

Sadberg

The young woman sitting on a freecycled sofa in a basement flat in East Finchley has no idea she holds a world record. Not that she holds it alone.

There are, of course, millions upon millions of undocumented world records, and a weirdly high number of them are held by Londoners. For example, a man in Crouch End has the highest aptitude for spotting shapes in clouds of anyone in the world, or will until the birth of a girl in Belarus in 2031. Neither of them will be particularly interested in spotting shapes in clouds, will never lie in a park pointing them out to new lovers as such things rarely happen outside of the establishing scenes of romantic comedies; they will simply walk around with the unnoticed talent. And if, today, you were to line up all the pink things in the world, the exact medium shade of pink would be found on the pancreas of a yoga instructor in Brixton. The doctor doing the autopsy 12 years from now will note the slight discolouration, though will ultimately dismiss it in light of the much more compelling discovery of a sports sock rammed into her windpipe.

The East Finchley woman holds a joint-record with her boyfriend of 20 months: they are, by an impressive distance, more in love than anyone who has ever lived directly above a sewer, closely followed by a female couple who, rather amazingly, lived in the same building in the late 1930s, in the flat five doors down, under a 28-year pretence of being sisters.

The woman will jump up from the freecycled sofa when she hears her boyfriend's footsteps clanging on the shaky metal staircase outside their front door. She often wonders when the day will come that she isn't so incredibly excited to see him that she stays seated, throwing a smile and a casual, "Hi honey," as he comes through the door. The day will come, of course, but not for another three years, four months and thirteen days. But for now, the idea of greeting him from a distance of more than a few inches doesn't enter her mind. She opens the door and he kisses her, holds her face in his hands and smiles.

And then, their nightly ritual. She lifts his shirt a few inches to reveal his puncture – an inch from his right hip bone, on the flat of his stomach – and then puts her arms around him and squeezes. His sadness gushes out of his puncture and splashes to the concrete. He does the same for her, lifts her shirt – her puncture is on her left side, under her ribcage – puts his arms around her and squeezes.

Neither of them holds the record for their level of sadness, but they do score higher than most because theirs replenishes daily, in the background, not just whenever they remember. His puncture was made when his mother died. Hers was made when her father didn't.

Her sadness follows his across the slight tilt of the floor to the drain. Even with the cheap rent, a drain in the living room would put off most people, a scum-sheened portal to the city's damp and stinking underworld. But they find it useful. Two or three times a day they perform this ritual, never letting the levels get high enough to drown the other.

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Tomorrow, an employee of London Water will lie on a report. He will state that the source of a sizeable fatberg in the sewers of East Finchley is inconclusive.

It is not inconclusive.

Neither is it a fatberg.

*

When he got the email inviting him to consult on the sewer blockage, the employee of London Water almost giggled with glee. He is not, generally, a glee-giggler. In fact, on his list of personal flaws, the London Water employee notes that he has virtually never felt thrilled or excited, never punched the air or spontaneously danced with joy – but my god, he loves a fatberg. Back in 2013, he took his husband on an unconventional date to the Kingston sewers see *the* London Fatberg, a bus-sized lump of cooking fat and wet wipes formed in the drains beneath London Road. His husband wasn't quite as enamoured with the great wobbling sludgebomb, all the hidden ugliness of the city shamefully glommed together, but he understood the

fascination. They'd read an article in which the fatberg had been compared to The Picture of Dorian Gray, the population's filth building and coagulating out of sight, so everyone could stay beautiful in the land above.

The London Water employee now dons his regulation hard hat and professional poker face, and makes his way into the sewer, where he's greeted by another hard-hat. The blockage is around a corner, and even from thirty feet away, he is startled by how different it smells from the last one. If he had to describe it, which no one will ever ask him to, he would simply say, "salty lilacs". He asks the fellow hard-hat about the size of the fatberg in his most neutral Work Voice, as if he wouldn't clamber down to the sewer on his day off to find out.

"That's the thing, sir," replies the hard-hat, "It's not a fatberg."

The London Water employee frowns.

"What is it, then?"

The hard-hat explains that the blockage is not made up of cooking fat. The mass, which is not as big as a bus, but certainly as big as a mid-range family car, is made up almost entirely of sadness – though there are also sizeable clumps of shame and rage, some stringy veins of anxiety, and, naturally, a lot of wet wipes. The flats above, he says, were converted from a Victorian factory, and the basement units have drains in the floors that run straight to the sewers. He suspects tenants have been improperly disposing of their sadness; washing it down the drains, flushing it, chucking it down sinks.

The London Water employee agrees to inspect the drains of the block of flats in question, and asks – for strictly professional reasons, of course – if he might see the... *sadberg*?

They round the corner, regard the mass and, for reasons neither of them will ever examine, remove their hard hats.

*

The young woman opens the door for the London Water employee. She makes him a cup of tea without asking what he's 'testing the drains' for, and potters around

with the awkwardness of someone hosting a polite invader. The London Water employee is impressed with how homey the tenants have managed to make a concrete box with a drain in the floor. Fairy lights hang from paintings of rivers and red skies and baobab trees. The buzzing little fridge is adorned with pictures of the young woman and a young man grinning and pressing their cheeks together. The sad, sagging sofa is topped with colourful cushions and warm, soft fabrics. A tiny bookshelf is stuffed with well-thumbed books, with a guitar hanging off the side and a smiling plush-toy sloth holding a loveheart, bearing the endearingly terrible pun, "I sloth you". The London Water employee takes a sip of the tea and gives a little jump as the young woman swooshes past him to the door. He's sure he didn't hear a knock.

She opens the door. The young man from the fridge photo is arriving at the bottom of the stairs. He meets her at the door, beams at her, puts his hands on her cheeks and kisses her nose. Then he puts his arms around her and squeezes.

The sadness gushes out of her puncture, splashes to the floor, and runs in a thin stream to the drain at the London Water employee's feet. He looks up at them, and realises, correctly, that the young man has no idea he is there, and in her haste to get to the door, the young woman has entirely forgotten. He watches as she squeezes him back, watches as his sadness follows hers, as if chasing it, keeping a promise to follow it anywhere.

The young man lets out a startled but friendly, "Oh!" when he sees the London Water employee, smiles and offers him a tea. The London Water employee holds his mug aloft and nods his thanks to him and the young woman, before setting the mug down on a tiny, wobbly side table.

He forces his gaze back to the drain, his mind racing. There's no disposing of sadness in these quantities, so fresh and so liquid. He tries to force his thoughts towards practical solutions to what he's just seen – but that moment, that fleeting few seconds have left him, he realises, transfixed. Perhaps transformed. He feels like he's just seen love in its purest form, a shot of love served neat in a crystal tumbler,

above this babbling sewer, under a star-canopy of black mould. He watches the last streaks of their sadnesses mingle like kisses and run together into the drain. He packs up his kit. He doesn't need to swab the drains. He knows what he's looking at.

The London Water employee stands, claps his hands together in a 'that's that' motion, and thanks them for their time.

*

The London Water employee has no idea he holds a world record. Not that he holds it alone. He and a Brazilian man in Oval – behind whom he will queue in Tesco three years from now – have worn out the highest number of socks owing specifically to the act of aimless pacing. The London Water employee will ultimately outstrip the Brazilian man in Oval, who will die in four years and only started wearing socks with any regularity when he moved to England thirty-five years ago. They have no idea that socks have a slightly longer shelf life, usually, than those of people who don't pace when thinking, texting, reading emails, waiting for the kettle to boil, or when they've had a shock.

But for now, the London Water employee simply stands in the damp hallway, surprised by the gasp in his throat, the insistence in his soul that the young people behind the door be happy, and safe. He thinks of his own sadness, how for years it brimmed to his eyes and choked him in the night. How he thickened it with drink, numbed himself until it calcified inside him, until he started noticing a faint internal crunching as he moved. He takes a tiny, guttural intake of breath, untucks his shirt on his right side, and locates his own puncture. He squeezes its sides and a lilac paste oozes reluctantly out, dormant sadness from his first marriage, the day he realised with crushing, drowning certainty that his husband didn't love him. A thousand tiny moments – every time he'd broken eye contact, every chance he'd taken to inch away – all fell into place, smithereens tumbling back together, an explosion in reverse. No, he will not report them. There will just have to be a regular build-up of sadberg in the sewer, until their sadness flows in smaller quantities, as it surely will one day.

The London Water employee steps out into the night. Closes his eyes. Listens to the city's hearts, working around their various breakages. He looks at the sadness smeared across his hand, holds it up to the light, wipes it on the wall of the building. He notes how it shimmers, almost glitters, under the glow of the streetlamps. He turns, marches into the night, thrilled to the marrow.

Hashtag

Ellie picked clips out of her hair like lice, discarding them on the street as she went. She marched past the Jack the Ripper Museum and noticed her stupid, quirky, mercifully comfortable boots matched the blood-red font on the facade. Day-old rain and chilled November dirt splashed her calves. She kept walking. She turned right onto Leman Street and ignored the stares, the lifted phones.

North, she thought, *North, north, north*. She tried to tell herself to go back, but her feet sped her towards Commercial Street as she picked another clip out of her hair.

She waited at the crossing by Aldgate East tube station, fiercely wishing she had her Oyster card, wallet, phone, anything. A group of tourists gasped and took her photo. She crossed the road, where a man stood holding his phone up, three little lenses staring her down like alien eyes. Ellie shoved past him, and turned to see the No.67 bus splashing in approach behind her, the words WOOD GREEN blazed across the front in friendly yellow letters. Frantically she stuck out her arm, and the bus pulled up.

She stepped on. The driver did a startled double take.

"I don't have my Oyster card," Ellie told the driver.

"Yes, darling, I can see that," she replied, in a soft Jamaican accent.

"Please, I know it's... but could I...?" said Ellie.

"I can't let you on just like that, darling, don't you have anyone who...?"

“Please,” Ellie pleaded, squeezing her eyes shut. Three more people had gathered at the open door of the bus, their phones held up, as if censoring their own faces. There was a long pause, then the hissing exhale of the bus doors closing. “Go on.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, so grateful she felt tears jostle at her eyelids. She grabbed the railing at the foot of the steps, gathered the skirts of her muddied wedding dress, and climbed to the top of the bus.

*

Ellie's phone sat in the zipped compartment of a ripped denim satchel, hanging off the back of a dinky armchair in a dressing room in the Tower of London. The screen was covered in fingerprints and scratches, all the more visible because the phone was off, black, dead to the world. It became the eye of the storm as aunts and cousins and friends started to move a little faster, their voices getting a little shriller, and because they didn't know what else to do, they sent signals into space to summon Ellie back to the room. Texts. Calls. Whatsapps. More texts, in caps this time. The signals bounced off the phone and back again, and again, and again. Are you there?, they said. We'll keep trying.

Are you there?

Are you there?

Are you there?

*

Ellie and Nathan had no problems. None. He was funny, handsome, kind. He told her he loved her every day, and even after three years together still reached mindfully for the words, never let it morph into a sign-off phrase at the end of a call, or when leaving for work. He was reliable; always texted when he said he'd text, always called when he said he'd call. And they were beautiful together. Whenever anyone tagged them in photos on Instagram, the hashtag #relationshipgoals would invariably crop up. Female friends asked Ellie “where she got him”. Any time she hinted at the merest vapour of doubt about their staying together, she was informed in no uncertain terms that “you guys are great together” and the subject was firmly

changed. She was always left feeling like a teen expressing an interest in ketamine to a vague authority figure, like a friend's aunt.

It was true that she and Nathan had always had a certain picturesqueness surrounding their relationship, as if it had been stage-managed by someone who thought Love Actually was good. One of their earlier dates was at the New Year's Eve fireworks over Alexandra Palace. He stood behind her on the side of the hill, his arms enveloping her and huddling her into his coat. As the crowd counted down to midnight, Nathan turned her face towards him, smiled a dopey red-wine grin at her, and they kissed in the new year, under exploding fireworks. She internally cursed herself for feeling so disconnected from the moment, for cringing at the schmaltzy rom-comness of it all.

Later, she saw one of his friends had uploaded an undeniably gorgeous five-second video of the moment to Instagram. Their faces were lit up under a pink firework exploding above the palace, turning gold as it rained down like fast-growing angel hair. The caption read, "These two tho... #goals". The comments were similar in tone: "The way the fireworks light up their faces! So beautiful!!!", "Maaaaan, whens the wedding lol", "This is stunning" and "OMG WHY NOT MEEEE".

Ellie was snapped out of the memory by a voice from above, "Ladies and gentlemen, apologies for the inconvenience but this bus will be terminating here."

Fuck.

*

Nathan had his head in his hands, because that's what people do when what is happening cannot be happening. He was reliable. He always texted when he said he'd text, always called when he said he'd call. He loved her. And they were beautiful together. Ergo, this could not be happening. He became the eye of the storm as uncles and cousins and friends started to move a little faster, their voices getting a little louder, and because they didn't know what else to do, they sent signals into space to summon Ellie back to the wedding. Texts. Calls. Whatsapps. In caps, all in caps. They whisked the champagne glasses out of sight, waved bottles of water at

Nathan, touched his shoulder, tried to get his head out of his hands, told the same ridiculous lie people always tell when what is happening cannot be happening.

It's ok.

It's ok.

It's ok.

*

It was raining, because of course it fucking was.

Ellie stood rooted to the filthy Shoreditch pavement. She felt rain trickle into the gap in her bodice and down her spine, but was grateful for the momentary drop in visibility as people pulled up hoods and scurried under umbrellas.

Shivering, Ellie dashed down a side street. She was, she realised, looking for help. She came across a cafe with a large windowfront, a dwindling late-afternoon brunch crowd, and a couple of young staff who looked like they'd pull up Google maps and help plan a route for a fleeing bride, just so they could tell the story. She opened the door, and was promptly intercepted by a large Viking of a woman. She wore big wooden earrings bearing the name ROBYN. Her hair hung in stiff blonde dreadlocks as thick as cigars.

"Bloody bugging hell, it's *you!*" she said, in a startlingly posh accent. Ellie took a step back.

"Sorry, do I know you?" asked Ellie,

"No but it's *lovely* to meet you!" she replied, as if it made any sense at all, then called to the barista, "Can I get a flat white for her please?" and gently led Ellie by her elbow to a table of people who looked as if they were going to a Halloween party dressed as hipsters.

"I'm – I'm not staying," Ellie stammered, "I need to get somewhere."

"I'd expect so and we'd *love* to hear about it!" For a brief moment, Ellie wondered if she'd been drugged, so untethered from reality was this woman's chat. Why was she talking to her like this meeting was set up? Why was she behaving as if a muddy

wedding dress was normal brunch attire? Surely even Shoreditch wasn't this ridiculous yet?

Before Ellie had a second to formulate any of this into words, Robyn rattled off the names of the others at the table – Ellie caught Danny, Lisa and Ashwin but stopped listening because Ashwin had put gold glitter on a cold sore.

“So,” said Robyn in a weird stage whisper, “Are you a *royal*?”

Ellie snapped her gaze from the gold-sore. “I’m sorry? What?”

“We all saw you running away from the Tower of London, are you royal?”

Ellie felt a cold rush in her stomach and the urge to scream, but decided to play along until her brain could work out what the fuck was happening.

“No, it’s – my fiancé’s nephew is the choir, we’re not–”

“Your fiancé?” interjected one of the hipsters whose name Ellie hadn’t caught. He had a Gandalf beard and a tartan farmer’s cap. “He’s your *ex*-fiancé now, surely?”

Ellie exhaled, baffled and frustrated, “Sorry, where did you find all this out? I’m guessing one of those assholes on the street posted a picture somewhere?”

The hipsters laughed. Lisa handed her a phone, “Hon. You’ve gone viral.”

The phone was open on Twitter, on a search for the hashtag #runawaybride. Ellie scrolled through the cascade of tweets with mounting horror. At least half of them included pictures or video of her. There she was, running from the Tower of London, with the caption, “A LITERAL RUNAWAY BRIDE OMG”. There she was, hurrying down Leaman Street. There she was, crossing the road by Aldgate East. There she was, on the bus, pleading with the driver. And she now understood why people had been so intrigued by the spectacle, even in the parade of performative kookiness that is East London. Because in all of these pictures and videos she was, unmistakably, a runaway bride. Her recently-dismantled hair was the hair of a runaway bride. Her face, twisted by stress and desperation, was the face of a runaway bride. Her dress, soaked and splashed by puddles, was the dress of a runaway bride; the dress of a woman who’s wilfully ruined everything. Ellie scrolled and scrolled, reading the

comments, dismayed and horrified at how quickly her rash decision had become public property.

"Omg I am LIVING for the #runawaybride hashtag rn"

"Does anyone know who she is?? Or the groom? #RunawayBride"

"Does he know she's gone yet?? Shiiiiiiiiit man's gonna find out from this hashtag lolololol #runawaybride"

"Just spotted #runawaybride getting off the bus in Shoreditch, she looks super stressed, prob worried about all the canapes going to waste hahahaha"

"Reply: Did you talk to her??"

"Reply: No just took her pic lol"

"Reply: Creep"

"Reply: Fuck off everyones doing it"

"SOMEONE ASK HER WHAT HAPPENED FFS #runawaybride"

"Fuckin ungrateful bitch she must be lovin this fuckin publicity whore hope she gets run over cunt #runawaybride"

"Dealing with my responsibilities like (attached was a gif of Ellie sprinting from the Tower)"

"Wow all you lot slagging off #runawaybride you dont know what shes gone thru groom couldve beat her u dont no have a good look at urselves"

"My boss: Looking forward to your annual appraisal?"

Me: sure hold on brb (the same gif of Ellie sprinting from the Tower)"

"BREAKING: The groom is Nathan Hawkins, she ran literally 20mins before they were about to get married, whole family is looking for her, he is PISSED apparently #runawaybride"

"Does anyone know where she might be going? Someone follow her I need to know how this ends #runawaybride"

"#runawaybride is hot come find me ill marry u hahahahaha"

"#runawaybride could be a victim of domestic abuse, stop judging her"

“Reply: OMFG that’s my martial arts instructor Ellie!!!! LOL no one’s takin her down trust me”

“I love her boots #runawaybride”

“That dress is the same designer as mine, is this a publicity stunt?

@VestidosJuanEs are you behind this? #RunawayBride”

“Where is she going I HAVE TO KNOW #runawaybride”

“OMG I TOTALLY RECOGNISE #runawaybride! It’s Ellie Golders, she went to my school, haven’t spoken to her in ages, can’t believe she’s run out on her wedding wtaf – @mattown0007 have you seen this???”

“Reply: Holy shit m8 is that actually Ellie Golders?????”

“Guys #runawaybride is here @ Visions Canteen!! Here she is finding out she’s going viral in REAL TIME”

The tweet was accompanied by a video of her, at this table, her brow furrowed, reading the timeline. It was posted eight seconds ago. Ellie gasped, “What the *fuck*-?” dropped the phone, almost retching with shock. Her eyes darting from one phone-clutching hipster to another, Ellie pushed her chair back, wrenched her dress’s layers of silk into her fists, and turned towards the door. Her way was swiftly blocked by Robyn, “Don’t go, you’ve got a flat white coming. He’s sorry – aren’t you Danny?”

“Please move.”

“Look, we’ll call you an Uber, just tell us where you’re going.”

“No, you’ll get some mob to follow me, get out of my way.”

“Darling – Ellie, is it? Just sit down and tell us why you ran out on your wedding, we *need* to know, we are just *living* for this today.”

Ellie spoke slowly, trying to stay calm, “Robyn, is it? I’m having a bad day.”

“Oh I *know* – does the groom know you’re gone yet?”

“I *do not owe you an ending* to your fucking internet brunch story – I have to go.”

“Ok, but we *kind* of need you to stay,” Robyn said, her expression draining of kindness.

Ellie spoke slowly, as if laying out the terms of a contract, "I am a martial arts instructor, please move."

Robyn laughed, towering an entire head above Ellie, "Yes hon, I'm sure you're a—"

Ellie stepped to her right. Like a lumbering oak Robyn followed. Ellie darted back to her left, swept her leg behind Robyn and tapped the back of her right knee, felling her in an instant. She ran out of the cafe to the sound of bellowing hipsters.

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Oliver's phone played short videos of Ellie getting on a bus, Ellie sprinting, Ellie dragging silk through puddles. Twitter sipped at the battery life as he scrolled and scrolled, played the videos again and again. The phone warmed as he gripped it, tight, as if it might try to escape, or change its mind about what it was telling him. She didn't go through with it, he whispered to no one.

She ran.

She ran.

She ran.

*

Of one thing Ellie was now absolutely sure: the fastest way to get to North London would be to sell a little piece of her story. As she turned onto Shoreditch High Street, her eye fell on the Ace Hotel. She'd attended a martial arts conference there when she was training to teach, and knew the downstairs cafe was constantly packed with bespectacled media types in staring contests with their MacBooks. Careful to avoid the sort of hesitation that would lead her to another like-hungry snakepit, she marched up the stairs and into the lobby. She turned left, regarded the long tables of freelance journos and PR executives and hybrids, and cleared her throat.

"Excuse me everyone." Around seventy per cent of the heads turned, most of them bearded versions of the nerd-glasses emoji. Her heart pounded. Nathan flashed into her mind, and then her mother, then a surge of panic and a brief urge to vomit.

Ellie heard someone gasp, “Shit, is that Runaway Bride?!” and realised, with dread, that she was already a meme.

“I believe I am the subject of something ‘viral’,” she said, cringing as phones began lifting before her like eyes on stalks, “If anyone here knows what I’m talking about, you know I’ve had a bit of a day. I didn’t have the foresight to grab my phone or wallet before... before I ran...” They gasped and murmured like delighted fucking bees and Ellie flushed, knowing she sounded like a homeless person on the tube asking the crowd to help them out – except wrapped in silk and privilege, and hardly anyone ignoring her – “...and I’d really appreciate some help in getting to...” – she gritted her teeth – “Finsbury Park.”

Ellie was quickly surrounded. She ignored the phones, answered one or two questions – only about the logistics of how she’d got here – and within minutes an Uber was on its way, and the person’s PayPal information was written on a scrap of paper and stuffed into her bra so she could pay him back later. The censored phone-faces followed her outside as she climbed into a Toyota Auris, driven by Majid, an ex-surgeon in his fifties, who didn’t bat an eye.

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The mounting signals bounced off Ellie’s phone like crazed fans trying to batter through a barrier. It sat still. Oblivious. Peaceful as a ruin.

*

This was it. This was the right mews. And there it was. Number six. Ellie had sprinted the last few minutes from Finsbury Park station – she’d kept the exact address from the swarm of avatars – but by now the meme was an epidemic. She’d run past stares and exclamations into phones, “She just went past me!” Her heels were sore. These boots weren’t made for running. She felt her knees buckle as she approached the door.

She pressed the buzzer.

And as she waited, she played out her most dreaded timeline, in which he refused to open the door, in which she would have to turn around and find her way

back to the life she'd ruined, the family she'd disappointed, the man she'd jilted; and with every step of it documented by the salivating internet she'd be unable to hide where she'd gone, and unable to lie about why. The truth would come out. That she'd met Oliver weeks after she and Nathan got engaged; that despite trying to stuff him in the 'best friend' tier, they'd fallen in love at a dizzying speed; that mere months ago, after a day together at a museum – a day thick with glances and grazes and gazes held for slightly too long – just when she felt she'd fold in half with the weight of not saying it, he got off the tube, turned and threw a word-grenade through the closing doors: "I'm in love with you, just so you know". That despite never so much as kissing him, despite 'letting him go' seven separate times over nearly two years of fraught friendship, it had been like declaring the extinction of ants or the existence of straight bananas: bollocks in the face of reality. That with every clip her aunt drove across her scalp to get her soft curls to fall just so, her chest tightened another notch. And her brain reached for the only painkiller it had, some image of Oliver; which was swiftly followed by emotional pain, because brains are stupid.

A hairclip scraped above her ear. *Oliver's laugh scrunches his face up like paper*, her brain offered in a flash.

Another clip skated across her cranium. *The way Oliver pushes his glasses up his nose with the back of his index finger*, it suggested.

Another one drove past her temple, like a blunt scalpel. *Oliver's chest under your head*.

Another one. *I'm in love with you, just so you know*.

Another. *I'm in love with you, just so you know*.

Just so you know.

Just so you know.

She'd stood, announced she was going to the bathroom, and hurried out of the room. As she noted with interest that she'd breezed right past the bathrooms the

fresh air had hit her, sucked itself into her lungs, the bright November cold had jolted her insides, and she'd begun to run.

Oliver opened the door.

"I'm a bad person," Ellie said by way of greeting. "I'm a jilter, a fare dodger, and a hipster-kicker. I *kicked a hipster* in Shoreditch."

"You look nice though," Oliver said.

"Thanks." There was a pause. "You saw the hashtag, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You knew I was coming, then?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to be so presumptuous."

Exhaustion flooded her body. It was too early. She couldn't collapse, yet. Not until she knew which timeline she'd just moved into. She took a deep breath, and asked the question. He held her gaze. She searched his expression for a clue, and felt her heart beating in her temples.

"You know I have the right to be pissed off at you?" he said. Her stomach fell. And fell. "You woke up today intending to marry someone else. I've had, to put it mildly, a shit morning."

She began to stammer, but was cut off. His body slammed into hers as he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off the ground.

"Of course you can come in, dum dum."

He turned, lifting her into the flat, and shut the door with his foot.

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Oliver's phone sat on a beanbag chair, under a framed Apocalypse Now poster, opposite a shelf of well-thumbed scripts, of which he had written three. The phone screen was covered in fingerprints and scratches, rendered invisible when it lit up with a folio of four Facebook messages, sent moments apart. Messages that would go unchecked until the following morning.

She's with you, isn't she?

Answer me.

Answer me.

Answer me.

*

Ellie kneeled on the floor, two vertebrae shy of a heap, as Oliver helped undo the million tiny buttons on her filthy, rain-soaked dress. She showered leaning against the tiles, and Oliver left her a pair of boxers and an old Led Zeppelin t-shirt on the bed. And when she crawled under the covers, utterly uninterested in what time it was, he climbed in and wrapped his arms around her. He breathed in her tangled, wet hair, breathed like so many quiet sighs of relief, breathed as if he'd just learned how.

"Ellie," he said, softly. His voice in her ear felt like the warm latch-click on the front door, closing behind her after a long day.

"Yeah?"

"You're going to stay here, right?"

"Yeah," she mumbled, already half asleep.

"Ok, good. I'll clear you some drawers."

"I don't have any clothes."

"We'll obviously get you your clothes."

Ellie began to sink into her exhaustion, but the enormity of what she'd done stabbed her awake. She sat up with a start sat up and said, "Oliver. Everyone knows what I did. Everyone."

He put his arms around her, "It's ok."

"It's not – do you think Mum knows where I am?"

"I think she does."

"How do you know?"

He put his hand on her face. "Your sister texted me. She said something like, 'Ellie just ran out on the wedding. I think we both know she's coming to find you.' Then she sent me a link to the hashtag and the words 'WHAT THE FUCK?' about eight times."

Ellie digested this information. She pulled the covers up and wriggled down into the bed. "I'm never leaving this flat, just so you know."

"Good," he said, and nuzzled her neck. "Look, don't worry. It's Twitter. Short shelf life for things like this. As long as you don't go out in that dress again, you'll be fine."

She groaned.

"I'm serious," he said, intertwining their fingers and planting a kiss on her shoulder, "No one remembers what anyone tweeted last week."

*

Ellie woke to the morning light filtering through Oliver's open blinds, and a curious, soft knocking sound. She rolled over to see Oliver using his foot to nudge open the bedroom door across thick carpet. He came in holding two mugs, with plates of toast balanced precariously on top.

"Don't you own a tray?" she said, sitting up.

Oliver paused.

"Well, yes, I do, now you mention it, and that diamond-sharp insight would have been useful thirty seconds ago, but as it is: take your pile of joy and shut your lovely face."

She smiled as he sat at the end of the bed, sipping his coffee. She tried to take a bite of the toast, but her stomach churned. She was a jilter. A *female* jilter, no less – a jiltesse. A jiltesse doesn't get breakfast in bed. She gets consequences. Oliver set his toast down on the bedside table, and sat facing her on the bed.

"So, darling," he started, taking her hand, "I don't want to alarm you, but Nathan's on his way over." A cold jolt bolted through her. "He got in touch on Facebook."

"How did he know where I was? My sister? My mum? Twitter?"

"Any of those is possible," he said, "but also... surely anyone who gets left on their wedding day can hazard a guess at who they're being left for?"

"So... you spoke to him?"

“Well, it was a very short conversation, he just sort of announced he was bringing your stuff over.” He took her hands and unfolded them from the fists she’d unknowingly made. She trembled a little. Strange how her body had gone into fight or flight mode, she thought, as if either were called for when facing the mortally wounded.

“Was he mad?” she said.

“At me, yes, very. Says he’s bringing your stuff as he assumes you’ll be moving in with me now, and I said yes, and that I’m very sorry for his loss, which made it sound like you were dead, and that seemed to cheer him up.”

Ellie barked with laughter. She threw off the covers, crawled over and wrapped her arms and legs around him like a koala bear.

“I love you,” she whispered in his ear.

The buzzer sounded, followed by a knock. A fuck-you knock. A furious, jilted, come-out-and-face-me knock. Ellie’s heart pounded her an extra serving of blood for the neither-fight-nor-flight horror she was about to endure. Oliver tried to stand up.

“It’s ok,” Ellie said, “I’ll go.”

As she descended the spiral staircase, she wished she had anything else to wear. The band t-shirt and boxers screamed romance – but it was certainly preferable to greeting him in her wedding dress. She took a deep, gulping breath as she approached the door.

She turned the latch, and Nathan broke her nose.

*

“Shit! Ellie!”

“Ow,” said Ellie, simply. She was on the floor. He’d kicked the door as she opened it, hitting her square and beautifully in the face.

“I’m sorry, oh Jesus, *fuck*, I thought you were him.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fucking fine – I’m sorry, I’m *so sorry*...” He kneeled, and reached for her.

“Nathan, I’m fine, I’ve bled from the face a hundred times, just calm down.” She wiped her nose, and saw dark red blood on the back of her hand. The flat echoed with Oliver’s footsteps on the spiral staircase, as he called, “What happened?”

“Nothing drastic,” said Ellie, getting up.

“Oh my god. What the hell did you *do*?” Oliver cried, stepping towards Ellie.

“Fuck off,” Nathan growled, defensively, “It was obviously meant for you.”

“You fucking idiot – Jesus Christ, Ellie, your *face*–”

Ellie held out her arms either side of her, the universal sign for ‘calm down lads, we’ve all had a drink’ and they fell silent. “I... am *fine*. Oliver, if you could maybe get me a towel and some ice if you have it, that would be great. Nathan, if you could just hold your punches for now...”

Oliver brought a kitchen roll, a bag of frozen peas and a cluster of ice cubes wrapped in a towel, muttered a terse apology to Nathan for calling him a fucking idiot, and made himself scarce. Ellie sat on the sofa and held the towel to her nose. Nathan perched on the sturdy coffee table, as if making himself comfortable would be to somehow take part in his own rejection.

“So... you weren’t really bringing my stuff,” she said.

“No. I just came over to break his face.” His expression was entirely blank, yet somehow flecked with confusion and pain. There was a long pause.

“I taught you to punch, Nathan, you didn’t need to use the door.”

“I was worried I’d fuck it up and catch a doorframe or something. I don’t really need any more humiliation.”

Ellie sighed, tensed her stomach for what was about to come. “Nathan, you can ignore the bleeding, just say whatever you need to say.”

“Glad to: you are *fucking scum*.”

“I know.”

“The whole world watched you do this to me.”

“Well not the *whole* world –”

"You're on BuzzFeed, Ellie. The headline was 'A bride fleeing the Tower of London in Doc Martens is the badass fairy-tale you need today'."

Ellie burst out laughing. She apologised, clamped her hand over her mouth, helplessly snorted flecks of blood over her fingers. Nathan looked on, stony faced. "I'm not quite ready to laugh about it yet."

"I'm sorry, oh god, I'm so sorry, it's just... cunts."

"Yeah. They've been bugging me for an interview. And you too probably, your phone is going to go off like a fucking grenade when you switch it on." He reached into his pocket, pulled out her phone and tossed it in her general direction. It hit a sofa cushion and lay there, face down.

"Shit," she muttered, the laughter ebbing away.

Nathan paused, as if readying himself to be stabbed. His voice took on the robotic monotone used exclusively by the emotionally destroyed. "How long have you been fucking him?"

"Nathan, you don't want to hear this."

"I do."

"You don't."

"Tell me. Then I'll go." He put his elbows on his knees and his face in his palms, tensing his whole body.

"I haven't even kissed him." Nathan looked up at her, his eyes wide with confusion. She cringed. "That's worse, isn't it?"

"It is, yes." He put his head back in his hands and spoke to his palms. "Well, fuck. So you're just... he's just...?"

"He's it."

"Don't *say* it, Jesus Christ, don't actually *say* that to me." He let out one guttural sob, then sucked in his breath and said, "I'm really sorry I broke your nose."

"No, you're not," she smiled. He snorted, despite himself. "Your timing was excellent. I'm proud of you. I might start teaching it in class."

“Oh god, Ellie, please, don’t make me laugh right now,” he said, his voice cracking.

“Sorry,” she whispered. She watched his shoulders shake and felt drenched in shame. The metal on the spiral staircase shook as Oliver came down the steps.

“Nathan,” he said, his voice full of an awkward kindness, “Can I get you a tea or coffee?”

“No, Oliver, you can get cancer,” Nathan snarled, “A rich fucking abundance of cancer.”

“Are you sure?”

He paused, then mumbled, “A tea would be lovely actually.”

“How do you take it?”

“Scalding hot in your face.” Oliver waited. “Milk no sugar.”

“Coming right up.”

Oliver brought Nathan his tea. Nathan thanked him, and told him to fuck off, which he did. They discussed a date for when Ellie would come and pick up her stuff – most likely after she’d ordered some clothes. She told him she was sorry and he told her, with heartbreaking calm and sincerity, that he wished they’d never met.

“Right,” he said, standing, “I won’t say goodbye to Oliver. Could you tell him I said thank you for the tea, and to look after you, and that I hope you both die in a fire?”

“Sure.”

He got up, went to the door, opened it, said, “I’m deauthorising you from my Spotify,” and walked out.

*

Oliver peeled the bag of frozen peas from Ellie’s nose, surveyed the damage, and said, “Darling, your poor face. Ew. I did not sign up for this,” and Ellie snorted blood all over his t-shirt, “*Oliver*. Don’t make me laugh until I’ve clotted!”

And with trepidation, Ellie switched on her phone and readied herself to be pelted. She did not resist when Oliver gently put it to the side, suggesting they give

it a minute. He replaced the bag of peas to one side of her face, rested his palm on her other cheek, and smiled.

*

Ellie's phone sat on the arm of Oliver's sofa, chirping like a distressed sparrow. One notification interrupted another. Texts, WhatsApps, missed calls, voice notes, Twitter notifications, Facebook messages... Ellie's finger clicked the little latch on the side, silencing the beeps. The phone crackled with energy beside her swollen, mangled face; demanding attention, getting none. They kissed, in the thrilling quiet of a moment undocumented, their faces lit up by the silent flashes of the screen.

The Londoner

James opened his eyes in a park. He couldn't tell which one, since it was dark, and he was preoccupied by the fact that he was naked. He let out a saliva-rich "Fuck!" and sprinted from the open path into a thicket of ivy and yellow flowers. He crouched and wrestled free a couple of small branches. He held one to his front and one to his back and stood, his feet smarting on the chilly ground, readying himself for a naked dash – but to where? His mind searched for plausible excuses for his scant and leafy attire. Road-testing a Halloween costume as Adam in the Garden of Eden? It was September. That wouldn't make him seem any saner. He started panicking as options for getting home, all the way to goddamn Peckham, failed to strike him. He could hardly flag down a taxi; but he also couldn't stay in an ivy bush, naked, in – ah, he was in *Clissold* Park, he recognised it now. He'd woken up here a couple of years earlier, near the bench with the Leonard Cohen quote – but that time he'd gone to bed fully-dressed, in a coat, with his wallet and phone, like a *non-idiot*.

James took a deep breath, gritted his chattering teeth, cursed this horrendous condition for the thousandth time, and bolted out. Dry leaves crunched under his feet and stinging nettles seared his ankles as he ran past the church graveyard at the edge of the park, feeling briefly envious of the dead. He saw a row of houses on the other side of the road. Perhaps someone there would... help him? He tried his best to hide behind a bush to avoid being illuminated in car headlights as he considered what to do. One house seemed lively with some kind of party. Music loud but not blaring, windows warm by the glow of a floor lamp, backed by the faintest flicker of disco lights. It was his best bet. When the road and pavements were clear, he made a run for it.

He leapt over a flower bed at the park's entrance, dashed through the wrought-iron gate, yelped as a stone lodged itself between his toes and another dug into the balls of his feet, like refrigerated Lego. The branches tickled and poked in all the wrongest places. He limped to the front door and, heart pounding, twisted his torso to press the doorbell with his elbow.

A skyscraper of a man in his fifties answered the door. He was clutching a very full glass of red wine and had a face like an offended hawk.

"Bloody hell," he said in an upper RP accent.

"Hi, I'm sorry, I'm very sorry about this," stammered James, deliberately poshing up his south London twang, "My... er... it's my stag do, and my mates took my clothes and left me in the park. I'd really, really appreciate it if you could maybe let me in and call my girlf- er, fiancée. And maybe – borrow some... clothes? That I will obviously bring back first thing. Sorry."

The Hawk regarded him for a moment, then threw his head back with a shouty laugh. "Bloody bastards!" he cried, moving aside, "Come in, goodness, come in!"

James shuffled in, muttering breathless thank-yous, wiping the London dirt off his bare feet against the sharp bristles of the doormat while trying not to knock over the hallway table with his branches. The Hawk yelled James's stag story to a multi-generational group of white people who were standing in the wide hallway. The

older folk held glasses of wine, while most of the younger ones held a glass of wine in one hand and an iPhone in the other. They exploded with gasping laughter and expressions of sympathy.

“You poor thing!” a very drunk woman in her fifties said, staggering over with two flutes of champagne, “And they just left you like that! Absolute rotters – here, here, have a drink!”

“He can't take that *now*, can he?” the Hawk scolded, indicating where James was clutching the branches to himself, “Stop trying to get the poor lad nakeder, Barbara! Follow me – what was your name?”

“James.”

“James!” he bellowed – god, he was drunk. “I'm Ian, pleased to meet you, I won't shake your hand! HA!”

Ian led him upstairs and tripped into a bedroom. James stayed in the hall with his branches, cringing at the racket as Ian crashed into furniture and composed a symphony of the word “bugger”. He ended on, “Buggeration!” and emerged with a surprisingly neat pile of clothes – a folded t-shirt, jogging bottoms and even a pair of boxers.

“There you go lad, go and change in the bathroom, it's just there, and then we'll call your missus and you can have a drink! Eh? It's just there, now. In you go.”

While James changed, Barbara called through the door, “Just throw your branches out the window!”

“Ok,” he called back, checking the door was locked.

“What would you like to drink, young man?” she called again, through the door, “I'd say you deserve one!”

“Er...”

“We've got champagne, red wine, white wine, vodka, gin...” She went on and on, listing every alcoholic beverage that existed between here and Fiji. James finished changing and opened the door, “...and avocaat but I don't suppose you'll want that, what sort of oddball wants to drink custard? So – champagne, was it?”

“Um, sure, thanks,” said James. “Do you have a phone I could borrow, to call my girlf- er, fiancée?”

She led him downstairs into a throng of people who asked him to re-tell the story. Ian was holding the receiver of a landline, and called over, “What’s her number, lad?” James told him, wondering why he didn’t just let him dial. “It’s ringing! Shhh everyone – Barbara, get him a drink, a big one – hello! Hello! I believe we have something that belongs to you!” He handed the phone to James.

“Hi babe,” James said, turning towards the wall. The paint was faded white, lightly peeling and had a fresh smear of hummus on it.

“Stoke Newington, right?”

“Did you type ‘naked black man’ into Twitter?” he smiled.

“I did,” Cheryl said, proudly. “Nothing for a few minutes and then four tweets at once, two of them had locations on them. Is it true you turned up at the door with *branches* to cover up?!” She dissolved into giggles.

“This is not funny.”

“It’s *very* funny, actually, and I think you know that. And it’s your fault for falling asleep after sex. Schoolboy error.”

“Shut up,” he grinned.

“I had my head on your chest, by the way, so when you vanished my cheek went smack into the mattress.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, that must have been really uncomfortable for you,” said James, “I was *naked* in *Clissold Park*.” Cheryl hollered with laughter, and he snorted despite himself.

“I told them it was a stag do prank,” he whispered.

“Oh, that’s good, that is good lying,” she said. “Anyway, I’ll come and get you. What’s the exact address?”

By the time Cheryl arrived, James was drunk on champagne and whatever shots Barbara’s friend Patrick had insisted he “down in one, stag style”. Cheryl rang the doorbell, and Ian yelled, “The bride-to-be is here!” and people cheered, the way

delighted drunk people do. Once everyone had shaken James's hand, congratulated him on his fake engagement and informed him once again that his friends were "bloody rotters", they were allowed to leave.

"So sorry," said James, shutting the passenger door and shaking his dizzy head.

"It happens, hon."

He sighed. "Only to me."

*

James was 17 the first time he woke up in a random area of London. The cold on his cheek startled him, and the bafflement at seeing it had been resting on a bronze plaque in the pavement was so acute his vision swam. He sat up, still in boxers and a t-shirt, and the statue of Charles I on a horse above him was almost silhouetted against the blue morning sky. As confused and afraid as he was having woken up in Trafalgar Square, the tears that washed down his cheeks were over Alice, his mother, who had died the previous week. And through the fog of his grief, James noted with interest that he was already walking home, barefoot and crying. He supposed, somewhere in his heartsmashed stupor, that he had sleepwalked, or maybe sleep-taken-a-bus. It took a little over an hour to get to where he now lived: his Auntie Lou's house in Camberwell.

"Bami J!" said Auntie Lou, surprised to be answering the door to her nephew, "What were you doing out in your pyjamas?"

"I don't know," he muttered, and went back to bed, where he lay awake until she coaxed him down for breakfast. Auntie Lou was his father's sister, and the only one to refer to him by his first name, Bamidele, rather than his middle name, James. Bamidele was his father's first name too, so she'd settled on Bami J to avoid confusion – though how there could be confusion between him and a man who lived in Lagos, James had little idea. Bamidele was Yoruba for 'follow me home' – not that he ever gave anyone a chance to, since he was a fan of what his mother had called the French exit; leaving without saying goodbye. James had managed to coax enough details out of Auntie Lou and his mother to piece together the story of his

father's reluctance to stay with them. It seemed that while he was delighted to have a son, he wasn't quite prepared for the challenge of it: mere days after James was born, his mother got an anguished call from Bamidele, and he confessed that he had spontaneously fled to Nigeria – though he did immediately regret it. He told her, "I'm so sorry, I was homesick, but I'll come back as soon as I can." To his credit he did come back, just a few weeks later, and in the meantime Auntie Lou became James's undisputed third parent. Bamidele arrived with two suitcases packed with soil and plants and ornaments from his parents' garden in Lagos, and he covered their tiny courtyard patio with them, creating a kind of shrine. Alice loved the new garden, thought it was a romantic idea for him to staunch his homesickness with this little piece of his old home – but then Bamidele announced the garden is where he would be sleeping from now on.

On occasion he would still run off to Lagos and call, citing a family emergency or a funeral, and Alice, keen to always 'love with an open hand' as she put it, asked him time and again if he really wanted to stay in London with her and the baby. He did, he insisted. He did. He did. He did.

The Bad Day, as James called it, he recalled strangely clearly. Suspiciously clearly, in fact, given that he was only four years old. He was sure he must have imagined many of the details, pieced together from stories and assumptions. It was a day in November. James was sitting at the kitchen table eating porridge with strawberry jam, and his father came in from the garden as usual, said, "Hey, little man!" as usual, and kissed him on the head as usual. What he didn't do as usual was mock-steal his porridge saying, "Is this for me? Thanks!" to which James would wail, "Nooooooo!" and his father would laugh. But on The Bad Day, Bamidele skipped the daily dad joke, walked straight to the radiator and rested his hand on it.

"What's wrong with your hand?" his mother had asked, alarmed.

"I'm just warming it up."

"Show me."

"It's fine."

“Bami, what happened?”

He remembered his mother looking at his father’s hand and getting angry and upset. Auntie Lou had filled in the blanks years later; his father had come in from the garden with mild frostbite. Alice took him to the tap and ran it under warm water, cried, and told him if his homesickness was so intense he’d rather get frostbite in his replica garden than sleep in a bed with her, he should return to Lagos. Bamidele had protested hard, Auntie Lou insisted – but he also refused to even consider not sleeping in the garden.

James remembered, or thought he remembered, being told to go and play, and hearing his mother shout, “You don’t want to be here. You don’t want to be with us.” He remembered sitting on the stairs, biting the banister so he wouldn’t cry too loudly. He remembered, very clearly, the feeling of his father’s tears as they dripped onto his forehead, as he promised to call every day. And he remembered that night, or what he remembered as being that night, his father made a bed on the sofa. He remembered sitting at the top of the stairs cuddling his mother, listening to his father’s pitiful sobs. He didn’t remember being put to bed. But he remembered that in the morning, his father was already gone. The note he left wasn’t addressed to either of them. It simply read, “I’m sorry. I love you. Follow Me Home.”

*

James wasn’t sure how he knew his rude awakening in Trafalgar Square would happen a second time, but that night he went to bed wearing shoes and sweatpants, and put his house key in his pocket. When he woke up in Richmond Park, it was with a strange calm, an acceptance that this would be his life from now on. And his first priority was to hide it from Auntie Lou.

Auntie Lou’s mind was on constant alert for the potential danger in any situation. If James arrived home even eight minutes late, she would explain – in a voice that could have narrated the trailer for a film about the apocalypse – that if he was late for a meeting in “the real world” he’d be fired without a reference, which would render him unemployable, and he’d eventually die from a heroin overdose in

a puddle of piss in an uncarpeted studio in zone five. She would later need constant reassurance that his life as a freelancer in no way resembled that scenario.

Luckily, as James found himself waking up in one random area of London after another, Auntie Lou took James's absence in the mornings as a sign that he was an early bird, a go-getter, a good nephew not headed for a zone five heroin bedsit. When he woke up in Hackney on the first morning of a school field trip to Paris, she bought the story that he had taken the train back because he was homesick. When he woke up in Camden after falling asleep on a train to Brighton, she was relieved he had decided not to go gallivanting on the beach, since he had school in the morning.

James waited three months, almost 100 instances of waking up in random spots across the capital – always outside, on the bastard-cold ground – before he confided in his best friend. Christopher agreed to come over on the pretence of a sleepover, like they'd had when they were kids, and investigate how James was managing to wake up so far from home. Christopher chugged cans of Red Bull while they played video games.

"Christopher and Bami J," said Auntie Lou, stomping to a halt in front of the television, ignoring their craning to see around her plump frame, "What are you doing taking up my entire sofa on a *Friday night*? Shouldn't you be out drinking and chasing girls?"

"Auntie, if you have to chase them, they don't want to be caught," said James, with no idea how attractive comments like this would eventually make him to women who had been repeatedly chased.

"You know what I mean," she sighed, "If you don't go out, you won't develop social skills, so you won't come across well in interviews and you won't be able to get a job."

"We're developing social skills *now*. That's what all the talking's for."

Auntie Lou wandered into the kitchen, muttering. James pictured telling her the truth about his strange problem, and shuddered. If she could catastrophise his

playing video games with Christopher, he couldn't imagine how she'd react to his lack of control over where he woke up.

James felt a strange *deja-vu* as the evening unfolded. The video games, the pizza, the lightness of the conversation – it was all weirdly reminiscent of the day they'd spent on this couch three months earlier, after his mother's funeral. Christopher had turned up, and after everyone else went home, they sat and played video games in their suits. Conversation mostly consisted of game talk; *pick up that gun, watch out for that sniper*. James couldn't place exactly what it was about Grand Theft Auto that set him off, but when he began to cry, Christopher had set down his console and put a hand on James's shoulder, firmly. The manly way to hold hands. James woke at 4am with his head on Christopher's forearm, and Christopher, who clearly hadn't slept a wink, had resolutely denied having pins and needles. It was the last day he'd woken up in the same place he fell asleep.

Eventually, Auntie Lou made her way to bed, and they set up the evening's experiment: James made up a bed on the couch, and Christopher cracked open another Red Bull and took a seat in front of him. It was a slow start; James felt weird being watched, and couldn't resist fake sleep-talking to suggest he was dreaming about Christopher's mum. Eventually he nodded off, and when he woke up, he was at the foot of a brick warehouse.

He hadn't even stood up before he heard the tinkle of his Nokia in his pocket. The pixels on the screen flashed Christopher's name. James answered and listened in horror as he babbled, breathless and agitated, "Your Auntie Lou slammed the bathroom door and you just... *vanished!* In front of me you vanished, like a... a fucking... *ghost* – where are you, man, *where are you?!*"

"I don't know..." said James, "Wait... I'm looking for a street sign." He turned a corner as a train rattled over the bridge above him. He found himself at the bottom of a long ramp, the overground sign for Hackney Wick looming like a punchline.

Christopher kept James's secret, without argument. Every night for two years, James would go to bed fully clothed with his phone charged and in his pocket. In the

morning he would wake up, work out where he was, and text Christopher his location. Christopher would plot it on a map, to see if they could find a pattern. It became clear after a few months that there truly was none. He could wake up on any compass point, sometimes east three mornings in a row, sometimes not for weeks. Sometimes he woke up close to home, mostly he didn't. Sometimes he woke up somewhere ridiculous, like Barnes, one of those places people debate whether or not it's "really London".

Over the course of a year, James became adept at working out where he was very quickly. He came to know all the postcodes, and became familiar with the architecture typical to different parts of the city. He knew north London soot from south London dirt, knew west London filth from east London grime. When smartphones came in, he would simply open the maps app to see where he was.

About once a year, he would wake up in someone's garden in a rich, lily-white area of London – forcing him, before he'd even had his coffee, into the nerve-fraying action of scaling a garden wall. James often thought that if he was in America he'd have been gunned down long ago. Death played on his mind with a draining frequency. He learned to spring into action the second he awoke, because only on good days did he wake up on grass or a quiet pavement. He'd woken up to the whoosh of passing trams, the clang of garbage trucks trundling towards his head, his face buried in the gravel that frames the city's train tracks. London is a city with over 100,000 roads and streets on which a person might expect to be hit by a vehicle, should they find themselves gaining consciousness on one. He frequently escaped collisions, often narrowly. Once a car ran over his foot which left him strangely unharmed, and another time a bike whipped past and broke his finger. He was sure if the speed limit was ever raised above 20mph, he'd be dead within a month.

And yet it was Christopher who, two years after their sleepover, while crossing a residential street somewhere near Euston, was hit by a car going 40mph, and died.

The driver insisted he "came out of nowhere".

*

James opened his eyes in Farringdon, and pumped his fist in triumph; he'd been hoping for east today, and this was close enough. He texted Cheryl, "Farringdon! Plan C is go! Meet me at J+A cafe?"

"Great! I should be there before 10. Nice badge by the way ;-)"

James looked down at his coat and grinned – she had pinned a hilariously childish "birthday boy" badge to his coat while he slept. It was his 30th, and the night before they had sat up planning. Plan A was if he woke up in the north: a daytime concert at Union Chapel, lunch at some pub Cheryl knew in Kings Cross, birthday drinks with friends in Camden. Plan B was for if he woke up in the south: South London Gallery, lunch in Brixton, an afternoon film at the Ritzy, birthday drinks with friends in Clapham (he hated Clapham, the bafflingly overrated pit of beige that it was, but Cheryl had always liked it and he didn't have the heart to slag it off). Plan C, east: Museum of London, lunch from the bagel place in Brick Lane, Jake and Dinos Chapman exhibit at Hoxton Gallery, then birthday drinks in Shoreditch with friends.

They hadn't made a plan for the west. The west, they'd decided, sucked.

James had told Cheryl about his condition after just two weeks of dating, and in the four years they'd been together, they had devised many creative ways to make it work. Minibreaks were tricky, of course, but they'd managed Edinburgh, Brighton and Paris. James would stay awake as long as he could, and use the time Cheryl spent on the train home to London – and the money he'd saved on a ticket – to make some kind of extravagant dinner in time for her arrival. They rarely went out for dinner, however, since in a normal working week they would often meet for breakfast in whatever area of London he woke up in. Cheryl was a book editor-at-large for a publisher in Dalston, and James was a video game designer – strictly freelance, after three years in an office left him sick of the sporadic nature of his commute. He was now entirely accustomed to going to sleep with his laptop bag strapped across his shoulder. He would wake up, text Cheryl his location, and if convenient she would come and meet him for coffee or breakfast. They would spend

the morning working across from each other – cafe owners all over London assumed they must live nearby – then go home for lunch or elsewhere for meetings, do another few hours' work, and settle into the evening.

James arrived at J+A just as it was opening. He ordered a coffee and felt around in his coat for his Kindle – he'd definitely stashed it somewhere in its endless pockets – and read as he waited for Cheryl to arrive.

*

"Why do people think unmarried women are dishonest?" Liz asked James, apropos of nothing, louder and closer to his ear than was strictly necessary. She'd had four complicated cocktails.

"What?" James said.

"What's so honest about a married women? Are they saying single people are *grifters*, for fuck's sake? *Rude!*"

"I agree, it's bullshit," James said, "But also: what are you talking about?"

Liz looked at him for a long time.

"Ah! I was about to ask when you're going to make an honest woman out of Cheryl, and I got distracted by the societal misogyny that's baked into our language. So?"

"I don't believe single women are dishonest," said James, "for I am a feminist, and a believer in the downfall of the patriarchy!" James noted that he was probably drunk, since he was jabbing his finger and beginning to talk like Russell Brand. He'd had three complicated cocktails himself.

Liz cackled, "No! Come on! When are you proposing? You gotta do it, man. Seize! The! Day!" She banged a fist on the table with every word. "Seize! The! Woman! With! Her! Consent!"

"Ok, let's just..." James gently moved her fist from the table, glancing at Cheryl who was at the bar, "Soon. I'm just not sure what to do about... she wants to go to Peru, and I'd love to take her there for the honeymoon but... I'm afraid of flying." That old lie.

“Staycation, mate! A banging staycation!”

James regretted bringing it up, so asked, “How’s Hannah?”

“We’re engaged!”

“Really?!”

Liz laughed, “Nope, fucked her ex.”

“Oh god Liz, sorry. How did you find out?”

“No, I fucked her, ex. I’m a scumbag and I will never be happy. But *you guys...*”

She made a frame with her hands, “You guys are perfect.”

*

James opened his eyes on the side of a hill. He rolled a little, cursing – he hated hill days – dug his feet into the earth and stopped in a seated position. He looked out at the distant city skyline, the foreground trees like fluffy green clouds in the morning light. His location was a no brainer; he didn’t even need to check Google maps.

His head throbbed and his mouth was moss. He reached into his coat pocket for his hip flask of water and drained it, wondering how many people contained in the view had any idea what it was like to wake up hungover on a hill. He took out his phone and texted Cheryl, “Primrose Hill. Thanks for a lovely birthday, babe. Not feeling too clever today tbh – whose idea were the shots? Liz’s? Ugh. How hungover are you? Wanna meet for breakfast or shall I bring something home?”

“Excuse me!” called a distant voice. James flicked his eyes downwards, registering that the voice had been calling pretty much since he’d stopped rolling. His eyes fixed on a small, round woman in a beige trenchcoat, waddling up the hill. She had red hair and a redder face. “Excuse me!” she yelled again, “Did you just *appear* there?!”

“Shit,” James muttered. It was rare that anyone would see James appear and not just blink, shake their head and blame a lack of sleep – Londoners are quicker than most to doubt their own sanity. His policy was to simply remove himself from the situation. He stood and, without dusting off the dirt, turned and began a brisk walk

to the top of the hill. But this woman was particularly keen to catch him, seemed unusually trusting of her eyes, even in the dim morning light.

“Wait!” she cried, quickening her pace up the hill as best she could. “Come back! I want to talk to you!”

But even hungover, James managed to jog up the hill, and lost her within seconds.

*

Cheryl took a full twenty seconds to shut the front door as silently as possible. It was just gone midnight, and the publisher’s Christmas do had got a little out of hand. She was usually a pro when it came to sneaking away by 9pm, but the new Head of Digital was one of those drunks who had an acute sense of when someone was winding up to leave, and would handcuff them to the party by buying them a drink. He had done that to Cheryl no less than four times, so she was now faced with the challenge of getting into bed without waking James and sending him across the city.

She slipped off her coat and shoes, and padded a stair every five or so seconds. The door was left open a crack, so she pushed it with her index finger, so gently it opened roughly at the speed of evolution. Finally, she tiptoed into the room, turned to shut the door – and felt her hip catch the lamp. It toppled off the nightstand with a clatter, and she whirled around to see the duvet settle onto the mattress where James had disappeared.

Before she could finish her string of swears, her phone vibrated with a text.

“GODAMMIT BABE.”

“I’M SO SORRY!!” she replied, “Where did you end up?”

“Fucking QUEEN’S PARK.”

“I’m sorryyyyyyyyyy. Too much wine. Stupid Malcolm. I AM SORRYYYYYYYYY!”

“You’d better wait up for me, you drunkard.”

“I will! Promise!”

“Do you want a kebab?”

“So much. x”

The front door opened just 45 minutes later; James had treated himself to an Uber. Cheryl was asleep on her arm, slumped across the sofa. He smiled involuntarily at the sight of her, with her smeared lipstick and her dress zip half-down. He kneeled, and wafted the kebab under her face. She woke with a start, “I’m up! I’m up!”

“Will you marry me?”

Cheryl blinked. “What?”

“You heard.”

She sat up, blinked again.

“Did you get extra chilli sauce?”

“Of course.”

“Then yes.”

*

Auntie Lou opened the door screaming, hugged Cheryl and James, demanded to see the ring, then scolded James for proposing with a kebab. The sound of a toilet flushing interrupted the conversation.

“Is somebody here?” asked James.

“Maaaaybe,” said Auntie Lou, winking. The bathroom door opened and a voice called out.

“Hey, little man!”

Bamidele came bounding down the stairs, and pulled James into a great, slapping hug.

“Dad! Oh my god, you’re here – Cheryl, this is my dad!”

“Cheryl, so good to finally meet you! The woman making an honest man of my boy!”

“Single people aren’t grifters,” James and Cheryl said in unison, and laughed.

The four of them sat down to the baffling lunch Auntie Lou had made – a huge pot of pepper soup, jollof rice, a lasagne, a pile of steamed spinach and a box of jam

doughnuts. Bamidele said he had been planning a visit for weeks, and couldn't believe the wonderful timing of the proposal.

"Are you staying for Christmas, then, Bamidele?" asked Cheryl.

Bamidele took an awkward pause. "Ah – no, the cold here is a bit much for me." James and Auntie Lou looked down at their plates. "And you know," he continued, "I'm a tour guide in Lagos, and Christmas is a really busy time, so it's just a flying visit. Have you thought about a honeymoon yet?"

Cheryl glanced at James, but Auntie Lou interrupted, "Bami, they don't want a tour of Lagos for their honeymoon – Cheryl likes Peru, she wants to climb that Macho Picho, don't you?"

"Machu Picchu, yeah – I might just do that by myself one day. James doesn't like to fly, so..."

Bamidele looked at James, "Son, you don't fly?"

James looked at his father, and swallowed. "I prefer trains."

"I suppose..." Bamidele began, searching James's face, "It's a lot easier to sleep on a train."

James stared back at him. His breath became a little shallow. Did he... *know*? James pulled his expression to neutral so as not to alarm Auntie Lou, and slowly got to his feet.

"How about this," said James, holding Bamidele's gaze and opening the box of doughnuts with slow, dramatic movements, as if proposing a game of Russian roulette. "If you can eat a jam doughnut... *without* licking your lips... we'll go to Peru for our honeymoon."

Bamidele bellowed with laughter and all four of them took the challenge. Five minutes, much pained screeching and several tears of laughter later, they'd sealed their fate of "a banging staycation".

*

At around 11pm, Auntie Lou was already in bed. James and Cheryl were staying in the spare room, and Bamidele was on the couch. James knocked softly on the living room door, and poked his head around to say goodnight.

"Hey, little man," Bamidele smiled. "Well, not so little anymore. Getting married." He shook his head, the way people do when considering the speed at which the years rush away.

"Any advice?" asked James, sitting tentatively on the couch.

"Don't sleep in the garden, they don't like it."

"Well... I don't have a garden." At this, Bamidele smiled, but James looked at the floor. There was a long pause. "You weren't homesick, were you?"

Bamidele considered this. "I *was*, of course but..."

"But you didn't decide to go back, did you? You just woke up there, right?"

Bamidele grimaced, shut his eyes, and placed a hand on James's arm. "When did it start happening to you?"

"When mum died. I thought... I thought you didn't want to be with us."

"That was never true," said Bamidele, forcefully, then softened his voice. "It broke my heart when she told me to go back. But I just couldn't tell her."

"Why not?"

"Because it sounded crazy, little man. Your mother and I, we weren't like you and Cheryl. I loved her a lot but, you know, we didn't know each other very long before you came along. I didn't understand what was happening. And the garden plan, it worked for a while..."

"So, did you just... trick your body into thinking it was in Lagos?"

"I guess so."

"But you still disappeared to there, a lot."

"Yeah little man, sometimes I didn't make it to the garden. One time I fell asleep on the couch and when I woke up in Lagos there was no one to pick you up from nursery. Your mother almost left me that time. I looked like such a bastard. Another

time I fell asleep on the bus. And every time I had to spend everything I had for a plane ticket back or borrow or save up. It was a nightmare.”

James thought about how annoyed he was at having to get a 45-minute Uber from Queens Park, and shuddered.

“Why do you think it happens? You weren’t even born in Lagos, were you?”

“No, I was born a little outside of it, to the east. But you know, I don’t think it’s about where you were born. I think it’s about where you belong. And that’s not really something a man can choose.”

They sat for a while, staring at the floor, mourning the years they lost to their mutual silence. James wanted to say something to that effect, but it got stuck in his throat.

“I’d like to come and visit you,” he said, straining to stop his voice from cracking. “It was fun when I was a kid.”

“I’d love that, little man. See, this is why I called you Follow Me Home.”

James nodded, blinked back a tear, and asked, “When do you go back?”

Bamidele smiled. “Soon as I wake up.”

*

James opened his eyes in Belgravia. He was slumped against a wall on a quiet residential pavement. It was such a convenient place to wake up, without the usual need to spring out of the way of some potential hazard, James took a moment to sit and contemplate the talk with his dad. Just as he was about to haul himself to his feet, a man in a long-sleeved Ryman’s stationery shop uniform approached him with a smile.

“Here you go, mate,” said the man, “Have a good day.”

As the man walked away, James blinked and realised he was holding a five pound note.

“Excuse me!”

The man stopped and turned, and James jogged up to meet him.

“Thanks, that’s really nice – but I’m not homeless. I was just having a kip.”

“Mate, it’s ok, I know what it’s like, I was homeless myself not long ago...”

“Honestly, I’m not homeless.” James took out his wallet and keys, opened his scruffy satchel to show him his iPad and noise-cancelling headphones. “It was, er, a big one last night.” The man seemed to find him strange, but took back the fiver with an awkward laugh and wished him a nice day.

James wandered aimlessly, not quite ready to start work. He found himself in Belgrave Square Gardens, and sat on a bench in front of a metal sculpture of a globe. He pictured where Peru would be, and slumped. He’d have given anything to take Cheryl on that trip, to tire himself out on that ridiculous Machu Picchu hike, to fall asleep in a tent at 10,000 feet and not wake up on cold, wet, British concrete.

“It’s you,” said a voice.

James looked up. A round, ginger-haired woman of about sixty plonked herself next to him on the bench.

“Where did you end up this morning?” she said. “I woke up in fucking Leyton again.”

In a crash of adrenaline, James recognised her. He tried to speak, but only managed a wobbly, “...what?”

“Oh yes, I’m one of you,” she said, taking a hip flask from her inside pocket. “Anthea. Pleased to meet you. I did try to tell you that day on Primrose Hill, but you’re in rather better shape than I am.”

James took a breath, felt something unzip in his chest, and his whole life fell out. He asked her questions for 40 minutes. It had started happening to her aged 19, after surviving a nasty car accident. Yes, there were others. Mostly older, a few younger than him. They had a Facebook group. Yes, she’d add him. And James unspooled his story in a rambling frenzy; that it started after his mother died. That his dad had it too, but in Lagos, that he’d spent his life thinking his father didn’t want to be around him. That she was only the fourth person who knew about his condition apart from his fiancée, his father and his best friend. He bawled into his sleeves that he didn’t understand how that had happened to Christopher, and not him. How much he

dreaded sleep, the possibility of getting run over, not to mention the wretched ballache of the randomised commute. How he couldn't take Cheryl on a proper honeymoon. At that Anthea finally interrupted him.

"Now, why on earth not?" she asked.

He frowned. What did she mean, why not? "Well, Peru's a long way to go for however long I'll be able to stay awake, isn't it? She'll end up spending her honeymoon alone from like, day three, once I wake up in London."

She looked confused. "Why don't you just take London with you?"

James blinked, and asked what she meant.

"Young man... you don't mean to tell me you've never worked out how to wake up at home?"

James's eyes widened. He knew he probably looked like a brain-damaged fawn, but couldn't help himself. Anthea stood, reached into the bush behind the bench, pulled out a handful of dirt and dropped it in his lap.

"What are you *doing*?" he cried, brushing it off.

"Oh, my dear silly boy. It's *London*." He looked at her, baffled. "You're a Londoner. A real one. The city just wants you close. If you take it with you, it won't pull you back." James stared. "Oh for fuck's sake, you adorable twit. Listen. Listen to a posh old cunt who's woken up in the fucking Thames: this thing we call London is a patch of dirt, and even though it's oblivious to the things we've built, and how we've made it a centre of art and culture and financial cuntery, it *knows* who belongs to it. It's like a child, tugging on your sleeve, not letting you get too far. It's an absolute fucker, frankly, and I'd love to get a memo to it about all the bloody roads and rivers – but honestly, young man, when it comes down to it, in this spiteful fucking skip-fire of a world, isn't it a little bit wonderful to be loved back?"

And she explained the secret, the life hack for Londoners who want to wake up in the same place they went to sleep. And James understood. He understood *why*. Why he always woke up outside, why Bamidele slept in the garden, and why this woman was a goddamn genius. It was all in the dirt.

He got up, announcing he was going to see Cheryl to tell her the news.

“Yes, goodness, bugger off,” she said, “Poor girl, waking up alone all these years. Go on!”

James began a sprint to the tube, then stopped and rushed back to the bench.

“Wait,” he said, cautiously, as if it all might yet be taken away, “If you know how to wake up in your own bed, why did you wake up in Leyton?”

Anthea smiled, and held her hip flask aloft as if making a toast.

“I’m a drunk, dear boy. I fell asleep on the couch again.”

*

Cheryl came home to find James sprinkling dirt in the bed.

“What are you *doing*?”

“I met another one,” James said, “Another... another Londoner. She told me if I just sleep on London dirt, the city won’t pull me back to it. I’ll wake up here. On the dirt. The London dirt.”

Cheryl stared at him.

“That is disgusting,” she said. “Let’s try it immediately.”

*

Cheryl opened her eyes. She stayed perfectly still, and watched James sleep. The dirt had spread across the mattress during the night. She felt the dust of it under her ribs, and there was a good smear of it across his cheek.

Her heart pounded. She reached her left hand across the bed, to place a hand on his cheek. She paused mid-air. She wanted to stay in this moment a little longer, in case it didn’t work. In case he was about to disappear again, for a few more hours, and every day for the rest of their lives. She took in his peaceful, slumbering form, his long eyelashes, his smooth skin.

She took a deep breath, and reached for him.

James opened his eyes.
