public breakdown due to accidentally deleting Kerry's article, I'd been trying to keep out of people's way at work, at least until I was sure

they had forgotten or there was a big turnover in staff and the office was full of fresh, new colleagues who hadn't witnessed it. So I was surprised when David had mentioned the event to me. As part of a mentorship program that *The Connect* was signed up to, there were two comp tickets for staff, and somehow I had been chosen to go, alongside Catherine, who already knew everyone's name in the office and was campaigning for her own column where she would sum up the week from a millennial's viewpoint – a demographic that she told Mathia we weren't catering to, and Mathia had actually listened.

I'd spent a week planning what I was going to wear – a black velvet tunic mini over my blue buttoned shirt covered in white dandelions. Something that I figured would be fine, even if the casual dress code listed on the e-vite turned out to be closer to cocktail. I'd rehearsed small talk with Lucas, in an effort not to resort to 'Chechnya' like Bridget Jones. Catherine and I were going to have a drink before we went, because who knew, we might even become friends. The word 'networking' filled me with fear, but I was setting myself up for success. Plus, there would be free drinks.

Then, the morning of, Lucas called me. His parents were in town. They'd bought tickets for them and him to go to a fundraiser for a new children's cancer unit. Could I go with him? He said he'd ask Patricia to buy me a ticket so I didn't need to worry about paying for it. All week he had sped read with me every newspaper we could get our hands on, so that I wouldn't look like I didn't know what was happening in the news at the networking drinks, and now he was asking me to go to a fundraiser with him and his parents, as if I had no other plans that night.

He was desperate. He hated being alone with his parents, and his sister was away, posing for selfies at Coachella. Without me, his dad would just launch at him (though I'd never known my presence to be a deterrent). He'd been there for me so many times, he said, and just needed me this *one* time. His mother was practically paying our rent, so we couldn't not go. We'd look like we didn't appreciate everything she'd done for us. For me.

I buckled. Of course I buckled.

I said I'd meet him at the venue. He insisted we go together from the apartment. I apologised to David. I apologised to Catherine. I went and spent money I didn't really have on a dress that I hoped Patricia wouldn't

judge too harshly and I sat in our apartment, waiting for Lucas so that we could face his parents together.

After an hour, I was annoyed. After two, I was worried that something had happened to him. After three, I was furious. He wouldn't answer his phone. I could see my texts were going through but I wasn't getting a response. At 2 am, after I'd changed into my pyjamas, unpinned my hair and washed the make-up off my face, I even nearly called Patricia. Just as I was searching through my contact list for her name, Lucas stumbled in. Jolly. Definitely not dead. Completely oblivious as to why I was fuming.

There had been a change in plans. His mum had taken him shopping because he hadn't worn a suit since cousin Eric's wedding at the Whitsundays, so he was due for a new one. She'd insisted he get changed with them at the hotel – it didn't make sense for him to go all the way back to the apartment – and while he was there, she wanted his opinion on a painting she'd found online and was thinking about buying. He insisted that he'd texted me to meet him at the venue. There was no text on my phone. Once he was there, he'd run into Bennett and Chip, guys he'd gone to school with – both were now in finance – and the night just got away from him. They'd kicked on for a cheeky beverage at a little bar after the event had finished. He was sorry but these things happened. He did think that he'd messaged me.

The next day it was like I'd dreamt it. No more apologies. Lucas was hung over. I missed out on the chance of friendship and the opportunity to show David and Mathia that I really cared about my job.

That was the moment I realised that I wasn't a priority for him anymore. I couldn't even recognise the man who'd lain with me on the mess of coats and blankets, in that old share house. He'd disappeared and now I realise that he never really came back.

* * *

At 12 pm, the new crossword notification pops up on my phone. The last time I was this happy to see a notification was when my pizza was arriving on the *Mystic Pizza* theme nights that Kitt and I have, pairing food and drinks to movies; carbonara for *Heartburn* was a particular favourite. A night that Lucas has always told me is ridiculous and one that he probably

recalls whenever he has had to justify fucking a woman who is confident prancing around in a bralette – a woman who laughed in the face of a cold breeze.

20 ACROSS

The Thursday crossword delivers hope and I cry with relief. I pull my pillowcase out of the dryer and go back to my orange, dimpled bucket chair to await further instructions. The first large across.

20A He went from *Less Than Zero* to 26 on the Periodic Table.

Finally, the fact that I've sat through the eleventy million movies in the Marvel Universe with Lucas, who claims he only watches them ironically when they come up in conversation with his friends, can deliver something of worth.

They are on our TV every Sunday – Saturday nights always accidentally (what Lucas says when he stumbles through the door in the am) and predictably (what I always say when he wakes me up, banging around jars and doors while he creates the 'perfect' sandwich) get out of control. So on Sundays Lucas is usually spread across the sofa, one hand wearing a pack of crinkle-cut chips like a glove, with the other hand on his forehead as if he is in the midst of an attack of the vapours. He watches movie after movie after movie, of cosplay and punches. Everyone has a movie balm that works for them in a hung-over funk: *Notting Hill* is mine, *The Avengers* is Lucas's. But he doesn't actually like them, so please don't suggest that he does – his favourite movie is still definitely *Pulp Fiction*, a cooler version of cosplay and punches – but we have to watch these ones because they have a soothing formula that makes the world spin a little less. Yet I am the ridiculous one for having a *Mystic Pizza* theme night.

Most Sundays, I've sat on my grey three-seater, unwittingly absorbing each manic storyline while thinking that this is going to be what it is like when we are married, this is my forever, and I'll not be able to read because of the explosions.

Well, after the events of today, maybe I'll be reading in silence after all.

Robert Downey Jr. A man whose mug shot I can instantly bring to the front of my mind. One of the mug shots, anyway. Dressed in the deep orange favoured by Californian celebrities, his face always makes me think of Sebastian from *The Little Mermaid*. The animated version. Very 'Under the Sea'. Now he is reformed and has been given a rare gift – usually only bestowed on male actors – the comeback. And *Iron Man* (symbol Fe, atomic number 26 on the periodic table) was a money-spinning part of that.

Like him, I need the restorative effects of a five-star rehab centre for addicts. The opportunity to drop out of the world until I am a different, put-together person. Unlike him, I am not an '80s icon and have recently invested the bulk of my savings in lavender fabric softener.

My home is occupied. My bedroom now a sex den. And I'm not involved in either scenario. Had I been invited, I would have politely declined and washed my hands after deleting the e-vite. It would have been nice to be asked by the host – my boyfriend – though.

I need to sleep but I can't go back to the apartment. I can't sleep in the laundromat.

There's no one standing around, waiting to move me along, but I don't like the idea of being asleep in a room with three large windows instead of the walls of my bedroom. My sleep isn't a spectator sport. I've chosen my hairdresser based on how exposed I'll be to foot traffic, when I'm wrapped in aluminium foil, so I'm certainly not going to sleep in a fishbowl. Especially not one that looks like it hasn't been cleaned in living memory.

I can see the sun when I close my eyes. I really need to sleep. Somewhere dark and cushioned. Preferably alone.

The cinema.

Inspired by the popcorn that had been on my brain since I got buttered up and Downey Jr's occupation of choice.

* * *

The Golden Screen is a clunky portmanteau of the silver screen and the golden age and the mash-up is reflected in its design. Bolted to the wall, housed in giant poster frames, Grace Kelly mingles with Awkwafina and Cary Grant stands next to Tom Cruise. All the fixtures are covered with

gold paint, a look that always makes me think of high school drama productions. Playing a queen? Put some gold paint on a circle of cardboard and a stick. You've got your sceptre. Need to look like a rich person? Coat some of those loose bricks from the side of the demountable in gold and pile them up beside you. I don't know what it is about the finish that makes it look so amateurish and fake. Or maybe I've just answered my own question. It isn't real.

The only thing that feels real right now is the layer of dust that sits on the heavy velvet curtains that bookend the screen.

The cinema itself is on the main street, squeezed so tightly between its neighbours that if the owners ever wanted to have windows inserted on either side of the building, they would have cut directly into a massage parlour on the east side. I've never worked out whether the massage parlour is a 'full-service' institution or a place that you would genuinely go to if you have bad pain. And on the west side they would have sawn into an accountancy firm that has three out of its twelve desks occupied by accountants. The other nine desks are covered in paper. Whenever the photocopiers spit out that last page that just has an inky black line across its width, they put it on an unoccupied table – presumably to live there for the rest of time. I don't know why they never put them in a recycling bin. I know this because I went there once to have my taxes done. I'd been alarmed by the piles but hadn't wanted to be rude and leave. I just ignored future spam from them in the following years. I couldn't, in all conscience, trust the kind of people that spread useless bits of used paper around a room with my financials.

Luckily, The Golden Screen has no need for windows. Cinemas are one of the rare businesses where the less natural light the better. Especially if you aren't going to run a vacuum over your curtains.

The cinema turns out to be a good choice. The black and white letters on the billboard outside the entrance could just as well have said, 'You're right to have faith in the crossword', though I don't think the letter pack came with punctuation, and, if it did, the managers had never chosen to use it. Ever.

What it does say is:

AN AFTERNOON WITH AUDREY FUNNY FACE ROMAN HOLIDAY BREAKFAST AT TIFFANYS

I realise I can bask in Audrey's warm glow for \$25 and by the time they are searching for the cat in the rain, I will know what to do. All my vital organs and powers of logic have been scooped out over the last, endless 24 hours and I need to give myself roughly six hours to regenerate.

I feel the chewed gum surrounding me. Hiding under the seats and tucked between armrests, and for once I don't mind. I think about my hand sanitiser in my crossbody, which is still sitting in my lounge room, but I don't have the strength to be anal. I just need to let the presence of the hardened pink blobs wash over me and for Audrey to work her magic.

There are no other patrons for this session – it's just me and the chewing gum and I despair at the low turnout for Audrey. What is the world coming to?

And then he comes and sits down next to me. Of course he does. Where else would he sit? He of the lightly crinkled blue button-up shirt and the scent of freshly cut grass. I only know I'm not dreaming because if I was, his shirt would be ironed.

'Running in to you again. This is my lucky day.'

Harry looks at me and takes it all in. The pillow I'm clutching on my lap – an attempt to stop it from touching the surface of the chair. The expanding darkness, spreading like ink blots, under my red eyes. The fact that I haven't returned his enthusiastic greeting with a self-deprecating quip. Clearly, I am not the woman he rescued from the toilet window last night. He reaches across the back of my shoulders, and I lean into him. Relax against his side.

He says, 'I'm sorry, mate,' and I finally close my eyes.

* * *

I don't wake up to see Holly Golightly clutch the cat. When I open my eyes, the lights are on and even though they still cast the room in shadow, the fluorescents are burrowing into my skull. My face is welded to Harry's shoulder. My eyes feel crusty and my cheeks feel warm.

‘They said we could stay in here until they shut for the night. They’re screening *Mission Impossible 16: Big Explosion* in the other cinema, so as long as you don’t mind twelve-year-old cleaners sweeping up popcorn for minimum wage, you’ve got this seat for another two hours.’

I nod gratefully. I can’t speak. If I do, the mess of my life will tumble out. All of it. It will be more embarrassing than my drool that is darkening the blue of his cotton shirt. I start nodding at him in lieu of words.

‘I promise I didn’t follow you in here. In fact, I swear *I* told *you* about this marathon the other night. My mum loved Audrey so I gave myself the day off. Whenever one of her movies was on television, she’d turn it up and tell us all to shut up. She wasn’t quite as delicate as her idol but you couldn’t be when you’d had three boys in six years, and fists and Lynx deodorant dominated your household.’

I nod.

‘She passed away last year. She’d been sick for a long time. We all took turns staying with her, trying to pretend like things hadn’t changed. That we couldn’t see her catch her breath after she climbed the one flight of stairs. And she returned the favour by acting as if we were just being lazy when we left her books, hand cream and everything else that she needed in the lounge room downstairs. We were all sparing each other “the talk”. We aren’t a “feelings” family.’

I nod slowly.

‘Even when she had to go into palliative care, she’d joke that it was because we were so untidy that her doctors – because they were a plural by then – were worried that if she stayed at home she’d trip on our shoes and break her leg. A broken leg. I wish. Something to be strapped together to reset rather than a diseased vine choking the tree that had been holding us all up for thirty-odd years.’

I put my hand on his arm. He looks down at it and smiles.

‘I’m okay. I just miss her.’

I squeeze his arm.

‘I still have my brothers, so it’s not like I’m alone in the world. In fact, I was covering someone else’s shift at the restaurant as a last-minute favour. Tim, my oldest brother. Thankfully, he’s the manager as well as my brother so no one has lost their job and he can’t hate me. It’s family law.’

I keep my hand on his skin.

‘I didn’t expect to have company for the screening. I can see that things haven’t improved since you climbed, or pushed yourself, through that window last night. If they had, I presume you’d be skewering me with some of that wit of yours, but I’m happy that you’re here. If that helps you feel any better?’

I nod.

‘You can go back to sleep on my arm if you want or I can take you somewhere?’

I shake my head. I know that I need to go to Kitt’s apartment. To lie on her couch and not say anything until I’ve processed it all myself. Harry is the human equivalent of a warm hug but I don’t know him. I know Kitt. Kitt knows me.

We help each other up out of the chairs. We’re like an elderly couple, with fifty years of experience hoisting the other person to their feet. Of knowing when silence is all that one of them can offer, and that is okay.

‘Are you sure you don’t at least want me to walk you somewhere?’ he asks when we’re out on the street.

I shake my head. I’ve already made his day – a day he’d set aside for his mother – all about me.

‘Let me guess, at midnight you’ll turn into a pumpkin, or a roast chicken, and drive away in your glass slipper and that will be the end of the fairy-tale?’

I want to smile but it comes out wobbly, so I settle for a shrug.

No, that’s not enough.

I hug him. Hold him close enough that I can happily confirm that he no longer wears Lynx body spray and the cut-grass scent from earlier is definitely him, and then I start walking towards Kitt’s apartment.

* * *

Kitt and I have a ‘Won’t Ask, Won’t Tell’ rule. It can be supremely frustrating but ultimately it’s a lifesaver. It gives us the chance to ask the other for help without the heavy burden of providing a reason alongside it. It had been born from a piece that I’d loosely helped David with (I brought him three coffees that morning while he wrote) about the rising suicide trend in men over fifty. A generation that had largely been raised under the

banner of 'Keep Calm and Carry On' long before it was emblazoned on mugs and cross-stitched all over Etsy.

It had broken my heart. I could see David mentally tracing back through all his non-conversations with his father, searching for weightier silences, checking to see if the same fate was about to befall him. I told Kitt and because she's the kind of woman who deals in fact, she proposed a solution, so that we would always have a lifeline in each other. Won't Ask, Won't Tell. Our *Friday Night Lights* version of a bat signal with a meme of Mrs Coach Taylor cradling a wine glass. Kitt had only used it once.

She'd been living alone at the time. This was three months before she'd met Elise and decided that having someone to split the bills with wouldn't be so bad after all. Apparently, they had met in a bar and hit it off, but Kitt hadn't mentioned the existence of Elise to me until they were sharing a bathroom. Maybe she'd thought I wouldn't want to share our friendship. Maybe she was a different version of Kitt with Elise.

I got the text when I woke up at 6 am. It had a 4.02 am time stamp on it. I ran straight over to the apartment and was handed a tote bag full of heads.

Porcelain figurine heads. Pale and sporting a collection of pastel tri-cornered hats and bonnets. It was like the lamb had finally stood up to Mary and her cohorts.

'What is this?'

'They are heads. I need to put them back on these bodies.' Kitt gestured over to her couch, which was littered with mint-green petticoats and sky-blue remains.

'I'm not going to ask.'

'You're not allowed to.'

'Do we have a timeline for fixing this . . . situation. A surgery that will no doubt be haunting me in my dreams tonight?'

'Ideally, lunchtime. I'd like to get them back by then.'

'Okay. Which grassy sheep knoll are the dolls returning to?'

'Are you allowed to ask that? I think that might violate our Won't Ask, Won't Tell policy.' Kitt kept her head down.

'I think it's up to you in this instance what I can ask and what I can't. If you want me to ask zero questions about the massacre that is lying before us, I can ask zero questions.'

‘These dolls need to go back to my parents’ house. I shouldn’t have decapitated them but we had a fight. They asked why I wasn’t seeing a nice boy and I told them the truth and when I slammed my old bedroom door, a bloody shelf came down in the hallway. The bloody shelf that these porcelain nightmares live on. My mum really loves these hideous dolls. I guess they’re the opposite to me. Manageable and just require a light dust every couple of weeks. She needs them. I’m more complicated.’

‘Okay.’ I wanted to reach my hand out and touch her arm but I knew it would just make her feel like she had to say more. I couldn’t imagine a fight breaking out between me and my grandma or my mum about a litany of disastrous first dates. What did Kitt’s parents expect her to do about that? ‘We don’t need to talk about it. Let’s just keep gluing.’

We worked quietly, Kitt showcasing the level of focus that had landed her the first pick of lab positions when she’d completed her graduate degree. My grandma would have made quick work of the porcelain graveyard. Maybe if I’d done papier-mâché with my mother all those years prior I would have been a defter hand – alas I was as coordinated and delicate as Lucas when he was making one of his drunken sandwiches. I left as soon as the last head was back on its neck (hopefully the right neck – all the necks looked the same to me). Kitt was too polite to fix my shoddy work while I was in the room doing her a favour but I have no doubt she spent another three hours smoothing back the claggy glue on my townsfolk after I’d left. Thanks to my highly specialised gluing technique, it took me three days to prise a piece of pale pink plaster off my thumb – my apologies to whatever fine lady of the court was missing a fold in her dress.

We’ve never spoken about the massacre or Kitt’s parents again.

* * *

Kitt wraps me in her arms at the door. It is as much of a bear hug as someone who weighs 60 kilos can possibly give. Her hair is piled up on her head with a rubber band (I internally shudder thinking of her future split ends) and she is in her usual uniform of patterned active wear. Oh, and she *stinks*.

‘Are you okay?’ She begins fussing with my hair, which looks like every strand was given a different map and is heading in a contradictory

direction. I'd texted her on the way over, saying that I needed to stay the night. Hoping that it was okay. Knowing it would be okay. I hadn't said why I needed to crash. I needed to go into my holding cell before I started delving into specifics. Even though we have the Won't Ask, Won't Tell rule, Kitt isn't the type to ask why someone needs help if they're asking for it. She just hands everything she has over to anyone who needs it.

'What smells?' I ask.

She pulls back from the hug to really look at me. 'Rory, why are you clutching a pillow?'

'Something smells very strong in here. I think you might need to clean out your crisper.'

'You know what? I bet it's the sauerkraut,' she says.

'It shouldn't smell like that if it's in a sealed container in the fridge, Kitt. I think you've been sold bad sauerkraut.'

She tugs the pillow gently from my arms and puts it on her couch.

'It's not in the fridge.'

'Are you telling me that you can't smell it? If this were a children's cartoon, I would see wiggly lines coming out from your apartment.'

'I'm just used to the smell now. There's a lot of it. It's a constant.'

Kitt and Elise's kitchen is a horror version of the candy-shop scene in *Willy Wonka* (the original; do not even bother with the Tim Burton one – honestly). The walls are covered in glass jars and opaque containers, but, instead of gumballs and sour worms, encased are variations on the colour green, and none of them look like a shade you would want to eat. And I can't see Andre the cat.

'We're in the midst of a fermenting binge. Some of the jars smell and some of them don't.'

'Are any of them supposed to smell?'

'When you take the lid off, they'll hit you with a burst of sulphur, but you get past that pretty quickly. If one of them is smelling now, that's a bad sign.'

'Why is this happening?' I ask.

'Elise watched a bunch of YouTube videos and I have a working, scientific interest in watching it all go down. I also don't mind the occasional kombucha. I hope the neighbours don't complain about the

smell. I really don't want to have to move to a new place. We like it here. I honestly can't smell anything.'

'I do not know how that is possible. I think you might need to go and see a doctor. Not one that you work with. An actual doctor.'

'The people that I work with *are* actual doctors.'

'If you were in a restaurant or on a plane and someone started screaming, "Is anyone here a doctor?", would you force any of their hands up?'

'No, but then maybe the onus might be on the person who is requesting the doctor to be more specific. Is anyone here a general practitioner? Or I need a cardiologist and, who knows, maybe someone does actually need a biochemist. These are strange times we're living in.'

'I think you need a biochemist or, better yet, a large bin and some heavy-duty gloves.'

'I'll talk to Elise about it when she gets home.'

'Where is she?'

'I don't want to tell you.' She looks away from the jars.

'Where is she, Kitt?'

'She's buying more jars.'

'I don't know where you're going to fit them.'

'Neither do I.'

We both start laughing. Clutching at each other's arms to keep ourselves from falling to the lino floor. It feels so good. I can't remember the last time I laughed. It's terrifying.

'Are you going to be able to manage sleeping here with the smell? Elise and I will hunt out the bad seed but it mightn't go away for a while. How long do you need to stay?'

'I'm hoping it's just tonight. I've had a total shitter of a day and I'd really love to not go into it right now. I feel fuzzy because I've just had a lovely sleep at The Golden Screen but I still feel raw. Kitt, I cried in a laundromat.'

'There's nothing wrong with that. Once, I cried in a spin class. I like that you brought your pillow.'

'It's the main casualty of the day. I need a pillow doctor. Do you know any?'

Kitt picks up the pillow and moves it around like one of the people who are professional sign dancers on street corners. Early Bird \$5 Parking – now with acrobatics.

‘I don’t, but it feels very soft and it smells . . .’

She lifts it up to her nose. I reach out and grab it before it touches her nostrils.

‘You do not want to be putting your nose on that pillow. Not until it’s had another couple of cycles. I’m going to need to borrow one of your pillows until it has.’

‘We don’t need to talk about what’s happened to your pillow, why you were sleeping in a cinema when you should have been at work and how you came to be crying in a laundromat. Which I maintain is as good a place as any to have a cry in. It sounds like you need more sleep. You can be horizontal here, not like those dictatorial cinemas. I’ll put you up in my room, which, at two metres away from the kitchen, is the furthest you can get from the smell in this apartment. I’ll light some incense to mask it as well. Just don’t be surprised when Andre starts licking your face in the middle of the night. If you want to tell me what’s happened, I’ll be right here.’

While Kitt has been talking, she’s also been leading me gently into her room and towards a swag that she has set up on the floor. It is an actual cocoon, which is exactly what I need. I sit on her bed and she passes me a shirt that would be oversized on her, but for me is just a standard shirt and I peel off the spy outfit I’ve been wearing all day and crawl inside the swag. Readier for sleep than I have been for years. Kitt kisses my forehead and leaves me to start spinning silk.

FRIDAY

One day ago

Five am sounds like a rude shock.

Instead of gentle twittering, the birds are shouting, ‘You have work today.’ And, ‘You need to come clean about Elle Chambers.’ And, ‘You need to go home and get clean clothes.’ And, ‘You need to talk to Lucas and fix what is left of your relationship.’ And, ‘You need to finish the TV-guide crossword.’ Simultaneously. The birds need a Valium and a good talking-to.

At least the clove smell of the past few mornings has been replaced by the aroma of the cabbage sweating in its own juices. Something I’d never thought I’d be grateful for.

I can hear Kitt moving around in the bathroom. Pipes contracting. Water rushing through the walls like pneumatic tubes with urgent dispatches. She’ll be washing her face before her morning run. She’ll glide through the streets to the backdrop of a glorious sunrise before going off to save the world, while I go back to the sex den to collect my clothes for a job that I’m unlikely to have much longer.

Kitt bounds out the bathroom door, already clad in a fresh set of leggings and a hoodie. Bouncing from one foot to other. Ready to go. Maybe I should have chosen Kitt as my guru instead of *The New York Times* crossword editor extraordinaire – Will Shortz.

‘What’s the plan, Secret Agent Man?’ she asks, stretching her arms across her body and behind her head.

I’m back in my all-black, sneaking spy ensemble. I don’t think many people would look twice at me if I walked home to my apartment in her shirt and my underpants – it’s that end of the neighbourhood – but it’s better to err on the side of caution. Although it wouldn’t be the first time that

someone in Kitt's street went waltzing down the footpath in their knickers, but if I did it, I would most certainly have the good luck to run in to Elle Chambers, Harry and Mathia. And I'd probably split my undies for good measure.

'I don't have a plan yet, but I will soon,' I reply to the stretching goddess. I'm in awe of her energy levels.

'I've never known you to be without a plan for too long,' Kitt says, reaching down to touch her toes.

'The crossword got me here. It'll get me to where I need to be next.' I sit down to tie up my shoelaces.

'Rory, I love this crossword experiment. I do. It's great to see you doing something fun. But I wonder if you're relying on it possibly a little too much at the moment. You're allowed to have your own agency. I mean, you're the one choosing what meaning you divine from what clues. You can take it easier on yourself.'

'I still have agency. It's just that *my* agency has done nothing for me in my life up to this point. Following the crossword since Monday has got me further in my role at *The Connect* than in the past two years of my working there.'

I don't qualify my statement by saying that me scoring a story has been based solely on my telling a giant lie, which has a very real chance of blowing up in my face.

'Great! Is that what you want going forward? Is this one by-line going to be enough for you?' she asks, raising her arms up to the roof.

'What do you mean is it going to be enough?'

'Is it enough to make you happy? Is it going to mean that you're succeeding in the career of your dreams? Is it going to make journalism the thing that you need it to be?'

'A career isn't about happiness.'

'It is, Rory. You want to be *happy* in your job. I know there are going to be days in any job where you don't want to be there and the bureaucracy of it all is driving you insane. That's work. That's why they need to pay you to be there. But you can still enjoy what you're doing while you're collecting a salary. You have that privilege. Why aren't you using it?'

'I have always wanted to do what I'm doing at *The Connect*. It's in my blood. My grandad was one of the best journalists in Queensland. I'm

meant to be doing this.'

'Just because you can do something, Rory, doesn't mean you should. Just because you've got a genetic disposition towards putting words on a screen designed to look like a page of a newspaper doesn't mean you *need* to do that. Lucas can draw braided grey hair on a potato chip and call it Agatha Crispy, but it doesn't mean he needs to do that or that he should. Does it?'

'Where's this coming from? How long have you secretly thought I'm a shitty journalist?' I can feel the tears rushing up behind my eyes. Who knew that one person could produce so many tears over a 24-hour period?

'I'm sorry, Rory. I don't want to upset you.' Kitt stops stretching and sits down at the end of the couch. She pats at the floral cushion next to her, motioning for me to move across and huddle in next to her. 'It must be all the kimchi going to my head. Can you come back after work? We should talk about this properly. Not when we're both headed out the door.'

'I'll call you,' I say.

'Rory, please don't be mad at me. I just want you to be happy.'

'You sound like my mother. Are you sure you aren't hiding a copy of the Dalai Lama's *Guide to Work and Fermentation* in one of your bookshelves?'

'I'm saying this to you because I care.'

'That's spot on. One hundred per cent my mother. Have you been taking acting classes? Let me guess – you're going method?'

'Rory, please don't be mad.'

'I'm not mad but I have to leave now. I'll call you.'

But obviously I am mad, and it's making me furious at myself.

* * *

I hate being angry. Anger is unpredictable. When I was twelve, my mother brought home a mahjong set from a location-scouting trip in China. She thought it would be a fun thing for us to play together. After all, I liked chess, so why wouldn't I like mahjong?

But I couldn't understand it.

My head felt like it was home to Mum's would-be papier-mâché hot-air balloons. They weren't the kind you stare up at and imagine freedom. They

were so heavy that I was surprised they could even float.

Mum had been away on a set for months. Grandma and Grandad would stop talking whenever I entered the room. There were doctors' visits and no one would tell me why but Grandad was getting thinner and finally taking his long service leave. Grandma started picking me up from school and lasagnes started being left on our doorstep by neighbours and members of Grandma's lawn bowls team. So much mince.

And now Mum was back, with useless plastic tiles that came with their own set of rules, but didn't she know that we already had new rules? Tiptoeing past the bedroom door. Leaving the toilet seat up. Not mentioning the C-word or what was happening to Grandad. To us. I had no room in my life for mahjong.

Grandma and I had just rewatched *The Sound of Music* – with the volume so low that I had to repeat to her most of what anyone was saying – and I was heartbroken for Baroness von Schraeder. She was a woman engaged to a man that she liked well enough, certainly enough to tolerate his seven children. Children who had a track record of torturing governesses. But she'd still thrown a ball around with them, only to be hated by virtue of just being there before Maria. I hated that she was punished for trying to make sure that her fiancé didn't ditch her for Maria. I hated that I knew I was not supposed to be on the side of the Baroness.

Grandma hadn't understood. She'd nudged me when the Baroness suggested that Maria might go back to the abbey. See, her elbow said, see, she's not nice, she deserves this. All I could think was why does Maria being naive and handy with a sewing machine mean that it's okay for her to break up an engagement?

And now my mum had me playing with these mahjong tiles. Tiles that she kept demonstrating to me that I had to discard or keep but I couldn't work out why I would do either of those two things. She might as well have been outlining the rules to me in the original Mandarin.

Mum was in the middle of very gently pointing out to me – again – that I couldn't have two of a particular tile when it happened. I saw white. Not a red mist. White rage. It blinded me.

I flipped over the small, laminated balsa wood coffee table that we'd been playing on. Tiles clattered to the floor. I started jumping on them. I wanted to break them all and grind them into dust like storybook giants

were always threatening to do with people's bones. It lasted only thirty seconds before the shame set in. Mum lifted me off the tiles. Tiles that had not broken but had most certainly bruised the soles of my feet. She sat me on the pilling grey couch and covered me in one of the twelve woven throws from her travels that were draped over the sides. (My mother couldn't leave a place without taking a piece of it with her. We'd long run out of unique places to put her souvenirs.)

She went and got me some water and I started climbing out the lounge-room window, even though the drop past the Queenslander stilts was surely too far. Liesl von Trapp had climbed out a window and forgotten all about her mother being physically gone and her father being mentally distant, and, even though it was for a rendezvous (and cracking duet) with hideous Rolf (dickhead), it had looked easy. Maybe if I climbed out and aimed for the compost heap, it would be enough of a break from the weight of the house to let me make sense of life and mahjong.

But Mum was back before I could clear off all the jade figurines that littered the window ledge. I apologised. It wasn't about the mahjong, it was about *The Sound of Music*. I wanted to tell her that it was about it being the fifth day of three weeks of lasagne for dinner, but I couldn't because that would mean I was talking about *it*. My mum patted me on the back, told me it was okay and said it was natural to be mad at the Nazis. Rolf was a little weasel. I didn't even mention the Baroness. I was too embarrassed. For thirty seconds, I had lost all control. It was terrifying.

I can't lose control like that again. Ever. I need to steel myself. Anger cannot be an option for me.

As I walk home, I try to think calm thoughts. Around me, as a man yells something about my tits from his beaten-up car, his back window emblazoned with one of those stick-figure 'my family' stickers, I imagine a grassy field. I accidentally step in a pool of vomit that someone has so kindly deposited in the middle of the footpath outside the bar that Lucas and I used to go to every Thursday for trivia. I pretend I am next to a burbling stream. Kitt's words replay in my head. I go back to thinking about my hug with Harry.

The Baroness was forced to be the grown-up and let the Captain out of his engagement as if he were her prisoner because he couldn't do the right thing for himself. Is that what Lucas wants to force me to do? I pretend I

can feel the breeze rustling through the trees that lined the streets of that Austrian road the von Trapps sang on as I walk past a vent from the German bakery close to home that is pushing out wet, hot air.

I still haven't shifted the tightness in my chest when I round the corner to our apartment. What if Lucas is there? What if he isn't? The worst-case scenario would be if *she* is still there. Ripping down our curtains and using them to make bralettes.

Think calm thoughts. Wide open spaces. Happy places. Bookshelves in alphabetical order organised by the author's last name. These are a few of my favourite things.

When I open the door, I'm relieved to note that she isn't there, but her clove smoke lingers. Maybe she's very noir and had lit up in our bed after they'd finished having sex. Cocked her head back and laughed at how silly I was as she blew out clouds of fragrant smoke at the photos on my bedside table of my grandma and grandad on their wedding day. 'She probably thought you'd marry her, Lucas. She's clueless.' And he'd said, 'As if!' like an evil Cher Horowitz as he put out her cigarette on my copy of Nora Ephron's *I Feel Bad About My Neck* so they could kick off round two.

But of course I can't just get ready for work in peace. Lucas is in the kitchen. Trying to get the temperamental kettle into gear as if he has any right to boiling water.

'I'm sorry,' he says, when he looks up from the cord and sees me at the door.

'Are you talking to me or the kettle?'

'To you. I'm really sorry you had to see that yesterday. I feel really horrible.' He moves the switch up and down. Flick. Flick. Flick.

'I think that feeling is justified. You should feel horrible.'

I am not going to help him with that bloody kettle.

'I do.'

'But you didn't try and call me.'

'I wanted to give you space. I didn't think you'd be in the mood to talk to me.' He runs his hands along the cord, looking for non-existent kinks.

'I wasn't in the mood to talk, but a text would have been a considerate thing to do. I would have sworn at it and not responded, but it would have shown that you had some concern that I might be upset about that woman

cloving up our bedroom. And that you understood that this might be the end of us.'

'This is the end of us, Rory,' he says, finally leaving the kettle alone.

All the air empties out of my lungs. Instead of red anger, I see nothing.

'What?'

'I'm really sorry that this is how it's ending, with you finding out about Marissa, but this has been coming for a while now. You can't be that shocked.' His tone implies that it is the most obvious thing in the world, as predictable as climate change and that I'd chosen to be a denier instead of acknowledging that icebergs were melting right in front of me.

'Did you want to let me know that we were over at some point or were you just waiting around because you needed someone to go to family dinners with you, and Marissa was busy with pottery class?'

'You were barely at that dinner, Rory. Remember? You're acting like you did nothing wrong, but abandoning me when I'd asked you to be there for me, to help protect me from my parents, was wrong. Don't stand there and act like you're a saint.'

A red washes over the nothing in my brain.

'Do you even remember when I gave up my ticket to that networking night so I could protect *you* from *your parents* at that fundraiser? A night, by the way, that I spent here instead of getting somewhere in my career because you couldn't be arsed to text me to meet you at the venue. But now you're saying that we're over because *I* didn't stand up for you enough in front of your parents at one meal out of fifty? *You* can't speak up for yourself! You can't tell your father to give you a break, but you can go and fuck someone else.'

'No, we're over because I don't even know who you are anymore. It's not just ditching the dinner; it's you not being here when I get home in the morning and then coming home in the middle of the day for no reason. It's you never talking about work unless you're complaining about not getting stories or having to do the TV-guide crossword. It's you barely containing your rage when I don't follow the weekly meal plan. I just can't have that atmosphere around me anymore. It's blocking my creative flow and I *need* to be creative, Rory. Art is my life. I'll die without it.'

'You're not going to die from a well-rounded diet. You are not three years old. I have always had meal plans. You never had a problem with

them in the past. You liked that I was organised.'

'I liked it until it became a noose around my neck. You're so rigid. It's suffocating.'

'I'm confused about what method I'm using to kill you – meal plans? Nooses? Plastic bags? I may have been a little pedantic, sure, but not *this* week. I've been trying to change. I've been making a big effort and you haven't even noticed.'

'No, I definitely noticed that you've changed. This week you've been keeping things from me and acting weird. This week is what made me realise that I couldn't keep doing *this* with you.'

'This? Because I'm being spontaneous instead of anal? You've decided that you don't want to be with me, no matter how I'm acting!'

'No, because you've shown me that even when you're being less stringent with yourself, with me, with us, that I still don't love you. That both versions of you aren't the right fit for me. I've grown out of this. Out of us.'

He gestures at me and the apartment like we're a teddy bear that his au pair is still packing in his schoolbag every morning, even though he's a teenager. We're embarrassing him in front of his friends.

'I cannot believe you are being this cruel,' I say, leaning against the wall in an effort to steady myself.

'I'm being honest. I *need* to be honest.' He puts his hands over his heart.

'If you were honest, this conversation wouldn't have come to a head because I found you with Maria in our bed.'

'It's Marissa.'

'I don't care what her fucking name is.'

'Don't make this ugly, Rory. I still want us to be friends.'

'How could that possibly happen after everything you've just said to me? After what I saw in our bedroom yesterday?'

'It might in time. Honestly, I don't even know why you care. You haven't thought I was worthwhile in ages.'

'You haven't thought you were worthwhile in ages.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You used to make these beautiful paintings that meant something to you, and then one day you just stopped doing that and you started drawing things like "The Handroll's Tale", and Lucas . . .'

‘Yes?’

‘A handroll with a red coat on it just looks like a furious penis. It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘Stop it, Rory. You’re being ugly. Just let this sit with you for a bit. I’m going to go and get a coffee. I can’t get this kettle to work. This place is falling apart. I’ll tell Mum that she’ll need to get some guys in here to fix the wiring once you’ve found somewhere else to live. No rush. I know you don’t have many friends around. I’m guessing you’re here to get ready for work?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you hear me? You should be thanking me. I just said I don’t want to leave you stranded so I’m going to let you stay here at the apartment. You can keep the bed. My half is your half. I’m moving out on Saturday morning and I’ll stay at a friend’s tonight. Hopefully by then we can have a nicer goodbye. You might have settled down a bit. We can sort out the long-term apartment plan when you’ve had a chance to absorb the reality of the situation. I’m being pretty generous, Rory. You’ll see that when you calm down.’

And he walks out.

‘You draw cartoon puns, Lucas. Your art is literally a bad joke. Fuck your bullshit creativity,’ I whisper at the inside of the door.

What bothers me more than the cheating and the fact I don’t recognise the person that my boyfriend has become is that some of what he has just said about me is true. I’ve been starting to not recognise myself either.

Deep breaths. My feet in the sand. Waves crashing at the shore. Calm seas.

I have a bus to catch.

24 ACROSS

As soon as I see the 334 bus approaching, I know that I now have a new scenario to add to my internal serenity screensaver.

I could have never imagined that I would find the sight of an object so large that it could crush me so comforting as it careened towards my person, but I also hadn't predicted that I'd be accused of assaulting Elle Chambers this week. I guess I won't be swapping my laptop for a crystal ball anytime soon. Sorry, Mum.

It isn't just my bus joining my roster of soothing images, it's him, my bus driver. Worth having to settle for a quick under-the-armpits shower at the sink this morning to get to my stop on time.

I just have to keep it together until tonight. Then I can sit in our, sorry, my temporary apartment and plot out the rest of my life or build further rules around the crossword approach to living. Tighten the reins in the hopes that it yields better results. Maybe I'll even treat myself to a cheeky collapse.

Ahhh, the soothing asthmatic wheeze of bus doors opening. I step inside.

'Good morning,' my lovely driver says.

He's grinning with what my grandma would call 'the full set'. His eyes, cheeks and mouth all happily greeting the day – and me.

'Good morning.'

I can't help but smile in return, despite everything. It isn't the kind of smile you find on Instagrammers hawking teeth-whitening kits, but it's the best I can do. Lucas's break-up announcement has been on constant replay in my head but my mood is lifted somewhat by my bus driver's sunny greeting.

I walk to my normal seat. Second right from the back. It's the only one that doesn't have a doodle or obscenity scratched into the back of the seat in front of it.

There are five other people on the bus, but it's as if they've seen a reserved sign and kept my seat free for me. I really need my familiar seat today. Or maybe they just hadn't wanted to bear witness to the decline of the English language and Jimmy and Tash's relationship, which had been crossed out with both a Sharpie and a set of keys.

Having a scheduled hour-long breakdown at the end of the day feels like smart forward planning on my part. It feels like control.

Then I can get back to turning everything around. Saving my job. Talking to Kitt. Working out what I'll do when Patricia realises that Lucas

and I aren't living together and she can evict me. Or perhaps I can save myself an eviction and work out how to get Lucas back. Work out if I want Lucas back. Is that even possible, though? Right now, all I want is to get the kettle working and pour boiling water over all his so-called artworks.

People do crazy things when they're under pressure. In *While You Were Sleeping*, Sandra Bullock fakes an engagement when she's pushed for an explanation about why she's sitting with a stranger in a coma. And in *The Proposal*, she fakes another one to try to keep her job and work on a grumpy man's book.

I wonder if they do rehab for people who just can't stop lying about their relationship status. My instinct towards self-preservation and not wanting to deal with Sydney's depressing housing market aren't nudging me down an imaginary aisle, but they aren't far off. They can't be trusted. I don't want to be back in a relationship with Lucas just for real estate.

My grandparents met in high school and still held hands when they crossed the road. Right up until my grandad couldn't cross the road.

Kitt must have something going on with Elise, whether she admitted it to me or not. There is no way you could put up with that stench if you didn't have skin in the game. I don't know why she won't speak to me about it.

My mum has never needed a partner. At least that's how it has always seemed to me. She has never openly dated, if she has dated at all. While I was growing up, when she was home, she was with me. When she was at work, she was building other people's worlds. She wouldn't have let herself get distracted with a romance on set and she has never spoken about my father. As far as I know, he's dead. I don't even care. I've never been that curious about him. I don't know what that says about me.

That's why I need *The New York Times* crossword. It never says it doesn't love me or that perhaps I'm not meant to be a journalist. And it will tell me what to do now. It's all I have left.

12A The place of Napoleon's exile. **No.**

16D A blue state. **No.**

24A Miss Fizzle took her students back in time on this.

That's it. *The Magic School Bus*. (Or in my case *The Relatively Clean City Bus*.)

I'll just stay on the bus forever.

When the bus pulls up at the stop where I normally get off, I don't move. Two people get off. Three people get on. I stay in my seat. The bus driver looks back at me. He must think I'm daydreaming and don't realise what stop we're at. I force another smile back at him to let him know that I'm alive and cognisant. I have no idea why I'm trying to fool him but it feels important. He shrugs his shoulders and kicks the bus back into gear.

I stay in my seat at the next stop.

And the next stop. Feeling myself getting further away from the TV-guide crossword and the judgement waiting for me, about my inability to secure the Elle Chambers interview at the office.

And the next stop.

At the next stop, we idle. No one gets on or off. The bus driver cranes his neck to look back at me, his face now a mixture of concern and confusion. He is giving me a chance to alight now while my normal stop is still within walking distance. I don't move.

Two people make a show of looking at their watches. One person puts their phone to their ear and starts to have a fake conversation. I can see from my elevated seat that her screen isn't lit up. 'Trish, can you believe how late I'm going to be? Can you get someone else to open the shop? The bus has stopped for no reason.' She is so loud that Trish could probably hear her anyway, the woman's impatience travelling to her on the wind. The driver gives in to peer pressure, turns back around, and drives off.

Soon it's just me on the bus. After three stops where my button to alight remains unpressed, he pulls over and slides down from his stool. I've never seen him standing before. Despite having a job that keeps him sitting all day, he obviously looks after himself. There is no sign of the first-trimester-pregnancy belly so many men seem to accumulate post-50. His black leather shoes are polished. His pants have an ironed crease down the middle. I was right to add this man and his bus to my Scenes of Serenity playlist.

'The next stop is the last one.' His voice is gentle. He isn't kicking me off, he's just concerned.

'Okay. Thanks for letting me know.'

'It's quite far away from where you normally get off.'

'It is. I'm doing things a little differently at the moment.'

'Well, that's nice. Have you changed jobs?'

‘No. Not yet. That decision might get made for me pretty soon, though.’

‘How are you going to get to your current job then? I presume it’s back in the city?’

‘It is, but I thought I’d just keep riding the bus.’ I smile.

‘The bus *is* lovely’ – he pats the top of one of the institutional blue polyester seats – ‘but after the next stop, I take her to the depot.’

‘You don’t do another loop?’ The crossword didn’t mention anything about a depot.

‘I just do the one trip a day. Then someone else takes over. At the depot.’

‘Ah, right.’

‘I’ll be driving, in my car, back through the city, though. On my way back home. If you like, I could drop you at your normal stop? I’m offering this in the least Harvey Weinstein way possible. Just trying to save you an expensive Uber in what is fifteen minutes away from being peak-hour traffic.’

When men actively point out that they aren’t creeps, it’s normally the flashing neon sign over their head indicating that they are most definitely going to try something untoward, but not my bus driver. Not with those ironed creases.

‘Would you mind?’ I ask.

‘Of course not.’

‘I’m supposed to stay on the bus, but I can’t very well do that if it’s sitting at the depot, can I?’

‘No, you can’t, unfortunately. Who told you stay on the bus?’ He looks around as if the person might be there.

‘*The New York Times* crossword,’ I say. I’ve already thrown him fake smiles. I don’t want to lie to him as well.

He pauses. ‘Okay. Let’s get you back to where you need to be.’

* * *

I wait outside the office, which looks a lot like Jerry’s guard box back at the television station but with a tearoom attached. A couple of people walk past me on the way in, all in the gradient blue uniform. They don’t meet my eye. It is like I’m sitting in a saloon in a Western and, with spurs clanging, a

grizzled cowboy has slid up to me and said, ‘You’re not from around these here parts, are you.’ and then everyone in earshot has studiously ignored me.

Except for my driver. He is all smiles when he comes out after ten minutes. ‘Let’s go,’ he says, and points in the direction of a small carpark.

His car makes me question my choice in career. A black BMW, shiny like his shoes. It makes me happy that bus drivers are making this much money. They deserve it. The amount of times I’ve seen a ‘Good morning’ go unanswered by someone who can’t be bothered taking earphones off, or abuse hurled the driver’s way because they’ve had the audacity to suggest that someone pay for the ride, is depressingly common. The drivers earn their salaries – and their luxury cars.

Inside, the car is spotless, and reminds me of the bronze sedan. There are no takeaway bags at my feet or coffee cups piled up in the cup rests. He is a beacon of tidy, ironed light.

‘I should introduce myself,’ I say. ‘I’m Rory. Thank you for giving me a lift and thank you for not asking any questions about a crossword telling me to do things.’ I extend my hand, even though I know he won’t be able to take it, with his hands reliably at ten to two on the steering wheel.

‘Introductions are a marvellous idea, Rory. I’m Ted.’

Ted the bus driver. The moniker suits him.

‘Is there something wrong that I can help you with?’ he asks, his face creased with sympathy.

‘You’re giving me a lift, which is a huge help. Thank you for your concern, but I’ll sort it all out tonight. First I just have to get through whatever today is going to bring.’

‘It’s good to have a plan,’ he says.

‘I think so.’

We sit in silence for a moment. It doesn’t feel awkward. It feels how I’ve always imagined daughters sit with their dads on the way back from soccer practice. Quiet, normal and – because I’d skimped on the shower and was probably starting to smell like I’d been running around a field – smelly.

‘Ted, how is it that you only do one trip a day and yet you have this lovely car?’

For a second he looks taken aback at my blunt question. I seem to have waylaid the filter between my brain and mouth. I’ve probably left it at the

laundromat.

‘I’m a journalist,’ I quickly add. ‘Of sorts. For now. It’s in my nature to pry.’

He lets out a deep laugh that seems to come from the very bottom of his belly.

‘Pry away! I do the one trip because I love it. Bus driving is in my coolant.’

‘Huh?’ I feel my face crinkling in confusion, like it does when David starts speaking to me about cryptocurrency.

‘I’m guessing you’re not a car buff. Engines need coolant to run. I thought I was being witty and comparing it to blood, but obviously my early-morning starts are dulling my puns. My mother was a bus driver. My grandfather was a bus driver. I’m carrying on the family legacy.’

‘But not full-time?’ I ask.

‘No, I used to do it part-time, when I was at university, but I went into finance full-time and I had to stop. But I missed driving buses, so when I semi-retired I decided to take it up again. The one-trip-a-weekday schedule suits me. My wife was always waking me when she got up for work anyway, so now we both get up and have coffee before going our respective ways. I do my route. Cash out. And then in the afternoons, I go back to finance.’

‘The bus company is happy to employ you for one trip a day?’

‘Miraculously, and thankfully, they are. I guess I didn’t look like I’d totally lost my mind when I contacted them about it. A lot of the other drivers don’t want to start the day at 5 am, so it was a good solution for them and for me.’

‘Do you like bus driving more than finance?’

‘They both appeal to different parts of me. It’s a good balance for now. I’ll go into full retirement from finance eventually and then keep up my bus hobby for as long as it suits.’

‘Do you have children that you’ll think will take up the mantle?’

‘No. No, children for us,’ he says, shifting in his seat.

I shouldn’t have asked him that. I wouldn’t have asked a woman if she had children, and I shouldn’t have asked him either. The subject of children is personal and sticky.

‘Sorry,’ I say.

‘Don’t be sorry. We’re very happy. We wouldn’t have the lives we have if there were children in the mix. Worse things happen at sea. Look, there’s your stop and you didn’t even need to press the button!’

He sounds relieved to be getting me out of the car and away from his reproductive issues.

I laugh.

He pulls into the bus stop – illegally – and winks at me. ‘You won’t do me in, will you?’

‘Of course not. Thank you again for the lift.’

‘It’s been my pleasure, Rory. If you need help with something, you just let me know. You know where to find me.’

‘I do. Thank you.’

I don’t want to get out from his pristine safe haven but I have to. It’s time to find a way to get Elle Chambers back on board, or I’ll have to face up to what I’ve done and tell Mathia the truth. Ted is right, worse things happen at sea. I just need to see if I can captain the ship out of the storm before I crash it into the rocks.

* * *

It’s past nine when I enter, but I can see that David’s saddlebag is still slung over the back of his empty chair. Mathia’s door is closed, but a light is coming out from the bottom gap of the door, so they must both be in there. A bad sign.

When they appear, they look more like they’re on a British cop drama than in a news office. Conspiratorial and dour.

David looks up from the floor and scans the room. He clocks me and his face crumples. It can’t just be because of my late start. Mathia doesn’t meet anyone’s eyes (standard) and she continues to talk at David and look ahead, as if she’s staring at a teleprompter that is just out of frame. She is giving David instructions. Once she finishes, she doesn’t wait for a response from him and turns on her heel. Walking straight back to her office, leaving the door open.

David heaves a signature sigh before heading in my direction. He must be in the role of good cop, then. She’s the bad one. That makes sense. The plan must be that she’ll be the one to turn the cameras off, stop the tape and

administer the strong, bespoke, moisturised arm of the law after David is sent out to soften me with feigned compassion, tenderising my flesh, for the final blow.

‘What happened, Rory? You’re attacking people in carpark now?’

David sounds like the disappointed father that I’ve never known. I know there’s no point pretending that I don’t know what he’s talking about. My appearance at the studio carpark must have got back to Mathia. I blame Jerry. I blame myself.

‘I thought I could do it,’ I say.

‘You thought you could do it . . .’ His sentence fades out.

He must be trying to work out when exactly I’d jumped the shark and why he hadn’t noticed that I’d done it. Exhausting himself past the point of forming words.

One night, not so long ago, when I’d been up at 4 am, jolted awake by a blank crossword corner that was a mess of disparate letters and devoid of words, I’d imagined what everyone else I knew was doing at that moment. I thought about how they’d sleep. Whether their bodies would be twisted or curled.

My mother would be taking up every inch of the mattress, doona thrown off, completely at ease. My grandma would be on her side of the bed, my grandad’s side now empty after a lifetime of love and companionship. She’d have a book on her chest and her glasses would have slid down to her chin. David would be lying on a couch with one of his children on top of him, reciting lines from ‘Jabberwocky’. Trying to lull them both back to sleep. A poem full of curly words that he knew so well he could whisper them with his eyes closed. He knew and loved words – I’ve known that ever since I met him – and now I have done something so bad that it’s taken words away from him.

‘I’m sorry, David, but I think I can make this better. I just need a little time to turn it over in my head. I’ll fix it.’

I need to make this better, even if it is only to ensure that I never see the utter disappointment that is on David’s face ever again.

‘There’s no point talking to me about it, Rory. This is with Mathia now. She’ll let you know when she wants to discuss the topic with you.’

He looks tireder than I’ve ever seen him. People are swivelling around, forgetting to pretend to pick something up from the floor or to type, and just

openly staring. Catherine has followed Mathia into her office.

‘You can’t talk to her about it for me?’

‘You’re not a child and I’m not your parent. Even if I *were* your parent, I’d tell you that you’re old enough to sort things out for yourself. I’d tell you to grow up. Do you even want this job? Do you want to be a journalist?’

‘Of course. Obviously I do.’

‘Why would it be an obvious *of course*? You come in here five days a week and wait for someone to give you something to write. You don’t pitch ideas in the meetings. I don’t see you putting your hand up with the rest of the staff when I need someone to go and check out a lead. You just sit here. You buy me coffee and you sit here. It’s not enough. It’s not the kind of behaviour that makes me think that *of course* you want to be a journalist.’

‘I do things. I take the porn out of the classifieds. I write the crossword every week.’

‘That’s not being a journalist, Rory. That’s being a censor and a cruciverbalist and that’s not a full-time job that’s available at *The Connect*. Maybe hit up the team at *Take 5* magazine.’

‘I *am* a journalist, David.’

It takes all of my energy to make my words sharp and firm. To muzzle the wobble that I can hear creeping into my voice. I’m not sure I’ve even convinced myself.

‘Show me some proof that you do care, Rory. Though it might be too late for you to start giving a shit about it now.’

Now I’m the one on mute. David was my one supporter at *The Connect*, and apparently he’s been harbouring all this doubt about my place here. He is just like Kitt. If David doesn’t see anything in me, maybe there is nothing to see.

He goes back to his chair. Wearing a blank face smoothed of the etchings of disappointment that he’d worn while telling me what he really thinks. He is already deleting me from his mind.

The chair swivellers take one last look at my face and turn back around to their screens. No doubt eagerly waiting until I leave the room so that they can replay what has happened with the person sitting next to them, like football commentators after a controversial try.

I sit in a chair. It isn't my normal chair. That has been taken by someone who hasn't adopted their bus driver as their substitute father. I need to complete the TV-guide crossword. That is something I can do for now.

The one 'piece' that I manage to file each week. The one work task that I can check off as being done even if it doesn't make me a journalist or even a valuable member of staff. I open the grid I've been working on, which is still only three-quarters done, and I realise – crushingly – that I might not even get the opportunity to finish it.

I have an irritating compulsion to finish anything I start. God knows how badly I wish I hadn't been tempted into reading that first *Twilight* book – a series that sucked weeks out of my life that I'll never get back, all because I had to get to the end. Not out of a desire to know what happened but because I just had to finish the series. It was an ending I would struggle to recollect to anyone now. No, that isn't why the idea of this grid not appearing on the weekend hurts me. I want to finish what might be my last crossword puzzle because of Harry.

Harry, a stranger, who had taken on my weight as his own. Both literally and figuratively.

He had taken a day off work to go and remember his mother with Audrey Hepburn and ended up comforting my drooling self. I had looked down on the weekly joy that he takes from a crossword that I create, and he'd greased me up so that I could free my hips – and the rest of my sorry self – from a bathroom window.

I don't even know if I'll ever see him again. He's a bartender, has a crinkly smile, misses his mother and has an affection for Audrey Hepburn – I don't know anything else definable about him because I hadn't bothered to ask, further proof of David's claim that I am no journalist. So how could I track him down? I could go back to the restaurant and ask his brother, but I am worried that they might have CCTV footage of me not so gracefully being greased up and fleeing out a bathroom window and what kind of brother would just dole out his brother's details to a mad woman?

'Mathia wants to see you. Now.'

Catherine is at my side. She's wearing a sympathetic, synthetic, lopsided grin. Like she's worried about me. Catherine knowing that I am in trouble is further proof that there is no future for me here. Everyone in this

office must know that I'm about to get the boot. I have never been further away from being able to raise my hand.

I don't want to give Catherine the satisfaction of asking her why I've been summoned. Why give her the opportunity to prove her relationship with Mathia and how far away I am from being on the inside track? I've been sitting in a dodgem car, three school fêtes away, while she's been lapping me without the need for a pit stop.

I try to focus on all my soothing, mindful visions of bus drivers, lush, breeze-filled valleys and gentle streams, but all I can see is Captain von Trapp, mahjong tiles, Lucas's smug, break-up face and now, because of my attempt to visualise a babbling brook, I have a pressing need to go to the toilet.

I shoot my hand out and grab Catherine's arm. Surprise and confusion flash across her face.

I drop my hand. The anger that I feel about Lucas. How we've treated each other over the past year. How he spoke to me this morning as if I were low-rise jeans in 2007 – I'd had my moment in the sun and now people were embarrassed that they'd allowed themselves to be photographed with me. How David thinks I just sit waiting all day. How I just sit waiting all day. All of that had been about to spit out at Catherine and my hand was a warning to myself.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have grabbed you. That was weird and scary of me. I've had a terrible week, and I'm really, really sorry.'

'Don't worry about it. I just didn't know what was happening for a second. That is, sadly, not the weirdest or scariest thing that has happened to me this week . . .'

A sharp cough comes out of Mathia's office and I know my time is up.

'We'll talk later,' Catherine says, patting me on the arm. I don't think there will be a later for me.

Mathia's office looks like a crime-scene clean-up crew has just been through it. Any traces of previous bloodshed are gone. Along with any sheets of paper or pens. Mathia is strictly digital. One of those people who thinks a messy desk translates to a messy mind. I can't get behind that idea. I might like a neat workspace but to-do lists just don't feel the same if you can't cross tasks off with a pen.

Her desk is the size of a paddling pool, which must be a sign of status rather than need because all it has on it is a white laptop and a pink and blue hydrangea that must be the greatest fake ever made because there is no way for natural light to enter the room.

Her office is as close to being in the centre of the floor plan as the communal desk that we gather around allows. *The Connect* is laid out like a panopticon prison. We never know whether Mathia is observing us, but it is always safest to presume her eyes are on you, especially if you were about to do something like adjust your undies.

Mathia doesn't look up from her laptop. She isn't typing, but she isn't about to acknowledge me immediately either. I can feel the collective gaze of the rest of the staff on my back. Colleagues looking at my unwashed hair and wondering what 'whatsername' is doing standing in Mathia's doorway.

'Excuse me, Mathia. Catherine told me that you wanted to see me.'

A heavy five-second silence.

'Please come in and shut the door behind you.' Her eyes remain on her screen.

I sit down on a buttery leather chair that feels so nice on my skin that I want to lie on it naked and take a nap. I resist the urge. If there is a way to make a bad situation worse, being charged with public indecency would do it. My grandma would not approve. She wears floaty scarves in the hottest of Queensland summers because she doesn't want to expose too much of her neck.

'What would you do if you were me, Rory?' Mathia lifts her eyes and levels them at me.

The question feels like a trap. The chair starts to chafe. I'm tempted to bump the hydrangea to see if any of the petals drop loose to prove my theory it's a fake – like me.

'I'm not sure what you mean.'

'Yes, you do, Rory. I got an email from Elle Chambers' agent, who reached out to me because our children both go to the same school. I'll admit I didn't realise that she managed Elle or I might have nipped this in the bud earlier and got the interview myself. Nevertheless, she tells me that a member of my staff practically assaulted Elle in the Studio Twelve parking lot. Between you and me, my first thought was that Steve Jeffers

had finally gone too far. Imagine my surprise when I find out it isn't Steve. It's you. What would you do if you were me, Rory? Keeping in mind that I won't necessarily be taking your advice on board due to your recent activity, which strongly implies that a sane, logical approach to things might not be how you operate.'

'I'd fire me.'

'You think I'd fire you because you made a mistake?'

'It was a *big* mistake.'

Mathia leans back into her chair and crosses her legs.

'Did you know, when I first got out of university, I spent three years getting people coffee in a newsroom before I managed to get a by-line?'

'I didn't know that.'

'Every day, I would make sure I was at my desk at 7 am and I didn't leave until 7 pm, just in case there was a chance that I could ride shotgun on a story, even though all I did was get under people's feet. I think most of the coffee runs I was sent on were just people trying to get me out of their way for five minutes. I didn't care. I still did it and smiled the whole time. I loved it.'

'How did you get your first by-line?'

'It was pure luck. A guy named Derek Lincoln held up the coffee shop while I was collecting my third round of coffee orders for the day. I was the man on the ground, so I convinced them to let me write the story. My editor loved it, and before I knew it, I was getting less coffee and more space in the paper.'

'Lucky for you. Not so lucky for the coffee shop.'

'No one died, Rory. Do you think my point is about luck?'

'No?'

'It's about hanging in there – not in the way that the kitten in the tree did in that poster I made Steve take down in the kitchenette – and, when an opportunity comes up, making sure you're ready to make it work for you. Every weekend, I was buying all the papers I could get my hands on to learn how to write a headline, how to open a story that would grip readers, how to make people feel something when I wanted them to feel something. I wasn't going out to bars and partying. I wanted to be a successful journalist. I made myself a successful journalist. I am the one responsible for the office I'm sitting in.'

‘I’m not out partying.’ My armpits start to stick to the underside of my shirt. If my only defence is that I haven’t been out partying, then there is no way I’m going to make it out of this room with my job.

‘No, you don’t look the type, but I also don’t think you look like you belong in an episode of *I Love Lucy*. Appearances can be deceiving. You seem so level-headed and I really don’t believe that you meant any harm, otherwise I wouldn’t be likening claims of assault to a madcap sitcom.’

‘I didn’t mean any harm. I just couldn’t think of another way to approach her after she hadn’t answered my email.’

Just like I hadn’t meant to grab Catherine. I had a problem. I was finally in Mathia’s office, breathing her rose-scented, hydrating face mist, and it was just another stop on my ‘I’m sorry for not being the person that you thought I was’ tour. When did I become this person?

‘You should not have lied about having a connection to begin with. That would have been a smart first step.’

‘I shouldn’t have lied. That was stupid. I was just desperate for an opportunity.’

‘Desperate sounds like the truth. I have a meeting in three minutes, so we need to move this along. Elle Chambers is not pressing charges, but she’s not about to give us a story either. I’d say that we are now firmly down at the bottom of the list of media outlets she’ll ever talk to. I don’t want to fire you. I think you’re a good kid who did a dumb thing. I’m not oblivious to what people think about me, but I’m not a monster and I think that women need to help one another. Otherwise, when I leave, there will be a man in a hideous suit ruining the décor of this office.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I believe you. I’ll let you know when I’ve made a decision about how to handle this. I need to tell Elle’s agent that I’ve done something in response to your behaviour before my next meeting, which is now due to start in two and a half minutes.’

‘I understand.’

‘Go home for the day. I don’t want your sad little face swaying my decision.’

‘Thank you, Mathia.’

‘But no slacking off or moping. I expect you to *work* from home, Rory. Finish that TV-guide crossword – even when you’re waiting in the margins

you still need to be meeting deadlines.’

‘I will.’

Her eyes go back to her laptop and everyone else’s turn to me as I exit her office and make my way to my desk to pack up my things. I wonder who I’ll be apologising to next. It’s a growing list and it isn’t even 10 am.

* * *

When I get home, I see all of Lucas’s pens, pencils and white squares of paper packed in cardboard boxes, ready to go to their temporary new home. A home that I will not be part of.

Our place has always really only been *his* apartment. Patricia bought it after he finally conceded to her, and himself, that living in a loft with twelve other people, all with varying degrees of personal hygiene, might not be the best space for him.

I’ve imagined Patricia visiting that loft, carting an artisanal wicker basket, full of seasonal organic honey and crispbreads, expecting to surprise him with afternoon tea and instead being assaulted by a noxious cloud of body odour and mould that sent her straight to her real estate agent. (Because of course Patricia has her own real estate agent, just like she has a business manager and Jeremy at Dior.)

What Patricia hadn’t realised back then was that Lucas had a girlfriend and that she was also in need of a new address. I’m sure she never meant to house me as well, but my blissfully unaware Lucas happily moved me in without even mentioning my existence to her.

It was only when she knew she’d be entering a safe place with her gourmet hamper that she attempted another pop-in, and instead of Lucas found me. With the flu, lying on the leather sofa that she’d carefully selected, in my pyjamas at 3 pm, surrounded by tissues and abandoned cups of tea. An interloper. No wonder our relationship has never progressed beyond cold pleasantries. In her eyes, I’ve always been the human equivalent of a viral infection. One that now she’ll finally get out of her system.

I don’t want to admit it, even to myself, but part of me this morning had hoped that if I didn’t come back to the apartment, everything would stay as it was. How it was before Monday. I’ve always been the one who cleans the

place, puts the clothes back in their rightful place – without me, nothing would happen. Lucas would realise he didn't want to leave. He'd look at the band flyer on the kitchen fridge, affixed with twelve of those letter magnets that you're supposed to make funny sentences out of but you only write 'I love you', 'buy milk' or 'cock' and after a couple of weeks they all become lone consonants. That band flyer on the fridge would remind him of the night we met – I'd pocketed it on the way back to our game of bedroom Monopoly – and he'd smile, remember the laughter and realise that we could be salvaged. Like all the vowels that have fallen under the fridge since we've lived here.

He'd cheated on me and I still want him to love me. I need a shift in perspective. I need the crossword. I need a shower.

His side of the wardrobe is bare when I open the door. Bent wire hangers from the dry cleaner are on the bed. His toothbrush is gone and so are all the spoons. Odd, the things that Lucas thought he couldn't wait for the removalists to take tomorrow.

It makes me feel slightly better about being single. What could he possibly need our teaspoons for? And why couldn't he leave me one to stir the milk in my tea with? Cruel.

The shower feels larger without his hyper-earthly bodywash and lime-green loofah. I can't tell if it is freeing or if I feel exposed without the nine empty bottles of shampoo lining the rim of the glass screen. I want to sit on the tiles and pretend that it's raining on me. I used to do it as a child. Not because I had a parade of ex-boyfriends – I was only ten years old and biding my time before I could watch *Midsomer Murders*. It was because it made me feel I was in one of the Friday-night movies that Grandma and I would watch.

I decide to slot in some shower-sitting tonight. It feels too dramatic for the daytime and now I have to go out and buy teaspoons before I finish the TV-guide crossword. Most likely my last one.

* * *

I call Grandma when I reach the park. It's a sprawling inner-city slice of greenery and unleashed dogs. No answer. I ring again, and on the ninth ring she picks up.

‘Hello?’ A puffed greeting.

‘Hi, Grandma.’

‘Oh, Rory. I was down in the garden. Pulling caterpillars off your grandad’s roses. Cheeky bastards. I thought it might be you when it rang for the second time.’

‘I did think you might be in the garden. I don’t know where else you’d be on a Friday morning.’

‘Got to get it done before the midday sun.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Why are you calling, Rory? You don’t normally call when you’re at work.’

A direct woman, who can hear something amiss in my voice. Grandma should have been the journalist, not me.

‘I’ve been fired,’ I say.

‘Beg your pardon, dear. What did you say?’

‘I’ve been fired. Well, not technically. Not yet. But I will be. And I don’t want to upset you, because I know you like Lucas, but we’ve broken up. He’s left me.’

‘Oh, so why is it that you’re calling?’

‘Because I’ve been fired and Lucas has left me!’

Please don’t let her be going deaf. All I have is the phone to connect us now that I’m in Sydney. We tried email once, but she could never remember her password, or that she had to check her inbox.

‘It can’t be that,’ she says.

‘What do you mean it can’t be *that*? It is *that*.’

‘No, it isn’t. You didn’t sound sad when you said you’d been fired or that Lucas had left you. It must be something else.’

‘I *am* sad about those things. Aren’t you sad about those things? I thought you were happy that I was at *The Connect* and was with Lucas. You said he reminded you of Grandad when you first met him,’ I say, inching away from the bird poo that I hadn’t noticed when I sat down on the park bench.

‘Rory, sweetie, you might be taking what I said out of context. Lucas reminded me of your grandad because he did nothing around the house when we were first married, before I trained him up. Your great-grandmother had coddled him. Lucas was just sitting around like a stunned

mullet when you and I were tidying up after dinner every night. The oblivious blank look on his face when I asked him if he was comfortable – I mean, it was uncanny. That’s why I said he reminded me of your grandad.’

‘That can’t have been it.’ I had taken that comment as a good sign of my future with Lucas and obviously I had stopped listening to anything else that had preceded or followed it.

‘Rory, how well do I know you?’

‘Better than anyone.’

A child on the other side of the oval launches a plastic yellow frisbee in the air. It careens towards me, narrowly missing my head.

‘Then listen to me. To everything I’m about to say. Don’t just tune out after the first sentence. Since you’ve been old enough to – in fact, before you were old enough to – you’ve made sure that nothing happens unless you want it to. The exception, of course, being your grandad passing away. An event that no one could have controlled. If you wanted to get an A, you studied and did it. If you wanted to not come last in the 100-metre sprint, you trained for a month and came second-last . . .’

‘I prefer second place in reverse.’

I glare at the child who has not even nodded an apology for orchestrating my near decapitation. His father sees me and pulls his son along, further away from the crazed woman. *Men.*

‘You trained for a month and came second place in reverse. You made it happen. If you truly wanted to stay at *The Connect*, you wouldn’t have put yourself in a position to be fired. Retrenchment is out of your hands – firing is very much on you. If you wanted to be in a happy relationship with Lucas, you’d force it. You’d be making him trendy curries and cooing over his sketches. You’d be ignoring things like shoes in the hallway and his misuse of “literally”. These are not the things you’re really upset about. How’s Kitt? You haven’t mentioned her in all this.’

‘I don’t know how she is. We had a disagreement this morning. Turns out she doesn’t believe in me.’

‘That’ll be it, then.’ I can almost see her nodding to herself in congratulations.

‘Kitt?’

‘I think you’re incredibly intelligent, but did you *listen* to what Kitt said to you? I bet she never said she doesn’t believe in you. I think you’ve put

those words in her mouth. I bet she was telling you something you might not have been ready to hear but that you *needed* to hear.’ Grandma was right. I worked hard to make things happen and it would appear I hadn’t been doing that with Lucas or journalism lately. ‘Don’t push someone away who genuinely cares about you. Best friends are important, Rory. Especially when you’re away from home. You didn’t have many close friends when you were growing up, but now you’ve found your person and that’s important and something to hold on to. You fix whatever has happened between you and Kitt.’

I should always just call Grandma. She always knows what is really happening. I need Kitt and her fermented vegetables.

‘You’re right.’

If she had a mobile and had me on speaker, Grandma would be fist-pumping the air. The woman loves to be right. As it is, she settles for a less exuberant whoop.

‘Get off the phone to me and fix things with her.’

‘While you’re on a roll, I also don’t know what I want to do with my life – as a whole. Can you give me the answer to that?’

‘Fix things with Kitt. You’ll sort the rest out later. Stop pushing yourself to have it all worked out *now*. It’s okay to spend some time getting things wrong before you get them right. Just go talk to Kitt first.’

‘Are you getting me off the phone so you can go and get more caterpillars?’

She laughs. ‘Ah, so it’s not just that I know you too well, you know me too well, as well.’

‘Love you, Grandma.’

‘Love you, Rory.’

I turn in the direction of Kitt’s and tread straight into something that doesn’t bear inspection.

* * *

I linger at the window of the German bakery on Kitt’s corner. I know that Elise will go up in flames if she touches a carb, but Kitt can’t resist an almond spritz cookie. I figure I’ll leave them with Elise if she’s home, or

outside her door and hope that no one with a sweet tooth in the apartment building wanders past and nicks the box.

Kitt answers her door in faded trackpants and an old Billabong hoodie. Whatever she's about to say is nixed when she takes in my appearance.

'What are you doing home?' Not the apology I was hoping to make.

'I couldn't get my head in the game today,' replies Kitt, 'and unfortunately I need to be able to focus at work so I called in sick. I might have run my mouth with my best friend and felt bad about it.'

'These are for you. Your friend is sorry. Your mouth was right. It should be rewarded.' I hold out the warm box of apology.

'Come in. Come in. What's happened to you? You look exhausted. Were you mugged on the way to work?' She takes the cookies out of my hands and pulls me through the doorway.

'No, I've got nothing on me that anyone would want.'

'You've got a great set of boobs.'

'Thank you. As do you.'

There's a weighted pause. Heavy with regret, sadness and fermenting cabbage.

'I'm sorry I stormed out of here this morning,' I continue. 'You were just trying to support me, which sometimes means having to tell me things that I don't want to hear.'

'Maybe I was wrong, though, Rory. I'm not always right – ask Elise.'

'I don't think you were wrong. I thought that I *had* to be a journalist. That it was something I was born to do. My grandad was a great one, so I would be a great one. It's shoddy reasoning. I should know better than that.'

'You do love a good story, though, so it's fine reasoning. And you loved your grandad. It makes sense to focus on journalism as a way to keep him with you.'

She flicks up the cardboard lid of the cookie box and holds them out to me to choose one. Always thinking of me first, while I haven't asked her once what's happening in her life recently. What's happening between her and Elise. Elise who is finding her way into a lot of our conversations of late.

'But I don't know if I've got the nose for sniffing out when other people have stories. I've never chased one down. Even when I thought I was about to have a big break with Elle Chambers, it was a story that was put to all the

staff. I didn't come up with it. I didn't even raise my hand in the meeting to talk about it. I just lied about being able to make it happen.'

'Your first story is still out there. You just haven't found it yet.'

'It might be, but I don't think it's in journalism. I haven't even asked all week how you've been. I've been too stuck in my own head and my crossword seven-day plan to check in with you. That's not being a good journalist, or friend.'

'Everyone is allowed a selfish week once in a while,' she says.

'Best friends aren't.'

'Best friends are the only ones that are.' She comes over and gives me a warm, sulphuric hug.

'I know you're going to laugh at me, but can you smell something really bad?'

She starts sniffing up and down my body like a drug dog at airport security or the man standing next to me on the train last week.

'It's me. I think I stood in some dog shit when I was leaving the park. I haven't had the strength to look. Honestly, I probably deserve it.'

'Stop beating yourself up and help me clean the floor before it gets spread around. I don't want anything affecting the cabbage-vibe Elise and I have going on. Tell me how the rest of the week has gone under the crossword's sage tutelage.'

She hands me a mop that I know she bought off the Home Shopping Network, which was the only thing she watched for a week when she couldn't find where she'd put the remote.

'You only have until the end of the weekend before my amnesty on selfishness is up. Make the most of it while you can. It's going to be all Kitt, all the time, from Monday onwards.'

4 DOWN

After tidying up yet another mess, I go to the corner shop to solve my no-spoon problem. Good to tick easy fixes off the mental list first and soon I have a seemingly cursed pint of ice cream that kicked off this week from

hell with a four-pack of teaspoons (that were shelved next to a pile of Nixon Halloween masks) in my bag. I feel like I'm gathering some momentum to help me deal with bigger mistakes that I've made this week. And at least now I have the ability to make myself a decent cup of tea.

Back at the apartment, I do my check of *The New York Times* crossword for today's guidance. I hope that whatever direction I get pointed in doesn't require anything larger than a teaspoon.

4D One of the City Slickers.

Billy Crystal. Billy Crystal who played Harry in *When Harry Met Sally*. Harry is the direction I'm getting pointed in.

Instead of me sloughing off pieces of my life, I could take this opportunity to add something great to it. The crossword must want me to apologise to Harry for hijacking his day of remembrance and to thank him for inexplicably being there for me all week. I decide not to second-guess this directive.

An itch to see him pulses through me.

I've already ruled out the restaurant as a way to track him down. Only very stupid serial killers go back to the scene of the crime. I can't just loiter around The Golden Screen in the hopes that he'll have another craving for popcorn. What I could do is go back to the gallery. Even if they don't have his direct contact details, they should have the name of the company that they hired him through. Oddly, it doesn't sound like the most stalker-esque move I've made this week.

Waiting for the pedestrian lights to turn green feels like an eternity. Entering the gallery, without all the hipsters, it feels like my voice will echo off the walls. A sculpture of an aggressive black steel ibis glares at me from a centre platform that must have been moved out the back for Tuesday night's exhibition. The only sign of life is an impossibly lithe woman, languidly turning a page of a book behind a white (could it be any other colour?) reception desk. On inspection, the book is *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. Of course it is.

'Hello,' she says cheerily. I feel bad for expecting a sullen, bored response.

'Hi. That's a great book,' I say.

‘It is. She’s practically written my life down. She’s a genius.’

I have no idea how to respond to her statement in a way that will make either of our days better. Of course, this woman believes that she is a Sally Rooney character. She’s pale and thin – that’s at least two of the required characteristics.

‘Yeah. Look, I’m really sorry to bother you, but I was hoping to get the details of a bartender that you had here earlier this week for an opening on Tuesday night.’

‘Don’t you be sorry,’ she says. ‘I’m sorry I can’t help. We don’t use bartenders for events, so I’m afraid I can’t help. Sorry.’

I want to ask her why we’re always so ‘afraid’ we can’t help. I always associate the word with how we might feel about a monster under the bed, rather than our inability to assist someone. But I decide now is not the time to go into that.

‘Please, don’t you be sorry. I’m the one interrupting your reading,’ I assure her. ‘The thing is, I was here at the opening on Tuesday night and there definitely was a guy who was serving drinks and moving boxes of empty glasses around, and he wasn’t the artist. I’m sorry if that sounds like me doubting you.’ Which I absolutely am.

She gently places her book down and stands up. I realise I definitely should have put an extra sorry in the last explanation.

‘I’m so sorry that I can’t help you find a random caterer or bartender or whatever, but there isn’t one here. I would *love* to help, but I need to finish this for my book group, so I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave. Unless you’d like to buy some *art*?’

I want to tell her that this bartender is called Harry. He is warm, lovely, knows his way around a tub of butter and is a fan of rom-coms. All defining and memorable features. Unless, of course, you’re the type of person who is going to deny the existence of bartenders and caterers as a people, and then what would a Harry mean to you anyway?

‘No, thank you. Sorry to bother you.’

She might be afraid of being unhelpful, but I am terrified that Harry was lying to me. I can think of no reason why the gallery assistant would lie to me about catering. I need him to *not* be a liar. I am terrified of never seeing him again. I realise I would climb out every window in town in the hope that it would summon him. Get my pen out and circle every event that

features Audrey in case I could corner him while he is chasing his own ghosts.

Does the crossword want me to find Harry or just admit to myself how much he already means to me?

* * *

We were outside my front door. He'd knocked and I hadn't expected it. I'd been lounging in my sophisticated, soft merino 'house wear' – its rusty hues shot through with seams of metallic bronze – and had poured myself a glass of red on my way to the computer on my antique desk by the window. The big Japanese maple outside always inspired me, and I had just settled in to write my wildly popular weekly column – people called me the voice of a generation! – when I heard the knock and opened the door to him.

Raindrops were scattered throughout his hair, as though Romeo and Juliet's fairy Queen Mab had sprinkled him with good luck. His eyes were where the real storm was. He had something to tell me, something that he'd known since the moment we first met but hadn't had the courage to verbalise until now . . .

'Rory, I've been standing outside your door for twenty minutes. What on earth are you doing?' Kitt is banging on my frosted bathroom window, ruining the romantic rain scene that has been playing out in my mind as I sit in my shower. I shut off the taps, grab a decidedly non-merino towel and write 'Go to the front door' backwards with my finger on the fogged-up glass.

'You're lucky I'm wearing something stretchy, otherwise I would never have been able to climb up on that wheelie bin to reach your window,' Kitt announces, once she's inside and back on solid ground, pulling plates out of my kitchen cupboards for the two pizzas she's brought. She's lucky that Lucas had seen fit to leave plates here. Though it's more likely he just hadn't noticed them. I'm sure Marissa has enough plates for them both. (Perhaps she'd had a shortage of spoons until today, and Lucas has now replenished her cutlery drawer.)

'Hopefully this hasn't gone cold. Why were you taking a shower in the middle of the afternoon?'

‘Just a little daydreaming,’ I say, piling four pieces of pepperoni on my plate and half the garlic bread.

‘You dirty bird! Sorry I interrupted. I didn’t know you had it in you. You’ve never seemed the type, but of course you do – you’re a human being!’ She raises her eyebrows at me as she takes a bite.

‘It’s not sexy role-play,’ I say, punching her shoulder, forcing her to drop the piece that’s in her mouth. ‘I just like to pretend I’m having a rainy rom-com moment when I need a break from *this*.’ I gesture around the apartment that is about to lose half of its furniture and then me, once Patricia is informed about the break-up. Whatever sympathy Lucas displayed this morning wasn’t from her side of the family.

‘Didn’t I look like a naked Andie MacDowell?’ I add.

‘A break from *this*?’

‘*This* whole thing. Lucas and work and my family being a state away. *This*.’

‘Maybe you should try the other kind of role-play as well. Always makes me feel better.’

‘Maybe you should tell me why you’re here. Is it just to eat carbs at a safe distance from Elise?’

‘I’m not going to lie, that is my motivation for leaving the apartment most of the time, but I also felt you needed a little more Kitt time. Time when we aren’t just apologising to each other. Although, I will keep up the apologising if it means you keep bringing me German cookies. I just didn’t realise you had your own separate self-care going on and I’d be interrupting.’

‘Do not filthy up my shower time with your dirty mind. I *need* that time.’

‘Look, I’ve always known you have an active imagination. I’m just happy to see you’ve found a productive way to use it. Have you ever considered writing romance novels?’

I laugh, gracefully shooting flecks of cheese out from between my teeth.

‘Romance seems like a natural genre for me to enter into. I mean, stuff that saying “Write what you know”. If I did that, I’d have to go into misery memoirs.’

‘Rory, your life is hardly *My Mother Left Me in a Public Toilet with a Pack of Cigarettes*.’

‘How about *Unemployed, Unsolved and Delusional: The Story of One Woman’s Quest for a Solved Puzzle and Life?*’

‘That’s quite catchy, actually. Maybe you should go into book publishing as well,’ Kitt says, heading back for another slice of pizza.

‘You can tell that you’ve had your head in more textbooks than novels. I might be a shitty journalist, but even I know that that title is rubbish. Would you believe that today I went on a wild goose chase for that supposed bartender I foisted myself on three times this week and I was told he doesn’t exist? Harry, the one good thing to come out of this horror show of a week, apparently does not exist. I’m starting to wonder if I’m in my version of *The Sixth Sense* or a really desperate remake of *Ghost*. I might need to invest in a pottery wheel. Once Lucas’s desk goes, I’ll have the space.’

‘Harry does sound too good to be true. I mean, a man who of his own agency chooses to spend an afternoon with Audrey Hepburn – phwoar! But I don’t think you’re quite delusional enough to have just conjured him up. At least, I didn’t think you were until I found out what you do when you’re in the shower.’

‘I’ll no longer be fielding any questions or comments about my showers. After I left your place, I went to the gallery where I’d met him and they said they never hire bartenders to do events. I don’t think he ever explicitly called himself a bartender so it doesn’t necessarily make him a liar, but it does mean I don’t have any way of reaching him.’ Kitt winks at me like she’s in a *Carry On* movie. ‘Lucas hasn’t even moved out yet, so it might be too soon to be looking for No-Last-Name-Harry. Maybe the woman at the gallery is my punishment and I’m not allowed nice things.’

Kitt leans forward. I can see from the serious look on her face that the jokes about me in the shower are going to be side-lined.

‘Did you want things to end with Lucas?’ Her hands cup her face like the pink ladies singing ‘Tell me more, tell me more’ in *Grease*. She’s just missing the gleeful smile and bouncy hair that only curlers can provide.

‘I don’t know. I do love him. He’s a total dickhead, but I love him. Or at least I did. I could have tried to move past him cheating on me. You probably think that’s thumbing my nose at feminism, but I would’ve given it a shot.’

‘Firstly, I love that you said “thumbing my nose”. It’s like I’m eating pizza with Shakespeare. And secondly, being a feminist is about making

your own choices and fighting for others to do the same. If you had wanted to stay with Lucas, I would have supported you in that decision. That's what we do for each other. You didn't storm out when you saw how Elise and I had fermented a farmers' market.'

'I had nowhere else to go.' I sink back in my chair at the realisation.

'You could have slept at the office.'

'True. While I had an office where I was welcome, I could have absolutely slept in it. Hey, while we're unearthing our real selves, when do you think you're going to be ready to tell me about Elise?'

Now Kitt sinks back.

'There's nothing to tell or nothing that I feel comfortable telling. Not yet. You'll be the first person to know when that changes. I'm not ashamed – I'm just keeping it for me, for now,' Kitt says, a blush storming up her neck.

'Okay, just don't think I don't see what's going on. I might be a shit journalist but I'm not an idiot. Well, I'm not a *total* idiot. I've never known you to go running so much before.'

'Fuck off, Sherlock Holmes.' She makes to throw her slice of pizza at me.

'Whenever you're ready. I'll be here. Or in another apartment. I'll be where you need me to be.'

'I'll know where to find you. Anywhere with a big shower head.'

'Stop sullyng my special time!' I pick up one of Lucas's pillows, one with a Che Guevara print on it, with my greasy fingers and peg it at her head.

'How are you going to find Harry?' she asks. 'You obviously want to. You can still be sad about Lucas and lust over Harry. I mean, who did you picture in the shower?'

'Shower man doesn't have a face. He's not fully formed. He's an amalgamation of a lot of leading men, with a strong leaning towards Gregory Peck. If he was a real person, it'd ruin it.'

'You need to find Harry. Even if it's just for a little role-play.'

'I don't think that Harry is a fling person. He's a ring person.'

'Settle down, tiger. I think you need to turn to the crossword again. I think this time your best shot when it comes to finding Harry is with the crossword. Just not one from *The New York Times*.'

SATURDAY

Now

Six am sounds like a rich, bubbling chuckle.

A female cuckoo. Like Marissa who has laid her eggs in my Lucas-shaped nest. My nest is being dismantled today, and it's all my own doing.

The reality of what today is hits me and for once I silence the alarm and pull my pillow back over my head. Soon the trucks will pull up outside. The chorus of steel-capped boots will begin and it'll all be real.

I wake up again, hours later, judging by the way the sun has moved up the wall, to the dulcet tones of someone swearing at our door. Lucas never could remember that you had to turn the key twice to the right before turning it left once in order to unlock the door. It always took him at least three goes. Would the removalists be questioning if they were even at the right apartment? Maybe this guy was an inept cat burglar with a deep affection for leather sofas? Either way I was going to help him.

Now I'm huddled in the corner of what has become 'my' instead of 'our' bedroom. Listening to boxes scrape along the wooden floors and paintings being taken off hooks.

The smart thing would have been to go for a walk. At the very least, I should've brought my earphones in from the kitchen counter so I didn't have to hear my life being heaved out the door, as well as Lucas's friendly banter with the removalists – as if nothing momentous at all was happening.

Nobody comments on why only half of the furniture is being removed. Why the grey three-seater is still sitting pride of place in the lounge room. Although it doesn't matter anyway, because the grey sofa has never really gone with the leather recliner that is being hoisted on their shoulders. Together, they had been brought into the room with such hope and joy.

They made sense in that early iteration of 'us'. Now the recliner is collateral damage.

I can't take this anymore. I crack open the bedroom window, throw on a black hoodie over my pyjama top, and climb out, via a tree and wheelie bin, to street level. Lucas leaves 'us' through the front door and I go out a window. After this week, could it be any other way?

I really don't know what the people on the streets of Sydney's inner west think of a grown woman wearing her striped blue-and-white pyjamas out in public at 11 am on a Saturday. Maybe I would have a week ago but things are very different now. But out on Main Street, nobody seems to look twice at me, bar a four-year-old who stops to pick up a twig I have just pulled out of my knotty hair and thrown onto the ground.

In the space of a week, my life has gone from dot points on a lined pad to doodles in the margins. Swathes of goals struck out with a fat red pen. And I feel alone. A week ago, I had Lucas, Kitt, David, an office full of people who had no idea what I did but, in the name of journalism, would have noticed if I dropped dead on the floor.

Now I'm likely to have none of those things. There's no way I'm not going to be fired after assaulting Elle Chambers. But I still have Kitt and I now sort of have Harry. Lovely Harry. A man I can't get in contact with – if he actually exists – and who might actually turn out to be another dishonest male. But for now, I have to hold on to the hope that he is the lovely man who let me sleep on him at the cinema and, I trust, hadn't peered down my top. I also still have my grandma, who is just a phone call away. And my mother, who could very well be a couple of plane flights away. The only thing I know about her whereabouts is that it has baths and cocktails.

Whether I like it or not, despite my building a life of routines in response to my mum's unpredictable schedule, I am just like her, picking up aspirations and personality traits in the same way she collects and brings home Moroccan lamps and vintage band posters to construct what a life should look like. But I know it doesn't take much more than a gentle shove for the film set to collapse and expose itself as balsa wood with a one-coat paint job.

I also know that I chose journalism as a career because that's what my grandad did, and I've never known someone to be so admired and then missed by readers.

Mary Tyler Moore was determined but also obliging, so I've fashioned myself to be that too. I've based myself on the lives of two people who both, ultimately, are fictional. Mary overtly so, but Grandad too. I've built him up in my head to be a gruff and gentle Lou Grant character, and now I have to face the fact that even Lou Grant was hiding Scotch bottles in his desk drawers. I need to let people be human. I can't live up to this fictionalised version of my grandad who was always picking me up from school; I have to allow for the reality that he often just dropped me home and drove back to the office, not returning until I was in bed, because he prioritised work over spending time with us – until the end. A fault that I am constantly internally accusing my mother of.

I've never lain down in the backyard and let grass spear me in the back as I construct my *own* castles in the air. I've just taken up the lease on other people's dreams – people who don't really exist – and claimed them as my own.

At the park, I pick out a spot and look to the sky. The clouds look light. No rain is forecast – which is one win because I certainly didn't think to bring an umbrella when I climbed out the window. I really should learn the names of the different types of clouds. Maybe that's what life is telling me: if you can't build castles and other dwellings in the air, it means you should just focus on the clouds themselves.

Perhaps I'm grasping at straws. I don't have my notebook, so I make a mental list.

Things I know I am good at:

1. Writing. Stringing together a sentence and, on occasion, a narrative.
2. Recalling the perfect moments in every rom-com. (Not all rom-coms are perfect, but they all have a perfect moment.)
3. Crosswords. (More solving than creating, but it still counts.)
4. Killing caterpillars that were preying on my grandad's roses. My grandma had raised a cold-blooded assassin.

Things I know I am not good at:

1. Journalism. (I can write news stories, but my heart isn't in finding them.)

2. Working out when my best friend is in a relationship. (Not realising she is partnered up until she is six months into living with that person.)
3. Making my own destiny. (My grand crossword plans have left me clueless – and one step away from homeless.)
4. Being spontaneous.
5. Remembering to bring my wallet when I climb out of a window.

I need to turn the things from the first list into a job – sans the caterpillar killings – and avoid the points on the second. Ideally, I need a job that pays a living wage and puts me back in touch with Harry.

How is it that I've run into him three times in the past week and as soon as I'm able to acknowledge to myself that I need him, he is nowhere to be seen? I pick myself up from the grass. Best that if I do run into him again, I'm not wearing my pyjamas. Hopefully the removalists are gone. I need a shower.

* * *

I pull over one of the bins that my neighbours never bring back off the street after the garbage truck has been, and stand on it so I can get back into the apartment through the bedroom window. I might have remembered my 'in case of fire shoes', but I hadn't taken the apartment key. It was hanging on the peel-away hook I'd stuck next to the front door. Something I'd done, thinking that it would stop me from being locked out, of course, but I had stupidly not predicted that my main exit from buildings would eventually be windows.

I can hear scratching on the other side of the bedroom door but I can't hear removalists or smell their smoky sweat. I pray this isn't a moment that leads to an acting student starring as me in a crime stoppers re-enactment.

No, it isn't scratching. A person is *stroking* the walls near my door. She is dressed like a gobstopper. Colour upon colour upon colour. If you took the first layer off, there would be a new spectrum of pinks and greens underneath. A mass of chestnut hair piled on her head is barely contained by a tortoiseshell clip.

'Mum?'

‘HMMMM?’

She is trying to lift one of the flakier bits of paint off the wall. Even when someone like Patricia with her silken money bags buys an apartment at Sydney prices, you are still going to have to live with a level of deterioration if you’re spending under two million.

‘Mum!’

‘Oh, sorry, honey! This colour is perfect. I have to kit out an office set for a comedy about a family that sells bathroom pipes, and this is *the* colour.’

‘Is that why you’re here? How are you here?’

Where my grandma is focused and direct, my mother’s mind jumps from idea to idea. Until this week, I’d definitely been more like my grandma.

‘Aurora, my love, I’m here because Kitt called me and confirmed that my feelings were right and that you’re on the verge of breakdown.’

‘Kitt called you? She should spend a little more time sorting out her own stuff and a little less time orchestrating my life. Did she mention Elise to you? How are you inside my apartment?’

‘Yes, she phoned not long after you did the other morning, and I had a couple of days break in between jobs so I thought I’d come and visit. I don’t know who this Elise person is. Kitt didn’t say what the actual problem is. I guess she figured you could do that, though I’m guessing Lucas has something to do with it.’

I pick up her backpack from the floor and put it on a dining chair, which thankfully was mine, so the removalists had left it.

‘How did you get inside the apartment? Lucas isn’t here.’

‘I know he isn’t, honey. One of the movers, a lovely man – his wife is due with their first child this month – told me I could wait in here for you. He said he hadn’t seen you, but Lucas was down in the van. He didn’t wave hello.’

‘How did the removalist know you were my mother and not some nutjob looking to take the stuff they’d left behind?’

‘Look at my face, honey. Do I look like a nutjob?’

I bite my lip.

The apartment actually looks like it has been robbed by shameless burglars who don’t care if they’re caught. There are black footprints all over

the carpet in the lounge room and one of the removalists has dropped and crushed a cigarette into the kitchen floor. At least it isn't clove.

'Honey, is there something you want to tell me?'

She starts taking photos of the wall colour with her phone.

I sit on the sofa. 'Lucas has left me. As you can probably tell, he moved out this morning. It was his movers that decided it would be okay to let in a random woman who they had no proof was related to anyone who lives – or lived – in this apartment.'

'Right.' She puts her phone down on the kitchen counter.

'Right?' I ask.

My mother has never been one to say one word when twelve would do.

'What do you want me to say?'

'You could ask me what happened?' I jiggle the kettle into life.

'You said what happened. Lucas left you. He's moved out.'

'Do you want to know why he left me?'

'Not really.' She shrugged.

'Not really?'

'I thought you'd grown out of that repeating thing you do.'

She opens all the cupboard doors, searching for mugs. She's never been in this apartment. It is always me who visits her back in Brisbane, and when she comes to Sydney she is normally put up in some middling hotel room and I meet her at a gallery or a dinky market, helping her load herself up with spices that would certainly add another hour to her trip back through airport security. Lucas always made some excuse to avoid seeing her. I thought he was just nervous – after all, he didn't have a great track record with mothers, given his own was a caricature of herself – but now I think it might have been slightly more self-serving. Given how I was always going on about my mum's freakishly on-point intuition, maybe he was scared she might see the real him.

'I haven't, but you're the second person who's pulled me up on it this week,' I say.

'That's something you can work on. In fact, I think I might have the perfect book for you . . .' She rifles through the totebag on her arm. One that looks like it has seen more than its fair share of heads of lettuce and misshapen apples (she always feels sorry for them, so grocery shopping with her is more like an adoption process than an essential chore).

‘You know what? I think I might have lent it to this woman on the plane. Her sister was about to have an operation. I want to say that it was for a tailbone issue. Aurora, tell me what some tailbone problems are called – I’ll know it when I hear it . . .’

‘Mum!’

‘What?’

‘Lucas was cheating on me and he realised he didn’t love me. I’m not sure which came first but that’s why he left,’ I yell.

‘Honey, if Lucas has left, it is absolutely his loss. I know things are hard now. I mean, you’ve only got four spoons and for some reason you’ve been wearing your pyjamas out on the street, so things obviously aren’t great, but they will be better for Lucas leaving.’

‘How do you know that? How many spoons is one person supposed to have?’

‘Some people aren’t meant to stay in our lives forever. I know you wanted to get the whole dating thing done and dusted, and settle down. You’ve never been about the journey. It has always been the destination that’s mattered to you, but that’s just not how the universe works. And, honey . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Lucas was also a bit of a dick.’ She opens the bag of teaspoons, tuts at the plastic wrapping, and stirs her cup of tea.

I burst out laughing. Which turns into crying. And hair stroking. Which turns into my mother making a huge plate of blueberry pikelets and asking me what else I have to do today. Which devolves into a short but rousing speech about the finite time we have on this earth. How the future is in our hands and not something that we can put on a crossword’s – albeit the best crossword’s – lofty shoulders. How we need to recognise when something isn’t working for us, take what we need from it and use those learnings to help us take the next step. How you can’t skip down the line and won’t appreciate it if you do, even if the man dressed as a sausage roll lands in your lap. You have to *find* the man in the sausage-roll suit.

Mum ends on a climate-change segue that slightly dilutes the message, but there’s a reason why she isn’t writing screenplays for a living. And even though it’s a speech that, by all accounts, should be incredibly depressing, what with the lack of government action towards the environment and given

that I'd heard seventy per cent of what I had counted as my worldly possessions being carried out the door that morning, it instead gives me a sense of my own agency, and while I don't see the sausage-roll man in my future, I do know that I need to do something if I want to claim my life back. It's in my power to do it.

By the second pikelet, I have a plan, and this time I need the TV-guide crossword to execute it.

* * *

Given the success of my email to Elle Chambers earlier in the week, I decide it's best to call Mathia rather than sending her a message. I press myself flat against a now-bare wall in the bedroom in an attempt to sound strong and feel like I have some support behind me. She answers on the third ring. I can hear children yelling and the occasional pop in the background.

'Rory, what an unexpected surprise.' I bet she has everyone she has ever known saved in her phone. She'd always want to know who is calling her; that way she'd always be prepared. The prime minister would call her – and probably does – and she'd immediately gain the upper hand by being able to treat him as if he were her hairdresser calling her up with a six-week reminder to get her roots done.

'Sorry to bother you.'

'No bother. I'm just at a birthday party for one of Clancy's friends. I'll step outside so I can hear you over the popping of balloons and ear drums.' She's silent for a minute before she comes back on. 'I'm sorry I haven't come back to you about what we're going to do about your role, but I'll attempt a ruling early next week. The problem is that you aren't making anything better for yourself. I checked with Melissa and she said you hadn't submitted your crossword for this week. That's the one thing I asked you to do. You do not want to upset crossword solvers, Rory. They are fanatical.'

An unfair image of someone pasting completed TV-guide crosswords like wallpaper in a dark room comes to mind. It's a little room, tucked away in the back of an apartment building. A detective would find it once the frustrated crossword addict had snapped and stormed *The Connect* building because I hadn't filed this Sunday's crossword. No one on the street would

be surprised when they saw it covered on the news. They'd say, 'We always thought there was something off about him. Who knows *that* much about recurring characters in the 1980s run of *Neighbours*?' Is that how people saw me?

'I know, Mathia.' Her name finally stumbles off my tongue; it has only taken three years of trying. 'That's what I'm calling about. I decided that I had to redo it, so if there's still time I'd like to send it to you this afternoon, if that's okay?'

I can hear a child's scream in the background, followed by a woman announcing that she is opening another bottle if anyone is interested. A cheer goes up.

'The bulk of the pages need to be set and uploaded by 3 pm. You have until then.'

Mathia wants me off the phone so she doesn't miss out on having her glass topped up. Since she's spending her Saturday at a six-year-old's birthday party, I can't blame her.

'Thank you so much,' I say, unsure of why she is continuing to be so generous to me. Is it possible that what I had thought was an aloof coolness is, in fact, someone who is too busy running a leading news site and paper to stop and ask everyone in the office how their weekend was?

'Rory, do you care about keeping your job at *The Connect*?'

The question is more one of concern than the threat I would have heard it as prior to our chat the day before.

'Honestly?'

'Best to be honest with me, Rory. You've proven that you're not a successful liar.'

'I don't think I do,' I say. 'I think I thought journalism was something I should be good at, for no reason other than it's a legacy career and that I can string sentences together. But I don't think that's enough anymore, and I think if I really wanted it, I would have submitted the crossword yesterday.'

'I'll ask you again, what would you do if you were me?'

'I'd let me submit this new crossword and then ask me to log off. There are plenty of people who are more talented and hungry for this than I am. Though of course I'll regret having given you that answer when my ex-mother-in-law asks me for rent or kicks me out.'

‘I sound very wise. Crossword by 3 pm and then you can log off. I hope we meet again, Rory. Unless I don’t have that crossword in my inbox by 3 pm today. Then you best avoid any event that I might be attending.’

Mathia hangs up. I’ve just fired myself.

* * *

My mum is sitting in the lounge room when I walk out. She has hung six plants from the ceiling, above the blank space where Lucas’s desk used to be. Mum is still holding the drill – the origin of which I am unsure. It could have been squirrelled away in her suitcase. A *Mary Poppins* bag of tricks, now in scratch-resistant graphite. And in her other hand is another plant. Knowing my mum, she has already made friends with a neighbour, and, in exchange for showing an interest in their back pain and recommending the appropriate essential oil, has garnered a tray of pot plants in macramé netting.

‘I don’t think Patricia is going to like that you’ve drilled holes into her ceiling, Mum.’

‘I don’t think Patricia likes anything, honey, so I say we do whatever we want.’ She puts her finger on the trigger and revs the drill.

‘Where did you get the ladder?’

‘Around. Maybe in the hallway? It feels like something that I’d find in a hallway.’

‘Will you remember to return it to whatever hallway you found it in?’

‘I will. You don’t want it sitting in here. People could use it to climb through your window, if the movers don’t come back and leave your door open again. Though, now that I say that, it is a bit of talking point.’

‘I don’t plan on having many people over. Kitt might come to sleep here when her whole apartment finally ferments itself, but I’m not really one for entertaining. Without a job to pay rent, and with Patricia’s decided lack of affection for me, I might not be here for long anyway.’

‘The universe will give you what you need, honey. Look what it’s given me – a wonderful daughter, a job travelling the world, legs for days and now a ladder. Trust in it.’

‘Mum, your legs are spectacular, and the ladder is very handy, but I need to do a little more than sit here and wait for the universe to deliver.’

‘I’m not telling you to do nothing. I’m just saying that, as you’ve realised over the last week, you can’t plan everything and you need to trust yourself. I think when you told that porky at work about having a link to Elle Chambers, you knew it was the wrong thing to do, but you didn’t dare question anything you thought the crossword was telling you. If you trusted yourself, you wouldn’t have done it.’

‘If I trusted myself, I’d still be treading water in a career that isn’t making me happy. The crossword was right to push me. I wish it hadn’t put me so close to potential assault charges, but I needed it. It’s just an instance where a little bit of planning would have helped. If it could have shown me the light but not expedited the unemployment, I could have worked out how I was going to live while I nussed out what’s next for me.’

‘Trust yourself, Rory. I’ll bet this ladder that being the gorgeous, anally retentive person you are, you’ve been putting away little packets of your pocket money and a percentage of your salary for a rainy day. You’re a rainy-day kid. Tell me I’m wrong.’

If the universe would give me what I truly need, it would let me prove her wrong right now.

‘I have some money.’

‘Ha! I knew it.’

‘I don’t want to spend it all. Otherwise, what will I do when I blow up the next stage of my life?’

‘You haven’t blown anything up, you just lit a fire under it. Gosh, you are so your father’s daughter sometimes.’

‘Lucky I have a fire extinguisher.’ I ignore the comment about my father. I go over to the cupboards to make sure the movers haven’t carted it and my fire blanket away.

‘You know, you never ask about your father,’ Mum says, putting the plant on the top of the ladder, where it will no doubt remain for the rest of her stay.

‘I know. I don’t care about him, Mum.’

‘For years I spent a really long time thinking about what to say when you asked about him. I didn’t want to broach it with you. At least not until you’d mastered mindful breathing. But maybe I should have just been brave and taken the plunge.’

‘Put the drill down, Mum.’

She laughs and sets it down next to the plant. ‘I’m serious. A lot of time. I even wrote a speech, folded it up and carried it around in my pocket for a good six years, in case you ever asked. You’re not the only one who can be prepared. But nothing. Not a murmur from you.’

‘I don’t need to know anything about him. I have you and Grandma. I had Grandad for a sliver of time. I have Kitt. Why do I need him?’

Growing up, I also had Steve Martin in the *Father of the Bride* movies – that had been plenty. You couldn’t top George Banks shooting hoops with you in the driveway. It was enough. I knew what love looked like from George and what it felt like from my grandma and Mum. I’ve never needed anyone else to muddy that for me.

‘It’s good to know where you come from. It might help you work out what to do next.’

‘Do I need to pat you down, looking for a crumpled speech?’

She laughs again and points to the sofa. I’m trapped.

‘Just let me do it now. I don’t think I’ve forgotten any of it.’

‘When did you write this?’

‘When you were around thirteen. It felt like something that a teenage girl would suddenly become obsessed with. Something you could blame all your hormonal torment on and your new interest in mopey music, but you never went that way. You did start wearing black more often, but that probably coincided more with you worrying about your periods bursting forth and greeting the world rather than a predilection towards teenage boys who give themselves comb-overs and scream into microphones.’

‘I feel like you dodged a bullet with me.’

‘You were a wonderful kid and now you’re a fantastic woman and . . . I still want to tell you about your father. Can we do this, for me? Then I’ll make us something delicious and we can watch television and not talk to each other for the rest of the day.’

I nod. I’m very hungry.

‘Now I’m all nervous. Argh.’ She throws her arms up in the air in mock stage fright.

‘This is your chance, Mum. You do it now or you don’t do it ever.’

‘I’m doing it.’ She straightens herself up as if she’s about to walk into a job interview.

‘Another condition is that I don’t want you to look me in the eye,’ I say, just as she’s about to start. ‘Pretend I’m Tom Cruise and you’re a boom mic operator on set with me. This isn’t an emotional scene. Think less *An Affair to Remember* and more *High Society*. That’s the level I want it at.’

‘I will agree to no last-minute conditions post the agreement, but I’ll factor them into my delivery,’ she says.

I sigh and allow myself to be enveloped by cushions.

‘Go on. I’m starving.’

‘Try not to roll your eyes when I tell you this. It’s my big moment.’

‘Starving, Mum. Start.’

‘I met your father when I was at uni. Note, I say father, not dad. To me a dad has always been someone who is actually part of raising a child, not a pen pal. So, I met your father at uni. I guess I was his manic pixie dream girl. He was serious. So serious. Chokingly rigid.’

My heart thumps at the word ‘rigid’. I feel it through my chest.

‘I cared about classes and assignments, but I also cared about wine and spontaneous daytrips with friends. Trips where we’d drive three hours to find a rodeo, or go all over Brisbane rating and trying to find the best vanilla slice. I don’t think Angus had ever even eaten vanilla slice. He wouldn’t have liked the texture of the set custard. Anyway, I mistook his seriousness for brooding and deeper thoughts, and he liked my tits – they used to stand up a lot more, like yours do now – and the way I could coax him away from worry, but then I got pregnant. Not planned, obviously – no offence, honey.’ She reaches out for my hand.

‘Don’t worry, Mum; I take no blame for any of this.’ But I put my hand on her arm. She looks like she needs steadying.

‘And serious became dangerous. He was excited for about five minutes before he started planning. Your grandma and grandad weren’t over the moon but they were supportive. That’s their default setting. I was lucky. A lot of girls’ parents wouldn’t have been so ready to step back into piles of nappies and sleepless nights to help out their reckless daughter. But they never mentioned it – they were all ready to help. I’d move back in with them and that way I could finish uni because Grandma would help when I was at lectures and needed to study. Angus didn’t want that. It was his duty to look after us. My theory was always that it was a misplaced sense of

honour that he'd developed when his father left them when Angus was ten. Not so helpful to me.

He dropped out of uni without telling me and started doing pizza deliveries when he told me he was at classes. The corner of what was now our shared bedroom had a tower of tinned food that he kept adding to, as if we were expecting a nuclear bomb to drop on us. He'd walk the neighbourhood streets at night, looking for any baby gear that someone might have put out on the kerb and bring it home. It was often just stray and warped metal rods and laundry baskets with missing handles that he thought he could craft into a pram or bassinet. Our place resembled a junkyard. I only found out about the dropping-out-of-uni thing when I'd gone over to a friend's house for lunch and he delivered the pizza we'd ordered. He'd known that's where Miranda lived, but he didn't want to get fired for not delivering the pizzas, so he took the risk and hoped I wouldn't be visiting.'

Mum gets up off the sofa and paces back and forth across the lounge room. Her hands twist up and down as if she's conducting an orchestra of memories.

'I made a call. He needed help and I couldn't be the one to give it to him. I was twenty-one! I was pregnant and trying to get my degree. I had enough going on. I called his mother and helped her check him into a hospital for treatment, and I carried on. I had to carry on.'

'Geez, Mum. That's a lot.'

'One of my friends – who is no longer my friend – said I was being selfish. That I was leaving as soon as things got hard with Angus. That he needed me. What did she know? She wasn't about to have a child. She wasn't the one who was resting her notebooks on cans of baked beans.'

'Fuck her, Mum.'

'Fuck her indeed, Aurora. I got a letter from your dad after a couple of months, when I was weeks away from your due date. He didn't trust himself enough to be involved. He was worried the birth would cause a relapse and he was sorry, but he'd try and send money when he was in a position to do so. It was very matter-of-fact. These days, if you got a letter like that, you'd think a bot had written it. There was zero emotion. A bot might have said sorry or expressed some regret. Nada. You know the rest. I had a gorgeous butterball of a baby and we all did the best we could. I think you turned out well.'

‘It sounds like it was hard on everyone. You and him. Did he ever get back in contact?’

‘He did. He got married, about ten years ago, and his new wife must have badgered him into asking about his child. I mean, he didn’t even know whether you were a daughter or a son. Perhaps she thought it was weird he didn’t know. Whatever the case, he got in touch over Facebook. Asked how we were. Said he’d back-pay child support if we needed it and that was that. Not a word since.’ Mum doesn’t look surprised that the messages hadn’t continued. ‘Did you want me to introduce you to him? Because I wouldn’t be offended if you did. So much time has passed now and so much of it was out of his control.’

It doesn’t take me long to make up my mind.

‘No. Maybe at one stage I’ll be interested, but right now I don’t think it would be good for either one of us. I’m happy to hear that he’s married and has been in touch to try to do the right thing, but for now I’d prefer to leave him in your past.’ It felt weird that my father had never been in my past. ‘I think I was worried that I might be a lot like him, and I didn’t want to share any traits with some stranger who didn’t care about his family, but that feels silly now that you’ve explained all that.’

‘Oh, honey, you couldn’t be less like him. You always keep going. Unfortunately, that wasn’t something he was able to do or had much control over. You’re moving forward right now; you’ve left a job and you’re thinking to the future. In a rational way. You’re not pulling out your hair and bin-diving.’

‘Like you did, Mum. You kept going.’

‘We’re women. That’s what we do.’

She extends her arm to me, bangles rushing down to gather at her wrist. ‘Let’s make something to eat. I think you’ve got one last job to do before you’re officially unemployed, don’t you?’

‘There’s more than one thing on my list.’

I open my laptop and start the Sunday crossword from scratch – past experience be damned; this one is going to be themed. It’s my best shot.

* * *

‘It’s a little late for coffee,’ David says.

It's a little past 11 pm and I'd been waiting for him, outside his semi-detached workers cottage, for an hour. I'd texted him that I wanted to chat and was at his house but he'd had his other child asleep on him at the time so there was no way he was rushing down. I'm lucky the wait hadn't been longer. I want to explain to him in person what I've been doing for the past week, and I had a hunch that now his mother-in-law had gone home, he might be back on baby night shift. Pacing the lounge room, phone in hand, while trying to get his daughter back to sleep all night.

'The coffee is probably lukewarm, anyway. I don't know how reliable these thermos cups are. They were \$3 each from the \$2 shop down the road from my apartment. I don't know how much heat that buys you,' I say, holding up a licensed *Frozen* mug, which seems an odd promotional pairing. I don't know how many toddlers are swilling hot drinks.

'Let's see, shall we?' David takes the cup and does that bounce that all new parents seem to do, whether they are holding a baby or not. I can see the side of the baby's face through a gap in the carrier. Soft and yeasty. Snuggled like a baby koala on David's shirt, which is promoting Robbo's twenty-first: 'Kegs, legs and no dregs'.

'You seem less disappointed in me, compared to how you were yesterday at the office.'

'I'm tireder than I was then, but Mathia called me earlier today – my wife was thrilled about that phone call because it came just as we were about to put the baby down – and let me know what you've decided to do, so I guess there's no real point in being angry now. You've made the call.'

'What do you think about my decision?'

'I think that what is great about you quitting is that you chose it, and you didn't ask me what to do beforehand. It's good to see you take some agency.'

'And I'm sorry about the Elle Chambers' assault thing. And the lying. Mainly the lying. I was being an idiot.'

'Both of us' – he gestures to the top of the downy head on his chest – 'agree with you, but don't beat yourself up. I was disappointed, of course I was. I don't like seeing people I know are better than that doing moronic things. That's why the heart-twanging phrase "I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed" is routinely dragged out by parents. But I'm not your parent, so I shouldn't have said it to you. I'd say I'm tired, but you knew I'd be up

at 11 pm doing laps of my lounge room so you know that. If I'm not asleep during the week at *The Connect* offices at night, I can't be doing something wacky like sleeping during the weekend. Heaven forbid my body thinks it has circadian rhythms to follow. You're smart like that. Keep being smart.'

'I don't feel terribly smart at the moment but I'm hoping that's fleeting.'

'You can be smart and not be a good journalist or a stalker. Millions of people are. You can also string a good sentence together. Maybe you're better off doing it in a fictional sense? I don't know. I'm not Yoda.'

'Even if you were Yoda, I wouldn't know. I haven't watched those movies.'

'That can be how you say sorry to me. You can have the joy of understanding *Star Wars* references that people have no doubt being making out to over years of your life'

'David?'

'Yes?'

'Who's Robbo?'

'Robbo?'

'Of, kegs, legs and no-dregs fame?'

'Just a guy I went to school with. Total dickhead. But his mother got a discount on shirts for his twenty-first, and they're made of the softest cotton I have ever felt. Feel free to chalk this one up to comfort over style. Emma loves it too.' He nods and smiles at his little person.

'Please let her mum be in charge of dressing her, David.'

'If you let me know what amazing thing you do next, that's a deal. Though I seriously doubt she's ever going to want to part with Robbo.'

SUNDAY

A new week

Six am sounds like a KT Tunstall song. A classic, hopeful, rom-com opening tune. Often used while the camera pans over city streets, establishing location. Works just as well when the lead is still lying in bed. I feel like I'm in my own establishing scene – cityscapes and coffee montages with smiling baristas, greeting doormen and having lifts held open for me while I run in heels and clothes that are worth three times my salary – or if this an ending.

My instinct is to open the app so *The New York Times* crossword can tell me what I'm doing, but I need to start weaning myself off it. I need to replace it with a less destructive vice – maybe smoking. I can ask Lucas's new girlfriend to recommend a brand – non-clove preferably.

When I stumble into the lounge room, I find Mum waving around a handful of smouldering herbs.

'Mum, don't do that. I might not like Patricia, but her apartment doesn't deserve to smell like burnt lawn clippings, and if we set off the fire alarm, I'll be out on the street sooner rather than later.'

'Honestly, Aurora, the way you speak, you'd think that instead of *Hairy Maclary*, I used to read you residential tenancy laws at bedtime. This smudging is necessary – it's part of the grieving process.'

'Are *you* grieving Lucas? I must have missed all the deep and meaningful conversations that you and he used to have.' I go over and open a window.

'I'm doing this for you because I know you won't do it. It's important to mark these moments. So far all you've done in the past day is visit a work

colleague, eat some pizza and tinker with a crossword. That's hardly marking an occasion.'

'I think you'll find that consuming pizza is a big part of my grief cycle and every other cycle that my body goes through, and that those safety rules are there for a reason. If a fire truck rocks up here, they won't excuse your need to smudge. And I don't think this is the end.'

'You and Lucas are going to get back together?' She goes to the sink and runs water on the end of the smudge stick, trying to blow the wisps of smoke down the drain and away from the smoke alarm. I should get her an *Introduction to Science* textbook for Christmas.

'No, the end happened ages ago. I just didn't realise it. We'd stopped talking or texting or engaging in any communication that wasn't about life admin months ago. I guess it's easy to not be honest when you aren't talking to your partner to begin with. He wasn't honest about who he was having sex with and I wasn't honest about how I really felt about anything.' I wave away some smoke that's lingering too close to the kitchen's smoke alarm. 'I fed his ego about his art, while at the same time I was making fun of him in my head. Honestly, Charles Duckins! Donna Torte – her name is Tartt, Mum, and he still went torte! I told him I didn't mind the Marvel movies. I said I didn't mind when he did fuck-all around the apartment. I don't think if I'd told the truth in the last year we'd still be together, but it might not have finished in such a cruel way.'

'I hope you're not blaming yourself for him cheating on you?'

'Of course I'm not. I'm a little tired of blaming anyone for anything. What I'd like to do is just be me again.'

And that was going to take me being a better journalist. At least for this morning.

* * *

As I call the depot, I swear to myself it'll be the last lie I tell. An older woman answers the phone. She must have just put lipstick on because I can hear a slight pull as she opens her mouth to start talking.

'Day's Buses, Kathy speaking.'

'Hi, I'm Rory Byrne from *The Connect*. I'm looking for the contact details of one of your bus drivers. We would like to talk to him in

connection to a story.’

‘Who did you say you work for?’ Kathy asks.

‘*The Connect*. It’s one of the biggest news sources in Sydney.’

I’ll miss telling people where I worked. It sounds a lot more important than ‘Rory Byrne, unemployed’.

‘And you want to talk to one of our drivers? About what?’

Kathy was starting to sound less cheery. Maybe I should have said I’m unemployed.

‘Kathy . . . is that what you said your name is?’

‘Yes, Kathy.’ She doesn’t sound any warmer.

‘Kathy, this is a good-news story. A passenger fell asleep on the bus and ended up in the depot, and this kind bus driver gave her a ride back to her intended destination. This is a piece about the generosity and kind spirit of the city’s bus drivers – urging us all to be kinder and more respectful to them. Nothing untoward, Kathy.’

‘Oh, that’s lovely,’ she says, thawing.

‘It is, Kathy, and much needed.’

‘It’s lovely, but I can’t give you any personal details of staff members. If you’d like to send me an email, I’ll be sure to forward it on to the relevant driver and they’ll get in contact with you.’

‘Kathy, I would absolutely normally do that. It’s such a great suggestion. It’s just that, Kathy, my problem is that I need to file the story today, so time is of the essence. I really need to see them today and get some photos, as well as pull quotes.’

‘It has to be today?’

‘Yes, Kathy. It has to be today.’

‘If they’re working today, I can get a message to them. Which driver is it?’

‘He drives the 334, which goes on Main Street at 7.03 am Monday to Friday.’

‘Oh, that’ll be Ted. He only works weekdays.’

‘Please, Kathy. This is so important. If I don’t get this story, I might get fired.’ My pleas hadn’t worked with Elle Chambers, but I think Kathy might be of softer heart.

‘They’d fire you for this?’ Kathy is shocked.

‘It’s all about the clicks, Kathy. That’s all they care about, and to get them we need to publish a certain number of stories a day. News isn’t what it used to be.’

‘Oh, you poor thing. It sounds like you need to find yourself another job.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that, Kathy. Believe me. But that’ll be even harder if I get fired from my current job.’

‘Here’s Ted’s phone number and he’s at 15 Rogets Avenue, Mosman, but you didn’t get it from me.’

Trust me to get my first source the moment I no longer needed a story.

‘Kathy, a journalist never reveals their sources.’ And even though I’m not a journalist any longer, and maybe never was, I’ll stick by the code.

* * *

Another way that news has changed can be clearly seen as soon as you walk into your local newsagent. For starters, I have to walk to the next suburb to get to mine, thanks to people not buying enough papers to justify having one on every corner anymore, and then there is the news-to-plastic-crap ratio they contain. A limp pile, comprised of two different mastheads, with their supplements stacked next to them, is on a shelf so low it might as well be on the floor, and the rest of the shop is dedicated to soft drinks, pens, tiny dolphin and manga figurines, lottery tickets and greeting cards.

I’d bemoan the lack of news in newsagents, but I’m actually here for one of the cards. Something to show Ted that I appreciate him taking the time to drive me back to my bus stop near work on Friday. I want to be the type of person who shows gratitude for acts of kindness but still refrains from calling themselves blessed.

‘Happy Farter’s Day’, ‘You’re so over the hill that you’re under it’, a cartoon of two anthropomorphised wine glasses doing something mildly pornographic – it is a varied selection. I settle on a typographic card with a simple ‘Thank You’. The cartoon wine glasses would send the wrong message. (I’m too scared to open up the card to see what the joke is.)

A corner at the back is full of what the store owner must have thought would make great last-minute gifts: bubble blowers, decks of cards (some not suitable for children – I was starting to feel unclean just being the in

shop) and, thankfully, in a sign that hipster had become mainstream, a handful of succulents in little pots.

I pick up the cheeriest one, part with money from what is becoming a dwindling pot of savings – I’ve chosen a poor time to start showing gratitude – and borrow my mother’s hire car to go and visit my bus driver.

My plan is to leave the card and plant at Ted’s front door and scoot straight back home to my mum and my plans for the afternoon. I can’t just show up to someone’s house uninvited. Another sign that my recent self-sacking was wise. Ted will open the door eventually, see my gift, smile and then carry on with his day, hopefully without having sworn off helping people again, in case they decide to violate his privacy. Probably do some weeding.

I have put a little note in the card, letting him know that he is the best bus driver anyone could ask for and that when I get another job, I hope it will still be on his route. I guess the card is also a goodbye, to someone with whom I’ve only had one proper conversation, but still count as one of my few friends in Sydney. I should be thanking Claire for trusting me as well. It might be good that I’d fired myself because it was going to take me a long time to thank all the people who’d helped me, despite how unhelpful I’ve been to them.

As I turn off the main road, and the GPS starts taking me past nicer and fancier houses, I realise it’s going to be impossible to drop something anonymously at a front door on Rogets Avenue. Everyone has imposing gates and fences. It is aesthetically more beautiful, with flowering climbing plants, than the security at the television studio, but it broadcast the same message: strangers are not welcome. Maybe I should move into the finance sector.

Number 15 has a softer look to it than the surrounding houses, although that might just be because I know there is a nice bus driver inside. A huge jasmine vine has taken over the bulk of the gate, and while I can see through the slats of the fence to the house, it is too high to scale.

I don’t know how I could post the succulent, so I park on the kerb and walk up to the glossy black intercom on the front pylon – it looks like the two-sided glass they have in interrogation rooms in cop dramas. High security for a part-time bus-driving finance worker.

I hold my breath while I wait for someone to respond.

‘Hello?’ It’s Ted’s voice. I nearly laugh with relief.

‘Hi, Ted, it’s Rory from the bus and then your car.’

‘Hello, Rory from the bus and my car!’ His warmth radiates from the cold black square.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you. I just wanted to drop off a little thankyou for your help yesterday. Kathy at the depot gave me your details. I didn’t realise I’d need to buzz to do that – I was just intending to drop and run.’

‘No need to be sorry – it’s not the way I would like to live but needs must. There are a lot of crazies out there.’

‘There sure are.’

Maybe I was wrong, and a lot of people are nice to their bus drivers, but enough where they’d need to construct security measures?

‘Come on in. You can have a cup of tea, given that you’ve come all the way out here.’

The gates open before I can decline the offer and I gawk at the circular driveway. It’s so grand I feel like I’m on the set of *Sabrina* or *Clueless*. Ted laughs at what must be the obvious awe on my face as he opens the door on my approach.

‘Don’t be fooled into thinking this is all me. My wife does very well for herself. I’m just along for the ride.’

‘This is . . . this is wow.’ I’ve never seen such grandeur outside of Hollywood sets.

‘Did I hear my name? Who are you talking to, Ted? I didn’t know we were expecting anyone,’ says a woman’s voice in the background. It must be his wife. There is something in the way each word is enunciated so clearly, like it has been guillotined from its predecessor, that is disturbingly familiar.

‘I didn’t say your name; I said *my wife*.’

The woman laughs.

‘Come on in, Rory. I’ve just put the kettle on.’

I step inside. The house is all clean wooden lines with pops of colour and sweaters over the backs of chairs. Scandi but lived in.

I have no doubt the paintings on the walls are all by artists who also have pieces hung in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but any

pretension has been stripped away by the cat asleep on top of the couch and the cups that sit on the smoked glasstop coffee table without coasters.

It is so warm and welcoming. Very *hygge*.

‘Rory, meet my wonderful wife, Elle.’

It is Elle Chambers.

She looks like a completely different person. A happy one. Which might have more to do with the fact that she isn’t yelling at me, rather than her choice of leisurewear. For now.

‘What the hell?!’ she shouts, and the cat takes off in search of higher ground.

I gulp and look at Ted. ‘Your wife is Elle Chambers?’

I am one of the people she’d built the security system to keep out.

‘Yes, sorry. She’s still a little jumpy.’ He frowns at his wife, who is clearly still in shock. ‘Some nutter launched herself at her in the work parking lot the other day. It’s left her on edge.’

‘*She’s* the nutter!’ Elle Chambers jumps up and points at me.

‘*I am* the nutter,’ I concede. ‘I’ll show myself out.’

‘Just wait. Hold up both of you. Sit down, Rory. I’ll get the tea on and we can make some sense of this.’

‘How do you know this person, Ted?’ Elle asks.

‘She’s a regular on my bus route and not someone who would go out of their way to assault someone.’

I appreciate the fact that he’s gleaned my non-threatening personality from my friendly ‘Good morning’ every weekday.

‘I’m sorry; I didn’t know you were married to Elle Chambers. I would never have come around if I’d known.’

‘Could you do me a favour?’ he asks.

‘Anything,’ I say.

‘Stop calling her Elle Chambers. Just call her Elle.’

I don’t really know if that’s possible but I nod.

‘Ted, I’m not comfortable with this,’ Elle Chambers says.

‘Indulge me.’ And he pours three cups of tea, setting down a small jug of milk next to mine, just in case, and pulls out a dining chair for her.

‘Are that plant and card for me, Rory?’ he asks.

‘They are. I just wanted to thank you for taking pity on me on Friday. I hadn’t had a great week and it meant a lot.’

‘No problem. Making a trip to give me the card and plant was completely unnecessary, but I appreciate it. You could have just given them to me on the bus tomorrow – you didn’t need to travel all the way here.’

Elle’s holding her dining chair in front of her as if she’s attempting to keep a wild animal at bay – me.

‘That’s the thing – I won’t be on the bus tomorrow. I kind of got fired. No reason for me to go into the city.’

Elle comes around from the back of the chair and sits down.

‘I didn’t mean for you to get fired. My agent shouldn’t have insisted on that. You did the wrong thing and were completely out of line, but I don’t want to be responsible for anyone losing their job.’

‘I don’t think it was just that one thing,’ I say. ‘I don’t mean that I’ve been running up to a lot of people in parking lots and begging them for interviews. There are multiple reasons my job didn’t work out. I haven’t really contributed a lot. In my head, I did all this grunt work – writing the weekly TV-guide crossword, cleaning up the classifieds, pulling together last-minute listicles – but that wasn’t what I was really employed to do and, honestly, while I’ve been trying to get you for the story, I was barely even doing that.’

‘That makes me feel better,’ Elle says, and takes a sip of tea. ‘Thanks.’

‘Are you upset about losing your job?’ Ted asks, sliding over a plate heaving with Monte Carlos. He must think this is going to be a long talk.

‘I thought I would be, but the past week has shown me that I’m probably not meant to be a journalist, and that’s okay. I do like to live by a plan, though, and I feel a little rudderless not knowing what I’m supposed to do tomorrow,’ I admit. ‘And I guess I do have to pay for pesky things like food and rent, so that’s a problem; but the not being at *The Connect* part, I’ve made peace with that.’

‘Ah, Elle’s the same way. Everything is planned.’ He reaches out and pats her on the arm. Desperate to help her find common ground with me. He’s clearly a born mediator. I can imagine him as a ten-year-old, coaching two boys arguing about a soccer ball to talk about their feelings and get to the root of the issue.

‘If you don’t mind, Rory, would you tell me exactly what’s happened this week?’ says Elle Chambers. ‘Feel free to not skimp on how you and my

husband seem to be best friends, even though I'd never heard of you until you accosted me in the carpark.'

Elle pulls the whole plate of Monte Carlos back over to her side of the table.

And so I tell them the whole story. There doesn't seem to be any point in leaving anything out. I start at my run and conversation with Kitt, when I decided to let the crossword control my decision-making, and end with my asking Mathia for one last favour. When I finish, the biscuits are crumbs and Ted has made us another two cups of tea.

'I love it,' Elle says. 'It's perfect.'

'How is it perfect?' I ask. There are a lot of descriptors I could use for this week. Perfect is not one of them. The last seven days of my life could have been written by Edgar Allan Pea.

'I was with you the whole way. Journalism might not be the field for you, but I still think you should be working in storytelling.'

'This isn't a story; this is my life.'

'And for this week you had a life that made a great story. Are you a reader?'

'Of course. I rabbit on about books so much that my boyfriend – sorry, my ex-boyfriend – made them into an art project. I am responsible for Mary Shellfish and Lewis Carrot existing in the world.'

'And you can tell. The structure is there. What about movies, television? Watch a lot of them?'

'I might dabble in the odd Nancy Meyers film. I've got a date with Richard Curtis this afternoon.'

'It's all there. In you. You're a natural.'

'A natural for what?' Ted is beaming. He knows something is coming.

'Sourcing books for screen adaptations at the production company I own. At the moment, we only do one or two projects a year; I just don't have the time to manage more than that with the breakfast show, but I'm going to start putting more of myself into the business. After all, I need something to do once it becomes too hard to hide my wrinkles from the camera.' Elle Chambers raises an eyebrow. 'People don't like to see ageing women when they're eating their cereal. Makes their indigestion flare up.'

'Well, that's depressing,' I say.

'It's life,' she says.

‘Won’t this council nomination get in the way of all that?’ I ask.

‘The council nomination is an unfounded rumour. Sorry that you lost your job over it. I won’t rule it out. I don’t like to rule anything out, but it’s not a feature in my five-year plan.’

A five-year plan. There’s our common ground. I wonder if hers is laminated.

‘Do you want a trial run on the production team?’ she asks.

‘Ummm, that’s an amazing offer. What would I be doing?’

‘Lots of reading. Scouting for books that might be good television or film adaptations. Investigating whether there are already options on them. Depending on how that goes, given that you obviously know how to turn a word, you could see if screenwriting might be something you’re good at.’

I’m so excited I could throw up the tea and two biscuits that Elle let me have before she stole the plate.

‘Only as a trial to begin with,’ she adds. ‘No promises of full-time work.’

I can’t blame her for not offering me a contract for life, given she’s seen me in action and I’ve just told her how I performed in my last job.

‘A trial sounds like a very good plan,’ I say.

‘Great, you can start on Wednesday. It’ll give you a couple of days to sort out the rest of your life and then you can come around to the office. I’ll email you the details.’ She pushes an old-fashioned address book at me. Clearly, she’s not only not on social media but she doesn’t trust technology at all. ‘It’ll be a new thing for you, being invited to something rather than just showing up.’

Ted gives her a gentle tap on her arm for that last comment and only then, when I see his watch, do I realise the time.

‘I’m so sorry but I have to go!’ I push the chair out from under me and shoot up.

‘Oh, that’s right,’ Ted says. ‘You said you’ve got a movie to catch.’

* * *

As I near the cinema, the dark clouds are now making good on their threats.

This is not movie rain. This downpour is more than capable of shifting eyeliner and it’s creating a small creek running from the side of my neck

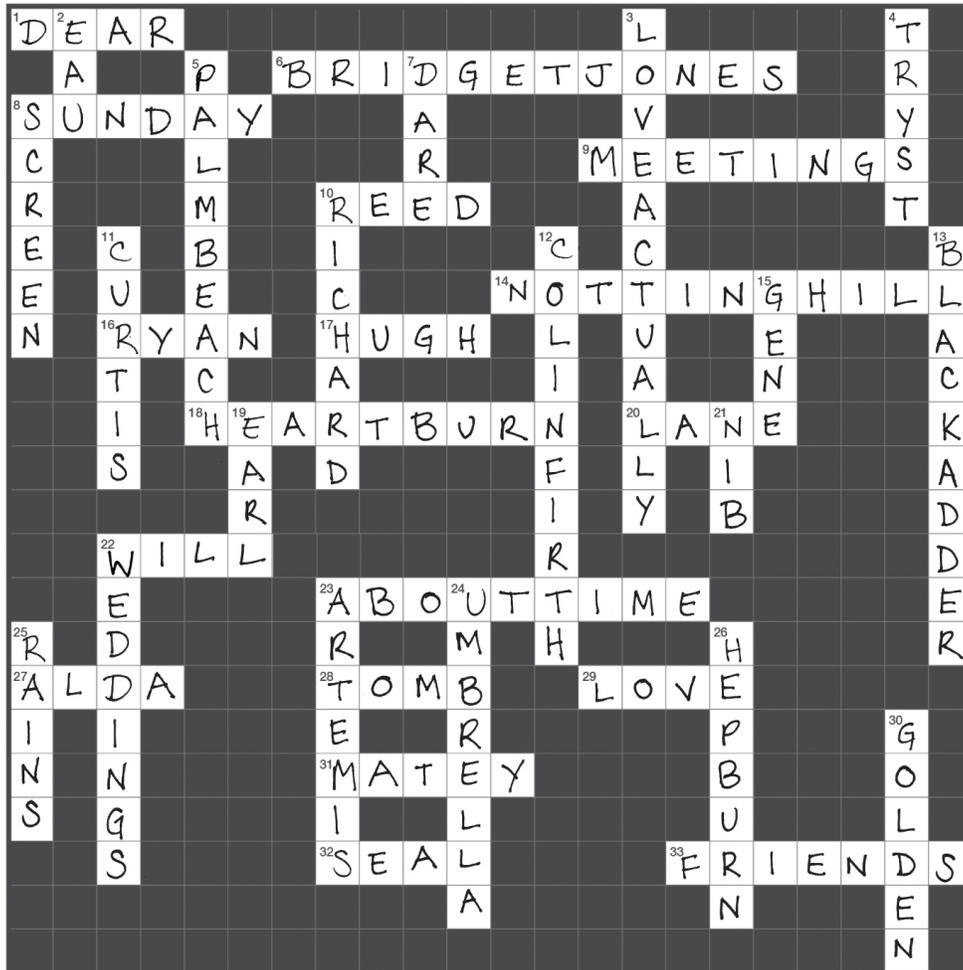
down the curve of my spine. I move the hood of my raincoat further over my face, taking what feels like a television soap-sized glass of water to my face from a café awning. Stopping me from seeing further than a foot in front of me.

I can't see him. All I see are people in pairs and a large group of women in their fifties who have obviously decided to make a day of the movies, basking in the Richard Curtis canon, and went for a long lunch beforehand.

What if my plan hasn't worked and he doesn't do the crossword every Sunday or, unlike me, doesn't read into it and takes it for what it is – a pastime? Not an oracle.

Suddenly, one of the women in the group moves to join the candy-bar queue and I see Harry.

Under the eaves. Crisp and dry. Holding up the crinkled page of today's TV-guide crossword.



See page 275 for the crossword's clues.

‘How did you know that the message was for you?’ I ask him, yelling over the cars honking at one another.

‘Hope. That and Golden, Screen, About Time, Hugh Grant, Blackadder, Notting Hill – I could keep going. But even if it wasn’t you reaching out, it certainly made me want to watch some Richard Curtis. Mainly hope, though,’ he yells back, startling a woman who is dragging a toddler away from the puddles that are quickly forming.

‘I didn’t know people still had hope.’

‘I didn’t know until I finally paid attention to the contributor details of the crossword that it was constructed by you.’

‘I didn’t want to brag about it. I didn’t want you to put me on a pedestal.’

‘Why did you put the message in the crossword if you thought I might not get it?’ he asks.

‘Hope,’ I concede. ‘I tried to find you at the gallery, but they said they’d never hired a bartender to work at an opening.’

We are in front of each other now. He pulls me under the roof of the ticket box with him.

‘I’m not a bartender. I own the gallery, Rory.’

‘I didn’t know!’

‘You never asked.’

‘I’m so glad you do the TV-guide crossword every week. It’s now my favourite crossword.’

Now that we’re undercover, he pushes my raincoat hood away from my face.

‘Are you in the mood for some Richard Curtis movies?’

‘There’s never been a person alive who isn’t in the mood for some Richard Curtis movies at some point during the day.’ Water drips off the end of my nose and onto my top lip.

‘Even when it’s raining torrentially?’ He gently wipes his index finger under my eyes, where my mascara must be pooling.

‘Is it raining? I didn’t notice,’ I say, laughing.

‘Does this screening come with popcorn?’ he asks.

I lean into him so that a couple can move behind us to shelter. ‘This is a date. Popcorn is provided.’

‘I thought that everything in your life was a mess. I didn’t think there was room for me. Has that changed?’

‘No. I’m still a mess, but I have hope.’

‘Do you have a plan?’

‘I have an inkling of something that I want to do, something I might be good at, and I have \$20 in my bank account, which might even cover you getting a choc top.’

‘That’s the best plan I’ve heard in a long, long time but I might just be saying that to get my hands on a choc top.’

‘Let’s just see what happens,’ I say, and we walk through the cinema’s big glass doors, not noticing the trail of rain dripping from our jackets that we’re leaving behind in our wake.

Clues for crossword on page 271

DOWN

- 2D Water (*Fr.*)
- 3D A star-studded Christmas ensemble
- 4D A meeting of lovers
- 5D It's the real Summer Bay
- 7D Truth or _____
- 8D For when you need some privacy
- 10D Gere or Wilkins
- 11D A Stoney chef
- 12D Cue swoons on lake departure
- 13D Atkinson through time
- 15D He was singin' in the rain
- 19D That's what his name is
- 21D The point of a pen
- 22D Austen loved to end on them
- 23D He's Fowl
- 24D Rhianna will let you stand under hers
- 25D It never _____ it pours
- 26D Audrey or Katharine
- 30D Some say silence is this

ACROSS

- 1A How you might start a letter

- 6A** She kept a famous diary
- 8A** A day of rest
- 9A** Could this have been an email?
- 10A** In swamps and wind instruments
- 14A** Opposites attract in this London suburb
- 16A** She's got mail
- 17A** He's played a bookseller and a prime minister
- 18A** A pain in the chest
- 20A** She's filing stories in Metropolis
- 22A** If you've got this, you might have a way
- 23A** How people might greet you when you're running late
- 27A** The original Hawkeye
- 28A** Lara raided this
- 29A** Apparently, it's all you need
- 31A** A pirate's BFF
- 32A** He's got a kiss from a rose
- 33A** Frequenters of Central Perk

Rom-com references

An Affair to Remember
Breakfast at Tiffany's
Bridget Jones's Diary
Can't Hardly Wait
Clueless
Every Nancy Meyers movie ever
Father of the Bride
40 Days and 40 Nights
Four Weddings and a Funeral
Friends with Benefits
Funny Face
Heartburn
High Society
How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days
How to Steal a Million
The Jewel of the Nile
Joe and the Volcano
Just Like Heaven
Mystic Pizza
Notting Hill
Only You
Pillow Talk
Pretty Woman
Pride and Prejudice (BBC version)
The Proposal
Roman Holiday
Romancing the Stone
Sabrina
Serendipity

Sleepless in Seattle
10 Things I Hate About You
When Harry Met Sally
While You Were Sleeping
You've Got Mail

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About the Author



KIMBERLEY ALLSOPP has had her work appear in *Kidspot*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *WHIMN* (now *Body & Soul*) and she co-hosts the rom-com podcast *Meet Cute*, which allows her to justify some of her otherwise questionable life choices. Kimberley has worked in bookselling and publishing since 2008. *Love and Other Puzzles* is her first book. She lives in Sydney with her partner and daughter.

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