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I.

Iris

I'm happy.

I am.

I know it's possibly not very convincing if I have to announce that fact rather than it be apparent in my smile, my laugh, my sunny demeanour, but I've always had a bit of a resting bitch face, so you'll just have to trust me on it.

I have it all, on paper. Almost. Friends (who I increasingly see less frequently as their lives are consumed by mumhood. That's not me being sneery by the way, that's me being envious), a good (but not exactly challenging) job, my own flat (well, owned by me and HSBC but mainly full of my lodger, Carol). All my own teeth. That last one's a joke. I mean, I do have all my own teeth but it's something my dad always used to say when he was teasing my mum about what a good catch he was. I never really got it, but I used to laugh. My dad told terrible jokes, but he told them so hopefully it was impossible not to give him the response he was looking for.

It's just that I thought there would be more. Four years ago I also had a husband, a house. We were trying for a baby. Really trying, like it was going out of fashion. With an app and a thermometer in place of lust and lingerie. With phone calls in the middle of the day that said

‘We need to do it now. Can you meet me at work, we can nip into the loos for a quickie.’ It hadn’t totally taken over our lives, though. At least, I didn’t think so then. It felt as if we still had time, we just wanted to complete our little family. Although I was starting to get more nervous with every month that passed. I’d even brought up IVF. Casually, as if it was just a conversation topic and not an actual possibility in our lives. I threw it in between asking what he fancied for dinner and what he felt like watching on TV that night. *Oh, I was talking to my mum and her friend’s daughter had IVF and it worked second time. Maybe we should think about it?* And Tom hadn’t baulked. He hadn’t rushed straight in saying *Over my dead body* or *Are you out of your fucking mind?* which I’d taken as a positive sign. We were in it together. That’s how I saw it, anyway. Maybe Tom thought differently. Maybe he thought all the spontaneity had gone and he just wanted sex to be sex again, not an appointment in the calendar whether you felt like it or not. He never said. It turned out there was a lot he didn’t say.

Sometimes, these days, I feel as if I’m going backwards. Losing accomplishments rather than gaining them. So I try to count my blessings. Write them in the ridiculous ‘Gratitude Journal’ Daisy gave me, every night. They’re always the same: Health, Mum, friends, job, flat, teeth. Imagine if that had been all Samuel Pepys had to say, I don’t think we’d still be poring over his diaries four hundred years later. It’s not that I’m complaining. I just sometimes think there should be more to show for forty-four years on this planet, that’s all.

Daisy also gave me some healing crystals, some cleansing sage and a copy of *Owning Your Own Pain* by some wiry old yogic guru, when Tom left. Daisy is – to be brutally honest – batshit crazy, but she’s my only sister and I love her. In increasingly small doses.

I snuggle back under the covers, trying for a Saturday morning lie-in. My weekends are always a masterclass in avoidance. Not of doing anything, but of bumping into Carol the lodger. One of the other downsides of finding myself suddenly single at forty was the need to share my home with a stranger to make ends meet. Tom and I sold our little two-up two-down terrace for way more than we paid for it, due to the area we lived in surprising us all by gentrifying around us. Where there had been an old key and shoe repair shop was now a GAIL’s. Itsu had moved into the run-down greasy spoon. The life and soul had gone out of the place and in its stead the prices had gone up. We still had a sizeable mortgage to pay off, but I ploughed my share of the profit into buying the most expensive property I could afford, in an OK part of Kingston that had still not quite up-and-come, but was threatening to, in the hope that it would be an investment for the future. An area randomly chosen because there was an opening in a branch of Marlborough Kitchens there that I could apply for a transfer to. And because I wanted to get as far away from Tom and our history as I possibly could. Don’t get me wrong, it’s still only a bog standard two-bedroom. Tiny. But it’s in a smart new build with an easy walk into the centre of the town. It should earn me some kind of

decent return when I decide where I really want to put down roots. I don't want to end up living out my days in a place chosen only by circumstances. I have no ties here beyond the financial. But then I don't really have any ties anywhere. Not any more.

I knew the mortgage would be a stretch on my own, but I resisted the idea of a lodger for as long as I could, hoping my life would suddenly take a turn for the better. After a year or so I knew I was defeated. I'd spent any savings I had left just on getting by. I had two alternatives: sell my flat and buy something smaller in a much worse neighbourhood, or rent out my spare room. I was too old for any of my friends to be unsettled enough to need to share a flat. They all had lives, families, mortgages of their own. So I advertised. I lucked out first time. Quiet, unassuming, only-in-London-from-Sunday-to-Thursday Joanne, who scarcely left her room and then, when the pandemic started, worked from her family home in Manchester and still paid the rent, until she realised she never needed to return to the office and could save herself a fortune. Carol is her replacement. From the sublime to the ridiculous.

So now I fill up my social calendar just to get out of the house – brunch with Cally, a long walk with Fay, drinks in the evening with whichever thinks they can stay awake later than nine that night. They both have babies, Fay's Kieran is almost one and Cally's Frankie just eight months. Spur-of-the-moment plans have long gone. Now their lives are one long negotiation with their partners about whose turn it is to do childcare while the other goes out

and pretends they wouldn't rather be at home. Our thirties were all about partying. So far, our forties seem to be mainly scheduling-based. Sometimes I feel like the oldest teenager in town next to my friends, but it's not through choice. My life just hasn't quite turned out like I planned, like it was supposed to. They have moved on, checking off the grown-up milestones, while I've stagnated. I'm stuck in quicksand. But most of the time that's fine. I'm luckier than many. My problems are firmly first world. No one has ever died because their friend cancelled their plans to see *The Book of Mormon* three times when their baby wasn't sleeping. Like I said, I'm not pissed off, I'm jealous. I would love to have a baby who kept me awake all night. I wouldn't care if I never slept again.

I give up trying to go back to sleep and get my phone and a coffee from the kitchen instead, checking first that the flat is quiet. I turn up the thermostat on the way back to bed. Fay always tells me that one way in which she envies my life is that I am mistress of my own heating system. No passive aggressive battle over the controls for me. They are firmly my domain. Fay is always cold. Always. It started as a running joke that she would turn up the radiators whenever her husband Steve left the room, and he would turn them back down whenever he came back in, but now it seems to be a metaphor for everything that is wrong in their relationship. Fay and Steve have been struggling since little Kieran was born eleven months ago. Steve is – and I don't say this lightly – a complete and utter cock. I didn't like him much before they got married, to be fair. He's one of those eternal

lads. Responsibility averse, Cally calls it. *Her* partner, Jim, on the other hand, is pretty much perfect. Kind, funny, a fabulous dad. He can't stand Steve, literally can't bear to be in the same room as him, so nights out with the five of us are out of the question. Quite often, though, me, Fay and Kieran will go round to Cally and Jim's for the evening and Jim will cook for us all and entertain the kids, and Cally has to listen to me and Fay ramble on about how we'd trample over her cold dead body in a heartbeat to snap him up if she keeled over prematurely. I don't think either of us mean it, by the way. At least I don't, Fay is anybody's guess. But I do adore him.

I scroll through Twitter reading odd bits of news, check out Instagram where I never post anything, I just like to lurk judgementally. I love this time of the morning. No phone calls, no texts, the world slowly waking up. I can hear birds outside where usually there's only traffic. The day feels full of potential. Hopeful. Before life steamrollers in and crushes all our dreams. I check my emails, something I usually avoid at the weekends in case I see an overlooked message concerning work and that ends up hijacking my attention. I like my job, but I like the two days a week when I don't have to think about it more. I deliberately chose a clock-on/clock-off career, one with no homework or extra-curricular reading, for that very reason. I wanted to make sure I had time to have a life.

I spot an email message from Fay. It's unusual for her to email. We have a WhatsApp group – she, Cally and me – and that tends to be our preferred means of interaction. If two of us are conspiring against the other

one – to decide a birthday present, say, or express a secret concern about Steve’s latest behaviour – we’ll text or, more likely, phone. Emails are for work or things that are never good news like gas bills. This one though is just titled *OK, there’s no good way to show you this, but isn’t this HER?*

There’s no message, just a link. I hesitate for a second, wondering if Fay has been hacked and I’m about to unleash a fatal virus on my computer. Not for the first time. I have a complete inability to ignore even the most potentially threatening-looking attachments ‘just in case’. The message could be headed ‘This is a virus’ and I’d still feel compelled to look. Even so I force myself to text her – ‘*did you just email me?*’ She replies immediately: *Yes! Open it! I’m here if you need to chat.* I know she’ll be giving Kieran his breakfast, choo-choo training spoonfuls of cereal into his open mouth while Steve has a lie-in. The link is to a YouTube video entitled ‘PJ Day’. It’s a family: mother, father and two identical little girls all dressed in matching leopard print pyjamas performing a choreographed dance to ‘Tiger Feet’ in a verdant child-friendly garden. It’s slickly edited, with wacky shots of swinging backsides and OTT expressions – all wide eyes, raised brows and open mouths. There’s a thick veil of smugness, of ‘aren’t we cute?’ slathered over the whole thing.

It’s nauseating.

And yes. It’s her.

It’s Maddy.

The woman who ruined my life.

2.

I watch it eighty-seven more times. A mere blip in the apparent five hundred thousand views it's already had. It's definitely Maddy, but I don't recognise the man. He's tall, dark and not particularly handsome in my humble opinion. What he isn't is my ex-husband.

I've spent the past four years imagining Tom and Maddy in their new, perfect, post-me world, but it seems that maybe I've got it all wrong. We cut ties fairly dramatically once he told me about her, communicating only about the sale of our house – our home – and the division of the spoils. I had been tempted to refuse to move out, or to go out of my way to spook any potential buyers, but after a while I thought, *what's the point?* Once I realised my marriage was definitely over, I needed to move on. Or try to, at least. So it all happened very quickly, very smoothly. Ten years of my life swept away in a couple of months and a handful of solicitors' letters.

I scroll through the comments underneath the video. Over six hundred of them.

Your family are so adorable!!!

I just love you all!!!

You brighten my day!!!!

And on. And on and on. It's like exclamation marks were going cheap and they all decided to bulk-buy.

WTF??? I send Fay.

I examine the page again. The channel is called 'Fun with the Fulfords' and has over a hundred thousand subscribers. There's a link to a TikTok account and another to Instagram with the same name, which boasts a staggering six hundred and eighty-three thousand followers. There are reams of videos. Scores of them. The YouTube channel has been open since 2020 and Insta the same. TikTok seems to have been added later. I start to watch them, jumping back and forth in time with no apparent logic. Singing, dancing, Maddy addressing the camera teary-eyed about a Mother's Day card, painting, baking, family life ad nauseam. In the early days Maddy and The Man wave the two babies in the air like a pair of foam hands at a football match. These are definitely Maddy's children. This is definitely her family.

There is definitely no sign of Tom.

My phone pings and I see that Fay has sent me a vomiting emoji. It makes me laugh, but nothing can distract me from my viewing for long. I decide to take a more systematic approach and trawl back until I find the very first video. The babies are wearing matching sunflower hats. They're tiny, a couple of months old maybe. Maddy introduces herself and her husband, Lee, both dressed in bright yellow sweatshirts and bright white smiles. Their twins, Ruby and Rose. It's amateurish, none of the polish of the more recent efforts, but they sing an idiotic song swaying the babies back and forth like they're blowing in the wind. There's a lot of self-conscious laughing and Lee looks as if he wants to murder someone, his

grin pasted to his face like clown make-up. This is definitely Maddy's rodeo. 'Follow our journey with these two little munchkins,' she trills. 'Subscribe today or join us on Instagram!' She points downwards and the account name pops up on the screen. But all I can fixate on is the date.

Tom told me it was over between us on 5th February 2019. I remember the date without trying because it was my fortieth birthday. The middle of my birthday dinner, to be precise. Between the hamachi starter and the black cod main. I had organised it. We never really did birthdays. I mean, we bought each other nice presents and made a fuss, but we didn't tend to go out specially. Not for years, anyway, preferring the sofa and Netflix and maybe cake if we were pushing the boat out. But everyone kept asking me what I was doing for my 'big one' and I'd got fed up of making excuses. Fay and Cally were threatening to kidnap me and make me go clubbing if I didn't mark it in some special way. And besides, I felt as if something was wrong between Tom and me. Something was slipping away. A night out with no talk of babies and ovulation and which position might give us the best chance of success would do us the world of good. Help us to reconnect as people, partners, lovers, rather than two would-be parents who had made trying to get pregnant their full-time occupation. So, I'd booked a table and surprised him with it, first checking his schedule that he'd pinned to the fridge with a magnet. He was working away four or five nights a week at that point, installing a new computer system in an office block in

Birmingham. Or, at least, I'd thought he was. *I can't do this any more* he'd said, his hand on top of mine, pinning it to the table. *I love you, but I can't.* My first reaction had been to hope the people at the next table couldn't hear, that there wasn't going to be a scene. And then the full force of what he'd said had crashed down on me, leaving me gasping for breath. *Is there someone else?* I'd asked. It was such a cliché but I had to know. *No. Of course not. It's us. It's me. I just . . . I don't want this any more.* And a couple of days later, while I cried and begged him not to give up on us, I'd got him to admit it. He'd met a woman through work. Nothing had happened but he wanted to be free to pursue it. I knew he was lying. People need an impetus to break up even the most basically functioning marriage, a cast-iron guarantee of something else on the horizon. Something free of baggage and disappointment and resentments. A blank slate they can project a new, improved version of themselves on to. They don't leave to pursue something; they leave because that pursuit has already been successful.

By – I check the date on this, the first clip, again – May 2020 Maddy was married to someone else with twin baby girls. The babies look to be at least two months old. Still tiny, but definitely not newborn. So she must have been pregnant by August of the year before. September at the latest.

She broke up my marriage, ruined my life, for a relationship that was over six months later? Less?

I push my laptop away. I feel sick.

I know, of course, that the blame doesn't all lie with

Maddy. Less than fifty per cent, if I'm being honest, because she wasn't the one who had promised to love and to cherish me, to forsake all others and stick with me no matter what. She wasn't the one who lied to me for months. Who listened to me cry when yet another treacherous period started, and told me it would all be OK. That we would try again. That we had years to make it happen. But she's still the woman who decided hooking up with a married man was acceptable. She didn't know me, but she knew what she was doing to me.

If it hadn't been for her, me and Tom would have worked things out. Got over the issues that I didn't even know we were having until it was too late. If it hadn't been for her, he would have stayed.

I have to resist the urge to call Tom. *It wasn't even serious? You didn't even have the decency to make a go of it?* There's no point. No good could come from it. He's almost certainly changed his number anyway. In fact, I know he has. In the early days I used to phone him sometimes – usually when I'd had a couple of drinks – and ask him why, when, how. I wanted details. Hard facts. I'd moved out to stay with Cally and Jim while I tried to accept what was happening, to plan what I would do next. The house was already on the market – Tom must have called an estate agent the minute he'd broken the news to me, before, even, it occurred to me. To be fair to him, he had offered to be the one to leave, but I couldn't bear to watch a stream of wide-eyed young couples planning their futures in the living room I'd painted myself. At first he used to indulge me, although without ever really

answering any of my questions. After a while I think he just got bored. He wanted to immerse himself in his shiny new life without the inconvenience of a tearful ex-wife reminding him it was built on ruins. No one wants to think they're living on landfill. I rang him one night and the number was dead. Just like that. His office told me he'd moved on and, no, they couldn't divulge where. I haven't spoken to him since. I tried his old family home too. I'd always got on with my in-laws. They were good people but, like all devoted parents, they were protective of their son. 'He doesn't want to speak to you,' his mum said, sadly. 'After everything . . .'

'He cheated on me,' I shouted. I blush thinking about it now. 'He's shagging some other woman.'

His mum had cleared her throat. 'I'm sorry, Iris, but I think it's better if you don't call again.'

And so I had turned my sights to Maddy.

Now I call Fay, knowing I won't be able to get her full attention but needing someone to just acknowledge that what I've just watched is real.

'I thought I should show you before you saw it somewhere else. Just . . . you know. It definitely is her, isn't it?' she says without even bothering with hello.

'Definitely. I don't get it.'

'She's an influencer. Kieran, don't . . .' I can almost see her flap her fingers in quote marks as she says the word influencer. We are not fans of the species.

'I know. I mean, I guess so. But where's Tom?'

'No idea. It obviously didn't work out.' I can hear

banging. Kieran thumping his spoon on his plate like a chubby little emperor. Feed me now.

‘But . . . I mean, I thought at least he’d dumped me for the love of his life . . .’

‘Maybe it was her,’ Fay interrupts. ‘She grew tired of the wonders of Tom.’ Fay has never really liked Tom. She thinks he’s too full of himself, which he is, although that’s a criticism I would definitely also level at Steve, not that I’d say so out loud. And actually, it’s not true that she’s never liked him. Both Fay and Cally loved him in the beginning. Back when he was chilled and funny and he so clearly made me happy. I don’t remember when that changed. They were my joint maids of honour at our wedding, both weeping noisily and laughing at the same time as they walked behind me down the aisle. I was the first of us to get married. Cally was already seeing Jim, but Steve was yet to appear on the scene and bulldozer over Fay’s life. At first we would all have nights out together – Tom and Jim got on fine, although they were too different to ever become close mates – but Steve’s arrival put paid to that. Steve doesn’t have a chip on his shoulder, he has a whole bag. And probably a piece of fish, too. And extra mushy peas. He decided early on that Tom and Jim looked down their noses at him. (Not true. Neither of them is exactly royalty. But Steve brandishes his working-class roots like a weapon. No one can have had a harsher upbringing than him, no one can have experienced any greater hardships than him, no one can have had it as bad as his poor old mum, et cetera, et cetera.) Everyone that isn’t him is basically

an overprivileged fucker even if they grew up on a rough estate too, like Tom, or had a drunk for a father like Jim. And some of his attitude rubbed off on Fay, I think. And then, by osmosis, Cally.

‘So, she fucked up my life and then got bored of him?’ I say now, angrily.

‘It takes two to tangle,’ she says. Fay loves mangling a cliché. She started off doing it deliberately to make us smile, but now I sometimes wonder if she can even remember what the correct sayings are. ‘He’s like a duck out of water,’ she’d apparently said to her health visitor the other day, when asked how Kieran was getting on with crawling. ‘I’m not actually sure what that means,’ the woman had said, pen poised in the air. ‘Is that good or bad?’

‘Either way you’re better off without him,’ she says now. For someone with such a messed up relationship herself, Fay has a lot of opinions on other people’s.

‘That’s not the point. I wasn’t given the choice. Are we still walking at ten?’

‘Shit, can’t,’ she says. ‘Steve’s told his mum we’ll take Kieran over for a visit.’

I sigh. I hate last-minute cancellations. I hate suddenly finding myself staring at a day with nothing scheduled in it. ‘Can’t he go without you?’

‘She’ll think I’m avoiding her. You know what she’s like.’

‘OK,’ I say. There’s no point arguing.

An hour and a half later I’m still not dressed, but I know all the words to ‘Let It Go’ and my brain is scrambled with

Maddy's megawatt grin and perky nuggets of happy family wisdom. 'Make time for each other!' she opines while sitting wistfully on a sunny bench. 'Remember who you were before you were mummy and daddy.' This one from her big farmhouse kitchen, the two little girls in highchairs behind her. 'Not that I would ever want to be anything else,' she chirps. 'But me time is important too.' She, Lee and the toddlers do 'The Locomotion' and 'Oops Upside Your Head' and the Chicken Dance, always in matching outfits in lurid colours. By the time I finally force myself to stop watching I feel as if I've overdosed on sickly sugary syrup. I need to get out and clear my head. Carol has been pottering around singing to herself for the last forty minutes or so. She loves to sing. The louder and more tunelessly, the better. Even though it drives me insane it's quite useful in that I always know where she is. Like a dog with a bell on its collar. I wait in the hope that she'll have plans and, thankfully, after about a quarter of an hour I finally hear the front door slam.

In many ways, Carol is the ideal flatmate. She's fairly clean and tidy. She doesn't want to have parties or play loud music. She doesn't eat my food. She's just . . . well, annoying. What she failed to mention when she came for the interview and to have a look round was that she was looking for a ready-made social life. I would have gone with sullen Sian who made it clear she much preferred animals to people if I'd realised. The day Carol moved in, I made her a cup of tea. That was my first mistake. I realised as soon as she sat down at the table and told me how much she was looking forward to us

having a girls' night out that I'd made the wrong decision. She lies in wait in the kitchen hoping that I'll venture out to put the kettle on and she can tell me about her day. She spends her evenings in the living room – Fay warned me I should make the living room off limits or I would eventually lose control of it, but I thought she was being alarmist. It seemed unreasonable to charge someone to live in my flat and then deny them access to the main heart of it – remote in hand, ready to pause *Strictly* or *BGT* or *Coronation Street* if I come in so we can watch together and chat about it. Consequently, I now spend my evenings in my room, watching Netflix on my computer. She's always trying to get me to go out on the town with her. 'Two single saddos on the pull together' as she laughingly put it once. She's a divorcee, same as me, a similar age, something I thought would be a positive. But I hadn't reckoned on her having a mission in life to 'show her ex what he's missing' by texting him photos of her wild nights out. Except that she doesn't have any wild nights out. She doesn't seem to have any friends, anyone else to socialise with – I have no idea why, I've been too scared to ask – so she's set her sights firmly on me. I feel sorry for her, of course I do. I know what it's like to be suddenly, shockingly alone. I just don't want to be her wing woman.

I decide to walk along the river from Richmond to Teddington like Fay and I had planned to do before she blew me out. I wonder about ringing Cally but I already know she has something on this morning that meant she couldn't join us in the first place. She hasn't responded

to my email yet, so I know she hasn't seen it. Cally keeps on top of life by never procrastinating. No long to-do lists for her. She treats a request for a routine reading of her gas meter with exactly the same urgency as she would an email saying her supply was going to be cut off if she didn't pay her bill in the next three minutes. It's a skill I envy, but I sometimes wonder what would happen if she let one tiny thing slip. If her life would collapse like a game of Jenga.

Somewhere in the fallout after Tom's announcement at that fateful lunch and his subsequent confession, I had found out Maddy's full name. He'd told me they'd met through work and that Mads – as he called her – had been speaking at a conference he'd attended in Brighton some four months before. *Have you seen her since?* I'd asked, and he'd said no, he hadn't, but he couldn't stop thinking about her, wondering if the connection he'd felt was real. *For four months?* I'd asked, incredulous. *She's probably forgotten you exist.* The idea that someone could meet the love of their life and start a passionate affair at a conference about big data and advances in quantum computing has always baffled me. I remembered him coming home full of what I thought was inspiration. Fired up.

'It was fantastic,' he'd said when I'd asked how he'd found it. 'Best one I've ever been to.' And now I finally knew why. Mads was some kind of life coach, a job I've always thought was made up, and she'd been brought in to lecture about work-life balance and burnout. Tom's work colleagues were the driest, least sexy bunch of humans I'd ever encountered. No wonder he'd noticed her.

‘Did she advise you all to shag around?’ I’d said, petulantly. In truth, I was shattered. Broken. I had never imagined that Tom would meet someone else. I had never rehearsed how I would react if he ever told me he had. He was a little bit full of himself, Fay was right, but not in the way that made him think he was god’s gift to women. Not in a way that made him think he could do better than me. At least so I thought.

I googled the conference, certain that knowledge would help me. I needed to find out more about this Mads. I wanted to see what I was up against. And there she was listed on the programme: Maddy Cartwright, Life Advisor, with a list of topics she was covering: *Perform at your highest level. Reach your confidence peak. Overcome fear of failure. Learn skills like Active Listening and Visualisation.* As if no one had ever managed to get through life without being told how to do it correctly. Fay, Cally and I spent a weekend hunting out every fact we could about her. Which turned out to be precious little. She had no social media presence at that time. At least none we could find. There was a website, but it was a dry list of achievements and services offered, along with a phone number to book an appointment. But she was on LinkedIn. And there was a photo. She was my worst nightmare. Flaming red curls, big green eyes, luminescent skin. The vibrant opposite to my mid brown hair, my sludgy grey eyes, my tired-looking complexion. I have never forgotten that picture.

It turned out I was wrong. Knowledge did not help me. It made her real.

Halfway between Petersham and Twickenham, I realise I could just google her again. Maybe now she's some kind of internet sensation there'll be salacious details of her life for me to pore over. I wander away from the towpath and find a bench, type in her name. There's nothing much of interest. It's almost a relief. But then I remember she's no longer Maddy Cartwright. She's Maddy Fulford now. At least I assume she is, going by the name of her channel. Lee's surname, I'm guessing. I try again. This time it's different. There are pages of results. She's definitely a big deal. My stomach turns over. Of all the potential fates I imagined her meeting, becoming a household name was not one of them. She isn't – not yet – but she's getting there. She has adoring fans who hang on her every word. Six hundred and eighty-three thousand of them on Instagram for starters. Six hundred and eighty-three thousand people think she's a celebrity. OK, so no one outside that bubble knows who she is yet, but that's a huge base to grow from. To put it into context, I have seventy-six. Not seventy-six thousand. Seventy-six followers.

Most of the information seems to be gleaned from her videos and one small article by a mummy blogger. Former life coach, married to Lee, with whom she has twin daughters. No mention of any previous relationships. Either she's very private or it's all carefully curated. My guess is the latter. She's building herself as a brand. She doesn't want random stories about broken marriages and infidelities floating around, waiting to come

back and bite her. She's Mrs Nice. Mrs Family Friendly. Me and Tom don't fit into her narrative.

I don't even know why I care. *If* I do. I wouldn't take Tom back now if he crawled in on his hands and knees and begged. But would I still be with him if he hadn't strayed? Almost certainly. We had history and it's hard to overestimate how much that counts for.

We'd met at a party, Tom and I. I could never remember whose. And neither could Tom. We both must have been there as some random friends' plus ones. 'We don't even know who to thank,' I said to him once, laughing. 'I can't even remember who I went with.'

'Fate,' he'd said with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. He was a complete non-believer in fate, as was I. I still am. Daisy has enough belief in it for the both of us. She uses it to excuse every bit of bad behaviour, every fuck-up, every hook-up that peppers her life. I wonder what he made of all Maddy's Goop-inspired hokum. Was that a bone of contention between them, or did he come round to her way of seeing things in the end? Start burning vagina-smelling candles and consulting the universe before he made any decisions?

What I do remember about the party is talking to almost no one else all evening. I remember noticing that his piercing pale blue eyes gave him a kind of vulpine look. Taking in his broad shoulders and the fine hair on his tanned arms. I remember us exclaiming as we found we had more and more in common. Not so much the facts as the likes and dislikes. We watched the same things, listened to the same things, liked the same food.

‘Are you just copying me now?’ he’d said with a twinkle when I gasped that Atkinson Grimshaw was my absolute favourite artist too.

‘This is insane,’ I remember saying. ‘It’s like the plot of a bad romcom.’

‘I love romcoms,’ he’d said and I’d slapped him on the arm. ‘Shut the fuck up! Me too! What’s your favourite?’

‘*My Best Friend’s Wedding*,’ he’d answered without hesitation.

‘No fricking way! That’s mine.’ I’d swiped his arm again.

‘Are you always this violent?’ he’d laughed.

‘Only about things I like.’

‘Good to know,’ he’d said. ‘I’ll make a note of that.’

Somehow even on that first night we’d talked about how much we both wanted a family one day. Both of our upbringings had been stable, happy. He’d never even realised he was poor, he said, until he went to uni. He had no siblings and he doted on his mum and dad. ‘They’re just good people,’ he said. ‘I want to give them lots of gorgeous little grandkids.’

‘Same,’ I’d said. ‘Three, at least.’

He’d held out a hand for me to shake. ‘Three.’

When the evening had ended it was just assumed by both of us that we’d see each other again. ‘Is tomorrow night too soon?’ he’d said, and I’d shaken my head. ‘I think we’re supposed to play it cool and not talk to each other for three days or something but, yes, tomorrow night.’

We’d been through so much together since. The deaths of both our dads. Moving in together. Getting

married. The failed attempts at getting pregnant. We were bonded for life, or so I'd thought. Yes, we'd been going through a bit of a rough patch. Yes, conceiving had become a bit of an obsession. But soon I would have been expecting and all that would be in the past. We would be back to being Us. The new improved Us, with a baby in tow.

And the truth is we probably *would* have a family now if we were together, that's the real kicker. Eventually I know it would have happened. Somehow. We'd be the ones with two little girls in sunflower hats. Of course, if it hadn't been Maddy it probably would have been someone else, I know that now. But that doesn't really help. The whole point is that it *was* her. That she was the one who said yes.

The timing is what kills me. If it had happened a couple of years before, it would still have been devastating but I might have met someone else I liked enough to have children with while I was still young enough to have them. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I wanted kids at any cost. Fay once suggested I just sleep around a bit in the hope of getting pregnant.

'I don't mean pick someone up in the street,' she'd said, when I'd pulled a face. 'I mean go on the odd date here and there and just be a bit careless.'

'I want to be a family,' I'd said. 'I'm not setting out to be a single mum. It's hard. Really hard.'

'It would have been no different if you and Tom had got pregnant and then he'd left once the baby was born. That definitely wouldn't have been out of the question.'

I'd shaken my head. 'No. Because he would have been there in the background somewhere helping out. We still would have co-parented, supported each other.'

'What if you had kids with someone and then they dropped dead?'

'Jesus, you're cheerful today,' I'd said, trying to laugh it off. There was no point talking about it. It didn't help. It was what it was. And maybe what it was was pretty shit, but there you go. I hadn't been given any choice in the matter. Maddy had seen to that.

Cally and I are meeting at a pub called the Whippet Inn, near to her and Jim's home in Queen's Park, at half six, for a quick drink and, hopefully, something to eat. You never know with Cally. I'll ask a passing waiter for a menu and she'll sheepishly tell me she ate half of Frankie's pureed broccoli and spinach while she fed him his. So, we've given up going to anywhere but the least formal places where they won't mind if we don't order any food. I could get something for myself, obviously, but since the night we went to The Wolseley for a special treat and she sat and watched me chew my way through three courses while the waiter glared at her (I know I didn't have to order dessert, but I'd never been there before, and it looked incredible. When was I ever going to have the opportunity again?) I've decided it's usually better to wait until I get home and shove in some toast in private if I have to.

Tonight she arrives at five to seven announcing she's going to 'get wasted'. She looks exhausted, bags under her hazel eyes the size of suitcases, pale blonde locks scraped back into a thin ponytail. I almost can't see the eighteen-year-old girl I met on my first day at uni – she was moving into the room next to mine in halls, Blur blaring from her CD player – in there. Fay came later

when she transferred on to my design course, halfway through the second term, having given up on Fine Art, and breezed confidently into the room lighting it up with her hot pink hair and megawatt smile.

‘I’m free,’ Cally says, laughing as she hugs me. By which she means she’s expressed enough milk to keep baby Frankie happy till Monday and that Jim is on overnight childcare duty and all day tomorrow if needs be. I also know from experience that a glass and a half of wine in she’ll feel guilty and switch to lime and soda, and then she’ll be falling asleep by nine and we’ll call it a night. None of this bothers me in the slightest. I go along with her delusion because it makes her happy.

‘Yay!’ I say, hugging her back. Cally is my rock. The sensible, kind heart at the centre of our three-way friendship. Fay is honest and fearless. I like to think I bring the fun. Or at least, I used to. Now I mainly bring the complaining.

‘So, you watched it?’ I say after we’ve ordered drinks. She’d replied to my email earlier with a shocked face emoji.

‘Cringiest thing ever,’ she says.

‘She’s not been with Tom for years, though, by the look of it.’ I pour sparkling water into both our glasses just as the waitress arrives with our wine. ‘Those kids are at least three.’

Cally looks at me wide-eyed. ‘I hadn’t even thought of that. I was too busy being sick. God. Unless . . . no.’

‘What? They’re his?’ This had occurred to me too, in a painful middle-of-the-night thunderbolt last night, and I’d got up and rewatched as many videos as I could bear,

looking for clues. ‘She talks about finding out they were pregnant in one of the early ones, her and Lee. And, besides, they look exactly like him, don’t you think?’

‘You’re right. The eyes. Absolutely.’

‘I don’t know why it’s bothering me so much.’ I pick up a menu. ‘Are you eating?’

‘Sure. Well, nibbling.’

‘I’ll get something we can share,’ I say.

‘Great. I’m happy with whatever.’ She says this as if I’ve forgotten she is the world’s pickiest eater. I run through her list of no-nos in my head as I check out the options: mushrooms (slimy – see also aubergines), leeks (chewy), asparagus (the whole weird-smelling wee thing), cabbage (just no). And that’s just the vegetable section. In the end I wave a waiter over and order fries.

‘It bothers you because it makes it meaningless. If Tom and Maddy had ended up having the Greatest Love Story Ever Told you would have at least understood what was going on eventually. That they were powerless to ignore it.’

‘I think you’re right. Do you think she’s earning loads of money from it?’

Cally nods vigorously. ‘Did you see how many subscribers she’s got? And billions of followers on Insta.’

‘Fuck. For prancing about dressed like an idiot.’

‘It’s embarrassing, right?’ She gazes out across the street watching two ancient Lycra-clad cyclists riding slowly past. I see her mouth twitch into a smirk.

‘What?’

‘I was just thinking. Imagine if it *was* Tom in the

videos. You'd be having to say to people "I used to be married to that prat in the pyjamas."

I laugh out loud. 'Street cred gone.'

'Yes, because you have loads of that.'

It feels good to be able to laugh about it. That, I realise, is the way to deal with this. Take the piss with my dearest friend. 'Did you see "The Locomotion"?'

Cally snorts into her sparkling water. As suspected, her wine is almost untouched. 'Oh yes. I've watched about a hundred of them this afternoon. Jesus Christ. To be fair I quite enjoyed that one.'

'Traitor,' I say, picking at a chip as soon as the waiter places the bowl between us on the table.

'Ignore it though, Rissa,' Cally says, a note of warning in her voice. Fay and Cally have always called me Rissa ever since I complained to them that Iris was a name that didn't lend itself to diminutives. (*Neither does mine*, Fay had said. *And thank fuck. Don't either of you even start thinking about calling me Fifi.*) 'She's nothing to do with you now.'

'Of course. You're right. I need to forget about it,' I say, waving a hand to order myself another glass of wine. I hold up a finger with a smile to confirm just one. 'I didn't even know about it yesterday. It doesn't change anything.'

'I'll drink to that,' Cally says, clinking her glass against mine and taking the tiniest sip. 'Christ, I feel as if I've drunk too much already. I'll order a soft drink.'

Back home and tucked up in bed by half past nine my resolve weakens. I'll just have a quick check of Maddy's channels to see if she's posted anything new. Is this how the slippery slope starts? One final farewell puff on the

crack pipe and suddenly all your teeth have fallen out and your mugshot is on *Crimewatch* on a list of Britain's Most Wanted?

There's nothing new on either YouTube or Insta and I feel strangely disappointed. Without thinking why, I sign up to receive a notification next time she posts a video. Might as well keep on poking that wound.

I'm with a customer on a grey, chilly Tuesday morning when my phone beeps. I work as a senior kitchen designer for one of the mid to higher range companies, which basically means I sit in a shop surrounded by sample cupboards and hope someone wanders in who is looking to spend forty thousand plus on a refit. Much of my day is spent lurking while couples browse, ready to dive in with the lowdown on marble versus composite worktops or the benefits of a butler's pantry if they give me the slightest hint of encouragement. My favourite part of the job is the quiet hours once I've managed to snare someone, spent drawing up plans, rearranging footprints, coming up with solutions. The pleasure you receive from the joy on their face when you tell them you've managed to squeeze in a rolling spice cupboard shouldn't be underestimated. Today I'm at that tipping point with Mrs Dolan of Hampton Wick. She's tempted to commit. She's on the verge, except that Harvey Jones have a sale on and what I'm suggesting to her is a little out of her price range. Same old same old. I'll find a couple of solutions to bring the cost down, a discount if she signs on the dotted line by close of play today.

Nothing galvanizes a customer like a deadline with a hefty price drop. She'll prevaricate until she realises there's no more to be squeezed out of me. We'll either come to a deal or not. It's a dance I have little patience for but it's a necessary evil. If I can leave Mrs Dolan congratulating herself that she's got a bargain while not bankrupting the company, I've won.

Usually I turn my mobile off while I'm in a consultation, but Mrs Dolan's visit was unscheduled. My job is very much of the feast or famine variety. Hanging round the empty showroom for hours on end waiting for a customer, or full-on back and forth with ideas and price negotiations in an attempt to seal a deal. I was having a leisurely morning playing around with sizes for an island unit in Richmond when Mrs Dolan and her Harvey Jones quote breezed in. This is her third visit and I know she wants to make it work with us. I just need to do whatever I have to do to get her to hand over a deposit. So, I ignore my phone. Reach out a hand and turn it over so the screen doesn't distract me. It's only once Mrs Dolan has said her goodbyes and promised to get back to me by the cut-off point at the end of the day, that I turn it back to see what I've missed. *Fun with the Fulfords* has posted a new video, the notification says. For a second I'm confused, but then I remember that I signed up for just this purpose. The shop is empty – Zak, my co-worker, is in the office at the back doing admin. Or Wordle. One or the other – so I click play. This time it's Maddy on her own, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, in a green cap-sleeved T-shirt, her copper hair falling in waves around her face.

‘Guess what!’ she squeaks. She has a high-pitched voice, breathy and childlike. In the past few days I’ve found myself wondering what Tom thought of that voice. If he found it sexy. Or if it started to grate on his nerves after a while. Too mannered, too affected. Marilyn Monroe with a helium balloon. The camera must be set up on a tripod because it’s perfectly still. Fixed. I find myself wondering where Lee and the girls are.

‘No idea,’ I say drily, as if she might be able to hear me.

‘I . . .’ she says, leaving a dramatic pause, ‘. . . have got a book coming out!’ She holds up a hardback. *Making Family Fun* by Maddy Fulford. My stomach lurches. Maddy grins maniacally, drunk on her own success. ‘It’s going to be published in June, just in time for the school holidays when you might be spending more time with your loved ones than usual, with all the stresses that can bring. We love ’em but sometimes they drive us mad, right? Well, my book is full to the brim of ideas to help you all get the best out of one another, to make sure those precious years really do bring the joy and fulfilment we all want from our families . . .’

‘Is that the Fun with the Fulfords woman?’ I jump as Zak appears behind me, looking over my shoulder. Press pause. ‘I love them,’ he says, not waiting for an answer.

‘I think she’s quite annoying,’ I say defensively.

‘Coffee?’ he says, heading for the front door. I nod. I don’t need to spell out exactly what I want. Zak knows my preference for skimmed milk, no foam, extra hot.

‘Thanks.’ I wait for him to leave and then I restart the video. Maddy burbles on a bit more about how you have