DiSORDiNARY

by

Mikey Jackson

Novel. Contemporary book club fiction

SECTION 1

It's cold outside.

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 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 rewound, 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.

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. A life with scenes repeated.

My name is Tangerine 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 to a noun.’

‘Oh, God, you’re an English teacher.’

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

‘It’s quite simple,’ I hasten to explain. ‘I’m a disordinary in the same way a boy or girl ditches their biological sex in favour of waving around a non-binary placard.’

‘Ah, so you identify as a disordinary.’

‘I do indeed.’

‘What do you call a non-disordinary? An ordinary?’

‘Actually, I call a non-disordinary 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 a little unfair of me. He seems like a really kind 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 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 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.

'Breaking news,' I announce. 'This watering hole will soon close its doors for the night. But I don't want this evening to end for us.'

Oh, yes, it's true. I'd hate for this particular episode to run its closing credits so abruptly. The night is still young, so much more to see, to feel, to experience, and I'd like this man to come along for the ride. 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.

'Interesting,' he responds, accentuating all syllables, as though he is a scientist on the brink of discovering a new species, a new planet, a new... whatever it is that scientists find fascinating. 'What do you have in mind?'

‘Continued alcohol consumption. Industrial strength.’

He crooks a cheeky grin. ‘Are you sure you’re old enough to drink?’

‘I happen to be nineteen. And hey, don’t you think it’s a bit late to go all “law abiding citizen.” You’ve been plying me with drinks for the last two hours.’ I fiddle with my annoyingly empty glass, my latest hint for an emergency refill. ‘So... does your place come equipped with all the essential beers, wines and spirits?’

‘It does. But we can’t go there.’

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 close.’

‘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 <u>have</u> 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 you want to spend more time with me, I demand backstory.’

‘Backstory? You mean my body count?’

‘Not necessarily. I can’t see your score being that high.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘You seem more “devoted husband” than “shag-frenzy womaniser.”

‘I guess I’ll take that as a compliment.’

‘Cherish it. I don’t hand them out too often. Now, backstory please.’

‘Why are you so interested in what came before?’

‘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. 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.’

‘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.

And as I nudge my empty glass formerly known as a double vodka and coke even closer to him, I remark, ‘Let us hope your much-anticipated upcoming performance lives up to your self-awarded five-star review.’

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

SECTION 3

Suddenly, unexpectedly, I'm middle-aged.

I sit alone in somebody's lounge.

How did I get here?

'I'm forty-six,' I tell myself. But then I ask myself, 'How the hell do I know I'm forty-six? How can I even be forty-six?'

A moment ago, the guy I like 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 this is the case, 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 that came before it, from my earliest childhood memory until

flirting with my chosen on-demand alcohol dispenser at the pub. Nothing from the age of twenty to 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 this particular 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. And then we have the faux leather sofa, the former host of 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?

Spotting 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've evolved 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 locks? And why am I draped in loose-fitting sportswear? I mean, come on, what's with the hoodie and baggy jogging bottoms? What happened to my self-confessed screwball dress-sense?

‘Jesus Christ,’ I exclaim to my reflection-based audience of one, ‘I look like a chav!’

Double worst nightmare or what?

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

Addressed to Miss Tangerine 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.

After standing up and placing the envelope on top of the chest of drawers, I unscrew the lid, finding 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. Late-teen me 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 practically everybody I've encountered during my life so far. '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. 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 truly sunk so low in my autumn years? As a nineteen-year-old, drinking is something I enjoy at the weekend. And some week nights. Actually, 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. Younger versions of myself would love this breaking news. But I can’t help feeling that my older self no longer shares the same sentiments.

‘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 stroppy bitch and a gobby cow, both traits no doubt inherited from the dark and twisted genetic blueprint of Tangerine 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.’

And 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 the man whose name I am yet to discover. 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. My drinking partner 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 the letter from the hospital. As far as I'm concerned, it can stay hidden in that 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 sees 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. The guy I like.

'Are you okay?' he 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 <u>was</u> somewhere else.' And off his resulting frown, I add, 'Don't worry about it. You'd never believe me anyway.'

I lead him over to a vacant table. We sit down, exchanging nervous smiles, both attempting 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, silly hats, 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 the man with no name as yet, 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... unlike the pound-shop versions of feminists among us (far-left liberal freaks who shouldn't identify as feminists because they're too extremist and give genuine feminism a bad name) who by now would be grabbing their phones to post selective outrage on social media. Personally, I 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.

‘Why the avid interest?’ I seek to discover. ‘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 deep into my murky world, I have a question.’

‘Fire away.’

‘Are you only chatting me up in the hope of getting between my legs?’

‘No way. I kind of like you.’

I grin. ‘You only <u>kind</u> 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 I tend to attract boast wishlists of nothing more than a quick bunk-up, no questions asked. We all know the type. Think-with-their-dick pussy-seekers, chests puffed out, hungry for the thrill of the hunt. I have no idea why I’m a magnet pulling in this particular genus. It’s not as though I

dress like a whore. Okay, so I'm wearing a short blood-red 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 males of the species looking to exchange genital fluids. 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 the 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; that dark and decadent world where girls are fucked and soon forgotten, another tick on the random guy's scorecard, then cast aside as "been there, done it." It means I can claim my fun and games without getting too close to somebody and revealing the true Tangerine Price. Instead, I am 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. Unknown. 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 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 hair. What made you ride the chaotic route?'

I knew at some point he'd mention my unruly mop, dyed a striking patchwork quilt of red, black, blue and green, a combination of shades I've been using to create scalp-based disorder for at least the last four years. Almost three decades from now may see me ponytailing colourless locks, but until that sorry day arrives, the preferred quad-coloured "dragged through a hedge backwards" look will prevail.

'Chaotic is my middle name,' I tell him, answering his question.

'What's the rest of your name?'

'Tangerine Price.'

His stunned double take is the best in show. 'Tangerine?'

'Yes. It was my mother's choice.'

He blows out a spill of air. 'And there was me thinking my name was odd.'

'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.

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... I think. 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. Slap-bang in the middle of the queue of animals, what should I find? Two lions. With manes. Yes. Manes. 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 relationship representation.’

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

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

Noah’s subsequent grin is obese. And after necking a glug or two of his beer, he wants to know, ‘Why did your mother call you Tangerine?’

‘Because she’s a grunt.’

‘A grunt?’

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

Noah looks thrown by my deadpan response. Only, it wasn’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, her arse parked on a memorial bench, looking a right state, nursing an almost-empty bottle of vodka. They eventually talked

her into coming back inside, but motherly duties were never part of her 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.

'I'm guessing "Mummy Dearest" hoped I'd detest the name Tangerine 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.' And 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-bedroomed social housing.'

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

'I was actually taken into foster care.'

To which he asks, 'Do you know anything at all about your mother?'

Again, I scoff. Louder than loudly.

'Or the father?'

'My theory, 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 though 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.’

‘What the fuck? 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 infuriation 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?’

‘Tangerine, 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. ‘Wind-up successful.’

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 explain, ‘The best education I could manage under the circumstances was important to me. I needed to be smarter than everybody else. 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: “Like, oh, my God, she was, like, totally 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 reader-based 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.’

‘Ah, I get it. You were eager to chance your luck in the big wide world.’

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

Ah, but Noah hasn’t figured 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. This time, coincidentally enough, 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 big orange spots, plus red and black 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, so 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 that 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.

'Tangerine Price,' proclaims the person I never call Dad. 'You are officially eighteen years of age.' He pauses to grant the milestone announcement adequate weight, then adds, '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. You have been fed, watered and above all, blessed with a roof over your head.’

Mrs Price tells me, ‘We have performed our given duty to the letter. But now our task is complete. 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 correctly. ‘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.

‘Three 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 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.’

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 floating above my head still anchored to my waist, my handbag hooked over my shoulder and 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 to the table 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, does that make me a superhero? Huh, I seriously doubt it. It's not as though I can use my special ability to catch master criminals or save citizens in peril. So... why me? God knows. Too many questions, not enough answers.

Downing my drink in one, I stand up and inform Noah of my intention to take a leak, claiming the only cubicle the ladies' toilets with its locking mechanism still intact. Once inside my private cube, 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. To you, it may seem extreme, but 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 overrated 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 brush of mascara. Next, we examine our untamed hair, taking note of the fact that our roots are beginning to show. Hmm, that will never do. Emergency stocks of red, black, blue and green 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, the guy has purchased a swan-song round of drinks, this particular panic-buy investment a product of the "last orders" call from the exhausted bar staff.

'Good boy,' I quip, indicating to my latest tipple. 'Easy to train.' I reach for my glass, keen to perform a toast. 'Here's to a brand new adventure.'

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

'To a brand new adventure,' he chants.

And we chuck the alcohol down our throats.

Oh, in my head, words of wisdom stand up to be counted. Should I consider cutting down on my units of 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 all those around me. She mocks and she jeers and she points and she laughs. In my tortured mind, the sky grows ditchwater dark 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.'

'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

Oh, once again, I am forty-six.

I certainly get around.

Look at me, I'm lounging upon the sofa in my older counterpart's shithole of a high-rise flat... 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'm sure 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.

Standing up, I 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. Trashed.

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 bills, 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. 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 whole 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 if somebody new to the area stood within the epicentre of the daily hubbub, all those roads, all those buildings, all that uninspiring grey-space, they wouldn't even know such calming greenery existed.

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 juvenile tree, my contribution towards saving the planet. Hmm, thinking about it, would the chavvy version of Tangerine 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.

Poppy Price.

Not a bad choice. In fact, the name is already growing on me. Memorable. Quirky. Alliterative. Oh, and not too common, not too obscure, somewhere safely in-between.

Casting inquisitive eyes upon her date of birth, I find that 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.

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? Oh, and more to the point, why did I leave the "father" field of the birth certificate blank?

Could it be possible that Noah 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.

Hmm, needing answers, 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 bigger picture of the current Tangerine 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 to whisk me off 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 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 a 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 point. All these years later, electric and fossil fuel vehicles continue to share the roads.

Dowsing complete, the two lads in possession of now-empty fuel cans step away a safe distance while the third hoodie yob sets their former ride alight, the boys hooting with laughter as the unforgiving flames take hold. 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 sudden pang of hunger begs me to stop off at a convenience store. From the chiller cabinet, I pluck a pre-packaged BLT sandwich. Jesus, the price of food has certainly shot up. Well, of course it has. This is twenty-seven years later.

Heading 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, Tangerine, 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 which involves me holding aloft the innocent foodstuff, Exhibit A. '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.

In protest, 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, herds of humans 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 using for their manic chatter-fests look more or less the same design as those in my present-day life. Perhaps only the installed apps have evolved. Oh, and clothing in the future hasn't changed at all. It's as though fashion designers have collectively muttered 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. At once, 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 the cheap-shit handbag, my plan to dispose of the flyer in the first recycling bin 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 saving her waistline.

I turn another corner and –

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

The bulky late-forties thug pins me against a brick wall, tightening his grip on 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. A man is attacking a woman in the middle of town and nobody is batting an eyelid.

‘Where’s my fucking gear?’ he snarls, loosening 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, Tangerine.’

Oh. It seems as though we know each other.

‘I’ve been looking all over the place for you,’ he bangs on, 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. Maybe they 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. Looking over my shoulder, I clock the thug struggling to his feet, clutching his gonads. Oh, and then, impossibly, he 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 over to an elevator. After multiple jabs of the request button, the metal door finally decides to slide open. Diving inside, I press-press-press 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 that 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 and I step out into a breezy expanse of dull, grey concrete, a stark contrast against the blues and reds and blacks and whites and yellows and greens of various parked cars.

I trot over to the perimeter ledge, a concrete barrier, three feet high with a flat-topped ledge and a metal railing, designed to prevent cars from toppling over the edge. I scan the ground below, checking for any sign of my chaser. Good, he is nowhere to be seen.

Oh, shit, a certain brick shithouse thug emerges from the stairs, 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, Tangerine?'

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

'Where the bloody hell have you hidden the goods?'

The closer he steps forward, the further I back away.

‘I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,’ comes my desperate plea. ‘I don’t even know who you are.’

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

‘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, unsure of his next move.

‘If we truly are acquainted,’ I stress to the man, ‘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 even though I’m playing babysitter to this body, the certain death of forty-six-year-old Tangerine Price is not my choice to make.

‘Tangerine, please,’ the man begs, an unexpected flash of concern dominating his face. ‘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 the shared curse of middle-age?

I don’t give a second thought to 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 driver-side window winds down.

‘Everything all right?’ asks one of the two police officers, the driver of the vehicle who does all the talking, the silent passenger-side upholder of the law choosing 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 to 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, clearly the work of my older self on auto-pilot. But 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 any choice in the matter. Climbing down from my wall of relative safety, 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, Tangerine, uh...’ the thug says 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.’

I unzip my handbag. A mobile device 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 workshy 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. ‘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 prehistoric “fake number” trick. Oh, but I check myself when I realise the all-talking policeman’s eyes are fixed upon me.

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

On the outside, I deliver what I hope is a credible portrayal of a nonchalant and carefree woman. ‘Yeah, yeah, living the dream.’ On the inside, the prospect of not living much longer deeply concerns me. If the suspected cancer doesn’t kill me first, this brick shithouse lunatic certainly will.

SECTION 9

I jolt back to my nineteen-year-old life, this particular return trip proving a somewhat bumpy ride.

Noah picks up on my unsteady gait. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Uh, yeah, living the dream. Blame too many voddies.’

In truth, I’m not drunk. Instead, recent events are playing on my mind. Well, when I say recent, I’m talking about twenty-seven years into the future. So many questions, too many questions. 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 wants to avoid what happens next.

I decide not to think about it. At least not tonight anyway. Having fun is the order of this evening. Therefore, shutting away my concerns, I guide Noah along the street where I live. We both 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. ‘This belongs to you?’

‘Hah, 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 fifteen 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 collective 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 and sickly fragrance laying thick and heavy in the air.

Music churns from a set-up of decks and speakers in the far corner, the spiky-haired DJ totally out of his monkey on his recreational substance of choice, but still able to blend the vibes seamlessly onto the next track. Now that is talent. Meanwhile, a lone raver, zinging on pills, eyes bulging, teeth grinding, arms thrashing, has claimed the centre of the room as his 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, Tangerine.' And he raises an expectant hand.

I fail to reciprocate. 'Is high-fiving still socially legal?'

The bearded man finds himself thrown by my deadpan query. 'I'm... not sure.'

'Then we'd better not do it.'

Shrugging it off, he lowers his hand, instead making a bee-line towards the current leaseholder of the nearest available spliff.

I catch Noah staring in disbelief at the unclothed male. 'What's the matter?' I ask with a smirk. 'Never seen a guitarist in his birthday suit 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... am I correct in assuming all the actual tenants 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 sail 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 cheeky 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,’ comes my immediate advice. ‘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. In Noah’s direction, Naked Busker holds out an expectant palm. 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 overdose of reluctance, he produces his wallet and hands across the required payment to Naked Busker who thanks him for his business and scoots away. Once the nude man is out of earshot, Noah turns to me and grumbles, ‘Expensive or what?’

‘Consider it your personal donation to our charity.’

‘And which charity is that?’

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 one of three provided bottle openers, 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?’

‘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 exactly what you’d call a regular girl.’

‘Yeah, yeah, so you told me. You’re a disordinary and proud of it.’

‘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 naked and vulnerable, risking whatever we have right now and whatever we might share in the future? I can’t open up to him about my troubles, not yet, not completely. 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 decide to admit, ‘I’m telling you 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. I can’t believe I just did that. But I did.

Staring ahead into the middle distance, Noah 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.’ I rest my head upon his shoulder. ‘We are.’

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 way too many piercings in her nose, lips, eyebrows, septum, between her eyes, in both cheeks, everywhere. Sure, I have multiple piercings in my ears, but her face is a precious metal shrine. 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 am truly into this man.

The subject of my attention indicates to Naked Busker. ‘Does 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 converge in my colourless, vulnerable 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. Making sure I’m armed with a bottle opener, I plunder three bottles each from the refrigerator, handing my potential boyfriend his share of the bounty.

‘Do you fancy going private?’ I ask him.

‘I like the sound of that.’

‘I like the sound of you liking the sound of that.’ And I lead the guy upstairs to my bedroom.

Fizzing with anticipation, we both step into my private domain. Allergic to random drunk and/or high people blundering in unexpected, unwanted, uninvited, I close and lock the door behind us. As such, 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. From this moment on, it's just the two of us, alone, together.

I study Noah's face as he explores my bedroom, the vibrant purple paintwork, 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... 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.' Parking my posterior upon the edge of the bed, I explain, 'I don't have a set agenda. If I like what I see, I claim it as my own. 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 menu of wacky disorders.'

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, wow, the light seeks to fade around me, a queer dullness blanketing the room, as though my brain has bagged a new job as a dimmer switch. 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 charging across 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 rapid 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, an out-of-body echo.

My cheeks tighten and my grin grows toothy and obese, toppling off the edges of my face. I take note of Noah who also finds himself slave to the effects of the recreational 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. I can't help but guffaw at his crazy antics. I'm not sure how long he keeps this up, but it seems like forever.

One forever later, Noah quits the marching and falls backwards onto the bed. I lay down beside him. 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, 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 though 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. Sitting up, he yanks 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, difficult for him to achieve with a permanent cheesy grin, I 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 am not prepared at this point in time 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 deck 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 short blood-red skirt, my super-bright yellow tights and a 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, all to no avail.

‘I can’t get hard,’ he whimpers, his cheeks glowing ruby.

‘Would you like me to give you a hand?’

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

‘Ah, so this is the embarrassing side-effect you mentioned earlier.’

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

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

‘I’m really sorry.’

An awkward hiatus reigns supreme.

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

Laying down on his back beside me, he too sees the funny side. ‘It’s probably for the best. I’d rather wait until we’re sober and drug-free, so we can properly enjoy it.’

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

‘I’d love to see you again.’

‘And I love the fact that you’d love to see me again.’

He turns onto his side to face me. ‘Is it okay for me to crash here tonight?’

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

We cuddle up together, eyes like golf balls, 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 loved-up tonight.

Oh, I do hope my current psychological state stays this way, even after tonight’s drug of choice has performed its final encore. My newfound burst of happiness will seriously infuriate my monster.

Good.

SECTION 10

I wake up (still a nineteen-year-old) in my purple-walled bedroom. Ah, so I managed 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 sardine-up together.

Careful not to disturb my slumbering bed 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, the usual snake of toilet tissue sheets laid upon the lavatory seat to defend my bum cheeks from bacterial attack, 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 performing rampant sex, eating each other's faces, far too busy to notice me. Undetected, I saunter past the rabid lovers and head into the kitchen.

Flicking the kettle to boil, I can't help thinking about my forty-six-year-old existence. 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 leading me onto this sorry path occur in my forties? Or much earlier? 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.

Two mugs of coffee made, I make my way back to my bedroom.

Upon my return, I find Noah 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.' He accepts his mug of coffee. 'We have all day to spend with each other.'

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

‘What? You mean we’ve slept that long?’

‘Looks like it.’ As further proof, I yank aside the curtains, revealing darkness outside.

Noah leaps out of bed, locating last night’s discarded clothes and setting about dressing himself in record time. ‘Sorry, 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 work in a supermarket. Started the job a few weeks 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, Tangerine, 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 send to jail my sombre thoughts. ‘But I don’t think the universe knows quite what to do with me yet.’