

DiSORDiNARY

by

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Novel. Upmarket fiction

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SECTION 1

It's cold outside.

That is, outside of my mother's womb.

I'm a newborn, and everything's a blur.

'It's a girl!'

I'm a girl.

'I don't want a girl,' my mother admits to the midwife. 'I was hoping for a boy.'

Ouch. A fledgling parent's biting resent undisguised.

I am yet to cast curious yet misted eyes upon the face of the woman who rented me her bump and then evicted me. But why do I wish to repeat this scenario? It didn't exactly go as planned the first time. Or the second time. Or the third time. Or the fourth time. So why do I think this latest rewind, replayed moment will work out any different?

As you've no doubt gathered, this isn't my debut return trip to day one of my existence. I don't know how I manage it. My nineteen-year-old consciousness hopping back to the brain of my yesteryear self should be impossible. But no, it happens, random and erratic, just like me. I wish I could control it, but I wouldn't know where to begin.

All I know is, I can revisit.

What I don't know is, why I revisit.

Why my mind keeps bringing me to my birth.

Is it to feed my insatiable addiction to the crushing betrayal I feel each and every time?

Yes, I do believe so. They say it's a form of self-harming, purposely repeating and reliving a specific moment of ice-cold devastation to the point of actually enjoying the sensation.

An instant fix of emotional heroin.

Here's a prime example. At twelve years of age, I told Bradley Samms (my one and only schoolgirl crush) I fancied him. How did he react? He laughed in my face and turned me down flat. Ouch, my heart torn to shreds. Humiliated in front of all within earshot.

Any sane person would have shuffled into the shadows to lick their wounds. But no, not me, I'm a far cry from the rational type. Instead, the very next day, I walked on over to the boy and re-enacted my undying confession of love, knowing it would lead to the very same soul-crushing outcome, knowing exactly how I'd feel, absolutely mortified, retreading the moment and feeding off the desolation like a hungry calf to an udder.

Indirect self-harming, yes. But equally as painful as a blade puncturing skin. I should know. I've been there, done it. When I'm older than a newborn.

Meanwhile, my birth continues to play out, the midwife landing my infant form upon my mother's bosom, her face a blurry haze of indistinct shades and shapes. The luxury of colour is yet to fully introduce itself to my juvenile perception, at present a mere tinge across this strange new greyscale world. I find myself drawn to a pair of smudgy shadows with flashes of white, my mother's eyes. She coos and she oohs, all the right noises in all the right places, but I know she doesn't love me, doesn't need me, doesn't want anything to do with me. Very soon, she will don her civilian threads and sneak out of this maternity ward, not telling a soul, no longer "with child" in more ways than one.

Why did my mother abandon me? I need to know. Badly.

God, I'm forever seeking answers. Story of my life. A life not necessarily chronological.

My name is Dandelion Price.

I'm not like all the other girls.

I'm a disordinary.

SECTION 2

‘What do you mean you’re a disordinary?’ asks the early-twenties guy I’m allowing to chat me up, my chosen on-demand alcohol dispenser for the evening.

‘Polar opposite of ordinary,’ I respond as a nineteen-year-old woman, girl, total fuck-up, draining my glass, placing it upon the bar and nudging it towards my human wallet.

‘Eccentric. Peculiar. Not of the norm.’

‘No, no, I’m talking about your leftfield grammatical choice. A disordinary. Changing the D-word from an adjective into a noun.’

‘Oh, God, you’re an English teacher.’

He laughs. ‘I can assure you I’m not.’

‘It’s quite simple,’ I begin to explain. ‘I’m a disordinary in the same way a man who fancies men is a homosexual, the same way a woman who fancies women is a lesbian.’

‘Ah, so you identify as a disordinary.’

‘I do indeed.’

‘Does this mean you call a normal person an ordinary?’

‘Actually, I call a normal person a vanilla.’

My on-demand alcohol dispenser is suitably intrigued. ‘Why?’

‘Because vanilla as a flavour is bland and mundane and boring and oh, God, do you realise there are people out there who are actually content being bland and mundane and boring?’

Again, he laughs. He’s enjoying my company. I’m glad. Most of all because I’d like to continue receipt of this ongoing conveyor belt of complimentary drinks. Which I guess is more than a little unfair of me. He seems like a really nice guy. The type us girls call a keeper. Somebody who could do wonders for my low self-esteem. And my mental health.

Or... he could end up true-colouring himself as a complete wanker.

Whatever the outcome, I'd like to get to know him better. There's deffo chemistry bubbling under the surface, waiting for us both to realise. But it's him getting to know me better that's the problem. I don't think he's ready for what might spill out of my mouth if I open up to him. Like, properly open up.

It's been three weeks since my last revisit to my birth. Three looooong weeks. Which is kind of strange. All previous occasions of my consciousness performing its hitch-hiking trick came mere days apart. Regular reminders of my mother's betrayal. Regular steel-toecapped kicks to the vagina. Regular shots in the vein, my addiction quenched. Since then, nothing. Waiting so long for the next time feels like a lifetime. Will there be a new episode? I do hope so. I could do with a fresh emotional self-harming fix. But what if the show has been cancelled? What if my backward journeys were caused by a temporary hiccup in the universe? What if the error has now been rectified?

Please. I demand another trip. I am hungry, so hungry, I am desperate to be fed.

Oh, God, I guess I'm going through my "cold turkey" phase.

I need a distraction. This guy can be my distraction. I must keep him interested.

'Do you see me as a vanilla?' my specially selected distraction asks, nudging me free of my troubled internal monologue.

'Yes,' I reply, firm nod included. 'But slightly upgraded. Consider yourself a VILF.' And off his look of question, I add, 'A vanilla I'd like to fuck.'

Oh, yes, it's true. I would indeed love to bed the guy. But not solely for distraction purposes. There's something about him. About us. A connection. I'm sure we're both feeling it. As such, I yearn to keep him close, but at the same time keep my distance. I can't have him knowing all my secrets. At least not yet anyway.

As predicted, the man likes the sound of my declaration of lust. 'Result,' he cheeps, rubbing his hands together in cliché glee. 'But we can't go back to my place.'

What follows is a very enjoyable tongue-in-cheek quick-fire exchange which kicks off with me asking, ‘Why can’t we go back to your place?’

‘I don’t live alone.’

‘Girlfriend?’

‘Not even warm.’

‘Wife?’

‘Never been married.’

‘Boyfriend?’

‘Oi. Strictly heterosexual.’

‘Still sponging off Mummy and Daddy?’

‘Flew the nest two years ago.’

‘Who then?’

‘Nosey flatmate.’

‘Male or female?’

‘Female.’

‘Have you shagged her?’

‘You ask too many questions.’

‘So you have shagged her.’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘So you have shagged her.’

‘It should never have happened.’

‘So you have shagged her.’

‘Only the once. We were both drunk.’

‘How drunk?’

‘What’s with the endless quizzing?’

‘If I’m accommodating your penis tonight, I demand backstory.’

‘Why?’

‘Would you buy a second-hand car without first checking the service history?’

‘Fair point.’

‘So what caused the shag that should never have happened?’

‘She needed a shoulder to cry on. An emergency drinking partner.’

‘Why?’

‘Cheating boyfriend. The poor girl was devastated.’

‘So you figured a session of between-the-sheets action might help alleviate her pain?’

‘I didn’t plan it, it was a case of... you know...’

‘One thing led to another?’

‘Exactly. But never again.’

‘Why not? Bad experience?’

‘No, no, nothing like that, it was okay.’

‘Just okay? Why the neutral score? Didn’t she come?’

‘...’

‘Didn’t you come?’

‘...’

‘Did she fake her own orgasm?’

‘...’

‘Did you fake your own orgasm?’

‘If you must know, she embraced celibacy.’

‘Celibacy? Straight after having sex with you?’

‘Not straight after, no. A few days later.’

‘Could it be possible that your bedroom performance was the deciding factor in practically turning your nosey flatmate into a nun?’

‘No way.’

‘Are you sure about that? On my side of the fence, that’s one hell of a coincidence.’

‘It was not the deciding factor.’

‘So you consider yourself good in bed?’

‘In my Complaints Department, my helpline is silent.’

I laugh. But not for the purpose of throwing validation confetti in his direction. The man is deffo not fishing for likes. He doesn’t look the needy type. No, no, seriously, my mirth is genuine. His sense of humour may be a tad pants, but it tickles me.

Once my mirth is spent, he asks, ‘Do you have somewhere we can go?’

I feign brow-wrinkling bemusement. ‘For what exactly?’

‘For the sex I’ve been promised this evening.’

‘This evening? I said you were a vanilla I’d like to fuck. I didn’t say when.’

He pulls a cheeky grin. ‘Well, this vanilla would like to get naked with you tonight.’

I match his grin with one of my own. ‘In that case, yes, I do have somewhere we can go. But not yet. I’m not officially drunk enough to have sexual intercourse with a complete stranger.’ And then I nudge my empty glass formerly known as a double vodka and coke even closer to him.

This time, my VILF takes the hint and orders our next round of drinks.

SECTION 3

Suddenly, unexpectedly, WTF-ly, I am forty-six.

I sit alone in somebody's lounge.

How did I get here?

Thinking about it, I'm not entirely sure how I know my precise age at this particular moment in time. I just... do.

A moment ago, my VILF was ordering my nineteen-year-old self a fresh drink. Huh, it looks as though I won't be sampling my latest gift of alcohol after all. Oh, and then it occurs to me. I know I can revisit my past. Could it be possible that I can also travel to my future?

If so, my life doesn't only have scenes repeated.

Also featured are scenes not yet broadcast.

Curious, I stand up and amble over to the window. Casting my eyes upon the outside world, I find that I currently reside in a high-rise block of flats, the fourth or fifth floor, one of three concrete social housing monstrosities built before I was born to house the scum of society, the workshy chavs, the alcoholics, the drug addicts, the ex-cons on licence who are certain to reoffend in the not too distant future.

Do I live here? If so, how the bloody hell did I end up in such a shithole? Seeking answers, I make an attempt at tapping into my forty-six-year-old version's brain.

Access denied.

Strange. I can't glean any information about my middle-aged life. Even though I'm inside my older self's mind and body, the only memories I hold are from my current nineteen-year-old life, oh, and anything which came before it, from my earliest childhood memory until meeting my VILF at the pub. Nothing from the age of twenty until forty-six, even though my mature version has lived through those particular years.

Is this how it works when I do the fast-forwarding thing, my nineteen-year-old consciousness squatting in my older self's brain, suppressing all knowledge of my current existence? I don't know. And why would I? This is my maiden voyage in this direction.

I turn around, my attention drawn towards the room's uninspiring decor. Magnolia walls. Beige carpet. Coffee table, teak veneer. Chest of drawers, pine veneer. The faux leather sofa which formerly hosted my bum, plus a matching armchair, both well past their sit-by date. Oh, and of course the obligatory monstrous widescreen TV, not a new model, this particular specimen war-wounded with dents and scratches, no doubt plundered from a skip somewhere. Ah, but what strikes me odd is that there are no pictures, no ornaments, no "me" crap, nothing to suggest the personality, the individuality, the defining uniqueness of the human who dwells within these four walls.

God, if this is indeed my place, I've turned into a vanilla.

Worst nightmare or what?

And then I spot a mirror on the wall. I can't help myself, I need to know what my just-past-mid-forties version looks like. Okay, so the good news is, aside from a subtle crinkle of crow's feet and the onset of frown lines upon my brow (well, of course I have frown lines), my face has yet to descend into wrinkle hell. Oh, and apart from the odd grey wisp or two, my hair hasn't fully surrendered to the cruel bleached-white curse of time.

Ah, but here comes the bad news. Very bad news. Since when did I totally ditch make-up (no mascara, no lipstick, nothing) and start wearing my hair in a tight ponytail? How come I no longer colour my once-dramatic follicles? And why am I draped in loose-fitting sportswear? I mean, come on, what's with the hoodie and the baggy jogging bottoms? What happened to my self-confessed screwball dress-sense?

'Jesus Christ,' I exclaim to myself, 'I look like a chav!'

Double worst nightmare or what?

Oh, look, in my hand, I hold an unopened envelope.

Addressed to Miss Dandelion Price.

Miss? Oh. I thought by now I'd be married. Then again, who'd want to shack up with me on a full-time basis? I doubt anybody could hack my moods, my swings, my episodes.

I tear open the envelope, revealing a letter from –

– the hospital.

Oncology Department.

Shit, that's the study of cancer.

Refusing to read the ongoing text, I refold the letter, stuffing it back inside its resident envelope. I don't like it, I can't handle it, this is freaking me out. And so, no longer wishing to occupy my forty-six-year-old body, I beg my consciousness to return to the past, to that pub, to the guy I like, to my next free double vodka and coke. I keep trying and trying and trying, but nothing happens. I'm bloody stuck here until my mind decides otherwise.

Right now, I really could do with a drink. A strong one.

For reasons unknown to myself, I am strangely drawn to the chest of drawers. I squat low and yank open the bottom drawer. No idea why. My older version's body seems to be set on auto-pilot. Allowing my/her free hand to do its own thing and rifle through the legal requirement of accumulated life junk, out comes –

– a half-full, half-empty bottle of vodka.

Aha, perfect.

Hmm, it's a strange place to store alcohol, but I must respect my middle-aged counterpart's foibles. Oh, and then I realise. Nineteen-year-old me didn't know that bottle was there. But forty-six-year-old me did. Which means my younger self's consciousness hasn't totally taken over the host body. Instead, it's sharing brain-space with my older self's

matured consciousness. I may not be able to access “her” memories, but “she” can still apply her own free will when required. Otherwise, how do I explain unearthing the vodka?

Fuck me, this gig is complicated.

Now I really, really need a drink.

I stand up, placing the envelope on top of the chest of drawers. Unscrewing the lid, I find myself awash with the sudden urge to take it neat, straight from the bottle, head tilted back, hefty gulp, ooh, yes, it surprisingly hits the spot. My late-teen version would never consume vodka in its naked form, but it’s clearly part of my older self’s daily routine.

I fail to clock the teenage girl in school uniform entering the room until she shrieks, ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’

‘Oh, sorry,’ I bumble, reuniting lid with bottle. And yes, I can see she’s a minor, but I still feel the need to ask, ‘Is this your vodka?’

The black look she lobs across reminds me of how I’ve scowled at pretty much everybody my entire life. ‘How much have you had?’

‘Literally one glug.’

‘Liar.’

This little bitch (who I assume is aged around the fifteen mark) is beginning to get on my nerves. Therefore, to highlight my burning irritation, I bark, ‘What’s it to you?’

To which she counter-barks, ‘You’re a recovering alcoholic.’

Alcoholic?

Bloody hell, have I really sunk so low in my autumn years? As a nineteen-year-old, drinking is something I enjoy at the weekend. And some week nights. Well, most week nights. But it’s not a problem. It never has been. Twenty-seven years later, however, it seems to be a major crisis.

‘Where did you get it?’ the teenager asks. ‘All the shops around here refuse to serve you.’

Again, bloody hell. I have a “bad girl” reputation. My younger self would love this breaking news. But I can’t help feeling that my older self no longer shares the same sentiment.

‘I found it,’ I declare. ‘In the bottom drawer.’

The schoolgirl groans. Loudly. ‘So you’re hiding booze around the flat again. Classy.’

Ouch. This means I’m not only an alcoholic. I’m a cliché alcoholic.

‘Why are you so bloody concerned?’ I demand to learn, returning the vodka bottle to the bottom drawer. ‘And who the hell are you?’

‘Jesus, Mum, you must be totally wrecked.’

Mum?

Oh, my God.

I have a daughter.

The girl doubles up as a stropky bitch and a gobby cow, both traits no doubt inherited from the dark and twisted genetic blueprint of Dandelion Price. Oh, yes, she deffo tumbled head-first through my rosé piss-flaps.

‘What’s that letter all about?’ comes my flesh and blood’s latest query.

I glance at the war-torn envelope on the chest of drawers, the subject of my daughter’s current attention. ‘Oh, nothing much,’ I lie. ‘Junk mail.’

There it goes, into the top drawer, out of sight, out of mind, until such a time when I, oh, actually, correction, my older counterpart can bring herself to properly read the letter. Well, that’s if she ever finds the courage to digest its dreaded contents.

SECTION 4

Oh, and then I'm back where I started.

Not the maternity ward, no, I mean the pub, standing at the bar with my on-demand alcohol dispenser. He's paying for that fresh round of drinks.

Everything is the same. It's as though I never left.

This brings me to wonder what happens to my nineteen-year-old body when my consciousness is elsewhere. Do I remain motionless, unspeaking, unthinking, frozen in time? Actually, no, I don't think that's the case. Noah doesn't look as though he's about to mention any happenings of severe oddness. It seems, in his eyes, I haven't journeyed anywhere. So I guess that means my travel-happy consciousness always returns to my present-day self the very moment it left, leaving no gap in the timeline, the continuity seamless.

I am so glad I chose not to read that letter. As far as I'm concerned, it can stay hidden in the top drawer. I don't wish to discover what happens next. I know too much already.

Oh, God, I try not to think about it, but it's such a big deal. Twenty-seven years from now will see me facing a cancer scare. I'm hoping it's benign. But what if it's terminal? Oh, fuck, my anxiety is doing cartwheels. I need to calm down. Focus on something else. On my current nineteen-year-old self. On tonight. This pub. My distraction. The guy I've just met.

'Are you okay?' the guy I've just met asks, handing across my latest double vodka and coke.

I blink myself free of my dark and dismal thoughts. 'I'm totally fine.'

'You look lost. Distracted. Like your mind's somewhere else.'

'A moment ago, my mind was somewhere else.' And off his resulting frown, I add, 'Don't worry about it. You'd never believe me anyway.'

I lead my VILF over to a vacant table. We sit down. We exchange nervous smiles. We both attempt to think of something else to say. Zero words come to light. We opt instead for a spot of synchronised self-conscious drink-gulping.

Whilst awaiting the dawn of a fresh conversation, I take in my immediate surroundings. This evening's live and unedited highlights include:

1. The cup final on the wall-mounted TV heading towards penalty hell, meticulously analysed by a testosterone-fest of zero brain cell, all muscle football shirts on legs, egging on their team in faux deep hooligan chants.

2. The lone elderly gentleman sitting in the far corner, heavily invested in his newspaper and supping the only half of bitter he'll be purchasing this evening.

3. The vivacious herd of hooting, chirping, squawking middle-aged women enjoying a birthday get-together, two lengthy tables positioned as one, bubbly on ice, party-poppers, the works.

4. The oft performed love triangle of a girl all over a guy who isn't that interested (but will shag her anyway), looked on by their mate, a man who is deffo interested (in a whole lot more than getting his cock wet), but will never win the girl over because she has no idea how he actually feels about her. Hah, the stupid cow would probably friend-zone him anyway.

Oh, yes, this pub welcomes folk from all walks of life.

Even total mental-cases like me.

Returning my attention to my VILF, I catch him taking a sly peek at my cleavage. Heh, he averts his eyes, both cheeks burning a guilty shade of scarlet. So funny. But I don't mind him looking. The pound-shop versions of feminists among us (who shouldn't identify as feminists because they're too extremist and give genuine feminism a bad name) would be grabbing their phones to post outraged comments on social media. But I personally see tongue-out ogling as a compliment.

‘So...’ the former tongue-out ogler utters, elongating the vowel. ‘...here we are.’ His empty and redundant statement reeks of a clumsy attempt to paint over the cracks of his failed tit-gawp.

‘Here we are,’ I mimic.

Then out of the blue, he says, ‘Let’s talk about you.’

My face drops. ‘Do we have to?’

‘You demanded backstory from me. So this is my revenge. After all...’ And then he wheels out the very same line I fed him. ‘...would you buy a second-hand car without first checking the service history?’

I smile at him. He mirrors the gesture.

And then I seek to discover, ‘Why the avid interest? What’s so special about me?’

‘I don’t know yet.’ He leans back in his chair. ‘But I can’t wait to find out.’

I too lean back, making us both a matching set. ‘Before you go delving into my murky world, I have a question.’

‘Fire away.’

‘Would I still be enjoying your undivided attention had I not first reeled you in with the “vanilla I’d like to fuck” line?’

‘Yes.’

Wow. He didn’t require any time to think about it. However, I remain a tad unconvinced. ‘What if I cancelled our forthcoming shag? Would you then run a mile?’

‘No way. I kind of like you.’

I grin. ‘You only kind of like me?’

He grins back. ‘More than kind of.’

‘How much more than kind of?’

‘I am genuinely interested in you as a person.’

I find this breaking news flattering. But also somewhat perplexing. The men who tend to latch onto me boast wishlists of nothing more than a quick bunk-up, no questions asked. We all know the type. Think-with-their-dick pussy-seekers. I have no idea why I attract this particular genus. It's not as though I dress like a whore. Okay, so I'm wearing a short denim skirt, but the shrewd addition of super-bright yellow tights means I'm not flashing the thighs. And sure, my green and mind-bending long-sleeved tie-dye top may be low cut, but my tits aren't exactly spilling out for all the world to see. This leads me to wonder if I have "guaranteed shag, come and get it" inked on my forehead, a tattoo only visible to the male of the species. Hmm, more than likely. But here sits a guy who is willing to stick around without the cast-iron guarantee of bedroom frolics. And that's what I find most perplexing.

If I'm brutally honest, I do feel comfortable, and safe to a degree, leaping blindfold into the sordid pit of dirty, empty sex. You know, that dark and decadent world where girls are fucked and then forgotten, another tick on the random guy's scorecard, then onto the next willing vagina. It means I can claim my fun and games without getting too close to somebody and revealing the true Dandelion Price. Instead, I'm greeted by zero emotion, zero commitment, zero complications. When the sun rises, I become nothing more than the skirt he shagged last night. Nameless. Anonymous. Past tense. And that suits me fine.

Tonight, however, it's a very different scenario. Unfamiliar. Uncharted. But something inside is telling me to give it a shot. To step out of my comfort zone. To open my eyes to the fact that I could very well be in the company of the mythological creature known as a gentleman. Wow, lucky me if this seemingly outlandish theory turns out to be true.

Heh, judging by the way my fellow table-dweller is looking at me (at my face, no longer my tits), he does seem pretty keen. And shock of shocks, he actually wants us to kick-start a deep and meaningful conversation. With words and everything. So maybe I should order my restless anxiety to calm down, go with the flow and see how it all pans out.

‘Okaaaaaaaaay,’ I almost sing rather than say, my turn to elongate a vowel. ‘What would you like to know?’

‘Let’s start with your name.’

‘Dandelion Price.’

His stunned double take is the best in show. ‘Dandelion?’

‘Yes. It was my mother’s choice.’

My VILF blows out a spill of air. ‘I thought my name was bad enough.’

‘Why, what is it?’

‘Not sure if I should tell you. You’ll only laugh.’

‘No, I won’t.’

‘Okay, here goes.’ Rapid finger tapping upon the wooden surface of the table provides his tension-building drum roll. Then comes the reveal. ‘It’s Noah. Noah Mann.’

I giggle. ‘Know a man, do you?’

In response, he shoots playful mock disgust in my direction. ‘You said you wouldn’t laugh.’

‘Technically, my sentence didn’t include a concrete promise.’

He smiles, acknowledging my cunning response. ‘Very clever.’

I take a gulp of my double vodka and coke. It goes down well, especially as I didn’t have to pay for it. ‘Noah was the Bible guy who parted the Red Sea, right?’

‘You’re thinking of Moses. Noah built the ark.’

‘Ah, yes. The animals went in two by two.’

‘That’s the one.’

‘At school, I read an illustrated version of the story,’ I begin to reel off. ‘Slap-bang in the middle of the queue of animals, what should I find? Two lions. With manes. Yes. Manes.

Like, what the fuck? I remember thinking, “How are they supposed to rebuild the lion

population with matching sets of meat and two veg?” I shake my head at the sheer idiocy of the illustrator’s faux pas before booming out in a “movie trailer” voice, ‘Noah’s Ark. The official literature first in same-sex representation.’

My companion snorts his amusement. ‘The things you come out with.’

‘Welcome to my warped imagination. And believe me, it is warped.’

My VILF smiles. And after necking a glug or two of his bottle of beer, he wants to know, ‘Why did your mother call you Dandelion?’

My face turns as rigid as stone as I tell him in all seriousness, ‘Because she’s a grunt.’

‘A grunt?’

‘Yes. I’m calling her the C-word, but with the C replaced by a G, so as not to upset the easily offended.’

Noah is thrown by my deadpan response. Only, it isn’t deadpan. I’m not telling a joke. I actually mean it. Because it’s true. I do indeed think my mother is a C-word. And I know he can tell, hence his prolonged open-mouthed episode of staggered non-speak.

‘It was the first and last birthday present she gave me before sneaking out of the hospital exit.’ I exhale a rush of air through my nostrils at the very thought of her clandestine tippy-toe departure. ‘I would say it was a kick in the teeth. But at the time, I didn’t have any.’

‘She abandoned you as a newborn baby?’

I offer across the most tragic of nods, sombre, unhurried. ‘So the story goes, a member of staff tracked her down an hour later in the hospital grounds, looking a right state, her arse parked on a memorial bench, nursing an almost-empty bottle of vodka. They eventually talked her into coming back inside, but motherly duties were never part of her long-term game plan. She stuck around long enough to register the birth, making my name official. And then she fucked off forever.’

‘Bloody hell. You never saw her again?’

‘That’s what fucking off forever means, Noah. Do keep up.’

We both consume a further mouthful each of our drinks. Our gulps are deafening.

And then I continue the conversation. ‘I’m guessing “Mummy Dearest” hoped I’d hate the name Dandelion with a vengeance. But no. I approve. Wholeheartedly. It makes me unique. Exclusive. One of a kind.’

‘I have to admit, it is kind of quirky.’

‘Only kind of?’ I ask with a grin, referencing our recent “kind of” exchange.

‘Okay, correction. Amazingly quirky.’ After a further glug of his drink, he asks. ‘Is there a father on the scene?’

I scoff. Loudly.

‘So... you were adopted?’

‘No. As an abandoned infant, I instantly qualified for three-bedroom social housing.’

‘Sarcasm?’

‘How did you guess?’

We smile. Briefly. But then our humour is lost to the seriousness of the moment.

‘I was actually taken into foster care.’

‘Ah, right. Do you know anything at all about your mother?’

Again, I scoff. Louder than loudly.

‘Or the father?’

‘Three words: One-night sperm donor. Or four words if you happen to take the pedantic route with indeterminate hyphen usage.’

For the second time this evening, Noah leans back in his chair, on this occasion eyeing me with a squint of scrutiny, as if attempting to work me out, to calculate exactly what makes me tick. Which of course is virtually impossible. As he will soon discover.

‘What?’ I prompt, needing to know what’s going on in that head of his.

‘For somebody who spent their childhood in care, you’re surprisingly au fait with the English language.’

I raise two animated eyebrows, then knit them together, highlighting my sudden infuriation. ‘Are you saying somebody like me shouldn’t possess the intelligence to reel off words of more than two syllables or string together intricate sentences?’

My unforeseen change of mood knocks Noah off-kilter. ‘No, no, I meant...’ And then he doesn’t seem too sure where his remark was supposed to be heading.

‘What exactly are you implying here?’ I bang on regardless. ‘That all children in care will invariably grow up to become thickhead dickheads?’

‘No, of course not, I –’

‘Did you expect me to talk like a chav?’

‘That’s not what I’m saying.’

‘Did you assume I’d have a criminal record as long as my arm?’

‘Dandelion, please, I –’

‘I don’t believe this. I thought you were different.’

He flounders, he stammers, he squirms, knowing he has put his foot right in it.

And guess what? I’m secretly loving it.

Heh, I am so tempted to keep up the pretence. But no. One flash of my cheeky smirk tells him he’s off the hook. ‘Relax, I’m only winding you up.’

He blows out the longest sigh of relief known to mankind. ‘I thought I’d upset you.’

‘It would take a whole lot more than a sweeping generalisation to stab through my thick skin.’ And then I decide to explain, ‘The best education I could manage under the circumstances was important to me. I needed to be smarter than everybody else.’

‘Why?’

‘To survive. And to stay one step ahead.’

‘Wow. Deep.’

‘Deeper than you could possibly imagine.’

For my age, I boast a wider than average vocabulary. I’m sure, reader, you’ve noticed during my prose-fest narration. It’s no secret that I am fascinated by language. From early childhood, if I came across a word I’d never before laid eyes upon, I couldn’t wait to look it up in my dictionary. Imagine my joy when I first discovered the word “discombobulated.”

Most people my age are way too lazy with the spoken language, stuffing unnecessary words such as “like” in the middle of sentences, sometimes two or three times in one sitting. Example: “She was, like, totally, like, all over him.” What’s that all about? Sure, hands up, I’m guilty of the occasional superfluous insertion of that particular L-word, but spouting it over and over again lacks flair and elegance. I’m sure you agree.

Oh, breaking me away from my musings, Noah asks, ‘Where does the surname Price fit in? Foster parents?’

‘Oh, yes. Just the one couple. No bouncing from household to household for me. Mr and Mrs Price raised me from birth until my eighteenth birthday. And then I left.’

‘I get it,’ Noah utters with the inclusion of a knowing nod. ‘You were eager to chance your luck in the big wide world.’

‘Something like that,’ I respond, making it appear as though he has sussed me out.

Ah, but Noah hasn’t sussed me out at all.

Like I said, I don’t want him knowing all my secrets.

Behind my mask lurks a very different chain of events.

SECTION 5

Oh, again, my consciousness is on the move. I find myself back in my foster home.

Today is my birthday. Eighteen years of age.

I sit in an armchair, wearing a blue long-sleeved dress patterned with dandelion flowerheads, plus tartan tights and pink hobnail boots. My favourite outfit. Total clash-fest. Just how I like it. Meanwhile, an “18 TODAY” helium balloon floats above my head, its ribboned mooring tied around my waist. And directly opposite, a man and a woman, both in their mid-forties, have claimed the sofa, him in a suit and tie, her in a polka-dot dress.

Introducing my foster parents, Mr and Mrs Price.

I don't call them Mum and Dad. I never did. I never will.

Between us on the coffee table, they've laid out their finest porcelain tea set. Neighbouring the chinaware sits a birthday cake, its lone candle standing aflame (eighteen deemed unnecessary by my substitute guardians), zero slices cut, for display purposes only.

Look at them. Rigid and formal, as if about to perform a royal ceremonial engagement. Mr and Mrs Price have always acted this way. They treat everything very, very seriously.

‘You may blow out the candle,’ the two of them request in complete unison, no doubt rehearsed, with Mr Price's fire extinguisher by his side. At the ready. Just in case.

I do as I am told, a single sharp exhale. And as the solitary candle surrenders its flame, I make the exact same silent wish I made when I was first eighteen years old. And no, I can't tell you what I wished for, otherwise it won't come true. I'm still hoping it will.

‘Dandelion Price,’ proclaims the person I never call Dad. ‘You are now officially eighteen years of age.’

Actually, I was technically eighteen years of age upon the chime of last night's midnight hour, my exact time of birth ignored by society in favour of a twenty-four-hour birthday

window, but I don't make an attempt at correcting him. It would only ruin his flow. And that would never do.

Mr Price continues the ceremony. 'If you look to your right...'

I look to my right.

'...you will discover a wheelie suitcase packed with all your belongings.'

I discover a wheelie suitcase packed with all my belongings.

The person I never call Mum says, 'I'm sure you can guess where this is leading.'

I guess where this is leading.

Well, of course I do. This is the second time I've played a part in this chapter of my life.

Mr Price tells me, 'We have provided you with a safe and satisfactory environment.'

Mrs Price tells me, 'You have been fed, watered and above all, blessed with a roof over your head.'

Mr Price adds, 'We have performed our given duty to the letter. But now our job is done.'

Mrs Price adds, 'The time has come for you to fly the nest.'

'So you're throwing me out?' I ask, knowing it's a stupid question, but as I delivered this same query the first time, fourteen months ago, I have to ask it again. Otherwise our confab won't play out right.

'Indeed we are,' responds Mrs Price. 'But kindly.'

'On my eighteenth birthday?'

'In the eyes of the law, you are an adult,' Mr Price is eager to remind me. 'The world is your oyster.'

It's funny in a tragic way. I'm not upset. Just a tad disappointed. I always knew my foster care would come to an end when I reached adulthood. Only, I didn't think they'd dispose of me the very moment I became that adult.

Mr Price plucks a bulging envelope from the inside pocket of his suit jacket and hands it across. 'Our birthday gift to you.'

I open the envelope, surprised to find it stuffed with a thick wad of cash. Okay, correction, I feign surprise on this occasion because I knew it was coming.

'Two thousand pounds,' explains Mr Price. 'Sufficient funds to keep you afloat until you find your feet.'

I lose the envelope to the handbag parked between my feet. Quickly. Just in case they happen to change their minds. 'Thank you.'

'You're very welcome. Now, if you'll be so kind as to make your immediate departure, myself and Mrs Price can continue with our day. In peace.'

Within minutes, I find myself walking down the garden path, with Mr and Mrs Price waving farewell at their doorstep, the wheelie suitcase trundling behind me, the balloon above my head still anchored to my waist, my handbag hooked over my shoulder, the birthday cake balanced upon the upward-facing level palm of my left hand, just as a waiter in a posh restaurant would transport a silver platter of champagne flutes.

Mrs Price calls out, 'Feel free to visit whenever you please. But no more than once a year.'

In turn, Mr Price calls out, 'Oh, and while we're on the subject, turning up unannounced without making a prior appointment is strictly prohibited.'

To anybody outside looking in, the act of flushing me away like a beetroot tampon may seem more than a little draconian. I'm sure most foster parents offer across the option of turning their ex-foster children into paying lodgers. However, I've grown accustomed over the years to Mr and Mrs Price's ways and means. I didn't expect anything less severe.

SECTION 6

Oh, look, I'm back in the pub as my nineteen-year-old self, sitting at the table with Noah. As before, everything is the same, exactly how I left it. Hmm, I wonder how many more past revisits or future visits I'll encounter tonight. Hopefully none. One of each is more than enough for a single evening.

I ponder over why it's happening to me, how my consciousness can randomly project itself through time. Is it a super-power? If so, why did it wait until my nineteenth year to step into the limelight? So many questions, not enough answers.

Downing my drink in one, I stand up and inform Noah of my intention to take a leak. I enter the ladies' toilets and claim the only cubicle with its locking mechanism still intact. Once inside, I carpet the lavatory seat with a snake of at least twenty toilet tissue sheets before losing my tights and underwear to my ankles and laying my posterior to rest. Bare skin meeting loo plastic disgusts me. All those bums. Hundreds of bums. All those germs. Millions of germs. I could catch anything. Therefore, prevention is paramount. The cure can jog on.

Pee deposited, undercarriage dabbed dry, goodbye tissue snake, toilet flushed, underwear and tights reunited with my girlie bits, I saunter over to the first in a parade of sinks, tap twisted, water flowing, a liberal squirt of cleanser, scrub, scrub, scrub, a second squirt, scrub, scrub, scrub, a third and final squirt, just to be sure, scrub, scrub, scrub. Drying my hands with a paper tissue, I stare at my specular twin in the communal mirror. We both decide to apply a fresh coat of lipstick and a touch-up of mascara. We then tousle our untamed hair, dyed a patchwork quilt chaos of red, black, blue and green, a combination of shades we've been using on our follicles for at least the last four years. Almost three decades from now

may see us ponytailing colourless locks, but until that day arrives, the preferred multi-coloured “dragged through a hedge backwards” look will prevail.

Hmm, I take note of the fact that our roots are beginning to show. That will never do. Emergency replacement hair dye required at the earliest convenience.

Waving my reflection goodbye, I return to the table I’m sharing with Noah. Aw, bless. During my brief absence, my VILF has provided a further round of drinks.

‘Good boy,’ I quip, indicating to my latest tippie. ‘Easy to train.’ I reach for my glass, keen to perform a toast. ‘Here’s to taking you home tonight.’

He raises his bottle, our glassware making contact, a celebratory chink.

‘To taking me home tonight,’ he chants.

We grin. We laugh. We chuck the alcohol down our throats.

Oh, and then words of wisdom stand up to be counted in my head. Should I consider cutting down on my alcohol consumption, seeing as I know I’ll eventually become dependent on the demon drink? Ummmmmm... bravo to a valiant attempt at taming my nineteen-year-old self, but get real, that particular event doesn’t take place until twenty-seven years from now. I appreciate the sentiment, words of wisdom, but it’s a “thanks, but no thanks” from me. Life is for living. And I plan to live my life to the full.

After all, the next twenty-seven years may be my last.

SECTION 7

I can feel her. Stirring inside me.

My monster.

Deep in the very pit of my gut. Watching. Waiting. Biding her time.

But she can fuck right off. She's not welcome here. She's no friend of mine.

When my monster comes out to play, she tells me I'm useless, worthless, a burden on those around me. She mocks and she jeers and she points and she laughs. The sky grows ditchwater dark, the thunder grumbles and the endless rain weeps eternal sorrow. I can't think, I can't sleep, I can't concentrate on anything but the bottomless pit of despair. As such, I find myself crying and crying and crying, so many tears shed for my monster's personal amusement.

But no. Not tonight. Right now, I have company. A man. We stroll along a deserted street, his hand clasping mine. And sure, the shadows of the graveyard shift may attempt to obscure our chosen path, but mutual anticipation shines bright, showing us the way.

'Noah,' I utter out of the blue, but not to garner his attention, no, I'm merely quoting his name aloud, after which I add, 'My saviour from the rain.'

Noah peers upwards at a clear night sky, a scattering of stars, a waxing crescent moon.

'No sign of any bad weather tonight.'

I tell him, 'Not all rain falls from the sky.'

He doesn't pursue my random crypticity. Instead, we chat and we laugh about nothing in particular. Tonight, I am happy. Tonight, I want to live.

So fuck off, bitch. Three's a crowd.

SECTION 8

We hear the music, the chatter, the laughter long before we reach my humble abode.

‘This is the place,’ I declare, indicating to the mighty four-bedroom house standing proud amongst a leafy laurel perimeter, a wildflower lawn and a weatherworn stone pathway leading up to the part-open front door.

‘Wow,’ expresses Noah, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. ‘This belongs to you?’

‘Heh, I wish. It’s kind of a house-share thing.’

I lead him over the threshold and into a semi-lit lounge occupied by at least twenty people aged between eighteen and thirty, some standing up, some sitting down on the sofa, on chairs, on beanbags, others laying spread-eagled on the floor, the lost souls of society who have come together as one, a commune of sorts. Everybody has custody of an alcoholic drink, whether it be beer or wine or spirit, with weed being freely passed around, its sweet sickly fragrance laying thick and heavy in the air.

Music blasts from a set-up of decks and speakers in the far corner, the spiky-haired DJ totally out of his tree on his recreational substance of choice, but still able to blend the vibes seamlessly onto the next track. Now that is talent. Meanwhile, a foursome of barely-twenty student types, two boys, two girls, all zinging on pills, eyes bulging, teeth grinding, arms thrashing, have claimed the centre of the room as their own personal dance floor.

A long-haired bearded guy (who looks uncannily like Jesus, but when asked always claims he isn’t him, not sure if I believe his side of the story) acknowledges my arrival, wearing no clothes and not giving a shit, his modesty saved by the acoustic guitar strapped around his nude form. Pleased to see me, he strolls on over.

‘High-five, Dandelion.’

We high-five... even though I suspect it's no longer socially fashionable. And then he makes a bee-line towards the current leaseholder of the nearest available spliff.

I catch Noah staring in disbelief at the unclothed man. 'What's the matter?' I ask with a smirk. 'Never seen a naked guitarist before?'

'I'm guessing he's a tenant.'

'Correct. But I never did catch his name. And I've gone way past the legally acceptable passage of time to ask him without embarrassing myself. So I call him Naked Busker.'

'Do all these people live here?' Noah asks, overwhelmed by sights and sounds new to him.

'Some do, some don't.'

'So you all share the rent?'

'We don't pay any. The deal is, we do Vince the landlord favours.'

'Sexual favours?'

'Not me. But some of the men do.'

We both step into the kitchen, sparsely populated, a welcome breather from the chaos of the adjoining room.

Naked Busker follows us in, holding aloft a baggie of pills. 'Can I interest you both in a dose of psychedelic paracetamol?'

I take advantage of the offer, swallowing the medication long before it has an opportunity to dispel its fly spray aftertaste.

'I'm not sure if I should,' mumbles a hesitant Noah. 'Embarrassing side-effect.'

'Oh, Noah, live a little,' I say to the unsure guy. 'I want to have fun tonight, and I'd like you to play your part in my downfall.'

My "heartfelt" speech convinces him. He swallows a pill, then opens his mouth to show me what a good boy he is. Naked Busker holds out an expectant palm in Noah's direction. My date for this evening throws me a bewildered gawp, seeking much-needed affirmation.

‘These pills are not complimentary,’ I let him know. ‘Bung him thirty notes.’

‘Thirty?’ he gasps.

‘Believe me, these bad boys are worth it.’

Exhaling away his reluctance, he produces his wallet and hands across the required payment to Naked Busker who then thanks him for his business and scoots away. Once the nude man is out of earshot, Noah turns to me and grumbles, ‘Thirty quid?’

‘Consider it your personal donation to our charity.’

‘What charity?’

I open the refrigerator door, revealing a treasure trove of bottled and canned beers. ‘This one.’ Sporting a broad grin, I pluck two bottles from the chiller, one for me, one for him.

‘Complimentary?’ he asks.

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Just making sure.’

After flipping off the lids with a bottle opener, we head back into the lounge and park our bums on the carpet, our backs propped against the wall.

Noah indicates to the music, the drinking, the dancing. ‘Does this happen every night?’

‘Once or twice a week. But never Sundays... when we all go to church.’

We both laugh. I could grow accustomed to laughing with this man.

‘Don’t the neighbours ever complain about the noise?’

I shake my head, a no from me. ‘The elderly lady to our left, deaf as a dead cow. And the guy to our right suffers from a severe case of agoraphobia. Never leaves the house. Ever. So he couldn’t knock us up to complain, even if he wanted to.’

‘I don’t think I could hack all this mayhem on a regular basis.’

‘I like the noise. It helps to drown them out.’

‘Drown what out?’

‘The voices in my head.’

Oh, bloody hell, what made me say that? It must be the drink loosening my tongue. An uncertain silence prevails. Hollow. Empty. A void begging to be filled. This makes me fear the worst. Tonight coming to an end before it has a chance to flourish. But no. It doesn’t seem as though I’ve scared him off. This is a good sign, right?

Even so, I still feel the need to admit, ‘I’m not what you’d call a regular girl.’

‘Yeah, yeah, so you told me. You’re a disordinary and I’m a VILF. We all have our crosses to bear.’ And then he delivers a chuckle.

‘Noah, I’m being serious. I have issues. Serious issues. Most days I’m pretty normal. Well, normal to an extent. But there are occasions when... when I’m not quite myself.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

Bloody good question. Why I am letting down my guard? Allowing him inside. Making myself vulnerable. Risking whatever we have right now. And whatever we might share in the future. I need to quit this madness. I can’t open up to him. Not yet. Not completely. He’s not ready. And so, I pack myself away, a closed shop, out of bounds, private property.

Noah, meanwhile, awaits a response to his question.

I need to offer him something. So I give him, ‘Because I like you.’

And now it’s out there. Floating in the air between us. A declaration of my initial feelings towards the guy. Not quite as bad as the confession of love I gave to Bradley Samms, my one and only schoolgirl crush. But bad enough. What if Noah also laughs in my face?

Staring ahead into the distance, the Noah in question takes a swig of his beer. He thinks about it. Turns to face me. And then he smiles. ‘Relax. I know what I’ve signed up for.’

My subsequent beam has gratitude written all over it. ‘Thank you for understanding.’

‘We’ll have less of the stressing, okay?’ Noah takes my free hand, holding it tight, not letting go. ‘Aren’t we supposed to be having fun tonight?’

‘Yes. We are.’ I rest my head upon his shoulder. ‘We will.’

The two of us cast our mutual vision across the room at Naked Busker who has taken up residence on the left-hand arm of the sofa, strumming his guitar and flashing “shag me” eyes at a green-haired girl with piercings in her nose, lip, eyebrows, septum, between her eyes, in both cheeks, everywhere. I do hope she doesn’t ever get struck by lightning.

Lifting my head from Noah’s shoulder, I gaze at my partner in crime without his knowledge as he devours his beer. I know it’s early stages, but I’m truly into this man.

Noah then indicates to Naked Busker. ‘Doesn’t that guy ever wear clothes?’

‘Sometimes. When legally required.’

I check on the Jesus dead-ringer’s progress with Green Hair. Heh, by the look of wicked delight on the pierced girl’s face, Naked Busker is deffo getting laid tonight.

‘He gets dressed when he ventures outside,’ I continue to explain. ‘And especially when he’s up in court.’ I sample a glug or two or three of my drink. Each time, it goes down well. ‘Right now, he’s exercising his God-given right.’

‘To do what?’

‘Not give a fuck.’

At that, we giggle like children.

I’m happy. I like being happy. It’s far more agreeable than the grim alternative. Oh, how I wish my sun could shine all the time. But it can’t. At some point, dark clouds will gather in my overcast sky and the rain will fall.

But not tonight. This evening, my woes can piss off out of it. We’ll have less of the stressing, that’s what Noah said. And that’s good advice. So I’m sticking to it.

After draining our bottles, we head back to the kitchen for fresh supplies. We plunder three bottles each from the refrigerator. Actually, make it four each. And then I lead my VILF upstairs to my bedroom, taking the bottle opener with us. Shrewd or what?

Once inside my private domain, I close and lock the door behind us. I'm allergic to random drunk and/or high people blundering in unexpected, unwanted, uninvited. The chaos downstairs finds itself demoted to mere background mumbles and grumbles. We can still make out the bass and the beat, but toned down, the closed door acting as a muffler. Segregation from lower-floor happenings suits us fine. The two of us, alone, together.

I study Noah's face as he explores my bedroom, the vibrant purple walls, the multi-coloured throw-on blanket making its mark upon the duvet of my single bed, random framed pictures busying all four walls, the invading army of figurines, statuettes, candle holders, vases and ornaments of all shapes, colours and sizes staking their claim upon the bedside cabinet, the top of the wardrobe, the chest of drawers, the window sill, everywhere.

'Check out all this chaos,' he utters, his awe-filled eyes discovering new species of trinkets, knick-knacks and oddities upon each subsequent sweep of his sight. 'Your taste is...' He tilts his head from side to side, attempting to locate an apt phrase. And then he finds one. '...eclectic.' From the window sill, he picks up an office stapler, red and shiny, then eyes me in question. 'Is this supposed to be an ornament?'

I claim back the red and shiny office stapler, returning the item to its exact spot on the window sill. 'It's interesting to look at. That's why it's there.'

'Fair enough.'

'I don't have a set agenda,' I inform my VILF as I park my posterior upon the edge of the bed. 'If I like what I see, I grab it. I refer to my collection as "me" crap.'

I try not to think about my notable lack of "me" crap in that high-rise flat when I'm forty-six, but I can't help myself. What happened to it all? What happened to me? It doesn't make sense. Why would I let it all go? Why would I let myself go?

'Where did you buy all this stuff?' asks Noah, breaking the spell of my thoughts.

'I didn't buy it.' My cheeky beam outshines my most sparkly trinkets. 'I stole it.'

His staggered double take could win first prize. ‘What, everything?’

‘Add kleptomania to my ever-growing list of disorders. Well, actually, I’m more of a part-time klepto. My compulsion only takes charge every now and then.’

My bedroom companion laughs as he sits down beside me, indicating to the colossal amount of “me” crap I’ve accumulated. ‘Now and then?’

‘When I first arrived here, I had to put my klepto urges on hold. I wasn’t given a bedroom on day one. There weren’t any available. You see, in this household, there’s a pecking order. I had to earn my place. Think of it as a points system. A loyalty card. When somebody leaves, the person who deserves it the most wins the prize.’

‘Where did you sleep in the early days?’

‘The garage.’

‘The garage?’

‘Still a roof over my head. Add a mattress, a pillow, a duvet and voilà. Home from home.’

Raucous laughter from downstairs resonates throughout the building.

‘Is there ever a quiet moment in this house?’ comes Noah’s latest question.

‘When everybody’s asleep. Or passed-out. Whichever comes first.’

Oh, the light begins to fade around me, as though my brain has bagged a new job as a dimmer switch. A queer dullness blankets the room. And sound finds itself stifled and subdued, that underwater feeling. At first, I wonder what is happening. But then I guess. So I allow these bizarre sensations to do as they please.

What comes next is sudden. Relentless. A flash-flood of brilliant light. A swoosh in my ears, like storm-driven waves smashing against a pebbled beach. Those downstairs vibes, once muffled and insignificant now fill my head with melody and bass and beat. My senses, they’re awakened, amplified, I can hear everything, I can feel everything, I am everything.

The sudden rush to my head takes me by surprise, my entire body swallowed whole by a surge of energy so overpowering, so overwhelming that I feel my featherweight form floating away, high above the trees, the clouds, the stars, the universe, and I don't care, I really don't care, nothing matters, nothing can hurt me, I am free, so very free.

'Jesus, this pill is good,' I remark, my voice reverberating, disconnected, an out-of-body echo.

My cheeks tighten, my grin grows toothy and obese, expanding and expanding, falling off the edges of my face. I take note of Noah who also finds himself slave to the effects of the medication. I wave my hands in front of my eyes. He mimics my moves, the pair of us fascinated by a hectic chorus line of fingers, so many fingers, too many fingers, blurred and out of focus, dancing for our entertainment, and we laugh, oh, yes, we laugh so much.

Noah stands up. Wobbles. Almost falls over. Giggles. Regains balance. Giggles again. Turns to face me. 'So much energy inside me. I need to work it off.'

'How?' I enquire, my permanent beam impossible to wipe off my tingling face.

'Like this.' He marches with haste over to the opposite end of the room, then twists around, stamping one foot upon the floor, head held high, body rigid, play-acting a soldier on parade. And then he's off again, marching in the opposite direction, twisting around, doubling back, this way, that way, this way, that way.

Apple-eyed, I stand up and copy his marching, with me heading in one direction, him the other, over and over again, this way, that way, this way, that way, guffawing like a loon every time we pass each other. I don't know how long we keep this up, but it seems like forever.

One forever later, I quit the marching and fall backwards onto the bed. Noah follows suit, landing beside me. He looks at me, I look at him, our pupils so enlarged, we'll need to be careful not to slip and fall into these bottomless black holes.

The initial explosive rush begins to wane, diminishing, surrendering to stage two, a constant candyfloss hum inside my head, neurotransmitters on overdrive, that orgasm feeling, but all over my body, lasting forever and ever, fucking amen.

We aim unblinking eyes towards the ceiling, our attention fixed upon its resident brushstrokes of yesteryear emulsion, a work of art on display for a captive audience of two. Minutes tick themselves away. Two. Three. Four. Five. But when I glance at the clock on the wall, several hours have passed. To us, the laws of time no longer seem to apply. No beginning, no end, we simply exist, somewhere, nowhere, anywhere, we don't care.

'Do you still have energy you need to work off?' I ask, my voice no longer sounding as if it's bouncing around in an echo chamber.

'Yeah, I do. Why do you ask?'

'Why do you think?' I go from laying down to sitting up and pulling my tie-dye top to collar bone height, revealing my "clutch of eggs" tits, moulded to perfection by the push-together bra I am so glad I sourced from the lingerie section of a random clothes shop.

I deliver the word "sourced" as I might not have legally purchased the item in question.

I deliver the word "might" so as not to implicate myself.

I decide to bank the phrase "accidentally borrowed" as my defence, should I find myself arrested for my crime and questioned by good cop, bad cop.

Noah understands my "bra on display" hint, no further clues necessary, well, of course he understands, he's a man. He too sits up, yanking at my top, intent on removing it in record time, but I recoil, self-consciously guarding my sleeves from attack.

'No,' I yelp. And off his look of question, which is pretty difficult for him to achieve with a permanent cheesy grin, I (sort of) explain, 'I'd rather keep my top on.'

Noah probably thinks I've gone all shy on him. Or at least that's what I hope he believes. Truth is, I don't want him to stumble upon one of my closely guarded secrets, my forearms

bearing historical scars of blade scoring flesh. It's way too soon in our relationship (if I can call it a relationship at such an early stage) for him to discover my thirteen-year-old self's favourite hobby of self-harming. I've kept it secret for so long. From everybody. Even Mr and Mrs Price. I'm not prepared at this point to reveal my former sins, the likes of which still haunt me today. Not now. Not yet. Not like this.

Good news, he doesn't question my motives. In fact, Noah seems to have already forgotten about my refusal of top removal, all thanks to the foggy effects of the pill in his system, oh, and his escalating lust. Instead, he sets about relieving me of my platform wedge sandals, my denim skirt, my super-bright yellow tights and my underwear, namely, the pair of sexy black thongs I might have also "accidentally borrowed" during a recent shopping trip.

I lay on my back, my legs wide open, watching as Noah stands up, achieving the pure state of nakedness at supersonic speed. He plucks a condom from the change pocket of his discarded jeans and clambers onto the bed, masturbating in a furious fashion to inject life into his surprisingly flaccid penis. He wanks and he wanks and he wanks, all to no avail.

'Bugger,' he curses, his cheeks glowing ruby.

'What's the matter?'

'I can't get hard.'

'What?'

'And my cock, it's kind of shrunk into itself. It's usually bigger than this.'

In playful response, I toss in his direction a ultra-sceptical smirk.

This gets him panicking. 'Honest, it is.'

Therefore, I suggest, 'Would you like me to give you a hand?'

'It won't do any good. This has happened before when I've dropped a pill. That's why I was so hesitant about taking it.'

'So... is this the embarrassing side-effect you mentioned earlier?'

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘So... are we talking total penis no-show?’

He offers across a disconcerted nod. ‘I thought, maybe, you know, it wouldn’t affect me this time. But it has.’

‘So...’ I consider apologising profusely for my unforgivable overuse of the S-word as a lazy method of adding depth to my questions, but no, I decide to cancel this plan, deeming it unnecessary to the narrative, a plot device which won’t drive the story forward. ‘...does this mean we won’t be having sex tonight?’

‘I’m really sorry.’ He couldn’t be any more sincere.

An awkward hiatus reigns supreme.

And then I cackle like a witch. ‘This is hilarious. Too fucked to fuck.’

Laying down beside me, he too sees the funny side. ‘It’s a blessing in disguise. I’d rather wait until we’re sober and drug-free enough to properly enjoy it.’

‘Does this mean you’d like to see me again?’

‘Yes. I would.’

‘I like the sound of that.’

‘So do I.’ And then he asks, ‘Is it okay for me to crash here tonight?’

‘Sure. But in our pillled-up state, I can’t see us falling asleep any time soon.’

We cuddle up together, eyes like golf balls, staring at nothing in particular, not a care in the world. And yes, I know it’s the pill talking, forbidden chemicals super-charging both my dopamine and serotonin levels, but I feel totally, totally loved-up tonight. I do hope my current psychological state stays this way, even after tonight’s drug of choice has performed its final encore. My newfound happiness will seriously infuriate my monster.

Good.

SECTION 9

Oh, once again, I am forty-six.

I certainly get around.

I find myself in my/her shithole of a high-rise flat, lounging upon the sofa, watching daytime television. Wait, what? Daytime TV? Jesus, where's the bloody remote control? Aha, there it is. Stand-by button pressed, goodbye pants quiz show, picture and sound replaced in an instant by an empty yet satisfying hush.

The rest of the property also celebrates its own personal silence. My daughter must be at school. I'm glad. No way do I fancy finding myself on the receiving end of a second unsolicited lecture concerning my forty-six-year-old version's drinking habits. At this latteryear stage of my life, I don't need reminding about my alcohol problem, especially by somebody who squatted inside me for nine months in a wobbly sack of womb fluid.

I stand up and catch sight of my older self in the mirror. What do I find this time? Surprise, surprise, my hair remains colourless and ponytailed. And I'm wearing yet another hoodie and jogging bottoms combination, its brand name emblazoned across both garments in a humungous font size no doubt viewable from space. Oh, great, so now I've joined the knuckle-dragging herd of brain-deads who happily wear their favourite sports brand with pride, unwittingly advertising the product without being paid for doing so. Modern slavery, hidden in plain sight.

I was hoping the previous impromptu visit from my nineteen-year-old self's consciousness would inspire my middle-aged counterpart to at least wear something a little more "me." Huh, no chance. My hopes dashed. Crashed. Burned.

Curiosity drives me towards the chest of drawers. No, not for the bottle of vodka. I want to check something else. Pulling open the top drawer, I ignore that dreaded letter from the

hospital. I'm not reading it, no way. And then I wonder if there will ever be a good time, an opportune time, a right time to read (in all probability) the worst news imaginable. I seriously doubt it. Instead, I sift through random paperwork, all the usual suspects, this year's (and last year's) council tax bill, a vast library of fast food menus and an Amazon rainforest of unwanted flyers advertising every business imaginable, one such leaflet from a designer of bloody stairlifts, for God's sake. My mature self should have recycled this shit the very moment the literature vomited through her letterbox and onto the doormat.

Oh, what's this? Upon closer inspection, I find that it's a dog-eared road map of my town, the type you unfurl into a huge one-page chart which takes up the entire interior of a car, several years old by the look of it, at this point in time tightly folded, the portion on display featuring the very edge of civilisation where concrete meets nature. You see, this town is surrounded by trees and fields, with dense woodland to the east, as this folded page of the map displays, yet in the epicentre of the daily hubbub, sharing grey-space with all those roads, all those buildings, you wouldn't even know such calming greenery exists.

Oh, look, sometime in the past, I penned a bolded cross in red ballpoint ink to the woodland section of the map. Why would I do that? Hey, maybe that's where I've planted a new tree, my contribution towards saving the planet. Hmm, thinking about it, would the chavvy version of Dandelion Price perform a task so gallant? Hah, yeah, right.

Returning the map to the chaos of my life junk, I continue my search, sift, sift, sift, until I find what I've been looking for. My daughter's birth certificate.

I cast inquisitive eyes upon her date of birth. Ah, so she was born just over three months after my thirty-first birthday. Looks like I guessed correctly the last time I was here. The girl is indeed fifteen years of age. I then scan the certificate for her name.

Poppy Price.

Poppy???

Jesus, why did I dish out the same punishment my estranged mother dished out to me? Talk about history repeating itself. If I'd set my heart so badly on naming my newborn baby after a flower, why didn't I lean towards the kinder option of, say for example, Rose? Or Daisy. Yes. Daisy. The perfect moniker to go hand in hand with Dandelion. The pair of us, beautiful yet misunderstood wild flowers sharing the very same expanse of lawn.

Hmm, no mention of the father. So who the hell fertilised my egg? Was it Noah? If so, where is he? And why would we wait until I was thirty before trying for a baby? Maybe his "couldn't get hard for me" embarrassing side-effect escalated into a far more serious problem. Perhaps it took years before he could successfully park his train in my tunnel. Oh, hold on, that doesn't explain why I left the "father" field of the birth certificate blank.

Could it be possible that he dumped me before the baby was born?

Could it also be possible that I never found anybody who could take his place?

It would certainly explain, all these years later, why I've totally let myself go.

I attempt to extract the necessary information from my older self's brain, but the bitch still refuses to let me in. Instead, I try to paint a picture of the current Dandelion Price through the moods and emotions I'm experiencing right now. Okay, so first impressions, this body doesn't feel at all loved up. I'm no expert, but that more than likely suggests a relationship status of single. In other news, middle-aged me isn't switching to auto-pilot, taking me to my place of work. This must mean I don't have a job. Conclusion: I'm an unemployed, alcoholic single mother on benefits. A walking, talking, living, breathing underclass cliché. No wonder I ended up here in this hellhole of a tower block. It's all I deserve.

God, I need to escape from the stifling claustrophobia of this place. Heading outside to sample a dose of fresh air sounds like the greatest idea ever. And so, making sure that my keys and purse are present in the cheap-shit handbag I clearly consider perfectly adequate at this point in my life, I journey out into the world of my forty-six-year-old host.

Jesus, it's equally as hellish out here. On the opposite side of the street, the site of a former sports field now demoted to an sorry overgrown wasteland, three teenage joyriders are in the process of drenching a stolen car in petrol. Hah, so much for going all-electric by a certain year. Almost three decades on and there is still a mixture of electric and fossil fuel vehicles.

Job done, two of the lads in possession of now-empty fuel cans step away a safe distance while the third hoodie yob sets their former ride alight. Whooooosh, the unforgiving flames take hold, the lads hoot with laughter, and with zero visible police officers on the beat, there is nobody around to stop them. What has this world become?

Copying all the other bystanders by blatantly ignoring the raging inferno, I amble down the road and around the corner. A pang of hunger begs me to stop off at a convenience store. I pluck a pre-packaged BLT sandwich from the chiller cabinet. Jesus, the price of food has certainly shot up. Well, of course it has. This is twenty seven years later.

I head towards the guy manning the till. I don't expect him to turn all wild-eyed and flustered, yelling at the top of his voice, 'Get out, Dandelion, you're not welcome here!'

At first, I'm thrown by his sudden vocal attack. But then I recall Poppy telling me during my previous visit about how all the local shops refuse to serve me. 'It's okay, I'm not after alcohol,' comes my somewhat flimsy defence, holding aloft the innocent foodstuff. 'All I want is this sandwich.'

'No! Piss off or I'll call the police.'

Bloody hell, in this neighbourhood, I must be public enemy number one.

I drop the sandwich on the floor, crushing it underfoot, stamp, stamp, stamp, revenge dealt, that'll teach him, before marching in a strop out of the premises. Huh, so much for satisfying my hunger. Plan B, I make my way towards the town centre where they won't know of me or my reputation. Or at least I hope they won't. What if I'm barred from literally every retail establishment in town? If it turns out to be true, that's one mean feat.

Ten minutes later and I'm in the thick of it, shops on both sides of the street, vehicles brum-brumming past, people admiring elaborate window displays. Here, I appear invisible, nobody recognising me, nobody shouting at me, nobody swearing at me, nobody noticing me at all. It's a most relieving case of everybody walking past, living their own lives, thinking their own thoughts, doing their own thing.

Technology doesn't seem to have moved forward. The mobile phones people are happily chatting away into look more or less the same design. Maybe it's only the technology of the apps that has evolved. Oh, and clothing in the future hasn't changed at all. It's as though fashion designers have collectively thought to themselves, "You know what? I can't be effing bothered."

A young Mediterranean guy gravitates towards me, handing out leaflets for the burger joint where he no doubt works. Oh, look, my forty-six-year-old's right hand switches to auto-pilot, snatching the offered flyer without question. Ah, it's obvious. Middle-aged me is a fast food junkie. No wonder there are so many takeaway menus in that top drawer.

I slip the colourful leaflet into my handbag. My plan is to dispose of the flyer in the first recycling bin that I happen to encounter. Sure, late-teen me likes takeaway food, but older me must be totally "breakfast, lunch, dinner" addicted. No way do I want my future self growing fat. I'm hoping, at some point, she'll thank me for it.

I turn another corner and –

– argh, a brick shithouse lunatic in his late forties grabs me round the throat, his eyes burning wildfire red. 'Gotcha, you bitch.'

The bulky thug pins me against a brick wall, tightening his grip around my windpipe. I can't breathe, I can't speak, I can't scream, oh, God, what the fuck? This male is big and tall and strong yet seemingly invisible to all passers-by. Again, what the fuck? A man is attacking a woman in the middle of town and nobody is batting an eyelid.

‘Where’s my fucking gear?’ He loosens his fingers to enable a raspy reply from his victim.

All I can think of to wheeze is, ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

It’s true. I have no idea what he’s barking about. What gear? Drugs? Personal belongings? God knows. And more to the point, who the bloody hell is this brute?

‘Don’t piss me about, Dandelion.’

Oh. It seems as though we know each other.

MEMO TO SELF: Choose your friends (and enemies) a lot more wisely.

‘I’ve been looking all over the place for you,’ he growls, with no plans any time soon to let me go. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you’d moved?’

I open my mouth to speak, but what can I possibly say to him? I don’t know the full story. Actually, correction, I don’t know any of this story. Maybe I don’t want to know.

‘I can’t believe you thought you could hide from me. In this tiny fucking town.’ Again, he tightens his grip on my neck. ‘Final warning, bitch. If you don’t tell me where you’ve hidden what’s rightly mine, I will do you serious damage.’

I’m scared. Really scared. Nobody is coming to my aid. Nobody is willing to save me. They probably believe it’s a petty domestic dispute, and so thus none of their business, but my money lies on the wager that they’re all way too frightened of this hooligan to risk an intervention. Therefore, it’s time for me to dish out the only self defence move every girl knows by sheer instinct alone.

Oof, my knee going full-on battering ram against his groin fells my attacker. Free from his hold, I make my escape, dashing along the street. Clutching his gonads, the thug struggles to his feet and gives chase.

I sprint through countless side streets and alleyways, but the brute is quick for a man of his barrel bulk, a combination of body fat and muscle, the distance between us a consistent twenty, maybe thirty feet, despite the damage I dealt to his plums. I turn a sharp right into yet

another alleyway, the huff, puff of my breath and the thump, thump of my trainers demolishing my eardrums. Emerging from the alleyway, I have two choices:

1. Turn right and leg it down another street.
2. Turn left into the entrance of a multi-storey car park.

I turn left.

Hoping and praying that he'll think I chose street over multi-storey, I enter the car park and locate the elevator. After multiple jabs of the request button, the metal door decides to slide open. I dive inside, press-press-pressing the top-most button. As the door begins to slide across, I spot the thug, oh, good, he's looking in the direction of the street I decided not to journey along. But then, a split-second before the door fully closes, he looks left towards me. Oh, God, did he spot his prey? There's no way of knowing.

The elevator hums into life, and up I go. First level, second level, third level, the fourth is the open rooftop level, my final destination. The door slides open. I step out into a breezy area of dull, grey concrete, a stark contrast against the blues and reds and blacks and yellows and greens and whites of various parked cars.

I trot over to the perimeter ledge, a concrete barrier designed to prevent cars from falling over the edge. I peer at the ground below, checking for any sign of my chaser. He is nowhere to be seen. God, it's certainly a long way down. I bet drivers are most relieved by the presence of this three feet high flat-topped ledge with a metal railing running along it. The trouble is, it boasts a major design flaw. It may stop car users plunging to their demise, but it doesn't deter depressed pedestrians from climbing aboard and taking their own lives. One step forward, wheeeeeeeee, splat, that's all it takes. Quick and simple.

Oh, a certain brick shithouse thug emerges from the elevator, marching towards me, his fists clenched, his face a carnival of glares and sneers. This answers my former question. He did indeed spot me. And now he's here. On the same level. Too close for comfort.

‘Look at the state of you,’ he remarks, gesticulating towards my hair, my clothes, an accompanying grimace included in the mix. ‘What happened to you, Dandelion?’

‘I’d love to learn the answer to that particular question myself.’

‘Where the bloody hell have you hidden the goods?’

‘The goods?’ The closer he steps forward, the further I back away. ‘I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘I didn’t do all those years inside for you to piss me about.’

‘I don’t even know who you are.’

He snorts. Loudly. ‘Now I know you’re talking bollocks.’

‘Look, I...’ At first, I don’t know what to say. But then I test the water with, ‘...I’m sorry, I’ve been having trouble lately. With my memory.’

Unconvinced, the man surges forward. ‘If you don’t give me the location right now, I swear I will beat it out of you.’

Wasting no time, I clamber onto the concrete ledge, one leg over the railing, then the next. ‘Come any closer and I’ll jump. And then you’ll never find out where the gear is.’

He stops in his tracks and snarls, ‘You’re bluffing,’ even though he doesn’t look too sure.

‘If we truly are acquainted, you will know I am capable of this.’

I’m taking one hell of a risk. If he knows me well, he is sure to back off. But if this thug turns out to be nothing more than a casual associate, he might ask me to call my bluff. And then what do I do? During my lowest of lows, I have to admit, I’ve experienced many, many suicidal thoughts. But right now, I do not wish to give my monster the pleasure. Back in the timeline of my nineteen-year-old self, I have a potential boyfriend. A reason to be happy. A reason to live. Oh, and not only that, I don’t particularly wish to find myself blamed for ending the life of my older version. This is only the second time I’ve played babysitter to this body. The certain death of forty-six-year-old Dandelion Price isn’t my choice to make.

Meanwhile, in the world outside of my thoughts, an unexpected flash of concern dominates the man's face. 'Dandelion, please. Get down from there.'

I'm not exactly sure what he is more afraid of losing. Me or the mystery goods. I'm guessing it's the latter. So I choose to remain strong, delivering a firm, 'No.'

He stares at me. I stare at him. Time stands still. I take this opportunity to study his weatherworn face, his thinning mess of grey hair. If we are indeed friends, or "sparring partner" enemies, what the hell do we have in common apart from middle-age?

I take no notice of the approaching vehicle, believing the tin can on wheels to contain nothing more than a normal, average driver entering this particular level of the car park. That is, until the police car slows to a halt and the passenger-side window winds down.

'Everything all right?' asks one of the two police officers, the passenger-side upholder of the law who does all the talking.

The silent driver sitting next to him chooses to act all mean and moody.

My attacker clocks the local constabulary, then shoots me a warning glare. Applying a fake smile, he returns his attention towards the occupants of the patrol vehicle. 'Just two old friends catching up,' comes his faux affable response.

Two old friends? Catching up? Is that what he calls it?

The all-talking policeman transfers his interest towards me.

My poker face gives nothing away. I have no idea why I'm not revealing my side of the story and having this beast arrested. It's strange. I feel compelled to protect this person. This is clearly the work of my older self on auto-pilot. Why is she doing this?

And then the police officer takes note of my current predicament, a middle-aged woman standing in a precarious fashion upon a concrete perimeter barrier. 'Madam, would you mind stepping down from the ledge?'

I'm not sure if I should, but it doesn't look as though I have much choice. As such, I climb down from my wall of relative safety. Up close, I study my former assailant's face. I know exactly what he's thinking. He wants the police to leave. But they won't. They're not going anywhere. Good news for me. Bad news for him.

'Listen, Dandelion, uh...' the thug begins to say to me, his tone calm and friendly, so obviously play-acting, '...how about giving me your number? So we can, you know, go out for a drink later in the week. To catch up properly.'

Give him my phone number? As if. Go out for a drink? Double as if. The last severe migraine I need in my forty-six-year-old guise is to get too pally with this brute.

I unzip my handbag. A mobile handset sits inside, but I'm not letting him know it's there. 'Sorry, my phone's in the repair shop,' I lie. 'Cracked screen.' Instead, I hand him the burger joint menu. 'Take this. It's where I work. I'm free on Friday night.' More lies. Where I work? Hah, who me, the chav of the year? And double hah, I'm not free on Friday night, nor any other evening, not with him. Even so, I indicate to the contact details on the flyer and tell him, 'Call that number nearer the time and we'll arrange something, okay?'

The brute considers his options. Moments tick by. Eventually, and thankfully, he closes the conversation with, 'I guess I'll be seeing you around.' And then he makes his departure.

I breathe a sigh of relief, so glad that he fell for the old "fake number" trick. Oh, but then I compose myself when I realise the policeman's eyes are fixed upon me.

'Are you sure you're all right?' the man in uniform asks.

I deliver what I hope is a credible portrayal of a nonchalant, carefree woman. 'Yeah, yeah, I'll live.' Or at least I hope I will. If the suspected cancer doesn't kill me first, this brick shithouse lunatic certainly will.

SECTION 10

I wake up as a nineteen-year-old in my purple-walled bedroom. Ah, so I did indeed manage to catch a session of sleep. Beside me, Noah is out for the count. There's not much room for us both in this single bed, but it was fun to cuddle up together.

Careful not to disturb my slumber partner, I clamber out from beneath the duvet and tip-toe out of the room. I'm still wearing yesterday evening's green tie-dye top. Oh, and the sexy black thongs I slipped back on following Noah's total penis no-show. After all, there was no point in hanging my ladybits out to dry with zero chance of sunny weather.

Following my extended wake-up pee, I make my way downstairs on a mission to fix us both emergency coffees. On the sofa in the lounge, Naked Busker and Green Hair are eating each other's faces, too busy to notice me. Haven't they fucked yet? God knows. Meanwhile, making use of the chairs, the beanbags and the carpet, herds of residents and visitors alike are generally hanging out, recovering from last night's drink and drugs binge-fest. A number of them nod me a greeting as I saunter past and head into the kitchen.

Flicking the kettle to boil, I am reminded of recent events. Well, when I say recent, I'm talking about twenty-seven years into the future. Who the hell was that brick shithouse thug? What did he mean by his gear? And where have I hidden the goods in question? Oh, God, in the autumnal phase of my life, what shit have I got myself involved in? One half of me wants to return to the future for answers. The second half of me wants to avoid what happens next.

Even so, I have another question. How the hell do I end up as a workshy chav? Okay, so I don't have a job at nineteen years of age, but I'm not planning on living off the state all my life. Further queries then stand up to be counted. Do the events which lead me onto this sorry path occur in my forties or much earlier? Oh, and will my consciousness go on to visit other eras in my life, my twenties, my thirties? I guess I'll find out soon enough.

Coffees made, I try not to think about it. At least not today anyway.

Upon my return to the bedroom, Noah is awake, sitting up in bed. 'I feel well spaced out. I am so glad Sunday is my day off. What time is it?'

'Ten.'

'Cool. We have all day to spend with each other.'

'Wonderful idea. Such a pity it's ten in the evening.'

'What?' His eyes bulge, his jaw falls slack. 'You mean we've slept that long?'

'Looks like it.' And then I pull apart the curtains, revealing darkness outside.

Noah leaps out of bed, locating last night's discarded clothes and setting about dressing himself in record time. 'I'm sorry, Dandelion, I'd love to stay longer, but I need to go home to prepare for work tomorrow, packing my lunch, ironing my uniform.'

'What do you do for a living?' I am keen to learn.

'I work in a supermarket.' He accepts his mug of coffee, taking sips between sentences. 'Started the job a few months ago. Pretty much entry-level duties at the moment. But I plan to work my way up the ranks and rise to the top. One day, Dandelion, I'll be the store manager.'

I post my potential boyfriend a glowing smile. 'I wish I had your ambition.'

'Why stop at wishing? Go for it. Be whatever you want to be.'

Regarding his words, I take my debut gulp of coffee. Be whatever I want to be? Hah, I already know what I become, so is there any point in me wishing for something else, anything else? So depressing. And for the first time in my life, I yearn to be like all the other girls (and boys) who know nothing of their future and can continue to dream.

'That's good advice,' I tell Noah as I lock away my sombre thoughts. 'But I don't think the universe knows quite what to do with me yet.'