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Keys

Posting the keys through her own letterbox was a pretty rubbish out-of-body experience.

Like finding her name in someone else's address book, seeing her face in the background of a stranger's photo, or really smelling the inside of her elbow; for a second, less perhaps, Hanna was no longer herself. She was witnessing herself from the outside. She was noticing herself, without really being herself.

Hanna had forgotten about the keys until they'd driven to the end of the road. After three hours of loading up a rented Luton van with just enough laundry bags to bring on an attack of self-loathing, she and her father had finally turned the corner and were out of sight when she felt the small prick of recognition. In her thigh. The clutch of keys, held together with a silver ring in the shape of a turtle, was pressing into her leg with an insistence that felt almost like an accusation. She'd put her hand on the dashboard, like a driving instructor preparing to fail a quaking seventeen-year-old, and whispered, 'Stop.' Her dad, thinking she was

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referring to the cheese and brinjal pickle sandwich he'd started to eat with only one hand on the wheel, slipped the offending item into his door pocket.

'No. Stop the car. I've forgotten something.'

With a small sigh, they pulled in behind a van advertising 'Cranston Scaffolding – Experts in Erections' and Hanna creaked open the door. The day was unseasonably warm and as she lowered her foot towards the pavement, a thick blare of sunshine hit the tops of her ankles, picking out the thin, pale hairs like the feathering around the top of a shire horse's hoof. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done anything to this winter pelt. Through a combination of thick tights, winter boots and unintended chastity, nobody had really looked at her Mr Tumnus legs for months. Not least her. And yet here she was, looking like something ready to be strapped into a harness and made to pull a cart full of apples to market.

Walking back to the no-longer-hers house felt like the longest march in history. Continents had shifted in the time it took her to ease the keys from her pocket. Rivers had changed course quicker than her route round next door's hedge. Glaciers had tunnelled out valleys in the space between her old front gate and former letterbox. At the door, her arms felt heavy, her head stiff. She lifted the flap and, for less than a second, she could smell the air inside the house. A combination of Persil, old coats, coffee and cat, with just a hint of cooking oil and damp, hit her nose. The oxygen of her

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old life ached through the gap in the door and into her lungs. It was heady. It was intoxicating. It was stale. Before she had a chance to think, she'd pushed the keys through the hole, scraping her fingers on that strange and brittle little moustache that rests across the top lip of so many letterboxes. She heard the dull clunk as they hit the floorboards on the other side and turned. Biting the inside of her cheek – an old habit born of being lacerated by train-track braces and their stray wires during adolescence – she walked past the gate and back down the road. She didn't look back. She didn't know if Joe was watching her. She couldn't bear it if he was. Or if he wasn't.

Four months earlier, Hanna had been chopping an onion and listening to a podcast about weathermen when something started to trickle down her spine like cold tea. A feeling like malign gravity started to leak across her shoulders, down her collarbone and over her ribs. This wasn't a panic attack, not a fever or a stroke. Standing at the kitchen counter, staring into the pine-effect cupboard door in front of her, she had been hit full force with something wet and blank and true. She was lonely. The loneliness that for months had been welling up inside her body had finally breached the watershed somewhere around her neck and now poured through her, unchecked. Those puddles, which had seemed a bit like hunger, a bit like sexual frustration and a little like sadness, suddenly overflowed with a thick, biting ache. She

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was lonelier than she had ever been in her life. The hours before bed had stretched ahead of her, utterly empty.

Her friend Dom had spent three days suggesting plans and then failed to commit to any of them. Even if by some miracle he was free, Dom lived in Hackney, Hanna in Brockley, meaning it would take both of them an hour to reach somewhere even vaguely central. Her colleagues had all gone straight home from work murmuring about the gym or having a flat viewing. And Joe? Well, Joe had been at band practice. Of course.

Joe's band was, let's be charitable here, awful. Microwave Death had formed when Joe was twenty-one and studying maths at Sheffield University. Their first EP, *Are You F**king Kidding Me?!*, had sold twenty-six copies. They didn't do many gigs. They didn't have a website. They didn't have fans. And yet, they still had band rehearsals four times a week. Because of band practice, Joe had missed: Hanna's twenty-fifth birthday party, every anniversary bar their first, the day Hanna had to be rushed to hospital with suspected appendicitis, her first day at a new job, her appearance as a vox pop on the six o'clock news talking about the cost of Boris Johnson's failed Garden Bridge, all the meetings with all the estate agents, their best friends' wedding, and enough dinners to feed the cast of *Hollyoaks*, past and present. All this would be frustrating enough if the band were brilliant, made money and brought great music into the world. That night, as the smell of onion spread from Hanna's fingers across her hot and sobbing face, it

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suddenly seemed unbearable. The band was shit. And yet there she was, alone again, because when it came to the crunch, the band always came first.

The loneliness washing through Hanna erupted that night into an argument. One of the few she and Joe had ever had. Standing in their hallway, shoeless and wild-eyed, she'd hurled words at him like thunderbolts: 'selfish', 'childish', 'egomaniac', 'hopeless'. Seeing him standing there, his eyes fixed on the coat hooks, his mouth shapeless, she'd wanted to smack him. She'd wanted to punch him, tear his skin, split him open with her bare hands and force this feeling on to him too. Her loneliness was too great, too heavy, and she demanded that he finally take some of the weight. She was going to make him take responsibility.

'You've made your choice! You chose them! You just didn't bother to tell me!' she'd screamed, trapped in their tiny hallway, hitting her elbows on banisters and radiators as she tried, desperately, to make him listen.

Finally, her fury spent and the tang of onions soaking up her sleeves, he'd held her against his chest and stroked her back with his fingers. He'd shushed her like a baby. Laid his lips on her hair without quite kissing it. In a voice that seemed to come from someone else entirely, she'd told him that she was lonely. Unbearably lonely. She was hanging in space, not going forward, unable to go back. His reluctance to plan the future, to get a mortgage, to even talk about babies, had made her feel cold, dark and remote. It was as though someone had pressed pause on

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her life. Her self-esteem was at rock bottom, she felt like a bit part in her own life, and she had spent so long having her hopes gently quashed by Joe's ambivalence that she had almost no idea who she was or what she wanted any more. Finally, she'd turned her face – a liquid mask of tears, snot and mascara – up to his and told him that she couldn't live like this for ever. She wanted an entire partner, and Joe was no longer that.

Reaching the passenger door, Hanna swung herself up on to the van's high metal step to climb back in.

'Well, that was great fun,' she said, chewing the inside of her mouth.

There in front of her, sitting on the grey, lightly stained polyester seat, was a sandwich, wrapped in greaseproof paper and covered with her dad's small, unjoined-up handwriting. She looked at the words. *What do you call a man covered in leaves?* There were three little dots in the bottom right-hand corner, slightly speckled with orange grease marks. She turned the sandwich over and read the back. *Russell.*

'I thought you might be hungry,' said Iain, smiling down at her. 'After hoofing all that stuff into the back of the van. And I knew you wouldn't have time to make anything.' Hanna was still balancing on the step, suddenly very tired. 'Do you remember the last time you came to Oxford, just before Christmas? You ate an entire cheese and onion pasty on the walk from the station to town. Well, I thought this would save us buying a pasty.'

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‘God, those sandwiches you made me every day for school,’ said Hanna, her foot in mid-air, the tang of nostalgia in her mouth. ‘You’d wake up at, like, dawn, put on some Zimbabwean funk, and assemble a sandwich almost perfectly designed to turn me into a social outcast.’

‘Those sandwiches were a culinary—’

‘Tuna mayonnaise with sundried tomatoes and sweet-corn?’ Hanna interrupted. ‘Grated carrot with cheese and peanut butter? Humous and sliced red pepper? Jesus, Iain. If it smelled, stained fabric and would fail a customs exam, you would put it in a sandwich.’

‘Hey, my Punjabi pachranga pickle was—’

‘Just opening my lunchbox was like an act of chemical warfare!’ Hanna’s voice was a little more rasping than she’d intended. ‘Nearby children would wrap their hoods around their faces to block out the smells. Even teachers would make comments about the drains.’

Iain laughed, a little sheepishly. ‘Ah, but the notes, Han. You’ve got to admit the notes were good.’

Hanna felt her breathing slow, a little. ‘Yes, OK. The notes were good.’

‘I mean, they were very good. Sometimes I’d be there for half an hour doing you those crosswords or drawing the cartoons.’

‘OK, I said the notes were good.’ Hanna was quieter now.

‘Added Consonants! Guess the Song from the Lyric! Hanna’s Adventures in Numberland! They were—’

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‘Thank you, Iain. Dad. That’s really . . .’ Holding the crackling parcel in her lap, Hanna gave out a long, judgering sigh.

‘No worries.’ Iain sniffed, quickly and sharply. ‘Now, shall we get this show on the road? I’ve already finished my thermos, and with my old-man bladder that means I’m going to need to pee pretty soon.’

Hanna tried not to picture Iain standing at the urinal of a service station off the M40; his drooping cock, his age-flattened arse peeping above his sagging waistband, the dribble as he did up his flies. Or worse, to save time, would he pull over in a layby and piss into a bush, the powerful slipstream of passing lorries spraying that urine all over his shoes and the side of the van?

‘I’m sorry it took so long,’ said Hanna.

‘Ah, it wasn’t so bad.’ Iain was leaning over the steering wheel, craning to see both sides of the junction before pulling out.

‘And I’m sorry I haven’t been to visit since before Christmas,’ Hanna added, surprised to hear herself apologizing. She had never visited much. Even though Oxford was only an hour away, the gravitational pull of London had been too strong. ‘I suppose I’m making up for lost time now though!’

Neither of them laughed. Hanna started unwrapping the sandwich. This, she knew, was a four-cornered mis-sive from her father’s heart; a token of his support, a dispatch of affection that he would never have been able to put into words. Without asking, he had fallen back to

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one of the useful services he had performed throughout Hanna's childhood. Where her mum would have screamed obscenities about Joe or fired a machine-gun attack of questions about her future into the side of Hanna's head, her dad had made a sandwich. Brie, mango chutney and yellow pepper. And why not?

'Do you remember that bike ride to Abingdon?' asked Hanna, looking down at the joke on the back of her sandwich.

'I do,' said Iain, grinding the van into the middle lane to overtake a minibus with the words 'Inspector Morse Tours' painted along the side in gold.

'What do you call a man covered in chain grease . . .?'

said Hanna, turning back to look at her father.

'Ollie Hans!' Iain laughed as if it was the first time he'd ever said it. 'And what do you call a woman covered in type?' He was chancing his arm and he knew it.

'Rita Book,' Hanna replied, tasting the salt from her tears across her top lip. 'I was, what, thirteen?'

'Yup. About that. You were going to start upper school that September.'

That day had been one of the happiest of Hanna's younger life. An uncomplicated day of joy as she leaned over the precipice of adolescence and decided, just for now, to stay a child. It was also, she now realized, a memory that Iain had held close all these years too.

'I'm really only planning on being at yours for a month, tops,' said Hanna, after a brief pause. 'Once I've got a job, I should be able to start renting a room

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somewhere. Maybe Cowley or Rose Hill. They're still a bit more affordable, aren't they?' Hanna thought of the two-up, two-down terraces she'd walked past on her way to middle school.

'They're still the more affordable areas, sure,' said Iain, before taking an enormous bite of his sandwich. Chunks of red pepper and bits of cheese started to crumble out of his mouth, like a dog trying to eat sand. It was revolting to watch.

'I could probably find a shared house or something,' Hanna said, as much to herself as to Iain. Hanna had been applying for jobs, rewriting her CV, going to job interviews and Instagram-stalking potential bosses for months before moving, but to no avail. Her last temping job, for a construction firm who were looking to invest in social enterprises as a way of greenwashing their more harmful practices, had come to an end a couple of months after that big, hideous, relationship-ending argument with Joe. It was hardly surprising; like so many of Hanna's jobs up until that point, the work had been dull and moderately paid and only tangentially related to what she really wanted to do. Her dissertation had been on microfinance and environmental conservation – at one point she really thought she knew how to save the world. Today, she wasn't sure she could even save herself. Sharing the rent in Brockley had torn through every scrap of Hanna's savings while she'd tried to decide what to do.

Though she was unsure where to go, all the jobs Hanna had initially looked for had been in London. Jobs that

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might just pay her enough to be able to afford her own one-bedroom flat, somewhere very quiet, far from transport links. Then jobs that would mean she could become somebody's lodger, somewhere very quiet, far from transport links. Then jobs that would qualify her for housing benefit, somewhere with no transport links at all. When these had all turned to ashes in her inbox, and Iain eventually offered to put her up for a few months while she found her feet, she'd started looking for jobs in Oxford. A free flat was, after all, a free flat. She'd started to fantasize about a new life, miles away from Joe, in the small, golden stone city. She'd begun to think of her move to Oxford as a sabbatical: she'd get a job, earn enough to rent her own place, maybe start growing vegetables in the garden, and rebuild her self-esteem, away from the piss and chicken bones of London. As the date she'd given Joe for moving out approached, a gnawing anxiety had started to spread through her intestines. She needed work, a job – any job – that could pay enough for her to rent a room. She'd applied to work on the reception of a local refugee housing charity; she'd applied to be a private maths tutor; she'd applied to do admin at the local art school; she'd applied to manage a coffee shop; she'd applied to be a marketing assistant at the local paper. She'd spent so long looking on the city council jobs website that she'd ended up applying to manage a weekly local car boot sale, despite having absolutely no relevant experience, not owning a car and not being able to drive. There had been a couple of promising interviews – one at

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a museum, another at a local PR agency – but nothing had come of either yet. Maybe things would be different when the new financial year kicked in. Even so, with her bank balance wilting like a bag of supermarket salad, she'd had to accept that, until she got a job, sleeping in Iain's spare room was her only option.

'Sure,' said Iain, spitting a tiny bit of lettuce on to the steering wheel. 'Something will come up, I reckon. Why don't you eat your sandwich and we can talk about the flat when we get back to Jericho.'

Hanna felt the weight of the greaseproof paper parcel in her lap. It didn't make her pain go away. It didn't make life any more certain. It didn't make her feel any less adrift in an unknown future. But, as they drove down the A40, soaring above London on the Westway and out into the green of the Chilterns on the way to Oxford, the sandwich in her lap did remind her of something. That she was a person. A whole person. And if that person smelled like an ungodly combination of brie and mango chutney then, well, so be it.

2

Jungle Book Duvet Cover

In the days immediately preceding her period, Hanna would often find herself standing at an open cupboard eating like a stray dog. Raw anchovies, dry cereal, spoonfuls of peanut butter, biscuits, fingers dipped in Marmite, or handfuls of raisins while waiting for her toast to finally pop up from the toaster. For a day, maybe two, she would eat like a log flume – entire meals disappearing through her body with no apparent impact on her revving hunger. Eventually, she would feel that familiar wetness, that unfurling of gravity between her legs, and immediately it would lift. She would look across the kitchen tops like a general looking over a battlefield after a particularly bloody assault. And she would stop eating. For a bit.

But while hormones could flip her appetite like a switch, her heart and stomach seemed to work on entirely different systems. Sadness, anger, grief; they did nothing to her hunger. And so, barely an hour after walking away from her boyfriend, home and former life, Hanna was sitting in a van, staring out of the window, crunching through a bag of Bombay mix on

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her sun-warm seat. As she and Iain soared over High Wycombe – a town apparently made up entirely of storage units and shopping centres – she pushed dusty fistfuls of puffed rice and spicy peas into her mouth like a conveyor belt. Red kites circled above them like paragliders. Crows flew from their treetop nests, ready to have a go at the other corvid big boys.

‘Are you ready?’ Iain said quietly.

‘Ready for what?’ Hanna replied, pushing a bit of pea out of a tooth gap with her tongue.

‘Are you ready?’ said Iain, louder this time.

‘What are you talking about?’ said Hanna, louder this time, wondering if he was about to do a bargain basement *Thelma & Louise* and zoom off the flyover on to an ASDA.

‘ARE. YOU. READY!’ Iain screamed. He was like a man blowing the whistle for a bare-knuckle fight. His hands were white, his eyes staring, his voice genuinely frightening.

‘NO!’ Hanna screeched. ‘Stop. What are you doing?! NO!’

And suddenly there they were – driving through the Aston Rowant Cutting. Two huge chalk cliffs rising up on either side of the motorway like the sides of ocean liners. The white stone, like a thousand paracetamol tablets, was dazzling in the midday sun.

‘ROCK TUNNEL!’ Iain roared, pumping his hand in the air like a cowboy whirling a lasso. ‘Rooooooock tunneeeellllll!’

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During the unending drives back from visiting her Auntie Molly in London, this motorway cutting had always signalled to Hanna that they were nearly home. As a child, long car journeys had brought on a kind of boredom that was actually physically painful. Beyond an itch of irritation, it was like having every limb pulled apart. Her joints would ache. Her chest would feel tight. Her eyes would dry out and her sphincter would pulse like an overtired eye. Reading made her sick. Drawing made her sick. Her parents would lose interest in playing games. Even making friendship braids out of knotted lengths of thread would eventually wear thin. And so this zoom through an actual hill had become something of a ritual bloodletting in the family. As they passed through it, Hanna, Iain and even occasionally Julie would bellow at the top of their lungs: 'Rock tunnel.' A motorway cliff. The gap that heralded the home stretch. It was like driving along the bottom of Beachy Head, but here, in the Chilterns.

'Christ, Dad. You could have warned me,' Hanna said, pulling her eyebrows back down from the roof felt.

'I did warn you!' Iain chuckled. 'I warned you just back there.'

'Screaming like the referee from *Gladiators* isn't exactly a warning,' Hanna shot back. She was trying her best to look cross but her face wouldn't behave. Her mouth kept curling up at the sides.

'Had you really forgotten?' asked Iain, checking his

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rear-view mirror as they were overtaken by yet another lorry.

‘Yes, funnily enough, people don’t tend to scream “rock tunnel” on the Oxford Tube very often,’ said Hanna.

‘I bet they’d feel better if they did,’ Iain said, his face creasing into an origami smile.

For a few more miles, they drove along in silence. Not an uncomfortable one. Hanna ran her fingernail along the gap between the passenger door and its window. Iain listened to the radio. Hanna tried to remember how it had felt to be that child, sighing in the back of a family car, rather than single, unemployed, heartbroken, and zooming towards middle age in a van full of old saucepans.

As they came into Oxford, through Summertown, past the giant houses and leafy gardens, Hanna was struck yet again by just how ludicrously beautiful the city was. They drove past Gee’s, a restaurant that had always epitomized sophistication to Child Hanna, because of its conservatory seating and string of outdoor lights. She used to tell herself, aged twelve or maybe thirteen, that when she was an adult – something she was desperate for – she would eat in places like Gee’s. She had pictured herself wearing platforms (of course) and a lycra minidress (*bien sûr*), with hennaed hair (this was the nineties after all) and smoking at a table in Gee’s, being attended to by a waiter wearing – and why not – a

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bow tie. Strangely, now she thought about it, Hanna had never actually pictured herself with anyone at that table. Only her. Just a perfect picture of adult sophistication on the Banbury Road.

They turned into St Margaret's Road – Iain was really showing her the scenic route – and for the first time, from her Luton van height, Hanna was able to see over the hedges and front walls; the tasteful Farrow & Ball front door colours, the heavy curtains, the bee-kissed gardens. These people were her neighbours of just a few streets but seemed to live in a different city entirely.

Hanna and Iain manoeuvred their way into Cranham Street like a heavily pregnant woman trying to navigate the tables of a crowded restaurant. The great girth of the van seemed to wheeze and spread even further as they clipped wing mirrors and sighed up the kerb. On their right was the small block of ex-council flats in which Iain lived. There was a single municipal willow tree on the front lawn, and the metal railing along the path was encrusted with bikes.

‘And that’s a wrap!’ Iain said, turning to face Hanna for the first time in nearly two hours. He was clearly enjoying his van driver role play. Hanna had felt a little twist in her heart when, after finally reaching the motorway, Iain had triumphantly produced two Yorkie bars from the glove box for them both. He’d even bought a coffee in a service station – an act of extravagance and eco-unfriendliness that marked this day out as almost otherworldly.

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‘Can I have a wee before we start unloading?’ Hanna asked, delaying the inevitable.

‘You can if you take a bag in with you,’ said Iain, leaping down into the road and only narrowly missing a cyclist.

Iain’s favourite part of moving his daughter out of her home and away from her ex-partner was clearly the buttons that operated the rear door of the van. She could see the childlike joy on his face as he lowered the footplate and unlocked the grille. He watched with something like awe as the hydraulics hissed and the cooling engine hummed. Then he jumped up and threw open the van like a magician whipping away a silk handkerchief. Seeing her belongings squished between the hard sides of the rented van made Hanna feel extremely small. The contents looked like a packet of cereal – shaken to dust across a potholed road. Nothing had really broken; it was all just flattened and sagging with exhaustion. *You and me both, pal*, thought Hanna, grabbing a plant pot and satchel full of old laptops. The stuff at the back was destined for a storage unit by the Cowley Carworks – another delightful family outing to come, no doubt – so everything in view was, pretty much, Hanna’s life. For the foreseeable.

Nothing good ever happened in a flat with a Salvador Dalí print on the wall. This Hanna knew and yet here she was, carrying another forty-litre laundry bag past a print of *Swans Reflecting Elephants* in her dad’s hallway.

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It wasn't even framed – just hanging by a bulldog clip looped over a baton pin.

‘So this is your room,’ said Iain, striding proudly into a pale blue box with sanded floors and Blu-tack stains on the walls. It was almost empty but for a huge shelving unit across one wall and a single bed, made up with a Jungle Book duvet cover and dark blue pillows. Until Hanna’s life zoomed down a U-bend, this had been Iain’s office. Except Iain didn’t really need an office – he never worked from home – and so instead the room had been used to store his enormous record collection. Metres of vinyl, at least a ton of CDs both bought and copied, guitars and drums, as well as his most prized collection: the compilation tapes.

‘Thank you, Dad,’ said Hanna, strolling over to the window and looking out at the pastel-coloured flats on the other side of the road. The ones painted to be an echo of the postcard cottages on nearby Observatory Road. One of them had a child’s bicycle on the balcony. Another a can of Tyskie. ‘I really am grateful to you for putting me up like this.’

‘And putting up with you!’ said Iain, clearly thrilled at his speedy wordplay.

‘Hm,’ Hanna nose-laughed. ‘Where shall I put my stuff?’ They both looked over at the pile of laundry bags heaped in the corner like Jabba the Hutt.

‘Well, ah, on the shelves, I reckon,’ said Iain, brushing his hand along one of the huge wooden slabs that had, up until now, held Rock and Pop J–L of his vinyl.

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As with much of the rest of the furniture in the flat, Iain had made these shelves himself, in just a weekend. His sheer capability with building, fixing and designing was one of the few areas in which Iain drew complete respect from his daughter. His ability to think in 3D, his exacting patience in lining up the weight-bearing angles, his unquestioning faith that he could do it best himself, seemed like a superpower when the rest of the world had to hire strangers to come and erect their new flat-pack furniture. That Hanna had inherited precisely none of this skill was made worse by the fact that she'd never taken a single moment to try and learn any of it either. Her apprenticeship to Iain consisted almost entirely of one botched attempt to build a brickwork compost heap together at her granny's house in 1996, during which she'd managed to drop a brick on her toe and split open the nail.

'But, like, my kitchen stuff and bathroom stuff. Am I OK to just put them in with yours?' she asked, thinking of her large stainless steel cooking pots and bottles of shampoo.

'Oh sure, sure. If we double up on stuff then we can just bung yours over to the storage unit another day.'

So *that's it*, thought Hanna. *My stuff. Bunged.* Just like her future. And her self-worth.

'But let's have a cuppa, before you start to unpack Mount Rushmore,' said Iain, nodding at the red checked bags. 'I might even have some of that dried mango left.'

Walking into Iain's kitchen, the first thing Hanna

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noticed was the square, black plates on the drying rack. What precisely was it with single men and black, square plates? Every student house, every bachelor pad, every bedsit: they'd be there. God knows where they bought these things – surely production stopped around 2004 when *Changing Rooms* finally came off air. But they were there. They were always there. Who actually wants to pretend they're eating everything off a slate? Off a matte-finish iPad? Off a chalkboard? Answer: a man.

Iain stood by the kettle and gestured towards a small shelving unit full of boxes of tea.

'What do you fancy? Builder's? Peppermint? Willow bark and spit? Clog heel and the whisper of moss?'

'Just regular for me,' replied Hanna. Then she slammed her hand on the table. 'Actually, fuck it. Let's have a blend.'

There was a pause.

'A blend for the lady,' said Iain, doing a little mock bow that made his knees click, before reaching for the teapot on top of the boiler. The blend – one bag of lap-sang souchong to two bags of Yorkshire Tea – was what Iain, Hanna and her mother Julie had drunk on Saturday mornings. Usually sitting on the kitchen floor reading the paper or while eating pancakes. The smokiness always reminded Hanna of camping trips, and the colour – just grey enough – had got it dubbed 'John Major's piss' by Julie, even though she happily drank it too.

Like someone on autopilot, Iain flicked a switch beside the kitchen window as he waited for the kettle to boil.

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There was a satisfying ‘pock’ followed by a hum. He then reached for a remote and pointed it towards a black, blinking mass in the corner. The strains of ‘Worried About You’ by the Rolling Stones poured out from the walls, coating Hanna like mist. Iain rarely did anything around the house without accompaniment. Like a man living in a film, his every move, his every thought was soundtracked by music. Whereas Hanna was fully addicted to podcasts, Iain had always switched between radio, records and CDs. Switched, literally. Since moving into this flat seven years ago, Iain had rewired every room in order to have a unified system of speakers, hi-fi, CD players, tape decks and record players so that he could listen to anything, anywhere, at the flick of his self-made switch. When Hanna pointed out last Christmas that he could now achieve the same with just his phone and a wireless speaker, he’d looked at her as if she was suggesting he could have his kidneys replaced with dishwasher tablets. Creating those switches, drawing out the plans and threading those wires had occupied Iain for the first two months after his marriage with Julie finally came to an end. They had become his life, if not his home-engineered wife.

‘So, love, here’s a thing,’ said Iain, after a few minutes of busying himself suspiciously at the kitchen counter. He’d produced a packet of oatcakes and a handful of dried mango and put them out on one of the black square plates like an airline snack. ‘I downloaded an app.’

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‘Tinder?’ interjected Hanna, her eyes twinkling at her hilarious joke.

‘Ah, actually . . .’ There was a dreadful pause. Hanna felt the chair against her buttocks. ‘Yes. Um. I downloaded Tinder.’

Hanna’s jaw twitched. What the hell was happening? Did her dad just say he was on Tinder?

‘Yes, a few months ago actually. It’s funny, you know – I heard them talking about it on Danny Baker’s show. It sounded a hoot. People going on there pretending to be Garfield. One man found his old piano teacher. Anyway. So I, umm. Well, I put it on my phone.’

Hanna was holding her cup of tea like a handbrake.

‘And I actually met some really nice people. One lady, Deborah, who makes her own ice cream.’ Hanna hated the way her dad still called women ‘ladies’. Amazing, really, that out of the horror of this whole sentence, his use of the word ‘lady’ could still set her teeth on edge. ‘And I got invited to this party down at Aston’s Eyot during the full moon by a lady called Ruth?’ Iain was starting to incline his voice at the end of these sentences, like questions. ‘It was fun?’ Hanna wasn’t taking the bait. Her jaw was clamped shut so hard that it was now both physically and psychologically impossible for her to respond, even if she wanted to. And she did not want to. Iain ploughed on. ‘Anyway, none of those really worked out. Not even a fumble.’ Hanna felt her head implode like those sinkholes that suddenly suck up entire streets in China. Her face collapsed into the pits that had been

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her eyes and ears. ‘But I’ve got a date tonight with a woman. Her name’s Mary.’

Hanna sat as unmoving as a loaf of bread. In her head, something was unravelling. Her dad was on Tinder? She now lived with her dad. Her dad was dating? She was single. She might go on Tinder? But no, now she couldn’t. Because her dad was on Tinder. Wait. Her dad had swiped right on someone called Mary? On Tinder? And Hanna was sleeping in his spare room? She was temporarily trapped in a two-bed flat with her keen-to-have-a-fumble dad, with no obvious escape. This. This was a disaster.

Without saying a word, Hanna stood up and walked – incredibly aware of the bones in her legs – out of the kitchen and into the front room. Going into the room, she managed to somehow trip over a drill and a small bag of nails. What the fuck were they doing in the middle of the floor? She heard Iain throw his teaspoon against the metal side of the kitchen sink behind her. Clang. And then the creak of a kitchen chair. Somehow the voice in Hanna’s head seemed to have got stuck on the words ‘swipe right’. Instead of processing any of what Iain had just said, instead of a stream of filth or shock or horror, instead of some reasoned debate, the only thing that her internal monologue seemed able to produce at the moment were the words ‘swipe’ and ‘right’. *Swipe right, swipe right, swipe right*, it went, over and over again.

Hanna looked around the room. It was, in every sense, the room of a single man. There were two clamps attached

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to the walls, holding Iain's prized guitars. There was a pile of trade magazines with thrilling titles like *Fire and Arson Investigator* or *Fire and Materials* sliding into the side of the sofa, like a drunken tired vicar. The sofa itself was black, faux leather and – perish the thought – wipe-clean. There were no cushions. No blankets. It was just a large, squeaky bench, squatting at the edge of the carpet. One entire corner of the room was taken up with a music system that looked more like the cockpit of a fighter plane than part of a home. Blinking lights, sleek black oblongs of various depths, disc drives, equalizers, Scart leads, speakers, and something that looked a lot like the timer on a B-movie bomb. In the centre of it all was Iain's fourteen-year-old Apple Mac, on the top of which was stuck a Danish troll doll, a novelty plastic turd from a joke shop, and a tissue-thin but fully intact snake skin. The walls of this techno hole were papered with old gig tickets, shopping lists, completed crosswords, printed-out emails and *Private Eye* cartoons. The carpet was mauve and grey. There was a dirty pair of socks on the back of a chair and a pile of ring binders stacked against one wall. Hanna turned back towards the window. There on the sill was a large potted spider plant. Its pale striped leaves were spread against the glass like fingers. Sunlight glowed through the green fronds and there, on the right-hand side, was a little clump. A baby, hanging off its plant parent like a tiny botanical firework. Attached, but trying to put down its own roots. Hanna looked at it for a second. Then watched as her fingers came up and pinched around the

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offshoot. Her nails bit into the adjoining stem. She gave a sharp tug and heard a snap.

The kitchen was silent, but for the milky guitar of *Tattoo You* still coming from the speakers – of course, it would never occur to Iain to turn the music off in the middle of an argument. *Although*, thought Hanna, *was this even an argument?* If neither of them was actually arguing? She walked past the bathroom and into her bedroom. The sun didn't reach this side of the flat in the afternoon. The pale blue of the walls looked slightly mottled – chalky outlines of recently dismantled shelves were etched across the surface like murder victims. Her pile of bags sat in the corner.

Hanna walked heavily over to the bed and sat down. She pulled out her phone. There was a message from her old friend, former flatmate and platonic ideal, Dom: *How's the castle?*

Hanna lifted the phone slightly above her head, so as to fit in the great landslide of laundry bags. She gave a thumbs up and pulled the exact face she'd last used when having her coil removed with a pair of medical tongs. *My dad is on Tinder*, she wrote as a caption. Send.

A couple of seconds passed. Hanna patted Baloo absentmindedly on the snout and rubbed her big toe across the floor.

OK. But no threesomes, Dom replied. Then: *Sorry. That was crass. I'm glad you got there in one piece.*

Giving in to the inevitable, Hanna lay back, her eyes

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open but blank. She felt her feet hot against the cold of the bedding. Immediately, the unmistakable smell of Febreze sighed out from the pillow and across her face. She lifted a corner of the duvet cover and held it against her nose. She gave a tentative sniff. Of course. Of course he'd Febrezed the bed. His bed. This bed. Her bed. Whatever.

Ping.

The sound of a message arriving on her dad's phone rang out from the kitchen down the hall. Why was it that middle-aged men always had their key tones and notifications on maximum volume? As if it weren't bad enough that they kept them in those sad little flip-open leather wallets, like Avon ladies.

'Hoooooeeee!' Iain let out a long, low whistle. Then a chuckle. 'Very saucy.'

Hanna wondered if she was about to vomit on Mowgli. This couldn't work. It might only be a few weeks but she was not going to listen to her dad slavering over his matches the whole time she was staying here. She wasn't going to be held hostage by her father's newly liberated libido. She had to say something.

'Iain,' she said, standing in the doorway, her hands stuffed into the pockets of her jeans to hide the shaking. 'I can't ask you to delete Tinder . . .' She left a long pause, just in case Iain wanted to offer to do precisely that. He didn't. 'But if we're both going to be under one roof, and both dating, I think we need to set some ground rules.'

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‘Oh, Hanna,’ said Iain, peering at her over his pound-shop reading glasses. ‘Don’t you think it’s a bit soon for you to be dating?’

Hanna let out a snort, somewhere between fury and derision.

‘Well, don’t you think it’s a bit late for you to be dating?’ she replied, staring at the eyebrow hairs that were curling over the frames of his glasses.

‘Fine.’ Iain sat up straight in his chair and braced his shoulders. ‘I’ll take Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. You have Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. No overnight guests unless previously agreed.’ Hanna contemplated throwing a ladle into his face to stop him talking. ‘And nothing that might wake the neighbours.’

Checkmate. He’d got her. He’d absolutely got her. While she’d hoped her father might shrink away from discussing the logistics of his sex life with his only daughter, Iain had apparently been preparing a rota. He’d thought it all out. She was prisoner of circumstance in this flat, and if that meant listening to her dad sexting at the kitchen table on a Saturday night, then apparently she had no choice.

‘OK, fine,’ Hanna mumbled, turning back into the hall. She needed to get out of this flat. She already felt like a worm, curled in on herself from the scorpion sting of rejection after her slow break-up with Joe. It was somehow far worse to be forsaken while your elderly father got his rocks off in the room next door. Pulling her laptop out of a nearby rucksack, Hanna

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dropped down on to her bed and started scrolling Gumtree.

Hi, I am the Rent Guru and I have a Great 4-Bedroom Student House Available for next academic year! Hanna tried to look past the frantic use of capital letters, to the useful detail. Fully furnished with washing machine, fridgelfreezer and cooker. It has 1 shared bathroom with shower. The single photo was of a large, arched brick porch and a red front door. Rent excludes utilities, total cost to include Gas, Electric, Water, Council Tax, and Wi-Fi. She looked around at her piles of bags. Maybe there would be a shed. Please call/email to arrange a viewing. Pushing away visions of shared Lynx shampoo bottles, threadbare carpets and black mould, Hanna hit the email button.

3

Tin Foil

Hanna stared at the corner of the ceiling as morning light pushed into the room like lecherous fingers. She was doing maths. *If the room is square*, she thought, *then there would be ninety-degree angles at the corners of all the walls. But when you look in the corner, the very corner, of a room, there are three ninety-degree angles all meeting. Side wall meeting end wall, meeting the ceiling. All the walls are touching, and yet all the angles are ninety degrees.* Hanna was lying in her bed, wearing a pair of medium-size maroon paisley men's pyjamas from Marks & Spencer, her fingers teasing through the tangles of her curly brown pubes, staring at those three ninety-degree angles, meeting in 3D space. *When a corner meets a corner meets another corner, that makes, what, 270 degrees? That's not a thing. Is it? 270 degrees isn't a known total. It's just three quarters of a circle. But then, of course, this corner is itself just one corner of the whole.* She accidentally pulled too hard and plucked out a pube with a ping. *Within a sphere there would be eight of these little corners, all meeting on the axis. Which is—wait.*

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