

LOUISE
CANDLISH

the
other
passenger



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*For everyone who has ever been tempted
to compare up ...*

1

27 December 2019

Like all commuter horror stories, mine begins in the mean light of early morning – or, at least, *officially* it does.

Kit isn't there when I get to St Mary's Pier for the 07.20 river bus to Waterloo, but that's not unusual; he's had his fair share of self-inflicted sick days this festive season. An early-morning sailing calls for a strong stomach at the best of times, but for the mortally hungover it's literally water torture (trust me, I know). In any case, he always arrives after me. Though we live just five minutes apart and he passes right by Prospect Square to get to the pier, we gave up walking down together after the first week, when his spectacularly poor timekeeping – and my neurotic punctuality – became apparent.

No, Kit prefers to stroll on just before they close the gangway, raising his hand in greeting, confident I've secured our preferred seats, the portside set of four by the bar. At St Mary's, boarding is at the front of the boat and so I'll watch him as he moves down the aisle, hands glancing off

the metal poles – as much for style as balance – before sliding in next to me with an easy grin. Even if he’s been up late partying, he always smells great, like an artisan loaf baked with walnuts and figs (‘Kit smells so *millennial*,’ Clare said once, which was almost certainly a criticism of me and my Gen X smell of, I don’t know, stale dog biscuits).

Get us, he’ll say, idly scanning the other passengers, snug in their cream leather seats. It’s one of his catchphrases: *Get us*. Pity the poor saps crushed on the overland train or suffocating on the Tube – *we’re* commuting by *catamaran*. Out there, there are *seagulls*.

Also, sewage, I’ll reply, because we’ve got a nice sardonic banter going, Kit and me.

Well, we used to.

I clear the lump in my throat just as the boat gives a sudden diesel rumble, as if the two acts are connected. On departure, information streams briskly across the overhead screens – *Calling at Woolwich, North Greenwich, Greenwich, Surrey Quays* – though by now the route is so imprinted I pay little attention. Through the silver sails of the Thames Barrier and past the old aggregate works and industrial depots of the early stretch; then you’re at the yacht club and into the dinghy-strewn first loop, the residential towers of the peninsula on your left as you head towards the immense whitehead of the O2 Arena. Strung high above the river is the cable car that links the peninsula to the Royal Docks, but I won’t allow myself to think about my only trip to date on *that*. What was done that night. What was said.

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Well, maybe just briefly.

I turn my face from the empty seat beside me, as if Kit is there after all, reading my mind with its secret, unclean thoughts.

‘Back again on Friday,’ he grumbled on the boat on Monday night, bemoaning his firm’s insistence on normal working hours for this orphan weekday between Boxing Day and the weekend. ‘Fucking cheapskates.’ Normally, if he misses the boat, I’ll text him a word of two of solidarity: *Heavy night?* Maybe some beer emojis or, if I was involved in the session, a nauseated face. But I don’t do that today. I’ve hardly used my phone since before Christmas and I admit I’ve enjoyed the break. That old-school nineties feeling of being incommunicado.

We’re motoring now past the glass steeples of Canary Wharf towards Greenwich, the only approach that still has the power to rouse my London pride: those twin domes of the Old Royal Naval College, the emerald park beyond. I watch the bar staff serve iced snowflake cookies with the teas and coffees – it’s surprising how many people want to eat this stuff first thing in the morning, especially my age group, neither young enough to care about their silhouette (such a Melia kind of word) nor close enough to the end to give a damn about health warnings. Caffeine and sugar, caffeine and sugar: on it goes until the sun is over the yardarm and then, well, we’re all sailors in this country, aren’t we? We’re all boozers.

Only when we dock in front of the *Cutty Sark* do I finally reach for my phone, reacquaint myself with my

communications of Monday night and the aftermath of the water rats' Christmas drinks. I scan my inbox for Kit's name. My last text to him was spur-of-the-moment and tellingly free of emojis:

Just YOU wait.

Sent at 23.38 on Monday, it's double-ticked as read, but there has been no reply. There *have* been, however, five missed calls from Melia, as well as three voicemails. I really should listen to them. But, instead, I hear Clare's voice from yesterday morning, the 'proper' talk we had under a gun-metal northern sky four hundred miles from here:

You need to cut ties.

Not just him, Jamie. Her, as well.

There's something not right about those two.

Now she tells me. And I slip the phone back in my pocket, buying myself a few extra minutes of innocence.

*

At Surrey Quays, Gretchen gets on. The only female water rat, she's prim in her narrow, petrol-blue wool coat, carrying one of those squat bamboo cups for her flat white. Though I'm in our usual spot, she settles in the central section several rows ahead. Weird. I move up the aisle and drop into the seat next to her. You can't usually take your pick so easily on the 07.20, but the boat is half empty – even excusing the lucky bastards who don't have to return to work till the New Year, I have to admit the river's no place to be in these

temperatures. It's one of the coldest days of the year, breath visible from people's mouths on the quayside and from the heating systems of the buildings.

'Jamie, hi,' she says, not quite turning, not quite smiling. Her lashes are navy spider's legs and there's a feathering of pink in the whites of her eyes.

'Thought you were blanking me there,' I say, cheerfully. 'Good Christmas with your family?' She's been somewhere like Norwich, if I remember. There are healthy, uncomplicated parents, a brother and a sister, a brace of nieces and nephews.

She shrugs, sips her coffee. 'It's all about the kids, isn't it? And I haven't got any.'

There's really no need for her to spell this out: we're connected, our little group, by our childlessness, our freedom to put ourselves before everyone else. To self-indulge, take risks. No parent would do what I've done this last year, or at least not so readily, so heedlessly.

'What about yesterday? Do any sales shopping?'

Gretchen blinks, surprised, like I've suggested she rode a unicorn naked down the middle of Regent Street. She's clear-skinned, delicately feminine, though in temperament a woman who likes to be one of the boys, who laments the complexities of her own gender and thinks men simpler allies (a dangerous generalization, in my opinion).

'You all right, Gretch?'

'Yeah, just a bit tired.'

'I don't know where Kit is this morning. I'm sure he said he was working today. Did he say anything to you?'

‘Nope.’ There’s an edge to her tone I’m familiar with, a peculiarly female strain of pique. I’ve wondered now and then if there might be something between Kit and her. Maybe there was some indiscretion on Monday night, maybe she worries what I saw. Did I say something I shouldn’t have? God, the ‘shouldn’t have’s are really building: shouldn’t have got so drunk, shouldn’t have let him goad me.

Shouldn’t have sent him that last text.

‘What happened there?’ she asks, noticing my bandaged right hand.

‘Oh, nothing major. I burned my thumb at work. Didn’t I show you on Monday?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Noticing the music piping through the PA – the same loop of festive tunes we’ve been subjected to since early December – Gretchen groans. ‘I can’t take any more of this “happy holidays” crap, it’s so *fake*. You know what? I think I might just book a trip somewhere sunny. Call in sick for a few days and get out of here.’

‘Could be expensive over New Year.’

‘Not if I go somewhere the Foreign Office says is a terrorist risk.’

I raise an eyebrow.

‘Anyway,’ she adds, ‘what’s another grand or two when you’re already in the red?’

‘True.’ But I don’t want to talk about money. Lately, it’s the only thing I hear about. We pass the police HQ in Wapping, close to the zone change at which the westbound boats are required to reduce speed precisely as passenger

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impatience starts to build. We're entering the London the world recognizes – Tower Bridge, the Tower of London, the Shard – and as the landmarks rise, Gretchen and Kit and their troubles sink queasily from my mind.

'Enjoy Afghanistan, if you go,' I say, when she prepares to disembark at Blackfriars for her office near St Paul's.

She smiles. 'I was thinking more like Morocco.'

'Much better. Let us know.' My joker's grin shrinks the moment the doors close behind her and I rest my cheek on the headrest, stare out of the window. Seven fifty in the morning and I'm already done in. The water is high as we sail towards Waterloo, sucking at the walls with its grimy brown gums, and the waterside wonderland of lights that glows so magically after dark is exposed for the fraudulent web of cables that it is. It's as quick to get off at Westminster Pier and walk across the bridge as it is to wait for the boat to make a U-turn and dock at the Eye, but I choose to sit it out. I hardly register the pitch and roll that once threw me into alarm or, for that matter, the great wheel itself, its once miraculous-seeming physics. Disembarking, I ignore the waiting ticket holders and stroll up the causeway with sudden sadness for how quickly the brain turns the wondrous into the routine: work, love, friendship, travelling to work by catamaran. Or is it just me?

It's at precisely that moment, that thought – right on the beat of *me* – that a man steps towards me and flashes some sort of ID.

'James Buckby?'

'Yes.' I stop and look at him. Tall, late twenties,

mixed race. Business-casual dress, sensitive complexion, truthful eyes.

‘Detective Constable Ian Parry, Metropolitan Police.’ He presses the ID closer to my face so I can see the distinctive blue banner, the white lettering, and straightaway my heart pulses with a horrible suction, as if it’s constructed of tentacles, not chambers.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘We think there might be, yes. Christopher Roper has been reported missing. He’s a good friend of yours, I gather?’

‘Christopher?’ It takes a moment to connect the name to Kit. ‘What d’you mean, missing?’ I’m starting to tremble now. ‘I mean, I noticed he wasn’t on the boat, but I just thought ...’ I falter. In my mind I see my phone screen, alerts for those missed calls from Melia. Her heart-shaped face, her murmured voice humid in my ear.

We’re different, Jamie. We’re special.

The guy gestures to the river wall to my left, where a male colleague stands apart from the tourists, watching us. Plainclothes, which means CID, a criminal investigation. I read somewhere that police only go in twos if they think there’s a risk to their safety; is that what they judge me to be?

‘Melia gave you my name, I suppose?’

Not commenting, my ambusher concentrates on separating me from the groups gathering and dispersing at the pier’s entrance, owners of a hundred purposes preferable to my own. ‘So, if we can trouble you for a minute, Mr Buckby?’

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‘Of course.’ As I allow myself to be led towards his colleague, it’s the coy, old-style phrasing I get stuck on. *Trouble you for a minute*, like trouble is a passing trifle of an idea, a little Monday-morning fun.

Well, as it transpires, it’s fucking neither.

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Still, at least they're not escorting me back to their base in Woolwich.

DC Parry suggests we go to my place of work instead – 'if that's more convenient?' They'd aimed to catch me at home before I left, he adds, only to get stuck in traffic and turn the car around – in effect, chasing the boat along the Thames. I suppose I should be grateful they didn't board the thing and arrest me in front of my fellow commuters.

Calm down, Jamie. No one said anything about an arrest.

'So I don't need a lawyer for this?'

'No, it's just an informal chat for now,' the second detective says (*for now?*). He is light-skinned, shorter and slighter than his colleague, a little less polished. A few years older, too – mid-thirties, I would judge. Whereas Parry gives every impression of having been born to apprehend suspects, this one is closer to my model of a man. A little less goal-orientated.

Don't be a fuckwit. What are detectives if not

goal-orientated? This ‘informal’ business will be an illusion designed to catch the kind of blurted secrets that are not so easy to come by in the interview room, some killjoy solicitor at hand to crush any mode of questioning too maverick.

‘To be honest, I’d prefer not to go to my work. It’s a small café and there’s nowhere private to talk.’ The idea of squeezing into the staff room, little more than a walk-in locker, with two detectives from the Met, while Regan, my manager and a keen follower of local crime news, hovers outside vibrating with curiosity, is excruciating. ‘Could we just find somewhere quiet near here instead? I’d be really grateful.’ The implication is I’ll be more co-operative and, to my relief, the ploy works.

‘Fair enough, I don’t see why we need disturb your customers,’ the second guy says.

I can’t keep calling him that so I ask him to repeat his name.

‘Andy Merchison.’ He speaks brightly, as if we’re meeting at a party or a sales conference. Though the name sounds Scottish, his accent is one of those smooth, neutral ones that’s impossible to place. ‘How about up there?’ He’s spotted a corner of the upper terrace of the Royal Festival Hall, both secluded and deserted, since the place hasn’t opened yet.

Jesus, they’ve come for you so ridiculously early public places are still shut!

Calm down. It’s just routine.

‘Yes, fine,’ I say.

A friendly nod to a passing security guard and we’re alone, seated at a table and sheltered from the December

wind that, fifty feet away, whistles off the water like a warning. No one can hear us here.

‘I need to text my manager and tell her I’ll be late.’ I produce my phone, tilt the screen away from the light. My eye catches the most recent message: an alert for those voice-mails from Melia. Melia Roper now, but still listed by her maiden name, still Melia Quinn to me.

I remember Clare telling me last night that she’d had missed calls from her too, though no voicemail had been left. Should she call her back, Clare had asked, her reluctance clear.

Leave it, I told her.

I blink, aware of the detectives’ scrutiny as I dither; they’re surely noticing my bandage, changed this morning but already grubby. I select the contact for Regan, who will by now have dealt with the deliveries of milk, sour-dough and pastries and be grinding her first coffee orders. It’s her habit to get in half an hour early, make herself a premium-grade matcha and open up solo. Her flat share sounds like hostel conditions and those thirty minutes before I arrive are the only ones she’ll get all day to spend in a room alone.

Going to be late, sorry. I stare at the screen as if an answer will come at once, something to rescue me, but of course she won’t have time to look at her phone. By eight thirty, the queue is out the door.

‘All done?’ DC Parry asks with an edge, like I’m taking the piss. Clearly he’s less accommodating than his partner and the moment I put the phone down, he gets down to business: ‘So, according to Mrs Roper, her husband failed to

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arrive home on Monday night and you were the last person to see him . . .’

There’s a significant pause where the word *alive* should fall.

I answer politely. ‘You mean on the boat home? To be fair, Melia wasn’t with us to know who that was.’

But this pedantry is water off a duck’s back. ‘Members of the crew witnessed you both disembarking and we’ve also spoken to another passenger who saw you alone together. Mrs Roper has spent the last few days contacting family and friends and is certain no one else has seen him since then.’

‘I’ve had missed calls from her myself,’ I concede. ‘I haven’t had a chance to get back to her.’ I wonder about this other passenger. Obviously not Gretchen, since I’ve just seen her and she made no mention of having been contacted by the police. Steve, perhaps? The last person besides Kit that I remember noticing, he got off at North Greenwich fifteen minutes before us. He’s off work now till next week, but I’m fairly sure he would have phoned or texted me if the police had been in touch.

I remain composed. ‘I suppose you’ve already checked the security video on the boat?’

‘We have indeed. So, your recollection of Monday night . . .?’ Parry prompts.

‘We got the last boat home together, that’s right. A few of us got on at Blackfriars after Christmas drinks at Henry’s on Carter Lane.’

‘The others being?’

‘Gretchen Miles and Steve Callister. We’ve got to know each other on the commute, had drinks a few times. We always sit together.’

The names don’t appear to be new to them, though Merchison jots an extra note I can’t decipher. Both detectives have big A4 pads in front of them, but only he has produced a pen.

‘But it wasn’t that late when we got to St Mary’s – the last boat gets in at eleven thirty. Someone else must have seen Kit after that, surely?’

‘That’s what we’re trying to discover,’ Parry says, frowning. I can tell he’s finding me unusually sanguine about a friend having been reported missing. ‘Did you and Mr Roper pass anyone in the street on your way up from the pier?’

‘Not anyone I particularly remember. We didn’t walk together, actually, so *he* may have.’

His gaze sharpens. ‘You didn’t walk together, even though you live a few streets away from each other?’

‘No. Normally we do, but . . . Come on, you obviously saw from the video that we got into a bit of an a row on the boat? I marched off ahead. I didn’t want to spend another minute with him.’ The statement hangs between us, I can almost hear it spinning around a wood-panelled courtroom – *I didn’t want to spend another minute with him* – and I’m not surprised by the doubtful look they exchange.

‘What was this row about?’ Merchison asks.

I sigh. My throat feels painful and gritty. ‘Nothing much. We were both the worse for wear. But I didn’t want to hang around arguing. I had a very early start in the morning, a

train to catch from King's Cross, and, like I say, I assumed he followed.'

'Are you and Mr Roper in the habit of arguing?' Parry says. Unlike his colleague, who shifts constantly in his seat, he has the sharp-eyed stillness of an owl.

'No, not at all. We're mates. We were drunk, that's all.' Without thinking, I bring my bandaged hand to my face and of course he makes the association I'd prefer he didn't.

'Injure yourself in this fight with your mate, did you?'

'No. This is a burn from the coffee machine at work. Speaking of which, is there any chance we can get some coffee?' My first, a double espresso at home, has worn off. Usually by this time I'd be at work and firing up my second or, if I'm lucky, being handed one on arrival by Regan. 'Look, there must be security cameras between the pier and the high street, so why don't you check them and you'll see it was exactly as I'm telling you?'

I happen to know that the route back to Prospect Square took me past at least one other CCTV camera. 'Maybe ask at the bar on Royal Way? Mariners, it's called, on the corner of Artillery Passage, less than two minutes from where the boat docks. We often go there after getting off the late boat, so maybe he went on his own this time.' I pause, convincing myself. 'Yeah, I bet he stopped for a drink there, met someone and, you know, continued his evening.'

Merchison's pen scratches the paper throughout this speech and when he raises his gaze I see a flare of interest in his eyes. 'Are you saying you think he spent the night with someone other than his wife?'

‘Maybe. If he didn’t go home, then I’d say it’s a possibility.’

‘Is several nights a possibility? The whole Christmas break?’

Both detectives’ scepticism is plain to see. I shrug. ‘Look, I’m not saying he’s eloped bigamously, just that he might have carried on partying and got caught up in something and now he’s sleeping it off. I mean, he must have been *somewhere* these last few days, mustn’t he? He’s not some loner, he’s a very social animal.’

Once, in the summer a few weeks before the wedding, Kit and I stayed out all night. It was a Friday and we’d got off the boat at North Greenwich, found a club near the O2 that stayed open till dawn. I remember there was a charity walk starting at midnight and it was surreal to watch thousands of women in leggings swarm by all bright-eyed, before limping back six hours later in a miasma of exhaustion. Melia, staying with a girlfriend across town, was not around to disapprove, but Clare was spitting blood when I finally skulked home at 8 a.m. ‘He’s young, Jamie, he can take it physically, but you might have a stroke!’ And for the rest of the day my inbox pinged with links to articles about middle-aged men falling down dead after binge-drinking.

I don’t say any of this to the police. Instead, I look from one detective to the other, spreading my integrity evenly between them. ‘Seriously, any minute now, he’s going to come strolling back in, probably not even sorry he wasted your time. So I should probably go to work now – my colleague will be struggling on her own. Plus it’s not the kind of job where you get paid if you’re not there, you know?’

There’s a short, sweet moment when I think I’ve swayed

it and they're going to say, Fine, off you go, our apologies for the overreaction. But they don't. Maybe they're remembering Melia's face, distraught at the thought of her new husband injured or abducted or worse. She's so appealing, even in red-eyed, nose-running distress; so persuasive.

She's obviously persuaded you, Jamie, Clare said, not long ago.

'If you don't mind filling in a few more gaps for us,' Merchison says. 'Would it help if we had a word on the phone with your manager?'

'Or perhaps it's best we head to the station, after all,' Parry says. He flicks Merchison a dismayed look and I know I'm right about them bending the rules talking to me unofficially like this. It's probably not even legal. But the last thing I want is for my words to be recorded and run through some lie-detection system (is that even a thing?). Or for a medical examination to expose the ugly bruises on my collarbone, safely hidden by the high neck of my sweatshirt, evidence of the true viciousness of that grapple with Kit. 'No, please.' I huddle inside my jacket, fold my fingers inside the cuffs for warmth. 'Whatever you need. I just need to keep work informed.'

'Thank you, James,' Merchison says, 'we appreciate your co-operation.'

'Jamie. No one calls me James.'

And no one calls Kit Christopher. The police's use of our full names only emphasizes the fact that they don't know anything about us, about this.

'Jamie. So how about we make this easy and start at the

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beginning. You tell us everything there is to know about Mr Roper.'

Sweet Jesus. They of all people must know that 'everything there is to know' is *never* as simple as it sounds. As a seagull squawks overhead, I nod my consent.

'How long have you known each other?'

'Almost a year,' I say. 'We met at the end of January.'

'January this year?' They both look up, surprised. 'Not that long, then.'

'No.' And it's true, it's no time at all.

On the other hand, it feels like the longest year of my life.

January 2019

Before I start, I should like to point out that it wasn't me who got us tangled up with the Ropers, but Clare. The woman who is now their fiercest critic was also their discoverer and erstwhile champion. For a while there, she thought they were the bee's knees – both of them.

Melia came first. Whatever complications arose later, there is one thing I have no doubt about: the collision of our two worlds was pure chance. Of all the estate agents in all the towns in all the world, she walks into Clare's.

Clare mentioned her on one of her first days back at work in January. 'I had lunch with that new girl who started last month. Melia, she's called. It turns out she lives near here.'

'Girl?'

'Well, she's in her late twenties. Possibly thirty. I honestly don't know.'

Hurling towards fifty as we were, we found it hard to judge younger adults' ages. They all looked like sixth formers to us.

‘Anyway, she’s the new junior Richard hired. To work with the re-lo consultants? She’s fitting in really well, he’s getting fantastic feedback about her.’

The relocation from overseas of corporate high flyers and their families was a healthy slice of the lettings business and I knew from Clare’s stories that some clients could be hard to please. ‘So she’s gorgeous, I take it?’

‘That sort of remark gets reported to HR, these days.’ Clare’s mouth curled. One of our shared convictions was a loathing of extreme political correctness. ‘If you ever hear me use the word “woke”, shoot me,’ she liked to say, and I’d reply, ‘What, even in the context of, “My devoted partner woke me up with a cup of tea and a bacon sandwich”?’ (Oh, the banter.)

‘Very gorgeous, yes,’ she added. ‘Dark hair in a bob, lovely eyes, a kind of tawny colour. Her skin is off-the-scale elastic.’

I chuckled. ‘How can you possibly know that? What scale measures skin elasticity, anyway?’

‘The human eye, Jamie, the human eye.’ Clare plucked the back of her hand with an expression of fascinated disgust. ‘All I know is it doesn’t pleat like *this*, so it must have plenty of natural elastin. Or is it collagen?’ She was, lately, a proud discussor of menopausal symptoms, referring openly to decreasing oestrogen levels and the shutting down of wombs. I’d learned not to show how revolted I was by such talk. In any case, Clare still looked all right to me. She was tall and slim (-ish, but I was hardly rocking a six-pack myself) with blonde hair swept from her face for work but

worn fringed and punky off-duty, kind of Debbie Harry circa ‘Heart of Glass’. A well-raised girl from Edinburgh, she’d been the beneficiary of an excellent state education, followed by university in London, where she’d stayed on account of a boyfriend, who exited the scene soon after. By the time, in her late thirties, she’d met yours truly at a Christmas party, her career in property sales had led naturally and lucratively to the establishment of her business with Richard. (It had helped to be free of any derailment wrought by motherhood, which by the way was a question of personal choice, not any biological malfunction or enforced preference by her current mate.)

‘So what did you and Melia the Millennial talk about, besides work?’

‘Loads of stuff. Life, family, our relationships. Oh, I told her about the career coaching and she thinks it’s an inspired gift.’

Because she has no idea what it signals, I thought. The clearly very costly Christmas present to me of a course of sessions with some guru or other marked the end of Clare’s tolerance of my non-career. While she didn’t deny that my prospects were threatened by ageism – how many of her own hires were over thirty, let alone late forties? – the gift had come just weeks after a renewed campaign for me to set myself up as a freelancer. ‘*I am* a freelancer,’ I’d told her. ‘A freelance café assistant.’

‘Eight one-on-one consultations, wow,’ I said, on receipt of the gift voucher. I would strongly have preferred a new shirt. “Dream job. Real results”. That’s my New Year’s

resolution taken care of, then. In 2019, I will finally find a way to work with white tigers.'

Clare smiled. 'You joke, but maybe you'll surprise yourself with what you decide to do next.'

Maybe I would. 'What about you? Any resolutions?'

'Actually, I do have one,' she said. 'I've decided I'm going to embrace the new. I read that's the key to ageing successfully.'

'I think all ageing is unsuccessful, ultimately,' I said, grinning. 'New what, exactly?'

'New everything. New hobbies, new ideas, new friends.' She grew emphatic as she searched for the right phrase and I saw she was very determined about this: 'I'm open to submissions.'

Enter Melia, and, a step or two behind her, Kit, with their winning submission of youth, fun, freedom. Everything Clare feared she was losing.

I suppose what I'm trying to say is this whole thing began with exactly the midlife crisis you might imagine – just not mine.

*

They came to dinner on the third Saturday of January. I was in the kitchen when they arrived and Clare ushered them straight off for a house tour, so my first impression was of two heads of glossy dark hair yet to lose its pigmentation in a single strand, of alien and seductive fragrances that lingered in their wake. As I opened the wine, I could hear their voices in the stairwell saying the things people

always say when exploring our four-storey Georgian townhouse:

‘Oh my God, this is, like, my dream house.’ (Her.)

‘Seriously, isn’t it completely beautiful?’ (Her.)

‘It’s fucking amazing.’ (Him.)

‘Look at this stone staircase. I feel almost *depressed*, it’s so grown-up.’ (Her.)

And Clare’s delighted laughter, at odds with her murmured modesty.

As I say, we were accustomed to the house being an object of envy, even among our peers. Prospect Square, a five-minute walk from the Thames, is an intact Georgian conservation area sometimes used in the filming of period dramas and number 15 still has many of its original glories: hand-cast ceiling roses, internal shutters, that kind of thing. From the rear window of our bedroom, which occupied the entire top floor, we had a view of the river; out front there was a private garden square. We were fortunate by anyone’s standards and every so often the realization would take possession of me: *I’ve got it made here. I’m #Blessed.*

Maybe this gushing Melia girl was taking pictures right now for her Instagram feed, so busy cropping, filtering, hashtagging, she didn’t notice she was leaning a little too far over the curved banisters. A gruesome image sprang to mind of a young woman hurtling through the tubular void and landing splat on the flagstones of the hallway, hair fanned around her head, absorbing the blood and turning sticky.

What the . . . ? I shook my head clear.

When the party came back down and settled in the sitting

room, I distributed large glasses of Burgundy. Helpfully, the other couple had chosen to sit opposite us on the smaller of the two sofas, a pale high-backed piece that showcased their strikingly twinlike good looks. Both were slightly built, she a beautiful tomboy dressed in an odd but winning combination of velvet shorts, glossy tights and a glittery top the colour of blue hydrangeas, he girlishly handsome in black jeans and a shirt in a paler blue. On closer inspection, of course, they weren't so similar. She was finer-boned, a proper beauty with large eyes the amber of Pears soap, whereas he had flaws: unusually wide-set eyes, asymmetrical eyebrows, a slightly beaky nose.

'This is a relief,' Melia said, gripping the wineglass in two hands as if it might at any moment be confiscated. Her nails were yolk-yellow. 'Everyone else seems to be doing Dry January.'

'We do it every other year,' Clare said, which made us sound not only dull but dull on an advance-notice basis.

'Wait, so you already know next January is going to be completely miserable?' said Kit. He was lithe with animation, clenching and twitching in his seat. 'Why not leave it to the last minute to decide? Give yourselves the gift of hope?'

'And what if something awful happens just before, like you're splitting up and you really need a drink?' Melia spoke with a blurting charm, immediately apologizing: 'I can't believe I said that! Of course you're not going to split up.'

'If we do, then plans for sobriety will need to be reviewed on an individual basis,' Clare reassured her, with mock formality.

‘You’ve never been tempted to go dry, then?’ I asked Kit and he gave a loose, roguish smile.

‘Mate, I’ll quit when I’m dead.’

Cliché though it was, we were all excitable enough to splutter at this and at the playful smack Melia landed on the back of his head. They touched and gasped and gestured frequently, I noticed, reinforcing each other’s presence.

‘That’s a refreshing attitude for your gen,’ Clare said to Kit. She was already very taken with him, I could tell. ‘We’ve been led to believe you prefer soya oat flat whites to the strong stuff.’

‘Soya *or* oat,’ I corrected her. ‘It’s one or the other.’

‘Jamie works in a café,’ she explained.

‘Really?’ Kit said. ‘Where? Here in St Mary’s?’

‘No, Waterloo. It’s called the Comfort Zone, which is appropriate since it challenges about as much as it pays.’

‘It’s only temporary,’ Clare said, loyally, ‘and it actually sounds exhausting.’

‘Well, physically, I suppose,’ I said, and as Melia’s gaze rested on me I wondered what she saw. In the flatteringly soft lamplight of our living room, a still-attractive man, I hoped. Tall, well-built, hair enduringly thick, jawline reasonably sharp. At forty-eight, I wasn’t so far off my prime, was I?

‘I know what those jobs are like,’ Kit said. ‘We’ve both done our share of bar work, haven’t we, Me? That’s what you do when you’re an actor.’ His tone became droll. ‘You never actually act.’

‘I thought Clare said you worked in insurance?’ It had

struck me as a staid career choice for a millennial when she'd briefed me; even more so now I'd met him.

'I do. De Warr Insurance. I've got debts to pay off before I can do anything interesting. But for a while there, I was, you know, deluding myself I might be the next big thing.' He shrugged the easy shrug of someone to whom such acceptance had not come easy at all.

'That's where we met,' Melia explained. 'Drama school.'

So they were both failed actors: Clare hadn't told me that. Though I hardly knew them, the detail made sense of them, of their physicality, their confidence, their need to be noticed, if not admired.

'How much professional acting work did you do?' Clare asked.

'Melia was in a rep for a season,' Kit said. 'I did a whole load of unpaid stuff, but I gave up after a few years.'

Melia sighed. 'I stuck it out for a bit longer, but it was the same story every time. You'd be down to the last two and it would go to the girl with the father in the business.'

'Showbiz does seem like it runs purely on nepotism,' Clare said.

'It's becoming one of those professions where only the rich can do it,' Kit said. 'They're living rent-free in their parents' house in Hampstead, while you're running up massive debts just to share a stinking mattress in Catford. You can't compete.'

There was more than a trace of resentment in this remark. Though they'd brought beautiful flowers and an expensive bottle of wine, a theme of financial hardship was already

established and, by the time we'd finished the main course – I cooked beef on the teppanyaki grill – and Clare was serving her cherry and pistachio trifle, had found full voice.

'I would literally give *blood* to live on this square,' Melia said.

'People "literally" give blood all the time,' I told her, grinning. 'It's called paid donation. But I think you only get a hundred quid, not a house.'

'Okay, but you know what I mean. I would give an organ or something.' She'd closed her eyes as she said this, as if she were making a wish before blowing out her birthday candles. Her eyelids were glittery bronze, the lashes extended in some mysterious way. Under the table, restless legs crossed and uncrossed constantly. She was, I acknowledged, insanely cute.

'Well, you're in the right job if you do choose to buy around here,' I said.

Eyes open once more, she licked the trifle spoon in front of her face as she studied me. 'It's not a question of *choice*. We've got no chance. Even one-bedders are pushing half a million, at least they are in the buildings *we* would want to live in.'

She and Kit glanced about them once again, not asking what they wanted to know: how much we'd paid for our place. How much it was worth was public knowledge since a similar house on the square was currently on the market for £2.3 million. In Greenwich or Camberwell, it would be a million more; in Kensington, five million more. It was all relative, but I'd lived long enough to know that

people compared up, not down – and not only in terms of property.

‘Luckily, we’re ancient enough to have bought when St Mary’s was a no-go area without a direct train into town,’ Clare said, her standard line, though neither of us had in fact been involved in the transaction. The property had been acquired by her parents when they’d lived in London briefly in the eighties and theirs remained the names on the deeds. Clare, an only child, would be the sole beneficiary of their estate when the time came. My decade of contributing to the bills was easily offset by the absence of rent; even if I wanted them to – and I didn’t – no lawyer was going to argue that the house was anything but an Armstrong treasure.

‘Believe it or not, you used to be able to get a mortgage for a place like this on just one person’s salary,’ Clare added, as if imparting word of a juicy scandal. ‘The average price of a house in London in 1986 was fifty-five thousand.’

‘Stop!’ Kit groaned, alcohol lending a camp extravagance to his manner. ‘To be told that if we’d just been born a few years earlier, we could have had what we wanted without lifting a finger.’

‘Well, not quite,’ Clare said, with a note of correction.

‘You’d still have to have had a nose for up-and-coming areas,’ Melia agreed, her professional instincts allowing a more nuanced envy than Kit’s. ‘*And* work incredibly hard to save for the deposit.’

He scoffed at this. There was an ingredient to his manner I couldn’t quite identify. Something childish, a propensity to

sulk, perhaps. ‘Yeah, but compare that with now. We could work 24/7 and still never come close. We couldn’t even buy our rental on Tiding Street.’

Tiding Street was a road of narrow terraces on the other side of the high street from us, not long transformed from near slums to desirable starter flats unaffordable to starter people.

‘Nice street. How long have you lived there?’ I asked.

‘Six months. We were over in Blackheath before, so we’re still getting to know St Mary’s.’

‘What do you think of us so far?’

He smirked. ‘I think you’re great – except for all the mums and babies.’

‘Kit!’ Melia protested. ‘You can’t say that!’

‘What? It’s true. They charge down the high street with their buggies, expecting you to jump out the way. I mean, for fuck’s sake, they’d rather you got hit by a bus than they should have to slow down for two seconds.’

‘I think new parents don’t always notice. They’re in a different mental zone from us,’ Clare said, amused.

‘They’re mental all right.’

There was that moment of collective elation when a group understands it agrees on something fundamental. As child-free fortysomethings, Clare and I were getting rarer by the year, marooned in a neighbourhood that had grown ever more family-friendly now the inner zones were unaffordable for most. Though Kit and Melia were still young and, presumably, fertile and might very well change their minds, they were for now at least in our camp.

‘The only real downside is the commute,’ Kit said. ‘The overland is a nightmare, isn’t it? I’m always late for work and that’s if I can squeeze on in the first place.’

Clare and I exchanged a look.

‘Those rush-hour trains are more than twice over capacity,’ I said. ‘Well over legal limits. I’ve complained repeatedly.’

They listened nonplussed as I detailed the complaints process. They hadn’t taken me for a consumer rights activist.

‘I’m quite claustrophobic,’ I explained, ‘so public transport is the bane of my life.’

‘He had to cut out the Tube completely,’ Clare said in a confirming tone. ‘He doesn’t like tunnels.’

‘I don’t like being *stuck* in them.’ I didn’t say that I found the overland passenger experience only minimally less panic-inducing. The trains had sealed windows and were supposedly climate-controlled, but in reality were overheated, commuters crushed against one another like lovers. London would soon need those Tokyo-style paddles to wedge people in.

‘He had to have CBT. Cognitive behavioural therapy,’ she spelled out, but she needn’t have: this age group knew its therapies better than ours.

‘What gets me,’ Kit said, ‘is there’s always some twat who’s jumped on the tracks or whatever. There was one the other day hanging off the bridge. Couldn’t make his mind up. I mean, if I wanted to end it all, I’d fuck off and do it privately, I wouldn’t hold up an entire rail network. That smacks of egomania if you ask me, not lack of self-esteem.’

This person shouldn't be topping himself, he should be auditioning for *Britain's Got Talent!*'

So much for being more mental health literate! 'Your compassion for society's most vulnerable is a beautiful thing,' Clare joked over Kit's shouts of laughter at his own comments. So he was a controversialist, I thought. A provocateur – in short, a man after my own heart.

'I've been thinking about switching to the river bus when my season ticket runs out,' I told him. 'They've just extended the route to St Mary's and it doesn't take much longer to get into town.'

'I heard it's pretty expensive,' he said.

Melia took out her phone to google. 'There's an introductory discount for annual tickets from St Mary's bought before the end of January. What d'you say, boys?'

'A year's quite a commitment,' Clare said.

Kit took the phone from Melia and peered at the timetable. 'What time do you start work?' he asked me.

'Quarter past eight. Monday to Friday. Not so different from you corporate drones, eh.'

'The seven twenty looks like the one then. Gets into Waterloo at eight-oh-five. You're on my way, I could swing by here at ten past.'

I played along. 'Five past, to be on the safe side.'

'The safe side! You're showing your age there, Jamie.'

Clare shrieked with delight. 'You tell him, Kit – he's turning into such an old codger!'

Not the most flattering remark – the sweet little protest Melia made didn't pass me by – but I couldn't begrudge Clare

her high spirits. She was really sparking off this pair. Normally by now she'd be winding down, co-operating fully with guests' murmurings about calling an Uber, but tonight she begged them to stay, insisting on sharing her love of 1980s power ballads, vintage videos of which were ceremoniously aired.

'You've never heard "Alone" by Heart?' She pressed her burning cheek to mine as the lyrics began and I felt the muscles in her face working as she sang. I mouthed along gamely, while our guests mocked the band's haircuts, speaking of the era as if it were Elizabethan. They were both pie-eyed now and elegantly swaying. Costumed differently, they could have been in Warhol's Factory, adult children wafting into shot behind a dancing Edie Sedgwick.

'Play us something *you* like!' Clare urged them, when her own favourites had run out.

Melia overruled Kit to choose a lullaby by some R&B star, which finally defeated our second wind and at last, just after two, they stood to leave.

'So great to finally meet you,' she told me, at the door, as if she'd known of me for years, not weeks.

'Likewise. Delighted to have had the opportunity to see your famously elastic skin close-up.'

'Oh!' She giggled. 'Clare *said* you were funny.' Amid farewell hugs and kisses on hot cheeks, her mouth caught the corner of mine.

'They're great, aren't they?' Clare said, upstairs. 'I didn't mean it about the old codger.'

'Oh, I don't care,' I said, thinking that I would only care if I *was* one. Even so, she was kissing me in apology, and I

THE OTHER PASSENGER

wasn't going to argue with that. These days, sex was neither frequent nor frantic and to be taken in whatever spirit it was offered.

But midway, a terrible, unforgivable thought ignited before I could stop it and I confess I almost burned my eyeballs on the flame before blowing it out:

Shame it's you and not her . . .