

**Terminal 3, Heathrow
London
April 26, 2024**

12:15 PM

Mia

Trouble lay ahead of her.

The line to board the plane had stopped moving, leaving Mia stuck next to a galley where two attendants made preflight preparations. One of them, a brunette with a silk scarf tied around her neck, opened a drawer containing a tray of foil-covered meals while her colleague poured water into small plastic cups. Mia watched them work, gathering her belongings in front of her. She had checked no bags. All she had was a small carry-on containing, among other items, a black dress, a leather tote that held her laptop, a paperback novel, a bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol, a charger for her phone, and an aluminum water bottle. She wore jeans and sneakers and a long wool coat, which she presently took off and draped over her right arm. The flight attendant who had been filling cups of water looked down the aisle. The line still hadn't moved.

"We've got a luggage problem," he said. His colleague closed the drawer containing the meals and glanced back to where he was gesturing. There Mia saw a man struggling to squeeze a large suitcase into the overhead storage bin. He kept turning it around, pushing it harder, but even from where she was standing Mia could see there was no way the bag was going to fit.

"These idiots," the flight attendant in the scarf said. "I mean, honestly."

She smiled at Mia, as if suddenly realizing she was there, then excused herself and slid by her. Threading her way past other passengers, she

eventually reached the man and tapped him gently on the shoulder. Mia took her phone from her pocket and opened her photo app. Before boarding began she had been looking through it, trying to find the last picture she had taken of all her friends together. Waiting at the gate, she had told herself that if she could find one, just one, then all of this would have turned out differently. But she hadn't, so now she found herself scrolling, past shots of Regent's Park and Broadway Market and her small, empty flat in Islington. When she reached November of last year, the flight attendant had made her way back to where Mia was standing, the bag held high above her head. She looked at her colleague and rolled her eyes. The line moved again.

By the time she settled into her seat Mia was deep in the fall of 2022. She had seen Adam and Richie on New Jersey Transit, and Sasha in a red leotard, and Theo strumming an electric guitar, and her old apartment in Greenpoint, and Lev with his glasses on the end of his nose. None of it was what she was looking for. For nearly a minute her mind drifted, her thoughts loose and scattered. Then, blinking, she opened a new text message, where she typed about to take off, see you tomorrow, and pressed send. A moment later, a response appeared on her screen: Only if you're up for it. She read it a few times over, then returned to her photos without responding. Beaches, skylines, cones topped with melting ice cream. Rami on a blanket in Fort Greene Park, and Marco with a baby, and the empty, postapocalyptic streets of the pandemic. Mia's thumb swiped faster and she felt herself starting to sweat. The trip had come together at the last minute—she kept thinking of things she hadn't done, people she had forgotten to call. She was next to a window, and she leaned her head against it. On the tarmac men in uniforms drove small carts, pulling trains of luggage behind them. Someone in a reflective orange vest directed a nearby plane to a gate. The sky was overcast, thick with gray clouds. Mia swiped her thumb once more and then—at last—she saw it: all of them together on a bright-green lawn. A swimming pool sparkled in the background, and bocce balls lay at their feet. She zoomed in on each of their faces, then looked at the geotag and date on the picture. Amagansett. Labor Day, 2019. She exhaled and waited for some relief.

“Good afternoon to you!”

Glancing up, Mia saw a man standing over her. He was large, well over six feet, and when he finally managed to sit down his knees brushed the seat in front of him. He looked to be about forty-five, which was to say a year or two older than Mia, and his red hair was parted neatly on the side. Mia smiled politely. She put away her phone and pulled the paperback novel out of her bag and read the first page. The sentences were clean and precise and they washed over her without meaning. She reached the bottom of the page, immediately forgetting what she had read, and went back to the beginning to start again.

“They pack us in here bloody tight, don’t they!” the man said.

Mia looked up from the book. He was smiling at her.

“Yes,” she said. “They do.”

“Can’t be too hard for you, though, being small like you are. Me, on the other hand.” The man slapped both of his knees. “Wouldn’t mind a bit more room!”

The plane pulled away from the gate. On the small screen in front of her, Mia watched as the president of Delta welcomed her aboard, and then as a diverse cast of flight attendants performed various safety demonstrations. When they were finished, a handsome man dressed as a pilot invited her to sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight. The plane swiveled ninety degrees. She heard the engines grow louder, and soon after that they were in the air. Below them, the ground was laced with roads that cut through parking lots and commercial centers and past empty green patches of earth. Mia’s ears popped. The plane began to level out, and she opened the paperback again.

“Good book?” the man asked.

“I’ve just started it.”

“I detect an American accent.”

Mia closed the novel. “Good ear,” she said.

“Going home, then?”

“No. Not really? I moved to London about six months ago.”

The man folded his fingers together. They were large, the knuckles

bulbous. Toward the front of the plane, the two flight attendants from earlier began pushing a drink cart down the aisle.

"It's my first time headed to New York, if you can believe it," he said.

"Oh?"

"You've been, I gather?"

"Yes. I lived there for a long time."

"Back to the old stomping ground, then?"

"Something like that."

"Smashing!" He reached into a backpack and pulled out a leather-bound notebook in which he had handwritten an itinerary. "I'm there for business, but I've got a mind to sneak in a bit of sightseeing on the side. This is everything that I've got planned. What do you think?"

Mia read it over. The Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Little Italy, Times Square, *The Lion King*. Handing it back to him, she said, "Yep, that looks like everything."

The man returned the notebook to his backpack.

"Not much of a talker, are you." He frowned, sounding puzzled if not a little hurt.

For a moment Mia felt guilty; she had hardly slept over the past five days, but the man was obviously excited, and she knew the polite thing to do would be to come up with some interesting suggestions. But then the drink cart arrived, interrupting her thoughts. The flight attendant in the silk scarf cleared her throat and widened her smile. She asked the man next to Mia if he would like something to drink.

"A gin and tonic!" he said. "Bloody hell, make it two gin and tonics. One for me, and one for—?"

"Mia. It's Mia." She looked at the flight attendant. "Just a club soda, please."

The flight attendant scooped ice into two cups. Rummaging around in a drawer, she found a small blue bottle of gin, then closed the drawer with her hip.

"Not too celebratory then, either," the man said.

“I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“We need to liven you up, missy!” He emptied the gin into his cup and took a sip from it. “We’re headed to *En Why See!* The Big Apple! The Center of the Universe! The City That Never Sleeps! It’s not like someone’s died, now, is it?”

The flight attendant pushed the cart farther down the aisle. Mia drank from her club soda and looked at the man.

“Actually?” she said. “They have.”

Orchard Street December 31, 2007

Richie Fournier: u coming tonite?

11:02 PM

Mia

They had run out of mixers.

Standing in someone else's crowded kitchen, Mia picked up one bottle after another. Club soda: gone. Tonic water: gone. Red Bull: gone. Cokes—original, diet, caffeine-free, cherry: gone. Everything: gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone. A man passed behind her, a towering guy in a striped button-down shirt that shone with a synthetic brilliance beneath the light. He yelled, “Yo, *Chris!*” and Mia’s ears rang; she pressed herself flatter against the counter to make room for him and felt his elbow brush against her spine. Next to a half-eaten bag of pretzels she spotted a can of lime-flavored seltzer water, traces of red lipstick on its opening. She picked it up, gave it a shake, and poured the few drops that remained into a cup of lukewarm vodka. There were fifty-eight minutes left in the year. And from the looks of it, she was going to spend them without a decent drink.

A few feet away from her, two girls she didn’t know passed a bag of potato chips back and forth. They looked a few years younger than she was, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two, and were both dressed in tight black pants and sequined tops that plunged dramatically toward their breasts. The one closest to Mia, a brunette whose lips were pink and glossy, wore a headband that had 2008 affixed to it in gold plastic. She ate a handful of chips, chewing with her mouth open as she tossed her hair over her shoulders. Then her friend took the bag back from her and said: “You won’t

believe this. But last weekend I was with Chris Villanueva at this party at Rachel's apartment on Avenue C—

"Rachel Goldfarb?"

"Yes."

"Rachel Goldfarb is a whore."

"Okay, well, I was there with Chris when Connor Cunningham walked in. I hooked up with him, you know. Then Robert Narducci walked in. I hooked up with him too. They both know about each other, and they both came over to talk to us and when they walked away Chris asked why things seemed weird. Sometimes I swear he was dropped on his head."

"Wait a second, wait a second, wait a second. Are you hooking up with Chris Villanueva? He's an asshole. He said he was going to pay me two hundred dollars for an essay I wrote him for Texts and Ideas sophomore year and I never saw a cent of it."

"I think he's really grown up since then. And also? He's a pretty good writer now. The sex is great."

The friend shoved her hand into the bag. "I feel like I just need you to, like, line up all the guys you know and tell me which ones you think are hot."

"What about Nick Cavanaugh?"

"He got fat."

"He didn't get fat-fat. He got dad-bod fat."

"Dad-bod fat is fat-fat. Also, he's a loser. He barely graduated, he's living back in Massapequa, and he doesn't own a car. I'm not sleeping with a guy who puts away grocery carts at Stop and Shop."

"What about Joe Rizzi?"

"Joe *Rizzi*? Are you kidding me?"

"What about him?"

"I saw that kid at Marquee. Kristen and I saw him. He came over to talk to us, and asked about all that crap Jacob told me. I got so mad. Like, I was ready to switch the rings from my fighting hand."

"Okay, so not Joe Rizzi."

"What about JJ?"

"You don't want to sleep with JJ."

"Why not?"

"Because he got a giant tattoo that says *household* in Mandarin across his back."

"No he did not."

"I swear to God. The week after Thanksgiving Ali Huang and I saw him at The Box and he took off his shirt to show it to us."

"How did you get into The Box?"

"Ali's sleeping with the door guy."

"I feel like everyone is having sex but me."

"Can I keep going?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry."

"Okay, so JJ—who, by the way, is *fat-fat*—takes off his shirt and is like, 'Look at what I got over break.' Then Ali is all, 'Uh, that says *household*.' JJ is like, 'Uh, no, it says *family*.' Ali goes, 'I speak Mandarin, you idiot, and it says *household*.' JJ gets all white and puts his shirt back on and calls Ali a bitch. And this is all in the bathroom line. He keeps yelling and I tell him to go to hell. We go back to the bar and he follows us, and I say that I would eat his skin off his face if he came near us again." She whipped her head around to stare at Mia. "Sorry, do you *need* something?"

The tips of Mia's ears began to burn. She felt her mouth fill with saliva. "Sorry?"

"You've been staring at us for five minutes—do you *need* something?"

The friend ate another handful of potato chips, working her jaw in slow, deliberate circles.

Mia smiled as brightly as she could.

"You two haven't found any mixers, have you?" she asked.

Their eyes rolling, the girls turned away. Mia searched the faces in the kitchen for someone else she knew. Bottles of liquor lined the counter alongside the empty mixers. Scattered among them were bowls with crumbs of what had once been in them. Corn chips, potato chips, pita chips, pretzels. A gash of salsa was splattered across the refrigerator door.

From the handles of cupboards hung bits of tinsel and gold streamers that swayed when people walked by; two unfurled party horns lay crushed and limp on the floor. Mia sneezed. One of the two girls glared at her with a scrunched-up face.

"Excuse me," Mia said, and choked down another sip of lukewarm vodka.

She hadn't been planning on leaving her apartment that night. She was fighting off a cold, and besides, she had never liked New Year's. But earlier that afternoon Sasha had knocked on her bedroom door and opened it before Mia could say "Come in." Leaning against the doorframe, she unpeeled the top from a carton of yogurt, plunged a spoon into it, and told Mia to stop being such a loser.

"I'm serious," Sasha said. "The only thing lamer than making a big deal about New Year's is making a big deal about not making a big deal about New Year's."

Mia looked up from where she was sitting on the floor amid a scatter of seventeen samples of various men's colognes in small amber-colored vials. She was wearing the pair of old lacrosse shorts that she had slept in, along with a T-shirt that said "Not Penn State," and her laptop was warm against the insides of her thighs. Open on the screen were three separate Internet Explorer windows: the first contained a black Theory peacoat she had found on Gilt Groupe and was psyching herself up to buy; the second an article on the best home remedies for ingrown hairs; the third a *Gawker* story about the Spice Girls reunion tour. She was eating from a block of cheddar cheese.

"I'm not making a big deal out of it, and I'm not *not* making a big deal out of it. I just don't want to go out." She took a bite of cheese. "I thought you were doing something with Theo."

"Theo's coming with us."

"Where are you going?"

"Richie Fournier is having a party at his apartment."

"That sounds illegal."

Sasha licked the back of her spoon. "Adam wants to go."

"Where is Adam?"

"Watching *Under the Tuscan Sun* on his computer."

Mia repositioned herself on the red Ikea rug that she had bought sophomore year of college, which was now losing its shag in thick, hairy clumps. Her left leg had fallen asleep.

"Adam's in love with Richie Fournier. That's why he wants to go."

"That's not my problem." Sitting on the edge of Mia's bed, Sasha crossed one long leg over the other. "Please just come?"

She picked up a few strands of Mia's hair and gently twirled them around her finger. They had met the second week of freshman year, in microeconomics. Their professor, who was Czech, had a problem saying *r*'s, *l*'s, and *w*'s, and after the fourth day of class, Sasha leaned over to Mia and said, "I'm sorry, but what is an ewasticity?" At that point Mia's only friend was Adam. They had done a pre-orientation camping trip together, where for five days Adam had set up her tent, and purified her water with iodine tablets, and packed her sleeping bag into a small red sack, all while Mia sat on a rock eating handful after handful of gorp.

Now Mia looked up at Sasha again. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, and her cheeks were sun-kissed from a Christmas trip to Aruba she had gone on with Theo and his family; a bit of yogurt clung to the corner of her lips. They both knew that Sasha would convince her, and that all of this begging was a charade. Still, Mia appreciated the extent to which Sasha was willing to go along with it, how she was game to make Mia feel important and wanted, so long as the night played out how she envisioned.

Mia coughed lightly into her fist. "I can't," she said. "I'm sick."

With her toe Sasha tapped a cup on the floor, where three cigarette butts floated in a shallow pool of brown water.

"I'm sure that helps," she said.

"Light smoking can actually help you get over a cold. The nicotine shocks your immune system into overdrive."

“Where did you read that?”

“The internet. Sasha, I’m serious, I can’t go. I’m so stuffed up I can barely smell anything.” She picked up one of the vials of cologne. “Like, what does this even smell like?”

Sasha took the vial and sniffed it. “High school.”

“Okay.” Mia gave her another one. “And this?”

“My grandfather.” Sasha frowned. “Actually, no. My grandmother.” She handed the vial back to Mia. “What are all those for?”

They were for her job. Mia was meant to write short descriptions of five of the scents, which would then be featured in the grooming section of *Details* magazine’s March issue. She had worked there as an editorial assistant since graduating in 2005—this was her first real assignment. When her boss had called her into his office to explain it, she was sure she was getting fired. For the last six months she had secretly been using the magazine’s printers to run off glossy pictures of James Gandolfini and Kyle Chandler—her spank bank, Sasha called it, which was accurate because Mia did, in fact, masturbate to them—and she was certain she had been caught. Instead, her boss, Eli, said he wanted her to “take a stab at writing some sexy scent copy.” Eli was three years older than her, and at Penn they had both worked on the staff of the *Daily Pennsylvanian*. When Mia was a sophomore, he had edited a story she had written about campus protests against the invasion of Iraq that had won them both a national award for college journalism. Now he wore distressed jeans and referred to certain Danish floor lamps as chic and sophisticated and liked to say things like “The other day I was talking to Anna near the elevators.” In his office at *Details*, he played around on his BlackBerry as he explained to Mia what made scent copy pop. “You have to say things like, ‘She’ll want to do a lot more than smell you,’” he told her, and then excused himself to go down to the cafeteria.

“Is Eli still gay?” Sasha asked, handing the vial back to Mia.

“One hundred percent. The gayest.”

“I figured.” Sasha reached down, took the block of cheddar from Mia’s

hands, and stood up from the bed. "Get in the shower. Adam wants to leave around ten."

In the kitchen, she swallowed another sip of her lukewarm vodka. A microwave sat on the counter across from her. Its glass was streaked with grease, but in the bits that were clean she could see parts of her reflection. Next to it, someone had set an upside-down iPod in a red Solo cup, and now Flo Rida's "Low" buzzed from its speaker. The two girls she'd been eavesdropping on had drifted toward the door leading into the living room. One of them was smoking a cigarette and the other was holding a bottle of tequila by its neck. Mia looked up to the top of the refrigerator. She saw a box of Wheaties, a miniature George Foreman grill, a tub of chocolate fudge protein power, and—she blinked—an unopened bottle of Canada Dry club soda. Over the din of Flo Rida, Mia heard one of the girls say, "No, listen, you *have* to add the cayenne pepper, the cayenne pepper is what makes you lose all the weight." The other girl nodded gravely. Walking over to the refrigerator, Mia held her cup in her mouth, stood on her toes, and felt on top of it. Her fingers brushed the Wheaties box and the curved plastic of the tub of protein powder. She clenched the cup in her teeth and jumped.

"What are you doing?"

Mia turned. Before her stood a man with dark, close-cropped hair, a furrowed brow, and a trio of freckles, lined up like an ellipsis beneath his left eye. He was wearing blue jeans and a loose white T-shirt, and a few specks of silver glitter clung to a spot of skin where his neck met his shoulders. The girl in the doorway said, "I swear to God I lost ten pounds in a week," and with his eyes still on Mia the man's frown deepened. He looked familiar. Mia felt herself starting to blush.

She realized she was still holding the cup with her teeth and reached up to remove it.

"There aren't any mixers," she said. "I was trying to reach that bottle of club soda."

"You just contradicted yourself."

“Excuse me?”

“You said there weren’t any mixers, and then you said you were trying to reach that bottle of club soda. Club soda is, in fact, a commonly used mixer.”

“I meant there were no mixers *available*.”

The man reached on top of the refrigerator for the bottle. “This seems pretty available,” he said.

“Okay, well, I couldn’t reach it.”

Flo Rida changed over to Timbaland. The man unscrewed the bottle’s top. Mia heard a faint hiss.

“You’re blushing,” he said.

“I’m not blushing.”

“Your cheeks are bright red.”

“It’s the vodka. I just have that kind of complexion.”

“And what kind of complexion is that?”

“I don’t know. A Jewish one?”

The man held up the bottle. A few wisps of dark hair poked out from the collar of his shirt.

“Did you want some of this?”

Mia said, “Yes, please.”

Tilting the bottle, he began filling the cup. Then he reached into the freezer, took a few ice cubes from a bowl, and dropped them in too. The soda fizzed with the vodka. Mia said, “What kind of asshole throws a party and gets this low on mixers an hour before New Year’s?”

“That’s a very good question.”

“It’s, like, who’s in charge here? Whose party is this?”

“It’s Richie Fournier’s—”

“Right, I know, I’m just saying.”

“And also mine.”

“Oh. Shit.”

He was smiling. His top teeth were straight, the bottom ones a little crooked. He screwed the cap back onto the bottle.

Mia sipped from her drink. She said, "So I take it you live here, then."

"As of two weeks ago."

"You know that living with Richie Fournier is liable to get you on the FBI's Most Wanted list, right?"

"My options were limited." The man's eyes narrowed. He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms. "You look kind of familiar."

"You do too, actually."

"Did you go to Penn?"

"Yeah. I graduated in '05."

"So did I. I think we were in Psych 0400 together."

"Which one was that?"

"The Pursuit of Happiness."

Mia began to nod. "Yeah. That's it. That's where I know you from."

"You sat in the front row. You used one of those pens where you could push a button and change the color."

"My mom sent me a bag of them."

"That makes sense."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The man didn't answer her. A woman in a pair of Seven jeans said, "Dude, you're blocking the refrigerator," and he took a step out of the way. For a few seconds after that he looked at Mia, as if trying to work out the end of an equation, and she could feel the tips of her ears turn hot again. But then he uncrossed his arms and his face relaxed. The woman in Seven jeans closed the refrigerator, and the man asked Mia, "So how is yours going?"

"How is my what going?"

"Your pursuit of happiness."

"Oh." Mia pursed her lips, staring down into her cup. The ice had already melted. "Can you ask me in, like, five years?"

"That implies we're going to know each other in five years."

She scratched a spot above her right eyebrow. "I wasn't trying to imply anything."

“You’re blushing again.”

“I told you already—it’s just my complexion.”

“And the vodka.” He smiled again. “I’m Marco.”

Mia tucked her hair behind her ear. She was about to take his hand and say her name when one of the two girls from earlier hugged Marco from behind, spinning him around. She said, “Maaaaaaarco,” and pressed her nose against his neck. Marco’s back was now to Mia, and she could see the bumps of his spine against his shirt. She watched as he wrapped an arm around the girl’s waist. Mia frowned at her vodka soda, then took another sip from it. She felt suddenly exposed, but also weirdly invisible, like she had come to the party naked without anyone noticing. The man in the striped shirt passed in front of her, this time stepping on her toes. The clock on the microwave read 11:18. The girl with her nose pressed against Marco said, “Stop it, don’t be mean, I hate you,” and Mia finished her drink. Then she walked out of the kitchen and into the living room.